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Tampa, Florida

Interfaith Dialogue – Religion and Government
Sponsor: Americans United for the Separation of Church and State

Hello. I am John Kieffer and I represent a Secular Humanist perspective to this most important and timely dialogue concerning religion and government. I would like to begin by pointing out two observations. As Dr. Jarrah noted, she is the only woman on this panel of four. Acknowledging a similar minority in number, I would like to point out that I am the only non-theist up here.

Dr. Jarrah also pointed out that the Qur'an -- and thus Islam -- is clearly inclusive of Jewish and Christian worldviews. I would like to note in response that Secular Humanists not only acknowledge Jewish, Christian and Moslem worldviews, but also recognize many others: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Shinto, Zoroastrian, Native American shamanism, Wiccan and Scientology to name a few. Just as the monotheistic Abrahamic traditions represented here today by my three colleagues are recognized as religions, there are very many additional and equally valid ways in which human beings do this thing called religion. Therefore, given that this symposium is in great part about religion, possibly some attention should be given to that concept to help understand what it is that we are dealing with.

Religion can be understood foremost as a means in which human beings answer questions of ultimate concern arising from their existential awareness: Why are we here; where did we come from; where are we going? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What will happen to us? Why do bad things happen? Why is there death; what happens after death? What is good; what is evil? Last, but not least, what is the meaning and purpose of sex? As we know, all religions have something to say about these ultimate concern questions. Through the many ways in which these concerns are answered, human beings find meaning, order and comfort in what may be otherwise experienced as an arbitrary, chaotic and frightening event called life. Through sacred myths, the various and numerous religions specify and expound these answers in equally various and numerous ways. Moreover, adherents enact these myths through ritual to educate, remind and connect them not only with these critical answers but also with each other as a community.

Earlier I mentioned a variety of religions. These religions represent some of the modern remnants of thousands of years of religious thinking; essentially an evolution and merging of answers to questions of ultimate concern formulated in the context of contemporaneous realities and cultures. I will briefly outline the development of religious worldviews next.

The earliest of the historic phases, ranging from about 10-20,000 years ago, can be identified as "Primal." Human beings in this period were nomadic, tribal hunter-gatherers. Their religions were cosmological; hence, the ultimate powers resided in the elements and forces of nature. For these cultures, the moon became the subject of ritual and symbolism. When members of the tribe died, they became ancestors; and importantly, the shaman was the link between the living and ancestral domains. Today,

Native American shamanism would represent a contemporary representation of such a primal religion. After 8,000 BCE, however, human beings began to domesticate plants and animals; a change that would eventually give rise to the next historical phase.

In the Archaic Period, beginning about 3,000 BCE, humans were urbanized and, in such stationary settings, they began to notice and record the sun's yearly progression on the horizon; this along with their realization of the sun's importance to agrarian concerns inspired solar symbolism in myth and ritual. In this period, humans no longer identified with the collective identity of the tribe; instead, they took on personal identities and became part of a society that featured monarchies, institutional differentiation and hierarchical class structure. The polytheistic religions with its celestial pantheon of personalities paralleled the stratified and individuated earthly human domain. Though residing in a celestial realm, the assemblies of gods and goddesses were located nonetheless in the physical universe; hence, this category of religions, like their primal counterparts, is considered cosmological as well. In the present, Hinduism would characterize the religions that developed during this period.

By 1000 BCE, some worldviews began to comprehend deities as not existing in the cosmological sphere but rather in a realm that transcended the natural world: the supernatural. Between 800 and 200 BCE, a period known as the "Axial Age," world religions began to emerge. These would include Daoism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Buddhism and the beginnings of the Abrahamic narratives in the works of Ezekiel and 2nd Isaiah. Within the following one-thousand years beyond the Axial Age, the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam would fully develop.

All of these religions from Native American shamanism to Islam and even those that came much later in the post-modern period commencing in the twentieth century, such as Scientology, are represented today as the many ways that Americans answer questions of ultimate concern. As Secular Humanists, we too have such questions; the difference is simply that we find answers not from the cosmological or supernatural realm but from an empirical comprehension of the natural world.

This leads to some final thoughts about the subject of this symposium: religion and government. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states in part: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." With this in mind, I have to ponder the constitutionality of some of our government laws. For example, a federal law mandates the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance; a recent Florida law requires this pledge be included as a daily ritual for school children, including my own child, in which the children must repeat in a solemn manner, regardless of their own families' religious worldviews, that they are a "nation under God." Or when Americans like myself spend US currency, we are forced to essentially utter with each bill or coin that we pass through our hands the words "In God We Trust" regardless whether or not we subscribe to that essential Abrahamic religious idea.

Americans carry with them a rich heritage of worldviews that have developed over thousands of years across the globe. Those views, including my own as a Secular Humanist, are how we place meaning, purpose and order into our respective worlds; as Americans we not only have that right; but just as important, we have the right to be free of government influence or interference as to how we, and our families, answer our questions of ultimate concern.