

## Atheist lobbies campaigning in the United States



Photo: Allison Shelley Agence France-Presse According to the Gallup firm, two in five Americans say they would not trust an unbelieving presidential candidate. Atheism has nevertheless become a real political movement over the past decades, with its lobbies and demands. Pictured is an atheist rally in Washington in 2012.

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**Religion takes such a place in American society that atheism has become a real political movement with its lobbies, its demands and, recently, its representatives in Congress. First text of three on a phenomenon less and less marginal among our neighbors to the South.**

In the United States, atheism is the subject of passionate activism, which the current president has revived. Portrait of a phenomenon unique to the United States, at odds with the reality of Quebec.

"I don't need God to be a good person," wrote Margory C. in a publication for the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), one of the largest atheist lobbies in the United States.

Margory took part in the "Atheists out of the closet" campaign. Because, with Uncle Sam, *coming out as* an atheist is sometimes more difficult than *coming out as* a gay man, many say.

"In the minds of many people, believing in God is a kind of guarantee that you are a good, righteous or moral person," summarizes Mandisa Thomas of Black Nonbelievers.



Photo: The Freedom From Religion Foundation

Conversely, non-believers are the object of persistent distrust. As proof, according to the Gallup firm, two in five Americans say they would not trust an unbelieving presidential candidate. A sign that atheism is the champion of taboos, fewer respondents would reject an openly homosexual or Muslim candidate.

As the US election approaches, atheism advocates in the United States are on the alert. "We have reached a critical point", pleads Annie Laurie Gaylor, the co-president of the FFRF.

"We are on the verge of losing Roe *versus* Wade [the Supreme Court ruling that protected abortion rights in 1973]. With Trump, we are currently witnessing a takeover of the Supreme Court. "

Founded in 1976, the FFRF has more than 30,000 members. Gaylor espoused atheism wanting first defend women's rights. "We realized that the only organized opposition to the right to abortion came from religious groups and that, to protect women's rights, we could not mix religion and government," she recalls.

The other distancing

A few months ago, the FFRF ran an advertisement in the *New York Times* denouncing the "theocracy" which, like a tsunami, was about to submerge the country.

Gaylor develops concepts pubs herself, not without humor. In recent months, one of them praised the merits of "distancing between religion and politics".

While in Quebec, we have seen nationalists become ardent defenders of secularism, among Americans, defenders of secularism are in open struggle against nationalists.

"We are fighting Christian nationalism, this idea according to which the United States was built on Christian principles and that we must reconnect with these principles", explains his colleague, the FFRF political advisor, Andrew Seidel. "It is the opposite of the secular principles of our Constitution. "

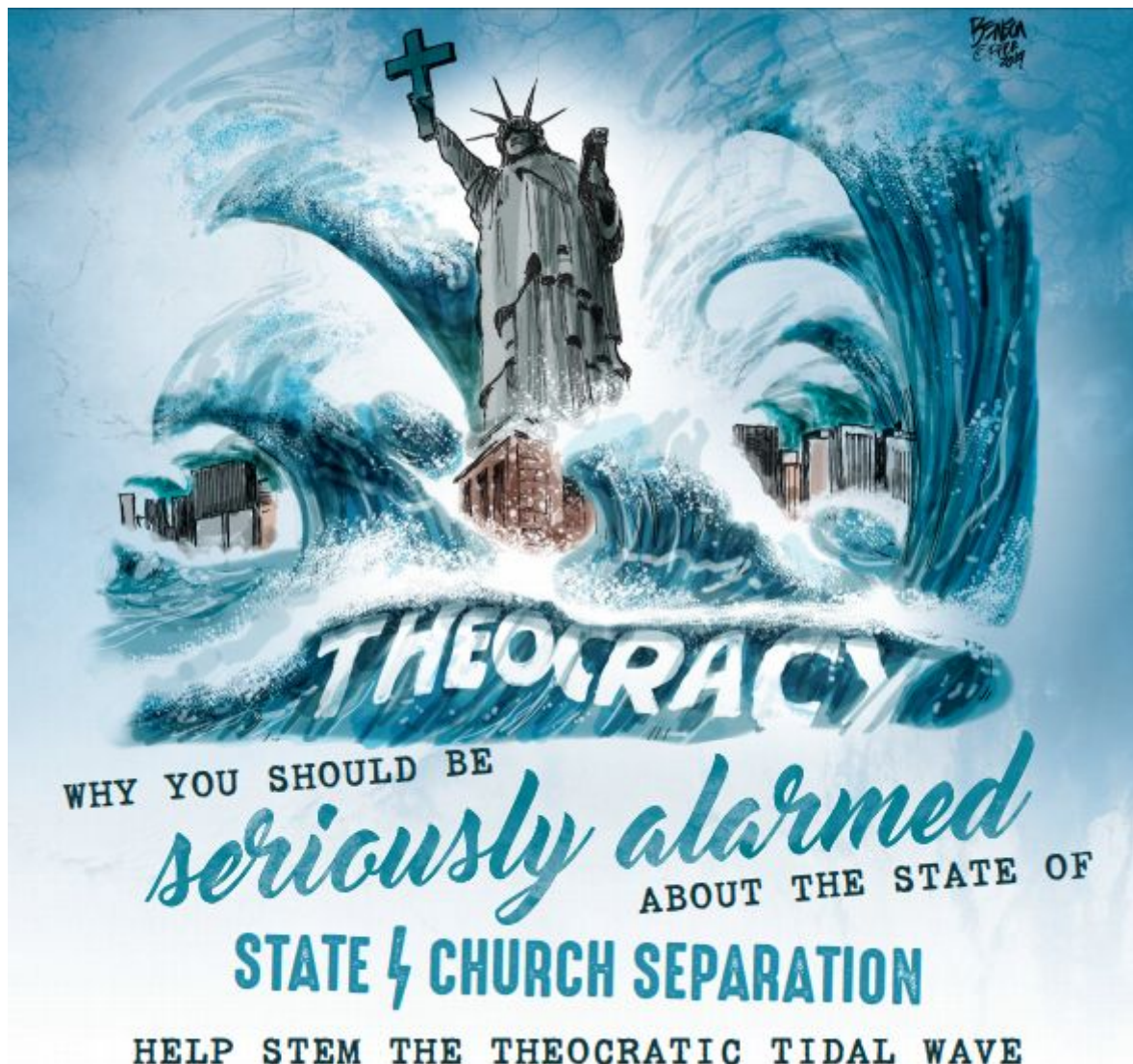


Photo: The Freedom From Religion Foundation

"Donald Trump," he continues, exploits this Christian nationalism a lot. "According to some researchers, this nationalism is the most common characteristic among those who voted for it in 2016."

What role do atheist lobbies play in the electoral campaign? A limited role, since the law prohibits non-profit organizations from openly supporting a candidate, financially or otherwise.

However, the rule also applies to religious groups. From then on, the FFRF sometimes intervenes indirectly in the campaign by filing complaints against religious groups who break the rule.

It happened in July when they filed a complaint with the Revenue Agency against Texan Pastor Robert Jeffress, who invited Vice President Mike Pence to deliver a speech to hundreds of worshipers in Dallas.

While some atheist groups file complaints, others send letters. The Secular Coalition for America is pushing its members to write to their elected officials in Congress to let them know that they are atheist voters. "With your help, our elected officials will notice the importance of our community and take it into account in their policies", pleads the organization.

Atheist groups are also very present on campuses. On September 8, the Secular Student Alliance organized a web conference entitled "How to go about supporting atheist candidates? "

Essentially, students were advised to set up booths at universities to encourage as many young people as possible to vote. In any case, it is practically impossible to support openly atheist candidates because they are so rare.

A "free-thinking" caucus

But that is starting to change. Two years ago, elected representatives of Congress created a "free-thought caucus" to "promote science, rational solutions and to defend the secular nature of government."

California Senator Jared Huffman is one of its founders. "We have a problem in the United States. We are moving slowly towards a theocratic regime, and our group thinks that the separation between Church and State is threatened ", he summarizes.

The term "theocracy" refers to regimes in which the government is seen as the representative of God and where priests play an important political role. This is the case, for example, with Iran.

Isn't the formula a bit exaggerated when it comes to the United States?

" No. Have you listened to Bill Barr [the United States Attorney General] lately? He gives speeches that seem straight out of a Margaret Atwood novel. [...] He regularly describes us as a Christian nation founded on Christian values and principles that we need to strengthen, "the senator answered tit for tat.

"It's very worrying, because we are a pluralistic country with a diversity of ideas and people. "

Today, the free-thinkers caucus has 14 members, including representatives of religious minorities (Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, etc.). All are Democrats.

In particular, the group introduced a bill in the House of Representatives to prevent the selection of immigrants based on their faith in reaction to the 2017 decree targeting nationals of Muslim countries [*"Muslim ban "*"].

The senator is convinced that he can double the number of caucus members during the next term. "Many colleagues agree with us," he says. Even among Republicans? "In today's Republican Party theocracy, it's hard to imagine. They are completely captives of evangelical Christian nationalism, "he says. "The price would be very high for a Republican to openly call himself non-religious. "