



Addressing the Rumors

Since the last issue of this magazine, American Atheists has entered a significant phase of transition, which was made public on Tuesday, April 10 with the announcement that the Board of Directors had unanimously voted on Sunday, April 8 to place President David Silverman on paid leave while it conducted an investigation of an internal complaint regarding violations of administrative policies. The board acted in accordance with American Atheists' bylaws in order to investigate the complaint, which had been brought to them on Saturday, April 7.

The public announcement was posted on our website (Atheists.org), our Facebook page, and our Twitter feed. We also sent the announcement to everyone who has opted to receive communications from us by email.

Shortly after the announcement was released, the board members received additional information from two women individually accusing him of sexual misconduct.

On Thursday, April 12, the board unanimously voted to terminate his contract. On the following day, Friday, April 13, we released another announcement in the same way as the first one.

Later on Friday, BuzzFeed News released a story about the termination. The article quotes the women, one of whom allowed the use of her full name. In response to the story, American Atheists amended the April 13 announcement to include a statement about the article.

In addition to my role as editor-in-chief of this magazine, I am also American Atheists' membership director, and it's in this capacity that I have had contact, either in writing or on the phone, with every member and supporter who has reached out to us with questions, comments, and concerns. These conversations have left me with the impression that most people heard our news indirectly from blog posts, social media communities, the BuzzFeed article, or word of mouth. Therefore, it's probably helpful to reproduce the official statements here:

Monday, April 9: *On the evening of Saturday, April 7, 2018, the American Atheists Board of Directors received a complaint regarding David Silverman, the president of American Atheists. The board takes very seriously the concerns expressed and, in accordance with organization policies, the board has placed Mr. Silverman on paid leave while an independent investigation is conducted. Mr. Silverman has pledged his full cooperation of the investigation.*

The board, led by Chair Neal Cary and Vice President Kathleen Johnson, will fulfill the duties of the president while Mr. Silverman is on leave. National Program Director Nick Fish will oversee the day-to-day operations of the organization.

While Mr. Silverman is on leave, American Atheists will continue our work protecting the separation of religion and government, elevating the voices of atheists in our nation's public discourse, and supporting our members and atheist communities across the country.

We are committed to transparency and openness about this process and will release more information as it becomes available.

Friday, April 13: *Last night, the American Atheists Board of Directors voted to terminate David Silverman as president of American Atheists. Board Chair Neal Cary and Vice President Kathleen Johnson will continue to fulfill the duties of the president while National Program Director Nick Fish oversees the day-to-day operations of the organization.*

On April 10, 2018, the Board of Directors placed President David Silverman on leave pending a review of allegations brought to the board's attention. Today's announcement is based on these findings, and the board intends to cooperate with any future investigations.

American Atheists is committed to creating and maintaining an environment that is safe and welcoming to all. Based on the allegations made, and the evidence presented, the board believes it is prudent and necessary to reaffirm that commitment and move forward with new leadership.

The staff of American Atheists will continue our mission to advocate for the absolute separation of religion from government, to elevate the profile of atheism in public discourse, and to build and strengthen communities that fully represent the growing number of atheists in America. We thank our members, supporters, and volunteers for their dedication and support of our mission.

Note: *After American Atheists announced the termination of Mr. Silverman, a BuzzFeed news article was posted detailing additional allegations of misconduct. In response, National Program Director Nick Fish released the following statement: "We take our obligation to create safe and welcoming communities for our staff, volunteers, members, and supporters very seriously. We have zero tolerance for the type of behavior alleged in these accounts. We will continue to demand the highest standards and accountability from our leaders, staff, and volunteers."*

It's only natural that this news surprised everyone. For nearly eight years, David Silverman's leadership as president elevated the profile of American Atheists, and through his firebrand activism, he became a popular author, speaker, and public figure who inspired countless Americans to come out of the closet and be openly atheist.

His immediate predecessor, Dr. Ed Buckner, who served as president from 2008 to 2010, was appointed volunteer interim executive director on April 30. In this capacity, he is providing advice to the board and guidance and support to the full-time staff while the board conducts its search for new leadership.

Because I have ongoing conversations with our members and the general public, and because Ed (he prefers "Ed" in all but the most formal circumstances) has leadership responsibilities

now, he wanted to hear the questions I've been asked so that he could answer them to the best of his ability and then discuss his current role at American Atheists.

Q: The board's initial announcement mentions "a complaint" but provides no description. Did it include any allegations of sexual misconduct?

A: No. The first complaint alleged violations of American Atheists' policies, including allegations of undisclosed conflicts of interest, as well as breaches of confidentiality and staff management guidelines. It's important to know that the first complaint was received *before* the two individuals brought their allegations to the board.

Q: That initial announcement also mentions an "independent investigation." Will those results be made public?

A: The investigation is now complete, but on the advice of our legal counsel, details cannot be shared because it's a personnel matter, and in standard practices of employment, the reasons for a termination must remain confidential. I can tell you that the investigator was an outside attorney with expertise in conducting internal reviews of this nature, and that the results corroborated the board's decision.

For American Atheists in the near term, and well into the future, the most important result of that investigation was the recommendations regarding policies and actions the board should undertake moving forward, and the board will carefully consider all recommendations.

Q: The board announced, in the following order, that David Silverman was suspended, that an investigation was launched, that his contract was terminated, and that the investigation was not yet complete. Why did the board decide to terminate his contract before the investigation was finished?

A: The investigation was a result of the allegations made in the first complaint, which relate only to conflicts of interest and failure to adhere to organizational policy. The additional alleged sexual misconduct was not a subject of the investigation. The termination decision was made before the investigation was complete because enough information was already in hand, and the board had lost confidence in his leadership.

Q: For a lot of people, David Silverman and American Atheists were one and the same. Does the board fully appreciate what it's losing?

A: David Silverman is a creative, dynamic man who is effective at attracting media attention and using it well. But, as one board member remarked to me, "He was not who we thought he was." It is worth noting that the decision regarding the termination was made without dissent from any board member, which means it was made by a very diverse group of atheists (go to Atheists.org/About/Board to read their profiles), all with a well-developed sense of fairness and a good understanding of how to evaluate information.

American Atheists has a long and powerful legacy, a talented

staff, and a dedicated network of members, supporters, and volunteers. The organization has never been and will never be about one leader. It is about our mission to advocate for the absolute separation of religion from government, to elevate the profile of atheism in public discourse, and to build and strengthen communities that fully represent the growing number of atheists in America.

Q: What are your hopes for the future of American Atheists?

A: My strongest hope is that we will preserve and protect this vital organization until the board hires a new trustworthy, creative, dynamic, media-savvy leader. Because the board is charged with acting in the best interests of the organization, choosing a leader is arguably its most important function. I will have no vote and no active role in that selection, and I want none.

But I know what I do want: an unabashed atheist with enough activist experience to know that the leader is important, but not as important as the people who comprise the membership. Someone who can make things happen in the short term but who can also see many years down the road. Someone who can lead by inspiring and respecting all members of the staff and all our dedicated volunteers. Someone we can point to with pride when talking to theists. Someone who understands that a key part of good leadership is to work to develop new leadership. Someone who will enhance our status and our strength while respecting the rules of our organization and the norms of civility.

Q: Are you interested in returning as the next president?

A: I took on this role because I am a committed atheist, a life member, and a longtime and strong supporter of American Atheists. I'm proud to contribute again, but I will definitely not be applying for the job. I'm only an interim this time around, and an unpaid one by my own choice, because I am not the dynamic, powerful leader we must have right now. I fervently hope, for the sake of the movement, but also for my own, that the board will find us that new leader swiftly.

We—the members, staff, and board—must look forward because there is still much work to do to earn the respect atheists deserve and to protect the rights that are ours. Threats to the separation of religion and government emerge daily, and many of them are serious. Mindless bigotry, based on oft-repeated hogwash equating religiosity with morality, continues apace in many communities. We cannot let up, and I'm proud to say that the day-to-day operations at American Atheists have continued during this time without so much as a brief pause. I am confident that, given the sterling qualities of our current staff and board, we will advance, and we will thrive. But we can only do it with the help and dedication of our leadership, staff, volunteers, members, and supporters. ■



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