



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

JANUARY 2026

When Race Becomes Our Faith

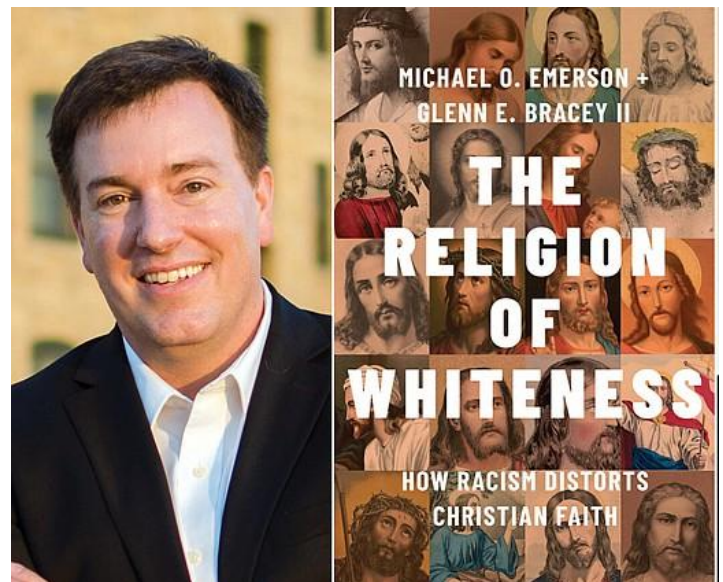
Our Program: Why won't racism and racial injustice go away? In this talk, Emerson will argue that race has become entangled with religion, taking on transcendent qualities. What emerges is a *Religion of Whiteness*, a powerful influence on the lives of millions of people, harmful to both Christianity and to human communities.

This presentation will help us better understand why people become so invested in protecting whiteness, why they are often so passionately committed to maintaining racial inequality, and what we can do to support positive change.

Our Speaker: Michael Emerson, Ph.D., is a Fellow in Religion and Public Policy at Rice University.

In his distinguished career, Emerson has published widely in the areas of religion and public policy issues, recently serving as the principal investigator of the largest ever national study of religion and race. He is the author of 15 books and nearly 100 other publications. His research and expertise have been featured in hundreds of media outlets, including CBS Evening News, NPR, the Wall Street Journal, CNN, the New York Times and USA Today.

He was the founding director of Rice's Center on Race, Religion, & Urban Life and is the co-founding director of Rice's Kinder Institute for Urban Research. His work focuses on understanding how religion and public policy interact, both here and abroad. He seeks to share his work with policymakers, and other leaders thus creating networks of dialogue and action.



Dr. Michael O. Emerson, co-author with Glenn E Bracey II, of *The Religion of Whiteness: How Racism Distorts Christian Faith*.

When: Saturday January 17, 3:00-4:30 pm (Martin Luther King weekend!)

Where: On Zoom. <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

**Rob Reiner, Michael Stivic, Archie Bunker,
Atheism, Religion, and Secular Humanism**
By Judy Flattery & Chat GPT

Along with so many others, I was shocked and deeply saddened by the death of Rob Reiner. I cried. I thought about his impact on my life. His movie, *The Princess Bride*, is on the short list of my all-time favorite movies—so very quotable and so much fun. As a director, Rob Reiner created movies spanning an impressive gamut of genres.

He also produced the 2024 documentary, *God & Country*, based on the Katherine Stewart book, *The Power Worshippers*. Recall that former Santa Barbara resident and author, Katherine Stewart, was our in-person April 2025 HSSB speaker.

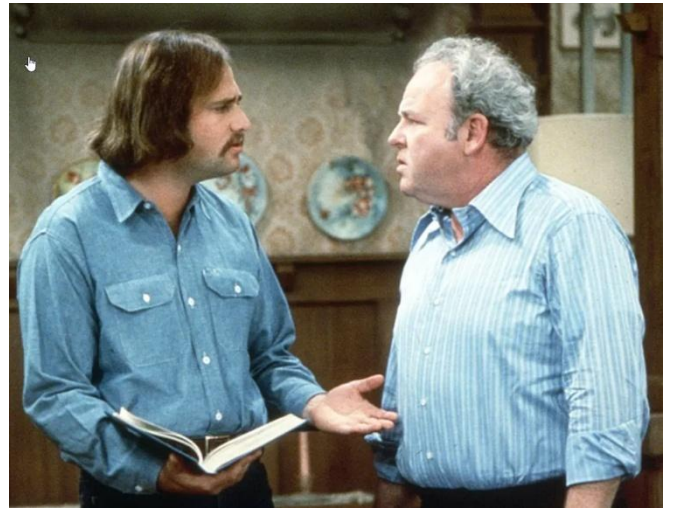
I also thought about Reiner's role in *All in The Family*, a massive national phenomenon, the top-rated show on TV for five consecutive years with 40 to 45 million weekly viewers—a true shared cultural experience that impacted all of us who watched it every Saturday night.

All in the Family premiered on January 12, 1971, the day after my 13th birthday. At 13, I was in the process of questioning Catholic theistic beliefs and wrestling with what it would mean to not be Catholic within my large Polish Catholic family. Was such a thing even possible?

Rob Reiner played Michael Stivic, a lead character in the series, who happened to be of Polish descent. Mike is an educated, progressive, unapologetic atheist. I found Mike's dialogue to be personally confronting. Mike Stivic said things that helped me clarify my own thinking; sometimes said what I wished I could say. His father-in-law, Archie Bunker, responded with a worldview that was also very familiar... I certainly knew people who held many of the views that Archie expressed. Archie calls Mike 'Meathead' ("dead from the neck up") and sometimes refers to him with the slur 'Polack'.

It's been a few years since I've watched *All in the Family* re-runs, so I decided to ask Chat GPT a few questions to refresh my memory and deepen my understanding and appreciation.

Here is a transcript of our 'conversation'. I found its answers very interesting (note that I have not independently confirmed the validity of what Chat GPT reported about specific episodes).



Judy asks Chat GPT: Tell me about the interactions between Archie Bunker and Michael Stivic regarding atheism and religion.

Chat GPT responds: In *All in the Family*, the interactions between Archie Bunker and his son-in-law Michael Stivic provide one of television's most memorable explorations of atheism and religion. Archie, a working-class conservative, views religion as an anchor of moral order and tradition. Though not deeply theological, his belief in God is intertwined with patriotism, family values, and a sense of certainty about how the world *should* work.

Michael, by contrast, is an educated, liberal atheist who questions religious belief as irrational and socially regressive. Their clashes over faith are less about doctrine than about identity, authority, and generational change.

Archie often treats Michael's atheism as both an intellectual threat and a personal insult. To Archie, disbelief signals moral weakness and disrespect for inherited wisdom. His arguments rely on common sense, emotion, and lived experience rather than formal reasoning.

Michael counters with abstract logic, sociology, and moral philosophy, insisting that ethics do not require belief in God. He frames religion as a cultural construct that can perpetuate prejudice and inhibit progress. These opposing styles of argument heighten the tension: Archie sees Michael as arrogant and disconnected from reality, while Michael views Archie as willfully ignorant and intolerant.



Yet the show complicates this binary. Archie's faith, though crude, is often linked to loyalty and love for family, while Michael's atheism sometimes veers into smugness and moral superiority. Their debates expose the limitations of both positions when taken to extremes. By staging these conflicts within a loving, if volatile, household, *All in the Family* uses humor to reveal how religious belief and disbelief can divide people, but also how dialogue—however messy—can humanize opposing worldviews.

Judy asks Chat GPT: In what episodes of *All In The Family* did the most intense and revealing discussion of religion vs. atheism occur?

Chat GPT responds: Several *All in the Family* episodes stand out for having especially intense and revealing clashes between Archie Bunker's religious traditionalism and Michael Stivic's atheism. Rather than being one-off jokes, these episodes put belief, doubt, and moral authority at the center of the conflict.

1. *The Sermon* episode is often considered the most direct exploration of religion versus atheism. Archie invites his minister over to 'straighten out' Mike. What begins as a polite discussion turns into a serious debate about faith, proof of God, and whether morality requires religion. The episode is revealing because Mike holds his own intellectually, while Archie's beliefs are shown to be emotional and cultural rather than theological.

2. *The Bunkers and Inflation* episode, while not exclusively about religion, includes a sharp exchange where Archie frames faith as a stabilizing force in hard times, while Mike dismisses it as a psychological crutch. The discussion exposes how Archie's religion is tied to fear of social change.

3. In *The Lord's Prayer* episode, religion becomes a family flashpoint when Archie insists on prayer as a moral necessity. Mike's refusal is not flippant; he explains his atheism in ethical terms, arguing that compassion doesn't depend on belief. The episode highlights the sincerity of Mike's worldview rather than treating it as mere provocation.

4. *Archie and the Miracle* (Season 5, Episode 11) This episode reveals Archie's selective faith. When faced with a supposed miracle, Archie embraces belief enthusiastically—until it challenges his prejudices. Mike points out the inconsistency, making this a subtle but powerful critique of performative religiosity.

Together, these episodes show that the religion-versus-atheism debate in *All in the Family* was less about winning arguments and more about

exposing how belief systems reflect fear, identity, and generational conflict.

Judy asks Chat GPT: Say more about the ‘miracle’ and the ‘prejudice’ in the *Archie and the Miracle* episode.

Chat GPT responds: *Archie and the Miracle*, is especially revealing because it exposes how Archie’s religious belief is conditional—shaped less by theology than by prejudice and self-interest.

In the episode, Archie becomes excited by news of an apparent religious miracle connected to a church. For once, his faith is not casual or defensive; he is openly awed and eager to believe. The possibility of divine intervention validates his long-held assumption that the world operates according to a moral order that ultimately confirms his worldview. Archie treats the miracle as proof that people like him—traditional, God-fearing Americans—are right.

However, the episode turns when the miracle becomes associated with people Archie already distrusts or looks down upon. Once belief would require acknowledging the spiritual legitimacy or moral worth of those he is prejudiced against, Archie’s certainty collapses. He begins to question the miracle’s authenticity, suddenly demanding skepticism and rational explanation—the very tools he normally mocks when Michael uses them. This reversal is the episode’s key insight: Archie does not abandon reason for faith, or faith for reason, consistently. He chooses whichever protects his existing biases.

Michael’s role here is restrained but pointed. Rather than attacking religion outright, he highlights Archie’s inconsistency, showing that Archie’s faith is not universal or compassionate, but selective. The episode suggests that belief without empathy can become a way to reinforce social hierarchies rather than challenge them.

Ultimately, *Archie and the Miracle* argues that the real moral failing is not belief or disbelief, but the refusal to let belief expand one’s sense of shared humanity.

Judy to Chat GPT (I pursue this line of questioning sensing that Chat GPT is being a bit evasive): What was the ‘miracle’ in this episode?

In the *All in the Family* episode *Archie and the Miracle*, the ‘miracle’ refers to a near-death experience that Archie Bunker interprets as divine intervention. While working at the loading dock, a heavy crate of machine parts nearly crushes him. Archie later claims that a *voice from God* told him to get up and get salt for his egg at just the right moment, saving him from being seriously hurt or killed. Because he survives what could easily have been a fatal accident, Archie concludes that God must have intervened—hence the “miracle.”

This experience triggers an abrupt bout of religious fervor in Archie, who begins attending church, talking about God’s goodness, and trying to ‘repay’ divine mercy by doing ‘the Lord’s work.’ The humor and conflict in the episode largely come from his sudden transformation and the way it clashes with his own preferences—especially when he’s asked to drive the church bus on Sunday instead of watching a New York Jets game.

Though Archie’s ‘miracle’ is sincere from his point of view, the episode uses it to highlight his selective reasoning and how easily he can interpret random events as signs when it suits his feelings or ego. His family’s skepticism—particularly Michael’s logical explanations—serves to underscore the difference between faith and coincidence in a way that’s both comedic and revealing.

Judy asks Chat GPT (Chat GPT is definitely being evasive; it didn’t explain how Archie’s ‘prejudice’ impacted the story): How was the

‘miracle’ associated with people Archie was prejudiced against?

Chat GPT responds: In *Archie and the Miracle*, the miracle becomes associated with people Archie is prejudiced against through the *obligations* he believes God now expects of him.

After Archie interprets his near accident at work as a divine intervention, he feels indebted to God and begins attending church more seriously. Wanting to ‘pay back’ the miracle, he volunteers for church-related activities. This is where the conflict arises: the church’s charitable work primarily serves poor and minority communities, including Black parishioners and inner-city children—groups Archie routinely stereotypes and resents.

The most pointed example is when Archie agrees to help with church transportation, which involves driving a bus for disadvantaged children. The task directly interferes with things Archie values more—his comfort, his routine, and especially watching football. Suddenly, the miracle no longer feels like a blessing. Archie begins to complain, resist, and look for ways out of his commitment. His enthusiasm for faith fades precisely when faith demands service to people he does not want to help.

This is where the episode makes its sharpest critique. Archie is happy to believe in a miracle when it flatters him or confirms that God favors *him*. But when belief requires empathy, sacrifice, or solidarity with people he considers ‘other,’ he becomes skeptical and resentful. Michael quietly exposes this contradiction, showing that Archie’s belief is less about God and more about maintaining his existing prejudices.

The episode’s message is clear: Archie doesn’t reject the miracle because it’s inconvenient—he rejects it because it challenges who he believes deserves compassion.

Judy asks Chat GPT (Ah! Finally I understand what Chat GPT was being evasive about! OK, we can move on...): Was Michael Stivic the first openly atheist character on American television?

Chat GPT responds: Short answer: no—but he was the first *prominent, recurring*, and explicitly self-identified atheist character on mainstream American television. Before *All in the Family* (1971), American TV generally avoided labeling characters as atheists at all. Because of network standards and cultural norms, disbelief was usually softened into ‘skepticism,’ ‘cynicism,’ or vague non-religiosity. Characters might question God or religion in isolated moments, but they were rarely allowed to openly say “I don’t believe in God” and continue as sympathetic regulars.

There were a few partial precedents:

- Occasional guest characters in anthology dramas (like *Playhouse 90* or *Studio One*) expressed doubt or unbelief, but these were one-off appearances, not ongoing roles.
- Some intellectual or comedic characters in the 1950s–60s were implicitly secular, but networks avoided the word *atheist*, and the issue was not central to their identity.

Michael Stivic was different in several crucial ways:

1. Explicit identification – Mike openly calls himself an atheist and defends atheism directly.
2. Recurring central character – He appears weekly, not as a ‘problem guest’ to be corrected.
3. Moral legitimacy – The show allows Mike to argue that morality does not depend on God, and he is often shown as ethically serious, even when flawed.
4. Unresolved conflict – Unlike earlier TV morality plays, Mike is never converted or decisively proven wrong.

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Norman Lear deliberately used Michael to break a cultural taboo. By placing an atheist inside a working-class family sitcom—and letting him spar endlessly with Archie without a final verdict—*All in the Family* made disbelief a permanent, visible part of American television discourse.

So, while Michael Stivic was not the first atheist ever shown, he was the first openly atheist character to be sustained, normalized, and taken seriously on American network television.

Judy asks Chat GPT: Was Rob Reiner an atheist?

Chat GPT responds: Yes. Rob Reiner has publicly described himself as an atheist. In multiple interviews over the years, Reiner has said that he does not believe in God and that he identifies with **secular humanist** values. His atheism was already established by the time he played Michael Stivic on *All in the Family*, and his own views helped inform how confidently and explicitly Mike's disbelief was portrayed on the show.

That said, it's important to separate actor from character in one respect: while Reiner personally shared Michael's atheism, Michael Stivic was written to be more ideologically rigid and argumentative than Reiner describes himself in real life. Reiner has later noted that Mike's tendency toward smugness and absolutism was intentional—Norman Lear wanted the atheist character to be flawed as well as principled, so the debates with Archie wouldn't feel one-sided.

Reiner has also emphasized that *All in the Family* was not meant to promote atheism over religion, but to normalize open discussion. His own lack of belief made him comfortable delivering lines that, at the time, were still shocking on network television—such as plainly stating that one could be moral without believing in God.

In short: Michael Stivic's atheism was fictional, but Rob Reiner's was real, and that alignment helped make the character historically significant.

Judy asks Chat GPT: What were the arguments for and against religion or god in *The Sermon* (Season 2, Episode 19)?

Chat GPT responds: In *The Sermon* episode, *All in the Family* presents one of its clearest, most balanced debates about God, religion, and morality. Archie invites his minister, Reverend Paul, to talk with Michael in hopes of “straightening him out,” but the conversation ends up exposing the strengths and weaknesses of all sides.

Arguments FOR Religion / Belief in God:
Archie's position

- Common-sense faith: Archie argues that belief in God is natural and obvious— “you don't need proof” because faith is part of how ordinary people live.
- Moral foundation: He insists that religion keeps people decent and that without God, society would fall into chaos.
- Tradition and continuity: For Archie, religion links generations and provides stability; rejecting it feels like rejecting family and country.

Reverend Paul's position

- Limits of reason: The minister acknowledges that God cannot be proven scientifically and argues that faith exists precisely beyond logic.
- Humility and mystery: He suggests that belief offers meaning, comfort, and humility in the face of life's uncertainty.
- Practical goodness: Religion, he says, encourages compassion, forgiveness, and community—even if belief isn't provable.

Arguments AGAINST Religion / Belief in God
Michael's position

- Burden of proof: Mike argues that belief requires evidence, and since none exists, disbelief is the rational position.
- Morality without God: He insists people can be ethical based on empathy, reason, and social responsibility, not divine command.
- Social harm: Mike points out that religion has historically been used to justify prejudice, intolerance, and resistance to progress.

Why the episode matters: What makes *The Sermon* powerful is that no one ‘wins.’ The minister admits Mike’s logic is sound; Mike admits faith can comfort people. Archie, meanwhile, reveals that his belief is emotional rather than reasoned. The episode’s real argument is that belief and disbelief answer *different human needs*—and conflict arises when either side claims total authority.

Judy’s take: I’m not sure I am aligned with Chat GPT’s assessment of the arguments presented in *The Sermon* episode, but this conversation with Chat GPT does inspire me to watch these episodes. *All in the Family* was both ‘of its time’ and ‘ahead of its time’ and is still very relevant today. Michael Stivic’s character, as portrayed by Rob Reiner, challenged and inspired me as a young Polish American skeptical Catholic teen. I am deeply saddened by the death of Rob Reiner, and I so appreciate the impact this secular humanist had on this world and on my life personally.

HSSB Solstice Gathering
Photos By Robert Bernstein



Humanists gathered at Diane Krohn & Wayne Beckman’s lovely home on Sunday December 14 to celebrate the imminent return of longer days and shorter nights that is the winter solstice.

We enjoyed a delicious catered meal out on the patio on a beautiful Santa Barbara afternoon. Good company, interesting conversations, and a relaxing end to a tumultuous year in the U.S. Thanks to Wayne, Diane, Judy Fontana, and Wendy Wergeles for planning this lovely event!



Judy Fontana demonstrates how to fold a napkin into the shape of a Christmas Tree!



“ IT’S TRUE, EVER SINCE HIS NEW YEAR RESOLUTION TO GIVE UP THINKING HE’S BEEN REALLY HAPPY ”

Reimagining First Chances

by Judy Flattery

The speakers at the November 22 Prisons2Partnerships Zoom conference (co-sponsored by HSSB) were excellent. I’d like to highlight one of my personal favorites and encourage our readers to [watch the video](#) and to consider volunteering with Defy Ventures.

Israel Garcia is the executive director of Defy Ventures in Northern California. His conference presentation was entitled *From Punishment to Possibility:*



Reimagining First Chances. He noted that incarceration often reflects systemic failures — poverty, racism, and exclusion — that deny people a real first chance. Yet when dignity, healing, and opportunity, are provided, transformation is possible. Defy reimagines

prisons as places where possibility begins and communities grow stronger to create lasting change.

Garcia knows the power of opportunity. After being incarcerated at age 15 and serving 25 years, he returned home in 2020 and dedicated himself to education, healing, and leadership.

Israel leads programs inside prisons and in the community that create real ‘first chances’— spaces where people can heal from trauma, grow, and build meaningful futures.

Dave and I have volunteered at Defy programs in several California prisons. It is a revealing, fulfilling and impactful day, assisting these ‘Entrepreneurs in Training’ in developing plans to start legitimate businesses or be valuable employees thus supporting themselves, their families, and their communities



after release. We provide feedback on their resumes and business ideas, based on our own business experience and personal perspective. Our respectful, compassionate, humanistic, and evidence-based input is welcomed and appreciated. Here is a [link to Israel Garcia’s conference presentation](#). I hope you are inspired by it and do consider volunteering at an upcoming Defy Ventures event. We’ll go in together!

Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

Submitted by Diane Krohn, Melanie Jacobsen & Margaret Downey

January 4, 10:00 am Pacific: *What Comes Next? Reflections on the Great Beyond* - Live Oak friend, Jay Hartz, a retired trial lawyer, will share his reflections about what happens after we die. [Live Oak UUC](#), 820 N. Fairview, Goleta CA

January 11, 10:00 am Pacific: *Longing Beyond the Stars* - Rev. Jonathan Young will draw on his work with the *Ancient Aliens* series to explore the widespread fascination with other life in the cosmos. He will reflect on the 1997 film *Contact* to see what encounter reports reveal about meaning and transcendence. [Live Oak UUC](#), 820 N. Fairview, Goleta CA

January 25, 11am – 1:00pm PT: Fish Stark: *How to Talk to Non-Humanists About Humanism*. A free Zoom presentation by Fish Stark, the Executive Director of the American Humanist Association. [How to Talk to Non-Humanists About Humanism](#)

January 29, 4:00 pm Pacific: *The Times That Tried Men’s Souls: Thomas Paine’s Service During the Revolutionary War*. U.S. Representatives Jamie Raskin and Victoria Spartz will deliver opening words. Little known facts about Paine’s military service will be disclosed and Jack Kelly, author of *Tom Paine’s War* will be the keynote speaker. Actor Ian Ruskin will read excerpts from Paine’s *The American Crisis* papers, which were often written in battleground locations. Gene Jones from Florida Veterans for Common Sense will talk about Paine’s heroism and



how the government repaid his service. This online presentation celebrating Thomas Paine is sponsored by the Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA), Black Nonbelievers, Thomas Paine Historical Association, Freethought Society, Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, American Atheists, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Thomas Paine Society, and Center for Inquiry. On-line. [A Celebration of Thomas Paine](#)

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To Join or Donate to HSSB: Annual Membership dues \$36 for an individual, \$60 for a couple, \$100 for a Society Supporter and \$300 (or more) for a Society Patron. Dues payments and other donations can be made via

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- Membership questions? Contact Mary Taylor at HSSB.Membership777@gmail.com

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[meetup](#) YouTube





Humanist Society of Santa Barbara
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HSSB Calendar

Tuesday January 13. 5:00 pm HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

Saturday, January 17, 3:00 pm. Dr. Michael O. Emerson: *The Religion of Whiteness*. On Zoom.
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

Tuesday February 10. 5:00 pm HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

Sunday February 15. 3:00pm Thomas Dixon: *How Valentines Day Became Secular*. On Zoom.
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.