

# Humanist in the House An Interview with US Representative Jared Huffman, 2020 Humanist of the Year

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*The following is adapted (with permission) from my presentation of the Humanist of the Year Award to Rep. Huffman at the American Humanist Association's 79th Annual Conference, "Distant but Together: A Virtual Celebration of Humanism," on August 8, 2020.*

**IN MY MANY YEARS** of service to the humanist movement, this is the first time I've had the honor to personally introduce the Humanist of the Year, and I couldn't be more pleased to do so. After meeting Representative Jared Huffman (D-CA) back in September of 2017, I was struck by his open approach, his genuine commitment to humanity and the environment, and his deep respect for people from every kind of background and belief. He subsequently made news across the nation when he went public as a humanist and agnostic, just the second member of Congress in history to take such a bold step.

In the months that followed, Ron Millar □of the Center for Freethought Equality and I met with Huffman and several of his fellow members of the US House of Representatives, and the Congressional Freethought Caucus was born. The CFC continues to grow, promoting sound public policy based on reason, science, and moral values while protecting the secular character of government and demonstrating the value of freedom of thought worldwide.

As a founder and current co-chair of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, Huffman has forged a coalition of more than a dozen members of Congress, working together to defend the rights of humanists, freethinkers, and other nontheists. Under his leadership the caucus has been an important voice on a wide range of issues, including: opposing the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, speaking out against the creation of the poorly named Religious Liberty Task Force, and supporting legislation such as the NO BAN Act, which the House passed in July to limit the president's authority to issue travel bans on foreign people entering the US and which prohibits religious discrimination in decisions related to immigration.

Huffman was elected in 2012 to represent California's second district, which follows the coast north of San Francisco. He currently serves on the Committee on Natural Resources, the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and the Select Committee on the Climate Crisis. In the 116th Congress, he chairs the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife, with jurisdiction over federal water projects, fisheries management, coastal and oceans policy, as well as wildlife and endangered species. He continues to be instrumental in defending America's coastlines from offshore oil and gas drilling, introducing legislation to protect ecosystems and coastal economies while reducing our unhealthy dependency on fossil fuels.

Before serving in Congress, Huffman served in the California Assembly, and prior to that he was an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, with legal cases that also included victories in gender and race discrimination trials.

It is my distinct pleasure to name Rep. Jared Huffman the 2020 Humanist of the Year—for his powerful, progressive advancements for our country and our planet and for his outstanding humanistic leadership. Congressman, the floor is yours.

**Rep. Jared Huffman:** Thank you so much. I am humbled and not worthy, especially when I think about the amazing people who have received this award in years past—among them incredible scientists and writers like one of my favorites, Kurt Vonnegut. I clearly don't belong in that strata, but I'll tell you what I'll do: I will try to live up to the incredible honor you have bestowed upon me, and I will accept it on behalf of all the good nontheists everywhere. And, of course, on behalf of a lot of closeted nontheists in the United States Congress, as well as nontheists around the country who may be wondering whether they can step into the arena of public service.

Thank you, Roy, and thanks to the American Humanist Association for being such great partners and for helping set me on this interesting path of being the only openly nontheist member of Congress.

**Roy Speckhardt:** Many atheists and agnostics find it empowering to hear others' stories about how they moved away from the belief systems of their early years to embrace a more humanistic way of thinking. I understand that you began to move away from organized religion in your early twenties. Can you tell us a little bit about your thought process during that period?

**Huffman:** It was obviously a time when I was figuring out who I was as an adult, and there was some pain involved. I lost my father, and in the midst of a liberal university education I started to think more critically. The answers that I had accepted from my religious upbringing just didn't work for me anymore.

I'd like to think that some of the good aspects of the moral framework I got from my religious upbringing are still with me, but the dogma is not. I suspect many humanists and other nontheists have had this experience if they grew up in a religion. You do feel a sense of loss when the break happens. For many years I didn't really know what label I could embrace or if there was a community of fellow travelers who might see things the way I did. You gave me your book, which helped me realize that humanism really is that label for me. That's why I felt comfortable coming out and embracing humanism—I wouldn't have done it if it hadn't been for you.

**Speckhardt:** Thank you, I'm very humbled by that. Have things changed for you in the three years since you first identified publicly as a humanist and an agnostic?

**Huffman:** When I first began to think about doing it, to a person everyone I talked to thought it was a terrible idea—advisors I trust, close family members and friends who had my interest at heart. Nobody could really see any upside to it; they thought it would hurt my political future.

I went against all of that advice because it felt like the right thing to do. I'm so glad I did, because I personally feel like a weight has lifted. I'm just being honest about who I am. And the nice surprise is a little bit of a political upside, especially in a district like mine. There are just an awful lot of people who see the world the same way, and they appreciate the honesty. And even people of faith who were growing tired of this drift to theocracy and the other challenges we're grappling with appreciated what I did and how I did it. So, it's been a net positive.

**Speckhardt:** Can you share a few guiding moral principles that are meaningful to you as a humanist?

**Huffman:** The moral framework of humanism just works for me—right down the line. I

love the focus on facts and science and reality. I love the focus on goodness as a human quality that we owe to each other and future generations rather than as some sort of a thing we need to do to gain entry to the afterlife. Humanism is a beautiful expression of the best of humanity, as I see it, and if everybody followed its principles I think we'd be a lot better off. We'd have far less conflict. We'd solve problems better. We probably wouldn't be in a number of these overlapping crises we're dealing with today because we would have been listening to facts and to science, and we'd make decisions based on those rather than wishful thinking, including of a religious variety.

**Speckhardt:** You're a champion of environmental justice and addressing the climate crisis. What drivers in your life brought you to make these issues such a priority?

**Huffman:** Let's start with justice. I always cared a lot about civil rights growing up in the Midwest. This wasn't something that my parents instilled in me. My older sister was marching and protesting in the heyday of the civil rights and anti-war movements, and as a kid I also found my own inspiration. I had a picture of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King on my wall growing up in the late 1960s and early '70s; those were my icons, and I think I've always felt a great deal of shame, guilt, and confusion about racism and its central role in the founding and the history of this country. I've felt it for as long as I can remember, even though I got one of those airbrushed versions of history.

As far as environmentalism, I've always had a connection to nature. I love fishing and the outdoors, and I've always been fascinated by rivers and natural systems. So, it's always resonated with me very personally to do that kind of work.

**Speckhardt:** The courts and the current administration together are making changes that elevate religious identity as the paramount concern in addressing the rights of individuals and organizations, resulting in religion being a valid legal excuse to engage in other types of discrimination. What can we do to reverse this course?

**Huffman:** It's really disturbing to see religion used as a sword in a very political and craven way rather than religious liberty as a shield. What can we do about it? I think we've got to call it out. We've got to shame them. We've got to make sure they know that we know what they're up to. [Secretary of State] Mike Pompeo's Commission on Unalienable Rights, for example, is just a sham. And even as loaded as it was from the start, and as much as we know what he's trying to do with it, the report was virtually useless. They're certainly trying to drag us down the slippery slope to theocracy so we must be vigilant and challenge them on every front—obviously in the courts, where the American Humanist Association is lawyered up, and now in Congress where a growing number of us are organized. The Congressional Freethought Caucus has really helped, with colleagues like Jamie Raskin (D-MD), Jerry McNerney (D-CA), Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), and others who will join me in efforts to push back.

**Speckhardt:** You've mentioned before that you believe even some conservative religious Americans are beginning to tire of the chaos and cruelty of the current administration. How can we as humanists better make space for disaffected groups in our fight against their theocratic policies?

**Huffman:** It's a great question, and I think the humanist community is doing a great job. The secular coalition continues to grow, and I'm always impressed when I see it working broadly as an interfaith coalition. When you can find that common cause with thoughtful people of faith, I think your work and your voice is more powerful. So, I think that's a great strategy.

**Speckhardt:** In response to Pompeo's Commission on Unalienable Rights report that was released in late July, you and Rep. Raskin put out a statement as co-chairs of the Congressional Freethought Caucus asserting that the report "may lend credence to a foreign policy that disregards our international human rights framework in favor of a narrower interpretation of fundamental property and majority religious rights, one that allows for increased discrimination against political dissidents, women, and minority groups."

The statement concludes that the Congressional Freethought Caucus will monitor the impact of Secretary Pompeo's commission and hold the administration accountable. What actions is the CFC hoping to take to hold Pompeo to account?

**Huffman:** We're going to keep challenging specific policy initiatives he undertakes. Obviously we're going to see efforts to prioritize some religions over others. I was so pleased that the House of Representatives passed the NO BAN Act trying to take religion out of our immigration policy, as well as repudiating the Muslim ban. It's this kind of blatant discrimination that we see over and over from this administration, as well as the attacks abroad on LGBTQ rights and reproductive choice that they may have a harder time advancing here at home.

**Speckhardt:** As of this writing, the Senate is poised to vote on President Trump's nominee to the Supreme Court, Amy Coney Barrett. What are your thoughts, given her strong Christian faith, her conservative jurisprudence, and on-the-record remarks promoting "a distinctly Christian worldview in every area of the law"?



AHA Executive Director Roy Speckhardt awarding Jared Huffman the Humanist of the Year award over Zoom

**Huffman:** Saying you want to make the law a vehicle for promoting a “Christian worldview” is disturbing for those of us who don’t want to live in a theocracy, and it’s hard to reconcile with her assurances that she would never let her religion impact her interpretation of the law.

But let me emphasize that my opposition to confirming Judge Barrett to the Supreme Court is not about her Catholic religion, just as my support for Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wasn’t about her Jewish religion. This is about judicial records and philosophies, and how that impacts peoples’ lives. It’s about what happens to healthcare, abortion rights, decades of progress on civil rights, and potentially a contested presidential election. And it’s about the unfair, ruthlessly partisan process whereby Republicans break their own public promises and do whatever it takes to steamroll Democrats and jam through their priorities. Republicans are eager to declare us “anti-Catholic” for opposing Judge Barrett, which is nonsense and another example of how they try to weaponize religion. I’ve been married for twenty-five years to a practicing Catholic, went to Catholic law school, and have a daughter at a Catholic college. So, I’m pretty comfortable with Catholics. Let’s focus on the work of the Supreme Court, peoples’ lives, and a very rotten, hyper-partisan process.



Rep. Jared Huffman (D-CA) with AHA supporters in Occidental, California, in 2018.

**Speckhardt:** Often the erosion of separation of church and state starts with small incremental decisions and slow cultural shifts. However, recently we’ve seen more overt attempts, such as the attempt to expand private school vouchers during the pandemic.

**Huffman:** Certainly anything and everything that Betsy DeVos is doing would be a good place to start. Sadly, it doesn’t end there. You also have [Attorney General] Bill Barr bringing a dark and heavy religious dogma to a lot of his speeches.

I hope humanists will continue to be ready to challenge these things in court. Sometimes the member organizations of the Secular Coalition for America can go further than what I can do as a member of Congress. For example, with the Cares Act, which was obviously a very important multi-trillion-dollar response to the terrible pandemic that has slammed our citizens and sent the country into an economic tailspin, we needed to get a lot of money out the door very quickly in order to prevent an awful lot of hardship. Unfortunately, we did that in some ways that allowed taxpayer dollars to go to religious organizations.

I didn't write it that way. I'm not thrilled about the way that came together, but my ability to stand in the way of a multi-trillion-dollar response to a crisis is pretty limited in a moment like that. This is where the secular community can step in and, as necessary, even bring legal challenges if those dollars are being misspent on religious activity as opposed to saving jobs and doing the other things that we intended.

**Speckhardt:** What would you say to a member of Congress or aspiring candidate even who is contemplating making their humanist identity more known?

**Huffman:** Well, every district, every community is a little bit different. But my sense is that a growing number of Americans are totally fine with a thoughtful nontheistic moral framework. In fact, that's how they see the world. And so I'd say, the water's fine—come on in. I do have some colleagues who would very much agree with you and me about religion but are in districts where the conventional wisdom may still apply, and I respect that. These are deeply personal choices. And yet if you're in the situation you describe, and you're thinking about making your humanism known, if struggling with staying silent, I say go for it.

**Speckhardt:** Assuming the presidential election yields a definitive result or at least the process moves to a conclusion in the weeks after, what are your hopes for the coming year—in terms of legislation and specifically in terms of how we meet the challenge of the coronavirus?

**Huffman:** We're at a crossroads where the country must choose between almost diametrically opposite futures. We'll either continue with divisiveness, chaos, and authoritarianism, knowing that the pandemic will get worse, or we'll get back to governing and making public policy based on facts, science, and some measure of institutional norms and accountability. If we choose a new path, I think we can quickly change course because the science is clear; we just need to follow it. A coherent national strategy built around widespread, rapid, and affordable testing, robust tracking and tracing, a national PPE procurement and stockpiling plan, and clear, consistent guidance on masks and safety protocols—all of this is within reach and would make a tremendous difference.

**Speckhardt:** Well, Congressman, thank you so much for all your work. Is there anything more you'd like to add?

**Huffman:** Just a reiteration of my appreciation for the American Humanist Association and all of the great secular groups that are part of the coalition you work with. There's no way I could have founded the Freethought Caucus without you, and there's no way we'd be growing and engaging effectively, with a lot of excitement about possibilities for the future, if we didn't have this strategic relationship. Thanks for all your great advocacy and your leadership, and of course for bringing me out of the closet as a humanist. I feel better about everything. It works.

**Speckhardt:** Thank you, Representative Huffman for your work and for everything you do to make humanistic change a reality.

**Huffman:** And thanks for this great award.