

Atlanta Freethought News

An AFS Publication • Volume 9 Number 12 • December 2003

Our December Meeting

Our December 14 meeting will include a speech by Laughlin McDonald, Director of the Voting Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Director of the Southern Regional Office of the ACLU since 1972. He is a graduate of Columbia University and the University of Virginia Law School. He has represented minorities in numerous discrimination cases, testified frequently before Congress, and has written extensively for scholarly and popular publications on constitutional and civil liberties issues. His book *A Voting Rights Odyssey, Black Enfranchisement in Georgia* was published this year.

The meeting will be at 1:00 at the **Atlanta Freethought Center**, Suite 500, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA. Please feel free to arrive early for snacks and conversation before the meeting.

To get there from Atlanta, take I-400 north past I-285 by 8 miles to Exit 7B, which is GA-140. Take GA-140 (Holcomb Bridge Road) west about 1 mile and turn left at Grimes Bridge Road. Go 0.2 miles to 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, which is on the right.

AFS Activities

The next **AFS Social** will be at Las Margaritas Restaurant at 1842 Cheshire Bridge Road (Atlanta) on Friday, December 19, at 7:00 PM. To get there, take I-85 to the Cheshire Bridge Road exit (Exit 88) on the north side of Atlanta. Turn east at the light and go about 1.5 miles. The restaurant will be on the right.

The **AFS Discussion Group** will meet on Sunday, December 21, at 4:00 to 6:00 PM at the AF Center.

The **Tuesday Lunch Bunch** meets every Tuesday for lunch at Panahar Restaurant at 12:30. The address is 3375 Buford Hwy, Suite 1060, in Atlanta. Come on down and enjoy the Bangladeshi food buffet and the great company.

SOS Meets at AF Center

The **Secular Organizations for Sobriety** meets at the Atlanta Freethought Center every Tuesday evening at 7:30 PM. SOS is the secular replacement for AA (Alcoholics Anonymous).

Fellowship of Reason Meeting

The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of each month at 12:30 PM at the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 1025 Mount Vernon Hwy, in Atlanta. For details, see www.fellowshipofreason.com.

Alabama Freethought Association's Annual Solstice Celebration

(at Lake Hypatia, near Talladega, AL)

Saturday, December 20th

"An Informal Evening Gathering, Hosted by the Mocking Bard: 6:00 PM "Until..."
Wholly Spirit Communion ("Bring Your Own")
Provided: mixers, apple-cinnamon cider, hot chocolate, and eggnog:):)
Presentation: The Mocking Bard: "Yes Virginia, You Can Be An Idiot All Your Life"

Followed By: Marshmallow Roast & "Make An Asimov Yourself Memorial Limerick Contest!! (Everyone contributes! Try to avoid using the word "Nantucket")

Sunday, December 21st

11:00--Hair of the Dog Hour
12:00--Solstice Feast (Potluck)
1:00--Speaker: Gary Taylor, Alabama Organ Donation Center & Legacy Foundation
Topic: "Giving The Gift Of Life"
2:00--Speaker: Karon Park
Topic: "Humor"
3:00--"DIRTY SANTA"

Patsyann says that Saturday night is designed to be informal and "skippable" for those disinclined to venture into the wilds of Talladega in the waning hours of daylight. The real deal is Sunday, but Saturday evening will be fun too, with festive drinks, a few blasphemous xmas carols...you know, good clean family fun.

Please RSVP via email to doobiemon812@aol.com. Remember to bring a limerick Saturday, a covered dish Sunday, and a wrapped gift (\$5-10) if you want to play DIRTY SANTA.

Need Directions? **Contact Patsyann:**
mothenature@acs-isp.com

Meetings and Activities

Dec 14: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
Dec 19: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00 PM.
Dec 21: AFS Discussion Group, AF Center, 4:00 PM.
Dec 20-21: AFA Solstice Celebration, Lake Hypatia, AL.

Freethinker: A person who rejects authority and dogma, forming opinions about religion on the basis of reason and rational inquiry independently of tradition, authority, or established belief. – American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition



Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at the AFS Center, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA, unless otherwise noted. Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

Dec 14: Laughlin McDonald, Director of the Southern Regional Office of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) will speak on the ACLU.

Jan 11: TBA

Feb 8: John Henderson (tentative) of Asheville, NC will speak about his new book, *Fear Faith Fact Fantasy*.

Mar 10: TBA

To join the AFS Forum e-mail list, send a blank message to AFSforum-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To join the AFS Announcements list, send a blank email to afs-announce-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To join the Georgia Freethinkers Letter Writing Cooperative, send a blank email to flwc-ga-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

You can unsubscribe by sending an email to xxxx-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com.

The Atlanta Freethought Society is a member-run organization dedicated to advancing freethought and protecting the rights and reputation of freethinkers, agnostics, atheists and humanists. We welcome anyone who is interested in learning about the advantages of living life free of religious dogma through speeches, debates, discussions, protests, letters to the editor, broadcast appearances, and any other reasonable and civil means available.

We define freethought as "the forming of opinions about life in general and religion in particular on the basis of reason and the evidence of our senses, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief."

We actively support a strict separation of church and state as the best means to guarantee liberty for all, regardless of religious belief or, especially, lack of belief.

We seek to educate ourselves on many topics but especially on religion and non-religion, primarily through having a series of thought-provoking speakers and programs and by maintaining and using our own extensive library of freethought, religious, and related books, pamphlets, videotapes, and audiotapes.

We provide an organization where freethinkers and non-theists can develop friendships, talk freely, socialize and enjoy each other's company. We do not discriminate against anyone on such irrelevant grounds as race, sexual orientation, age, gender, class, or physical disability. We welcome members and leaders of all political parties and preferences.

Because we are designated by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) educational organization, contributions to AFS are tax deductible.

Any who are like-minded are welcome to join us.

Atlanta Freethought News
an AFS publication

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Steve Yothment

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Vol. 9, Number 12, December 2003
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Judge Moore Removed

Chief Justice Roy Moore was removed from office on November 13 for refusing to obey a federal court order to move his Ten Commandments monument from the rotunda of the state courthouse.

The Alabama Court of the Judiciary unanimously imposed the harshest penalty possible after a one-day trial in which Moore said his refusal was a moral and lawful acknowledgment of God. Prosecutors said Moore's defiance, left unchecked, would harm the judicial system.

Moore, a champion of religious conservatives, had been suspended since August but allowed to collect his \$170,000 annual salary. He was halfway through his six-year term.

Presiding Judge William Thompson said the nine-member court had no choice but to give the harshest punishment after Moore willfully and publicly ignored the federal court order. "The chief justice placed himself above the law," Thompson said.

"I have absolutely no regrets," Moore said afterward. "I'm very comfortable in the fact that I've done my job and upheld my oath."

Moore served notice that he wants to continue his crusade for "acknowledgement of God" in government. "I will announce something in a few weeks that will alter the course of the country," he said, declining to elaborate.

Asked if he would run for public office, he replied, "I'm not thinking of

running for anything right now."

Richard Cohen, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, one of the three groups that sued Moore over the monument, said the action of the court was courageous.

"They stood up to a popular political figure and said no one is above the law. We intend now to file a complaint with the Alabama State Bar Association asking that Moore be disbarred," Cohen said.

In a press release on November 13, Americans United for Separation of Church and State welcomed the unanimous vote by the Alabama Court of the Judiciary to remove Judge Moore.

"Moore flagrantly announced his intention to violate a federal court order, made a mockery of the legal system and created an unseemly media circus," said AU's President Barry Lynn. "Today, he learned the results of that defiance. The Court of the Judiciary has served the cause of justice."

"This case was a no-brainer," remarked Lynn. "Moore's refusal to abide by the rule of law made it clear that he is not fit to sit on a court anywhere in this country. The Court's vote was a courageous act that should be hailed by everyone who understands the importance of the rule of law in America."

Lynn vowed that further attempts by Moore to violate the separation of church and state will not be tolerated. Should the Ten Commandments mon-

ument reappear on public display at the Judicial Building or other government facilities, Lynn said, Americans United will respond quickly.

"We beat Moore in court two times," said Lynn. "We will not hesitate to do so again if he persists in violating the Constitution."

Larry Darby, president of the Atheist Law Center in Montgomery, AL, said in a press release, "Although polls indicate that most citizens of Alabama believe it was wrong for Moore to wantonly flout the law, it is important for people of reason to continue to speak out in support of the 'rule of law' and our constitutional republic form of government... Moore has shamed both the Bench and the Bar and made a mockery of Alabama in the eyes of the world. Moore should be stripped of his office and then disbarred."

MOORE TO PAY \$7000 FOR MOVING

On November 19, acting Supreme Court Chief Justice Gorman Houston said Moore must pay the \$7,000 expense for moving the 5,280-pound monument.

But, in a written statement, Moore argued he didn't agree to have the monument moved. "In fact, I never ordered the monument moved because it represented an acknowledgment of God," Moore said.

[From a Nov 13 AP article by Kyle Wingfield, a Nov 13 AU press release and a Nov 19 article by Jannell McGrew in the *Montgomery Advertiser*]



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Ten Commandments Removed from Habersham County Courthouse

A federal judge ordered Habersham County to remove its Ten Commandments displays at the county courthouse and swimming pool, finding the markers run afoul of the First Amendment. Senior U.S. District Judge William O’Kelley in Gainesville said Habersham “failed to retreat from the unambiguous religious purpose” expressed when the county first passed a resolution to post the displays in 2001. For this reason, the judge wrote in an order signed on November 17, the displays fail a test set by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1971.

“While there might be ways to constitutionally display the Ten Commandments as part of a larger, historical presentation, Habersham County has failed to do so in this case,” O’Kelley wrote.

The Habersham displays were challenged by the Rev. Charles “Bo” Turner of the Tallulah Falls Baptist Church of Clarkesville.

“I really expected it,” Turner said. “I did not feel the other side had a position that was strong enough to stand

up...The decision is good for all of us.”

Habersham’s displays of the Ten Commandments hang just inside the entrance to the courthouse and at a county swimming pool.

Turner, who was represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, filed suit in March 2002.

A few months later, the Habersham board of commissioners passed a resolution to accept private donations of historical legal documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Mayflower Compact, the Bill of Rights, the U.S. Constitution and the Magna Carta. These documents were placed next to the Ten Commandments displays.

But O’Kelley wrote that these secular displays do not cure the unconstitutional violations that arise from the Ten Commandments displays.

Perhaps the most serious problem, the judge said, was the wording of Habersham’s resolution when it initially adopted the Ten Commandments displays. The board resolution stated, “We hereby petition the God of heaven to preserve the peace which

he has so graciously extended to us by our ancient acknowledgement of the Ten Commandments and beg his continued protection and alleviation of ills which come to those who forget him and his law.”

Such wording leaves no question about the intent of the displays, O’Kelley wrote.

“If nothing else, the board made it very clear why it was doing what it did,” the judge’s order said. “It did not leave the record murky or attempt to hide behind a sham secular purpose... The lone display of the Ten Commandments was blatantly unconstitutional.”

A similar suit is pending in federal court against Barrow County, which has a display of the commandments in its courthouse. A trial date has not been set.

In October, Jackson, Cherokee and Walton commissioners voted to allow displays similar to Habersham’s. Suits are not yet filed in those counties.

[From an article by Bill Rankin in the Nov 19 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*]

Legislators to Push for Amendment

Group wants to allow posting of Ten Commandments

Fearing the Ten Commandments and other religious staples are under attack, a group of conservative Florida lawmakers is joining a national push to amend the U.S. Constitution to allow posting of the commandments in schools, courts and other public places.

The move comes in the wake of several court fights across the country over the biblical commandments’ place in government buildings.

More than a dozen Republican state House and Senate members met on November 19 with leaders of a grassroots evangelical movement that wants a change to the U.S. Constitution to spell out that the Ten Commandments, the motto “In God We Trust,” and other phrases referencing God can be displayed.

One of the leaders of the legislative

group, Republican Rep. Dennis Baxley of Ocala, said he would sponsor a measure in the House next spring that, if passed, would urge Congress to make the change to the Constitution. He said there’s a groundswell of people who are like him – who perceive Christianity as under attack by a liberal court system.

“I meet people all the time who say, ‘Isn’t there something we can do?’” Baxley said. “There is a wave of public opinion waiting.”

The House measure would be purely symbolic, without any force of law. But the activists pushing it say it would send a powerful message. A similar message to Congress already has passed in Kentucky.

“The first five or six states are going to be important,” said Judy Webb Sipes, a Kentucky attorney working

with the evangelical ministry Light of the World in pushing the amendment, which if passed by Congress would require ratification by 38 states.

Civil-liberties groups reject the notion that Christianity is under attack and say efforts to protect the Ten Commandments are an attempt to force the religious beliefs of the majority onto society as a whole and use tax dollars to do it.

“There aren’t restrictions on exercising religion in public places, that’s not what they are interested in,” said Howard Simon, director of the Florida chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. “What these people want is government funding for a government-sponsored display of a religious document.”

[From a Nov 20 AP article by David Royce.]

Massachusetts Court Rules Gay Marriage Ban Unconstitutional

Massachusetts' highest court ruled on November 18 that the state cannot deny gays and lesbians the right to marry and ordered the state's lawmakers to devise changes in the law within six months.

In a 4-3 ruling, the court stopped short of allowing marriage licenses to be issued to the seven couples that challenged the Massachusetts law.

The ruling could set new legal ground, and drew quick reaction from advocates on both sides of the issue.

Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney issued a paper statement saying he believes marriage should be between a man and a woman and he would support an amendment to the state's constitution "to make that expressly clear."

"Barred access to the protections, benefits, and obligations of civil marriage, a person who enters into an intimate, exclusive union with another of the same sex is arbitrarily deprived of membership in one of our community's most rewarding and cherished institutions," the court's ruling said. "That exclusion is incompatible with the constitutional principles of respect for individual autonomy and equality under law."

Connie Mackey of the conservative Family Research Council criticized the ruling, saying it was "a clear case of the courts overruling the majority

opinion of the people."

"If the will of the people has anything to do with it... the people will throw out any legislator that upholds this ruling," she said. "The culture has seen the family unit for thousands of years as one man and one woman for the purpose of raising children."

Mackey also urged passage of a federal constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriages.

But Elizabeth Birch, director of the gay rights organization Human Rights Campaign, argued that the courts are not obliged to support a majority of the people.

"If not for courts, African-Americans would not have the right to vote, women would not have the right to vote," she said. "The purpose of a constitution is to protect a minority group from the wrath of the majority."

"The majority of people understand that a government-issued civil license to marry is not a threat to anyone," Birch added.

In its ruling, the Massachusetts court rejected arguments based on religious or moral grounds — from either side of the contentious issue.

"Our concern is with the Massachusetts Constitution as a charter of governance for every person properly within its reach," the ruling said.

"The question before us is whether,

consistent with the Massachusetts Constitution, the commonwealth may deny the protections, benefits, and obligations conferred by civil marriage to two individuals of the same sex who wish to marry," the court said. "We conclude that it may not."

In a press release on November 18, The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United, said the Massachusetts court was right to make its ruling on constitutional, not religious, grounds.

"The court majority explained that this decision is based on constitutional principles, not religious dogma," said Lynn. "In a nation that separates religion and government, that's a vital distinction."

"This decision deals only with civil marriage, not religious marriage," he continued. "It's important for all Americans to understand that under this ruling every house of worship retains the right to marry or not marry same-sex couples in keeping with their faith traditions."

"Religious Right groups will no doubt try to spread hysteria about the decision, and I hope the American people firmly reject their overheated appeals to intolerance and divisiveness," Lynn concluded.

[From a Nov 18 CNN.com article and a Nov 18 AU press release]

December Board Meeting Minutes

In attendance: Judy Thompson, Kate Miller, Kelly Wilhoit, Steve Yothment, Lew Southern, Harriet Harris, Bill Burton

Minutes taken by: Harriet Harris

Time/Date of meeting: 2:00 PM, November 16, 2003

- ▶ The minutes of the October meeting were approved as they appeared in the November newsletter with one correction: The ballots are to *mailed*, not *received* by Nov 23.
- ▶ Treasurer Bill Burton distributed a detailed financial report, showing a balance of \$1,838, with one bill just received for \$600 for annual fire insurance, leaving a balance of \$1,238.
- ▶ Bill reported that the 2nd edition of Michael Ledo's book *A Sceptic's View of the Christian Bible* has been completed.

We now need loans to finance its publishing. Several loan offers have already been made. The book will be sold through Amazon.

- ▶ Bill also reported that we are running out of copies of Massamo Pigliucci's book *Tales of the Rational*. We will need loans to finance further printing.
- ▶ Steve announced that Sue Garland has accepted nomination for the Officer position of V.P. External Communication.
- ▶ The board discussed future speakers.
- ▶ The board discussed the voting ballots for the current election. The board decided to include a return envelope with the ballot, and to include a voting form for three By-laws amendments.

Who Was Wenceslas? Christmas Myth-Making

by William Hopper From the Secular Web website, <http://www.infidels.org/>. Reprinted by permission.

Each December we head to the mall to buy our annual Christmas decorations. This fine yuletide tradition is usually followed closely by yet another great tradition: the annual debate about what (if anything) trees, holly, or mistletoe have to do with the birth of Jesus or the Jewish Festival of Lights. The answer, usually, is nothing at all. Like many revered Judeo-Christian traditions, most of these were borrowed from others. The following brief synopsis of the origins of Christmas customs is offered in an attempt to shed light on some of the more-obscure references.

CAROLING-WASSAILING

Wassailing, or caroling, is Celtic in origin. Originally, wassail was a cup used for beverages made of mulled ale, curdled cream, roasted apples, nuts, eggs, and spices. The word comes from the Old Norse *ves heill*, meaning "be well, and in good health." (See Encyclopedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=1394&tocid=0&query=ves%20heill&ct>.)

The tradition of wassailing (or singing for ale) supposedly comes from a Saxon woman named Rowena who presented Prince Vortigen a bowl of wine and toasted him with the words "Waes hael." The Celts mimicked this toast by going door-to-door singing to bless the farmers for the next season of crops. In thanks, the farmers would offer the wassailers a drink, usually mulled wine or hard cider, in return for the well-wishing. The wassailers would wind through the city and end up at the orchard. There, they would blow horns and beat drums in an attempt to wake the tree from its winter slumber so that it would again bear fruit. This was also a community service disguised as a ritual. By going door-to-door, the crowd was able to check-in on the sick and elderly of the town to make sure they were still alive.

THE FEAST OF STEPHEN

The Stephen in the carol Good King

Wenceslas is the biblical St. Stephen who was martyred by being thrown off a cliff near Jerusalem. Saul of Tarsus (who later became St. Paul) was witness to Stephen's martyrdom and it is said that this was one of the main reasons that Saul embraced Christianity. The Catholic Church holds a feast day to St. Stephen on December 26. (Catholic Encyclopedia, St. Stephen) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14286b.htm>

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The origin of the Christmas tree is difficult to pin down as so many cultures had sacred trees. The Roman Saturnalia festival included the decorating of houses with fir branches. The Norse had Yggdrasil, the Great Tree of Life, which some contend is the original Christmas tree. Others credit the enemies of ancient Israel, quoting Jeremiah's condemnation of sacred trees in Jeremiah 10, verses 2-4: "Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are false. A tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. Men deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move."

GIFT-GIVING AND CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

Gift-giving in December is a very old tradition. It dates back to the Saturnalia festival in Rome in the first century AD. This festival, named for the god Saturn, took place from December 17th to December 25th. Adults exchanged *strenae*, boughs of laurel and evergreen. Children were given small clay dolls called *sigillaria*. Because Saturnalia took place at the Solstice, it was also known as the Festival of Lights. Many of the presents given were candles, used to summon the sun back to life. Several hundred years later, the Celts also developed a winter festival, which they called "Candlemas." It was a midwinter house-cleaning day wherein people

would light candles and clean everything. This tradition was originally a health precaution. In the middle of winter, the small hovels would become rank and dirty. A day was set aside to cleanse the houses of the soot and dirt that would accumulate through European winters. The early Catholic Church allowed the idea of lighting candles in December, eventually adopting the practice into Christianity as birthday candles for Jesus. Whether they adopted this idea from the early Romans or the Celts is debatable, though it is likely the former.

CHRISTMAS WREATH

Originally, a wreath was called a "diadem." It was a band made of cloth that was worn as a circlet around the head very much like a joggers sweatband. In 776 B.C., diadems or wreaths made of laurel leaves were used to crown victors of Olympic games. The Roman Caesars wore these laurel wreaths to show their victory over Roman territories. During the Olympic games in Greece, each host city would award head garlands made of branches of local trees. This version of the wreath is likely the origin of the traditional Christmas wreath made of fir trees. Hanging the wreath on a wall likely began as a remembrance of the person who owned it.

GOOD KING WENCESLAS

King Wenceslas (also "Wenceslaus") was born in Bohemia, present day Czech Republic, in approximately 907 AD. Because he was too young to rule, his mother, Drahomira, became regent when his father died. Drahomira was opposed to Christianity, and banned all Christian practices in Bohemia. When Wenceslas took power he lifted the ban on Christianity and allowed people to worship as they wished, which is why he is referred to as "Good King Wenceslas."

The carol refers to his death in the line "Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen..." His brother, Boleslav, had joined nobles in plotting an assassination. Boleslav in-

Christmas Myth-Making (*continued*)

vited Wenceslas to celebrate the Feast of Stephen and then attacked him on his way to mass. While the two fought, Boleslav's supporters jumped in and murdered Wenceslas. He died in 929 AD and is now the patron saint of the Czech Republic. (See the Catholic Encyclopedia, St. Wenceslaus) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15587b.htm>

HOLLY AND IVY

In both Norse and Celtic myth, Holly represented the woman and Ivy the man. In any fertility ritual, both were used. The intertwining of holly and ivy was meant to represent the male and female united, and good luck for any marriage. In Christian lore, the holly became identified with the crown of thorns Jesus wore on the cross; the ivy became associated with the ivy (sometimes translated as "gourd") that God gave Jonah to rest under. (Jonah 4:6-10) Both of these interpretations are ways of including the pre-Christian tradition into the "Xmas" festivities.

MISTLETOE

The Norse were likely the first to record mistletoe as being a "magical" element. In the Norse myths, Odin's wife, Frigga, made a charm that would protect her son Balder from fire, water, air, or earth. Because it grew on trees as a parasite, mistletoe was not considered to be of these four elements. Loki was able to kill Balder with a dart made of mistletoe. Afterwards, Frigga swore that mistletoe would never cause harm again, so she is said to kiss anyone who passes under it. An interesting side note to this is that the word Friday comes from Frigga's name. It was originally Frigga's Day. Similarly, Wednesday was originally Woden's Day, or Odin's Day. Thursday was Thor's Day.

ST. NICHOLAS

St. Nicholas did not live in the North Pole. He was from Myra, Turkey. The only tale we have about his life had to do with a father who had three daughters and no dowry money. The father decided to sell the daughters

into prostitution, as he wasn't going to be able to find them husbands. To prevent this, Nicholas anonymously threw bags of money through the father's window. The father used the money as a dowry for his daughters and they were saved from a life of prostitution. Nicholas is also famous for miraculously saving the life of a sailor while on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He eventually became the Bishop of Myra, and died in 340 AD. Because he was credited with saving the sailor while at sea, the Catholic Church canonized him as the patron saint of mariners. (See the Catholic Encyclopedia, St. Nicholas of Myra) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11063b.htm>

SINTER KLAAS (SANTA CLAUS)

When the Dutch adopted Christianity, the name St. Nicholas became Sinter Klaas, the Dutch rendering of Saint Nicholas. To distinguish Sinter Klaas from Odin, the Dutch Church donned him in a red robe that flowed to the ankle. The red outfit (that of a bishop) became the popular image of St. Nick throughout Europe from that time onwards.

YULE LOG

The word "yule" is generally accepted to mean "feast," although some scholars attribute it to the Scandinavian *Ylir*, the name of a winter month. The tradition of a Yule Log was originally a huge pyre of logs burned at Yule in honor of Thor, the Norse god of thunder. Regardless of the god in question, however, the burning of a log in December when it is freezing is less religious than it is practical. (See the Dictionary.com reference on Yule.) <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=Yule%3F%20>

XMAS

One of the most misinterpreted words in the Christmas vocabulary is "Xmas." Many Christians contend that using "X" in place of "Christ" is the way that evil atheists take the "Christ out of Christmas." In fact, the opposite is true. The X has been used by theologians for hundreds of years

to denote chi, the first letter in the Greek spelling of the word "Christ." It is meant to represent Christ and remind the reader of the cross upon which he was hung. (Dictionary.com, Xmas) <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=xmas>

During the transition of power from fun-loving Hellenistic orgiastic cults to supreme Christian control of the Roman Empire in the fourth century AD, just before it collapsed, Rome was rife with parties and feasts of all kinds. At the point where the Christians took control in Rome, their theology was up against a month of feasting that consisted of:

- ▶ Consualia, or the end-of-sowing-season festival, December 15
- ▶ Ops (Goddess of plenty/agriculture), December 19
- ▶ Dies Juvenalis, Coming of Age for Young Men, December 22
- ▶ Saturn's Feast, December 25
- ▶ Feast of Mithra, the Unconquerable Sun, December 25
- ▶ Brumalia, Winter Solstice on pre-Julian calendar, December 25
- ▶ Janus Day (New Year's), January 1

In December, the early Christians who fought so hard for stoic abstinence and purity were confronted with a month of drunken revelry and fun. It is no surprise that, in the end, the revelry won out. The best they could do was to adopt the festivities and mask them in Christian interpretation.

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See William Hopper's book, *The Heathen's Guide to World Religions*, at www.secweb.org/bookstore/bookdetail.asp?BookID=881.

Our apologies go to Ried Crowe and Larry Darby, whose excellent letters-to-the-editor could not be fit into this issue. Keep writing those letters!

Clipped **Letters to the Editor from AFS Members**

Steve Yothment's letter was in the Fayette County *Citizen News* on November 19.

Bill Jager's letter was in the Douglas County *Sentinel* on November 5.

Hank Shiver's letter was in the *Montgomery Advertiser* on November 27.

1st Amendment: government endorsement

I must disagree with John Mrosek's views about the First Amendment. Mr. Mrosek says that "federal cases (are) removing any reference to God and religion from our public affairs."

This is a very misleading statement, and is a typical tactic of the Religious Right. The issue here is not removing God from our public affairs; it is the government endorsement of religion. The judges are ruling that government is not allowed to endorse religion.

Every citizen has the right to pray, to acknowledge God and the Ten Commandments, and to share their faith with others. That is a Constitutional right. But we need to be careful about what we let the government do. It is not a proper role of government to be an endorser of religion.

Our Founding Fathers learned this lesson a long time ago. Government involvement with religion back in Europe led to the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and many religious wars in which millions of people were killed in the name of religion.

Every time government gets involved with religion, the rights of the citizens are trampled. If the U.S. government promoted Christianity, it would offend U.S. Muslims. If it promoted paganism, it would offend U.S. Christians.

Since we have a pluralistic society, the only way for the government to act regarding religion is to be neutral, neither promoting nor prohibiting religion. This allows citizens to freely pursue religion as they choose. The principles of freedom promoted by our system of government require that the government be religiously neutral.

Does that mean that the government promotes atheism? No! The government cannot promote or prohibit atheism either! Besides, I've never heard a government representative promote atheism, and I doubt that I ever will. Remember: the key is for the government to be religiously neutral.

It appears to me that Mr. Mrosek wants the U.S. government to force religion on its citizens. (And of course, it is his particular brand of religion that he wants promoted.) I am thankful that the Constitution prevents this from happening! I'll get my religion from a church of my choice. I don't want the government forcing it on me!

Mrosek is quick to blame the "problem" on atheists. Then, he proposes to change the First Amendment to "fix" the problem. So, in actuality, the "problem" was caused by the Founding Fathers!

I've had enough of this baloney. The Constitution is fine just like it is. If Mr. Mrosek wants government promotion of religion, he should move to Iran or Afghanistan. (Of course, the religion police may not like his particular form of religion.)

Steve Yothment
Peachtree City, GA

Dear Editor,

Bill Mitchell states, "Our founding fathers were Christians." Douglas County Sentinel, October 23, 2003.

Yes, some of the founding fathers of this country were Christian, but there were also some who were Deist and did not believe in the divinity of Jesus. Deists believe in the existence of a God on the evidence of reason and nature only, with rejection of supernatural revelation. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the first three Presidents of the United States were Deists. "By the end of the 18th century deism had become a dominant religious attitude among upper-class Americans, and the first three presidents of the United States held this conviction, as it is amply evidenced in their correspondence."

Bill Mitchell asks, "So we ask who governs? The majority or the vocal minorities?"

For religious freedom to exist for everyone, the majority cannot use the government to promote their brand of religion. No minority is prohibiting anyone's free exercise of religion. People in the United States are free to practice their religion as they choose without government interference (minority and majority alike).

Even those Founding Fathers who were Christian wanted to safeguard individual freedom, they did not establish a Christian government. The majority of the citizens in the United States may be Christian, but the government is secular. Article 11 of the Treaty between the United States and Tripoli states: "As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion . . ." The Treaty of Tripoli was passed unanimously vote by the Senate and signed by the 2nd President of the United States, John Adams (one of this countries "Founding Fathers") on June 10, 1797.

Everyone with religious majority, or minority religious beliefs, and everyone without any religious beliefs is protected by having a separation between religion and government.

Sincerely,
Bill Jager

Dear Editor:

Sen. Jeff Sessions must really hate the Bill of Rights and the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence. If he and other politicians don't, why are they trying to undermine it?

Should the state and federal government be able to exclude homosexuals from the concept that all men are created equal? There is nothing in the phrase that says that only white heterosexual men are created equal. It says, "all men." That tells me that there were no devout Christians working on that document, just moral men who believed in human rights. It is not news that Alabama and its citizens have a long and tragic history of violating basic human rights.

That hated First Amendment will finally be overthrown, much to the glee of the conservative Christian. Holy matrimony is a religious sacrament, and Jeff Sessions wants the federal government to tell churches how they must perform that sacrament. Why is the government involving itself in the matters of religion and how it is practiced?

What next, Senator Sessions? Will you outlaw praying for the sick? Praying for the sick is practicing medicine without a license.

Rev. Hank Shiver
Talledega

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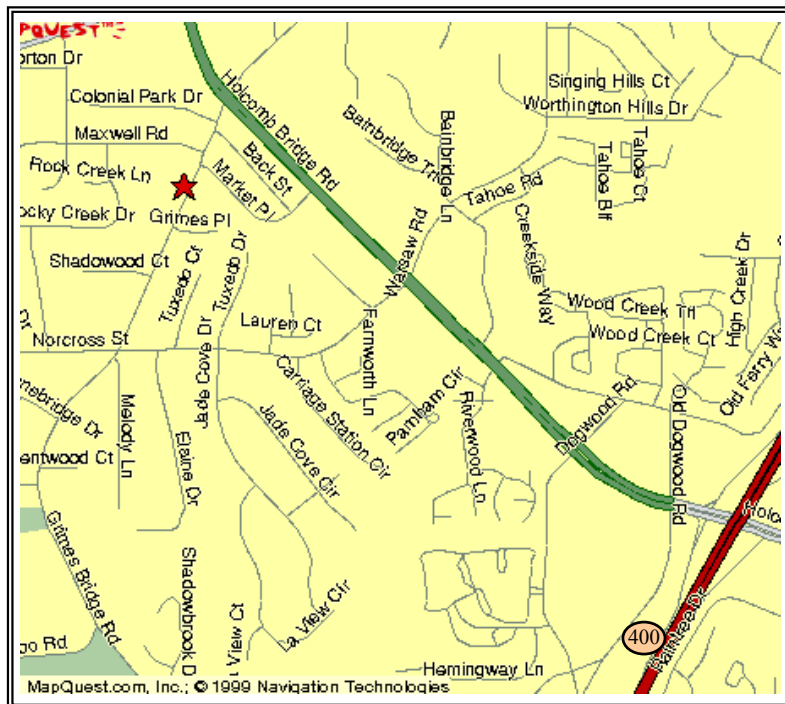
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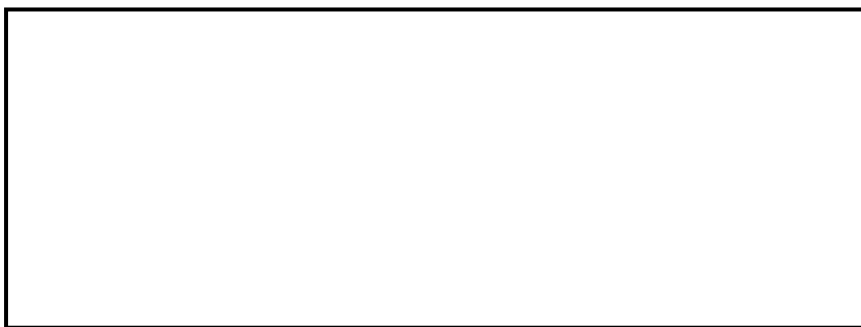
Atlanta Freethought Society

The December Meeting: Sunday, December 14 1:00 PM at the AFS Center 1170 Grimes Bridge Road Roswell, GA

This Month's Speaker: Laughlin McDonald Director of the ACLU Southern Regional Office



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