

Atlanta Freethought News

An AFS Publication • Volume 10 Number 2 • February 2004

The February Meeting

The February 8 AFS meeting will include a talk by Dr. John Henderson of Asheville, NC about his new book, *Fear Faith Fact Fantasy*.

Dr. Henderson spoke at the July meeting last year.

His book calls attention to the role religion has played in our nation's history, and shows how fortunate we are in curbing and restricting all of the encroachments the "faithful" have made on our basic freedoms and liberties to date.

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, February 13, 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, February 15, 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.

Darwin Day: February 12

On February 12, Freethought groups around the world will celebrate the birthday of Charles Darwin. (For details, see www.DarwinDay.org.) AFS plans to have a table set up at Georgia State University with material that honors the scientist. The coordinator for Darwin Day activities is Ried Crowe. If you would like to help out at the table, please email Ried at riedpamc@bellsouth.net.

Meetings and Activities

Feb 8: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
Feb 13: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00 PM.
Feb 15: AFS Board Meeting, AF Center, 2:00 PM.
Feb 15: AFS Discussion Group, AF Center, 4:00 PM.

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.

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center at 12:30 on Sunday, February 22.

The AAI Convention: Focusing on the Real Family

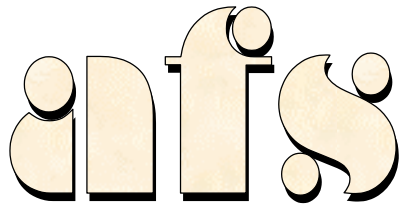
The annual convention of Atheist Alliance International will be held on April 9-11 in Colorado Springs, CO. Speakers will include biologist Massimo Pigliucci; activist Ed Buckner; founders of the Brights movement, Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert; Internet Infidels Public Relations Director, Clark Adams; anthropologist David Eller, and Saturday Night Live comedienne Julia Sweeney. Author-producer Ann Druyan will receive the prestigious Richard Dawkins award as one of the world's outstanding atheists.

The theme, Focus on the *Real* Family, refers to one of many religious organizations based in Colorado Springs, Focus on the Family. In their version of family, homosexuals can be "cured," "the rod and reproof give wisdom" to the difficult child, and bringing an unwanted child into the world is preferable to abortion. Though not every talk will concentrate on family issues, many will. In keeping with the theme, there are programs for all ages.

Cost for the weekend, including all five meals, is \$185. The hotel is offering single or double occupancy rooms for a special rate of \$59 per night. See the January issue of Atlanta Freethought News for a registration form. You may register on-line by credit card at atheistalliance.org.

"You will never see or hear of a free people under god's rule... While god's laws are carved in stone, man's laws can be changed as problems arise. The ability to change laws is a great safeguard against theological tyranny."

— Dr. John Henderson, MD
from his book *Fear Faith Fact Fantasy*



**Atlanta
Freethought
Society**

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.

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

Mar 14: Joe Beck will speak on "Religion: Stress Creator or Stress Reducer?"

Apr 11: Scott Lilienfeld will speak on "Science and Pseudo-science in Clinical Psychology."

May 9: Reginald Finley will speak on "Logical Arguments Against God."

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

Editor

Steve Yothment

How to Contact the Editor

Send correspondence to AFS at:
1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500
Roswell, GA 30075-3905
or phone Steve at 678-364-8703
or send e-mail to SteveYoth@aol.com.

Atlanta Freethought Society

President

Steve Yothment – 678-364-8703

VP for Internal Communication

Judy Thompson – 404-296-2020

VP for External Communication

Sue Garland – 404-875-7288

Treasurer

Bill Burton – 770-469-1228

Board of Directors

Freya Harris – 404-xxx-xxxx

Harriet Harris – 404-252-1962

Joel Kollin – 770-392-7958

Kate Miller – 770-xxx-xxxx

Lew Southern – 770-509-8272

The Atlanta Freethought News

Vol. 10, Number 1, January 2004

is copyright © 2004 by The Atlanta
Freethought Society, Inc.

Signed articles are all copyright ©
2003 by their respective authors.

For membership and subscription
information, contact AFS at:
1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite
500, Roswell, GA 30075-3905

Membership in AFS is \$25/year for in-
dividuals, \$35 for households, and \$10
for students/low income/under 21. Sus-
taining members (individual) \$100 and
sustaining members (households) \$125.

Subscriptions alone are \$20 for 12 is-
sues, \$25 to Canada/Mexico, \$30 for
other addresses. Please make checks
and money orders payable to
Atlanta Freethought Society, Inc.

Visit our World Wide Web site at

www.atlantafreethought.org.

Send E-mail to

afs@atlantafreethought.org.

AFS Webmaster: Ken Cummings

Call the AFS Infoline: 770-641-2903

The Georgia Legislature and Gov. Perdue

As state lawmakers marched into their offices for the opening day of the legislative session on January 12, they found copies of the Ten Commandments on their desks, courtesy of Rep. Bobby Franklin.

"We must be reminded that everything we do in the Georgia General Assembly must be rooted in the Ten Commandments," said Franklin, a Republican from Marietta. "After all, the Ten Commandments are foundational to Georgia law as well as the state constitution, which acknowledges God in the preamble."

Republicans in the state House said the following day that they will sponsor a resolution supporting display of the Commandments in public buildings, despite warnings by the American Civil Liberties Union that the practice violates the constitutional separation of church and state.

"Passing a resolution at the state level doesn't overcome the requirement of the U.S. Constitution," ACLU staff attorney Maggie Garrett said. "The courts have been clear that posting the Ten Commandments is unconstitutional when done by the government."

The authors of the resolution think they have a plan to address that. House Republican Leader Glenn Richardson (R-Dallas) said the resolution will list the text of documents that underpin state and national government, including the Declaration of Independence and the Ten Commandments.

PERDUE'S FAITH-BASED INITIATIVE

Acting with extraordinary speed, a Senate committee on the first day of the legislative session approved Governor Perdue's plan to give the state new legal power to contract with faith-based organizations to provide social services.

The measure, Senate Resolution 560, proposes to change the Georgia Constitution in Section II, Paragraph VII, which reads, "No money shall ever be taken from the public treasury, directly or indirectly, in aid of any church, sect, cult or religious denomi-

nation or any sectarian institution." The governor wants to add, "except as permitted or required by the United States Constitution, as amended."

The unanimous vote in the Senate Rules Committee came in spite of arguments from opponents that it would open the door to vouchers and put churches at the mercy of government bureaucrats.

The measure was rushed to a vote in the Republican-controlled Senate on that Thursday, where it passed.

Some senators worried that a "no" vote on the Resolution could haunt them in their re-election campaigns, because political opponents could charge that the vote is evidence the incumbent is anti-God. "If I voted 'no' it would show up on some report card," said Senate Minority Leader Michael Meyer von Bremen (D-Albany), who voted for the bill. "I could explain all I want that I voted 'no' because of a procedural issue, but it still would matter to voters."

The Resolution faces a tougher time in the Democrat-controlled House. Rep. Calvin Smyre (D-Columbus), said Democrats are working on their own version, which would include language prohibiting the change from clearing the way for school vouchers.

Because it is a constitutional amendment, the measure needs a two-thirds vote in both houses to pass. It then must be ratified by voters in November before it takes effect.

PFAW RESPONDS

In a press release on January 15, the Georgia Chapter of People For The American Way said, "Gov. Sonny Perdue and his right-wing allies in the General Assembly are trying to pull a fast one on Georgians and the state Constitution. Gov. Perdue has crafted a proposed constitutional amendment that would severely weaken church-state separation and open the door to taxpayer-funded discrimination and religious coercion. They've given this dangerous proposal a typically harmless-sounding name: the 'Faith and Family Services' amendment."

The press release also gave significant

facts about the resolution, saying, "Organizations with religious affiliations – like Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services and Jewish Family and Career Services – can and do receive taxpayer funds under the current Constitution, as long as they do not discriminate or proselytize while providing publicly-funded services. All social service providers – religious and non-religious – live by the same rules. The governor's proposal really aims to remove these constitutional safeguards so that religious groups can receive public funds directly and use them to discriminate against and proselytize to Georgians."

PERDUE'S STATE OF THE STATE SPEECH

On Wednesday of that week, Governor Perdue gave his State of the State speech. To help bolster his Constitutional Amendment plan, he had the following to say:

"I have another priority for children that deserves your bipartisan support – the Faith and Family Services Amendment.

Faith-based organizations provide critical services to children, seniors, battered women, the disabled, the homeless and other at-risk groups.

But our Georgia Constitution is out of step with the U.S. Constitution in this area. It discriminates against faith-based providers.

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution should be the standard for providing care in Georgia, not an outdated provision rooted in a dark period of religious bigotry.

The simple 12-word Faith and Family Services Amendment brings our Constitution in line with the U.S. Constitution. It will ensure that our citizens can have access to the best providers of social services.

I'm asking you to pass the Faith and Family Services Amendment and put it on the ballot this November so the people can decide if faith-based services will continue to be there for children and others who need our help."

Many organizations responded to Governor Perdue's appeal, and his

The Georgia Legislature and Gov. Perdue (*continued*)

characterization of the Georgia Constitution as having "an outdated provision rooted in a dark period of religious bigotry." Notably, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution had several editorials on the subject.

On January 18, an AJC editorial noted that "Millions of dollars in state contracts go every year to dozens of faith-based groups to provide social services, and those groups often do valuable work with people in need. The only stipulation by the state is that the services are faith-neutral, meaning nobody serves sermons with the soup. A change in the Georgia Constitution sought by Gov. Sonny Perdue could eventually mean that faith-based groups could require clients to offer a confession of faith before getting a cot."

The same editorial said, "Perdue's constitutional amendment would erode the wall between church and state first erected in the 1777 Georgia Constitution. While Perdue attributes the current church/state provision in Georgia's Constitution to the 19th century wave of anti-Catholic measures known as Blaine Amendments, the separation of church and state has

been enshrined in the Georgia Constitution for 220 years."

Another AJC editorial on January 19 by staff writer Jay Bookman noted that "the effort to gut [the Georgia Constitution] is part of a larger movement by Republicans to strip such guarantees from state constitutions all across the country. The eventual goal is to let conservative Christian groups tap into taxpayer money, giving them enormous resources to help spread their faith. In many cases, that crusade has followed an approved script, in which state guarantees of religious liberty are attacked as so-called 'Blaine amendments.'"

"Blaine amendments do indeed have a vile history – they were added to many state constitutions in the 19th century as part of a vicious anti-Catholic movement and were intended to prevent the flow of tax money to Catholic parochial schools. Here in Georgia, Gov. Sonny Perdue is now citing that history of bigotry to insist that Georgia's religious-liberty language be rendered invalid."

"But Georgia's provision is not a Blaine amendment. The language in our constitution actually has an hon-

orable heritage and ought to be protected, not tossed aside."

"Again, the evidence is strong. Paragraph VII was not added to our constitution as an amendment; it was simply part of a completely new state constitution. Unlike true Blaine amendments, Georgia's provision makes no mention of public schools and in fact reads nothing like actual Blaine amendments. Most importantly, language creating a wall between church and state can be found in Georgia constitutions that date all the way back to 1777, long before the Blaine movement. In the state's very first constitution, in Article LVI, our founding fathers thought it important to bar the use of tax money to support ministers, which until then had been common practice. Baptists in particular had insisted on that provision, because they believed that faith ought to be a matter between a person and God, with no role for government."

[This article is from a Jan. 12 AP article on AccessNorthGa.com, a Jan. 14 AJC article by Jim Tharpe, Jan. 15 and Jan. 16 AJC editorials, and a Jan. 15 PFAW press release.]

January Board Meeting Minutes

In attendance: Steve Yothment, Judy Thompson, Sue Garland, Bill Burton, Lew Southern, Kate Miller, Harriet Harris, Bruce Herr

Minutes taken by: Harriet Harris

Time/Date of meeting: 2:00 PM, January 18, 2004

- ▶ The Minutes of the previous (November) meeting were approved as distributed.
- ▶ Treasurer Bill Burton, reported a cash balance sufficient to cover all bills through January, and distributed a detailed cash flow report. There was a discussion about budget, record keeping, and assuring income to cover our average expenses of about \$1,250/month. That amount will be reduced somewhat as a result of Kate Miller's success in refiling as a non-profit organization, thus qualifying for property tax exemption. On the other hand, our condo association has decided to paint the windows and doors throughout, at a cost of \$400 per unit.

- ▶ Bill presented information regarding the revised and re-titled version of Michael Ledo's "Bible Bloopers" book, now titled *A Skeptic's View of the Christian Bible*. After discussion, it was unanimously decided to underwrite the printing of 1,000 copies of this revision. An unsecured loan was obtained from one of our members to cover the cost of printing.
- ▶ Other ideas for fund raising and for increasing membership were discussed. Lou proposed to hold a luncheon at Panahar Restaurant in April. This was voted on and accepted. Also, a letter will be sent to former and expired members. Ed Buckner has agreed to write the letter.
- ▶ Sue, our new VP, External Communications, will see how we can make good use of our AFS Info Line. She will also handle incoming e-mails.
- ▶ AFS will be a sponsor of the Darwin Day celebration on February 12th. Sue will look into publicity possibilities for the event.

Cox Says “Evolution” is a Negative Buzzword

A proposed set of guidelines for middle and high school science classes in Georgia has caused a furor after state education officials removed the word “evolution” and scaled back ideas about the age of Earth and the natural selection of species.

Educators across the state said that the document, which was released on the Internet in January, was a veiled effort to bolster creationism and that it would leave the state’s public school graduates at a disadvantage.

“They’ve taken away a major component of biology and acted as if it doesn’t exist,” said David Bechler, who heads the biology department at Valdosta State University. “By doing this, we’re leaving the public short-changed of the knowledge they should have.”

Georgia’s schools superintendent, Kathy Cox, held a news conference near the Capitol on January 29, a day after *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published an article about the proposed changes.

Cox said she removed references to evolution from the proposed biology curriculum because it is “a buzzword that causes a lot of negative reaction.”

She also said that students should understand that science is constantly changing and they need to be exposed

to “all legitimate theories.” This could include the teaching of “intelligent design,” though it is not specifically mentioned in the proposed curriculum. Most scientists deride “intelligent design” -- the idea that life arose through a purposeful design by a higher being -- as junk science. But Cox described it as a scientific theory that could be discussed in science classes.

“That is a scientific theory,” she said. “Now people say, ‘Oh, those folks, they’re kook scientists.’ But it does have scientists, rather than theologians, talking about other ways we may have come into being.”

DECISION ANGERS MANY

Cox’s reference to evolution as a “buzzword” rankled professors who say it is a widely supported scientific explanation for the diversity of life and something students should understand.

And the superintendent’s mention of intelligent design sparked criticism by scientists who say it is religion masquerading as science.

“There is no science or evidence behind it,” said Carlos Moreno, an assistant professor in the department of pathology and laboratory medicine at Emory University. “It is an attempt to take the creation story from Genesis

and make it into science.”

If the proposed curriculum is adopted, it would be a national embarrassment for Georgia, Moreno said. “It’s going to institutionalize poor education in science in this state.”

Dr. Francisco J. Ayala, the author of a 1999 report by the National Academy of Sciences titled “Science and Creationism,” vehemently opposes including the discussion of alternative ideas of species evolution.

“Creation is not science, so it should not be taught in science class,” said Dr. Ayala, a professor of genetics at the University of California at Irvine. “We don’t teach astrology instead of astronomy or witchcraft practices instead of medicine.”

The biology standards are being revised as part of a massive overhaul of the state curriculum designed to have teachers concentrate on critical subject areas. The yearlong process of revising the standards included teachers, college professors and curriculum specialists.

The new curriculum is to be voted on in May by the state Board of Education after public comment. Cox said changes are likely to be made based on public input.

[From a January 30 AJC article]

Science relies on confidence, strength of evidence, not faith

By John Bice (bice@msu.edu), a staff member at Michigan State University. Reprinted by permission.

This article first appeared on January 27 in *The State News* (www.stateneews.com), an MSU newspaper.

Religion and the concept of faith are recurring themes in my columns; as a result, I am frequently inundated with e-mails loaded with one misconception after another. The most common misconception of all, and simultaneously, one that is among the most damaging to an understanding of the difference between religion and science, revolves around the definition of faith.

When religionists have their faith questioned, they almost invariably respond with the defense, “even science requires faith.” Of course, that asser-

tion is nonsense, and I’ll explain why.

Everyday language works fine for normal communication; but if there is no strict definition of terminology, language can lack the precision required for meaningful discussion.

Especially problematic is the fact that commonly used words often have multiple meanings. It is, therefore, important for terminology to be defined as precisely as possible when entering into a debate.

For example, in most circumstances, the word faith is understood to mean, “belief in the truth, value, or

trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing.” Under that broad definition, it is true that we all embrace beliefs based on faith, even scientists.

I have faith that my doctor is qualified to practice medicine; scientists have faith that gravity will behave tomorrow as it does today. It’s under this definition of faith that it is possible to have the impression that religion and science aren’t really so different. The problem is in how we define “faith.”

To avoid confusion, I’ll use the word “confidence” as a substitute for

Science relies on confidence, strength of conviction (*continued*)

the word "faith" as defined above. The word "confidence," however, will have the further requirement that beliefs be based on strength of evidence.

Scientists and rationalists form beliefs in this way. For example, scientists have a level of confidence in the predictability of gravity based on an inductive interpretation of past observations.

Similarly, I have confidence in my doctor, based on the knowledge all physicians must be board certified to practice medicine.

If, however, my doctor had his license suspended due to malpractice, my confidence in him would be eroded. Our confidence in people, ideas and things varies based on evidence and is adjusted accordingly, like a sliding scale of certainty.

Scientific beliefs can have high or low levels of confidence associated with them. Quantum mechanics, germ theory of disease, and yes, even the fundamentals of evolutionary theory are accepted with a very high degree of confidence based on their wonderful performance as theories.

Of equal importance, scientific understanding is tentative by nature; all theories are subject to reinforcement, revision or rejection in light of newly acquired evidence.

Religious faith, on the other hand, is a separate beast entirely. The American Heritage Dictionary defines such faith as "belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence."

This type of faith makes it possible to form strong beliefs without any supporting evidence at all. In fact, the weaker or more nonexistent the evidence, the more religious faith is required for firm belief. Conversely,

when good evidence exists for a belief, the need for religious faith vanishes.

My favorite example of religious faith-based belief is the Catholic "Doctrine of Transubstantiation." This doctrine asserts that communion wine and bread literally, not symbolically, change. The "inner reality" of the bread and wine changes into the body and blood of Christ, but the "accidents," or "external qualities" experienced through the senses (taste, appearance, etc.), are unchanged.

Especially amusing is the difference of opinion between Catholics and some Protestant religions regarding the Eucharist. For example, Lutherans believe the Eucharist is best understood in the concept of "consubstantiation" rather than "transubstantiation."

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, "consubstantiation" is a "heretical doctrine" which asserts the substance of Christ's body and blood exists together with the substance of bread and wine. As silly and irrational as the quarrel sounds, and is, people have been burned at the stake for the heresy of doubting the truth of transubstantiation.

Both Catholics and Lutherans agree the Eucharist doesn't appear to change at all. However, since their faiths compel them to believe some change occurs, they are forced to attempt an explanation. Of course, being "faith-based," their explanations are not predicated on any actual evidence, yet they debate the issue as though it were actually something tangible.

It's a classic example of the irrationality at the heart of religious be-

liefs. Even if an infinite number of tests demonstrated no change in the Eucharist, the truly faithful would continue to believe with unabated certainty. If, however, a reliable and repeatable physical test demonstrated wine changing to blood, faith would no longer be required.

That's the key point; religious faith is only required when there is an absence of good evidence or logical proof. This absurd quality of faith compelled Mark Twain to wryly observe, "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."

Regardless of how adorable or comically wacky religious beliefs can appear, we mustn't forget there can be dark and disturbing consequences to beliefs predicated on faith alone.

Such beliefs are characteristically held with an unnerving and unconditional certainty. Individuals capable of believing something without evidence, yet with absolute certainty, are also capable of unimaginable cruelty, hostility and violence based on those beliefs.

Catholics torturing and murdering heretics and suspected witches during the Inquisition is one horrific example. The seemingly eternal bloodbath between Israelis and Palestinians is similarly motivated by faith in their divine right to the disputed territories; thus, no compromise seems possible. The Muslim suicide pilots who killed thousands of our citizens were motivated by a certainty only faith can provide.

Religious faith makes those horrific acts possible. The list goes on, the religiously motivated killing continues. When will the madness end?

"Moral certainty is always a sign of cultural inferiority. The more uncivilized the man, the surer he is that he knows precisely what is right and what is wrong. All human progress, even in morals, has been the work of men who have doubted the current moral values, not of men who have whooped them up and tried to enforce them. The truly civilized man is always skeptical and tolerant, in this field as in all others. His culture is based on 'I am not too sure.'" — H.L. Mencken

"It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong." — Voltaire

Clipped

Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Ried Crowe's letter was in the *Brandenton* (Florida) *Herald* on January 12.
Barry Palevitz's letter was in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on January 30.
Tony King's letter was in the *Toccoa Register* on January 6.

Don't Blame ACLU

Some people just don't get it. Take, for example, Hazel Van Hoosear. In her Jan. 5 letter ("Preserve rights"), she goes on a tirade against the ACLU for trying to ensure a religiously neutral setting in government-funded schools. She is enraged that the practice of a board-sponsored reciting of the Lord's Prayer has been ill-advised and that the relating of the biblical birth story of Jesus in class is considered taboo.

Well, let's just take a wild guess as to what religion Mrs. Van Hoosear belongs to. You guessed it: Christian. Why is this important? Because it is Christians who most often don't give a flip about the religiosity (or lack thereof) of others and continuously try to foist their dogma upon the rest of us — especially when they can get our collective tax dollars to support their efforts.

Consider how Mrs. Van Hoosear might feel if she were a part of a minority religion (Muslim, for instance) and her child was being taught Christmas carols in school. I imagine that she would probably find this to be an outrage and an attempt to brainwash her child into adhering to a different religion against her wishes.

It is for this reason that the only way to "keep the religious peace" in public schools is to ensure secularity such that our schools don't endorse any particular religion (or religion over non-religion). This concept offends nobody's spirituality and makes perfect sense when one considers that members of all religious persuasions — as well as atheists — are required to pay for our public schools. But people like Mrs. Van Hoosear will most likely never get it.

*Ried Crowe
Powder Springs, Ga.*

Key point of biology

My response to the proposed state school standards omitting evolution is simple: As head of advising for the biology major at the University of Georgia, I will recommend that we not give advance placement credit for college-level introductory biology, regardless of test score, to students who take biology in Georgia high schools.

A student who wants to be a science teacher or go to medical, dental or other graduate school will have to retake intro biology here.

Evolution is simply too important for all of modern biology to omit it at the whim of religious zealots, most of whom know nothing about biology but are only too happy to spout off about it.

BARRY A. PALEVITZ
Palevitz, of Athens, is a professor of plant biology.

Your View: If we have state Christianity, where does that leave the rest of us?

The question that I would like to ask every Georgia citizen, and every citizen of the U.S. is this: Do we live in a republic with democratic forms, or do we live in a theocratic dictatorship?

These days it is not so clear any more, and the line is getting more and more blurred every day. The Georgia General Assembly will soon consider measures that blur the line of separation of religion from government even further when its 2004 session begins. Should we have a state sponsored Christianity?

If we have a state-sponsored Christianity, where does that leave the rest of us citizens (i.e., Pagans, Jews, Hindus, Atheists, Freethinkers, Secular Humanists, Muslims, Wiccans)? After all, America IS a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society.

How corrupt is our government on every level? Who holds the real power in government? We The People? Or just a handful of over-influential groups with their own agendas? Should we have groups such as the Christian Coalition and others determine our fate as a nation?

In whose hip pocket are the two big-dog political parties?

And how many of you have blindly followed the party line?

Who do you really trust in government?

As I see it things are not looking good. Our politics have become very soiled with irrationality, dirty-pool, mud-slinging, subversiveness, underhanded secretiveness, and downright unfairness. Our national Constitution is being thrown out the door before our very eyes, and we are either too damn stupid, lazy, busy, or apathetic to do anything about it.

And the Bush Administration is not helping any. Bush policies in particular, and peoples' certain attitudes in general regarding who is an American and who is rightfully patriotic and whether anyone has a right to peaceably assemble and protest has created a climate of fear regarding free speech. ["Maybe I should not speak my mind, I might be regarded as an unpatriotic infidel, I will be fired, I will lose my friends, I will lose my funding, I will be ostracized, I will not get that loan—the kiss of death!"]

Do we keep our country as our Founding Fathers envision it? Or are we going to wind up like Iraq or other countries that have despots for leaders?

Whether America continues to be free, whether we continue to be a country at all, is dependent on all honest hard-working Americans standing up and speaking for themselves, giving their opinions and solutions honestly. The choice is ours. I hope that we make the correct one.

If you have been burying your head in the sand, you only have two choices. Start taking a look around you, or get beheaded!

May 2004 prove to be the year that Freedom and Democracy wins.

*William A. King
Toccoa, GA*

Clipped

Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Ed Buckner's letter (below left) was in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on January 18.

Ed's letter (below right) was in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on January 1.

Government neutrality on religion is vital

DEAR EDITOR:

Recent letters to the MDJ raised good questions: Tony Brown asked what secular humanists like me "want for our citizenry;" Cathy Wells asked for a "review of the history of this country."

The politics of secular humanists vary, but all want freedom for everyone, including those who disagree with us. We advocate a skeptical, questioning approach to all proposed solutions, including ours. We support separation of church and state not as a "clandestine" way of attacking religion, but as the only way anyone's religious liberty will be protected.

This nation was *not* "founded solidly on Judeo-Christian religious principles." There is

nothing in the Torah or the Bible about representative government, individual rights and freedoms, or a democratic republic, to say nothing of bicameral legislatures, religious liberty, and many other matters basic to our nation. This nation has many Christian citizens, whose religious expression and rights are protected — but it is not a Christian nation.

James Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," wrote in 1822, "religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together."

John Adams wrote, in defending the Constitution and denying that it has religious origins, that "it will be forever acknowledged that these governments were contrived merely by the use of reason and the senses."

Thomas Jefferson argued

repeatedly against claims that our government is based on Christianity. He included no Christian references in the Declaration of Independence, only references to "Nature's God." He admired Jesus but denied in writing most basic Christian doctrines, including that Jesus was divine, rose again from the dead or atoned for our sins. His self-designed memorial — the obelisk over his grave at Monticello — does not allude to God but declares his authorship of Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom. Furthermore:

■ Swearing is explicitly *not* required of anyone by the U.S. Constitution; the words "So help me, God" are added only by tradition. Theodore Roosevelt did not add the words, nor was a Bible used in the ceremony when he was sworn in as presi-

dent in Buffalo, N.Y., in 1901.

■ The text of the Ten Commandments does not hang in the chambers of the U.S. Supreme Court," unlike what Ms. Wells suggested. To any who insist that they are there, please answer whether or not it is the version called "the ten commandments" in Exodus 34. That version, by the way, commands us not to "seethe a kid in his mother's milk."

In summary, America's founders varied in their religious beliefs, but all knew that freedom of religion must include the freedom to be irreligious and depended on government neutrality in these important matters.

Ed Buckner

Southern Director
Council for Secular Humanism
Smyrna

Buckner says critic's logic questionable

DEAR EDITOR:

MDJ guest columnist Gary DeMar ("Path leads to dark corner of oblivion," Dec. 9) carefully avoided personal attacks on me as he analyzed my arguments, and I thank him for that. Some of his arguments are sound, at least from a fundamentalist Christian perspective, but he makes some logical errors and attributes to me, at least by implication, some views I do not hold.

For example, I did not say that only religions could be the basis for tyranny and oppression — Pol Pot and communism, neither of which have much in common with secular humanism or with religion, have indeed demonstrated as much. Secularism is an antidote to tyranny only if accompanied by strong cultural and legal protection for individual liberty.

One logical error Mr. DeMar makes is to claim that allowing homosexual marriage would mean "the human race would cease to exist." No such danger looms unless everyone, or at least most people, *want* homosexual partnerships. Nothing in human history suggests that most straight people are lusting in their hearts for same-

sex relationships.

Another error Mr. DeMar commits is to claim that the approval found in some parts of the Bible for two-person marriages implies condemnation of the polygamy reported in many other places. Mr. DeMar ignored entirely the Biblical chapter I cited, where God Himself is credited with providing multiple wives for David. That story, in Chapter 12 of Second Samuel, also describes God as threatening to turn the wives over to David's neighbor, with no hint of a say in the matter for the wives themselves. To be sure, the Bible is contradictory on this principle, as it is on many important matters — another

major reason why we cannot rely on the Bible for our laws or our moral standards.

Passages in the Bible describe without condemnation — or even prescribe — father-daughter incest, child abuse, and sex with young maidens. In Numbers we are told that Moses, inspired directly by God, advised soldiers to kill all captives except young virgins, who they can keep for themselves. Slavery and rape do not even make the Top Ten sins. Whatever the Bible or other holy books say, rape, incest, slavery,

and sex with children must be opposed and outlawed, based on the most straightforward secular principles. All these practices gravely injure and endanger innocent human beings, people who are unable to provide genuine consent. Polygamy can almost certainly be prohibited on similar grounds.

A major problem with deciding such matters, as Mr. DeMar seems to prefer, on religious grounds is that no one, not even his fellow Christian fundamentalists, can agree on which biblical (or koranic, etc.) principles are the right ones to follow.

Our freedom depends on guaranteeing that religious organizations and individuals have legal protection for believing and practicing differently. No law requiring a church or mosque or temple to accept homosexual marriage would be or should be constitutional. But neither are any laws based only on favoring one religious interpretation over another.

No religious or irreligious perspective gets preference under the Constitution.

Ed Buckner

southern director
Council for Secular Humanism
www.secularhumanism.org
Smyrna



Ed Buckner

Become a Member!

(Or renew your membership with this form!)



If you've enjoyed what you've read, we enthusiastically invite you to join the Atlanta Freethought Society. Every month you will get our acclaimed monthly newsletter the *Atlanta Freethought News*, voting rights in the organization—and enjoyment of the superb speakers we have coming up, as well as the social and activist events that we sponsor!

Individual memberships: One person can become a member for \$25 per year.

Household memberships: A household is defined as two members sharing one newsletter, and is available for \$35 per year. Since some of our households have additional members, there will be a \$5 per year charge for each additional voting household member.

International members: because of international postage rates and special handling, we have been forced to add a surcharge of \$5 for members in Canada or Mexico, and \$10 for other foreign addresses.

Thank you for all your support and we look forward to your being with us in the coming months!

Annual dues are:

Membership	Dues	# of mems	Total
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual	\$25	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Household (2 members)	\$35	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Additional household mems	\$5 ea	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Low income/Student/Under 21	\$10	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Subscription only	\$20	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Member	\$100	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Household	\$125	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Postage for Canada/Mexico	\$5	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Postage for other foreign addresses	\$10	_____	\$ _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Extra donation (thank you!)		_____	\$ _____
TOTAL			\$ _____

Please send this form with payment to:
 Atlanta Freethought Society
 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500
 Roswell, GA 30075

Atlanta Freethought Society

1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500, Roswell, GA 30075
 Phone: 404-805-2020 e-mail: mirza404@aol.com

"Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect." - James Madison, 1774

Why I Am Not A Christian — \$9

Lucid, comprehensive, engaging answer to Christian apologists by Keith Parsons. Respectful but devastating to all Christian claims. Wonderful follow-up to Bertrand Russell's great essay with the same title.

Tales of the Rational:

Skeptical Essays About Nature and Science — \$17

Massimo Pigliucci's essays examine and criticize both religion and science. He defends straw men, attacks creationism, and explains why scientists and other skeptics should be nontheists.

An Uppity Old Atheist Woman's Dictionary — \$10

By Carol Faulkenberry (illustrated by Amanda Faulkenberry); like Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*—but better: more biting, funnier. Guaranteed to make you laugh out loud and to challenge at least one idea you hold.

Bible Bloopers: Evidence That Demands a Verdict, Too!

(A Skeptic Answers Josh McDowell) — \$15

Mike Ledo's funny, scholarly book—over 270 pp. of effective dissection of biblical mythology, explanations of Bible contradictions, and detailed background on historical, mythological perspectives for modern Christianity.

Quotations That Support the

Separation of State and Church (2nd edition) — \$11

Compiled by Edward M. Buckner and Michael E. Buckner; ammunition against Christian-nation mythologists. Quotes from America's revolutionaries, constitution framers, Presidents, court decisions. Sources carefully documented, extensive index. Comb-bound—lies flat for easy copying.

Please add:

\$4 TOTAL S&H Charge for up to 2 books,

\$1.50 EACH S&H Charge for 3 to 9 books.

No S&H Charge for 10 Books or more.

(All Merchandise will be shipped USPS Priority Mail)

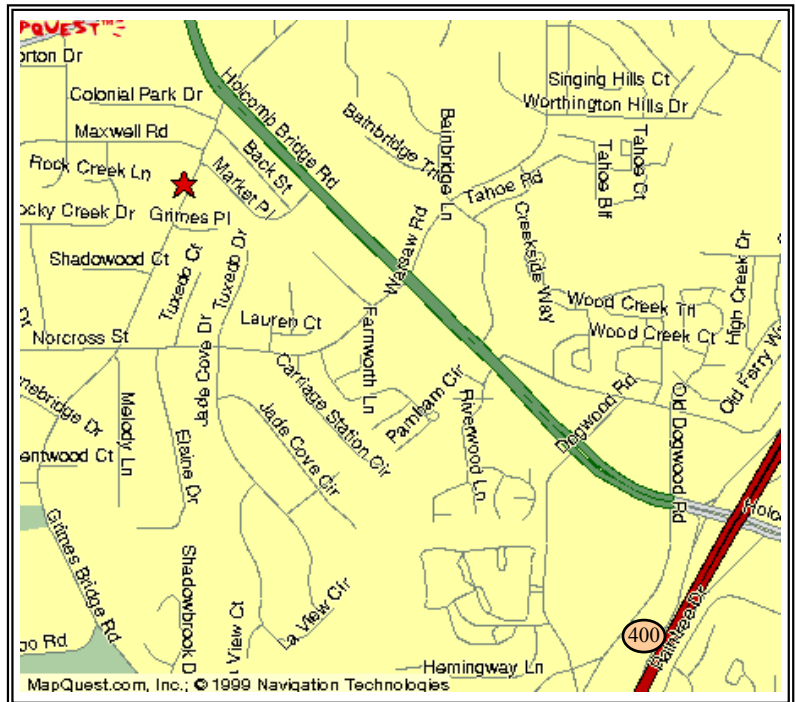
Send check or money order to:

ATLANTA FREETHOUGHT SOCIETY
 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500, Roswell GA 30075

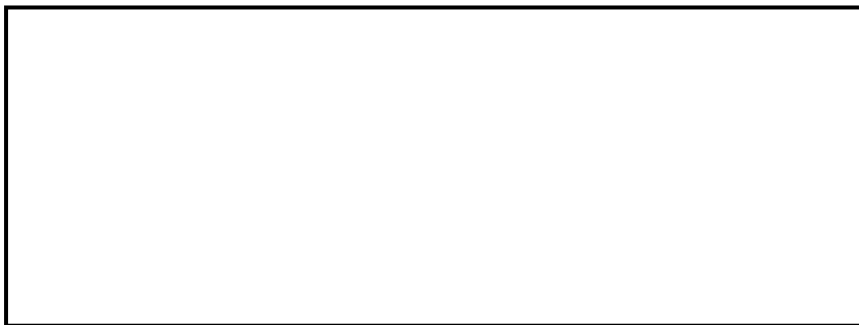


**The February Meeting:
Sunday, February 8
1:00 PM at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Dr. John Henderson**



Atlanta Freethought News is produced by the Atlanta Freethought Society, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit, member-run, educational organization created to advance freethought and protect freethinkers. Any freethought, atheist, secular humanist, agnostic, or rationalist group is granted permission to reproduce anything from our newsletter not expressly labeled otherwise (acknowledgement of AFS and author appreciated). Articles published represent the official opinion of AFS only when that is clearly stated; all other opinion is that of the individual author.



If you label indicates "02 2004" or earlier, please renew. Thanks.

Atlanta Freethought News
Atlanta Freethought Society
1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500
Roswell, GA 30075