

Atlanta Freethought News

An AFS Publication • Volume 10 Number 7 • July 2004

The July Meeting

The July 11 AFS meeting will feature Dr. Fred Whitehead, speaking on "The Freethought Heritage of Germany."

Dr. Whitehead was a Fulbright Scholar to University College in London in 1966, earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Kansas and master's and doctoral degrees in English from Columbia University in New York City in 1972. He taught and did research at the KU Medical School from 1978 to 2000.

Dr. Whitehead has published more than 80 works in scientific and literary journals, which include *New Letters*, University of Missouri-Kansas City's literary journal. He has written, contributed to, or edited 19 books. Dr. Whitehead has also organized community and state programs to bring the medical school into direct contact with the public.

The AFS 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, July 16, 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, July 18, at 4:00 to 6:00 PM at the AF Center.

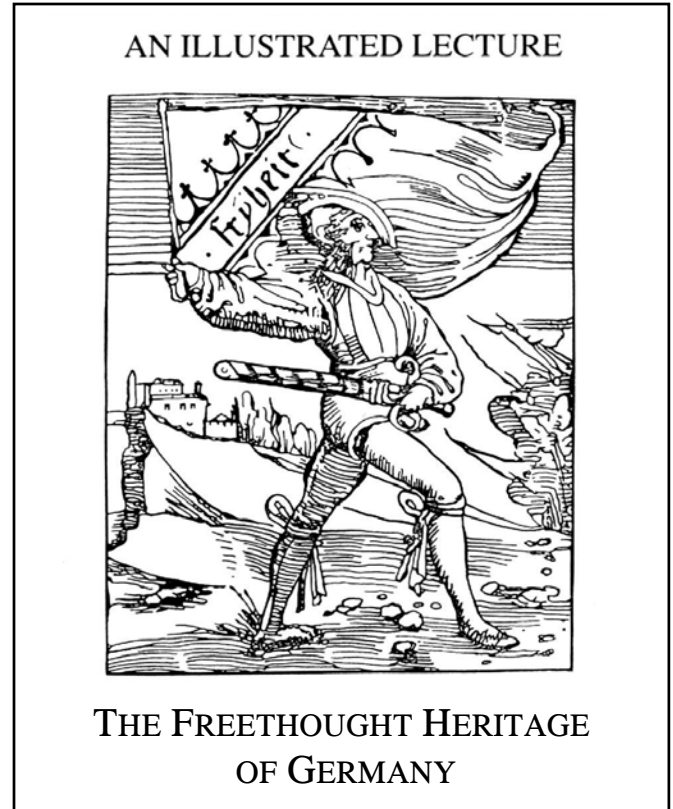
The **Tuesday Lunch Bunch** meets every Tuesday for lunch at Panahar Restaurant at 12:30.

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.

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).



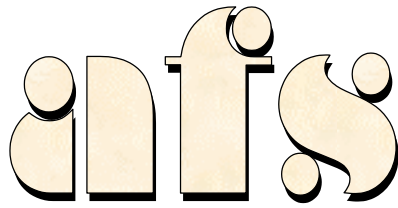
AFS at F.A.C.E. Pride Celebration

A special "Thank You!" goes to Bill Burton and Dennis Martin, who represented AFS at the Pride Celebration of the Fulton Alliance of County Employees for GLBT Equality (F.A.C.E.). We learned about this event only 2 days before it started! Even so, we were able to get a table and present AFS material at the June 22 event.

Bill reported that the other exhibitors were friendly and showed great interest in our table, although most people walking by the exhibit area viewed our table "timidly from afar." AFS helped to break the ice for GLBT (gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered) employees of Fulton County, and organizers of the event said they were grateful that we were there.

Meetings and Activities

- July 11: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
- July 16: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00 PM.
- July 18: AFS Board Meeting, AF Center, 2:00 PM.
- July 18: AFS Discussion Group, AF Center, 4:00 PM.



**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.

July 11: Dr. Fred Whitehead will speak on "The Freethought Heritage of Germany."

August 8: TBA

September 12: TBA

October 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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Supreme Court Decides Pledge Case on Technicality

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled on June 14 that California atheist Michael Newdow lacked the right to bring a constitutional challenge to the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, avoiding a decision on the key church-state issue.

By an 8-0 vote, the justices overturned a controversial decision by a U.S. appeals court in California that reciting the phrase amounted to a violation of church-state separation.

The ruling by the justices was based on the technicality that Newdow could not bring the case before the court because he did not have legal control over his daughter, on whose behalf he was arguing.

The ruling came down on the 50th anniversary of the addition of the words "under God" to the pledge. The U.S. Congress adopted the June 14, 1954, law in an effort to distinguish America's religious values and heritage from those of communism, which is atheistic.

Three court members – Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Clarence Thomas – disagreed with the ruling that Newdow could not bring the case. They said they would have ruled that the words "under God" do not violate the Constitution.

Newdow, an emergency room doctor who has a law degree and acted as his own attorney in the case, sued because he objected to his daughter's saying the daily ritual at her school in Elk Grove.

The girl's mother, Sandra Banning, a born-again Christian, has custody of the 9-year-old girl on school days, when the pledge is recited, and supports her saying the pledge.

The U.S. Justice Department and the California school district had argued that Newdow lacked legal standing or the right to bring the case.

The Supreme Court's majority opinion, written by Justice John Paul Stevens, agreed. He said the problem became apparent when Banning filed her motion declaring she has sole le-

gal custody and is authorized to exercise legal control over her daughter.

Millions of American students every day "pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

The case generated a political uproar after the appeals court ruling declared the "under God" part unconstitutional.

A California law requires the pledge to be recited every day at public elementary schools, although no child has to join in.

Newdow argued that having school children recite the pledge amounted to coercion, daily indoctrination and a government-imposed religious exercise, almost like a prayer. He wanted the "under God" phrase removed.

Newdow had numerous backers at the high court, although they were outnumbered by legal briefs in favor of keeping the wording of the pledge as it is.

REACTIONS

In a telephone interview with the Associated Press on the same day as the ruling, Newdow said he would continue the fight. "The pledge is still unconstitutional," he said. "What is being done to parents is unconstitutional."

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said he is disappointed by the ruling.

"The justices ducked this constitutional issue today, but it is likely to come back in the future," Lynn said. "Students should not feel compelled by school officials to subscribe to a particular religious belief in order to show love of country."

ANOTHER CASE TO BE FILED SOON

Undeterred by the U.S. Supreme Court throwing out his legal challenge to the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, Newdow told Reuters in a telephone interview on June 26 that he would file another federal lawsuit to remove the words from

the pledge.

Newdow now plans to represent two families in a renewed challenge to the constitutionality of the religious reference in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Newdow said he would act as their lawyer in a lawsuit against the Elk Grove Unified School District, the same Sacramento-area district he sued in the case that the U.S. Supreme Court rejected on June 14.

Newdow said arguments in the new lawsuit will echo those in his recent effort.

"It would be the exact same case," Newdow said of the lawsuit, expected to be filed in federal district court in Sacramento in August. "All the work has been done. Just plug in a different name and do it all over again."

THE CASE THAT NEWDOW WON

Back on June 10, the Thursday before the Supreme Court Ruling, Newdow won a \$1 million judgment in a libel suit against a minister.

After a brief hearing, Contra Costa Superior Court Judge Steven K. Austin entered a default judgment of \$1,000,645.96 against Chaplain Austin Miles.

The Antioch, CA minister never responded to Newdow's lawsuit and did not appear in court to defend himself.

Last fall, however, he acknowledged in a petition to disbar Newdow that was posted on the Internet that he was aware of the lawsuit. Newdow passed the State Bar, but is not a practicing attorney.

The suit's basis was an article by Miles, widely quoted in the press, accusing Newdow of perjury, a crime.

Miles contended that Newdow falsely testified under oath in court that his daughter had suffered "emotional damage, stress, anxiety and a sense of being left out" because she was forced to recite the pledge with the phrase "under God."

In the course of the suit, Newdow has said many things, but he insists he never made the statement that Miles attributed to him. By claiming he did,

and that it was perjury, Miles damaged his reputation and caused him other forms of harm, including "hurt feelings," the libel suit said.

"The man fabricated a quote and accused me of perjury, based on his

fabrication," Newdow said after the judgment.

Newdow said he sought \$1 million in damages on the basis of recent libel awards in California. He expects to have trouble collecting, however.

[From a June 14 Reuters article by James Vicini, a June 14 AP article by Anne Gearan, a June 28 Reuters article, and a June 11 Sacramento Bee article by Claire Cooper.]

Commandments Go On Display in Cherokee County

The Cherokee County commission put the Ten Commandments on public display on July 1, eight months after receiving a stone copy of the biblical laws from a local preacher.

(Cherokee County is about 30 miles north of Atlanta. Its county seat is Canton, GA.)

The display will be up until July 9, the commissioners said in a news release. They previously had said the long-awaited showing would be temporary.

A paper copy of the Ten Commandments – not the granite tablets that were given to the commissioners Oct. 31 by the Rev. Daniel Becker of the independent Little River Church – will hang on the second floor of the Cherokee County Justice Center in the company of representations of the

U.S. Constitution, the Georgia Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence and the Magna Carta.

The event is linked to the observance of Independence Day, said Jackie McMorris, community relations coordinator for the commission.

The documents in the display all have historic and legal significance to Cherokee County, the state and the country, she said.

Commissioner Ilona Sanders said on June 28 that support for the display is unanimous among the commissioners.

"The delay was partially due to the threat of litigation, action from the ACLU," she said.

The American Civil Liberties Union and other organizations have opposed

displays of the Ten Commandments in courthouses around the country, asserting that the U.S. Constitution prohibits government sanction of religion – in this dispute, the Judeo-Christian beliefs represented by the Ten Commandments.

Debbie Seagraves, executive director of the ACLU of Georgia, said of the Cherokee commissioners' announcement: "It's really a shame. I hope they reconsider. It seems to be a reckless move, considering recent court decisions."

Seagraves would not say whether the organization will seek a court order to have the temporary display removed.

[From a June 29 article by Doug Payne in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*]

Barrow County To Continue Ten Commandments Lawsuit

Barrow County will be able to continue its legal battle with the American Civil Liberties Union over a Ten Commandments plaque after getting last-minute donations and pledges.

(Barrow County is about 40 miles northeast of Atlanta. Its county seat is Winder, GA.)

The ACLU sued Barrow County in September 2003 for refusing to remove a Ten Commandments plaque hung at the county courthouse. The county claims highlighting the Ten Commandments is constitutional and legal.

For a time, it looked like the county might have to end its fight when Herb

Titus, the Virginia Beach, Va. attorney acting as the county's lead counsel, last week demanded that the county pay him \$35,000 immediately to keep him on the case. The county's six commissioners had been prepared to take out a private loan to continue funding the case.

But at a meeting Monday, at which they were to consider whether the county could afford to remain in the lawsuit, commissioners got pledges of private funding equaling Titus' payment.

The largest donation came from Ten Commandments-Georgia, Inc., a fund-raising group started as the

court battle began. Dr. Jody Hice, pastor of First Bethlehem Baptist Church and head of Ten Commandments-Georgia, Inc., said he would present the commissioners with a check for \$12,000 after the meeting. Hice also said he would receive \$9,500 in additional donations.

"Please stay the course, so much is at stake in this battle," Hice told the commissioners. "It is so critical that we maintain the right to acknowledge God."

The lawsuit is pending in U.S. District Court in Gainesville.

[From a June 8 AP article]

"The purpose of separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the ceaseless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries." – JAMES MADISON

"Religion is not in the purview of human government. Religion is essentially distinct from government, and exempt from its cognizance. A connection between them is injurious to both." – JAMES MADISON

Party Appeal for Help from Churches Raises Doubts

The Bush-Cheney campaign has laid out a brisk schedule for legions of Christian supporters to help enlist conservative churches and their members, including sending church directories to the campaign, according to a Bush campaign document.

The document, which was reported on July 1 in *The Washington Post* and given to *The New York Times* by Americans Coming Together, a left-leaning group, underscores how heavily Mr. Bush is relying on conservative Christians.

The campaign is asking conservative churches and churchgoers to do everything they can to turn their churches into bases of support without violating campaign finance laws or jeopardizing their tax-exempt status.

The effort has drawn accusations from various groups that the campaign may be inviting churches to risk accidentally or deliberately crossing the lines.

Under the heading "Coalition Coordinator: Duties," the schedule lists 22 objectives with deadlines from July 31 to Oct. 31, including sending the campaign their directories and receiving back lists of "all nonregistered church members and pro-Bush conservatives"; talking to their senior or "20-30 something" groups; asking pastors to hold a "citizenship Sunday" and voter registration drive; identifying another conservative church "who we can organize for Bush"; giving a "party for the president" with church members; recruiting up to 10 church members as volunteers; distributing "voters' guides" in the church; and posting reminders of the duty of "Christian citizens" to vote.

After earlier reports about the campaign's courtship of churches and their members, the Internal Revenue Service sent a letter to political parties reminding them that a church violates its tax-exempt status when it supports a candidate.

Legal experts say that churches are allowed to hold nonpartisan voter

registration drives and that individual church members are free to lobby church acquaintances on behalf of a candidate, but that any use of church resources to support a political campaign, even a gesture like placing campaign fliers on a literature table, can run afoul of the tax-exempt requirements.

A spokesman for President Bush's campaign, Steve Schmidt, confirmed that it had distributed the document. Mr. Schmidt said the church program, including the collection of registries, was proper.

"We are collecting all kinds of lists from many different sources, and it is completely appropriate to do so," he said. "People of faith have as much right to participate in the political process as anybody else."

Others called the effort an exploitation of religious faith for political gain and a potential violation of privacy.

In a statement, the Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, president of Interfaith Alliance, said, "As the pastor of a local congregation, if I found out that my church membership directory was shared with a campaign or political party, I would begin immediate legal action against the campaign or political party."

More theological conservatives also questioned the plan. Richard J. Mouw, president of the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., one of the largest evangelical Protestant seminaries, said, "Theologically speaking, churches are really in a position to speak truth to power. But this smacks of too close an alliance of church and Caesar."

Mr. Mouw added that the Bush campaign should not take evangelical votes for granted.

"I find," he said, "that a lot of church people, including a lot of evangelicals, are increasingly nervous about the credibility of the Bush administration on issues that a year or two ago people were ready to trust them on, like foreign policy.

"Rather than just assuming that

evangelical churches are ready to hand over their membership lists, they would do much better to spend some time trying to convince us that they really do have the interests of biblical Christians at heart."

At President Bush's campaign, Mr. Schmidt said he was confident of churchgoers' support for Bush.

"There is a wide and diverse coalition formed to make sure that President Bush has a second term," he said. "The level of support is at record levels," comparable to the support for President Ronald Reagan at the same point before his re-election.

AU RESPONDS

In a July 1 press release, Barry Lynn of Americans United for Church and State responded to the Bush campaign move, saying, "This is a shameless attempt to misuse and abuse churches for partisan political ends. People go to church to worship, not to be proselytized by politicians."

"Injecting partisan politics into our nation's sanctuaries is a desecration of sacred space," Lynn continued. "Politicizing churches is morally wrong and legally dubious. The Bush campaign should repent of this reckless scheme."

Lynn noted that the Internal Revenue Service issued an unprecedented warning to the nation's political parties June 10, reminding them that churches and other 501(c)(3) organizations may not be involved in partisan politics.

"Any coordination between the Bush campaign and church leaders would clearly be illegal," Lynn said. "Our chapters and members around the country will be watching closely to see how this plays out in the pews."

Americans United has reported over four dozen churches and other religious organizations to the IRS for electioneering activities since 1992 for violations of federal tax law.

[From a July 2 *New York Times* article by David Kirkpatrick, and a July 1 press release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State]

House Committee Scuttles Plan to Allow Church Electioneering

Americans United Hails Removal of "Safe Harbor" Provisions

Americans United for Separation of Church and State has hailed the June 16 vote by a House committee to remove provisions from a tax bill that would have allowed houses of worship to intervene in partisan politics.

The so-called "Safe Harbor for Churches" section of the "American Jobs Creation Act of 2004" (H.R. 4520) would have revised current law, which forbids churches from endorsing candidates for public office, and replaced it with watered-down language giving churches the right to intervene in electoral politics.

The House Ways and Means Committee voted unanimously to remove the provisions after it became clear that the proposed change had no support.

"Far from creating a 'safe harbor,' this scheme would have set houses of worship adrift on the stormy seas of partisan politics," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. "I'm glad the committee decided to torpedo it.

"Americans do not want to see their churches politicized," continued Lynn. "Our houses of worship are already free to speak out on public concerns, and they don't need politicians trying to turn them into cogs in a political machine."

The church politicking provisions would have allowed religious leaders to "unintentionally" endorse or oppose candidates up to three times per year. Under current law, a house of worship can lose its tax-exempt status for intervening in partisan politics.

Some Washington observers noted that the provisions were quietly placed in the tax bill at the same time that the Bush/Cheney re-election campaign was waging an outreach effort to "friendly congregations."

The "Safe Harbor" provisions ran into trouble from the start. Shortly after their place in the bill was discovered, officials with the Southern Baptist Convention and other Religious Right groups announced they would not support the language. Organizations that promote separation of

church and state also attacked it. With the move garnering virtually no support from any quarter, its backers agreed to withdraw it.

AU's Lynn warned, however, that the battle over church politicking is still under way. He noted that U.S. Rep. Walter B. Jones (R-N.C.) is promoting a bill that would remove language from the IRS Code and allow houses of worship to engage in politicking with no penalties.

"We won this skirmish in Congress, but the larger battle is far from over," Lynn said. "We will continue to oppose misguided schemes that would politicize America's houses of worship."

Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.

[From a June 16 press release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State]

Rationally Speaking: Liberal Vs. Illiberal Democracy

By Massimo Pigliucci

Plato famously did not like democracy. He saw the death of his mentor, Socrates, decided by an ignorant and fearful mob of Athenians, as the logical consequence of giving power to the masses. While Plato's solution to the problem, his utopia of a state guided by philosophers (surprise, surprise) depicted in the Republic obviously wouldn't cut it neither in theory nor in practice, he had a point.

Churchill once quipped that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others, which reflects the attitude of most in the modern Western world. And yet, Churchill, unlike Plato, failed to define what kind of democracy he was referring to. Roughly speaking, there are two fundamentally distinct kinds of democratic government: the simple

rule of majority, despised by Plato but simplistically endorsed by many in the United States; and a constitutional democracy, in which the decisions of the majority of the moment are constrained by a set of rules aimed chiefly at protecting the rights of minorities, including freedom of speech and action.

Author Fareed Zakaria, in his lucidly written *The Future of Freedom*, labels the two kinds respectively "illiberal" and "liberal" democracy. By "liberal" Zakaria doesn't mean left-leaning (as he is quick to point out), but rather constructed so to insure an open society, encouraging a healthy liberal exchange of ideas among its citizens, and tolerant of a wide (though obviously not boundless) spectrum of beliefs and practices.

This distinction is crucial, and yet it is rarely drawn by our politicians, who use the word "democracy" as synonymous with unquestionable good, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary. Indeed, Zakaria convincingly argues that — under certain temporary circumstances — a reformist autocracy may be preferable to an illiberal democracy. He points out that the most successful instances of transition to democracy in the world throughout the 20th century have developed gradually, beginning with relatively enlightened autocratic leaders who saw the eventual inevitability of change. Soviet Russia comes to mind, and China may represent the next big example.

On the other hand, democracy has notoriously failed in many instances

Liberal Vs. Illiberal Democracy (*continued*)

in South America, and especially in Africa. That, claims Zakaria, has been because the transition was sudden, with little if any constitutional protections. The results have been disastrous, leading to massacres of dissenting ethnic or political minorities, and often to the rise of a brutal dictator favored by an urgent need of reestablishing “order.”

Zakaria’s book was written before the US-led invasion of Iraq, but his points apply remarkably well to the current situation in that country. Of course, nobody would ever think of Saddam Hussein as an “enlightened” dictator, but it is also obvious that the Iraqi’s concept of democracy – if indeed they do have one – is of the illiberal type. The Shiite clerics who are pushing the country to the brink of civil war want immediate elections, even though clearly the minimum necessary conditions are not in place. Why? Because they know they would easily win a majority of the votes, which would pave the way to the establishment of a democratically elected theocracy in that country. Not exactly what the so-called coalition of the willing had in mind when they embarked in one of the most ambitious operations of nation building ever attempted (and led by a US president who campaigned against the very idea of nation building).

Then again, dictators have come to power by (illiberal) democratic means before; just think of Hitler.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Zakaria’s argument is that the US itself may be moving toward an increasingly less liberal form of democracy. Many of the guarantees put in place by the Founding Fathers and embedded in the American Constitution are being eroded, or are increasingly under attack by a politically and religiously conservative (slight) majority. For instance, the US Constitution guarantees a separation of church and state, and yet Americans are increasingly undisturbed by the encroaching of government upon religion. (Just think of the popularity of faith-based initiatives, school vouchers, etc.) Americans stubbornly hold to clear symbols of breach of the wall of separation of church and state, such as the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, or “In God We Trust” on paper currency.

All of this is done in the name of democracy, adopting the narrow meaning of the term according to which if the majority (even as slight as 51%) wants something, it should be done. This is precisely what led Plato to reject the democratic model to begin with, and what differentiates successful democracies from abysmal failures.

I doubt we will see another Socrates being put to death anywhere in the Western world, but it is significant that intellectuals, or simply independent thinking lay people, are under increasingly vicious attack in the US for simply having the guts to voice their dissent regarding the Bush administration’s foreign or domestic policy. We have gotten to the point that being religious, right-wing, pro-war and patriotic are all seen as synonymous, simply because a narrow (and narrow-minded) majority of Americans currently sees it that way.

It is also astounding to see that the right to marry (i.e., to be legally recognized as a couple) is being denied to gays and lesbians by people including those (e.g., some blacks) who until very recently had been discriminated against in their turn by a bigoted majority. The obvious problem with illiberal democracies is that majorities can change, sometimes dramatically and over a short period of time. That is why it is in the long-term interest of every member of a society to defend the rights of the minorities. Next time around, *you* may be the one to need such protection.

[This article is the May 2004 *Rationally Speaking* column by Massimo Pigliucci and is reprinted here by permission. See www.rationallyspeaking.org for similar articles.]

Do You Believe in Evolution?

By R. J. Riggins, a teacher at The Science Academy of South Texas, a Public Magnet School

Do You Believe in Evolution?

In my part of the country I get asked that a lot by students. That’s partly because of the part of the country I’m in (South Texas). Fundamentalism-creationism is endemic around here, and somehow that noisy minority has convinced the indifferent majority that to be a Christian of any sort, one must reject evolution. Ironically, even many of my Catholic students think their church is “against evolution.” (It isn’t.) Somehow Protestant fundamentalism has “converted”

them, at least on this article of faith, without their even realizing it. Perhaps their own church has not strongly, positively, and publicly stated its position to parishioners.

Perhaps it’s also because, as an English teacher in a science-oriented magnet school, I often include science fiction novels and, at least once a year, a science nonfiction book as assigned readings. Inevitably, there will be something (probably a lot of things) in those books that rub the creationists the wrong way, since to maintain

their structure of beliefs they have had to reject the facts established in practically all areas of science, from astronomy through nuclear physics to geology and biochemistry. Perhaps they’ve actually never encountered a teacher who openly “believes in” evolution (a very real possibility around here). Now that’s scary! No wonder on those international comparisons our students score worse than kids in Lower Slobovia or wherever.

But the problem I want to deal with here is how to answer that question.

Do You Believe in Evolution? *(continued)*

It's easy to say "Yes!" but that's not right. The problem is that the question itself is wrong. It's like the old "Have you stopped beating your wife?" question: either a yes or a no gives the wrong impression.

I certainly don't want to say "no", since that would create an entirely wrong impression. But answering "yes" isn't quite right, either. The problem is the phrase "believe in", just as the "have you stopped" is the trap in the earlier example.

Concentrate on the "believe in": no, I don't believe in evolution. Think of how that phrase is often applied. Little kids believe in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. We often judge their maturity by finding out which things they still believe in and which they have "grown out of" ("Aren't you a little old to believe in the Tooth Fairy?"). The phrase "believe in" in common parlance seems to mean to take something literally for which there is little or no objective evidence. You must believe in the Easter Bunny, because you've never seen the real one yourself, there's nothing he has done that couldn't be simply explained by ordinary phenomena (parental trickery), and there's no objective, physical, replicable (in other words, scientific) evidence that he's real. If you had those last things, then you wouldn't have to believe in the Easter Bunny, you would know he was real.

That's the difference: you absolutely know some things are real, through your own experience or other kinds of really solid proof. That's knowledge, not belief. Other things you believe in. You want them to be true. It would be nice if they were true. It's probably fun to believe in them. But you don't have solid, irrefutable (scientific) proof, so you have to keep believing in them, rather than knowing them (or you could just throw them out entirely, like most of us over 6 have done with Santa Claus). If you had that kind of evidence, then the folks whose job it is to find out the physical facts about the

world (scientists) would know them too, and belief wouldn't be required. A mark of the immaturity of small children is that they haven't learned this distinction yet. About the only proof they may demand is what someone older tells them, or what they see on TV. Note also that you can't trust the believer. He may, of course, say he knows his favorite belief is true, and may trot out what to him is adequate proof (But I saw Santa in the store, and look at all the stuff he brought, and on the news they saw him on the radar, and... and...). Or he may be one of those incredibly shallow people whose answer amounts to, "I don't know why, I just believe it," or the ludicrous contradiction, "I just know it's true."

Evolution is not a matter of personal opinion, or philosophy, or a gray area where one must decide what might be best overall.

I know that evolution is real. It doesn't require believing in. And I don't "just know it", like the vacuous air-head. I have all the objective evidence I need for real knowledge. The reality of evolution having occurred and continuing to occur is every bit as strongly established as the knowledge that the Earth is round, that germs cause disease, that electrons exist, or that the speed of light is ~300,000 kilometers/second. I can see that offspring aren't identical to their parents. I have seen new varieties of plants and animals developed within my own lifetime. I live in an area where boll weevils often win the evolutionary race to develop resistance to pesticides. I can easily catch a case of (newly evolved) resistant staphylococcus, which might very well kill me. I have seen and touched and personally found the fossils of the now-extinct ancestors of living creatures.

As a matter of fact, I have more down-to-earth proof of the reality of evolution than I have of the other things mentioned above, which I know to be real. I will never see an electron. How would I ever come close to accurately measuring the

speed of light? My chances of ever getting far enough away from Earth to actually see for myself that it is round are practically nil. Then don't I just take those things "on faith"? Don't I believe in them, rather than actually know them? NO. As a society we have hired specialists to find out these kinds of things. We've done everything we can to assure that they are highly trained, that they are objective (not letting their philosophies or beliefs get in the way), that they are honest, and that their answers are true (they constantly check on each other, compete, and repeat experiments to make sure the results are real). We've set up a system (science) in which wrong answers are quickly thrown out, all answers are tested over and over in every imaginable way, right answers get righter all the time (like relativity doesn't "disprove" Newtonian mechanics, it just improves on it; punctuated equilibrium doesn't "disprove" Darwinian evolution, it just clarifies it further), and the best way to make a name for yourself is to disprove an older idea (with enough proof of your own to stand up to the toughest tests). And finally, that system works far better than any other way mankind has ever tried for finding out about the physical world.

So what science knows, I know. They are my agents for finding out things I can't find out for myself. Science knows (and tells me) that there are electrons and what the speed of light is. I would be foolish to reject that knowledge. Science also tells me, with just as much assurance, that living things have evolved. I know that knowledge has been tested, tried, experimented with, and applied to real situations, and has proven its "fitness" by growing stronger through 150 years of severe testing. I would be foolish to reject that knowledge.

So no, I don't believe in evolution; I know that it has happened and still does. — R. J. Riggins

[From the Free Republic Forum at <http://www.freerepublic.com/forum/a3ad3069d3f60.htm>.]

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June Board Meeting Minutes

Present: Steve Yothment (presiding), Judy Thompson, Sue Garland, Bill Burton, Kelly Wilhoit, Kate Miller, Freya Harris, Joel Kollin, Harriet Harris

Minutes taken by: Harriet Harris

Time/Date of meeting: 2:00 PM, June 20, 2004

- ▶ The Minutes of the May board meeting were approved as they appeared in the newsletter.
- ▶ Treasurer Burton presented a Financial Report that showed a balance of \$2,832 after figuring all income and expenses to date. A separate report showed details of dues, pledge, and fund-drive income. Profit from the Panahar luncheon meeting was \$680.
- ▶ The nature and purpose of participating in festivals was discussed. We decided against having a booth at the Gay Pride Festival because the entrance fee has increased to an amount that would not cover our anti-

ipated expenses. It was agreed that our purpose in participating in festivals is not necessarily monetary – though we do not wish to lose money. Our main purpose is to gain publicity – a way to find new members – and secondarily to sell merchandise.

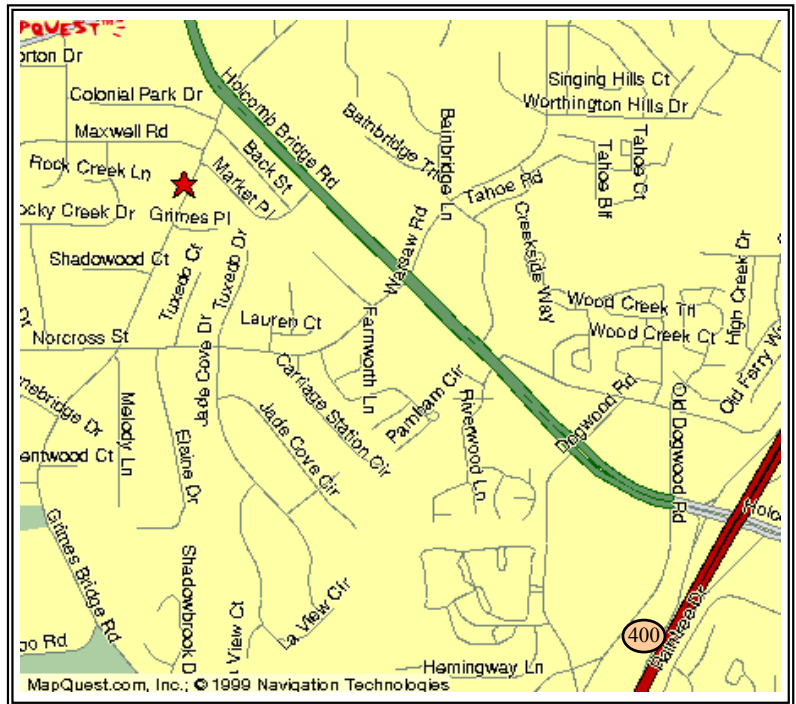
- ▶ The Inman Park Festival is definitely of interest, and several others were discussed. Bill volunteered to distribute AFS literature on June 22 at the Fulton Alliance of County Employees for Equity - an employee-based organization of Fulton County govt. working to insure gay and lesbian equality in the work place.
- ▶ Steve submitted some design and language options for the membership cards that will be given to those who make a pledge. A selection was made. Sue will send a thank-you note along with each card.
- ▶ The July program will include Fred Whitehead, author of "History of Free Thought in Germany."



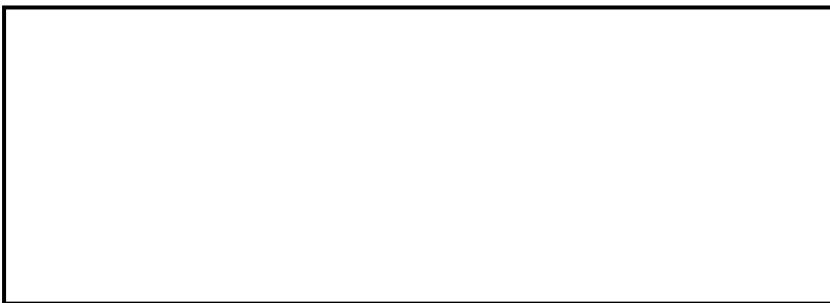
Atlanta
Freethought
Society

**The July Meeting:
Sunday, July 11
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Dr. Fred Whitehead**



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