

Atlanta Freethought News

An AFS Publication • Volume 10 Number 8 • August 2004

The August Meeting

The August 8 AFS meeting will feature Aaron Ruscetta of the Georgia Voter Choice Coalition, who will talk on "Paperless Privatized Electronic Elections: the Definitive Death of Democracy." The presentation will address most of the facts and fictions in the debate surrounding computerized electronic voting and the privatization of election systems, as well as the current efforts of the Georgia Voter Choice Coalition to restore open, public and auditable elections in Georgia.

Aaron Ruscetta has devoted hundreds of hours to the lobbying and public education efforts of the GVCC. He's worked for 25 years in video, media and computer technologies. He has taught college courses in computer art, graphics and animation, as well as design and market commercial computer software. He is an active member of the Atlanta Linux Enthusiasts Group, a vocal organization of computer network and security professionals that has helped raise awareness of electronic voting pitfalls. He also advocates for fair use, free speech and personal privacy in the digital age through affiliation with Electronic Frontiers of Georgia and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (<http://www.eff.org>).

AFS Activities

The next **AFS Social** will be at **Las Margaritas Restaurant** at 1842 Cheshire Bridge Road (Atlanta) on Friday, August 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, August 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.

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).

Meetings and Activities

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

The Interfaith Alliance Foundation Election Year Forum on Religion

On September 8th, 2004, The Interfaith Alliance Foundation, The Interfaith Alliance of Georgia and The Greater Atlanta Interfaith Alliance will host its Election Year Forum in Atlanta. The event is free and open to the public, and will include major speakers who will explore the dynamics of religion in the 2004 presidential campaigns.

Confirmed panelists include:

- ▶ **Dr. Richard Land**, President of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
- ▶ **John Podesta**, Former Clinton White House Chief of Staff and Current President and CEO, Center for American Progress
- ▶ **William Smith**, Political Consultant, Washington, DC
- ▶ **Steve Waldman**, CEO, Co-Founder and Editor, Beliefnet

The event is on September 8th at 10:00 to 11:30 AM at the Georgia World Congress Center, Building B, Meeting Room B403. A breakfast "meet-and-greet" starts at 9:15 AM.

For details on this event, see www.interfaithalliance.org.

To RSVP, call Jenny Davis at 800-510-0969 or send email to jdavis@interfaithalliance.org.

Atheist Daily Briefing to Change

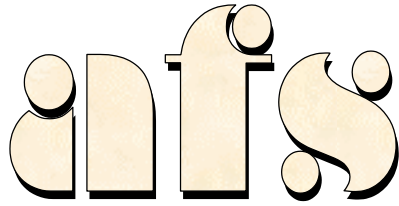
Larry Darby of the Atheist Law Center in Montgomery, AL, informed AFS recently that he will discontinue the Atheist Daily Briefing, an email daily newsletter of the Atheist Law Center. The Briefing rapidly grew in outreach, apparently filling a heretofore unknown need within the atheist community. The ALC board was very pleased to see the Briefing serve as a conduit to make atheists around the world better informed while creating a sense of global unity among subscribers. However, the Briefing began to define the Center as a journalistic endeavor, rather than the educational, legal advocacy organization.

The Briefing (or some other name for the periodic e-mail) will reemerge to continue as a medium to inform supporters of the Center as to its activities to the Center's web site.

Larry says a volunteer with a background in journalism has stepped forward and will play an integral role in expanding the service previously provided by the Briefing.

Meanwhile, the Atheist News Service will serve as an evolutionary bridge between the Atheist Daily Briefing and the coming new entity.

Send an email to Larry at PubliusWrites@knology.net to subscribe to the Atheist News Service. The website of the Atheist Law Center is www.atheistlaw.org.



**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.

August 8: Aaron Ruscetta of the Georgia Voter Choice Coalition will talk on "Paperless Privatized Electronic Elections: the Definitive Death of Democracy."

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 living a good life free from religion through attending AFS speeches, debates, and discussions. We employ protests, letters to the editor, broadcast appearances, and any other reasonable and civil means available to achieve our mission.

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 lack of belief.

We seek to educate ourselves on many topics but especially on religion and non-religion. We do this through a series of thought-provoking speakers and programs, and by maintaining a web forum and an 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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For membership and subscription
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Membership in AFS is \$25/year for individuals, \$35 for households, and \$10 for students/low income/under 21. Sustaining members (individual) \$100 and sustaining members (households) \$125.

Subscriptions alone are \$20 for 12 issues, \$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

Senate Scuttles Marriage Amendment

Religious Right's Constitutional Scheme Falls Far Short of Votes Needed To Advance To Senate Floor

In a major defeat for the Religious Right, the Senate decided on July 14 to not bring up the Federal Marriage Amendment for a floor vote.

Only 48 senators voted to bring S.J. Res. 40 to the floor, far short of the 60 votes needed.

Opponents of the amendment were jubilant. Speaking at a news conference on Capitol Hill, the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the Senate did the right thing.

"Today's vote," said Lynn, "is a powerful repudiation of bigotry. It rejects unnecessary Constitution tampering and is a strong rebuke to the Religious Right.

"A serious threat to the separation of church and state lurked in the shadows of this debate," Lynn continued. "From the very beginning, supporters of the marriage amendment have used religious language to describe their goals. Marriage was 'sacred,' noted President Bush, and it was a 'sacrament' according to Sen.

Frist. The preservation of the sacred and promotion of sacraments is the province of religious institutions, not government bodies."

"This unfortunate debate," Lynn said, "was spawned by an unholy matrimony between political leaders with an eye on the ballot box and Religious Right leaders determined to win support for a mean-spirited and divisive proposal. The result was a floor vote designed to score political points, not advance sound policy. Now it's time for a divorce. The Senate needs to move on to more important matters instead of trying to curry favor with religious extremists."

A broad array of civil liberties, civil rights and mainstream religious groups opposed the amendment. It was supported by James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and other Religious Right leaders. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and a few other conservative religious bodies also endorsed the measure.

In an ACLU e-newsletter, ACLU Executive Director Anthony D. Ro-

mero said, "Election-year politics may have pushed the Federal Marriage Amendment, but a commitment to fairness led to its demise. The defeat of this discriminatory proposal is a true victory for American families. The Senate has done the right thing by rejecting attempts to write discrimination into the Constitution."

If adopted, the Federal Marriage Amendment would have denied states the right to decide who can get married and would have preempted the constitutions of the 50 states.

Advocates say the measure was intended only to keep state and federal courts from requiring that same-sex couples be allowed to wed. But critics insist the amendment jeopardized many civil rights protections extended to gay people by state and local laws. Church-state separation activists say the plan entangled religion with government by writing the marriage doctrines and rituals of the majority faiths into the Constitution.

[From a July 14 AU press release and a July 22 ACLU e-newsletter.]

Veterans Take Monument on Tour

A veterans group, with the blessing of ousted Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, moved his Ten Commandments monument out of storage at the state judicial building on July 26 and is taking it on a national "God Bless America" tour.

The 5,280-pound granite monument has been out of public view for nearly a year after Moore lost a court fight over its display. It will be hauled to rallies for three months by American Veterans Standing for God and Country.

"This is not a church movement, and this is not a military movement," said Jim Cabaniss, president of the Houston-based group. "This is the veterans that have fought for our country taking a stand for what is good for our children and grandchil-

dren."

The group reached an agreement for the tour with Moore, who was expelled as chief justice for refusing a federal judge's order to move the monument out of the building's rotunda. Moore installed it during the summer of 2001, and throngs of supporters held vigils and staged protests when it was ordered removed two years later.

"The Ten Commandments is the foundation of our laws in America," Cabaniss said. "And it's important to us, and that's the reason we're willing to spend the time and effort to get involved."

The tour, announced July 29 on the Web site of a pastor who is a member of the group, will feature a veteran, a civic leader and a spiritual leader

speaking at each stop.

The tour began in Dayton, TN, on July 31 and will move through other cities in Tennessee before winding through Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma. The rest of the itinerary is uncertain, though Cabaniss said the tour would be in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 19 for rallies by Christian and voter registration organizations.

The veterans hope the monument will stay in Washington at the U.S. Capitol, where Moore has asked Congress to display the marker in a prominent place.

"If Congress will accept it, we'll be glad to put it in the Capitol building at that time," Cabaniss said. "If not, we'll spread back across the country and cover other states."

Ten Commandments Monument On Tour (*continued*)

Larry Darby, president of the Atheist Law Center in Montgomery and frequent critic of Moore and the monument, said he was glad to see it leave town.

He said his only beef with the tour would come if it turns a profit while Alabama taxpayers are left with more than \$500,000 in legal fees for the attorneys who sued Moore to have the monument removed in the first place.

"I would hope that once this takes place, that they start profiting from it, that perhaps the court might order that money held in trust or something," Darby said.

Cabaniss balked at the idea that his group would use the monument to make money. He acknowledged the group has sought donations to cover the tour's costs, estimated at \$200,000.

In Dayton on July 31, about 75 people gathered to see the monument, which was set up outside the site of the Scopes Monkey Trial, where high

school teacher John Scopes was convicted in 1925 of giving lessons on evolution.

"The ACLU is still the enemy," said June Griffin of Dayton, an outspoken advocate for displays of the Ten Commandments in government buildings.

In an interview in Dayton, Jim Cabaniss said, "One of our domestic enemies is our failing judicial system. Our position is we have removed the monument from a dark room in the Alabama Supreme Court Building and exposed it to the world."

(Actually, no, the light was constantly on in the storage room for the 11 months that the monument was in storage. In a July 20 interview, the judicial building manager Graham George said so, saying, "It just felt like the right thing to do.")

Although no speaker asked for money at the Dayton rally, pamphlets handed out included an application for active membership in the veteran's

group, at a cost of \$120 a year or \$1,000 for lifetime.

Larry Darby was there at the Dayton rally, and was heckled by some in the crowd, who shouted, "You're not welcome here."

At one point, John Rocco, 73, of Dayton, bumped his knee into Darby's leg as they passed on the ramp steps to the display.

"That's typical Christianity," Darby shouted. "These people are the lunatic fringe."

Rocco said the knee bump was an accident.

"I'm glad I didn't carry my gun. I'd probably be in jail right now," Rocco said. "I believe in the Ten Commandments and I don't appreciate what people like him are doing to my country."

[From a July 17 AP article by Kyle Wingfield and a July 20 article by M. J. Ellington in the *Decatur Daily*.]

Council Splits on Atheist's Invocation

The mayor says the invocation should be reserved for believers in God.

The Tampa, FL City Council's opening invocation is usually a quiet moment of peace.

People from all faiths bow heads to hear pastors, rabbis and even poets offer some inspiration.

But on July 29, three council members walked out rather than hear an invocation from a man who doesn't believe in God.

Council members Kevin White, Mary Alvarez and Rose Ferlita left their seats rather than listen to Michael R. Harvey, a member of Atheists of Florida who had been invited by council member John Dingfelder to offer the invocation.

Even before Harvey began to speak, White was pushing to cancel the invocation. These are sacred moments that refer to a supreme being, White said, and this speaker is an atheist.

"We have never had people of an atheist group represent Americans," White said. "And I don't think it is

appropriate in this setting."

White's motion to cancel the invocation failed 2-4, supported only by him and Alvarez. She called White "very brave" for making the effort.

"I just can't sit here and listen to someone that does not believe in a supreme being," she said.

Ferlita voted to allow the invocation to go on, but also walked out. "I think this is sending us in the wrong direction," Ferlita said.

Mayor Pam Iorio, who did not attend the council meeting, said later that the invocation should be reserved for speakers who invoke God. She would not say whether she would have walked out.

"I certainly don't agree with having an atheist come for the invocation," she said. "I think the invocation is a time for the council to start their day with an expression of faith."

Dingfelder said his invitation to Harvey started with a neighborhood

talk. He often saw Ed Golly, president of Atheists of Florida, in South Tampa. Golly needed him that the invocation violated the separation of church and state.

"I agree you should have equal time," Dingfelder told him. "I'll set it up."

Usually, clergy members deliver the invocation. But poets, civic leaders and ordinary citizens have been invited to speak, too. Some are non-denominational; others mix politics with prayer. Some invoke Jesus, others are more meditative.

Dingfelder, who attends a Jewish synagogue, has also invited Baptist and Methodist preachers, as well as a chaplain from MacDill Air Force Base.

"I was honestly hoping it would not be a big deal," he said. "Obviously, I am a little naive about that."

He blamed the atheist group for stirring up attention.

"I think they went out of their way

Atheist's Invocation *(continued)*

to make it a media circus," he said.

Harvey, however, said he had been fielding reporters' questions for days, ever since news of the invitation broke earlier this month. At the Council meeting, Dingfelder introduced Harvey without mentioning his membership in Atheists of Florida.

Then, White stepped in. White said he had heard news reports that Harvey planned to make a political statement. Harvey should make his speech during the audience portion of the meeting, he said, when people have three minutes to address the council.

"What you are proposing is a form of censorship," Dingfelder said. And he said he was not told in advance what Harvey planned to say.

"City Hall belongs to everybody - everybody - regardless of what they believe in or what they don't believe in," Dingfelder said, his face getting flushed. "Because that is what our nation was built on. And that is what our soldiers overseas are fighting for."

With the debate over, council vice chairman Shawn Harrison invited

Harvey to begin. Harrison warned him not to make a political statement.

Harvey thanked the council, then spoke about the separation of church and state.

Harrison banged the gavel.

"Sir, you are out of order," he said. "This is a political statement."

"I would say what occurred before was more of a political statement," Harvey said.

Harrison warned Harvey again.

The three council members still in the room lowered their heads.

Harvey continued: "So rather than clasping your hands, bowing your heads and closing your eyes, open your arms to that which truly makes us strong - our diversity."

Later that day, Harvey said he expected controversy, but not the hostility he faced.

"They did not want an atheist to share in that symbolic gesture to participate in government at that level," Harvey said. "I think it disturbed them. I think they did not know how to act."

Harvey said he was particularly

disappointed that White, Alvarez and Ferlita walked out, calling their actions "a discriminatory gesture." White is black, and Alvarez and Ferlita are both Hispanic women.

"I think it is terribly ironic that the (wrong) message was sent by three members of a minority group to another minority," Harvey said. "Knowing how far minorities have come, you would think this would be fresh in their minds."

Later, White agreed that he was taking a stand. Listening to an atheist even one time could unleash a "snowball effect" on government. He compared it to having unprotected sex.

By the afternoon, Dingfelder was sounding somber. Asked if he regretted the invitation, he paused.

"I don't know," he said. He paused. "No, I don't think so."

His political career will probably be hurt, he said.

"All I can tell you is I did this because I honestly believed it was the right thing to do."

[From a July 30 article in the *St. Peters-*

MICHAEL R. HARVEY'S SPEECH

This is the opening invocation delivered by Michael R. Harvey of Atheists of Florida at the July 29 meeting of the Tampa City Council:

An invocation is an appeal for guidance from a supernatural power, but it is not only that. It is also a call, a petition to positive action on behalf of and for a diverse citizenry. On behalf of Atheists of Florida, I would like to express our gratitude in being invited to deliver today's invocation.

We are committed to the separation of state and church as defined by the United States Constitution. It is the core value of that remarkable and visionary document to protect the human-derived rights of all people in the continuous struggle for equal opportunities to pursue a safe and decent quality of life.

When an invocation takes on the form of public prayer, it is also a violation of the very principles upon which our country and Constitution were founded. Although we are dismayed that the practice of public prayer by governing bodies charged with representing all citizens still continues in violation of the Constitution, we also recognize that this practice has become deeply embedded in the national psyche.

Elected and appointed leaders who wish to seek the guidance of a deity can do so in private, as is their right. But not in the public arena where the establishment of religion is an assured end-result.

History — that ever-unfolding, ever-flourishing story of human civilization — teaches us that the rights and accomplishments of humanity are the results of its past struggles, and that the road less traveled is many times the highest path to human progress. We therefore invoke this council and all of our leaders to be guided and inspired by the invaluable lessons of history, the honest insights of science, the guileless wisdom of logic, and the heart and soul of our shared humanity — compassion and tolerance.

So rather than clasping your hands, bowing your heads and closing your eyes, open your arms to that which truly makes us strong — our diversity. Raise your heads and open your eyes to recognize and fully understand the problems before you and know that ultimately, solutions to human problems can come only from human beings.

Thank you.

Humanist Network News Investigates “Atheist Charities”

If you're a freethinker, chances are you've been spammed by Atheist Charities. The so-called charitable organization maintains the Website www.atheistcharities.com, which contains several pages of information regarding the activities and future programs of Atheist Charities. Some of the programs listed are counseling, vocational training, employment services, ESL courses. Atheist Charities also claims to accept canned food donations. As of July 19, the site was boasting 89 “Worldwide Contributors.” By July 20, the number increased to 400. Donors can donate online through PayDirect, and PayPal. Personal checks are accepted too.

The email spam (addressed to “Dear Freethinkers”) comes from atheistcharities@hotmail.com or atheistcharities@yahoo.com. HNN has also received emails soliciting for Atheist Charities from a Lisa Patton (lisapatton574@hotmail.com) and a Julia Swenson (jswenson@yahoo.com). Messages sent to all but the atheistcharities@yahoo.com email address bounce back. HNN has not received any responses from atheistcharities@yahoo.com.

In the most recent email from Atheist Charities, the anonymous messenger was soliciting \$200 to help pay to move the Website to a Korean sever that does not discriminate against atheists.

“Today the webhosting company of Atheists Charities has shut down our site because they don't agree with atheist values and lack of religious beliefs. They gave no warning and are refusing to refund the money we paid them for a year's hosting,” the message read.

Those who are considering donating to Atheist Charities, or those who have already done so, should consider what HNN found in its investigation of the organization.

The Atheist Charities Website is registered to:

Atheist Charities (PPKBK)
atheistcharities@yahoo.com

P.O. Box
Las Vegas, Nevada 89109
United States
Phone: +1(111)111111

The billing contact is the same, except (Z4RDP) appears in the place of (PPKBK).

The www.atheistcharities.com domain name is registered through Aplus.net. An Aplus.net tech staffer checked and said he could not find any additional contact information for Atheist Charities. He said he would put down a note to have it investigated. HNN filed a complaint with the abuse department of Aplus.net.

As of July 27, the Atheist Charities Website was hosted by AboveNet. HNN contacted an AboveNet tech staffer. With regard to the Atheist Charities email claim that its host shut it down, the staffer said, “Knowing this customer, it's down because it's a fraud.”

Legally, the AboveNet staffer said he could not reveal the name of the customer to HNN. But he also said that he did not have access to the name either.

In many cases, he said fraudulent Websites use false registration information. Once they get shut down, they use different fraudulent information to register the site again. “Go to the DA's office,” he said. “This happens all the time.”

Based on the “low” volume of traffic to the Atheist Charities Website, though, the AboveNet staffer did not think it would rank high on the District Attorney's list of priorities.

The “17112 P.O. Box” listed on the Atheist Charities Website (not on the Website registration) is a Clark County, Nev. Zip code. According to a Clark County clerk, there is no “Doing Business As” license for an Atheist Charities on file. There is no solicitor's license for Atheist Charities in Clark County either.

HNN asked The Internal Revenue Service whether there was a 501(c)(3) organization under the name Atheist Charities, or if an application had

been filed under that name, but the clerk did not return HNN's calls in time for this article.

A U.S. Postal Inspection Service employee told HNN that she would keep an eye on the P.O. Box and invited HNN to fill out a fraud form, which we did. She said that if there were registered complaints she might be able to give HNN more information. [To request a Mail Fraud Report, contact: L.A. Division/Las Vegas Domicile, US Postal Inspection Service, 101 Convention Center Drive, Suite 1050, Las Vegas, NV 89109-2099, tel: 702-796-5272, fax: 702-796-6780]

PayPal refused to give any information. PayDirect could not be reached for comment.

Large portions of the text found on the Atheist Charities website match almost word for word with the Website for [Catholic Charities of San Jose](http://CatholicCharitiesofSanJose) (Just substitute “Atheist” for “Catholic” in most cases.) A tech staffer at CCSJ said he was surprised to learn that CCSJ had been plagiarized. But the AboveNet staffer said that fraudulent websites frequently steal content from legitimate websites in order to look legit, plus it's easier than writing the content yourself.

This classified ad ran in the Salt Lake City [Daily Herald](http://DailyHerald) on July 17:

ATHEISTS: Atheist Charities will empower those in need without imposing chains of religion. Info: www.atheistcharities.com

HNN contacted the Daily Herald classified department, but a sales rep could not find any information about the ad.

HNN is still interested in collecting information about Atheist Charities. If you are affiliated with Atheist Charities, or if you have any information regarding Atheist Charities, please send an email to HNN. Be sure to write “Atheist Charities” in the subject line!

[From the July 21 issue of *Humanist Network News*, a weekly e-zine of the Institute for Humanist Studies, www.humaniststudies.org.]

Institute for Humanist Studies Under Attack

The Institute for Humanist Studies (the publishers of *Humanist Network News*) says it was impersonated in a fundraising spam e-mail sent on July 23 from a bogus address, humaniststudies@angelfire.com.

IHS says the spam appeared to have originated from the same source as atheistcharities@yahoo.com, and was convincingly worded, using language from their Website. But the impersonators also inserted false, inflammatory, anti-Christian (and gram-

matically incorrect) language that does not represent the opinion of the Institute for Humanist Studies or its employees.

IHS says that the spam was not a legitimate solicitation from IHS. Financial donations to IHS are always directed towards constructive promotion of humanist ideals in real communities everywhere. Legitimate bulk e-mail from IHS is generated by a server script (not Outlook); moreover, IHS sends mail only to individuals on

their subscriber database.

Unfortunately, the IHS has no way of knowing exactly who received the spam. IHS says it received angry responses to the spam from both Christians and the non-religious. IHS attempted to respond to every message sent to them about the fraudulent spam.

[From the July 27 issue of *Humanist Network News*, via www.humaniststudies.com.]

Clipped

Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Steve Yothment's letter was in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on July 10, 2004.

Blair Scott's letter was in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on June 16, 2004.

Reid Crowe's letter was in the Bradenton, Florida *Herald* on July 30, 2004.

Many benefits

Lorraine V. Murray is right that the use of embryos in stem cell research is a moral issue. We must weigh the moral cost of using embryos that die during research with the benefits that result from the research.

To me, the choice is obvious. The benefits of the research (cures for diseases) outweigh the loss (death) of the embryos. Currently, embryos for stem cell research are abandoned cells from in-vitro fertilization attempts. These embryos have exactly zero chance of ever maturing into human beings.

Stem cell research offers these embryos more opportunity for life than they would otherwise see. It offers many afflicted people an opportunity for healthier, longer lives.

Allowing embryonic stem cell research may not be an easy choice, but it is the right and moral one.

STEVE YOTHMENT

Yothment, of Peachtree City, is president of the Atlanta Freethought Society.

Under pressure about 'under God'?

The Supreme Court ducked a major issue when it reversed the "under God" decision on a technicality instead of the case's merits ("Challenge to pledge is rejected," Page One, June 15). This leaves lower courts without guidance regarding this crucial First Amendment issue, and you can rest assured that a similar suit is likely.

The phrase "under God" does not belong in the Pledge of Allegiance. Knowing that, did the Supreme Court dodge the decision to avoid the political fallout?

BLAIR SCOTT

Scott, of Huntsville, Ala., is Alabama director of American Atheists.

Control zealotry

In her July 24 letter ("Bring God back"), Joanne McCusker does a wonderful job of typifying the intolerant Christian mentality that plagues America today. In an honest desire to improve our nation, she asserts that all Americans are Christians and that we should all feel a need to worship Jesus Christ, just as she does. Furthermore, we are implored to "put God back into. . . our schools."

Thus, according to McCusker, all patriotic Jews, Muslims, Wiccans and atheists (like me) are not only un-American, but ought to immediately convert to her particular brand of piety and likewise start to deny our fellow citizens their First Amendment rights to religious freedom. Why is it apparently so difficult for people like McCusker to understand that America was founded on the fundamental principles of secularity, religious pluralism and tolerance for the lifestyles of others? Why can't the overzealous hordes among us understand that a large—and growing—fraction of Americans are proud to consider ourselves non-Christians, and that we have every right to ensure that our views are not trampled on by myopic folks like her?

Ried Crowe
Powder Springs, Ga.

Council to Stick with its Prayers

Fredericksburg, Va., City Council member Hashmel C. Turner Jr. says he will say a Christian prayer at the start of the next public meeting, defying a recent federal court ruling that the practice is unconstitutional.

The 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals made the unanimous decision on July 22 in a case involving town council meetings in South Carolina that start with a prayer that includes references to Jesus Christ. The three-judge panel said the practice was an unconstitutional government endorsement of a single religion.

Still, Mr. Turner says he will continue to say the prayers that mention Christianity and Jesus Christ despite the ruling, which applies to all legislative bodies in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and the Carolinas, unless the case is taken to a higher court.

"I have no intention of compromising my prayer language," said Mr. Turner, an associate minister at First Baptist Church of Love. "The way that things are in the world today, the one thing I believe is needed is prayer."

Mr. Turner has served on the seven-member council since 2002.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia has asked the City Council to discourage Mr. Turner from delivering his sectarian prayers, saying his actions indicate the government prefers one religion over others.

"It is unconstitutional to open a meeting with a sectarian prayer," said Kent Willis, executive director of the Richmond-based ACLU. "That is clear and unambiguous."

He also said the group would help a resident's legal challenge of the prayer but would rather avoid "costly and timely litigation."

Fredericksburg City Attorney James M. Pates will be distributing a copy of the South Carolina case at the meeting and that his office is "scrutinizing" the case to learn its implications for the

council.

Mr. Pates, who has held the post 18 years, said he will not try to stop Mr. Turner from saying the prayer.

"This is a small town, and neither the city nor the Rev. Turner is looking for a fight on this one," he said. "The city council has never advanced any particular religion or denomination, nor has it attempted to do so. We make an effort not to promote or infringe on any particular religious belief or practice."

Mr. Willis said the ACLU was alerted to the prayers last year by a Fredericksburg resident who became uncomfortable during a council meeting. Others have complained informally to the ACLU.

Mr. Willis, who lives in Fredericksburg, wrote Mr. Turner a letter, explaining that it was OK to pray at meetings as long as the prayers do not promote a single religion.

Mr. Turner then took himself out of the council prayer rotation, saying he would rather not pray if he couldn't invoke Jesus' name.

Charlottesville's Rutherford Institute told Mr. Turner he had a right to deliver the prayers and that the group would represent him in a legal challenge.

But the group's president, John Whitehead, reviewed the ruling and suggested yesterday that Mr. Turner use the words "in God's name" or "in His name" instead of citing "Jesus Christ."

"The case doesn't say you can't pray," Mr. Whitehead said. "It only says you can't invoke a specific deity."

The Virginia General Assembly has opening prayers before each daily session, but those are nonsectarian in nature.

Several state legislators are ordained and lead prayers during the session, and clergymen of many faiths are invited to lead prayers, though

they are reminded that an interdenominational message is preferred.

Delegate Ward L. Armstrong, Henry County Democrat, led a prayer during this year's session that was intentionally "devoid of any denominational references," he said.

"It's important to be sensitive to different faiths," Mr. Armstrong said.

The court's ruling came after a Wiccan high priestess sued the town council of Great Falls, S.C. because its leaders refused to lead prayers that don't invoke a single religion or to allow members of different faiths to lead the prayers. The woman claimed she was ostracized for refusing to stand and bow her head during the Christian prayers.

U.S. District Judge Cameron McGowan of Rock Hill, S.C., ruled last August that the prayers violated the First Amendment's establishment of religion clause. The appeals court agreed, citing U.S. Supreme Court rulings that allow only generic prayers by government bodies.

"The [council] remains free to engage in such invocations prior to council meetings," 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Diana Gribbon Motz wrote.

"The opportunity to do so may provide a source of strength to believers, and a time of quiet reflection for all. This opportunity does not, however, provide the town council, or any other legislative body, license to advance its own religious views in preference to all others, as the town council did here."

There may be more to come in the South Carolina case, however, as the defendants could ask for an opinion from the full 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals or could petition the U.S. Supreme Court to consider the case.

[From a July 27 *Washington Times* article by Christina Bellantoni.]

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Henry County Commissioners Vote for Ten Commandments

(Henry County is about 45 miles south of Atlanta.)

Henry County commissioners have voted to display the Ten Commandments in the county courthouse after a citizen donated a 3-by-2 foot framed copy.

"Let them sue. I'm not afraid of a lawsuit," Commissioner Gerry Adams said on July 6 as the commission agreed to the display requested by Ray McBerry, who said he represented League of the South.

McBerry suggested that his donated copy of the Ten Commandments, along with the Declaration of

Independence and the Bill of Rights, be placed in the 107-year-old courthouse south of Atlanta.

McBerry's organization, League of the South, says it seeks to preserve Southern heritage. But the group is considered a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

McBerry led an unsuccessful effort three years ago to create a Henry County flag bearing the Confederate battle emblem.

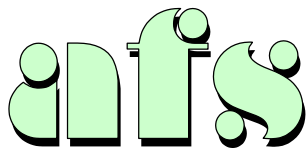
He said displaying the Ten Commandments "would express our soli-

arity with our sister counties and states across America that are under fire for having done the very same thing themselves."

In Cherokee County, north of Atlanta, commissioners put the Ten Commandments on public display on July 1 in their justice center. In Barrow County, northeast of Atlanta, the American Civil Liberties Union, representing an anonymous plaintiff, is suing to have a Commandments display removed from the courthouse.

[From a July 7 AP article.]

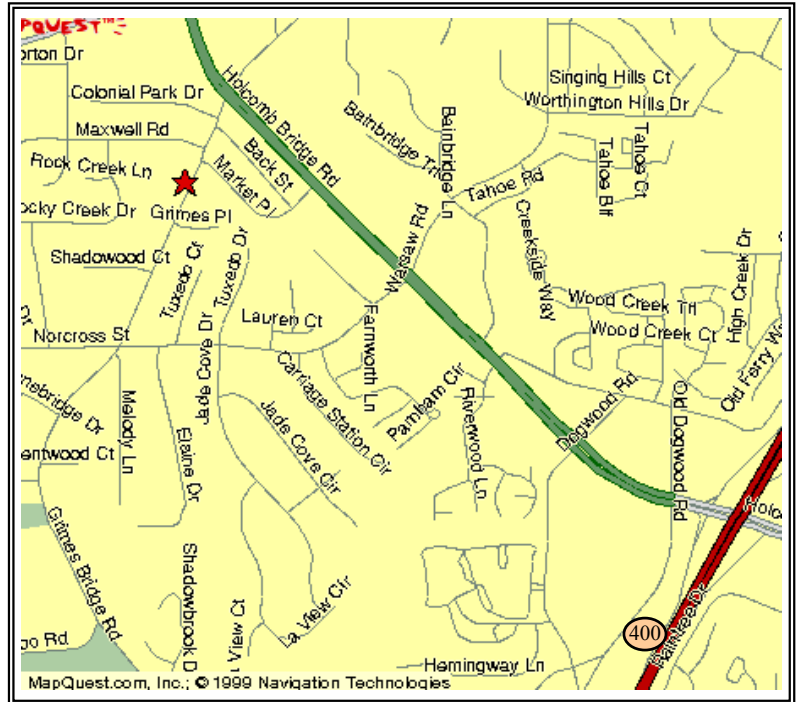
"Their belief is just that—an article of faith, and they are entitled to it, but it does not follow that the theology of a few should be allowed to forestall the health and well-being of the many." — Ron Reagan, son of the late President Ronald Reagan, addressing the Democratic National Convention on July 29, 2004, and criticizing opponents of embryonic stem cell research.



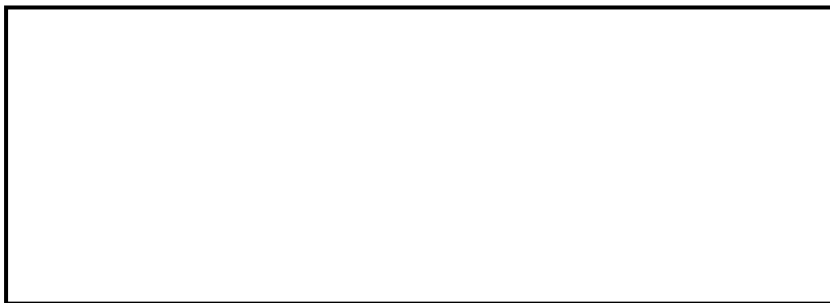
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**The August Meeting:
Sunday, August 8
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Aaron Ruscetta**



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