

Atlanta Freethought News

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The October Meeting

Larry Darby, president of the Atheist Law Center, Inc. and proprietor of the Atheist News Service, will speak to the Atlanta Freethought Society on Sunday, Oct. 10. His topic will be "Engaging the Enemy in Hand-To-Hand Combat: A First-Hand Account of Government Resistance to Atheist Civil Rights".

Darby will talk about his interactions with Alabama elected officials last spring in the process of organizing a Rally For Reason at the Capitol on the same day as the National Day of Prayer. Several officials publicly admitted and attempted to justify blatant discrimination against atheists. After the day's events, Darby debated the issues with Rep. Jay Love on *For The Record*, an in-depth news program broadcast live statewide by Alabama Public Television. The program will include a videotaped presentation of the debate.

The AFS meeting will be at 1:00 at the **Atlanta Freethought Center**, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, in Roswell, GA. 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 Rd., 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, October 15, 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, October 17, 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.

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center at 12:30 on Sunday, October 24. Rush Netterville will discuss the book *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* by Susan Jacoby.

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).

AU of Georgia Meets at AF Center

The first official organizational meeting of the new **Georgia Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State** will be at 4:00 on Sunday, October 10, at the Atlanta Freethought Center.

Atheist Meetup in Atlanta

Atlanta Atheists will have a "meetup" on Tuesday, October 19 and 7:00 PM. The informal gathering will be at Apres Diem Restaurant, 931 Monroe Drive, in Atlanta. The restaurant's phone number is 404-872-3333. For details, see www.meetup.com.

Late-breaking News: La. Judge Tosses Same-Sex Marriage Ban

On October 5, a Louisiana judge tossed out the recently passed constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriages in Louisiana.

State District Judge William Morvant said the amendment violates the state constitution because it addresses two issues — same sex marriages and civil unions.

The constitution limits amendments to a single issue.

Morvant ruled in favor of Forum for Equality PAC, a New Orleans gay and lesbian group which challenged the constitutionality of the amendment.

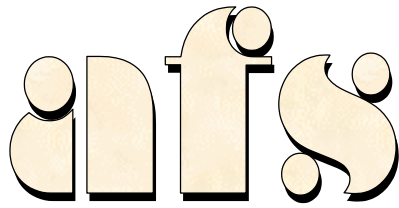
The state plans to appeal the ruling.

Last month, Louisiana became the fifth state in the nation to add a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages. The measure, which also bans civil unions, defines marriage as the union of one man and one woman. It requires state officials and courts to recognize only marriages between one man and one woman.

Georgia voters will vote in November on a similar state constitutional amendment.

AFS Meetings and Activities

- Oct 10: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
- Oct 15: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00 PM.
- Oct 17: AFS Board Meeting, AF Center, 2:00 PM.
- Oct 17: 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.

October 10: Larry Darby, president of the Atheist Law Center, Inc. and proprietor of the Atheist News Service, will speak on "Engaging the Enemy in Hand-To-Hand Combat: A First-Hand Account of Government Resistance to Atheist Civil Rights".

November 14: Ford Vox and Todd Stricker of the Universist movement will speak on Universism. See www.universist.org for more information.

December 12: 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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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.

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“Marriage Protection Amendment” Voted Down

The Federal Marriage Amendment failed in a vote in the U.S. House of Representatives on Sept. 30.

The House voted 227-186 in favor of H.J. Res. 106, but that tally fell short of the two-thirds necessary to pass a constitutional amendment. The amendment, which was heavily promoted by Religious Right organizations, would limit marriage to one man and one woman. It was designed to outlaw same-sex marriages.

“This amendment posed a grave threat to the separation of church and state, and I’m delighted that it failed,” said the Rev. Barry Lynn, Executive Director of American United for Separation of Church and State. “Some religious traditions perform same-sex unions, and some do not. It’s wrong for the government to favor the reli-

gious rituals of the majority over those of the minority.”

Lynn added that it is deplorable that members of Congress used this issue as a pawn in election-year politics. House leaders knew the votes were lacking to adopt the amendment. “The only reason for this vote,” said Lynn, “is to give the Christian Coalition and similar groups another line item on their biased ‘voter guides.’”

Lynn noted that during a national meeting of the Christian Coalition in Washington, D.C., Sept. 23-25, staffers with the group bragged that they would distribute millions of “voter guides” this year.

The guides, Coalition Field Director Bill Thomson said, “are our greatest weapon. It is the best weapon in our arsenal. It is our B-2 bomber.”

In addition, the Family Research Council (FRC) has pledged to include three FMA-related votes on its congressional scorecards this year. (The FRC will even rate lawmakers on whether they cosponsored the amendment.)

The Coalition, the FRC and other Religious Right groups, Americans United asserts, are eager to get a vote on the amendment, put the results on guides and scorecards and use them to tip the balance in close House races around the country.

In a September 30 Action Alert email by the Christian Coalition of Georgia, chairman Sadie Fields was quick to point out how Georgia Representatives voted on the issue.

[From a September 30 press release by Americans United.]

Ruling Goes Against “Choose Life” Tag

A federal judge struck down Tennessee’s “Choose Life” specialty license plate on September 24 after determining that the state is engaging in unconstitutional “viewpoint discrimination.”

However, Judge Todd Campbell did not invalidate the state’s entire specialty license plate program, a potential remedy that had been suggested by the American Civil Liberties Union and had threatened to eliminate scores of license plates that honor colleges, natural landmarks, arts programs and cultural highlights.

The controversial Choose Life plate was enacted by the state legislature this year, and Gov. Phil Bredesen allowed it to become law without his signature.

A group opposing abortion, New Life Resources Inc., was the plate’s primary sponsor and designer.

Before Tennessee’s Choose Life plate could be issued, the ACLU and Planned Parenthood of Tennessee filed suit in U.S. District Court here. They claimed that because the state government had chosen one viewpoint over another, it was violating

free speech guarantees in the Constitution.

The Chose Life plate, like other specialty plates, was adopted by the legislature after sponsors obtained commitments from at least 1,000 people to buy one.

“We are very pleased with the court’s decision,” plaintiff’s attorney George Barrett said. “We think it is a very well-reasoned ruling.”

It wasn’t clear whether the state Attorney General’s office, which defended the “Choose Life” plate, would appeal Campbell’s decision. A spokeswoman there did not return phone calls yesterday afternoon.

But New Life Resources, which had intervened in the case, blasted the judge’s decision.

“We are disappointed but not surprised,” said Brian Harris, New Life Resources’ chairman. “Based on the political philosophy of Judge Campbell, we anticipated this ruling and have already committed to appeal at every possible level.”

Campbell was appointed by President Clinton, an abortion-rights advocate, Harris noted.

Campbell stated in his opinion that the case was about free speech, not abortion or adoption.

“The result in this case would be the same if the statute authorized a ‘Pro-Choice’ license plate instead of the ‘Choose Life’ license plate,” the judge wrote. “Either way, it is unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination in violation of the First Amendment.”

In ruling on the case, Campbell adopted much of the logic applied by the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals, based in Richmond, Va.

In 2002, that court struck down a Choose Life license plate adopted by South Carolina.

Part of Campbell’s task was to determine who was doing the speaking – the person with the license plate or the government that issued it.

The state argued that the plate represented governmental speech and that if enough people disagreed with that speech, the politicians who uttered it could be voted out of office.

The plaintiffs countered that the Choose Life plate amounted to private speech.

Campbell found that in this case, it

Ruling Goes Against “Choose Life” Tag (*continued*)

is a mixture – just as the Fourth Circuit found in the South Carolina plate case: The government speaks by issuing the plate; the individual speaks by choosing to display it on a car.

Because the state has established the license plate as a forum for the abortion debate, Campbell ruled, it cannot limit the viewpoints expressed in that forum.

“The statute at issue makes clear that the State of Tennessee is willing to use its considerable power and resources to control private speech and to discriminate based on viewpoint. The First Amendment makes clear, however, that the State cannot do so constitutionally.”

Gene Policinski, the executive director of the First Amendment Center

at Vanderbilt University, said, “Anytime you go asking the state to define speech and what’s acceptable or not, you’re getting into the area of regulating ideas. And that’s where you come afoul of the First Amendment.”

[From a September 25 *Tennessean* article by staff writer Rob Johnson.]

Henry County Displays Ten Commandments

Henry County commissioners insist they’re not worried about any legal challenges to posting a Ten Commandments display in the county courthouse in McDonough, GA.

On September 22, commissioners unveiled a framed display of the Ten Commandments in the courthouse foyer among such documents as the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Several federal judges in the past year have ruled it unconstitutional to post the Ten Commandments in government buildings, saying it violates constitutional rights to freedom of religion.

Debbie Seagraves, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia, said the ACLU has received several phone calls from Henry County residents disturbed by the county’s decision and will review the display.

“Having the Ten Commandments in a public building, paid for by public tax dollars, is clearly an establishment of one religion over another,” she said.

County Chairman Leland Maddox described the commission’s decision to put the documents in the courthouse as “good common sense.”

Commissioner Gerry Adams agreed. “This is not a religious display,” he said. “This is a historical display.”

Last November, the U.S. District Court of Northern Georgia ruled that Habersham County must remove a Ten Commandments display in its courthouse because the court believed it was posted for religious purposes.

In March, the state Senate voted overwhelmingly in favor of a non-binding resolution supporting Ten Commandments postings in government buildings.

[From a Sept 29 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article by Eric Stirgus.]

Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Non-Christians

A new study released by The Barna Group of Ventura, California, shows that the likelihood of married adults getting divorced is identical among Christians and non-Christians.

Based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3614 adults, the Barna survey found that among those who have been married, more than one out of every three (35%) have also been divorced.

Although many Christian churches attempt to dissuade congregants from getting a divorce, the research confirmed a finding identified by Barna a decade ago (and further confirmed through tracking studies conducted each year since): “born again” Christians have the same likelihood of divorce as do non-Christians.

Among married born again Christians, 35% have experienced a divorce. That figure is identical to the outcome among married adults who are not born again: 35%.

George Barna noted that one reason why the divorce statistic among non-Christian adults is not higher is that a larger proportion of that group cohabits, effectively side-stepping marriage – and divorce – altogether. “Among born again adults, 80% have been married, compared to just 69% among the non-born again segment. If the non-born again population were to marry at the same rate as the born again group, it is likely that their divorce statistic would be roughly 38% – marginally higher than that among the born again group, but still surprisingly similar in magnitude.”

Barna also noted that he analyzed the data according to the ages at which survey respondents were divorced and the age at which those who were Christian “accepted Jesus Christ as their savior.” “The data suggest that relatively few divorced Christians experienced their divorce before accepting Christ as their savior,” he explained. “If we eliminate those who became Christians after their divorce, the divorce figure among born again adults drops to 34% – statistically identical to the figure among non-Christians.” The researcher also indicated that a surprising number of Christians experienced divorces both before and after their conversion.

[From a Sept 8 Barna Group press release. See www.barna.org for details.]

Another Faith-Based Initiative Gone Awry

When Michigan resident Joseph Raymond Hanas was arrested and convicted for a nonviolent drug offense in January 2003, the court gave him the choice of completing a drug rehabilitation program (which might have led to charges being dropped), or serving jail time. Not surprisingly, Hanas chose the rehabilitation program, administered by the Inner City Christian Outreach Center.

But Hanas, a Catholic, was in for a shock: The program, administered by Pentecostal Christians, had no drug or alcohol counselors on staff; their "treatment" consisted mainly of prolonged bible study and indoctrination in Pentecostal rituals. He was deprived of his Bible and rosary, and he was prevented from seeing his priest and deacon. The rehabilitation staff told him that Catholicism is "witchcraft." He was forced to attend Pentecostal worship services. He was also told he would never overcome his addiction until he proclaimed himself "born again."

When Hanas requested a transfer to a more tolerant program, the judge interpreted his request as a failure to complete the program. The judge then gave Hanas four years' probation (with six months' jail time) and removed any opportunity to have the conviction removed from his record. Hanas has since filed an appeal with the Michigan State Supreme Court, requesting that his conviction be reversed or sent to Appeals Court for review.

"The Michigan case shows just how horribly wrong the merging of the state and religion can go, even with the noblest of intentions," says David Koepsell, executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism. "The Hanas case is a prime example of how the First Amendment's strict separation can be destroyed with such 'faith-based initiatives.' It is time once again to take the wall of separation seriously, and to put an end to the insidious destruction of our secular society

by these devices."

Edward Buckner, Southern Director of the Council, says that while faith-based initiatives may sound like a good idea, people shouldn't let sentiment cloud their judgment. And because such programs affect both the government and the religious organization, they should never be funded without proper oversight.

"No self-respecting religious group should consider risking government control and government interference in its affairs by accepting tax dollars," says Buckner. "And no self-respecting taxpayer should consider voting to give up those tax dollars without a full and fair accounting for the funds, clear standards for evaluating whether the money is doing what it is supposed to be doing, and full enforcement of equal protection under the law for employees and clients for whom the tax money is spent."

Joe Hanas's plight demonstrates that the very problems critics of faith-based initiatives predicted would happen. Hanas is Christian; one can only imagine what would happen to a nonbeliever in similar circumstances.

Faith-based services are—and will continue to be—used to proselytize by the religious groups that administer them. Thanks to the Charity Choice provision of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, many states now include faith-based programs as part of court-ordered drug rehabilitation, and despite some legal challenges, such programs are expanding. Legislation passed last year, for example, includes appropriations from the Healthy Iowans tobacco trust and the tobacco settlement trust fund, (HF 685) which has a line item appropriation of \$310,000 to the Newton Correctional Facility for a "value-based"

treatment program. Kansas legislators passed the "drug abuse treatment fund" (SB 123), which allows for community-based or faith-based programs to provide drug treatment.

Ohio House Bill 95 established the Governor's Office for Faith-Based Nonprofit and Other Nonprofit Organizations. The office will serve as a clearinghouse of information on federal, state, and local funding for charitable services performed by organizations. The bill allocates \$625,000 in TANF funds to support the activities of this office for the 2003-2004 biennium.

On the federal level, the Bush administration has spearheaded faith-based initiatives independent of Congress. According to an August 2004 report published by The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, titled *The Expanding Administrative Presidency: George W. Bush and the Faith-Based Initiative*, "the Bush Administration has made concerted use of its executive powers and has moved aggressively through new regulation, funding, political appointees and active public outreach efforts to expand the federal government's partnerships with faith-based social service providers in ways that don't require Congressional approval."

The White House Office of Faith-based Initiatives and a network of satellite centers in the federal departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and the Small Business Administration "articulate, advance and oversee coordinated efforts to win more federal funds for faith-based social services."

[From a September 25 *Take Action!* email from the Council for Secular Humanism.]

Can't find it at the AFS bookstore? No problem! You can now order EvolveFish items through the AFS website! Just click on the [EvolveFish](http://www.EvolveFish.com) logo.



Should Congress scrap a law that prevents churches from engaging in political activities? No.

By The Rev. Barry W. Lynn

On any given weekend, millions of Americans attend services at churches, synagogues, temples and mosques. People go there to worship, to learn about their faith and to enjoy communion with like-minded believers.

It's safe to say, however, that few go to hear which candidates they should vote for in upcoming elections.

Yet some religious leaders insist that handing down lists of endorsements is part of their job. In this election year, some are even boldly urging churches to evade or defy tax law and jump head-first into partisan politics.

Federal tax law simply does not allow this. Under the Internal Revenue Code, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organizations – including houses of worship – may not endorse or oppose candidates for public office.

Despite this clear legal mandate, the Rev. Jerry Falwell and his Religious Right allies are urging evangelical churches to plunge into politics. He asserts that the IRS does not enforce the “no politicking” rule.

Of all people, Falwell should know how wrong that is. His “Old Time Gospel Hour” was found to have engaged in unlawful campaign intervention by the IRS in 1993. The ministry's tax exemption was revoked for the years 1986 and 1987, and he was required to pay \$50,000 in back taxes.

Others have run into similar problems. In 1998, TV preacher Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network

lost its tax exemption retroactively for two years and was required to pay a significant sum in back taxes. A church near Binghamton, N.Y., lost its tax-exempt status in 1995 and disbanded because it ran newspaper ads telling people not to vote for presidential candidate Bill Clinton in 1992.

Loss of federal tax exemption is no mere “slap on the wrist” for a religious institution. Tax law experts say it may also lead to loss of a church's property tax exemption or even put a pastor's ministerial housing allowance in jeopardy.

Tax-exempt organizations, including churches, are free to speak out about pressing moral issues and social justice concerns.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King spoke in hundreds of churches as he advocated for civil rights, but he never abused the role of the church by endorsing any candidate from the pulpit. Church resources and church personnel may not be used to advance a candidate's campaign. It's a small price to pay for the valuable privilege of a tax exemption.

There are profoundly important reasons beyond fear of legal penalties why religious leaders should refrain from church-based electioneering. The simple fact is, such activity invites controversy into the sanctuary. Congregations are sure to be divided when church leaders favor one candidate over another.

Church electioneering also invites sectarian strife into our diverse de-

mocracy. In some countries, the largest religious denomination assumes the power to run the government and subjects everyone to its dogma by the force of law. These places are not free, and few Americans would want to live in them.

Yet this is what many in the Religious Right seek.

In keeping with their fundamentalist doctrines, they want to teach their religion in public schools, use tax dollars to subsidize religious schools, ban reproductive choice, deny legal equality to gays and restrict medical advances through stem-cell research.

By forging a church-based political machine, they hope to control the government. They must not succeed.

Mergers of church and state always end up hurting religion in the long run. Wedded to the machinery of partisan politics, the church surrenders its prophetic voice for the promise of favored treatment. People quickly detect when a church has sold out to political interests – and they abandon it in droves.

To abide by the laws of the land and to maintain their independence and integrity, America's houses of worship must stay out of partisan politics.

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn is executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and a civil liberties attorney.

[This story appeared in the September 9 issue of Provo, Utah's *Daily Herald*.]

Survey Shows Increase in Number of Americans with No Religious Identity

When asked to name their religion, sixteen percent (16%) of American adults, or 34 million people, now decline to choose a church or denomination, up from less than ten percent (10%) in the early 1990s. That is, nearly one in every six Americans now answers “none” or “no religion,” or describe themselves as secular, humanist, ethical-culturalist, agnostic,

or atheist.

The survey is from a new report, “The Decline of Religious Identity in the United States,” released by the Institute for Jewish & Community Research.

The trend seems especially strong among the young. Fully one-quarter of 18-24 year-olds fail to identify with some religion, compared to only 5% of

those 65 and older. This pattern persists steadily across the age spectrum.

Women are less likely to be non-identifiers (13%) than men (20%). Regionally, 24% of Westerners vs. 14% of those in other parts of the country identify with no church or denomination. [From the Institute for Jewish & Community Research. For details, see www.jewishresearch.org.]

Falwell Says Evangelical Christians Control Republican Party

The Rev. Jerry Falwell boasted on September 24 that evangelical Christians, after nearly 25 years of increasing political activism, now control the Republican Party and the fate of President Bush in the November election.

"The Republican Party does not have the head count to elect a president without the support of religious conservatives," Falwell said at an election training conference of the Christian Coalition.

Falwell said evangelical Christians are now "by far the largest constituency" within the Republican Party, their route to dominance beginning in 1979 with his founding of the Moral Majority, a precursor to the Christian Coalition.

"I tell my Republican friends who are always talking about the 'big tent,' I say make it as big as you want to, but if the candidate running for president is not pro-life, pro-family... you're not going to win," he added.

"Big tent" is a term the late Lee Atwater coined as chairman of the Republican National Committee after the 1988 presidential election to summarize his view that the Republican Party should expand beyond its conservative base to include political moderates.

Falwell expressed confidence in a Bush victory over Democratic nominee John Kerry, adding "You cannot be a sincere committed born-again believer who takes the Bible seriously and vote for a pro-choice anti-family candidate."

Falwell was among roughly a dozen speakers at the Christian Coalition workshop, which was held in a U.S. Senate auditorium, a courtesy arranged by Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., the majority whip, the No. 2 Republican position in the Senate. The speakers included:

► Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, who said Bush's re-election was critical because "the next president is going to appoint two, perhaps four, Supreme Court justices," making it possible to reverse the landmark *Roe v. Wade* abortion rights ruling.

► Father Frank Pavone of Priests for Life, who, in announcing a \$1 million campaign to mobilize church-going voters, likened politicians who support abortion rights to individuals who support terrorism. He did not mention Kerry by name, however, but said supporting abortion, like supporting terrorism, is "one of those stands... that (should) exclude that person from public office."

► Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., who insisted that "preachers must be free to speak out" in favor of anti-abortion office-seekers because liberals are attempting to "eliminate the Judeo-Christian principles upon which this country was founded and we cannot let that happen." Jones is a sponsor of legislation that prohibit the Internal Revenue Service from removing the tax exempt status of churches engaged in partisan politics.

The "Road to Victory 2004" conference concluded on September 25 at a

downtown Washington hotel with several hundred Christian activists attending training sessions for registering new voters and getting those voters to the polls on Election Day. It will include the distribution of the Christian Coalition Voter Guide for the November election.

But Roberta Combs, the organization's president, said the Christian Coalition has been registering new voters for more than a year, not just in the final weeks of the presidential campaign. "We haven't told anyone, but we've been out doing our job," she said.

The Christian Coalition, founded in 1989 by religious broadcaster Pat Robertson, does not appear to be as large as it once was. Its "Victory" conference this year attracted several hundred activists, compared to the thousands it drew when it was led by Ralph Reed, now a senior Bush campaign strategist.

Still, "it would be a mistake to underestimate its political potency," said the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Indeed, Falwell said that the Christian Coalition has been involved in voter registration in more than 225,000 churches across the country in preparation for the presidential election. And he predicted a "landslide" for Bush in November, largely as a result of the efforts of evangelical Christians.

[From a September 26 Cox News Service article by Scott Shepard.]

Americans United Condemns House Passage of "Pledge Protection Act"

On September 23, the U.S. House voted 247-173 to approve the so-called "Pledge Protection Act." The measure, H.R. 2028, bans all federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, from considering constitutional challenges to the Pledge.

Americans United had urged lawmakers to defeat the bill, calling it "extreme and unwise."

"This bill is a dramatic assault on the courts and individual rights, wrapped in phony patriotism," said Rev. Barry Lynn, Americans United executive director. "The supporters of this bill have shown callous disregard for long-standing constitutional principles...The federal courts should be open to all Americans seeking protection of their constitutional rights."

The Pledge Act, sponsored by Rep. Todd Akin (R-Mo.), is the second court-stripping bill passed by the House this session. In July, the House approved a bill banning the federal courts from hearing legal challenges to the federal Defense of Marriage Act.

"I am confident the Senate will bury this bill, as it so richly deserves," Lynn said.

Schools Must Certify Prayer is Protected

The federal government is trying to teach schools a lesson about freedom of religion.

And to make sure school officials are paying attention, the federal government has a stick — the threat of loss of federal funds — if schools don't comply.

In Kentucky, the state Department of Education has sent a form to school superintendents across the state asking them to certify that their districts are in compliance with federal guidelines assuring they have no policies that deny individuals the right to pray in public schools.

First published in 1995, the guidelines were updated as part of the No Child Left Behind law, the centerpiece of the Bush Administration's plan for public education.

While some debate the legal interpretations set out in the guidelines,

school superintendents appear to be signing off on the document without complaining.

"I think we're in an age of accountability, and everybody wants to make sure you're following the guidelines," said Campbell County Superintendent Anthony Strong.

Lawyers with state school board groups in Kentucky said school districts haven't raised concerns about the issue.

Steve Kirby, director of legal services for the Kentucky School Boards Association, said he believes some school districts in other states might raise concerns if they are working within the constraints of court decisions that might be contrary to what is cited in the federal guidelines.

Kentucky has a state law addressing religious practices in school, passed in 1998 to clear up confusion

about what is allowed, Kirby said.

That statute "basically said school districts are to allow students the opportunity to pray and that a teacher could not lead a prayer as school activity. I don't think anyone disagrees with that. As long as the only thing anyone is saying is that the schools are going to follow the decisions of the courts, I don't think there's a problem."

The Bush administration is clearly trying to push the envelope on behalf of prayer in public schools, said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Administration lawyers have selectively read case law to come to the conclusions they wanted, he said.

"Those guidelines assert that students can lead prayers or give sermons at some school functions," Lynn said. "The Supreme Court has never allowed that. If the administration tries to cut off federal funding to any school on the basis of those guidelines, that action will surely be challenged in court."

The group also contends that some sections of the guidelines are deliberately vague or imply that certain types of religious activities in public schools must be permitted when courts instead have been unclear on those points.

In other cases, the guidelines cite lower court cases that aren't relevant, Americans United said.

A Boone County lawyer who is state director of American Atheists Inc. agrees with the alarms raised by Lynn's group.

"Any person can pray any time they want silently, but the idea that a certification is needed to show us how you have made it possible for students to pray is missing the point," said Edwin Kagin of Union. "You should show us what guarantees have been put in place to prevent the establishment of a religion at school."

[From a Sept. 13 *Kentucky Post* article by staff reporter Crystal Harden.]

Letters to the Editor

Ed Buckner's letter was in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on Sept. 11, 2004.

Can't have one without the other

Sen. Elizabeth Dole's (R-N.C.) remarks at the Republican convention betrayed a frequent but important misunderstanding of religious liberty and separation of church and state ("Quotes of the week," *Faith & Values*, Sept. 4): She reiterated, to sustained applause, the false phrase that the U.S. Constitution "guarantees freedom of religion, not freedom from religion."

Freedom of religion must include the freedom to be irreligious, if that is what one wants, or it is not freedom at all. And no one's freedom of religion will be safe for long if every American is not free from government-imposed, government-sponsored religion. If majorities or governments can decide religious



Elizabeth Dole says Republicans didn't invent Americans' right to worship God, but they will defend it.

truth for any citizen, no citizen has secure religious liberty.

ED BUCKNER

Buckner, of Smyrna, is Southern director of the Council for Secular Humanism.

September Board Meeting Minutes

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

Minutes taken by: Harriet Harris

Time/Date of meeting: 2:00 PM, September 19, 2004

- ▶ The August Minutes were approved as they appeared in the September newsletter.
- ▶ Treasurer Burton presented his financial report. Although AFS is financially in the black, the board agreed that we need to find ways to increase our income. Bill and Steve agreed to work together to prepare a 2005 budget. Judy will look into reducing our property taxes - on the basis of our status as an educational organization.
- ▶ Since nominations for Board members and Officers are

to be submitted at the October meeting, we reviewed our nomination process, and noted that nominations will be accepted for all four Officers (President, Treasurer, External and Internal V.P.), whose terms are for one year; and for 3 of the 6 Board members, each of whose term is for two years. Nominations are to be submitted either at the Oct. meeting, in person, or by mail in advance of the meeting. One must obtain in advance the permission of any proposed nominee.

- ▶ The board agreed that the Ga. Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State may hold their monthly meeting at our Center, without charge, through the end of this year. Thereafter they will pay a to-be negotiated monthly fee.

“Rulers who wished to subvert the public liberty, may have found an established Clergy convenient auxiliaries. A just Government instituted to secure & perpetuate it needs them not.” – James Madison, in *A Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, addressed to the Virginia General Assembly, June 20, 1785

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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.

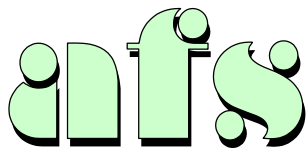
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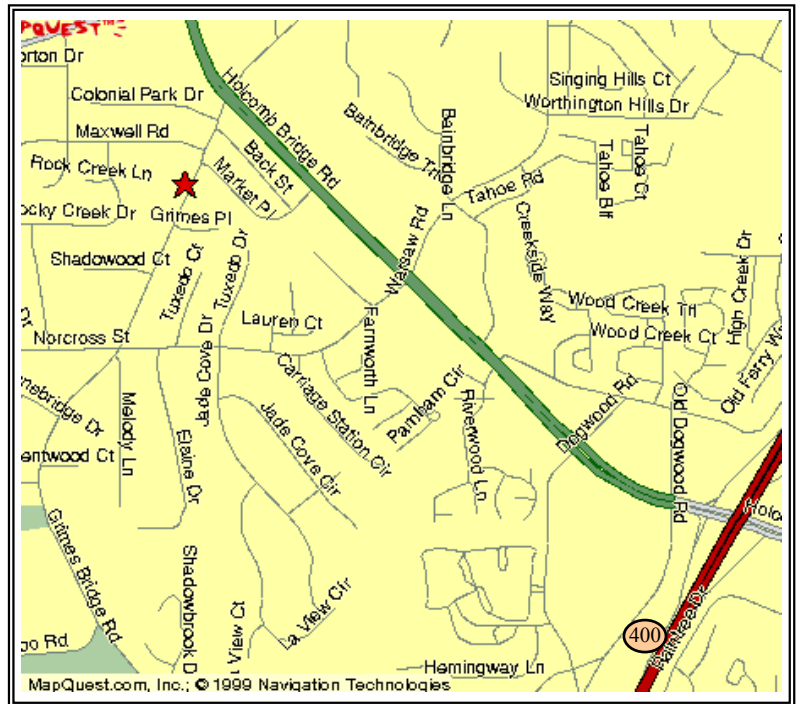
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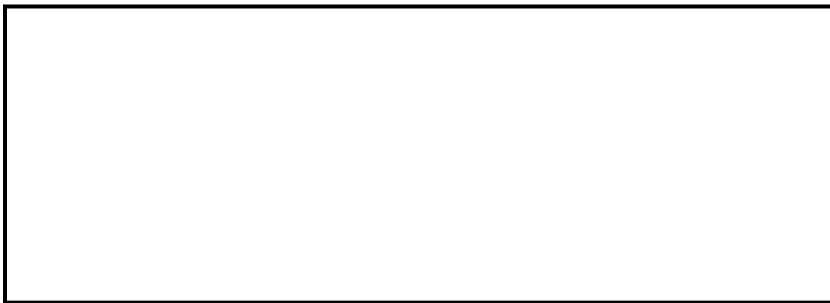
**Atlanta
Freethought
Society**

**The October Meeting:
Sunday, October 10
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Larry Darby**



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