

Atlanta Freethought News

An AFS Publication • Volume 10 Number 12 • December 2004

The December Meeting

The December 12 AFS meeting will be a potluck dinner at the Atlanta Freethought Center.

The dinner will start at 1:00 PM. AFS will provide soft drinks and coffee, tableware and entertainment. Please bring food according to the first letter of your last name:

A - J: Please bring a main dish.

K - T: Please bring a side dish.

U - Z: Please bring a desert.

Any member may also bring their own refreshments. Food may be reheated at the AF Center's micro-wave oven.

Even if you haven't been to the Atlanta Freethought Center before, come on down for a nice dinner and some lively conversation with fellow freethinkers!

The Atlanta Freethought Center is at Suite 500, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, 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 Road, which is on the right.

AFS Activities

The next **AFS Social** will be at **Las Margaritas Restaurant** at 1842 Cheshire Bridge Road (Atlanta) on Friday, December 17, 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 not meet this month.

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

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will not have a regular meeting this month.

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).

Atheist Meetup in Atlanta

Atlanta Atheists will have a "meetup" on Sunday, December 19, at 2:00 PM. The informal gathering will be at Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Road, Atlanta, GA. Their phone is 404-255-5911. Details: www.meetup.com.

North Georgia Freethinkers

The North Georgia Freethinkers have a new website at www.freewebs.com/northgeorgiafreethinkers/. They will have an NGF Social on Saturday, December 11, at 2:00 PM in Rick's Restaurant, 47 South Park Street, Dahlonega, GA.

To get there from Atlanta, take GA 400 North, then a left onto US-19/GA-60, then turn right on Choice Ave., then turn left on S. Park Street, ending on 47 South Park Street.

AFS Meetings and Activities

Dec 12: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.

Dec 17: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

Please note that there will be no Board Meeting and no Discussion Group meeting this month. Happy Holidays!

Overheard in an Internet chat room:

Q: Why do they call that magazine "Time?"

A: Because "Christianity Today" was already taken.
(See the Dec. 13 issue.)

"We must question the story logic of having an all-knowing, all-powerful God, who creates faulty humans, and then blames them for his own mistakes."

— Gene Roddenberry

Websites for Holiday Surfing:

Things You Never Knew About Christmas, by Tony King:
http://www.geocities.com/ngoldwe_2000/youneverknew.html

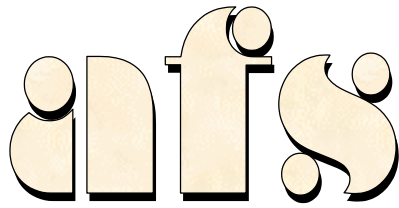
Is Christmas Just for Christians? by Jeanne Haslett:
http://www.atlantafreethought.org/nl_xmas-jh.html

The Agnostic Christmas, by Robert Ingersoll:
<http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/fai.shtml>

What I Want for Christmas, by John Patrick Murphy:
<http://www.evolvefish.com/writings.html>

An Atheist Christmas! by Judith Hayes:
<http://www.thehappyheretic.com/12-99.htm>

Season is the Reason for Jesus, by Blair Scott:
www.alabamatheist.org/blasphemy/articles/200012.htm



**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.

December 12: A Winter Solstice Party! Bring food for the pot-luck dinner.

January 9: Bob Truett will speak on Freethought issues.

February 13: (tentative) Ed Kagin will speak about his new book *Baubles of Blasphemy*.

March 13: TBD

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.

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Editor

Steve Yothment

How to Contact the Editor

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

Atlanta Freethought Society

President

Steve Yothment – 678-364-8703

VP for Internal Communication

Judy Thompson – 404-296-2020

VP for External Communication

Sue Garland – 404-875-7288

Treasurer

Bill Burton – 770-469-1228

Board of Directors

Freya Harris – 404-xxx-xxxx

Harriet Harris – 404-252-1962

Joel Kollin – 770-392-7958

Kate Miller – 770-xxx-xxxx

Lew Southern – 770-509-8272

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information, contact AFS at:
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afs@atlantafreethought.org.

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Call the AFS Infoline: 770-641-2903

Cobb: Judge to Decide Textbook Case

The arguments have been made, and now a judge must decide: Do disclaimers Cobb County stuck in its science textbooks two years ago — calling evolution a “theory, not a fact” — violate the principle of separation between church and state?

After three days of testimony in a lawsuit seeking to rid the school system of the disclaimers, Attorney Michael Manely, in closing arguments for the six parents who brought the suit, argued that the disclaimers are religiously motivated. He compared them to cigarette warnings, saying they question how valid science’s answer is to the origins of man.

U.S. District Court Judge Clarence Cooper gave no date but said he will make his ruling as soon as possible.

The disclaimers say: “This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully and critically considered.”

The wording is “vague [and] may create doubt in some people’s minds” about evolution, Cobb schools attorney Linwood Gunn acknowledged during closing arguments. But, he

added, the wording is also neutral: It makes no mention of religion or faith.

Teachers are required by law to teach only evolution in class, he said. He argued that Cobb school board members meant only for the disclaimers to make students, whose religious beliefs conflict with evolution, feel comfortable, because “science and religion can’t be mutually exclusive [if] conflict does come up.”

Manely, however, said the disclaimers “do not just go to students who need accommodation. [They] go to all students.” He argued the disclaimers assert a belief by calling evolution “not a fact. It is not accommodation to assert, ‘we are right, you are wrong.’”

Some school board members, Manely said, testified they themselves do not fully believe in evolution. All five who testified said they knew when they put disclaimers about evolution in science textbooks, religious ideas of man’s origin would be brought up in class.

So did the public, Manely argued.

“Letter after letter, e-mail after e-mail” from the public to school board members referred to alternatives to evolution being allowed into class as a

result of the disclaimer, he said, reading several in court.

Manely then summarized the testimony of scientists he called to the stand, who said any “alternatives” to evolution are considered unscientific — and religious — by most scientists. “The school board undermines evolution... as if they are standing behind the teacher shaking their heads and saying, ‘Oh no, that’s not a fact,’” Manely said.

The scientists and a North Cobb High School teacher testified that the disclaimers were a “warning” to students that evolution was, somehow, suspect or suspicious. The teacher, Wes McCoy, said he now spends a lot of class time talking about the fact that a scientific theory is not the same as a “theory” applied in everyday life.

Gunn during the trial argued the stickers were just a way to be respectful of students’ views on a controversial subject. Manely argued they were pandering to specific religious views not shared by all students.

Both cited court cases to bolster their arguments, but the decision now is up to the judge.

[From a November 12 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article by Kristina Torres.]

Record Priest-Abuse Settlement in California

An agreement by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange County to pay \$100 million to settle 87 sex-abuse claims against priests probably will set a standard that profoundly will affect hundreds of cases nationwide, lawyers familiar with the litigation said on December 3.

Although final terms of the settlement remain undisclosed under terms of a gag order, sources on all sides of the case confirmed the overall settlement figure, which would be a record payment by a Catholic diocese in the United States.

The Vatican-approved deal will provide, on average, \$1.1 million to each of the 87 alleged victims of sex-

ual abuse — considerably more than most previous settlements of multiple priest sex-abuse claims. The previous record settlement came last year when the Archdiocese of Boston agreed to pay \$85 million, divided among 552 victims.

Orange County church officials said the money will come from a combination of insurance, cash reserves, loans, and perhaps the sale of property.

The size of the agreement will provide a benchmark for future settlements. “It’s like a gigantic eBay,” where recent sales can dictate prices, said Patrick Schiltz, a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law in Minneapolis. Schiltz called the

\$100 million settlement “an astonishing amount of money.”

The deal probably will have its greatest impact on the neighboring Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which is trying to settle 544 molestation claims.

The amount of the Orange County settlement suggests that the Los Angeles archdiocese could face a bill of at least \$500 million to resolve its litigation.

The Orange County diocese’s promise not to fight the release of confidential personnel files of accused priests will also set an important precedent.

[From a Dec. 4 *Los Angeles Times* article by Bill Lobdell and Jean Guccione.]

Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Programs Teach False Information

A report released by Rep. Henry Waxman on Dec. 3 shows that many federally funded abstinence-only education programs use curricula that distort information about the effectiveness of contraceptives, misrepresent the risks of abortion, blur religion and science, treat stereotypes about girls and boys as scientific fact, and contain basic scientific errors.

Under the Bush Administration, federal support for "abstinence-only" education programs has expanded rapidly. The federal government will spend approximately \$170 million on abstinence-only education programs in fiscal year 2005, more than twice the amount spent in fiscal year 2001. As a result, abstinence-only education, which promotes abstinence from sexual activity without teaching basic facts about contraception, now reaches millions of children and adolescents each year.

The report evaluated the content of the most popular abstinence-only curricula used by grantees of the largest federal abstinence initiative, SPRANS (Special Programs of Regional and National Significance Community-Based Abstinence Education). Through SPRANS, the Department of Health and Human Services provides grants to community organizations that teach abstinence-only curricula to youth. The curricula used in SPRANS and other federally funded programs are not reviewed for accuracy by the federal government.

The report finds that over 80% of the abstinence-only curricula, used by over two thirds of SPRANS grantees in 2003, contain false, misleading, or distorted information about reproductive health. Specifically, the report finds:

- **Abstinence-Only Curricula Contain False Information about the Effectiveness of Contraceptives.** Many of the curricula misrepresent the effectiveness of condoms in preventing sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. One curriculum says that "the popular claim that 'condoms help prevent the spread of STDs,' is

not supported by the data"; another states that "[i]n heterosexual sex, condoms fail to prevent HIV approximately 31% of the time"; and another teaches that a pregnancy occurs one out of every seven times that couples use condoms. These erroneous statements are presented as proven scientific facts.

- **Abstinence-Only Curricula Contain False Information about the Risks of Abortion.** One curriculum states that 5% to 10% of women who have legal abortions will become sterile; that "[p]remature birth, a major cause of mental retardation, is increased following the abortion of a first pregnancy"; and that "[t]ubal and cervical pregnancies are increased following abortions." In fact, these risks do not rise after the procedure used in most abortions in the United States.

- **Abstinence-Only Curricula Blur Religion and Science.** Many of the curricula present as scientific fact the religious view that life begins at conception. For example, one lesson states: "Conception, also known as fertilization, occurs when one sperm unites with one egg in the upper third of the fallopian tube. This is when life begins." Another curriculum calls a 43-day-old fetus a "thinking person."

- **Abstinence-Only Curricula Treat Stereotypes about Girls and Boys as**

Scientific Fact. One curriculum teaches that women need "financial support," while men need "admiration." Another instructs: "Women gauge their happiness and judge their success on their relationships. Men's happiness and success hinge on their accomplishments."

- **Abstinence-Only Curricula Contain Scientific Errors.** In numerous instances, the abstinence-only curricula teach erroneous scientific information. One curriculum incorrectly lists exposure to sweat and tears as risk factors for HIV transmission. Another curriculum states that "twenty-four chromosomes from the mother and twenty-four chromosomes from the father join to create this new individual"; the correct number is 23.

The report finds numerous examples of these errors. Serious and pervasive problems with the accuracy of abstinence-only curricula may help explain why these programs have not been shown to protect adolescents from sexually transmitted diseases and why youth who pledge abstinence are significantly less likely to make informed choices about precautions when they do have sex.

You can see the complete report at <http://www.democrats.reform.house.gov/investigations.asp?Issue=Public+Health>.



Battlefield Earth: A Speech by Bill Moyers

On December 1, the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School presented its fourth annual Global Environment Citizen Award to Bill Moyers. In presenting the award, Meryl Streep, a member of the Center board, said, "Through resourceful, intrepid reportage and perceptive voices from the forward edge of the debate, Moyers has examined an environment under siege with the aim of engaging citizens." The following is the text of Bill Moyers' response to Ms. Streep's presentation of the award.

I accept this award on behalf of all the people behind the camera whom you never see. And for all those scientists, advocates, activists, and just plain citizens whose stories we have covered in reporting on how environmental change affects our daily lives. We journalists are simply beachcombers on the shores of other people's knowledge, other people's experience, and other people's wisdom. We tell their stories.

The journalist who truly deserves this award is my friend, Bill McKibben. He enjoys the most conspicuous place in my own pantheon of journalistic heroes for his pioneer work in writing about the environment. His bestseller *The End of Nature* carried on where Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* left off.

Writing in *Mother Jones* recently, Bill described how the problems we journalists routinely cover — conventional, manageable programs like budget shortfalls and pollution — may be about to convert to chaotic, unpredictable, unmanageable situations. The most unmanageable of all, he writes, could be the accelerating deterioration of the environment, creating perils with huge momentum like the greenhouse effect that is causing the melt of the arctic to release so much freshwater into the North Atlantic that even the Pentagon is growing alarmed that a weakening gulf stream could yield abrupt and overwhelming changes, the kind of changes that could radically alter civilizations.

That's one challenge we journalists face — how to tell such a story without coming across as Cassandras, without turning off the people we most want to understand what's happening, who must act on what they read and hear.

As difficult as it is, however, for journalists to fashion a readable narra-

tive for complex issues without depressing our readers and viewers, there is an even harder challenge — to pierce the ideology that governs official policy today. One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe, to sit in the seat of power in the oval office and in Congress. For the first time in our history, ideology and theology hold a monopoly of power in Washington. Theology asserts propositions that cannot be proven true; ideologues hold stoutly to a world view despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality. When ideology and theology couple, their offspring are not always bad but they are always blind. And there is the danger: voters and politicians alike, oblivious to the facts.

Remember James Watt, President Reagan's first Secretary of the Interior? My favorite online environmental journal, the ever engaging *Grist*, reminded us recently of how James Watt told the U.S. Congress that protecting natural resources was unimportant in light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. In public testimony he said, "after the last tree is felled, Christ will come back."

Beltway elites snickered. The press corps didn't know what he was talking about. But James Watt was serious. So were his compatriots out across the country. They are the people who believe the bible is literally true — one-third of the American electorate, if a recent Gallup poll is accurate. In this past election several million good and decent citizens went to the polls believing in the rapture index. That's right — the rapture index. Google it and you will find that the best-selling books in America today are the twelve volumes of the left-

behind series written by the Christian fundamentalist and religious right warrior, Timothy LaHaye. These true believers subscribe to a fantastical theology concocted in the 19th century by a couple of immigrant preachers who took disparate passages from the Bible and wove them into a narrative that has captivated the imagination of millions of Americans.

Its outline is rather simple, if bizarre (the British writer George Monbiot recently did a brilliant dissection of it and I am indebted to him for adding to my own understanding): once Israel has occupied the rest of its 'biblical lands,' legions of the anti-Christ will attack it, triggering a final showdown in the valley of Armageddon. As the Jews who have not been converted are burned, the messiah will return for the rapture. True believers will be lifted out of their clothes and transported to heaven, where, seated next to the right hand of God, they will watch their religious and political opponents suffer plagues of boils, sores, locusts, and frogs during the several years of tribulation that follow.

I'm not making this up. Like Monbiot, I've read the literature. I've reported on these people, following some of them from Texas to the West Bank. They are sincere, serious, and polite as they tell you they feel called to help bring the rapture on as fulfillment of biblical prophecy. That's why they have declared solidarity with Israel and the Jewish settlements and backed up their support with money and volunteers. It's why the invasion of Iraq for them was a warm-up act, predicted in the Book of Revelations where four angels 'which are bound in the great river Euphrates will be released to slay the third part of man.' A war with Islam in the Middle East is

Battlefield Earth (*continued*)

not something to be feared but welcomed – an essential conflagration on the road to redemption. The last time I Googled it, the rapture index stood at 144 – just one point below the critical threshold when the whole thing will blow, the son of god will return, the righteous will enter heaven, and sinners will be condemned to eternal hellfire.

So what does this mean for public policy and the environment? Go to Grist to read a remarkable work of reporting by the journalist, Glenn Scherer – “*The Road to Environmental Apocalypse*.” Read it and you will see how millions of Christian fundamentalists may believe that environmental destruction is not only to be disregarded but actually welcomed – even hastened – as a sign of the coming apocalypse.

As Grist makes clear, we’re not talking about a handful of fringe lawmakers who hold or are beholden to these beliefs. Nearly half the U.S. Congress before the recent election – 231 legislators in total – more since the election – are backed by the religious right. Forty-five senators and 186 members of the 108th congress earned 80 to 100 percent approval ratings from the three most influential Christian right advocacy groups. They include Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Assistant Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Conference Chair Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, Policy Chair Jon Kyl of Arizona, House Speaker Dennis Hastert, and Majority Whip Roy Blunt. The only Democrat to score 100 percent with the Christian coalition was Senator Zell Miller of Georgia, who recently quoted from the biblical book of Amos on the senate floor: “The days will come, sayeth the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land.” He seemed to be relishing the thought.

And why not? There’s a constituency for it. A 2002 TIME/CNN poll found that 59 percent of Americans believe that the prophecies found in the book of Revelations are going to

come true. Nearly one-quarter think the Bible predicted the 9/11 attacks. Drive across the country with your radio tuned to the more than 1,600 Christian radio stations or in the motel turn some of the 250 Christian TV stations and you can hear some of this end-time gospel. And you will come to understand why people under the spell of such potent prophecies cannot be expected, as Grist puts it, “to worry about the environment. Why care about the earth when the droughts, floods, famine and pestilence brought by ecological collapse are signs of the apocalypse foretold in the bible? Why care about global climate change when you and yours will be rescued in the rapture? And why care about converting from oil to solar when the same god who performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes can whip up a few billion barrels of light crude with a word?”

Because these people believe that until Christ does return, the lord will provide. One of their texts is a high school history book, *America’s Providential History*. You’ll find there these words: “The secular or socialist has a limited resource mentality and views the world as a pie... that needs to be cut up so everyone can get a piece.” However, “The Christian knows that the potential in god is unlimited and that there is no shortage of resources in god’s earth... while many secularists view the world as overpopulated, Christians know that god has made the earth sufficiently large with plenty of resources to accommodate all of the people.” No wonder Karl Rove goes around the White House whistling that militant hymn, “Onward Christian Soldiers.” He turned out millions of the foot soldiers on November 2, including many who have made the apocalypse a powerful driving force in modern American politics.

I can see in the look on your faces just how hard it is for the journalist to report a story like this with any credibility. So let me put it on a personal level. I myself don’t know how to be

in this world without expecting a confident future and getting up every morning to do what I can to bring it about. So I have always been an optimist. Now, however, I think of my friend on Wall Street whom I once asked: “What do you think of the market?” “I’m optimistic,” he answered. “Then why do you look so worried?” And he answered: “Because I’m not sure my optimism is justified.”

I’m not, either. Once upon a time I agreed with the Eric Chivian and the Center for Health and the Global Environment that people will protect the natural environment when they realize its importance to their health and to the health and lives of their children. Now I am not so sure. It’s not that I don’t want to believe that – it’s just that I read the news and connect the dots:

I read that the administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has declared the election a mandate for President Bush on the environment. This for an administration that wants to rewrite the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act protecting rare plant and animal species and their habitats, as well as the National Environmental Policy Act that requires the government to judge beforehand if actions might damage natural resources.

That wants to relax pollution limits for ozone; eliminate vehicle tailpipe inspections; and ease pollution standards for cars, sports utility vehicles and diesel-powered big trucks and heavy equipment.

That wants a new international audit law to allow corporations to keep certain information about environmental problems secret from the public.

That wants to drop all its new-source review suits against polluting coal-fired power plants and weaken consent decrees reached earlier with coal companies.

That wants to open the arctic wild-life refuge to drilling and increase drilling in Padre Island National Sea-

Battlefield Earth (*continued*)

shore, the longest stretch of undeveloped barrier island in the world and the last great coastal wild land in America.

I read the news just this week and learned how the Environmental Protection Agency had planned to spend nine million dollars – \$2 million of it from the administration's friends at the American Chemistry Council – to pay poor families to continue to use pesticides in their homes. These pesticides have been linked to neurological damage in children, but instead of ordering an end to their use, the government and the industry are going to offer the families \$970 each, as well as a camcorder and children's clothing, to serve as guinea pigs for the study.

I read all this in the news.

I read the news just last night and learned that the administration's friends at the international policy network, which is supported by Exxon Mobile and others of like mind, have issued a new report that climate change is "a myth, sea levels are not rising," scientists who believe catastrophe is possible are "an embarrassment."

I not only read the news but the fine print of the recent appropriations bill passed by Congress, with the obscure (and obscene) riders attached to it: a clause removing all endangered species protections from pesticides; language prohibiting judicial review for a forest in Oregon; a waiver of environmental review for grazing permits on public lands; a rider pressed by developers to weaken protection for crucial habitats in California.

I read all this and look up at the pictures on my desk, next to the computer – pictures of my grandchildren: Henry, age 12; of Thomas, age 10; of Nancy, 7; Jassie, 3; Sara Jane, nine months. I see the future looking back at me from those photographs and I say, "Father, forgive us, for we know now what we do." And then I am stopped short by the thought: "That's not right. We do know what we are doing. We are stealing their future. Betraying their trust. Despoiling their world."

And I ask myself: Why? Is it because we don't care? Because we are greedy? Because we have lost our capacity for outrage, our ability to sus-

tain indignation at injustice?

What has happened to our moral imagination?

On the heath Lear asks Gloucester: "How do you see the world?" And Gloucester, who is blind, answers: "I see it feelingly."

I see it feelingly.

The news is not good these days. I can tell you, though, that as a journalist I know the news is never the end of the story. The news can be the truth that sets us free – not only to feel but to fight for the future we want. And the will to fight is the antidote to despair, the cure for cynicism, and the answer to those faces looking back at me from those photographs on my desk. What we need to match the science of human health is what the ancient Israelites called "hocma" – the science of the heart... the capacity to see... to feel... and then to act... as if the future depended on you.

Believe me, it does.

(Bill Moyers is the host of the weekly public affairs program *NOW with Bill Moyers*, which airs Fridays on PBS.)

[From a Dec. 4 posting on Alternet.org and a Dec. 5 Truthout.org article.]

James Madison: A Speech by Danielle Darby

On November 18, Danielle Darby, 15 year-old daughter of Larry Darby, gave the following speech at the Montgomery, AL chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution. Larry reported in the November 20 *Atheist News Service* that her speech so infuriated the leadership (mostly high-ranking retired U.S. Military officers) that they judged her's the worst speech of all (4th out of 4) and decreed that he may never again attend a chapter meeting. Danielle recited the speech from memory with no props and, unlike the poor child who finished third, no prompting from the official in charge of the contest.

One purpose of the Joseph Rumbaugh Historical Oration Contest is to place a positive emphasis on contributions from our Founding Fathers. I will talk about James Madison, born, 1751, Orange County, Virginia.

I begin with various biographical facts relating to Madison, proceed with commentary about his political background, and conclude with emphasis on what is considered by many to be his most important contribution.

Madison is the acknowledged chief architect of the 1787 Constitution and

the 1789 Bill of Rights. In 1808 he became the fourth president of our constitutional republic. However, I am here to proclaim that Madison's most enduring contribution to America was his steadfast assertion that religion and government must be kept separate.

In 1776 Madison was a delegate to the Virginia General Assembly and, in contrast to mere toleration, was responsible for the provision which made all religions in Virginia equal before the law.

In years to follow, there were many political battles regarding the proper relationship between religion and government. Madison wrote: "Strongly guarded as is the separation between Religion and Government in the Constitution of the United States, the danger of encroachment by Ecclesiastical Bodies may be illustrated by precedents already furnished in their short history."

In 1785 Madison supported a Virginia bill which eliminated taxation for support of religion and made sup-

James Madison (*continued*)

port of religion voluntary. Madison considered government the essence of coercion. In his essay "Memorial and Remonstrance," Madison stated opposition not only to use of coerced taxes for support of religion, but also to the "legal establishment of Christianity" and to the legal establishment of "religion."

In the Virginia Assembly, Madison sponsored Thomas Jefferson's "Bill for establishing Religious Freedom," which, in 1786, was enacted into law as the Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty.

In 1787 Madison represented Virginia at the Constitutional Convention and became known as "Father of the Constitution." In 1789, he was a member of the House of Representatives in the First Congress. He drafted and sponsored the Bill of Rights and was co-chair of the six member Senate-House conference committee which produced the final draft of the two religion clauses in the First Amendment.

As President, in 1811, Madison vetoed two religion bills passed by Congress. One because it "would be a precedent for giving to religious societies a legal agency in carrying into effect a public and civil duty," the other because it comprised "a principle and precedent for the appropriation of funds of the United States for the use and support of religious societies."

After leaving the Presidency, in his essay "Monopolies, Perpetuities, Corporations, Ecclesiastical Endowments," Madison wrote about violations of the constitutional principle of separation between religion and government, violations which continue even today. Madison warned that the silent accumulation of tax exempt property by churches has "not sufficiently engaged attention in the United States" and that "the establishment of the chaplainship to Congress is a palpable violation of equal rights" and constitutional principles. Madison objected to the opinion that religious truth is tested by numbers. In that context, Madison supported America's written constitution, not majority opinion.

Today, who is unaware of the many government and religion leaders, as well as citizens, who reject and/or distort our Constitution and its principles relating to religion? Article 6, Section 6, says "no religious test" shall ever be required as a qualification to any office under the United States. Yet, it is commonplace for Americans at all levels to be subjected, by politicians and clerics, to the repeated refrain that America is a nation founded on Christian principles. Not so. America is founded as a nation wherein citizens of all religions, and of none, are welcome to participate freely in all of its social and political functions.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment states that "religion" is not to be established by law or Congress. In obvious violation, in 1954, Congress passed Public Law 396 which Established the words "under God" into a national pledge of allegiance. In 1956, by coercion of the federal government, the words "In God We Trust" were established on all currency.

In the 1940s the Supreme Court ruled against use of coerced tax money for students attending church schools and use of tax money for religion instruction in public schools. Today, public money in terms of vouchers for students attending religion institutions remains a political issue, as well as does the issue of funding "faith-based" charities. In the 1960s the Supreme Court properly ruled against required prayer and required Bible reading in public schools.

I know of Americans who insist on using government institutions and public property for the purpose of placing plaques or monuments of the Jewish Ten Commandments or who distort the free exercise clause as if it were a license for anarchy.

Hopefully, you will look at America, and the world, and recognize the wisdom of James Madison's constitutional principle of "separation between Religion and Government."

[From the Nov. 20 *Atheist News Service*]

Letters to the Editor from AFS members

Edwin Kagin's letter was in the *Kentucky Post* on Nov. 14, 2004.

Atheists do occupy foxholes

The Post's front-page article of Nov. 12, "Vets reaffirm: No atheists in foxholes," is an insult to those many atheists who have served and are serving in our armed forces to protect his freedom to lie about atheists.

Yes, there are atheists in foxholes. I am one of them. It was offensive to hear you repeat the slander that we do not exist.

America always has had, as now, atheists in foxholes. We owe our freedoms to them as much as we do to those Americans who follow one of the many different religious faiths our way of life permit to exist free from the tyranny of an established religion.

Rather than attempting to state a reporter's religious views—or the views of others who think a god saved them in combat while killing their companions—as facts, please do us the courtesy as Americans and patriots of informing your audience that there really are honest, decent, hard working, loyal Americans who do not share the belief that all good people, or at least all frightened people under fire, must believe in a god.

Please don't lie about us. It is neither good religion nor good journalism.

Edwin Kagin
Union, KY

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(Or renew your membership with this form!)



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

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

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

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November Board Meeting Minutes

Present: Steve Yothment (presiding), Sue Garland, Bill Burton, Lew Southern, Harriet Harris, Freya Harris, Kelly Wilhoit, Joel Kollin and a guest, Solomon Mansour

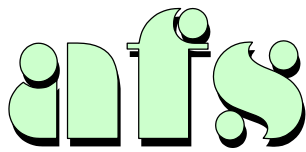
Minutes taken by: Harriet Harris

Time/Date of meeting: 2:00 PM, November 21, 2004

- ▶ The October Minutes were approved as they appeared in the November newsletter.
- ▶ Treasurer Bill Burton reported a current balance of \$2,045 - minus some outstanding checks and bills - for a balance of about \$1,000. Steve will prepare and e-mail a 2005 budget - calculating income and expenses based on the figures from the past 5 years.
- ▶ Fund-raising and public service opportunities were discussed. It was decided to participate in the Adopt-A-Highway program. Specifically, AFS will maintain a one mile segment of GA 400 near exit 7, south of Holcombe Bridge. The purpose is to increase our public awareness while doing some good. Hank Shriver will be our leader

in this project, which will probably begin in the spring. We must clean up the assigned area at least one time before we will be granted a sign.

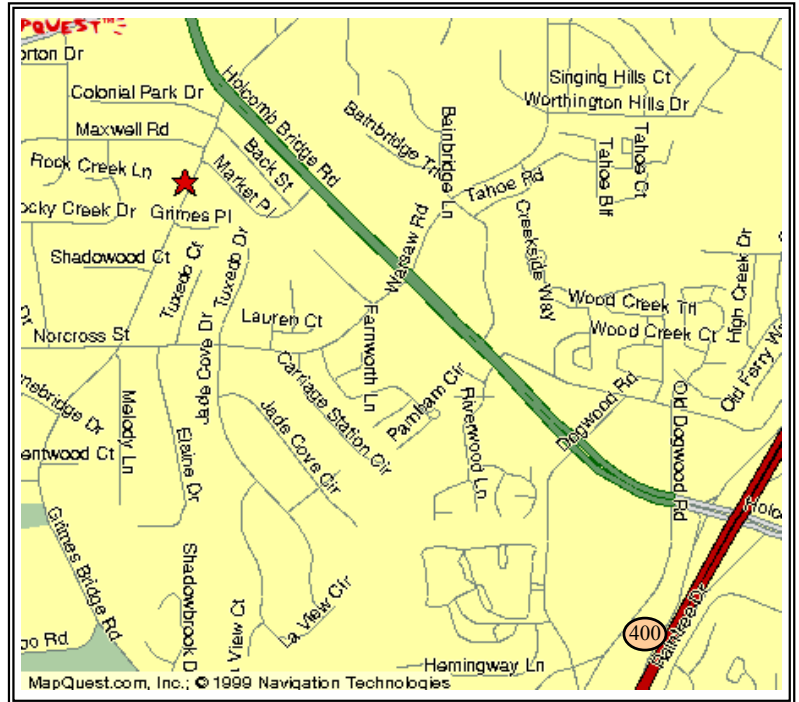
- ▶ The board decided that our next scheduled gathering will be a celebration of the Winter Solstice in the form of a potluck dinner. The dinner will be on Sunday, Dec. 12th at the Center, beginning at 12:30. To ease the decision as to what one should bring, as well as to assure a variety of food, the following assignment, based on the first letter of one's last name, was agreed upon:
 - A thru K - main dish
 - L thru R - side dish/salad
 - S thru Z - dessert
- There will not be a speaker.
- The bookstore will be open for the sale of books.
- Lew will provide soft drinks and coffee. Freya and Harriet, plates/napkins.
- ▶ There will be no Board meeting in December. The new Board will hold its first meeting in January.



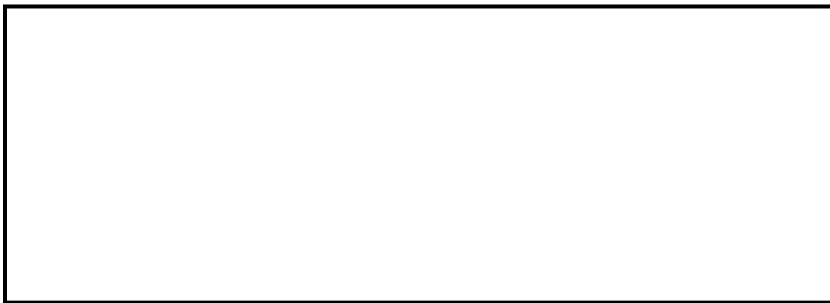
Atlanta
Freethought
Society

**The December Meeting:
Sunday, December 12
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Meeting:
A Pot-luck Dinner**



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1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500
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