

Atlanta Freethought News

An AFS Publication • Volume 11 Number 2 • February 2005

The February Meeting

The February 13 AFS meeting will feature **Edwin Kagin**, speaking on his new book, *Baubles of Blasphemy*.

Edwin is an attorney in Union, Kentucky. He is a founding member, former Vice President, and board member of the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky and is the Kentucky State Director of American Atheists. He is a co-author of the book *The Fundamentals of Extremism; The Christian Right in America*. He is the originator and Director of Camp Quest, the nation's first residential secular summer camp for children of Atheist and other freethinkers, started in 1996.

The meeting is at 1:00 at the Atlanta Freethought Center, 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.

New AFS Publication!

The Atlanta Freethought Society is very pleased to announce it's latest publication, *Baubles of Blasphemy* by Edwin Kagin. The book will be available at the February AFS meeting.

After reading the book, Bobbie Kirkhart, President of Atheist Alliance International, said, "Edwin Kagin's unfailing humor and zany logic have long been a delight to his many friends in the Freethought community. This book shares with a wider audience the irreverent humor and commitment to common sense that have brought joy and sometimes bemusement to those who know him."

Forwarded by Tom Flynn (*Editor of Free Inquiry* magazine) and edited by Ed Buckner (Southern Director of the Center for Inquiry and an AFS officer), the book is a delightful collection of Edwin's essays and poetry on religion and non-religion. Editor Ed Buckner writes in the Editor's Notes of the book that "Kagin will make you think as well as laugh, and he will stir your political passions, your outrage, maybe your fears, and certainly your love of life."

Baubles of Blasphemy

By Edwin F. Kagin

With a Foreword by Tom Flynn

Freethought Press
Atlanta Freethought Society, Inc.
www.atlantafreethought.org
1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500
Roswell, Georgia 30075

AFS Activities

The next **AFS Social** will be at **Las Margaritas Restaurant** at 1842 Cheshire Bridge Road (Atlanta) on Friday, February 18, 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 at 4:00 to 6:00 at the AF Center on Sunday, February 20.

The **Tuesday Lunch Bunch** meets every Tuesday at 12:30 at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy in Atlanta.

Potluck Dinner with the Kagins!

AFS will have an informal potluck dinner with Edwin and Helen Kagin and Ed and Diane Buckner on Saturday, February 12, at 6:30 PM at the AF Center. All AFS members are invited. Please bring food! AFS will provide drinks, plates and silverware. Kagin's new book will be on sale, and with some cajoling he may even sign it for you!

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center on Sunday, February 27, 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).

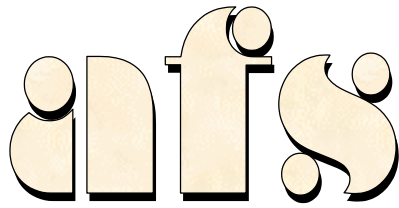
Darwin Day: February 12

On February 12, Freethought groups around the world will celebrate the birthday of Charles Darwin. (For details, see www.DarwinDay.org.) Ried Crowe is coordinating AFS's Darwin Day activities, which will be at Georgia State University on Thursday, February 10. (Friday and Saturday were considered for the celebration, but student activity is low on those days due to fewer classes.) All AFS members are encouraged to attend. Email Ried for details at riedpamc@bellsouth.net, or phone him at 678-355-1049.

Atheist Meetup in Atlanta

Atlanta Atheists will have a "meetup" on Tuesday, February 15, at 7:00 PM. The informal gathering will be at Bahama Breeze, 10845 Haynes Bridge Road, Alpharetta, Ga. Their phone is 678-319-9949. Details: www.meetup.com.

"Blasphemy is the crime of making fun of religious beliefs someone else holds sacred." — Edwin Kagin



**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.

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

March 13: George Sossenkeno will speak on Atheists in Foxholes.

April 10: 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.

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.

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Cobb Sticker Ruled Unconstitutional

A federal judge in Atlanta has ruled that the sticker placed in Cobb County science textbooks referring to evolution as “a theory not a fact” are unconstitutional.

U.S. District Judge Clarence Cooper ruled on January 13 that labeling evolution a “theory” played on the popular definition of the word as a “hunch” and could confuse students.

The stickers read, “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 disclaimers were put in the books by school officials in 2002.

“Due to the manner in which the sticker refers to evolution as a theory, the sticker also has the effect of undermining evolution education to the benefit of those Cobb County citizens who would prefer that students maintain their religious beliefs regarding the origin of life,” Cooper wrote in his ruling.

Cooper said he was ruling on the “narrow issue” of the case, brought against the Cobb County School District and Board of Education by four parents of district students, was whether the district’s stickers violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

His conclusion, he said, “is not that the school board should not have called evolution a theory or that the school board should have called evolution a fact.... The distinction of evolution as a theory rather than a fact

is the distinction that religiously motivated individuals have specifically asked school boards to make in the most recent anti-evolution movement, and that was exactly what parents in Cobb County did in this case. By adopting this specific language, even if at the direction of counsel, the Cobb County School Board appears to have sided with these religiously motivated individuals.”

The sticker, he said, sends “a message that the school board agrees with the beliefs of Christian fundamentalists and creationists.”

“The school board has effectively improperly entangled itself with religion by appearing to take a position,” Cooper wrote. “Therefore, the sticker must be removed from all of the textbooks into which it has been placed.”

Cooper ruled that the sticker violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment as well as Article I, Section II, Paragraph VII of the Georgia Constitution, which reads, “No money shall ever be taken from the public treasury, directly or indirectly, in aid of any church, sect, cult, or religious denomination or of any sectarian institution.”

Five parents of students (including Jeffrey Selman, an AFS member) and the American Civil Liberties Union had challenged the stickers in court, arguing they violated the constitutional separation of church and state.

The case was heard in federal court last November. The school system defended the warning stickers as a show of tolerance, not religious activism as some parents claimed.

“The Cobb County school board is doing more than accommodating religion,” Michael Manely, an attorney for the parents, argued during the trial, according to a report from The Associated Press. “They are promoting religious dogma to all students.”

Lawyers for Cobb County, however, argued in court that the school board had made a good-faith effort to address questions that inevitably arise during the teaching of evolution.

The evolution disclaimers stem from a petition drive begun in 2002 by Marjorie Rogers, a creationist. Rogers collected 2,300 signatures from supporters, prompting the board to stick the disclaimers on the inside front covers of 13 science books used in middle and high schools.

The Cobb County School District has appealed the ruling against the sticker.

In multiple editorials, the Atlanta Journal Constitution expressed concern that the School District should forget about any appeal and remove the stickers. On February 3, an AJC editorial noted that a powerful Christian legal group, the Alliance Defense Fund, notified the School District of their willingness to finance the appeal. In an opposing editorial on the same day by the School District, however, they said that the appeal would be provided by their own attorneys on a pro-bono basis.

It is anticipated that the School District already will have to pay lawyer fees of around \$100,000 after losing the case, and fees may be double that amount if they lose the appeal.

Atheist News teams up with Freethought Radio

Atheist News: An informative email newsletter sent to over 2000 people every day, with current information on atheist issues. It is generated by Larry Darby, President of the Atheist Law Center in Montgomery, AL. If you would like to receive the email newsletter, send your name, mailing address and phone number to Larry at PubliusWrites@knology.net.

Freethought Radio: A free internet radio service with discussion of freethought issues. (www.freethoughtradio.com)

The Atheist News is now broadcast daily on Freethought Radio on the top of every hour on Monday through Friday. Each day features 5 new stories from Atheist News.

There is also a Weekly Weekend Wrap-up 4 times on Saturday and 4 times on Sunday. Each 30 minute wrap-up has 12 news stories from the previous week.

The “Woman’s Right to Know Act”

Georgia Senate Bill 77, the “Woman’s Right to Know Act” and parental notification law, passed in a 5-1 vote in committee on February 3, after two hours of passionate testimony from both sides. It could go to the full Senate for a vote as early as Tuesday, February 8, which is Georgia Right to Life’s “Pro-Life Day at the Capitol.” An identical version of the bill in the House could be taken up on February 10 by that chamber’s Health and Human Services Committee.

A similar version of the legislation passed the Senate last year but languished in a committee of the Democratic-controlled House. After the November elections, Republicans control both chambers. Last month, House Speaker Glenn Richardson (R-Hiram) promised 2,000 cheering anti-abortion activists who showed up at the Capitol for a march that the bill would be voted on in the full House.

Advocates of the Republican bills say women need to be given crucial information about abortion, including the medical risks associated with the procedure.

“We have thousands of women telling us they’re not informed,” said Pat Chivers, lobbyist for Georgia Right to Life. “This is a life-changing decision. Not only does that decision affect the life of her baby, it also affects her life, a decision that will affect her physically and psychologically, emotionally and sometimes spiritually.”

But abortion rights supporters have blasted the legislation as an unnecessary attempt to restrict access to safe and legal abortion guaranteed by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*.

“When you ask what’s driving this, it’s not public health policy,” Kay Scott, executive director of Planned Parenthood of Georgia, said after the Senate committee’s vote. “Ideology is driving this radical regulation.”

Scott and others worry the legislation is just the first volley in a war on abortion in Georgia. They fear the state is headed down the same path as

Mississippi, where a raft of laws has curtailed legal abortions to just one clinic in Jackson. Pro-Life Mississippi no longer has a legislative agenda; all of its requests have been fulfilled.

“Basically the national right-to-life movement used Mississippi as a test case to see how far they can go to eliminate abortion in spite of *Roe v. Wade*,” said Becky Rafter, executive director of NARAL Pro-Choice Georgia.

Abortion rights supporters promise to be politically active as well, designating every Tuesday throughout the legislative session as “Reproductive Justice Lobby Day,” Rafter said.

If Senate Bill 77, sponsored by Sen. Renee Unterman (R-Loganville), is approved and signed into law, Georgia will become one of only three states—including Mississippi and Texas—where physicians who perform abortions will be required to tell women the procedure may cause breast cancer. The National Cancer Institute has concluded that the risk of breast cancer is no greater for women who have had an abortion, though there have been some studies suggesting a link.

Unterman said she hasn’t been surprised by the criticism of her bill from abortion rights advocates.

“The ironic thing is, the bill has nothing to do with the legality of abortions—abortions are legal,” said Unterman, a registered nurse. “What it has to do with is quality and standards of care for women.”

Senate Bill 77 and House Bill 197 would require physicians to give women seeking abortion information on the medical risks of abortion, the probable gestational age and development of a fetus, fetal pain and alternatives to abortion, including adoption. It would require women to wait 24 hours after receiving the information before proceeding with an abortion. The bill also would require that only a parent or legal guardian be notified when a minor younger than 18 seeks an abortion. Currently, Geor-

gia law allows certain people, such as a grandparent or other relative caring for the minor, to act as a stand-in for a parent or legal guardian.

On February 8, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution wrote a scathing editorial titled “Women’s rights in legislators’ sights: Proposed waiting period a poorly camouflaged attack on abortion.” The editorial explained that “Under the proposed Woman’s Right to Know Act in the Georgia Legislature, even a woman who has made the agonizing decision to abort a pregnancy because prenatal tests revealed fatal abnormalities—a missing brain, a defective heart—would still have to endure a state-mandated lecture that includes a slide show of a healthy fetus.”

“So when the first doctor in Georgia has to show a devastated pregnant 39-year-old woman photos of what a normal pregnancy would have looked like, bill sponsor Renee Unterman, a Republican senator from Loganville, will be there in spirit if not in person for that wonderful moment.”

“So how exactly does that help women?”

The editorial continues, “This is the new Georgia, in the hands of extremists so disdainful of women that they are set to intrude on the most personal of decisions that a woman can make. The rights of Georgia women are under full-scale government assault, led by a right-wing Legislature determined not only to limit abortion but also to give strangers the legal right to take control of a woman’s womb.”

“The bill is as riddled with bad science as it is with bad policy and bad logic.”

“For example, the medical world says a pregnancy is established at the point at which the fertilized egg embeds itself in the thickened wall of the uterus in the process called implantation. Senate Bill 77 says the pregnancy is established at the moment of fertilization, the instant that sperm and egg unite. Under that definition, long-standing means of contraception such

The “Woman’s Right to Know Act” (continued)

as the IUD become abortion devices, because they work after fertilization by preventing implantation.”

“Emergency contraceptives and the morning-after pills prescribed for rape and incest victims would also fall into that category.”

“To persuade women away from abortions, the state-mandated script that doctors will be forced to read includes bogus medical claims that the procedure increases the risk of breast cancer, a claim discredited by the National Cancer Institute and by extensive medical research.”

“Yet the same Legislature that insists breast cancer prevention is so important that it belongs in the abortion bill is about to gut a state law requiring that insurance companies pay for mammograms.”

“Supporters of the bill defend the mandatory 24-hour waiting period in part by claiming that few surgeries can be scheduled in less time anyway.

But if that’s true—if women are already waiting 24 hours for abortions—why are legislators so intent on passing this redundant piece of legislation?”

“The answer is obvious: The bill goes much further than setting up a 24-hour delay. It creates pages of onerous reporting regulations for doctors and imposes a \$500 penalty for late reports. It requires that simple, first-trimester abortions take place only in hospitals, rather than in medical offices. There are no legitimate health or safety concerns to justify that change, only the hope of creating fewer places where Georgia women will be able to get abortions.”

“Overall, this bill does everything possible short of prison to throw roadblocks in the way of women who have made the difficult decision to seek an abortion. And prison may not be far behind if the radical element of the General Assembly has its way.”

“The state-mandated script will also tell a woman about all the state services and funding available to her if she chooses to continue the pregnancy. What the bill neglects to tell her is that Georgia already ranks 44th in the country in infant mortality, and that the predominantly male Legislature supposedly so concerned about saving babies has actually slashed funding for prenatal care.”

“The script also won’t tell the woman that once she has the baby and comes looking for help, she’ll find that the General Assembly is contemptuous of single mothers. In fact, the only epithet in the Legislature worse than ‘liberal Democrat’ today is welfare mother.”

“Yet legislators are apparently intent on making more of them.”

[From a February 7 AJC article and a February 8 AJC editorial.]

U.S. Christians Issue Gay Warning Over Kid Video

Christian Conservative groups have issued a gay alert warning over a children’s music video starring SpongeBob SquarePants, Barney and a host of other cartoon favorites.

The wacky square yellow SpongeBob is one of the stars of a music video due to be sent to 61,000 U.S. schools in March. The makers—the nonprofit We Are Family Foundation—say the video is designed to encourage tolerance and diversity.

But at least two Christian activist groups say the innocent cartoon characters are being exploited to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.

“A short step beneath the surface reveals that one of the differences being celebrated is homosexuality,” wrote Ed Vitagliano in an article for the American Family Association.

The video is a remake of the 1979 hit song “We Are Family” using the voices and images of SpongeBob, Barney, Winnie the Pooh, Bob the

Builder, the Rugrats and 100 TV cartoon stars. It was made by a foundation set up by songwriter Nile Rodgers after the Sept. 11, 2001 hijacked plane attacks to promote the nation’s healing process.

Christian groups however have taken exception to the tolerance pledge on the foundation’s Web site which asks people to respect the sexual identity of others along with their abilities, beliefs, culture and race.

“Their inclusion of the reference to ‘sexual identity’ within their ‘tolerance pledge’ is not only unnecessary but it crosses a moral line,” Dr James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, said in a statement on January 20.

Rodgers was astounded at the attack. “That is so myopic and harsh. You have really got to look hard to find anything in this that is offensive to anyone. The last thing I am going to do is taint these characters,” he told Reuters.

Dobson was quoted by the New York Times on the same day as having singled out the wildly popular SpongeBob during remarks about the video at a Washington D.C. dinner.

SpongeBob, who lives in a pineapple under the sea, was “outed” by the U.S. media in 2002 after reports that the TV show and its merchandise was popular with gays.

His creator, Stephen Hillenburg, said at the time that although SpongeBob was an oddball, he thought of all the characters as asexual.

It is not the first time that children’s TV favorites have come under the critical spotlight of the U.S. Christian right. Tinky Winky, the purse-toting purple Teletubbie, was declared a homosexual role model in 1999 by Rev. Jerry Falwell.

[From a January 20 Reuters News Service article by Jill Serjeant.]

“Choose Life” Plates Not Allowed

South Carolina motorists who want to display a license tag bearing the anti-abortion message “Choose Life” may yet get to do so. But they would have to share the road with cars whose plates carry an abortion rights slogan.

On January 22, the U.S. Supreme Court let stand a lower court ruling that declared unconstitutional an S.C. law passed in 2001 authorizing the “Choose Life” plates. Abortion rights advocates weren’t given a similar opportunity, the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in a lawsuit brought by Planned Parenthood.

On January 25, the author of the 2001 law said she is ready for another try, but this time allowing for both “Choose Life” and abortion rights plates.

“I am all for the other side having a license tag,” said state Rep. Gloria Haskins, R-Greenville. “I’ll look into it, and I will introduce it.”

Planned Parenthood board secretary George Johnson of Columbia said

that if such a law were to make it through the legislature, his organization would take advantage of it.

“We didn’t bring it up to start with,” he said, “but certainly if the other side is going to benefit from having a plate, we think that the people who believe in women’s choice, who we happen to believe are in the majority in this state, ought to have the opportunity to have a plate as well.”

As for what the abortion rights plates would say, Johnson said, “‘Trust Women’ is one that some of us like.”

The original “Choose Life” plates -- bright yellow with smiley-face drawings of children -- were never issued. Two months after then-Gov. Jim Hodges signed the law authorizing the plates in September 2001, U.S. Circuit Judge Patrick Michael Duffy issued an injunction preventing the state from making them until the lawsuit was heard.

Department of Motor Vehicles

spokeswoman Beth Parks said: “The way we look at it, it’s sort of a dead issue. We can’t issue the plate that’s on the books because the court says we can’t unless we have another plate. Well, we can’t issue another plate unless the legislature says we can.”

The “Choose Life” tags were to be sold for \$70, with part of the money going toward local crisis pregnancy programs.

DMV already offers 48 special-interest plates sponsored by various advocacy groups. Slogans include “Nurses Care,” “Working for the Wild Turkey,” and “No More Homeless Pets.”

After lawmakers authorized a plate proclaiming “In God We Trust,” a group called Secular Humanists of the Low Country got a dissenting plate that says, “In Reason We Trust.”

Parks said the DMV sold 21 of the plates last year.

[From a January 26 Charlotte Observer article by Henry Eichel.]

Groups Gather to Discuss Bush’s Faith Initiatives

Forty to 60 humanists, atheists, nontheists, secular Jews and ethical culturalists started an emergency summit on January 15 at a Dupont Circle (Washington) hotel to discuss strategy over how to fight President Bush’s faith-based initiatives planned for his second term.

“The situation is now as bad as we’ll ever see it,” said Roy Speckhardt, deputy director of the American Humanist Association (AHA), a conglomeration of 80 grass-roots activist groups that promote humanism, a philosophy of living without supernatural influences.

Mr. Speckhardt said this year’s so-called “inauguration summit” dwarfs a similar 1981 meeting at the University of Maryland after Ronald Reagan won the White House with the help of the Moral Majority.

“We convened the meeting because of the unprecedented challenges, such as the election results and how they’re being interpreted,” he said. “A slim victory is being interpreted as a mandate on moral issues, so we are concerned.”

The organizations intend to hire lobbyists to stymie any legislation that would limit abortion rights or deny homosexual rights. They also oppose giving federal funding to religious social-service programs. Some \$1.2 billion was appropriated in 2003 for such programs, Mr. Speckhardt said.

“Faith-based initiatives mean public dollars given to faith-based organizations,” he said. “The minority religions and us will be left out.”

Anne Gaylor, founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, said organizations like hers are quite con-

cerned about the president’s agenda.

“There is complete scorn on the part of the current administration as to the separation of church and state,” Miss Gaylor said. “There has never been any less respect in Washington for church-state separation, even though church-state separation is one of the things that made our country possible in the first place.”

Concern among the nontheistically-minded is at an all-time high, AHA officials said, citing a 5 percent jump in membership to 7,000 persons since Mr. Bush was re-elected Nov. 2.

“The present Bush administration is identifying itself with faith,” AHA editorial director Fred Edwards said. “That’s the kind of thing nontheistic organizations are concerned about.”

[From a January 16 Washington Times article by Julia Duin.]

God did it, or did He?

By Massimo Pigliucci

In 1755 a great earthquake struck the city of Lisbon, in Portugal. As a result, roughly 100,000 people died, in the process sparking a new debate about an old and deep theological dilemma: if (the Christian) God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, how could this happen? The answer, such as it is, has always been that we simply can't understand how such calamities fit into God's plan, but they do, so we should simply have faith in the supreme being and not be as "arrogant" as constantly questioning His plans.

Of course, any human being who deliberately causes the death of thousands, regardless of the stated motive or "higher" purpose, is branded as a horrible criminal, hunted down and prosecuted to the full extent of human law. Rational people feel rather frustrated by this sort of nonsensical double standard, and one defense against the irrationality of the world is, as Mel Brooks once said, a good sense of humor. If anything good came out of the Lisbon earthquake was that it inspired the French philosopher Voltaire to write what became a classical masterpiece of world literature, *Candide*. In it, Voltaire makes fun of the simplistic attitude that we live "in the best of all possible worlds," as affirmed by one of the main characters, Dr. Pangloss (loosely based on the philosophy of Leibniz), and clearly implied by theological "explanations" of natural disasters.

Recently, I have witnessed two more examples of "Pangloss' syndrome," one in response to an event publicized throughout the world, the other while attending a religious gathering celebrating a rite of passage. The scopes of the two episodes are wildly different, and yet they reflect the same irrational, and highly dangerous, attitude about what happens in the world and why.

The largest event was, of course, the tsunami that caused two hundred thousand people to die in southeast Asia. For several days after the trage-

dy there was a serious debate in the media, eerily similar to the one that moved Voltaire's pen: how could God allow such a tragedy to occur? Christian theologians, Jewish rabbis, and Muslim clerics all gave the same answer: we don't know, but it must have been for a higher good. Some of these self-appointed experts about nothing went so far as to claim that perhaps the people who died were in fact somehow undeserving, and that the tsunami was God's punishment for their sins. A colossal and outrageously insulting instance of blaming the victim, if ever there was one! It is hard for me to imagine the degree of mental gymnastics that one must perform in these cases to save one's cherished pet religious views. This sort of events must cause an almost unbearable degree of cognitive dissonance, and one has to be particularly skilled at fooling oneself in order not to perceive the sheer absurdity of the whole plot. And yet, it seems to work for hundreds of millions of people the world over. This attitude "explained" Lisbon, the tsunami, the 9/11 attacks on the US, and essentially anything else bad that happens in the world: it is either our own fault, or it is for the pursuit of God's inscrutable (but certainly supremely good) plan.

The same bizarre logic applies in reverse, of course: just in the same way as God is never responsible for anything bad happening to us, He takes all (or most) of the credit whenever something good happens. A good gig if you can get it! The second example I witnessed falls into the category of "God did it (because it's good)." I was at a religious ceremony celebrating an important rite of passage for a young girl, followed by a feast at which everybody was having a jolly good time. At one point, the father of the girl took the microphone and told us a very poignant story: his daughter had actually been born very prematurely, and both her and her mother had barely survived the ordeal. Moreover, the girl had been in

desperate conditions in the hospital after birth, and the doctors had little hope that she would make it. However, some doctor had the daring and brilliant idea of trying a new experimental drug, after having asked the parents' permission. It worked, and the result was the beautiful young woman that we were now celebrating.

Had the story ended there it would have been a wonderful and moving tale of human compassion and ingenuity. But of course the father had to go on and add that, although he was sure the doctors had some merit for the final outcome, really this was a clear example of a miracle, a direct intervention of God to save his child. There are so many things that are simply wrong with all of this that it is, again, hard to imagine how perfectly normal, functional, people can sincerely embrace this sort of "reasoning." To begin with, why does God get the credit for solving the problem, but not for creating it in the first place? Second, isn't such an unwarranted shift of credit insulting for the doctors who did the actual hard work and took on a huge responsibility in case of failure? More generally, if we all (including doctors) adopted such attitude, wouldn't that spell the end of any attempt to better humanity's condition? If it's all in God's hands, then why bother? Which is, of course, exactly the attitude of so-called Christian scientists (an oxymoron of grotesque proportions), who leave their children to die because they think that all disease is the result of poor faith and can be cured only by restoring the latter.

I am no Voltaire, and this essay is no *Candide*. Therefore, I will leave it to the great French Enlightenment writer to make a final comment: "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd." We would find ourselves in a much better world if more of us lived by such words.

[From Massimo Pigliucci's February 2005 *Rationally Speaking* column at www.rationallyspeaking.org.]

January Board Meeting Minutes

Note: This was a special meeting called by the AFS President to expedite the installation of officers for banking purposes. The regular meeting is held on the third Sunday of each month unless determined otherwise by the Board.

Present: Steve Yothment, Judy Thompson, Freya Harris, Ed Buckner, Bill Burton, Lew Southern, Tony King, Diane Buckner

Date/Time: 9 January, 2005, 11:00 AM

Minutes taken by: Bill Burton

- ▶ It was determined that a quorum was present.
- ▶ The minutes of the December Board meeting were approved without objection.
- ▶ Scheduling Regular Board Meetings
Proposed (Ed Buckner): That regular Board Meetings should be held on the second Sunday of each month before the regular public meeting. Judy objected to the early hour. Some other members agreed with Judy. It was decided not to change the schedule and that the Board Meetings continue on the third Sunday at 2:00 p.m.
- ▶ Installation of New Officers and Board Members
Steve recognized new board members per the December election: Ed Buckner is now AFS Treasurer; Freya Harris is now AFS Vice President for External Communications; Bill Burton, Jim Middleton, and Tony King are now AFS Board Members at Large.
- ▶ Tsunami Relief
Proposed (Bill Burton): That the AFS should consider calling on members to contribute to relief efforts of our co-thinkers in South Asia in areas hit by the recent Indian Ocean tsunami. Several members agreed that information should be made available in the AFS Newsletter. Judy Thompson informed the Board that Congress has just passed legislation to allow deductions on the 2004 return for contributions to relief efforts. The general consensus was that contributions should be encouraged but be left up to individual members.
- ▶ Adopt-a-Mile Program
Steve announced that he has applied for an AFS adopt-a-mile (Adopt-a-Highway) on Georgia 400 near Holcomb Bridge Road. This was mandated by the Board at the November meeting.
- ▶ Treasurer's Report
Reported (Bill Burton, retiring AFS Treasurer): AFS has a \$743 balance in its account at SouthTrust Bank. Funds

were short in December, and due to inaccurate accounting an overdraft on a \$200 check was incurred. The overdraft was paid by SouthTrust Bank as a courtesy in view of AFS's excellent standing with the bank. Bill agreed to deposit his personal check to cover the overdraft charge of \$30. Judy reported that the year-end balance is \$46,697.51 on the mortgage on Suite 400. Payments of \$3,800 were received in 2004, which just about covered interest that accrued during the year. Judy also mentioned that the mortgage on Suite 500 will be paid off in a few months. Bill agreed to get a report to Ed (Treasurer-Elect) on the royalties owed by AFS to authors and on the 2004 income taxable under Georgia Law. Bill agreed to get a list of AFS members who have contributed \$250 or more to AFS in year 2004 to Steve so that Steve can generate IRS tax letters.

- ▶ 2005 Budget Proposed (Steve Yothment, President): That the AFS should adopt a budget for year 2005 based on a projection from income and expenses incurred by AFS in the past six years. Steve suggested \$8,000 for publishing expenses to allow for the printing of two books in 2005. The budget (compiled by Steve) is tentative. The board approved the tentative budget until a more permanent budget is adopted.
- ▶ Report on Edwin Kagin's Book
Proposed (Ed Buckner): That AFS should fund the printing of Edwin Kagin's BAUBLES OF BLASPHEMY at a cost of \$3,920.00 for 750 copies. Ed suggests that a special fund should be set aside for the printing and that members be encouraged to contribute to the fund in any amount that they can afford. The board approved the proposal unanimously.
- ▶ Executive Appointment of a Board Member at Large
Proposed (Judy Thompson): That the AFS Executive appoint a new Board Member at Large to replace a position which has become vacant since the election. According to the AFS By-Laws this can be done by the President. Judy suggested that Diane Buckner (then present) be appointed to the Board. Diane said she would accept, and Steve then appointed her as a Board member. The AFS board approved the appointment unanimously.
- ▶ Next Meeting The next meeting of the Board will take place in February 20 (the third Sunday) at 2:00 PM.
- ▶ The meeting was adjourned at about 12:00 PM.

"I must admit moreover that it may not be easy, in every possible case, to trace the line of separation between the rights of religion and the Civil authority with such distinctness as to avoid collisions and doubts on unessential points. The tendency of a usurpation on one side or the other, or to a corrupting coalition or alliance between them, will be best guarded by an entire abstinence of the Government from interference in any way whatever, beyond the necessity of preserving public order, and protecting each sect against trespass on its legal rights by others."

-- **James Madison**, letter to Reverend Adams, in Robert L. Maddox, *Separation of Church and State: Guarantor of Religious Freedom* (1987) p. 39, quoted from Ed and Michael Buckner, "Quotations that Support the Separation of State and Church"

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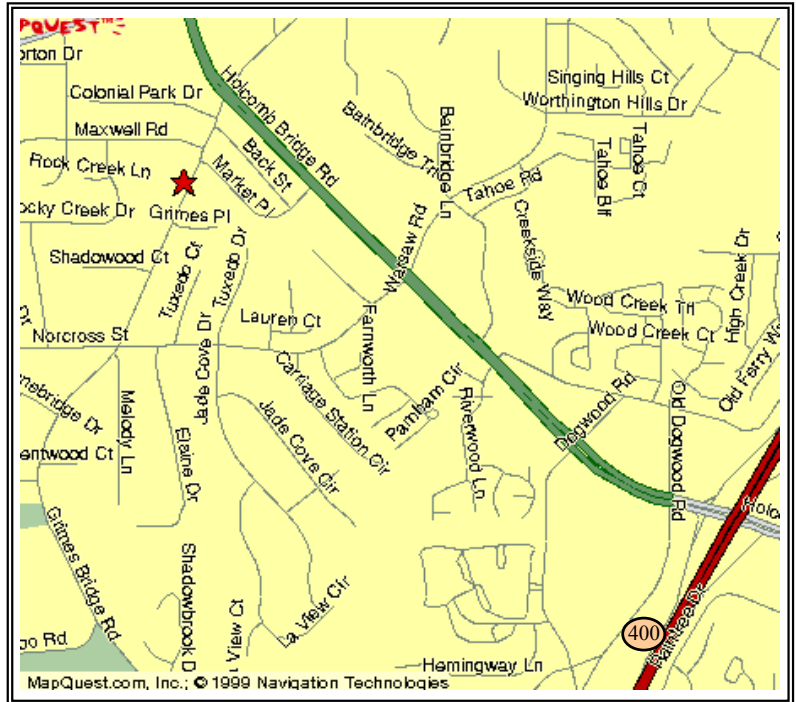
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**The February Meeting:
Sunday, February 13
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Edwin Kagin**



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