

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 12 Number 4 • April 2006

The April AFS Meeting

The April 9 AFS meeting will feature **Dan Barker**, co-president of the **Freedom From Religion Foundation**, who will talk about current freethought issues.

Dan Barker, a former minister and evangelist, became a freethinker in 1983. Books he has written include *Just Pretend: A Freethought Book for Children* and *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher To Atheist*. He is a graduate of Azusa Pacific University with a degree in Religion, which he now puts to work as a freethinker. He is a professional pianist and composer, performs freethought concerts and is featured in many musical cassettes. He joined the Foundation staff in 1987, serving as public relations director. He was elected co-president in November 2004.

The AFS meeting will be at 1:00 at the **Atlanta Freethought Center**, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA. (Feel free to arrive early for discussion and snacks.) 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.

AFS Activities

The next **AFS Social** will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Friday, April 14, at 7:00 PM.

The **AFS Discussion Group** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center on Sunday, April 16, from 4:00 to 6:00 PM.

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

Fellowship of Reason Meeting

The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of every month at 12:30 PM at the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 1025 Mount Vernon Hwy, in Atlanta. For details, see www.fellowshipofreason.com.

The April Atheist Meetup

Atlanta Atheists will have a "meetup" on Sunday, April 23, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Road, in Atlanta. The phone there is 404-255-5911.

AFS Meetings and Activities

April 8: Highway Cleanup, Glenridge Ramp, 10:00 AM.
April 9: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
April 14: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.
April 16: AFS Board Meeting at AF Center, 2:00 PM.
April 16: AFS Discussion Group at AF Center, 4:00 PM.
April 29: AFS Yard Sale at Judy's house, 9:30 to 4:00 PM.

Potluck Dinner on Saturday Night

AFS will have an informal potluck dinner with Dan Barker at Kelly Wilhoit's house on Saturday evening, April 8, at 7:00 PM. (Kelly's address is: 321 Weatherstone Lane, Marietta, GA.) Please RSVP to Steve Yothment (678-364-8703 or steveyoth@aol.com) for details and driving directions if you would like to attend the dinner.

The AFS Yard Sale

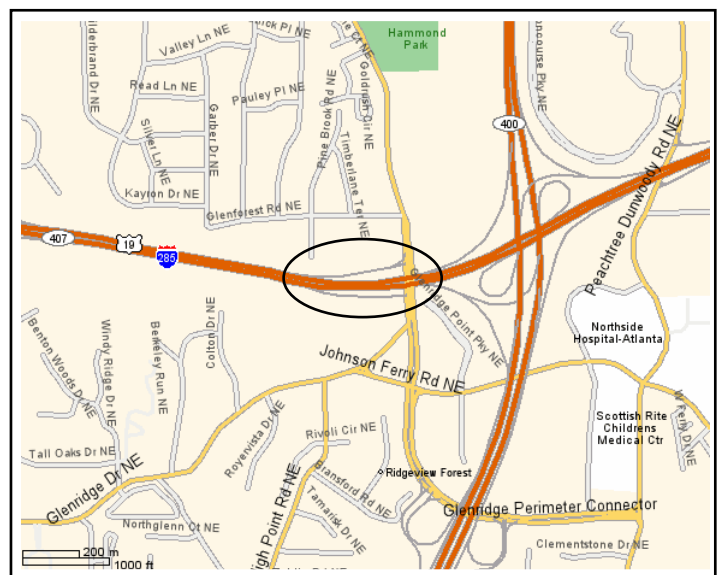
The Atlanta Freethought Society will have a **yard sale** on Saturday, April 29, at Judy Thompson's house, 3366 Rockbridge Road, in Avondale Estates, from 9:30 AM to 4:00 PM. Antiques, collector's items and books are particularly welcome.

At 4:00, immediately after the yard sale, we will have a **barbeque dinner**. Bring your appetite! Charles has his grill ready for a major cooking event!

Highway Cleanup is This Saturday

The Atlanta Freethought Society will have its **Adopt-A-Highway cleanup** on Saturday, April 8 at 10:00 AM. The cleanup work will be on the Glenridge Ramp at Exit 26 of I-285. (This is the long ramp that connects Glenridge Drive to I-285 near GA400.) We will clean the ramps on both sides of I-285.

Please park along the north ramp. The Highway Department will provide safety vests and trash bags.



The Fundamentals of Extremism: the Christian Right in America can be read online. See it at: <http://www.newbostonbooks.com/Look%20Inside.htm>



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.

Apr 9: **Dan Barker**, co-president of the **Freedom From Religion Foundation**, will speak on living without religion.

My 14: **Charles Lantz**, DC, PhD, will speak on "Faith and Reason in Chiropractic." He is currently writing a book titled *Chiropractic – Behind the Mystique*.

June 11: **Kevin Fortune** will speak on "Christian Freethought."

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 xxx-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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Georgia Lawmakers OK Public School Bible Classes

Georgia lawmakers have approved a measure to fund elective Bible courses in public schools, raising concern among civil liberties groups the classes could violate the U.S. constitutional separation of church and state.

Under the bill, which now goes to Gov. Sonny Perdue for his signature, the State Board of Education would have to adopt curricula for two classes on the history and literature of the Old and New Testaments. School districts would then have the option of offering the courses.

The measure's enactment threatens to again inflame the debate between secularists and the religious right that has been invigorated under President George W. Bush.

The elective courses, according to the bill, are to "be taught in an objective and non-devotional manner with no attempt made to indoctrinate students," and should "not disparage or encourage a commitment to a set of religious beliefs."

Senators in the Bible Belt state approved the bill in a 45-2 vote late on March 28, following passage by the Georgia House of Representatives in a 151-7 vote the week before.

"Are we to say that the world's best seller, a book that has influenced Western culture more than any other, is off limits to kids?" Georgia Sen. Tommie Williams, the measure's chief

sponsor, told Reuters, adding that he was concerned about biblical illiteracy among students. "If you asked a kid what the Good Samaritan Law means, there's a history behind that that they probably don't know."

Williams, a Republican, said the proposed curriculum had been widely adopted in school districts in many states. "The Bible is just so much a part of our culture that I think it should be taught, but not to indoctrinate," he said.

While U.S. courts have ruled that Bible courses are constitutionally sound as long as they are objective, the Georgia law troubles civil liberties groups worried that classes could promote a Christian perspective.

"The broader issue is there are many U.S. conservative Christians who feel that public schools have become hostile to their faith," said Charles Haynes, a senior scholar with the First Amendment Center in Arlington, Virginia, which educates the public about free-speech issues.

Haynes said he believed the Georgia bill marks the first time a state has set guidance on how elective Bible classes should be conducted. A similar bill is being considered in neighboring Alabama, he added.

Haynes said the Georgia measure should have included safeguards to make sure the courses would pass constitutional muster, such as stan-

dards to ensure teachers will be properly prepared to teach them.

"This is not a Sunday school course," Haynes said. "I think the legislature didn't do its homework, didn't think about the ramifications of this."

Judith Schaeffer, deputy legal director at People for the American Way Foundation in Washington, said she was concerned that the bill would foster teaching about the Bible as if it were truth, failing to meet a federal court requirement that public school Bible studies be objective.

"People are entitled to believe the Bible is true as a matter of their faith, but students in public schools can't be taught that it is true," said Schaeffer, whose group has sued school districts that offered Bible courses.

Despite criticism, Williams said he was confident that the bill would be signed into law by Perdue, a Republican.

"We're obviously going to have folks that challenge the issue, but if we do nothing because of fear of a lawsuit, then school boards and superintendents can live in that fear and kids never learn what they might need to know," Williams said.

The bill gives the state Board of Education until February 2007 to adopt a curriculum; the first classes won't be offered until the 2007-08 school year.

[From a March 28 Reuters News Service article by Karen Jacobs.]

Ed Buckner to Participate in Debate

AFS Treasurer Ed Buckner will be in a debate on Wednesday evening, May 24th, in Toccoa, GA at the Georgia Baptist Conference Center. This is part of a three-day-long conference which will include three debates: Ed will debate against Bill Federer on church and state on the 24th; UGA biologist Mark Farmer will debate Carl Wieland on creationism v. evolution on the 25th, and Thomas Ice will debate Gary DeMar on biblical matters on the 26th. The whole event, called

"Creation to Revelation...Connecting the Dots" is sponsored by American Vision (a conservative Christian organization led by DeMar; offices are in Cobb County GA).

Ed's debate is from 8:30 PM to 10:00 PM. Ed has 15 complimentary tickets to the Wednesday night event. Please e-mail him directly (ed@buckners.us) if you think you might come and you want one of these tickets.

For details on the entire event, go to www.americanvision.org/wsc.asp.

Joel Kollin, jkollin@gmail.com, is considering attending the whole event, or at least a full day of it. Please e-mail him if you want to consider doing the same.

John Sugg, Group Senior Editor of Creative Loafing and our most recent AFS speaker, also plans to be there.

If you would like to participate in a carpool to the event, please let Ed know.

Ed says that any advice on the debate is welcome.

No Benefit of Prayer Found After Surgery

Praying for other people to recover from an illness is ineffective, according to the largest, best-designed study to try to examine the power of prayer to heal strangers at a distance.

The study of more than 1,800 heart bypass surgery patients found that those who had other people praying for them had as many complications as those who did not. In fact, one group of patients who knew they were the subject of prayers fared worse.

The long-awaited results, the latest in a series of studies that have failed to find any benefit from "distant" or "intercessory" prayer, came as a blow to the hopes of some that scientific research would validate the popular notion that people can influence the health of people even if they don't know someone is praying for them.

The researchers cautioned that the study was not designed to test the existence of God or the benefit of other types of prayer, such as praying for oneself or at bedsides of friends or relatives. They also did not rule out that other types of distant prayer may be effective for other types of patients.

"No one single study is ever going to provide an answer," said Jeffery Dusek of Harvard Medical School, who helped lead the study being published in the April 4 issue of the *American Heart Journal*.

While many studies have suggested that praying for oneself may reduce stress, research into praying for others who may not even know they are the subject of prayers has been much more controversial. Several studies that claimed to show a benefit have been criticized as deeply flawed. And

several of the most recent findings have found no benefit.

The new \$2.4 million study, funded primarily by the John Templeton Foundation, was designed to overcome some of those shortcomings. Dusek and his colleagues divided 1,802 bypass patients at six hospitals into three groups. Two groups were uncertain whether they would be the subject of prayers. The third was told they would be prayed for.

The researchers recruited two Catholic groups and one Protestant group to pray "for a successful surgery with a quick, healthy recovery and no complications" for 14 days for each patient, beginning the night before the surgery, using the patient's first name and the first initial of the last name.

Over the next month, patients in the two groups that were uncertain whether they were the subject of prayers fared virtually the same, with about 52 percent experiencing complications regardless of whether they were the subject of prayers.

Surprisingly, however, 59 percent of the patients who knew they were the targets of prayer experienced complications.

Because the most common complication was an irregular heartbeat, the researchers speculated that knowing they were chosen to receive prayers may have put them under increased stress.

"Did the patients think, 'I am so sick they had to call in the prayer team?'" said Charles Bethea of the Integrus Heart Hospital at Baptist Medical Center in Oklahoma City, who helped conduct the study.

[From a March 31 Associated Press article by Rob Stein.]

Letter to the Editor

Congratulations to Ed Buckner, whose letter was in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on March 18.

Beware anyone who offers God's answer

People without religion are just as likely to be compassionate, to suffer, to value life, or to comfort others as those who believe "human beings are made in God's image."

End-of-life decisions, for ourselves or our loved

People without religion are just as likely to be compassionate, to suffer, to value life, or to comfort others as those who believe "human beings are made in God's image."

ones, are often fraught with unresolvable complications and great emotional pain. We should, individually and as a society, analyze and consider the issues involved with great care. I agree with several of Lorraine V. Murray's points.

But we should beware anyone, on any side of these issues, who pretends to be able to provide "God's" answer.

— Ed Buckner, Roswell

"All that is necessary, as it seems to me, to convince any reasonable person that the Bible is simply and purely of human invention – of barbarian invention – is to read it. Read it as you would any other book; think of it as you would of any other; get the bandage of reverence from your eyes; drive from your heart the phantom of fear; push from the throne of your brain the coiled form of superstition – then read the Holy Bible, and you will be amazed that you ever, for one moment, supposed a being of infinite wisdom, goodness and purity, to be the author of such ignorance and of such atrocity."

— Robert G. Ingersoll, from *The Gods*, 1872.

Is America A ‘Christian Nation’?

Is the United States a "Christian nation"? Some Americans think so. Religious Right activists and right-wing television preachers often claim that the United States was founded to be a Christian nation. If the people who make this assertion are merely saying that most Americans are Christians, they might have a point. But those who argue that America is a Christian nation usually mean something more, insisting that the country should be officially Christian. The very character of our country is at stake in the outcome of this debate. (From a brochure by Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Reprinted by permission.)

Religious Right groups and their allies insist that the United States was designed to be officially Christian and that our laws should enforce the doctrines of (their version of) Christianity. Is this viewpoint accurate? Is there anything in the Constitution that gives special treatment or preference to Christianity? Did the founders of our government believe this or intend to create a government that gave special recognition to Christianity?

The answer to all of these questions is "No." The U.S. Constitution is a wholly secular document. It contains no mention of Christianity or Jesus Christ. In fact, the Constitution refers to religion only twice in the First Amendment, which bars laws "respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," and in Article VI, which prohibits "religious tests" for public office. Both of these provisions are evidence that the country was not founded as officially Christian.

The Founding Fathers did not create a secular government because they disliked religion. Many were believers themselves. Yet they were well aware of the dangers of church-state union. They had studied and even seen firsthand the difficulties that church-state partnerships spawned in Europe. During the American colonial period, alliances between religion and government produced oppression and tyranny on our own shores.

Many colonies, for example, had provisions limiting public office to "Trinitarian Protestants" and other types of laws designed to prop up the religious sentiments of the politically powerful. Some colonies had officially established churches and taxed all citizens to support them, whether

they were members or not. Dissenters faced imprisonment, torture and even death.

These arrangements led to bitterness and sectarian division. Many people began agitating for an end to "religious tests" for public office, tax subsidies for churches and other forms of state endorsement of religion. Those who led this charge were not anti-religion. Indeed, many were members of the clergy and people of deep piety. They argued that true faith did not need or want the support of government.

Respect for religious pluralism gradually became the norm. When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, for example, he spoke of "unalienable rights endowed by our Creator." He used generic religious language that all religious groups of the day would respond to, not narrowly Christian language traditionally employed by nations with state churches.

While some of the country's founders believed that the government should espouse Christianity, that viewpoint soon became a losing proposition. In Virginia, Patrick Henry argued in favor of tax support for Christian churches. But Henry and his cohorts were in the minority and lost that battle. Jefferson, James Madison and their allies among the state's religious groups ended Virginia's established church and helped pass the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty, a 1786 law guaranteeing religious freedom to all.

Jefferson and Madison's viewpoint also carried the day when the Constitution, and later, the Bill of Rights, were written. Had an officially Christian nation been the goal of the founders, that concept would appear in the

Constitution. It does not. Instead, our nation's governing document ensures religious freedom for everyone.

Maryland representative Luther Martin said that a handful of delegates to the Constitutional Convention argued for formal recognition of Christianity in the Constitution, insisting that such language was necessary in order to "hold out some distinction between the professors of Christianity and downright infidelity or paganism." But that view was not adopted, and the Constitution gave government no authority over religion. Article VI, which allows persons of all religious viewpoints to hold public office, was adopted by a unanimous vote. Through ratification of the First Amendment, observed Jefferson, the American people built a "wall of separation between church and state."

Some pastors who favored church-state union were outraged and delivered sermons asserting that the United States would not be a successful nation because its Constitution did not give special treatment to Christianity. But many others welcomed the new dawn of freedom and praised the Constitution and the First Amendment as true protectors of liberty.

Early national leaders understood that separation of church and state would be good for all faiths including Christianity. Jefferson rejoiced that Virginia had passed his religious freedom law, noting that it would ensure religious freedom for "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, the infidel of every denomination."

Other early U.S. leaders echoed that view. President George Washington, in a famous 1790 letter to a Jewish congregation in Newport, R.I., celebrated the fact that Jews had full free-

Is America A ‘Christian Nation’? *(continued)*

dom of worship in America. Noted Washington, “All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.”

Washington’s administration even negotiated a treaty with the Muslim rulers of north Africa that stated explicitly that the United States was not founded on Christianity. The pact, known as the Treaty with Tripoli, was approved unanimously by the Senate in 1797, under the administration of John Adams. Article 11 of the treaty states, “[T]he government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion...”

Admittedly, the U.S. government has not always lived up to its constitutional principles. In the late 19th century especially, officials often promoted a *de facto* form of Protestantism. Even the U.S. Supreme Court fell victim to this mentality in 1892, with Justice David Brewer declaring in *Holy Trinity v. United States* that America is “a Christian nation.”

The government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion...
— U.S. Treaty with Tripoli, 1797

It should be noted, however, that the *Holy Trinity* decision is a legal anomaly. It has rarely been cited by other courts, and the “Christian nation” declaration appeared *in dicta*, a legal term meaning writing that reflects a judge’s personal opinion, not a mandate of the law. Also, it is unclear exactly what Brewer meant. In a book he wrote in 1905, Brewer pointed out that the United States is Christian in a cultural sense, not a legal one.

A more accurate judicial view of the relationship between religion and government is described by Justice John Paul Stevens in his 1985 *Wallace v. Jaffree* ruling. Commenting on the constitutional right of all Americans to choose their own religious belief, Stevens wrote, “At one time it was thought that this right merely proscribed the preference of one Christian sect over another, but would not

require equal respect for the conscience of the infidel, the atheist, or the adherent of a non-Christian faith such as Mohammedism or Judaism. But when the underlying principle has been examined in the crucible of litigation, the Court has unambiguously concluded that the individual freedom of conscience protected by the First Amendment embraces the right to select any religious faith or none at all.”

A determined faction of Christians has fought against this wise and time-tested policy throughout our history. In the mid 19th century, several efforts were made to add specific references to Christianity to the Constitution. One group, the National Reform Association (NRA), pushed a “Christian nation” amendment in Congress in 1864. NRA members believed that the Civil War was divine punishment for failing to mention God in the Constitution and saw the amendment as a way to atone for that omission.

The NRA amendment called for “humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, [and] His revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government.” Ten years later, the House Judiciary Committee voted against its adoption. The committee noted “the dangers which the union between church and state had imposed upon so many nations of the Old World” and said in light of that it was felt “inexpedient to put anything into the Constitution which might be construed to be a reference to any religious creed or doctrine.”

Similar theocratic proposals resurfaced in Congress sporadically over the years. As late as 1950, a proposal was introduced in the Senate that would have added language to the Constitution that “devoutly recognizes the Authority and Law of Jesus Christ, Savior and Ruler of nations, through whom are bestowed the blessings of liberty.” This amendment

was never voted out of committee. Efforts to revive it in the early 1960s were unsuccessful.

Today, America’s religious demographics are changing, and diversity has greatly expanded since our nation’s founding. The number of Jews has increased, and more Muslims are living in America than ever before. Other religions now represented in America include Hinduism, Buddhism and a myriad others. In addition, many Americans say they have no religious faith or identify themselves as atheists, agnostics or Humanists. According to some scholars, over 2,000 distinct religious groups and denominations exist in the United States.

Also, even though most Americans identify as Christian, this does not mean they would back official government recognition of the Christian faith. Christian denominations disagree on points of doctrine, church structure and stands on social issues. Many Christians take a moderate or liberal perspective on church-state relations and oppose efforts to impose religion by government action.

When the underlying principle has been examined in the crucible of litigation, the Court has unambiguously concluded that the individual freedom of conscience protected by the First Amendment embraces the right to select any religious faith or none at all.
— Justice John Paul Stevens

Americans should be proud that we live in a democracy that welcomes persons of many faiths and none. Around the globe, millions of people still dwell under oppressive regimes where religion and government are harshly commingled. (Iran and the former Taliban regime of Afghanistan are just two examples.) Many residents of those countries look to the United States as beacon of hope and a model for what their own nations might someday become. *(continued p8)*

Americans United Criticizes Bush for Faith-based Funding

Americans United for Separation of Church and State blasted the Bush administration on March 9 for its relentless effort to steer federal funds to religious organizations, charging that the “faith-based” initiative undermines civil rights and civil liberties.

President George W. Bush renewed his push for the initiative on March 9 in a speech in Washington, D.C. A new administration report claims that \$2.15 billion in tax aid was directed to faith-based groups for social services during the last fiscal year.

James Towey, head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, asserts that Bush is breaking down barriers that prevented religious groups from accessing government funds.

“The president seems to have little or no regard for the separation of church and state,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. “This initiative clearly rolls back constitutional safeguards and

civil rights protections that people count on.

“Bush is slashing social service spending across the board and using the faith-based initiative to divert attention from the cuts,” said Lynn. “This initiative is a scam, and I hope America’s religious leaders and the American people don’t fall for it.”

Lynn added, “Bush persists in claiming that religious charities have a better success rate than governmental and private secular programs. However, there is no proof that this assertion is true.

“It is particularly deplorable that Bush boasts about rolling back civil rights protections for government employment,” Lynn continued. “This initiative lets religious groups run publicly funded programs that openly discriminate in hiring on religious grounds. That’s an outrage.”

Under executive orders issued by the president, tax dollars can go to religious groups to operate social ser-

vices even if they discriminate in hiring on religious grounds. Thus, taxpayers are being required to pay for programs where they would not be allowed to work or even volunteer.

Lynn charged that far from trying to create a level playing field for faith-based groups, Bush wants to tilt the process toward favored religious groups and leaders.

“I don’t think it’s coincidental that TV preacher Pat Robertson, a prominent Bush backer, received \$1.5 million in faith-based funding,” said Lynn.

The initiative, Lynn said, has clearly been used for partisan purposes. He noted that in February, Towey spoke at a conference on the initiative for religious leaders in Pennsylvania, where U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, who is locked in a tight re-election bid, appeared via video.

[From a March 9 press release from Americans United for Separation of Church and State.]

Atheists Identified as America’s Most Distrusted Minority

America’s increasing acceptance of religious diversity doesn’t extend to those who don’t believe in a god, according to a national survey by researchers in the University of Minnesota’s department of sociology.

From a telephone sampling of more than 2,000 households, university researchers found that Americans rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, gays and lesbians and other minority groups in “sharing their vision of American society.” Atheists are also the minority group most Americans are least willing to allow their children to marry.

Even though atheists are few in number, not formally organized and relatively hard to publicly identify, they are seen as a threat to the American way of life by a large portion of the American public. “Atheists, who account for about 3 percent of the U.S. population, offer a glaring exception to the rule of increasing social tolerance over the last 30 years,” says

Penny Edgell, associate sociology professor and the study’s lead researcher.

Edgell also argues that today’s atheists play the role that Catholics, Jews and communists have played in the past—they offer a symbolic moral boundary to membership in American society. “It seems most Americans believe that diversity is fine, as long as every one shares a common ‘core’ of values that make them trustworthy—and in America, that ‘core’ has historically been religious,” says Edgell. Many of the study’s respondents associated atheism with an array of moral indiscretions ranging from criminal behavior to rampant materialism and cultural elitism.

Edgell believes a fear of moral decline and resulting social disorder is behind the findings. “Americans believe they share more than rules and procedures with their fellow citizens—they share an understanding of right and wrong,” she said. “Our findings seem to rest on a view of atheists

as self-interested individuals who are not concerned with the common good.”

The researchers also found acceptance or rejection of atheists is related not only to personal religiosity, but also to one’s exposure to diversity, education and political orientation—with more educated, East and West Coast Americans more accepting of atheists than their Midwestern counterparts.

The study is co-authored by assistant professor Joseph Gerteis and associate professor Doug Hartmann. It’s the first in a series of national studies conducted the American Mosaic Project, a three-year project funded by the Minneapolis-based David Edelstein Family Foundation that looks at race, religion and cultural diversity in the contemporary United States. The study will appear in the April issue of the American Sociological Review.

[From a March 20 article in University of Minnesota News.]

Is America A ‘Christian Nation’? (continued)

Only the principle of church-state separation can protect America’s incredible degree of religious freedom. The individual rights and diversity we enjoy cannot be maintained if the government promotes Christianity or if our government takes on the trappings of a “faith-based” state.

The United States, in short, was not

founded to be an officially Christian nation or to espouse any official religion. Our government is neutral on religious matters, leaving such decisions to individuals. This democratic and pluralistic system has allowed a broad array of religious groups to grow and flourish and guarantees every individual American the right to determine

his or her own spiritual path or to reject religion entirely. As a result of this policy, Americans enjoy more religious freedom than any people in world history. We should be proud of this accomplishment and work to preserve the constitutional principle that made it possible.

March Board Meeting Minutes

Present: Steve Yothment (President), Judy Thompson (VPI), Freya Harris (VPE), Ed Buckner (Treasurer), Diane Buckner, Bill Burton, Jack McKinney, Jim Middleton, Lew Southern, George Page, Walter Beal, Kevin Fortune.

Date/Time: March 19, 2006; 2:00 PM.

Minutes taken by: George Page

Call to Order: Steve Yothment called the meeting to order. Judy noted that a quorum was present.

Minutes: The February Board minutes of February 19, 2006 were accepted without amendment.

Financial Report: Ed submitted an interim report dated March 19, 2006. He noted that due to the board decision that the treasurer need only report at the end of each quarter, the next complete report will be prepared at the end of March. The checking account balance is \$3,660.80. A portion of the AFS holdings was transferred to the PayPal account earning 4.27% interest and the balance is \$3,039.06. The current balance is now \$6,599.86. Ed also submitted the AFS Royalties Report covering the period September, 2005 through February, 2006. Ed asked if there were any changes required to the reports and none were voiced. It was noted that book sales are down and utility bills are higher.

Steve reported that thank you letters were sent this past month to anyone who donated more than \$100 in calendar year 2005.

Ed suggested that it is time to write a fund raising letter and offered to prepare a first draft to present to the board. Various board members made suggestions on the contents of the letter and points to make in the letter.

Yard Sale: The time/date of the sale was confirmed to run from 9:30 AM to 4:00 PM on April 29, 2006. It was noted that the signs for the sale would be put out on Wednesday just prior to the sale. Bill Burton and Kevin Fortune offered to put signs up. George is to email Judy a letter to give to donors thanking them for the donation and to serve as a record of their donations for tax purposes. Judy will present a letter for suggested amounts for deductions.

It was noted that we plan to advertise the larger ticket items on the AFS website and to try to do some pre-selling of items. Any monies collected prior to the sale are to be given to Ed Buckner. Diane suggested we hold a BBQ party directly following the yard sale.

Space Renovation: Jack presented the board with the preliminary layout of the renovation and comments from the renovation committee. The commitment to the board is to get the maximum space for the minimum amount of money. We will re-use as much of the existing materials as we can during the process.

Various board members made suggestions based on the drawing and for possible adjustments of the layout. Invited AFS member Walter Beal made two specific comments: It is imperative to have a qualified professional review the plan to ensure we meet fire codes. The other point was to make the board aware of the possibility that many of the systems, if altered enough, might need to be brought completely into code. A visitor, Kevin Fortune, reiterated the comments.

Ed offered that he will attempt to contact the original architect with the condo association, who might be able to offer advice on the issues Walter brought up regarding the renovation. If that option is unavailable, the board directed the renovation committee to pursue information on how to get professional advice at the lowest cost possible. Walter suggested that AIA (American Institute of Architects) may be able to give us assistance.

The question of looking into moving to another site was raised. Lew and Jack provided information regarding other locations.

Ed requested that the next drawing of the renovation plan reflect commitments made for naming rooms/spaces from previous donors. The board room is to be named for Dorothy Lawson and the Library should be named for Sam Howell.

Website and Social Expansion: AFS member Walter Beal requested time to discuss two issues with the board. Walter suggested that our website be updated to reflect current technology and offer a friendlier face to the group and he offered his assistance to update the site.

He also gave testimonial regarding another group he works with regarding the social aspect of getting new and younger members. One suggestion was to deemphasize the word “society” when advertising the group. It may be more attractive to say something along the lines of AFS Social group. Walter also offered to supply AFS with leftover movie passes he receives in association with his other social group.

Speakers: Judy reported that the next speakers will be:
April: Dan Barker – Freedom from Religion Foundation
May: Charles Lantz, D.C. – Chiropractic
June: Kevin Fortune – Christian Freethinking

Details of Dan Barker’s visit to Atlanta were mentioned and we discussed preliminary plans of a possible dinner with Dan the night before he speaks to the group (Saturday evening, April 8). This depends on his arrival time on Saturday. Jack was asked if he could host Dan during his stay. Steve is to contact Kelly Wilhoit to ask if she may be available to host a dinner/party.

Adjournment and Next Meeting: There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned. The next meeting of the board of directors is scheduled for Sunday April 16th at 2:00 PM.

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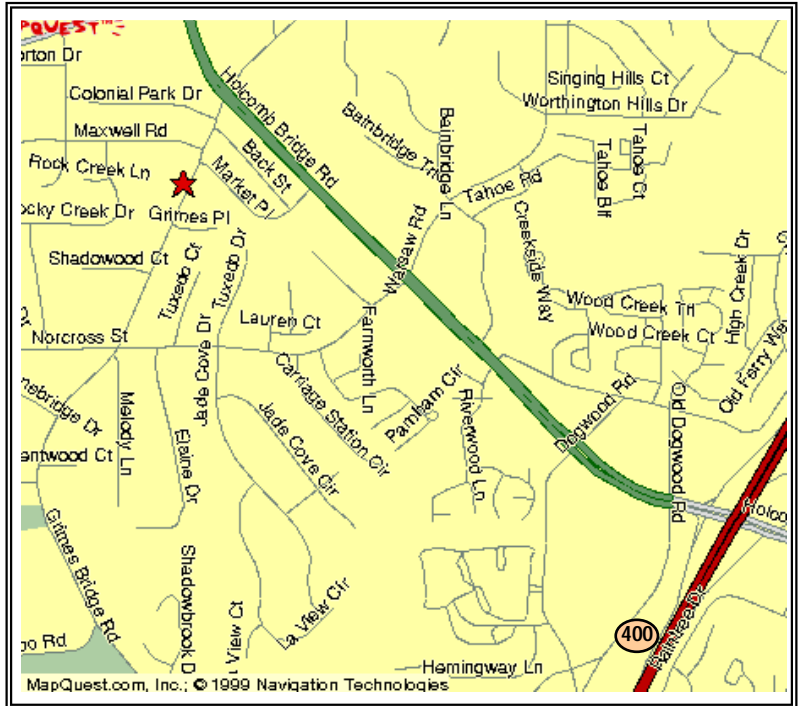
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**The April Meeting:
Sunday, April 9
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Dan Barker**



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