

# Atlanta Freethought News

*Dare to Think for Yourself*

An AFS Publication • Volume 12 Number 9 • September 2006

## The September AFS Meeting

This month's meeting on Sunday, September 10, will feature **Charles Lantz, DC, PhD**, speaking on "Chiropractic... Behind the Mystique."

Dr. Lance received a BS degree in Zoology and a PhD in Pharmacology from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He also earned a post-doctoral fellowship at The Johns Hopkins University Department of Biology. He is co-author of *The Chiropractic Theories*, a standard text in Chiropractic education. He was Director of Research at Life Chiropractic College West in San Francisco for 10 years. In 2000, he moved to Georgia to be Director of Research at Life University. He has published numerous articles on topics as diverse as anatomy, statistical theory and applications, spinal motion analysis and chiropractic theory.

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, September 15, at 7:00 PM.

The **AFS Discussion Group** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center on Sunday, September 17, at 4:00 to 6:00 PM. This time, we expect to play a recording or watch a video of Ed Buckner's May 24 debate with Bill Federer on "American History: Christian or Secular?" The folks at American Vision told Ed recently that the audio CD is finally in the mail and that a video will be sent soon.

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

## SOS Meets at AF Center

The **Secular Organizations for Sobriety** meets at the Atlanta Freethought Center every Tuesday evening at 8:00PM. SOS is the secular substitute for Alcoholics Anonymous.

### AFS Meetings and Activities

Sept 10: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.

Sept 15: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

Sept 17: AFS Board Meeting at AF Center, 2:00 PM.

Sept 17: AFS Discussion Group at AF Center, 4:00 PM.

## The September Atheist Meetup

**Atlanta Atheists** will have a "meetup" on Sunday, September 24, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Road, in Atlanta. The phone there is 404-255-5911.

## 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](http://www.fellowshipofreason.com).

## Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center on Sunday, September 24, at 12:30 PM.

## Our Real Estate Purchase

The AFS Board of Directors has decided to not purchase the Collins Springs Primitive Baptist Church property. The seller did not have clear title to the property, and it appears that they will not resolve the title problem very soon.

We are still looking at other properties to buy, so the expansion of our current property is temporarily on hold.

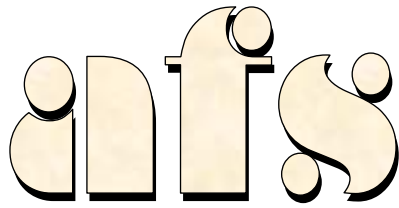
## AAI has a New President

In an August 28 press release, Atheist Alliance, International (AAI) announced that its board has unanimously elected a new president, Margaret Downey, from Pocopson, Pennsylvania. (AFS is a member group of AAI.) She replaces Bobbie Kirkhart, who served as president since 2002.

Downey has a long record of advocacy and litigation to establish the civil rights and civil liberties of non-theists. She is founder and president of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia and the Atheist Anti-Discrimination Support Network.

In assuming the presidency of AAI, Downey said her goal is to help build a strong coalition of Freethought organizations into an effective national voice for an inclusive society. "This nation was founded with the hope and expectation of creating one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all," Downey said. "That goal can be realized only if all citizens are treated equally before the law, with no governmental preference shown for skin color, national origin, age, gender or religious opinion."

AAI, founded in 1991, is an umbrella organization for local, autonomous, religion-free groups. Its purposes are to help establish and strengthen the religion-free community and to achieve visibility and acceptance for Atheists as respected contributors to discussions of public policy.



**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.

Sept 10: **Charles Lantz** will speak on "Chiropractic... Behind the Mystique."  
He is currently writing a book with the same title.

Oct 8: **Dennis Martin** will speak on "Calling All Agnostics! Is Agnosticism to Atheism a Leap or a Short Step?"

Nov 12: **Clark Adams** (tentative) will speak on "How to Keep Your Freethought Group from Looking Like a Funeral" and his updated "Atheism in Media."

Dec 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 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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# D. James Kennedy and “Darwin’s Deadly Legacy”

**B**ack on August 26 and 27, the Coral Ridge Hour, hosted by Dr. D. James Kennedy on Christian broadcasting channels, presented a TV Special called “Darwin’s Deadly Legacy.” The main point of the program was the claim that Hitler was inspired by Charles Darwin in his eugenics program in which millions of people were killed by the Nazis. Dr. Kennedy claimed that “Social Darwinism,” from Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, was the motivation behind the Holocaust.

Advertisements for the program said that it was about “the chilling impact of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution” and “the mounting evidence that Darwin had it wrong on the origin of life.”

A Coral Ridge Ministries press release promoting the program said it “features 14 scholars, scientists, and authors who outline the grim consequences of Darwin’s theory of evolution and show how his theory fueled Hitler’s ovens.”

Guests on the program included Ann Coulter, the ultra-conservative columnist; Richard Weikart, author of *From Darwin to Hitler*; Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for a Creator*; Jonathan Wells, author of *Icons of Evolution*; Phillip Johnson, author of *Darwin on Trial*; Michael Behe, author of *Darwin’s Black Box*; Ian Taylor, author of *In the Minds of Men*, and Francis Collins, Director of the Human Genome Project.

One of Dr. Kennedy’s quotes in the program: “We have had nearly 150 years of the theory of Darwinian evolution. And what has it brought us? Millions of deaths, the destruction of those deemed “inferior,” the devaluing of human life, and increasing hopelessness. Darwin’s legacy has been deadly indeed.”

The program proclaimed “The Darwin-driven Nazi Holocaust illustrates what can happen when man forgets and rejects God. When that happens, a vacuum is created into which many false, foolish, and fatal

ideas can come rushing in. When He who gave mankind the true Tree of Life is rejected, error and infamy can quickly follow.”

The program also promoted a new book by Coral Ridge Ministries, titled *Evolution’s Fatal Fruit: How Darwin’s Tree of Life Brought Death to Millions*.

## RESPONSES TO THE PROGRAM

Responses to the program have been numerous. First to respond, on August 22 (four days before the program aired), was the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which blasted the television documentary and Dr. D. James Kennedy for saying that Darwin’s theory of evolution had anything to do with Adolf Hitler and the atrocities of the Holocaust. The ADL also denounced Coral Ridge Ministries for misleading Dr. Francis Collins, the director of the National Human Genome Research Institute for the NIH, and wrongfully using him as part of its “twisted documentary.”

After being contacted by the ADL about his name being used to promote Kennedy’s project, Dr. Collins said he was “absolutely appalled by what Coral Ridge Ministries is doing. I had NO knowledge that Coral Ridge Ministries was planning a TV special on Darwin and Hitler, and I find the thesis of Dr. Kennedy’s program utterly misguided and inflammatory.”

ADL National Director Abraham H. Foxman said in a statement: “This is an outrageous and shoddy attempt by D. James Kennedy to trivialize the horrors of the Holocaust. Hitler did not need Darwin to devise his heinous plan to exterminate the Jewish people. Trivializing the Holocaust comes from either ignorance at best or, at worst, a mendacious attempt to score political points in the culture war on the backs of six million Jewish victims and others who died at the hands of the Nazis.”

“It must be remembered that D. James Kennedy is a leader among the distinct group of ‘Christian Supremacists’ who seek to “reclaim America for Christ” and turn the U.S. into a

Christian nation guided by their strange notions of biblical law.”

## BLOGGERS RESPOND

Of particular interest were the negative responses from science weblogs.

At [scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/](http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/), P.Z. Myers commented, “The opening scene was *perfect*. Kennedy walked onto a stage decorated with flasks and beakers and graduated cylinders full of brightly colored water. One had a small flame going under it; the graduated cylinder was bubbling. It was practically an admission that all of the science in the show was going to be fake.”

“In a show purportedly about science, how desperate do you have to be to give *Ann Coulter* that much face time? Triple points for irony, though, when Coulter called Eugenie Scott a ‘hack.’”

“The first half was all Nazis and Columbine. No mention of [Hitler’s Christianity](#), of course. Everything was driven by “Darwinism.”

“The second half was all about the ‘crumbling theory of evolution.’ All the old chestnuts were tossed out. We got ‘*just a theory*,’ 747s being spontaneously assembled while monkeys write Shakespeare, Behe babbling about “molecular machines,” Strobel saying there were no transitional fossils, Nebraska Man, teach both theories, and that famous paleontologist, Ann Coulter, telling us that all forms of life suddenly appeared in the Cambrian explosion...and did you know you’ll get sued if you mention the Cambrian in a classroom?”

“Francis Collins’ contribution was to help Kennedy argue that evolution is inadequate, that ‘man is a special creature,’ and go on and on about how complex the genome is.”

“It was a truly vile exhibition. The fans of this kind of crap will eat it up, and man, is it ever easy for these guys to lie.”

[From an August 22 press release by the ADL, the Coral Ridge Ministries website ([www.coralridge.org](http://www.coralridge.org)), and blogger site [www.scienceblogs.com](http://www.scienceblogs.com).]

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# Rep. Harris Condemns Separation of Church, State

**R**epresentative Katherine Harris (R-Fla.) said on August 25 that God did not intend for the United States to be a “nation of secular laws” and that the separation of church and state is a “lie we have been told” to keep religious people out of politics.

“If you’re not electing Christians, then in essence you are going to legislate sin,” Harris told interviewers from the Florida Baptist Witness, the weekly journal of the Florida Baptist State Convention. She cited abortion and same-sex marriage as examples of that sin.

Harris, a candidate in the Sept. 5 Republican primary for U.S. Senate, said her religious beliefs “animate” everything she does, including her votes in Congress.

Witness editors interviewed candidates for office, asking them to describe their faith and their positions on certain issues.

Harris has always professed a deep Christian faith. But she has rarely expressed such a fervent evangelical perspective publicly.

Political and religious officials responded to her published remarks with outrage and dismay.

Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) said she was “disgusted” by the comments “and deeply disappointed in Representative Harris personally.”

Harris, Wasserman Schultz said, “clearly shows that she does not deserve to be a representative.”

Ruby Brooks, a veteran Tampa Bay Republican activist, said Harris’s remarks “were offensive to me as a Christian and a Republican.”

“This notion that you’ve been chosen or anointed, it’s offensive,” Brooks said. “We hurt our cause with that more than we help it.”

Harris told the journalists “we have to have the faithful in government”

because that is God’s will. Separating religion and politics is “so wrong because God is the one who chooses our rulers,” she said.

“And if we are the ones not actively involved in electing those godly men and women,” then “we’re going to have a nation of secular laws. That’s not what our Founding Fathers intended, and that certainly isn’t what God intended.”

Harris campaign spokeswoman Jennifer Marks would not answer questions about the Harris interview. Instead, she released a two-sentence statement.

“Congresswoman Harris encourages Americans from all walks of life and faith to participate in our government,” it stated. “She continues to be an unwavering advocate of religious rights and freedoms.”

[From an August 26 article by Jim Stratton in the Orlando Sentinel.]

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## Christian Coalition Losing Chapters

**T**hree disgruntled state affiliates have severed ties with the Christian Coalition of America, one of the nation’s most powerful conservative groups during the 1990s but now buffeted by complaints over finances, leadership and its plans to veer into nontraditional policy areas.

“It’s a very sad day for our people, but a liberating day,” said John Giles, president of the coalition’s Alabama chapter, which announced Wednesday that it was renaming itself and splitting from the national organization. The Iowa and Ohio chapters took similar steps this year.

Giles said he and his Alabama colleagues have “a dozen hard reasons” for the action but would elaborate on only one — a perception that the coalition’s leadership was diverting itself from traditional concerns such as abortion and same-sex marriage to address other issues ranging from the environment to Internet access.

“In their prime, they were rated

the seventh-most powerful lobbying organization in the country,” Giles said. “Now, there’s not even any blip on the radar screen.”

Roberta Combs, the coalition’s president, insisted her organization, which is \$1 million in debt, would survive the defections, and was unapologetic about her interest in new directions.

“We’re going to have a new mission, a new vision, much more broad-focused,” she said. “They don’t like some of the comments I’ve made about the environment and some of these other issues.”

The coalition, which claims more than 2 million members, was founded in 1989 by religious broadcaster Pat Robertson and became politically powerful under Executive Director Ralph Reed before he left in 1997. Robertson, who turned over the presidency to Combs in 2002, has been criticized for provocative public statements, while Reed lost an election in Georgia last month after being linked

to disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

Jim Backlin, the coalition’s vice president for legislative affairs, said the Reed situation harmed the organization because of heavy media coverage that constantly mentioned his past role with the coalition.

Backlin insisted, however, that the coalition remains influential among conservatives in Congress.

“Many of the congressional offices always look for Christian Coalition support right away when trying to get their legislation passed,” he said.

In all three states with defecting chapters, there had been disputes with the coalition’s national office over distribution of voter guides and political surveys. The national office, as part of an agreement with the Internal Revenue Service over its tax-exempt status, had asked the state chapters to submit any such materials for advance review, and Combs said the request was sometimes ignored.

[From an August 24 AP article.]

# Is Faith Good for Us? By Phil Zuckerman

Phil Zuckerman is an associate professor of sociology at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. He is the author of *Invitation to the Sociology of Religion* (Routledge, 2003) and is currently writing a book on secularization in Scandinavia.

Whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or Sikh, there is one common belief that all religious fundamentalists share: worship of God and obedience to his laws are essential for a peaceful, healthy society. From Orthodox rabbis in the occupied West Bank to Wahhabi sheiks in Saudi Arabia, from the pope in Vatican City to Mormons in Salt Lake City, the lament is the same: God and his will must be at the center of everyone's lives in order to ensure a moral, prosperous, safe, collective existence.

Furthermore, fundamentalists agree that, when large numbers of people in a society reject God or fail to make him the center of their lives, societal disintegration is sure to follow. Every societal ill — whether crime, poverty, poor public education, or AIDS — is thus blamed on a lack of piety. A most disconcerting example of this worldview was expressed in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, when Jerry Falwell blamed the terrorists attacks on America's "throwing God out of the public square," further adding that "when a nation deserts God and expels God from the culture ... the result is not good."

If this often-touted religious theory were correct — that a turning away from God is at the root of all societal ills—then we would expect to find the least religious nations on earth to be bastions of crime, poverty, and disease and the most religious nations to be models of societal health. A comparison of highly irreligious countries with highly religious countries, however, reveals a very different state of affairs. In reality, the most secular countries—those with the highest proportion of atheists and agnostics—are among the most stable, peaceful, free, wealthy, and healthy societies. And the most religious nations — wherein worship of God is in abundance—are among the most unstable, violent, op-

pressive, poor, and destitute.

One must always be careful, of course, to distinguish between totalitarian nations where atheism is forced upon an unwilling population (such as in North Korea, China, Vietnam, and the former Soviet states) and open, democratic nations where atheism is freely chosen by a well-educated population (as in Sweden, the Netherlands, or Japan). The former nations' non-religion, which can be described as "coercive atheism," is plagued by all that comes with totalitarianism: corruption, economic stagnation, censorship, depression, and the like. However, nearly every nation with high levels of "organic atheism" is a veritable model of societal health.

The twenty-five nations characterized by organic atheism with the highest proportion of nonbelievers are listed in Table 1. When looking at standard measures of societal health, we find that they fare remarkably well; highly religious nations fare rather poorly. The 2004 United Nations' Human Development Report, which ranks 177 countries on a "Human Development Index," measures such indicators of societal health as life expectancy, adult literacy, per-capita income, educational attainment, and so on. According to this report, the five top nations were Norway, Sweden, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands. All had notably high degrees of organic atheism. Furthermore, of the top twenty-five nations, all but Ireland and the United States were top-ranking non-believing nations with some of the highest percentages of organic atheism on earth. Conversely, the bottom fifty countries of the "Human Development Index" lacked statistically significant levels of organic atheism.

Irreligious countries had the lowest infant-mortality rate (number of deaths per 1,000 live births), and reli-

gious countries had the highest rates. According to the 2004 CIA World Factbook (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook>), out of 225 nations, the twenty-five with the lowest infant-mortality rates had significantly high levels of organic atheism. Conversely, the seventy-five nations with the highest infant-mortality rates were all very religious and without statistically significant levels of organic atheism.

**Table 1**  
Top 25 Nations with "Organic Atheism"

Country	Total Pop. (2004)	Percent Non-believers
1 Sweden	8,986,000	46-85%
2 Vietnam	82,690,000	81%
3 Denmark	5,413,000	43-80%
4 Norway	4,575,000	31-72%
5 Japan	127,333,000	64-65%
6 Czech Rep.	10,246,000	54-61%
7 Finland	5,215,000	28-60%
8 France	60,424,000	43-54%
9 South Korea	48,598,000	30-52%
10 Estonia	1,342,000	49%
11 Germany	82,425,000	41-49%
12 Russia	143,782,000	24-48%
13 Hungary	10,032,000	32-46%
14 Netherlands	16,318,000	39-44%
15 Britain	60,271,000	31-44%
16 Belgium	10,348,000	42-43%
17 Bulgaria	7,518,000	34-40%
18 Slovenia	2,011,000	35-38%
19 Israel	6,199,000	15-37%
20 Canada	32,508,000	19-30%
21 Latvia	2,306,000	20-29%
22 Slovakia	5,424,000	10-28%
23 Switzerland	7,451,000	17-27%
24 Austria	8,175,000	18-26%
25 Australia	19,913,000	24-25%

Concerning international poverty rates, the United Nations Report on the World Social Situation (2003) found that, of the forty poorest nations on earth (measured by the percentage of population that lives on less than one dollar a day), all but Vietnam were highly religious nations with statistically minimal or insignifi-

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## Is Faith Good for Us? (*continued*)

cant levels of atheism.

Regarding homicide rates, Oablo Fajnzylber et al., in a study reported in the *Journal of Law and Economics* (2002), looked at thirty-eight non-African nations and found that the ten with the highest homicide rates were highly religious, with minimal or statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism. Conversely, of the ten nations with the lowest homicide rates, all but Ireland were secular nations with high levels of atheism. James Fox and Jack Levin, in *The Will to Kill* (2000), looked at thirty-seven non-African nations and found that, of the ten nations with the highest homicide rates, all but Estonia and Taiwan were highly religious, with statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism. Conversely, of the ten nations with the lowest homicide rates, all but Ireland and Kuwait were relatively secular nations, with high levels of organic atheism.

Concerning literacy rates, according to the United Nations Report on the World Social Situation (2003), of the thirty-five nations with the highest levels of youth-illiteracy rates (percentage of population ages fifteen to twenty-four who cannot read or write), all were highly religious, with statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism.

In regard to rates of AIDS and HIV infection, the most religious nations on earth—particularly those in Africa—fared the worst. (Botswana suffers from the highest rate of HIV infection in the world; <http://www.avert.org/aroundworld.htm>.) Conversely, the highly irreligious nations of Western Europe, such as those of Scandinavia—where public sex education is supported and birth control is widely accessible—fared the best, experiencing among the lowest rates of AIDS and HIV infection in the world.

Concerning gender equality, nations marked by high degrees of organic atheism are among the most egalitarian in the world, while highly religious nations are among the most

oppressive. According to the 2004 Human Development Report's "Gender Empowerment Measure," the ten nations with the highest degrees of gender equality were all strongly organic-atheistic nations with significantly high percentages of non-belief. Conversely, the bottom ten were all highly religious nations without any statistically significant percentages of atheists. According to Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris's (2003) "Gender Equality Scale," of the ten nations most accepting of gender equality, all but the United States and Colombia were marked by high levels of organic atheism; of the ten least-accepting of gender equality, all were highly religious and had statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism. According to Inglehart et al. in *Human Values and Social Change* (2003), countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands, with the most female members of parliament, tended to be characterized by high degrees of organic atheism, and countries such as Pakistan, Nigeria, and Iran, with the fewest female members in parliament, tended to be highly religious.

The acceptance of gender equality among irreligious nations may be linked to the relative acceptance of homosexuality. Inglehart et al., in *Human Beliefs and Values: A Cross-Cultural Sourcebook Based on the 1999-2002 Value Surveys* (2004), found that, of the eighteen nations least likely to condemn homosexuality, all were highly ranked organic-atheistic nations. Conversely, of the eighteen nations most likely to condemn homosexuality, all but Hungary were highly religious, with statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism.

A country's suicide rate stands out as the one indicator of societal health in which religious nations fare much better than secular nations. According to the 2003 World Health Organization's report on international male suicide rates (<http://www.who.int/en/>), the nations with the lowest rates of suicide were all highly religious,

characterized by extremely high levels of theism (usually of the Muslim and Catholic varieties). Of the ten nations with the highest male suicide rates, five were distinctly irreligious nations ranked among the top twenty-five nations listed earlier. These five are Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Russia, and Slovenia. It is interesting to note that of the nations currently experiencing the highest rates of suicide—including the five just mentioned—nearly all are former Soviet/communist-dominated societies. (The nations of Scandinavia, where organic atheism is strongest, do not have the highest suicide rates in the world, as is widely thought to be the case.)

In sum, countries with high rates of organic atheism are among the most societally healthy on earth, while societies with nonexistent rates of organic atheism are among the most destitute. The former nations have among the lowest homicide rates, infant mortality rates, poverty rates, and illiteracy rates and among the highest levels of wealth, life expectancy, educational attainment, and gender equality in the world. The sole indicator of societal health in which religious countries scored higher than irreligious countries is suicide.

Where does the United States fit in all this? Americans are very religious. Many studies have found that only between 3-7 percent of Americans do not believe in God. Rates of prayer, belief in the divinity of Jesus, belief in the divine origins of the Bible, and rates of church attendance are remarkably robust in the United States, making it the most religious of all Western industrialized nations, with the possible exception of Ireland. When it comes to societal health, the United States certainly fares far better than much of the rest of the world. According to the United Nations' 2004 "Human Development Index" discussed earlier, the United States ranked eighth. However, when we compare the United States to its peer nations—i.e., developed, industrialized

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## Is Faith Good for Us? (continued)

democratic nations such as Canada, Japan, and the nations of Europe—its standing in terms of societal health plummets. The United States has far higher homicide, poverty, obesity, and homelessness rates than any of its more secular peer nations. It is also the only Western industrialized democracy that is unwilling to provide universal health coverage to its citizens. The fact is that extremely secular nations such as Japan and Sweden are much safer, cleaner, healthier, better educated, and more humane when compared to the United States, despite the latter's exceptionally strong levels of theism.

The information presented in this discussion in no way proves that high levels of organic atheism cause societal health or that low levels of organic atheism cause societal ills such as poverty or illiteracy. The wealth, poverty, well-being, and suffering in various nations are caused by numerous political, historical, economic, and sociological factors that are far more determinant than people's personal belief systems. Rather, the conclusion to be drawn from the data provided above is simply that high levels of irreligion do not automatically result in a breakdown of civilization, a rise in immoral behavior, or in "sick societies." Quite the opposite seems to be the case. Furthermore, religion is clearly not the simple and single path to righteous societies that religious fundamentalists seem to think it is. This fact must be vigorously asserted in response to the proclamations of politically active theists. From small-town school boards to the floor of the Senate, conservative Christians are championing religion as the solution to America's societal problems. However, their pious "solution" is highly dubious and clearly not supported by the best available research of social science.

Belief in God may provide comfort to the individual believer, but, at the societal level, its results do not com-

pare at all favorably with that of the more secular societies. When seeking a more civil, just, safe, humane, and healthy society, one is more likely to find it among those nations ranking low in religious faith—contrary to the preaching of religious folks.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My article is indebted to Gregory S. Paul's important research correlating rates of belief/non-belief with various measures of societal health.

### FURTHER READING

Reginald Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Stoddart Publishing Company, 2002).

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"Religion is what keeps the poor from slaughtering the rich." — Napoleon Bonaparte, 1769-1821

# Clipped

## Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Eileen Stratidakis's letter was in the Faith and Values section of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on August 19.

### Heaven-hell divide leads to two paths

A letter writer ("Nothing relative about the afterlife," Faith & Values, July 29) makes the very accurate observation that "the existence of a life after this one cannot be proven – it is based on faith." However, after accusing other letter-writers of being "subjective, ... even contradictory," he goes on to make the subjective, contradictory assertion that "there is a heaven ... and there is a hell" and that "[i]n one of those two places everyone will spend eternity."

In my observation, this very teaching leads to the "moral and spiritual decay of society." Our world is in chaos because our minds are in chaos. A large contributor is the incoherence generated by religious institutions, many of which teach that humans are "born bad" and that, as a result, they must pay – either in this life, through penance and self-denial, or in the next through eternal punishment and damnation.

When faced with such ultimatums, there are only two

ways for a person to react: He can either submit and, in doing so, become powerless and a victim, or he can elect to fight back, thereby preserving the integrity and freedom of his own mind. It is this latter that most frightens both church and state. For a person who demands the right to form his own opinions cannot be controlled. And that is what government and religion are about – control.

It is our uncertainty and dissatisfaction with ourselves that has resulted in the current unrest in our country and in the world. When people are told they are "not good enough," predictably they will behave in a less than civilized manner. It is not lack of faith in God or an afterlife that pushes people to perform immoral acts. It is fear and the absence of hope; the belief, based on what they have been taught and exposed to, that the only way to have their needs met is through lying and intimidation, violence and coercion.

Leadership comes through example – and that example must make sense to those we wish to influence. Only through self-control, which comes first from scrutinizing and filtering the thoughts and beliefs that inhabit our own minds, can we bring society back to order. Just as jails do not deter the commission of crimes, threats of punishment and an afterlife will not "save" society. What is needed is a system that assures security and sufficiency for all people – in this life; one that celebrates the good in all humans, fosters our inborn intellect and capacity to create a world of peace and plenty, equity and equality, for everyone. To bring that about, we must first examine the beliefs we harbor about ourselves and why we choose those beliefs.

As long as we buy into the message that we are innately "bad" or that some are more superior than others, we will continue to find ourselves inhabiting a world of strife.

**EILEEN STRATIDAKIS**  
Atlanta

## You Might Be a Freethinker... By Jim Middleton

The Atlanta Freethought Society makes efforts to educate people about freethought, and the advantages of life as a freethinker. This is not an easy task, especially given the right-wing leanings of the current federal government. As a part of our ongoing effort to get recognition and spread the good word, we have adopted a portion of the interstate highway to keep it clean. In return for our efforts, there is a sign announcing our contribution.

We need more of our members to assist in the cleanup. In the past, we have had the same group of members do the work, and enjoy the camaraderie of working together. So, examine your life as a freethinker and think how you can make a statement to others. Watch for the announcement, and join us next time to do our civic duty, and to get publicity for AFS. The more people we have, the easier the work, and the more fun it is to visit with like-minded friends.

Remember: If your most-quoted book is *The Golden Bough* – you might be a freethinker. If you rely on science to answer your questions about the universe – you might be a freethinker. And, if you no longer believe that nature cares whether you live or die – you might be a freethinker.

But especially, if you have a college degree and still volunteer to pick up trash from the highway – you might be a freethinker.

"If priests had not been fond of mutton, lambs never would have been sacrificed to god. Nothing was ever carried to the temple that the priests could not use, and it always happened that god wanted what his agents liked."

– Robert Ingersoll, from *Ingersoll the Magnificent*, by Joseph Lewis, p. 53.



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(Or renew your membership with this form!)



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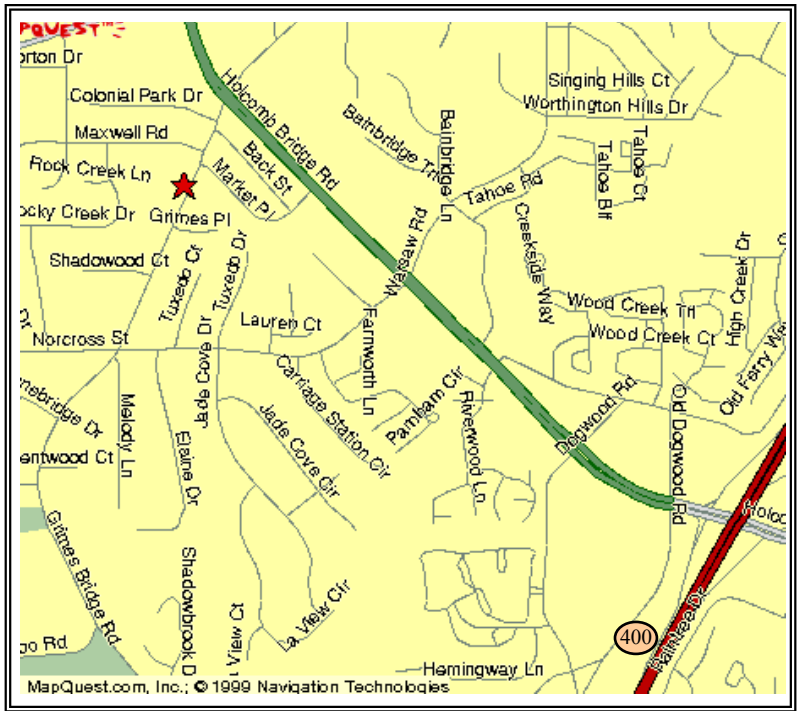
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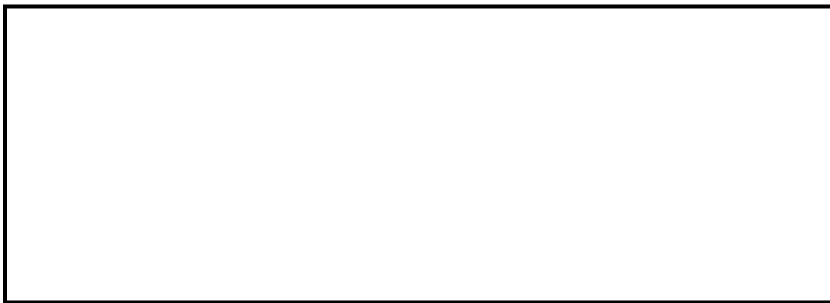
Atlanta Freethought Society

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

**This Month's Speaker:  
Charles Lantz, DC, PhD**



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