

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 13 Number 1 • January 2007

The January AFS Meeting

The January 14 AFS meeting will include a talk by Thomas Nisley, Ph.D., on "God has a Foreign Policy? Israel and U.S. Foreign Policy."

Dr. Nisley is an Assistant Professor of International Studies at Southern Polytechnic State University. His doctorate dissertation, given in 2002, was on Democracy Promotion and U.S. Foreign Policy.

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.

The January AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Friday, January 19, at 7:00 PM.

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.

The January Atheist Meetup

Atlanta Atheists will have a "meetup" on Sunday, January 28, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Road, in Atlanta. The phone there is 404-255-5911.

Ayn Rand Discussion Group

A new discussion group will begin a series of meetings by listening to outstanding recorded lectures from a number of provocative speakers affiliated with *The Objectivist Center* and will follow up with group discussion.

The **Ayn Rand Discussion Group** will have its first meeting on February 4 at 2-4 PM at the Marietta Central Library public meeting room. Subsequent meetings will be on the first Sunday of each month. The group leader is Lance Lamberton, llamberton@bellsouth.net.

AFS Meetings and Activities

Jan 14: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
Jan 19: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.
Jan 21: AFS Board Meeting at AF Center, 3:00 PM.

Election Results

Congratulations to the following AFS officers and board members elected to serve in 2007:

Steve Yothment, President	Bill Burton, Board
Judy Thompson, VP, Int.	Freya Harris, Board
Walter Beal, VP, Ext.	Jack McKinney, Board
Ed Buckner, Treasurer	

Diane Buckner, Lew Southern and George Page will continue their 2-year terms as board members.

Also, we would like to thank Jim Middleton, who has served on the AFS Board for the past 2 years. He is moving to New Mexico this month, and will be missed very much.

AU of Georgia Meeting

The Georgia chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State will meet at the AF Center on Sunday, January 21, at 1:00 PM.

Fellowship of Reason Meeting

The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of every month at 1:00 PM at the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 1025 Mount Vernon Hwy, in Atlanta. For details, see www.fellowshipofreason.com.

Congratulations to Donna Gore & SOS

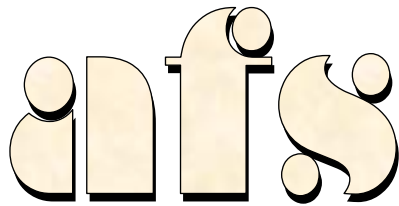
Donna Gore and the Roswell chapter of SOS (Secular Organizations for Sobriety) were highlighted in a full-page story in the Fall 2006 SOS International Newsletter. In the article, Donna told about her frustration with Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in the Atlanta area.

Then, in the process of attending AFS meetings, she says, "I became aware of the constitutional challenges being made to court-enforced AA and the numerous lawsuits that had been filed. I also discovered that there were secular alternatives to AA. I became committed to the principle that these secular alternatives should be made available to the religious hostages that were being sent to AA by the courts."

Donna continues, "I asked the AFS if I could use their office condo to start an SOS meeting, and they readily agreed. Thus, Roswell SOS was born."

"...Being the independent thinkers we are, lifetime attendance is not something I expect. Come as long as you want to, as long as you're getting something out of it. If the time comes when you feel like it's time to move on, then we'll bid you a fond farewell, secure in the knowledge that we've given you a couple of tools for your journey."

Thanks to Donna and the Roswell SOS for providing this community support group.



**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.

Jan 14: Thomas Nisley, Ph.D., an assistant professor at Southern Polytechnic State University, will give a presentation on "God has a Foreign Policy? Israel and U.S. Foreign Policy."

Feb 11: TBD

Mar 11: 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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Textbook Stickers on Evolution Out in Cobb

Congratulations to Jeffrey Selman, who initiated the lawsuit

The Cobb County School board has agreed to settle the long-running legal fight over its 2002 decision to place anti-evolution stickers in high school biology textbooks.

In an agreement announced on December 9, Cobb school officials said they will not order the placement of any "stickers, labels, stamps, inscriptions, or other warnings or disclaimers bearing language substantially similar to that used on the sticker that is the subject of this action." School officials also agreed not to take other actions that would undermine the teaching of evolution in biology classes.

The settlement puts an end to a nationally watched case that has raised questions of local authority over schools and whether Cobb's sticker — which called evolution "a theory, not

a fact" — runs afoul of the First Amendment.

"We are very pleased to reach this agreement and end the lawsuit," said Cobb County Board of Education Chair Dr. Teresa Plenge. "We faced the distraction and expense of starting all over with more legal actions and another trial. With this agreement, it is done, and we now have a clean slate going into the New Year."

After the Cobb School board passed the sticker policy in 2002, school district parents sued arguing that the policy promoted religion in science classrooms and violated the separation of church and state. In January 2005, U.S. District Judge Clarence Cooper agreed and ordered the school district to remove the stickers from its 35,000 biology textbooks.

School officials removed the stickers, but asked the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to reverse Judge Cooper's *Selman v. Cobb County School District* decision. In late spring, the appellate panel sent the case back to Cooper requesting more information about the situation. The panel ruled that the court record of the case was too incomplete for it to decide if Cooper was correct in his decision.

"We're very pleased that the Cobb County school board has done the responsible thing, to call a halt to the litigation," said Debbie Seagraves, executive director of ACLU of Georgia. "It's absolutely a victory for the parents and the children in Cobb County school."

[From a Dec. 19 article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.]

Cobb School Board wants Bible Classes

Cobb County's new school board members think there is enough interest in the school district for a course on the history and literature of the Old and New Testaments.

"I think a lot of parents would want their children to take that class," said board member-elect Holli Cash, who will represent Smyrna when she takes office Jan. 1. "A lot of people leave public schools because they want their kids raised in a Christian environment."

The state Board of Education must adopt curriculum for the Bible course by Feb. 1. Last spring, the General Assembly passed Senate Bill 79, which allows public high schools to teach the Bible as an elective beginning as early as next year. Woodstock Republican Sen. Chip Rogers, who also represents Cobb, was among its chief sponsors.

Board member-elect Dr. John Abraham, who will represent north central Cobb, also believes there is interest.

"I'm sure there is a tremendous amount of support," Abraham said. "I don't have a problem with teaching

the Bible in school. At least it will force people to read."

But high schools that offer electives on the Bible apparently won't get much guidance from the state to ensure they don't end up promoting religion.

A Bible curriculum committee will leave most decisions up to local school systems, offering little advice about lessons, classroom materials or teacher qualifications.

The law requires the State Board of Education to create two optional, non-devotional classes on the history and literature of the Old and New Testaments. Although other states have offered similar courses in public schools, Georgia's law is believed to be the first to require the state board to create them.

The state board meets Jan. 11 to discuss the proposal and possibly approve the Bible study courses. School systems could begin offering them next school year.

Superintendent Fred Sanderson said while there is a chance to offer the

elective in August, the time frame makes it unlikely.

"It's a remote possibility," Sanderson said. "There's a lot of questions, and I need to see what the curriculum is from the state to make a determination."

Such questions include how it will be taught — as literature, or as history — and what kind of teacher will teach it.

Cobb schools that have the most interest in the course will offer it, district chief academic officer Dr. Diane Bradford said. Schools likely will have sign up sheets and if 15 students per school sign up, the class could be offered.

Fresh out of a controversy over Darwinian evolution, Abraham believes offering a class on the Bible could put the district at risk from church-state champions.

"I could see problems down the road. I could see someone challenging that," said Abraham, who is Catholic.

But inserting evolution disclaimers in textbooks, as the board did in 2002 before a federal court judge ruled that

Cobb School Board wants Bible Classes (*continued*)

it was unconstitutional, is different from teaching a state-approved class on the history and literature of the Bible, he said.

"I don't know that they're the same," he said. "This is legal, supposedly."

Ms. Cash, who attends Mount Paran Church of God, said she would enroll her children in the class.

"Being a Christian, of course I would want them to take it," she said. "I would want them to take it because of my Christian beliefs. There's a lot to be learned there."

Ms. Cash said while she supports the elective, she wants to make sure

it's not taught from the point of view of just one Christian denomination.

"We're teaching evolution and the Big Bang; if it's an elective and it's not forced on anyone, why not? There is a lot of value to teaching the history of the Bible," she said.

Other board members, such as Dr. Teresa Plenge, Betty Gray, Lindsey Tippins, Johnny Johnson, and board member-elect the Rev. Dr. John Crooks have said in past interviews they also support teaching the class as an elective.

Yet with all the mandates required by No Child Left Behind, Abraham

said he wonders if a Bible class is where the district should spend its time and money.

"Does it really need to be taught in public schools? With so many other competing things I think the faith-based community would have a better handle on it. I just think we have more pressing problems than that."

Abraham called for public involvement to help decide the issue. "We need to have open meetings with the community," he said.

[From a December 27 article by Jon Gillooly in the *Marietta Daily Journal*.]

Georgia Right to Life is On the Move

In a Jan. 8 press release, Georgia Right to Life announced that the upcoming legislative session of the Georgia General Assembly shows promise for the pro-life issues that GRTL wants to promote. GRTL said they "will have an active presence at the Capitol" and that they, during the last six months, have spent extensive time and resources developing strategy and attending numerous meetings in preparation for this year's legislative session. For the first time in the history of Georgia, the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and a majority of the Georgia Senate are "GRTL-endorsed candidates."

The press release announced that, "after wise counsel and prayerful consideration, the following pieces of legislation will be introduced during the 2007-2008 legislative session," implying that GRTL representatives have been working with legislators on specific bills. The list includes:

1. The Women's Health and Human Life Protection Act, designed to create a Georgia Constitutional amendment to prohibit abortion.

2. The Full Disclosure Ultrasound Act, which would require that an ultrasound be performed on any "unborn child" before an abortion.

3. The Georgia Starvation and Dehydration Act, which requires doctors

to provide nourishment and hydration sufficient to sustain life to any person, even if family members want to withhold nourishment or hydration.

4. The Human Cloning Ban, intended to ban human cloning.

5. The Non-Embryonic Stem-Cell Bill, which would promote non-embryonic stem-cell research in Georgia.

On January 9, the second day of the legislative session, there was a General Assembly Public Meeting on House Bill 1 (HB1) at the Coverdell Legislative Office Building. (Go to http://www.legis.state.ga.us/legis/2007_08/fulltext/hb1.htm to see the full text of the bill.) HB1 is laced with GRTL language. For example, the first paragraph of the bill says:

"The State of Georgia has the duty to protect all innocent life from the moment of conception until natural death. We know that life begins at conception. After three decades of legal human abortion, it is now abundantly clear that the practice has negatively impacted the people of this state in many ways, including economic, health, physical, psychological, emotional, and medical well-being..."

The bill declares that "A fetus is a person for all purposes under the laws of this state from the moment of conception," and "Because a fetus is a person, constitutional protection at-

taches at the moment of conception. It is therefore the duty of the General Assembly to protect the innocent life that is currently being taken."

The bill also makes some surprising claims, saying, "as a direct result of three decades of legalized abortion on demand, the nation has seen a dramatic rise in the incidence of child abuse and a dramatic weakening of family ties, with the infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision pitting mothers against their children and women against men." Other claims: "Abortion results in increased tobacco smoking..." and "Abortion is linked to alcohol and drug abuse..." and "Thirty years of abortion on demand have resulted in an increase in breast cancer." (Recent studies have shown that abortion does *not* increase the chance of breast cancer. This is a common fallacy promoted by right-to-life groups.)

In a January 4 press release, GRTL announced a Together For Life Memorial Service for the Unborn, scheduled for January 22 on the Georgia Capitol steps. Former Georgia Statesman Zell Miller is scheduled to speak at the event. (That date will be the 34th anniversary of the famous *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision.)

[From the Georgia Right to Life website at <http://www.grtl.org/>.]

God's Enemies Are More Honest Than His Friends

by Sam Harris

For better or worse, I am partly responsible for the recent emergence of "atheism" as a topic of conversation. This is somewhat ironic, as I do not like the term and rarely use it. I did not, for instance, refer to myself as an "atheist" when I wrote *The End of Faith* – and yet this book is my most substantial contribution to the discourse of atheism.

As I pointed out in my subsequent book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, we do not have a term for a person who rejects astrology, nor do we need one. If legions of astrologers sought to bend our public policy to their pseudoscience, we wouldn't need to dub ourselves "non-astrologers" to put them in their place. Words like "reason," "evidence," and "commonsense" would suffice. So it should be with religion. Still, one can only spend so much time quibbling over words, and there are far more consequential matters for believers and nonbelievers to discuss. Despite my misgivings about answering to the name "atheist," I consider the stigma now associated with the term to be entirely unwarranted. This stigma is, of course, the continuous product of the inane and unctuous declarations that still pass for argument among the faithful. One need look no further than the responses to this week's question to find some mesmerizing examples.

As to whether atheists and believers can have "a productive conversation," I am quite sure that the answer is "yes." But I am uncertain whether this conversation can bear fruit quickly enough to keep civilization from becoming fully engorged by Iron Age stupidity and horror. Our capacity for self-destruction is now spreading with 21st century efficiency, and yet our beliefs about how we should pass our days and nights on this earth still spring from ancient literature. This marriage of modern technology and preliterate superstition is a bad one, for reasons that I should not have to specify, much less argue for—and

yet, arguing for them has taken most of my time since September 11th, 2001, the day that nineteen pious men showed our pious nation just how beneficial religious certainty can be.

As someone who has spent the last few years publicly criticizing religion, I have become quite familiar with how people of faith rise to the defense of God. As it turns out, there aren't a hundred ways of doing this. There appear to be just three: either a person argues that a specific religion is true, or he argues that religion is useful, or he simply attacks atheism as intolerant, elitist, irrational, or otherwise worthy of contempt. Any conversation between atheists and believers is liable to fall into one or more of these ruts, or lurch back and forth between them:

1. Religion is true: There are two problems with arguing that any one of the world's religions is true. First, as Bertrand Russell pointed out a century ago, the major religions make incompatible claims about God and about what human beings must believe in order to escape the fires of hell. Given the sheer diversity of these claims, every believer should expect damnation on mere, probabilistic grounds. The second problem with arguing for the truth of religion is that the evidence for the most common religious doctrines is terrible or nonexistent – and this subsumes all claims about the existence of a personal God, the divine origin of certain books, the virgin birth of certain people, the veracity of ancient miracles, etc. For thousands of years, religion has been a haven for dogmatism and false certainty, and it remains so. There is not a person on this earth who has sufficient reason to be certain that Jesus rose from the dead or that Muhammad spoke to the angel Gabriel in his cave. And yet, billions of people profess such certainty. This is embarrassing. It is also dangerous—and we should stop making apologies for it.

2. Religion is useful: The argument

that religion is useful is also problematic – and many of its problems are announced daily by bomb-blasts. Can anyone seriously argue that it is a good thing that millions of Muslims currently believe in the metaphysics of martyrdom? Is it really useful that so many Jews imagine that the Creator of the universe gave them a patch of desert on the Mediterranean? How psychologically beneficial has Christianity's anxiety about sex been these last seventy generations?

The worst problem with arguing for religion's usefulness, however, is that it is utterly irrelevant to the question at hand: the fact that a belief might be useful is no argument that it is *true*. While there are many ways to illustrate this, here is how I recently made the point in an online [debate](#):

The fact that certain religious beliefs might be useful in no way suggests their legitimacy. I can guarantee, for instance, that the following religion, invented by me in the last ten seconds, would be extraordinarily useful. It is called "Scientismo." Here is its creed: Be kind to others; do not lie, steal, or murder; and oblige your children to master mathematics and science to the best of their abilities or 17 demons will torture you with hot tongs for eternity after death. If I could spread this faith to billions, I have little doubt that we would live in a better world than we do at present. Would this suggest that the 17 demons of Scientismo exist? Useful delusions are not the same thing as true beliefs.

3. Atheism is bad: Rather than argue for the truth of their religious beliefs, or produce evidence that religion is useful, apologists for God often attack atheism as though it were another religion. We are told that atheism is dogmatic, intolerant, irrational, etc. This homily has the virtue of being easy to remember and reproduce – and it now reverberates ceaselessly within the echo-chamber of American religious discourse. It relies, however, on many false ideas about atheism. So, on Dec. 24, I wrote the following...

10 Myths – and 10 Truths – About Atheism

by Sam Harris

Several polls indicate that the term “atheism” has acquired such an extraordinary stigma in the United States that being an atheist is now a perfect impediment to a career in politics (in a way that being black, Muslim or homosexual is not). According to a recent Newsweek poll, only 37% of Americans would vote for an otherwise qualified atheist for president.

Atheists are often imagined to be intolerant, immoral, depressed, blind to the beauty of nature and dogmatically closed to evidence of the supernatural.

Even John Locke, one of the great patriarchs of the Enlightenment, believed that atheism was “not at all to be tolerated” because, he said, “promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human societies, can have no hold upon an atheist.”

That was more than 300 years ago. But in the United States today, little seems to have changed. A remarkable 87% of the population claims “never to doubt” the existence of God; fewer than 10% identify themselves as atheists – and their reputation appears to be deteriorating.

Given that we know that atheists are often among the most intelligent and scientifically literate people in any society, it seems important to deflate the myths that prevent them from playing a larger role in our national discourse.

1) Atheists believe that life is meaningless.

On the contrary, religious people often worry that life is meaningless and imagine that it can only be redeemed by the promise of eternal happiness beyond the grave. Atheists tend to be quite sure that life is precious. Life is imbued with meaning by being really and fully lived. Our relationships with those we love are meaningful now; they need not last forever to be made so. Atheists tend to find this fear of meaninglessness ... well ... meaningless.

2) Atheism is responsible for the

greatest crimes in human history.

People of faith often claim that the crimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were the inevitable product of unbelief. The problem with fascism and communism, however, is not that they are too critical of religion; the problem is that they are too much like religions. Such regimes are dogmatic to the core and generally give rise to personality cults that are indistinguishable from cults of religious hero worship. Auschwitz, the gulag and the killing fields were not examples of what happens when human beings reject religious dogma; they are examples of political, racial and nationalistic dogma run amok. There is no society in human history that ever suffered because its people became too reasonable.

3) Atheism is dogmatic.

Jews, Christians and Muslims claim that their scriptures are so prescient of humanity’s needs that they could only have been written under the direction of an omniscient deity. An atheist is simply a person who has considered this claim, read the books and found the claim to be ridiculous. One doesn’t have to take anything on faith, or be otherwise dogmatic, to reject unjustified religious beliefs. As the historian Stephen Henry Roberts (1901-71) once said: “I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.”

4) Atheists think everything in the universe arose by chance.

No one knows why the universe came into being. In fact, it is not entirely clear that we can coherently speak about the “beginning” or “creation” of the universe at all, as these ideas invoke the concept of time, and here we are talking about the origin of space-time itself.

The notion that atheists believe that everything was created by chance is also regularly thrown up as a criticism

of Darwinian evolution. As Richard Dawkins explains in his marvelous book, “The God Delusion,” this represents an utter misunderstanding of evolutionary theory. Although we don’t know precisely how the Earth’s early chemistry begat biology, we know that the diversity and complexity we see in the living world is not a product of mere chance. Evolution is a combination of chance mutation and natural selection. Darwin arrived at the phrase “natural selection” by analogy to the “artificial selection” performed by breeders of livestock. In both cases, selection exerts a highly non-random effect on the development of any species.

5) Atheism has no connection to science.

Although it is possible to be a scientist and still believe in God – as some scientists seem to manage it – there is no question that an engagement with scientific thinking tends to erode, rather than support, religious faith. Taking the U.S. population as an example, most polls show that about 90% of the general public believes in a personal God; yet 93% of the members of the National Academy of Sciences do not. This suggests that there are few modes of thinking less congenial to religious faith than science is.

6) Atheists are arrogant.

When scientists don’t know something – like why the universe came into being or how the first self-replicating molecules formed – they admit it. Pretending to know things one doesn’t know is a profound liability in science. And yet it is the life-blood of faith-based religion. One of the monumental ironies of religious discourse can be found in the frequency with which people of faith praise themselves for their humility, while claiming to know facts about cosmology, chemistry and biology that no scientist knows. When considering questions about the nature of the cosmos and our place within it, atheists tend to draw their opinions from science.

Ten Myths... (*continued*)

This isn't arrogance; it is intellectual honesty.

7) **Atheists are closed to spiritual experience.**

There is nothing that prevents an atheist from experiencing love, ecstasy, rapture and awe; atheists can value these experiences and seek them regularly. What atheists don't tend to do is make unjustified (and unjustifiable) claims about the nature of reality on the basis of such experiences. There is no question that some Christians have transformed their lives for the better by reading the Bible and praying to Jesus. What does this prove? It proves that certain disciplines of attention and codes of conduct can have a profound effect upon the human mind. Do the positive experiences of Christians suggest that Jesus is the sole savior of humanity? Not even remotely — because Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and even atheists regularly have similar experiences.

There is, in fact, not a Christian on this Earth who can be certain that Jesus even wore a beard, much less that he was born of a virgin or rose from the dead. These are just not the sort of claims that spiritual experience can authenticate.

8) **Atheists believe that there is nothing beyond human life and human understanding.**

Atheists are free to admit the limits of human understanding in a way that religious people are not. It is obvious that we do not fully understand the

universe; but it is even more obvious that neither the Bible nor the Koran reflects our best understanding of it. We do not know whether there is complex life elsewhere in the cosmos, but there might be. If there is, such beings could have developed an understanding of nature's laws that vastly exceeds our own. Atheists can freely entertain such possibilities. They also can admit that if brilliant extraterrestrials exist, the contents of the Bible and the Koran will be even less impressive to them than they are to human atheists.

From the atheist point of view, the world's religions utterly trivialize the real beauty and immensity of the universe. One doesn't have to accept anything on insufficient evidence to make such an observation.

9) **Atheists ignore the fact that religion is extremely beneficial to society.**

Those who emphasize the good effects of religion never seem to realize that such effects fail to demonstrate the truth of any religious doctrine. This is why we have terms such as "wishful thinking" and "self-deception." There is a profound distinction between a consoling delusion and the truth.

In any case, the good effects of religion can surely be disputed. In most cases, it seems that religion gives people bad reasons to behave well, when good reasons are actually available. Ask yourself, which is more moral, helping the poor out of concern for their suffering, or doing so because

you think the creator of the universe wants you to do it, will reward you for doing it or will punish you for not doing it?

10) **Atheism provides no basis for morality.**

If a person doesn't already understand that cruelty is wrong, he won't discover this by reading the Bible or the Koran — as these books are bursting with celebrations of cruelty, both human and divine. We do not get our morality from religion. We decide what is good in our good books by recourse to moral intuitions that are (at some level) hard-wired in us and that have been refined by thousands of years of thinking about the causes and possibilities of human happiness.

We have made considerable moral progress over the years, and we didn't make this progress by reading the Bible or the Koran more closely. Both books condone the practice of slavery — and yet every civilized human being now recognizes that slavery is an abomination. Whatever is good in scripture — like the golden rule — can be valued for its ethical wisdom without our believing that it was handed down to us by the creator of the universe.

[From a Dec. 28 post by Sam Harris on WashingtonPost.com, and a Dec. 25 post by Harris on Samharris.org. See http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/sam_harris/archives.html and http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/10-myths-and-10-truths-about-atheism1.]

"Heaven doesn't exist, hell doesn't exist ... We weren't alive before we were born and we're not going to exist after we die. I'm not happy about the fact that that's the end of life, but I can accept that and make my life more fulfilling now, because this is the only chance I have." — Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, in the December 22 ABC News "20/20" segment "Heaven: Where is it? How do we get there."

"Every new and successful example, therefore, of a perfect separation between the ecclesiastical and civil matters, is of importance; and I have no doubt that every new example will succeed, as every past one has done, in showing that religion and Government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together."

— James Madison, *Letter to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822*

"As a biological phenomenon, religion is the product of cognitive processes that have deep roots in our evolutionary past. Some researchers have speculated that religion itself may have played an important role in getting large groups of prehistoric humans to socially cohere. If this is true, we can say that religion has served an important purpose. This does not suggest, however, that it serves an important purpose *now*..."

— Sam Harris, from *Letter to a Christian Nation*, page 91.

Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Debbie Parks' letter was in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on Dec. 9. Ed Buckner's letter was in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on Dec. 23.

Atheists' anger sparked by religious right

While I agree with Nicholas Kristof that acerbic assaults (from either side) are not likely to lead to the mutual understanding necessary for a truce in our nation's culture war ("America's religious war in need of truce," @issue, Dec. 6), he underplays several points.

The emergence of this aggressively atheistic minority is a direct result of the aggressive attempts by a strong minority of Christian fundamentalists (led, unfortunately, by President Bush) to impose their religious dogma on all citizens using the power of government.

Just as the majority of Christians may be more interested in human charity than in power politics, the majority of those of us working to promote secular government (many of whom are deists, some of whom actively participate in organized religion) understand that only a government with a neutral stand toward religion can protect our religious freedom — a critical cornerstone of a free society.

DEBBIE PARKS
Norcross

Steve Yothment's letter was in *The (Fayette) Citizen* on Jan. 3.
Jack McKinney's letter was in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on Jan. 5.

Reader objects to slam of non-religious people

I must take exception to William Murchison's opinion article in the Dec. 22 *Peachtree Citizen*. In the article, he offers the old chestnut about ACLU lawyers wanting to "muzzle Christian expression at Christmas" by fighting against public Nativity scenes.

So, how many lawsuits have you heard about recently against public Nativity scenes? I haven't heard of any.

And, of course, any church, business or private property can have a Nativity scene if the owner wants it. The ACLU only goes after government-sponsored Nativity scenes, because it then is a government endorsement of a particular religion, which is not permitted.

Murchison shows his disdain for non-religious people, saying "In the secular doctrine of man alone, bereft of God, there is neither warmth nor richness nor comfort — just terrible coldness."

What religious baloney! I know many non-religious people, and they are just as warm, pleasant and comforting as anyone else. They still give gifts to their children at Christmas time, visit with friends and relatives, and enjoy holiday parties like anyone else.

Murchison talks about "the real stuff": angels, a talking snake in a garden and "a stable...where lies none other than the Son of God." Any other view is just a "creepy creed of a creepy age."

Well, Mr. Murchison, it is not just "politically correct" to respect another person's right to believe as he or she chooses about religion. It is the civil thing to do. And it's the Christian thing to do, too.

Happy holidays.

Steve Yothment, Peachtree City, Ga.

Scrooges trying to spoil holidays

DEAR EDITOR:

The holidays are again upon us and most people I know are enjoying exchanging their favorite cheery greeting, contributing to charities, etc.

A few Scrooges, however, seem determined to spoil the general upbeat atmosphere with phony claims about wars on Christmas or outrage over someone wishing them "Happy Holidays" instead of the specific greeting they demand. A few also use this time of year as an excuse to drone on about this being a Christian nation, one where not celebrating a religious holiday is somehow tantamount to being unpatriotic.

A majority of people in this nation are women, but that doesn't make this a "female nation." And the framers of our Constitution plainly did not rely on the Bible or Christian theology when they established our form of government.

Perhaps the Bible somewhere lays out in exacting detail all about individual freedom, democratic election of leaders, republican representation, women's rights, due process, the right to bear arms, freedom of the press, habeas corpus, bicameral legislatures, civilian control of the military, separation of powers, religious freedom, and separation of church and state - but I missed it. Enlighten me, please!

I hope all the Christians I know have a Merry Christmas and that everyone else enjoys seeing friends, celebrating, and overeating.

Ed Buckner, Smyrna
Treasurer, Atlanta Freethought Society

Belief in God doesn't make it so

DEAR EDITOR:

Re: Betty Ann Horne letter, "Why so afraid of belief in Creator?" Dec. 26 MDJ

Ms. Horne condemns atheists for the Cobb school board's decision to put to rest the infamous textbook sticker case. A careful reading and analysis of her tirade reveals it is obvious that in reality it is she who is "afraid."

Consider that her seven-paragraph letter contains three uses of the word "fear," four of "afraid" and six of "threat/threatened/threatening." Add to that her references to "violence," "shot" and "kill." Perhaps her most revealing comment is when she refers to "all the violence in schools since - corporal punishment was restricted." Excuse me, isn't corporal punishment "violence"? Is she really implying that violence is OK if it meets with her approval?

Her inconsistency leads her to ask, for the third time: "What are you so afraid of? Let me answer that for you." If she thought she had the answer (she didn't), why did she ask the question three times?

Ms. Horne's zealotry peaks with her compulsion to invoke the "divine creator" five times in four consecutive paragraphs.

The fallacy of her letter is best summed up with her last sentence, referring to God: "He exists! Just because you don't believe it doesn't make it not so!" — to which I respond: "And, just because you believe it doesn't make it so!"

Jack McKinney
Kennesaw

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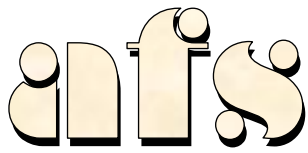
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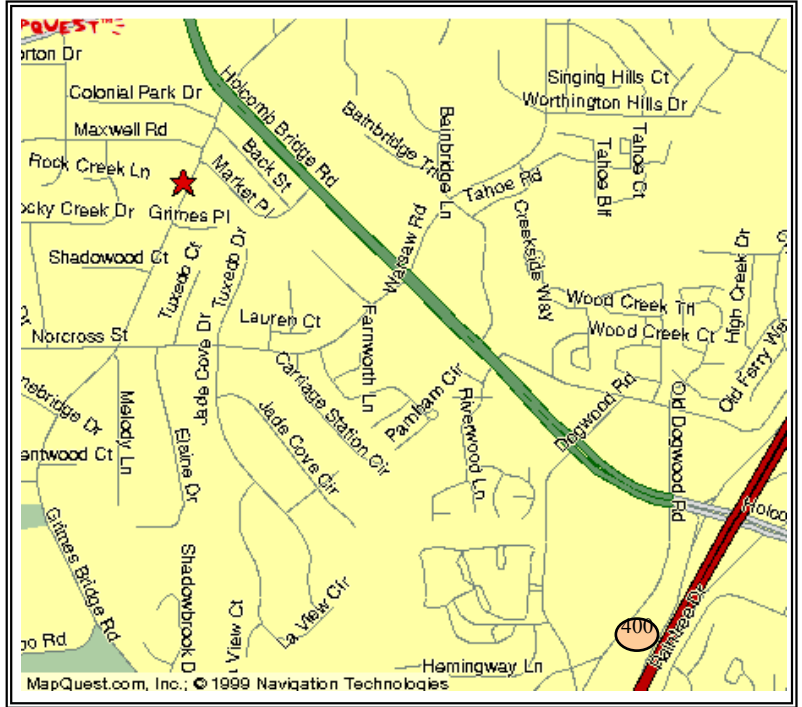
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Atlanta Freethought Society

**The January Meeting:
Sunday, January 14
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
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**This Month's Speaker:
Dr. Thomas Nisley**



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