

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 13 Number 2 • February 2007

The February AFS Meeting

The February 11 AFS meeting will include a talk by Jeffrey Selman, president of the Georgia Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. He will speak on current church/state separation issues in Georgia.

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.

Darwin Day Celebration at the Georgia Capitol Building!

The Atlanta Freethought Society plans to have a table at the Georgia Capitol Building on Monday, February 12, to celebrate Charles Darwin's birthday! We plan to hand out birthday cupcakes and coffee, as well as a flyer on Darwin and his contribution to modern science. If you can help with setup or in talking with people about Darwin, please plan to attend this event!

Our table will be right outside the main entrance on Washington Street from 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM. February 12 is also Georgia Day at the Capitol (as well as Abraham Lincoln's birthday), so it will probably be very busy.

The exact address is 100 Washington St. SW, Atlanta, GA.

Contact Steve Yothment (steveyoth@aol.com) for details and updates on this event.

The February AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Friday, February 16, at 7:00 PM.

Discussion Group to Meet

The **AFS Discussion Group** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center on Sunday, February 18, at 4:00 to 6:00 PM. This time, we will discuss bills being considered by the current Georgia legislature.

AFS Meetings and Activities

- Feb 11: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
- Feb 12: Darwin Day Celebration at Capitol Building.
- Feb 16: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.
- Feb 18: AFS Board Meeting at AF Center, 2:00 PM.
- Feb 18: AFS Discussion Group at AF Center, 4:00 PM.

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the Atlanta Freethought Center on Sunday, February 25, at 12:30 PM. Dr. Richard Bennett is scheduled to speak on "Islam and the Current World Crisis."

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.

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 February Atheist Meetup

Atlanta Atheists will have a "meetup" on Sunday, February 25, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Road, in Atlanta. The phone there is 404-255-5911.

FSU Conference on the *Origin of Species*

The *Origin of Species* by the English naturalist Charles Darwin is one of the most important scientific books ever written. First published in 1859, its 150th anniversary will be in 2009, the year in which we will also celebrate the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth.

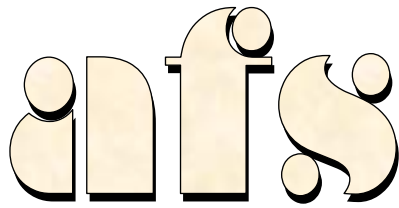
This year's Werkmeister Conference at Florida State University will be on the *Origin of Species*, and will lay the foundation for the *Cambridge Companion to the Origin of Species*, to be edited by Robert J. Richards and Michael Ruse. Participants will present their first drafts of the papers to be included in the *Companion*.

The conference, organized by Michael Ruse, is scheduled for March 23-24, 2007 at FSU's Longmire Building. Go to www.fsu.edu/~philo/new%20site/sub_category/events.htm for more information on the event.

Property Search is Underway

The Atlanta Freethought Society is still looking for a new property with a meeting room to accommodate 100 to 150 people. If you know of property for sale that might be appropriate, please contact any AFS officer or board member.

Visit www.infidelguy.libsyn.com for lots of free podcast downloads of Reggie (the Infidelguy) and his freethought radio programs. He broadcasts live at 8:00 PM every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday night from this website.



**Atlanta
Freethought
Society**

Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at the AFS Center, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA, unless otherwise noted. Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

February 11: Jeffrey Selman, president of the Georgia Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, will speak on Church/State Separation Issues in Georgia.

March 11: Keith Nalumango, former head of programming for Zambia National Broadcasting Corp. (ZNBC), will speak on "A Bone in the Throat: Threats to a Free Press, in Africa and America."

Apr 8: 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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Steve Yothment

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Taxpayers Should Be Allowed To Challenge Bush “Faith-Based” Office, Americans United Tells Supreme Court

AU’s Lynn Says Justices Should Protect Right of Citizens to Fight Government Promotion of Religion

The U.S. Supreme Court should affirm the right of taxpayers to challenge the Bush administration’s use of public funds to support religion, says Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

In a [friend-of-the-court brief](#) filed on February 2, Americans United urged the justices to uphold precedent that allows taxpayers to sue when the government uses tax dollars for religious purposes.

Americans United called on the high court to hold that three Wisconsin taxpayers have legal standing to challenge President George W. Bush’s creation of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and other promotion of his “faith-based” agenda.

“We hope the Supreme Court rules that taxpayers may go to court to challenge government spending that supports religion,” said Barry W. Lynn,

executive director of Americans United. “Public funds should not be used to advance religion, and Americans must have the ability to prevent that from happening.”

In *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation*, the Bush administration is urging the Supreme Court to overrule the 7th U.S. Circuit of Appeals and other federal courts that have upheld taxpayer challenges to government expenditures on religion. The administration argues that legal precedent only allows taxpayers to question government appropriations if they go directly to religious organizations.

Americans United, along with the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation, the Anti-Defamation League, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and People For The American Way Foundation, said the Bush administration’s analysis is flawed and an attempt to block citi-

zens from fighting for their constitutional rights.

Citing a 1968 Supreme Court decision, the groups’ brief noted that history “vividly illustrates that one of the specific evils feared by those who drafted” the First Amendment “was that the taxing and spending power [of Congress] would be used to favor one religion over another or to support religion in general.”

The 23-page brief concluded that the high court should protect the principle that, “When taxes levied and appropriated by Congress are spent in violation” of the separation of church and state “a taxpayer may constitutionally challenge such expenditures because he suffers a direct and concrete injury that is caused by the illegal expenditure and that would be redressed by enjoining it.”

[From a February 2 Americans United press release.]

City Settles ‘Day of Faith’ Lawsuit

Jacksonville, Florida will pay an atheist group \$5,000 in attorney fees in the settlement of a lawsuit over a Day of Faith rally.

The rally in August was in response to a spiraling murder rate and the shooting death of an eight-year-old. Her slaying sparked community outrage and more aggressive measures to

reduce the homicide rate.

The settlement requires the city to write New Jersey-based American Atheists a letter saying it did not intend to violate the First Amendment and will warn department heads against funding programs that “foster excessive entanglements with religion.” The city will avoid holding reli-

gious events in the future.

Despite the settlement, Mayor John Peyton still defends the rally.

About six-thousand people attended the rally that included Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders.

[From a Jan. 4 article at the Jacksonville www.firstcoastnews.com website.]

A New Book: *Parenting Beyond Belief*

“*Parenting Beyond Belief* is a book for loving and thoughtful parents who wish to raise their children without religion. There are scores of books available for religious parents. Now there’s one for the rest of us.”

So reads the introduction to a new book, edited by Dale McGowan, on “Raising Ethical, Caring Kids Without Religion.” The book is now available through www.Amazon.com and other sources.

The book includes essays by Richard Dawkins, Julia Sweeney, Penn Jillette, Matt Cherry, Dan Barker, Dale McGowan, and a host of other popular modern freethinkers, including our own Ed Buckner! (Let’s ask him about his chapter in the book at the next AFS meeting!)

Information on the book says that it is devoted to the joys and challenges of raising children without religion. The www.parentingbeyondbelief.com

website answers some common questions about the book as follows:

Is this the first such book?

There have been some excellent shorter books and booklets on parenting without religion, with more limited scope and by smaller presses. *Parenting Beyond Belief* is the first comprehensive parenting book by a major publisher on raising children without religion. We hope it isn’t the last!

Parenting Beyond Belief (continued)

How big is the audience for this kind of book?

Enormous—and growing. In 1990, 8% of respondents to a USA Today poll identified themselves as nonreligious. By 2002 that sector had grown to 14.1%. A minimum of seven million non-religious parents are raising children in the U.S. today—and doing so with limited resources. It is estimated that over 10 million “nominally religious” parents attend church for social and structural benefits and would welcome a secular parenting book.

Why do secular parents need a resource specifically for them?

Religion has much to offer parents: an established community, a pre-defined set of values, rites of passage, a means of engendering wonder, comforting answers to the big questions, and consoling explanations to ease experiences of hardship and loss. *Parenting Beyond Belief* demonstrates the many ways in which these undeniable benefits can be had without the harmful effects of religion. It is also intended to show secular parents, who often feel isolated in their disbelief, that they are far from alone.

You mention “the harmful effects of religion.” What harmful effects?

Honest questioning is too often disallowed in religion, the word “values” turned on its head, and an “us-vs.-them” mentality reinforced. Many feel that fear—of God, sin, doubt, and difference—is more prevalent with religion than without, and that children often learn to obey authority rather than develop their own judgment.

Does the book intend to convert parents away from religious parenting?

Not at all. The book is a resource to help parents who have already decided to raise their children without religion to do it well. Many religious readers have praised the tone of the book, which encourages coexistence, not conflict. Anything that helps parents to be better parents, regardless of their beliefs, is a good thing.

How can you not believe in God when...[fill in the blank]?

A fine question, but that’s not our topic. Though the book includes one essay with the classic arguments for and against religious belief, that’s not the main purpose—and if we spend too much time arguing about disbelief itself, we will never get to parenting! Readers wishing to engage those fascinating and worthy questions should look to the many outstanding books exploring basic questions of religious faith and doubt. This book is for those who have already investigated those questions and decided that religion is not for them.

Should religious believers feel threatened by this book?

Quite the opposite. A quick glance through the contents shows that believers and nonbelievers share most of the same values. Like people of religious faith, nonbelievers value love, honesty, kindness and generosity, are captivated by wonder and moved by the mysterious, seek consolation in times of loss, and treasure the companionship of others. We want to raise children who are ethical and caring. Nonetheless, polls indicate that nonbelievers are the most mistrusted and feared minority in the U.S. This fear is groundless—and this book can comfort people of faith by helping them realize that there is nothing to fear from nonbelievers. Our shared dreams for our children show that we are far more alike than unlike.

Isn’t the book just encouraging indoctrination in a different direction?

It would be dishonest for secular parents to limit their children’s freedom to think for themselves, especially in questions of belief. And honesty emerges in the book as one of the most heartfelt values among nonbelievers. Honesty, after all, is what led us to question religion in the first place. Author after author in this collection underlines the importance of creating a truly honest and open environment without indoctrination of any kind.

Is the book disrespectful toward religious people?

Some of the contributors are quite straightforward in their disagreement with certain ideas, but never disrespectful toward religious people themselves. The book takes the basic position that religious belief is an understandable human phenomenon—though at times an unfortunate one—and that the beliefs themselves can be questioned honestly without belittling the people who hold them.

Do the writers always agree?

Not by a long shot! One of the strengths of the book is that it practices what it preaches by offering a diversity of opinions. There’s even a point-counterpoint in which two authors square off on the question of what to do with the Santa Claus story in secular families. And this is precisely the model we want to present to our kids—not lockstep agreement, but a healthy, open, friendly exchange of ideas and an invitation to sort it out for yourself.

What topics are covered?

The book begins with personal essays (by such secular parents as Julia Sweeney, Penn Jillette and Richard Dawkins), followed by chapters titled Living with Religion, Holidays and Celebrations, Being and Doing Good, Meaning and Purpose, Dealing with Death, Questioning, the Wonder of Science, and Seeking Community.

How can children be taught moral behavior without religion?

The chapter titled “Being and Doing Good” is devoted to this very topic. Behaving morally makes sense, and most people behave well for sensible reasons—even if they think they are relying on commandments. Psychologist Dr. Jean Mercer contributed an essay describing the six stages of moral development. Children are more likely to move to the higher levels of development and to retain a more nuanced and reliable moral sense if they learn the reasonable principles of ethical behavior than if they rely on parental or scriptural authority.

Beyond the Believers

From the February/March 2007 issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine.

by Sam Harris

Recently, I attended a three-day conference at the Salk Institute, organized by The Science Network. The conference was titled “Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason, and Survival,” and was conducted as a town-hall meeting before an audience of invited guests. Speakers included Steven Weinberg, Harold Kroto, Richard Dawkins, and many other scientists and philosophers who have been, and remain, energetic opponents of religious unreason. And then there were other esteemed participants and audience members who proved themselves to be eager purveyors of American-style religious bewilderment.

It was a room full of bright, scientifically literate people—molecular biologists, anthropologists, physicists, engineers—and yet, three days were insufficient to force agreement on whether or not there is any conflict between religion and science. While at Salk, I witnessed scientists giving voice to some of the most unctuous religious apologies I have ever heard. It is one thing to be told that the pope is a great champion of reason and that his opposition to embryonic stem cell research has nothing to do with religious dogmatism; it is quite another to be told this by a Stanford physician who sits on the President’s Council on Bioethics. Over the course of the meeting, I had the pleasure of hearing that Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were examples of secularism run amok, that the doctrines of martyrdom and jihad have nothing whatsoever to do with Muslim terrorism, that people can never be argued out of their beliefs because we live in an irrational world,

that science has made no important contributions to our ethical lives, and that it is not the job of scientists “to take away people’s hope”—all from atheist scientists, happily trading in the most abject and paralyzing shibboleths of academic political correctness. There were several moments during our panel discussions that brought to mind the final scene of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—people who looked like scientists, had published as scientists, and would soon be returning to their labs nevertheless gave voice to the alien hiss of religious lunacy at the slightest prodding. In case anyone thought that the front lines in our culture wars could be found at the entrance to a megachurch, I am here to report that we still have considerable work to do in a nearby trench.

For all the frustration I felt at this meeting, it seemed like the perfect forum in which to resolve the centuries-old collision between reason and faith. If reputable scientists cannot be made to agree that there are important intellectual and moral differences between knowing something and pretending to know it, we are doomed. Happily, the meeting at Salk will be convened again next fall. Perhaps then it will be possible to rule out the Virgin Birth of Jesus as a valid scientific hypothesis.

While I heard many silly retorts to atheism at this conference, here is a list of those most in need of deflation by freethinkers:

1. Even though I’m an atheist, my friends are atheists, and we all get a long fine without pretending to know

that one of our books was written by the Creator of the universe, other people really do need religion. It is, therefore, wrong to criticize their faith.

2. People are not really motivated by religion. Religion is used as a rationale for other aims—political, economic, and social. Consequently, the specific content of religious doctrines is beside the point.

3. It is useless to argue against the veracity of religious doctrines, because religious people are not actually making claims about reality. Their claims are metaphorical or otherwise without real content. Hence, there is no conflict between religion and science.

4. Religion will always be with us. The idea that we might rid ourselves of it to any significant degree is quixotic, bordering on delusional. Dawkins and other strident opponents of religious faith are just wasting their time.

I invite readers of FREE INQUIRY to provide short answers to any or all of these fantasies. The winning responses will be published in a future issue of the magazine. Winners in each category will be sent signed copies of both of my books and a cash prize of \$100. Each response must be two hundred words or less (longer responses will be disqualified). Correspondence should be sent to: Free Inquiry Contest, P.O. Box 664, Amherst, NY 14226-0664.

Sam Harris is the author of The New York Times bestsellers, The End of Faith and Letter to a Christian Nation.

[From the Feb/March 2007 issue of *Free Inquiry*, published by the Council for Secular Humanism. For more articles: www.secularhumanism.org.]

“The expression ‘free thought’ is often used as if it meant merely opposition to the prevailing orthodoxy. But this is only a symptom of free thought, frequent, but invariable. ‘Free thought’ means thinking freely—as freely, at least, as is possible for a human being. The person who is free in any respect is free *from* something; what is the free thinker free from? To be worthy of the name, he must be free of two things: the force of tradition, and the tyrant of his own passions. No one is *completely* free from either, but in the measure of a man’s emancipation he deserves to be called a free thinker.”

—Bertrand Russell, “The Value of Free Thought: How to Become a Truth-Seeker and Break the Chains of Mental Slavery” (1944) in *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1986), p. 239.

“Ignorance is the soil in which the belief in miracles grows.” —Robert Ingersoll, from *Ingersoll the Magnificent*, p. 195.

The Unexplained, the Unproven, and the Unlikely

by Greta Christina, from her weblog at <http://gretachristina.typepad.com/> (Reprinted by permission)

If an explanation isn't proven, how do you decide how likely it is to be correct?

There are two big arguments that believers in the supernatural make again and again. One is the "Explain that!" argument: the world is full of things for which there is currently no explanation, and therefore it's reasonable to believe that those things might have supernatural causes. The other is the "You can't prove anything!" argument: naturalists can't definitively disprove the supernatural, and therefore it's just as reasonable to believe in it as it is to disbelieve.

In the most literal sense, these arguments would seem to be unanswerable. Yes, it's certainly true that the existence of supernatural phenomena has not been disproven—it's notoriously difficult, even impossible, to prove conclusively that something doesn't exist. And yes, of course the world is full of phenomenon for which we currently don't have naturalistic explanations.

So in the narrowest sense, these arguments are true. But they are terrible arguments. I want to talk about why they are so terrible.

Let's look at the history of the world. Specifically, let's look at the history of knowledge in the world.

When you look at the history of the world, you see thousands—tens of thousands, arguably hundreds of

thousands or more—of phenomena for which a supernatural explanation has been replaced by a natural one. Why the sun rises and sets; what thunder and lightning are; how and why illness happens and spreads; why people look like their parents; how people got to be here in the first place... all these things, and thousands more, were once explained by gods or spirits or mystical energies. And now all of them have natural, physical explanations.

Natural explanations, I should point out, with mountains of solid, carefully collected, replicable evidence to support them.

Now, how many times in the history of the world has a natural explanation of a phenomenon been supplanted by a supernatural one?

As far as I am aware, exactly zero.

Of course, people are coming up with new supernatural explanations of naturally-explained phenomena all the time. Intelligent design is the most obvious example. You can pick up any New Age magazine to find more.

But explanations with evidence? Replicable evidence? Carefully gathered, patiently tested, rigorously reviewed evidence? Internally consistent evidence? Large amounts of it, from many different sources?

Again, as far as I'm aware—none.

Which brings me to my point: the question of likelihood.

Given this pattern—thousands upon thousands of natural explanations accurately supplanting supernatural ones, zero supernatural explanations accurately supplanting natural ones—doesn't it seem that any given unexplained phenomenon is far more likely to have a natural explanation than a supernatural one?

Far, far more likely? Like, several orders of magnitude more likely?

So when you're looking at a phenomenon—consciousness, for example, my current favorite example—that doesn't currently have a good naturalistic explanation, you can of course argue "Explain that!" or "That doesn't prove anything." You can argue that scientists don't really know what consciousness is, and therefore it could be some sort of metaphysical energy, and science can't conclusively prove that it isn't.

But I think it makes a lot more sense to look at the pattern—the overwhelming pattern of natural explanations replacing supernatural ones by the thousands and more—and consider which kind of explanation is really more likely.

*Greta Christina is a freelance writer and has written several books and articles. Her article *Comforting Thoughts About Death That Have Nothing to Do with God* was published in the *Skeptical Inquirer* in 2005. See more of her work at www.gretachristina.com.*

No, Religion Really is Evil by John Henderson

I want to take exception to Thomas Barefield's article in the December *Atlanta Freethought News*.

There is no questioning the fact that many good people go to church and believe in a religion. But that does not alter the fact that religion is evil. It is ironic that one should not criticize religion and their superstitious myths for fear of hurting someone's feelings, but that same person can turn around and tell the nonbeliever that he is going to hell if he does not believe as instructed. Religion is the biggest scam ever perpetuated on the human race and it is about time we say so.

Even Barefield recognizes the atrocities of religion; that religion is mainly myth; that humans created their relig-

ions and their gods. He just doesn't want anyone to say that out loud in front of a person who believes that superstitious crap.

Enough already. It is past time to call religion what it is – a power struggle to manipulate and control people. If religion were not so evil, nontheists could shut their mouths and go on their way. Until conflicts, fights, wars, and killings stop in the name of god and religion, more must speak out even though that may hurt some feelings.

Gods and religions must not be above truth, logic and reason.

– John A. Henderson, MD, author of *God.com: A Deity for the New Millennium* and *Fear Faith Fact Fantasy*

Religious Decline in U.S. Follows Europe

By Matt Cherry, Executive Director of the Institute for Humanist Studies

Is the U.S. following Europe in becoming less religious? This is the tantalizing prospect held out by some recent surveys.

A new survey in the U.S. shows that the number of 18-25 year olds who are atheist, agnostic or nonreligious has increased from 11 percent in 1986 to 20 percent today. Meanwhile a survey of the United States and the five largest countries in Western Europe reveals that religious belief continues to plummet in Europe, with Italy being the only country with a majority believing in any form of God or supreme being. And even in these overwhelmingly godless countries, the young are still significantly less religious than their elders.

A survey of young people ages 18-25 by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press includes encouraging news about the growth of humanist beliefs among the so-called "Generation Next." Among the findings:

- One-in-five members of "Generation Next" say they have no religious affiliation or are atheist or agnostic, nearly double the proportion of young people who said that in the late 1980s.
- Nexters are among the least likely to attend church regularly: 32 percent attend at least once a week compared with 40 percent of those over age 25.
- Nearly two-thirds of Nexters (63 percent) believe humans and other living things evolved over time. By contrast, Americans over the age of 40 favor Creationist accounts over evolutionary theory.
- Nexters are the most tolerant of any generation on social issues such as immigration, race and homosexuality.
- Nexters are among the most likely to say the will of the American people, not the Bible, should be a more important influence on U.S. laws.
- And just 4 percent of Gen Nexters say people in their generation view becoming more spiritual as their most important goal in life.

Late last year, a Harris Poll for the *Financial Times* conducted a large survey on religious beliefs in France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and the U.S. The U.S. was the most religious country, with 73 percent of respondents describing themselves as believers in "any form of God or any type of supreme being." (This figure is lower than many other surveys, but the totals include 6 percent who prefer not to say and 3 percent who don't know—categories that other surveys often drop from their results.)

Italy wasn't far behind the U.S., with 62 percent believing in a god. In the other countries, believers in God are the minority: 48 percent of Spaniards, 41 percent of Germans, 35 percent of Britons and just 27 percent of the French believe in any form of a supreme being.

Looking at similar surveys over the past few decades, religious belief is in decline and humanist values are on the rise in all Western nations. The general pattern is that there is a small decline in religious adherence as people age, but that skepticism about religion—and other humanist values—increases markedly with each rising generation. In other words, the big changes in religious belief do not come from people changing their beliefs as they age, they come from new generations having different beliefs.

As the Pew Forum notes, in its 1986 survey on religion and belief, 11 percent of 18-25 year olds gave their religious preference as "no religion/atheist/agnostic" and 8 percent of Americans over 25 said the same. Moving forward two decades, 20 percent of 18-25 year olds had no religion as did 11 percent of those over 25.

Digging deeper into the Harris research data, we see that religion is declining in almost every generation in every country. (An interesting exception is France where 38% of those over 55 believe in God, but every other generation has between 22 and 26% believing—however, the younger

generations increase the proportion of atheists to agnostics!) In the U.S., 64% of 16 to 24 believe in a god, with 18% agnostic and 8% atheist, and then each older generation increases in religiosity, with 55+ showing 78% believing in God. Britain is fairly typical of the European pattern, with 40% of those 45 and over believing in God, but with each younger generation reporting lower levels of belief, with just 23% of 16 to 24 year olds believing in any form of Supreme Being.

Overall, the US looks a lot like Western Europe 30 or 40 years ago. At that time most Europeans still believed in a god, but younger generations were more atheist and agnostic than their elders. That trend has continued with religion steadily declining, generation by generation.

While a current snapshot of religious belief makes the two continents look very different, the long-term trend appears remarkably similar. Young people are growing up less religious and the most religious generations are dying out. At the same time, support for secular government and greater tolerance is rising with each new generation. Or to put it another way: the future looks bright for humanism.

FOOTNOTES

The FT/Harris Poll was conducted online by Harris Interactive(R) among a total of 12,507 adults (aged 16 and over), within France (2,134); Germany (2,127); Great Britain (2,090); Spain (1,991); the United States (2,078), and 2,087 adults (age 18 and over) in Italy, between Nov. 30 and Dec. 15, 2006.

Pew Forum survey interviews were conducted by phone Sept. 6 to Oct. 2, 2006 among 1,501 adults ages 18 and older, including an oversample of members of Generation Next (ages 18-25). The total sample size for those 18-25 was 579.

[From the Jan. 24 *Humanist Network News*, the weekly e-zine of the Institute for Humanist Studies. Reprinted here by permission.]

Clipped

Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Ed Buckner's letter was printed in the Ft. Worth *Star Telegram* on January 10.

The Bill of Rights and Religion

J.R. Labbe's Dec. 31 column ("Is tolerating intolerance a college's cross to bear?") missed the main point, underplayed the key fact and ran directly counter to American political and religious history. She dismissed those who insist on separation of church and state with her snide question, "So tolerance is not enough for some people?" No, it isn't, and the people include Thomas Paine and Baptist colonial preacher John Leland, both of whom wrote of the inadequacy of mere tolerance. As Leland wrote in 1820, "The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest to grant indulgence; whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks [Muslims], Pagans and Christians."

The crucial fact in this matter is that the church that founded the College of William & Mary gave up control

of it and financial support for it. In a chapel owned and paid for by a church no one can expect a cross to be set aside, nor should they. But in a public university, funded by taxpayers, leaving a religious symbol in place implies public endorsement of that religion, and that is dangerous and unconstitutional.

Ms. Labbe suggests that the problem is overly sensitive non-Christians, pointing out that the Bill of Rights does not guarantee any of us "a right not to be 'put off.'" She's right about that, but religious liberty is threatened by government endorsement of any religious view. And religious liberty is a right guaranteed by the Bill of Rights.

Ed Buckner
Smyrna, GA

January 2007 Board Meeting Minutes

Present: Steve Yothment (President), Judy Thompson (VPI), Walter Beal (VPE), Ed Buckner (Treasurer), Diane Buckner, Lew Southern, Jack McKinney, Freya Harris and Bill Burton.

Location: AF Center, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500, Roswell, Georgia.

Date/Time: January 20, 2007

Minutes by Bill Burton.

Approval of the minutes of the December Board meeting.

APPROVED WITH A MINOR CORRECTION.

Treasurer's Report: Highlights of the printed Treasurer's report, as compiled by Ed Buckner:

Bank Balance: As of 30 September 2006: \$12,541. As of 31 December 2006: \$10,215.

Annual Cash Flow: Beginning balance, 01 January 2006: \$1,501. Ending balance, 31 December 2006: \$10,215. Y2006 income: \$188,180. Y2006 expenses: \$179,471.

Unusual Expenses: \$3,000 in fees related to negotiations on the Collins Springs church property, \$1,000 of which was re-funded.

Member Contributions: \$14,258 in donations and pledges. \$2,280 in dues.

Expenses on AFS Center: \$3,000 for condo fees. \$2,362 for taxes. \$1,263 for utilities.

APPROVED WITHOUT OBJECTION.

Discussion of AFS finances

How can we raise more money for AFS?

Proposal (Judy): We should put Suite 400 (the unused suite) up for sale or accept an exceptionally favorable lease offer.

APPROVED UNANIMOUSLY.

No specifics were agreed on as to who is to negotiate the sale/lease. However, an AFS member and professional real-estate agent who has previously offered his services was proposed, and a member volunteered to contact him.

Lew Southern said he will continue to look for building opportunities.

Adopt-a-Highway

The question was raised about the lack of visibility of the AFS Adopt-A-Highway sign. Steve said he would request Georgia D.O.T. to move the sign.

Darwin Day

Steve and others will look into finding a venue for celebration of Darwin's birthday.

Speakers

Report (Judy Thompson):

The February public forum will feature Jeff Selman, leader and activist with the Georgia Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The April forum will feature a presentation entitled "Secular Inspiration" by AFS member Bruce Herr.

May is not booked.

The June forum will feature biologist Steve Burnett.

The July forum will feature geologist Doug Hattersley.

APPROVED WITHOUT OBJECTION.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned. The next meeting will convene at 2 p.m. on March 18th.

APPROVED WITHOUT OBJECTION.

"All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind and monopolize power and profit." — Thomas Paine (1737 – 1809)

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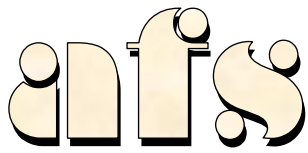
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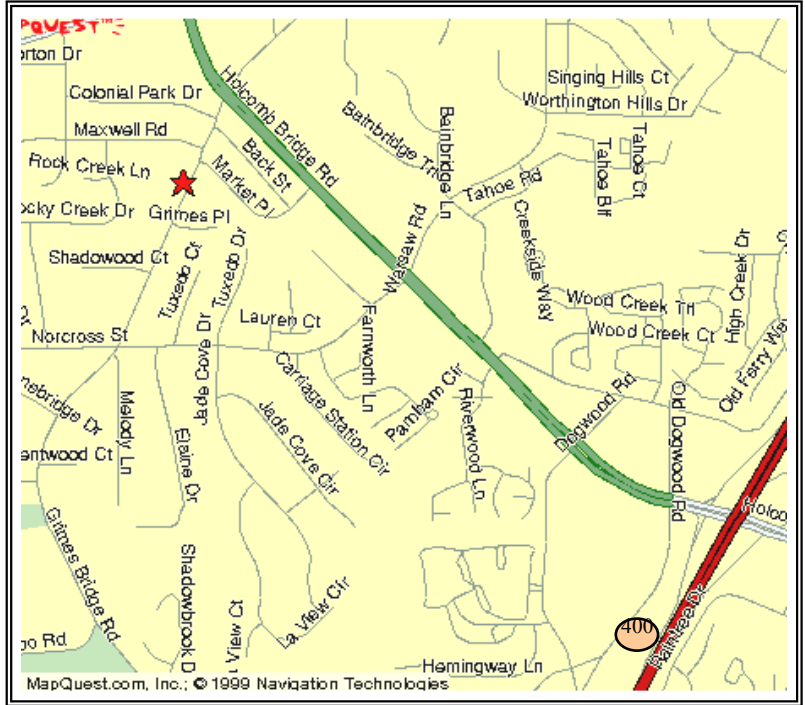
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 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500, Roswell, GA 30075



Atlanta
Freethought
Society

**The February Meeting:
Sunday, February 11
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Jeffrey Selman**



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