

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 13 Number 5 • May 2007

The May AFS Meeting

The May 13 AFS meeting will feature a talk by Dr. David E. Giannasi, Associate Professor, emeritus, Department of Plant Biology at the University of Georgia. The title of his talk will be "Comments on Religion and the Bible."

The 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 May AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Friday, May 18, at 7:00 PM.

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will not have a regular meeting in May. Instead, they will have an outdoor party at John Barnes' place near Woodbury, GA on May 19. Contact John (jobar2@earthlink.net) for directions and details.

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 <http://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 May Atheist Meetup

There will be a "meetup" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, May 27, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Road, in Atlanta. The phone there is 404-255-5911.

Another Meetup Group

A second meetup for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for Sunday, May 13, at 6:00PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur, GA. Learn more about this meetup at <http://atheists.meetup.com/93/?g=sj8>.

AFS Meetings and Activities

May 13: AFS Board Meeting at AF Center, 11:00AM.
May 13: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
May 18: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

A "Book Bash Debate"

The Margaret Mitchell House will sponsor a "Book Bash Debate" on Wednesday, May 16. **Christopher Hitchens**, author of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, will debate **Timothy P. Jackson**, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. The debate will be moderated by *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* editorial page editor **Cynthia Tucker**.

In *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Hitchens makes his case against religion. With a close reading of major religious texts, he documents the ways in which religion is a man-made wish and argues for a more secular life based on science and reason.

A widely published polemicist and frequent radio and TV commentator, Hitchens has written columns for *Slate* and *The Daily Mirror* and is a contributing editor to *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Vanity Fair*. He appeared on The Daily Show on April 30 to discuss his book. Educated at The Leys School, Cambridge, and Balliol College, Oxford, he became a U.S. citizen just last month.

Admission to the debate is \$15; pre-payment is required. Call 770-578-3502 for admission. There will be a reception at 6:00 PM; the debate will be at 7:00PM. The Margaret Mitchell House is located at 999 Peachtree St. NE (corner of Peachtree and 10th St.) in Atlanta. If you like, arrive early and visit the museum at the same location.

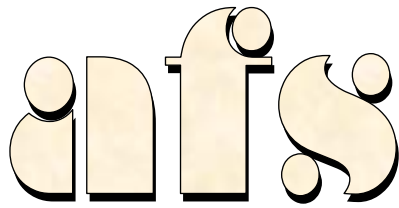
Scouting For All Protest

Scouting For All, a group that is working to convince the **Boy Scouts of America** to stop its discriminatory practices against gays and atheists, will have a protest and rally on May 30 & 31 in Atlanta at the BSA's National Conference.

The group has invited many community leaders to speak at its press conference at 10:00 AM on May 30 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, 265 Peachtree Street NE, in Atlanta. A protest and rally is scheduled for the same day from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM. That evening, there will be a Candlelight Vigil.

In an April 28 Action Alert, Scouting For All said "How can we as a nation support an organization that discriminates against any segment of our society? Those who believe in justice and human rights for all should be offended by the BSA's policy. According to the BSA's national leadership, GLBT and atheist people are not moral and are not good Americans simply because of their sexual orientation or atheistic belief... The BSA policy is a divisive policy, furthering the violence, hatred and discrimination against these groups. As President Clinton once said, 'To discriminate against an American is un-American.'"

For more information, see <http://www.scoutingforall.org>.



**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.

May 13: Dr. David E. Giannasi, Associate Professor, emeritus, Department of Plant Biology, University of Georgia, will speak on "Comments on Religion and the Bible."

June 10: Dr. Stephen Burnett will speak on Biology and Evolution.

July 8: Ed Buckner will speak on his writing for a section of the recently-published book *Parenting Without Belief* and some of his other writing efforts..

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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U.S. House Rejects Effort To Remove Civil Rights Protections From Head Start **Americans United Calls Effort To Undercut Popular Education Law “A Mean-Spirited Affront To a Fine Program”**

Americans United lauded the defeat of an effort on May 2 in the House of Representatives to repeal civil rights protections in Head Start, the popular federal program aimed at helping impoverished children gain a sound education.

“Today’s action is a victory for our nation’s commitment to protecting civil rights and advancing early childhood education,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. “The attempt to re-write Head Start rules to allow for ‘faith-based’ providers to discriminate in hiring based on religion was a mean-spirited affront to a fine program.”

In March, the House Education and Labor Committee turned away an amendment that would have given faith-based Head Start providers the right to discriminate in hiring based on religion. On May 2, lawmakers un-

successfully tried again to amend the Head Start reauthorization bill through a procedure known as a “motion to recommit.” The motion was soundly defeated on a 222-195 vote.

Americans United had urged lawmakers to keep the civil rights protections within Head Start, the nation’s premier early education program. In letters to representatives, Americans United argued that the civil rights protections have enjoyed bipartisan support and that revoking them would endanger the jobs of thousands of Head Start providers.

Lynn added that “Taxpayer-supported Head Start employees and volunteers should not be selected, hired or fired based on their religious leanings. To allow a Southern Baptist Church to turn away a Jewish volunteer tutor would be inexcusable.”

The Bush administration continues

to push the so-called “faith-based” initiative, which includes allowing religious social service providers to discriminate in hiring in federally funded programs. Religious Right backers of the faith-based agenda have been pressuring Congress to overhaul Head Start to allow for religious-based discrimination.

Americans United has helped lead a diverse coalition of public interest groups in supporting Head Start’s civil rights protections. The Coalition Against Religious Discrimination includes: the United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society; American Federation of Teachers; American Jewish Committee; NAACP; American Baptist Churches, USA; National Head Start Association; and the National Education Association.

[From a May 2 press release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.]

Religious Right Takeover of National Day of Prayer Sparks Discords, Says AU’s Lynn **Dobsons Use Government-Sponsored Prayer Event to Push Religious-Political Agenda, But Others Are Fighting Back**

Far from being a day to bring people of various faiths together, the National Day of Prayer has been hijacked by intolerant Religious Right groups who seek an officially “Christian nation,” says Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The National Day of Prayer (NDP) took place on May 3rd. By federal law, the commemoration occurs on the first Thursday of every May.

Most events around the country are coordinated by the National Day of Prayer Task Force, a private group run by Shirley Dobson, wife of Religious Right leader James C. Dobson of Focus on the Family. The task force instructs its volunteers to allow only conservative Christians to speak, and its events are often laden with “Christian nation” rhetoric.

“A government-sponsored day of religious activity was never a good idea,” says the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. “Now, the event has been taken over by the Religious Right and turned

into an exercise in political posturing and theological one-upmanship.”

Lynn noted that in recent years, some fed-up religious leaders have planned alternate events that are more inclusive. “Dobson and other Religious Right leaders seek a nation where their version of Christianity has official preference,” said Lynn. “And they are using the National Day of Prayer to advance that agenda. I’m glad that an increasing number of religious leaders realize that and are organizing alternative events.”

An application for prayer coordinator volunteers on the NDP Task Force Web site claims that its events are “Judeo-Christian” but then goes on to require that applicants sign a statement affirming belief in the Trinity, the virgin birth, the miracles of Jesus and his resurrection.

The application also requires coordinators to “ensure a strong, consistent Christian message throughout the nation” and “commit that NDP activities I serve with will be conducted

solely by Christians.”

Lynn charged that the event has become an excuse for the Religious Right to promote its extreme political views. He notes that the NDP Task Force Web site recommends a prayer that blasts Supreme Court decisions for “allowing You and Your Word to be thrown out of schools, and for allowing your truth to be replaced with lies.”

In fact, the high court has ruled only that schools may not sponsor devotional activities. The Bible may still be included in objective study about religion at appropriate points in the curriculum, and students may read the Bible and pray during free time at school.

It would be better, Lynn said, for the nation to follow the example of Thomas Jefferson. When asked to issue an official prayer proclamation, Jefferson declined. Civil officials, he pointed out, have no business meddling in private religious affairs.

[From a May 2 AU press release.]

CFI Deplores Supreme Court Ruling on Abortion

From a May 2 Press Release by the Center For Inquiry

The Center for Inquiry is deeply concerned over the decision of the United States Supreme Court last week, in *Gonzales v. Carhart*, to uphold the federal law banning the abortion procedure known as intact dilation and extraction. Congress banned this procedure through the misleadingly named Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act of 2003. This procedure is employed by physicians in late term abortions when, in their expert opinion, the procedure is required to preserve the health of the woman undergoing the abortion. In previous cases, the Court has recognized that, in addition to the fundamental right of a woman to have an abortion, she is constitutionally entitled to access to procedures

that are medically necessary to preserve her health. This right of access was recognized as not being subject to revocation because of political opposition from some circles. All of this has now been nullified by a Supreme Court that has ignored its own precedents.

The rationale the Court provided to mask its reversal of position, namely that it is "medically uncertain" whether intact D & E is necessary, cannot withstand scrutiny. As Justice Ruth Ginsburg pointed out in her sharp dissent, a division of medical opinion obviously implies there is a risk to a woman who, in consultation with her physician, is now denied the right to choose intact D & E. Effectively, the Court has, for the first time since *Roe*

v. Wade, deprived women of the right to choose a safe abortion procedure. The Court's decision demonstrates that pressure from the religious right, which produced both the replacement of Justice O'Connor by the religiously conservative Justice Alito and the passage of the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act itself, has had an unfortunate and troubling effect on public policy.

Religious points of view must never be allowed to dictate public policy and limit fundamental freedoms. We call upon the Congress of the United States to repeal the law that the Supreme Court has just upheld. The health and lives of women should not be pawns in the religious/culture wars of the United States.

The Freedom of Choice Act

From an April 19 Press Release by Planned Parenthood

On April 18, 2007, the highest court in the country voted 5-4 to uphold the federal abortion ban. (See <http://www.federalabortionban.org>.) Passed by Congress and signed by President Bush in 2003, the ban criminalizes abortion procedures employed in the second trimester of pregnancy that doctors say are safe and often the best to protect women's health.

The threat to women's health and safety posed by the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Gonzales v. Planned Parenthood* is very real. To protect women's health and guarantee the right to choose for generations to come, Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) is calling on Congress to pass the Freedom of Choice Act (FOCA). Now, more than ever, it is essential that the federal government not endanger women's health. The freedom to choose should not be limited to women who are fortunate enough to live in a pro-choice state.

THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE CONTINUES TO BE THREATENED

Although *Roe v. Wade*, which guarantees a woman's constitutional right

to choose abortion, is still the law of the land, the Supreme Court's sweeping decision on the federal abortion ban has opened the door for a new wave of direct attacks on that constitutional right.

The new makeup of the court further threatens *Roe's* stability. In the dissent to *Gonzales v. Planned Parenthood*, Justice Ginsberg warned that this court not only tolerates government interference in women's health – it applauds it.

Since 2001, state legislators have considered almost 3,300 anti-choice measures, and more than 250 of these have been enacted. More than 514 anti-choice measures have been enacted in the states since 1995. Many more threats are expected as a direct result of the latest decision.

FOCA WILL PROTECT A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE

FOCA would codify in federal law the protections for a woman's right to choose as outlined in *Roe v. Wade*. The bill states that it is the policy of the United States that every woman has the fundamental right to choose.

FOCA will protect this right by prohibiting state and federal government entities from:

1. Denying or interfering with a woman's right to choose to bear a child, to terminate a pregnancy prior to viability, or to terminate a pregnancy after viability where termination is necessary to protect the life or health of the woman
2. Discriminating against a woman's exercise of these rights in the regulation or provision of benefits, facilities, services, or information

The legislation would invalidate existing and future laws that interfere with or discriminate against the exercise of the rights protected. It also would provide an individual aggrieved by a violation of the act a private right of civil action in order to obtain appropriate relief.

In light of the recent Supreme Court decision undermining the core protections of *Roe v. Wade*, Planned Parenthood has redoubled its efforts to urge passage of FOCA in order to protect women's health and secure the right to choose for future generations.

A Conversation With Ourselves

Cruising the web recently I came across the creationist “news” site onenewsnow.com, and a headline: “American Christians encouraged to bombard heaven with prayers for persecuted Church.”

Intrigued by the idea that some Christians wanted to destroy heaven through mass bombing of prayer, I clicked to the page and read.

The story was not particularly interesting – a plea for American Christians to pray for fellow-believers being persecuted in Hindu India and to pray for the many Asians who have not yet embraced the Christian faith.

Inter-faith violence is unfortunately common in India but relatively few Christians have died compared to the thousands of Muslims who have been killed over the years.

What was much more revealing, however, was the confused and contradictory attitude of Christians – and presumably other Goddists – towards prayer.

The crux of the story was that a K P Yohannan, founder of Dallas-based Gospel for Asia, says that American Christians have an obligation to pray for believers throughout the world who are persecuted for their faith.

“I wish that every believer would be willing to wake up one hour early every morning and spend that hour before a world map,” Yohannan is quoted as saying, “praying and crying out to God for this generation, some two billion people that wait to hear that Jesus died for them on the cross.”

Yes, you know and I know that the idea that a supposedly loving God killed his son to teach his creation a lesson is the sign of a sick mind, but

The pointlessness of prayer.

that’s not the point here.

The point is that K P is under the impression that the deity needs to be reminded that a third of the human race still has not accepted the message that torture and death is really a sign of love. Either that or God is perfectly aware of the situation but will do nothing about it until the one sixth of humanity who have bought into the cross-and-resurrection myth prod him into action.

Suppose for one moment that Mr. Yohannan is right. Jehovah is either ignorant of the situation or too lazy to do anything about it. Is this a God worth worshipping? Is this an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-compassionate being deserving of respect?

The answer, of course, is No. K P’s concept of God insults the non-existent deity. The Texan’s plea for a daily 60 minute prayer reveals not God’s strength, but his weakness.

Not every Christian would accept that God should be bothered in the way proposed by K P Yohannan.

Just as each has their own personal portrait of the deity, each believer has their own opinion of what kind of prayer is acceptable to the big G. Some are happy to ask for their own lives to improve while others insist that you can only pray for other people.

For some the wish list can include wealth, happiness and physical health, while for others only spiritual welfare and eternal life are acceptable.

Irrespective of what believers ask for, and whether they ask it for themselves or others, all prayer comes down to the same thing. It is a request to God, either directly or through his

By Martin Foreman

saints, son, ghost or mother.

But that request is irrelevant, because God already knows what you want, and his decision to grant or ignore it depends on his whims, not your petition.

If God exists, he either knows about the subject of the prayer and chooses to do nothing, or he knows and is able to do nothing. If the first case is true, he is not compassionate. If the second case is true, he is not omnipotent. In both cases he is not the loving God claimed by followers of the mythical Christ.

Prayer is proof of God’s incompetence, his lack of honor and/or his lack of compassion. A truly just God would never need to be reminded of his obligation to heal the sick, to keep the innocent from harm or to protect the faithful. A God who needs reminding is a pathetic excuse for a deity.

Those who claim that science has proved that prayer cures people and saves lives are plain wrong. The studies they cite are flawed; the overwhelming evidence is that prayer has no impact at all on people’s lives. Situations where it appears to have worked can all be attributed to other, more compelling causes.

Prayer claims to be a conversation with God, but at the end of the day, it is nothing more than a conversation with ourselves. We may think we hear God’s voice, but all that comes back to us is the echo of our empty faith. The only honest prayer is a prayer to oneself to be freed of the illusion of faith.

[From Martin Foreman’s May 6 entry at www.godwouldbeanatheist.com.

Reprinted here by permission.]

“Many religious [people] like so many others are brain-washed with traditions, not with truths or facts, and are deceived. Truth and Justice are greater than religion. Seek them, and practice the Golden Rule. Make a better and more peaceful world. Let’s all get along.” – AFS member Hulda Pelzl, from a letter to the AFNews editor

“You can only protect your liberties in this world by protecting the other man’s freedom. You can only be free if I am free.” – Clarence S. Darrow, 1857-1938, American attorney. From Henry O. Dormann, compiler, *The Speaker’s Book of Quotations*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1987, p. 44.)

Able-bodied, Healthy, Adult Freethinkers Beware!

(This article *may* induce more guilt than you've experienced since Sunday School.) By Ed Buckner

Diane and I recently participated in the successful AFS Adopt-a-Highway trash pickup. (It was on the Saturday of "Easter" Weekend.) The average age of the four people who showed up and worked was approximately 62.6 years old.

With apologies to both, I have to note that the average age would have actually been *older* if either of the two most frequent past participants who missed this session had been there—**Jack McKinney** missed, probably for the first time he's ever missed—and we knew in advance he wouldn't be there and that he had a good reason.

Jim Middleton now uses as his excuse (he never missed before) the profoundly flimsy claim that living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, means the commute might be troublesome. **Steve Yothment** was there—he always is, and he's the kid among us at a mere 54. **Lew Southern** was there—he always is, and he's **not** the kid among us.

The work is unpleasant (lots of

people—especially smokers, drinkers, and eaters of fast food, apparently—are pigs), with backache-inducing, repetitious, and boring bending over, hauling unidentifiable nasty crap, and constant imagining that all the passersby are just waiting till you leave to toss out more half-full beer cans, soon-to-be-broken whiskey bottles, leftover auto parts, cigarette butts, fast-food Styrofoam containers, and other fun stuff. If the wind is blowing—it was on Saturday—it's hard to hold your plastic bag open while you cram stuff in it. And it's always too hot or too cold.

There are, of course, many reasons why an AFSer (or a member of one of the several groups we cooperate with and publicize) might not make it to one of these sessions:

- Injured or sore from the last AFS event or volunteer activity
- Work schedule that has you working on Saturday (or late the night before), etc.
- Ill or disabled

- Principled opposition to a freethinkers group doing community service or things not clearly related to our educational mission
- Too hung-over from the wild celebration of Good Friday the night before
- Tied up getting hair done for the Sunrise Service the next day

And if the above upbeat, positive appeal is not enough to inspire you to come next time, consider the plusses:

- Keeping company with good friends and freethinkers
- Getting rich (we really did find one \$20-bill, several smaller bills, and many coins)
- Making a (small) positive difference in the world
- Getting (a little) good publicity, via our signs, for AFS and freethought

And, I promise, the people who show up *never* piss and moan about what a pain it is to do this. Well, except for maybe me just this once.

See you at the next AFS roadside trash pick-up?

Some Interesting Links...

See Eddie Tabash's March 25 debate with Todd Friel at the Center for Inquiry in Daytona Beach at this link:

<http://www.gatorfreethought.org/2007/03/eddie-tabash-debates-todd-friel-talk-at.html>

Carnival of the Godless: http://klaasacts.typepad.com/photography/2007/04/carnival_of_the.html

"Nighttime is for dreaming. Daylight is for action." See many article on atheism at: <http://www.daylightatheism.org/>

The Freethought Movie "Heart of the Beholder" can be viewed at: http://www.beholder.com/WebTheater/webtheater_ft.aspx

Read "Atheist Awakening: The Appeal of Unbelief," an assessment of atheism, at: http://www.religionlink.org/tip_070507.php

Learn more about the Flock of Dodos program (Evolution vs. ID) on Showtime this month at: <http://www.flockofdodos.com/>

For more info on Christopher Hitchens, see this interview of him at: <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/31244/>

Watch a debate: Christopher Hitchens vs. George Galloway on the Iraqi War: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INy2ysHhgYM>

For the May 5 New Your Times article "A Split Emerges as Conservatives Discuss Darwin," see: <http://tinyurl.com/yprbo4>

The Constitutional Principle: Separation of Church and State: <http://members.tripod.com/~candst/index.html>

Learn more about the Rally for Reason on May 28, outside the gates of "Answers in Genesis," the new Creationist Museum in Boone County, Kentucky at: <http://rallyforreason.com/> Compare with: <http://www.answersingenesis.org/>

See Dave Silverman's American Atheists blog at: <http://www.nogodblog.com>

See a May 9 debate on the existence of God on ABC's Nightline at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=3148940&page=1>

See the AFS website with recent updates at: <http://www.atlantafreethought.org>

And don't forget the Atheist Alliance website at: <http://www.atheistalliance.org/>

Atheists Can Be Moral: Why It Matters

From a May 3 article at <http://www.daylightatheism.org>.

In the aftermath of the recent Virginia Tech shootings, the lowest and most contemptible specimens of religious fundamentalism have been crawling out of the woodwork to blame atheism for this horrible tragedy, without presenting a shred of evidence. I castigated some of these fanatics in another post, but since then, more have come to light. <http://www.aloadofbright.wordpress.com> points out another one, a deceitful and arrogant apologist who will go un-named. He had this to say:

The shooter at Virginia Tech was a madman. However, he had also been raised on a solid diet of secular humanism which teaches no moral absolutes. "If it feels good, do it," is one of the many mantras he ingested. Consequently he did what felt good, and innocent people died as a result.

This piece contains the comical assertion that David Barton – whose major pastime is promoting fabricated quotes from America's founding fathers to support his anti-religious-freedom viewpoint – is "perhaps the nation's leading historian," and goes downhill from there. After the standard lies about prayer being "banned" from public schools, which seems to be obligatory nowadays in the writings of every religious fanatic unconcerned with the truth, it culminates in the atrocity quoted above.

This attempt to extract a trite Sunday-school moral from the rampage of a psychopath is all too typical of the breed. The writer doesn't possess or offer any evidence whatsoever in support of this claim beyond his own fantasies. Cho-Seung Hui never claimed to be an atheist or a secular humanist, nor has anyone who knew him said he was. In the video rant he taped, he actually compared himself to Jesus Christ. But when have inconvenient things like facts ever stopped a Religious Right partisan from exploiting tragedy in an attempt to inspire everyone else to hate whom they hate?

In tone and in substance, rhetoric like this differs in no significant way from that of the hate-mongering lunatic Fred Phelps, who travels around the country with his clan of like-minded believers to picket and scream abuse at the funerals of AIDS victims, American soldiers, and all others who in his eyes have sinned against God. Phelps is unapologetic about his ghoulish desire for self-aggrandizement through deepening the wounds of those already in pain. (I have to admit, though I steadfastly oppose laws that would ban "hate speech," I find my allegiance to that principle sorely tested by his actions.) The un-named writer and all the rest may be slightly less gleeful than Phelps, but in their callous desire to score self-promotion through the exploitation of tragedy, they are all one and the same.

As readers can probably tell, I'm more than a little tired of being told I have no morals just because I'm an atheist. That is a brazen and deceitful falsehood long overdue for the burial it deserves. As I have explained before, along with many others, atheist morality is based on the human sense of compassion and on our rational ability to determine what ways of acting will create the most happiness and justice and allow people to live together most harmoniously. This is a simple, obvious ethical standard that is in no way dependent on the edicts of holy books or the dubious commands claimed to emanate from God.

If religious apologists were aware of this philosophy and clearly explained why they disagree with it, that would be one thing. I have no fear of fair criticism. But that is not what they are doing. Instead, they are pretending that this alternative does not exist, that atheists have never stated a basis for non-religious morality. In other words, they are lying. That, more than anything else – the dishonest refusal to acknowledge that atheists *do* have an alternative basis

for moral action – is what I find so infuriating.

But this is not just about outrage or wounded pride among atheists; it matters for a far more important reason. If people believe that atheists have no morals, they will be far more likely to believe the corollary that usually goes along with this message: since religious leaders *do* have access to an absolute morality based on God, this means they are decent and trustworthy people. And when people believe that, it leads to stories like this, from <http://tinyurl.com/2r42j6>:

A six-month investigation was unfolded Friday night on ABC's 20/20 which found "preacher predators" all over the country and shielding themselves in churches.

Cases of clergy members molesting and abusing children are sickeningly common, as can be seen from sites like this: <http://tinyurl.com/2r7nv2>. As explained on the website, this is very likely because priests and ministers, of every denomination, are often viewed by church members as the epitome of morality and trustworthiness. Their behavior is too often considered to be above question or reproach, in a way that other professions such as schoolteachers or coaches are not. This belief is a direct descendant of the more general religious belief that God's ways are not for human beings to question or criticize. That wholly undeserved cloak of infallibility may also end up being applied to those who claim to be God's servants and to speak in his name.

The naive trust that religious authorities all too often receive also plays into the epidemic of faith-based fraud, which I discussed in a post from February. Tightly-knit religious communities are magnets for scammers and fraudsters, many of them in positions of authority within the community, who exploit the credulity and unquestioning trust of lay members to get away with all manner of theft and deceit.

Atheists Can Be Moral (*continued*)

This is why it matters that atheists are moral. Too many theists believe that the world outside their religious community is rife with sin and cannot be trusted, and conversely, that every-

one within those sacred walls should be given the presumption of trust and good will. If it were widely known that atheists had reasons to be good that were every bit as strong as the rea-

sions offered by believers, that would break the perceived link between religion and morality that has facilitated the commission of so many crimes.

[From <http://www.daylightatheism.org>.]

Some Georgia School Districts to Offer Bible Classes

Georgia's public schools walk a delicate line as they decide whether to offer the nation's first state-funded Bible classes – measuring the difference between preaching and teaching with the likelihood of costly lawsuits looming for those that miss the mark.

The state school board approved curriculum in March for teaching the Bible in Georgia's high schools, but there hasn't been a rush of schools to start up the classes. Only a handful of the state's 180 school districts have agreed to offer the classes so far.

"It has been a very thoughtful, healthy process," said Robin Pennock, deputy schools superintendent of Muscogee County, where the school board decided to offer the Old Testament and New Testament classes next fall. "Most people do realize that this is an area that many people can feel very passionate about."

It's difficult to confirm how many school boards are considering or have adopted the classes. However, Muscogee – which borders Alabama and includes the city of Columbus and the Army's Fort Benning – is one of the state's largest districts to have done so.

"It's important to understand religion; it's something we've gotten too far away from," said Jan Pease, whose 15-year-old daughter attends Northside High School in Columbus.

The Bible already is incorporated into comparative religion and other public school classes in many states, but those classes are funded by the local districts, not with money from state government.

The Georgia law allowing the state-funded Bible classes won overwhelming approval last year from both Democrat and Republican lawmakers.

The classes must be taught "in an objective and non-devotional manner with no attempt made to indoctrinate students."

Lawmakers in Alabama, Missouri, Tennessee and Texas have considered similar plans this year, although none has received final approval. One proposal in Texas would require all high school students to take a Bible class.

Supporters say fully understanding history, literature and political science – from the writings of Martin Luther King Jr. to the war in Iraq – requires knowledge of the Bible.

"I don't think you can understand Shakespeare, that you can understand a great deal of literary allusions or that you can understand a great deal of Western civilization without understanding the role of the Bible," said Pennock, a former Western civilization teacher.

The Reverend Charles Hasty, of First Presbyterian Church in Columbus, said he hopes exposure to the Bible's teachings may lead some students to seek out a more spiritual approach in their lives.

"It's going to challenge the faith of some students and it may foster the faith of others," Hasty said.

Critics fear the classes could easily turn into endorsement of Christianity.

"Georgia has set teachers up for failure," said Charles Haynes, of the First Amendment Center, a Washington, D.C.-based civil liberties group. "The chances of it being unconstitutional are pretty big and the pitfalls are huge."

His group supports religious discussions and study of the Bible in public schools, but Haynes says Georgia's law fails to give enough guidance to teachers on the difference be-

tween academic study and spiritual teaching.

No additional training for teachers is required, although Barrow and Muscogee counties, which both will offer the classes, plan to give teachers an online course and other special preparation.

Haynes said the lack of direction in state law makes schools vulnerable to lawsuits if students feel religion is being endorsed.

"People are going to sue," he said. "That's why the Legislature should have been more responsible about putting school boards in situations where they might have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, split their communities and end up in a courtroom."

The First Amendment Center and Georgia's branch of the American Civil Liberties Union both say they plan to monitor how the classes are taught.

Concern about violating the separation of church and state is a reason why some of Georgia's largest districts have steered clear of the classes so far.

"We have to be very careful with that," said Joe Buck, chairman of the Savannah-Chatham County Board of Education. His school system has not made a move yet to consider the classes.

Pease, a Christian, said she'd support schools teaching comparative religion classes, including those that studied the holy books of other major faiths like Islam's Quran.

"I don't think any particular religion needs to be pushed on anyone," she said. "But I do think it's important to teach about them."

[From a May 1 article at [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com).]

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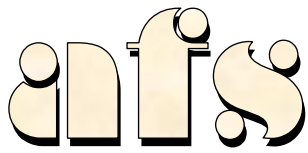
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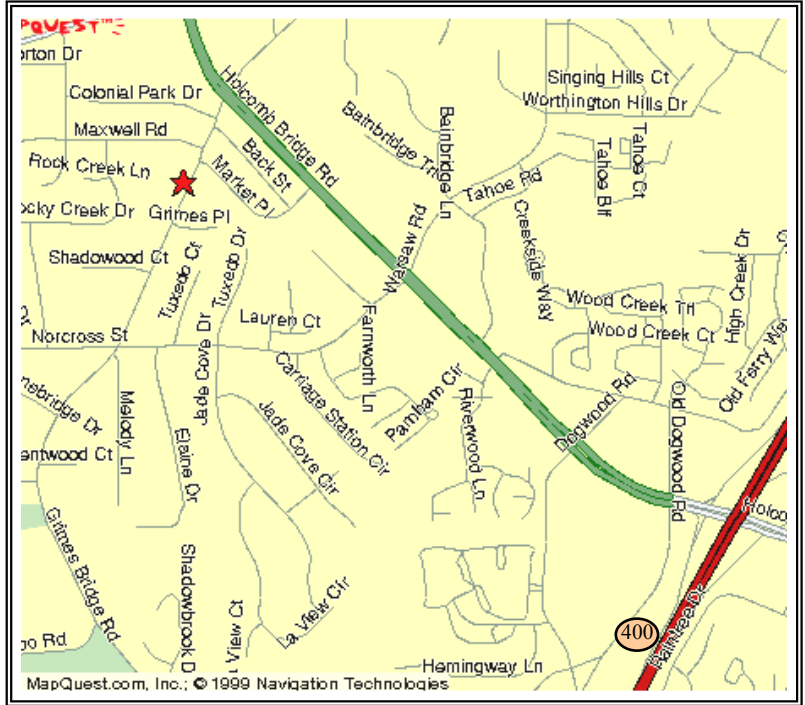
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Dr. David E. Giannasi



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