

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 13 Number 6 • June 2007

The June AFS Meeting

The June 10 AFS meeting will feature a talk by **Stephen Burnett**, Associate Professor of Biology at Clayton State University, on "Biology and Evolution." He is also president of the Humanists of Georgia.

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 June AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Friday, June 15, at 7:00 PM.

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the AF Center on Sunday, June 17, at 12:30PM. Their speaker will be Gerald Robison, a former Baptist minister, now a humanist, who will speak on "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly."

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 June Atheist Meetup

There will be a "meetup" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, June 24, 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, June 10, 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

June 10: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
June 15: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

A New AFS Phone Number

Thanks to Walter Beal's efforts, the Atlanta Freethought Society has a new message-and-voice-mail phone number: 404-284-3478, or, using letters, 404-ATHEIST.

Lake Hypatia July 4th Celebration

Celebrate Freethought and Independence Day with the **Alabama Freethought Association** at its annual "Glorious Fourth" weekend at **Lake Hypatia**, near Taladega, AL.

The June 30 - July 2 event will include these speakers:

- Annie Laurie Gaylor, on "FFRF vs. Faith-based Initiative"
- Dan Barker, Concert and Talk
- Ed Buckner, on "Atheists, We Hardly Know Ye"
- John Henderson, on "Fear, Faith, Fact, Fantasy."
- Michael Chandler, State/church litigant
- Also Eric Pepke, Bob Collins, Pat and Alice Cleveland

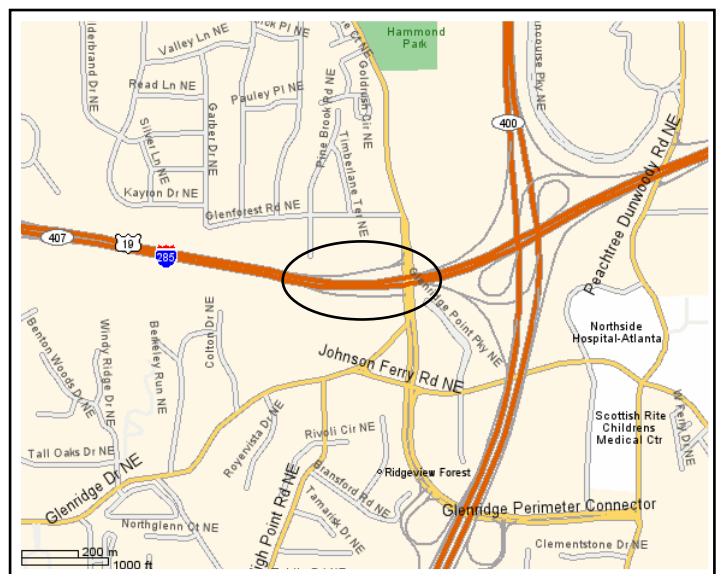
Speeches take place in the spacious, air-conditioned **Lake Hypatia Freethought Hall**. Inexpensive catered meals are held at a beautiful lakeside pavilion.

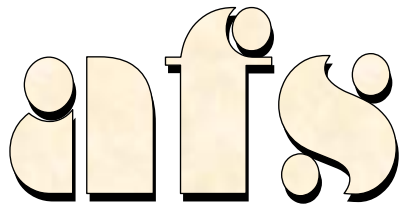
Swimming, paddling, boating, hiking, poetry-reading, relaxing and socializing are all on the agenda. See registration details at: <http://www.ffrf.org/lakehypatia/>.

Highway Cleanup is This Saturday

The Atlanta Freethought Society will have its **Adopt-A-Highway cleanup** on Saturday, June 9, at 10:00 AM. The cleanup will be on the Glenridge Ramp at Exit 26 of I-285. (This is the long ramp that connects Glenridge Drive to I-285 near GA400.) We will clear trash on both sides of I-285.

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





**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.

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

July 8: Ed Buckner will speak on "Secular Schooling," which is also the topic of the chapter he wrote in the recently-published book *Parenting Without Belief*.

Aug 12: AFS member Doug Hattersley, a geologist, will speak.

Sept 9: 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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The Atlanta Freethought News

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See page 9 of this newsletter for a
membership and subscription form.

Membership in AFS is \$25/year for
individuals, \$35 for households, and
\$10 for students/low income/under 21.

Add \$15 to receive AFNews by mail.
Sustaining members (individual) \$100
and sustaining members (households)
\$125. Subscriptions alone are \$20 for

12 issues, \$25 to Canada/Mexico,
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Visit our World Wide Web site at
www.atlantafreethought.org.

Send E-mail to

afs@atlantafreethought.org.

AFS Webmaster: Walter Beal

Call and leave messages on the

AFS Info Line: 404-ATHEIST

ACLU Defeats Georgia Bible-Tax Exemption

The Atlanta Freethought Society provided a Declaration to the Court for the Lawsuit

United States District Judge Richard W. Story ruled on May 16 that two provisions of the Georgia Sales and Use Tax Code which exempt religious books and papers from taxation is unconstitutional. The ACLU lawsuit, which was successful on February 6, 2006, was awaiting a "final declaration." For the final ruling, the court considered additional testimony, including a Declaration to the Court by Ed Buckner as Treasurer of the Atlanta Freethought Society regarding the fact that AFS must collect and file Georgia sales tax on sales of its books.

The case, *Thomas Budlong and Candace Apple v. Bart L. Graham*, challenged the constitutionality of Georgia Law O.C.G.A. 48-8-3, subsections 15(A) and 16, which provide that the following items are exempt from Georgia's otherwise generally applicable sales and use tax:

15(A): ...any religious paper in this state when the paper is owned and operated by religious institutions or denominations and no part of the net profit from the operation of the institution or denomination inures to the benefit of any private person;

16: ...Holy Bibles, testaments, and similar books commonly recognized as being Holy Scripture regardless of by or to whom sold.

In the case, Thomas Budlong, a retired librarian and former President of the Georgia Library Association, brought the action along with Candace Apple, a proprietor of a retail bookstore in Atlanta. Mr. Budlong complained that he was forced to pay sales tax on books and papers in the State of Georgia, including *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Ms. Apple operates the Phoenix & Dragon, a retail bookstore in Atlanta that specializes in the sale of metaphysical, religious, and spiritual books and periodicals which are subject to Georgia sales tax. Both alleged that the Georgia sales tax exemption for religious publications should be impermissible under the Free Speech, Free Press, Establishment, and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and various correlative provisions of the Constitution of the State of Georgia. They sued the Defendant, Bart L. Graham, the Commissioner of the Georgia Department of Revenue, seeking injunctive relief.

The court ruled that "the sales tax exemptions at issue discriminate on the basis of protected content without advancing a compelling state interest,

in violation of the First and Fourteenth Amendments."

In the Order Granting Summary Judgement, Judge Story wrote: "For subsection 15(A) to exempt a publication from taxation, it must not only be 'owned and operated by a religious institution,' but it must be 'religious.' It thus discriminates between religious and non-religious writings. Similarly, for subsection 16 to apply, a publication must be a 'sacred' writing which is 'commonly recognized as Holy Scripture.' It thus discriminates between sacred writings and non-sacred writings, and disfavors writings which might be considered sacred to some but are not 'commonly recognized' as such. In doing so, both exemptions express a governmental preference for organized religious expression over spiritual, philosophical, agnostic, atheistic, and other forms of self expression... In sum, the Court concludes that O.C.G.A. 48-8-3(15)(A) and O.C.G.A. 48-8-3(16) are unconstitutional under the Free Press Clause of the First Amendment."

The court also issued a permanent injunction for the Commissioner of the Georgia Department of Revenue to no longer allow those provisions of the Georgia Code.

Air Force and Army Back Away from Christian Event

American United for Separation of Church and State notified them that the Stone Mountain event was religious

On the heels of an Americans United complaint, the U.S. Air Force and Army distanced themselves from an evangelical Christian event held on Memorial Day weekend.

Promotional material about the three-day "Salute to the Troops" celebration strongly implied that it was co-sponsored by the U.S. Air Force and Army alongside several evangelical groups: Task Force Patriot USA (TFP), Lifeway Christian Stores and Holman Bible Outreach International.

Due to intervention by Americans United, the show went on that week-

end in Stone Mountain, Ga., but without the military's stamp of approval, according to a report by *The Washington Post* on May 25.

Americans United became concerned with the armed forces' involvement when they learned that the primary group sponsoring the event, Task Force Patriot USA, describes its mission as "sharing the fullness of life in Jesus Christ with all U.S. military, military veterans and families." The group's Web site says, "Christ is our Commander-in-Chief," and its logo is a shield with the American and Chris-

tian flags bracketing a large Christian cross.

AU grew more concerned after seeing "Salute to the Troops" plugged as an official U.S. Air Force 60th anniversary celebration in TFP promotional materials and a military newspaper.

Promotional materials promised hourly flyovers by Air Force B-2 Bombers and parachuting demonstrations by the Army's Silver Wings Parachute Jump Team mixed in with Bible distributions, worship services, personal religious "testimony" by a uniformed B-2 pilot and revival-type

Air Force and Army Back Away (*continued*)

sermons by a slew of ministers.

Americans United sent letters earlier that week informing the Secretary of the Air Force and Acting Secretary of the Army that the military's co-sponsorship and planned participation in this evangelistic event violates the separation of church and state.

"This marriage of religion and government is precisely what the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to United States Constitution was designed to forbid," the letter said. Americans United respectfully requested that the Air Force and Army "take steps to ensure that the military's sponsorship and endorsement of the event is retracted and rectified."

To their credit, both branches acted promptly. In a statement, officials said the Air Force was never an official co-sponsor of the event. Other steps were taken to put some distance between the Air Force and the event.

"Upon learning of the schedule of events sponsored by Task Force Patriot, Air Force officials began taking steps to avoid the appearance of any endorsement or preferential treatment of any religious faith or worship ser-

vice," reads the statement. "The Air Force activities at Stone Mountain Park will take place apart from those of Task Force Patriot, and flyovers by Air Force aircraft will not be scheduled to occur during religious services. Any Air Force personnel who may participate in religious activities at Stone Mountain Park will do so in their individual capacities, not representing the Air Force. The aircraft scheduled to fly over the park are part of Memorial Day 2007 recognition around the country, when Air Force aircraft will perform 107 flyovers (of 284 total requests), in 20 states. We have asked Stone Mountain Park to clarify the nature of the Air Force association with the Memorial Day activities and they have kindly agreed to do so."

Of the B-2 pilot, the Air Force said he can participate in the private event as he pleases, but he has been instructed not to appear in uniform or on behalf of the Air Force.

The Post subsequently reported that the Army issued a statement that said, "The Silver Wing Team is not participating in this event and we are unaware of any other Army involvement."

On their website, Americans United reported, "It's difficult to tell what really went on here and how deeply the armed forces were enmeshed in this evangelistic event. Nevertheless, we at Americans United are pleased that the Air Force and the Army pulled back. It is fitting and proper to remember our fallen war veterans this weekend. There are many ways to meet that goal that don't run afoul of the very Constitution so many brave men and women have given their lives to protect."

[From a May 25 article by Lauren Smith at <http://www.au.org>]

Our own Ed Buckner appeared on two Atlanta TV station news programs about the Air Force and Army not participating in the Stone Mountain event. On WSB-TV (Ch 2) News, Ed adeptly said, "It's inappropriate, and in fact un-American for the government of the U.S., the military of the U.S., to be used to endorse a religious point of view. This is not a question of whether we support the Air Force, or support our troops. It's a question of supporting religious liberty."

Clark Adams

Well, here is some very sad news. Clark Adams, a former AFS member, long-time board member of the Internet Infidels (and for many years its public relations director), and Emcee at the Lake Hypatia July 4th Celebration for several years, was found dead in his apartment on May 23. He was only 37 years old. He apparently took his own life and left a good-bye letter for his family and friends.

Clark was founder and president of the Las Vegas Freethought Society. He was the past president of the Humanist Association of Las Vegas and Southern Nevada, which won AHA's

2002 Chapter of the Year award. He participated in meetings of the Coalition for the Community of Reason. He was a co-founders of the Secular Coalition for America and a board member of Atheist Alliance, International.

Clark is listed in various quotation books with his famous quote, "If atheism is a religion, then health is a disease." He was a very likable and easy-going person, and will be sorely missed by family and friends.

There will be a celebration of Clark Adam's life on Monday, July 2, at 12:30PM, at Lake Hypatia, near Talladega, AL. Clark was scheduled to

From AFS President Steve Yothment

emcee the Lake Hypatia July 4th Celebration this year; instead, Ed Buckner and Dan Barker will do so.

Here are some internet links for freethought blogs about Clark Adams: http://www.infidels.org/electronic/email/ex-tian/Clark_Davis_Adams.html

<http://lippard.blogspot.com/2007/05/clark-adams-rip.html>

<http://myspace.com/godlessclark>

<http://friendlyatheist.com/2007/05/23/bye-clark/>

<http://atheologian.blogspot.com/2007/05/in-memorial-clark-adams.html>

http://www.infidels.org/electronic/email/ex-tian/Clark_Davis_Adams.html

"Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important. Where once it used to be able, by its total command of a worldview, to *prevent* the emergence of rivals, it can now only impede and retard—or try to turn back—the measurable advances we have made."

— Christopher Hitchens, from *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 2007, p. 282.

Does the 1797 Treaty with Tripoli Matter to Church-State Separation?

John Adams signed the Treaty with Tripoli on June 10, 1797, exactly 210 years ago. So, here's a speech about the Treaty given by Ed Buckner to the Humanists of Georgia on June 22, 1997 and at the 1997 Lake Hypatia Independence Day Celebration.

We freethinkers are, I suspect, sometimes suckers for the big lie that the U.S. really was founded as a Christian nation. We've heard it so often that we tend to doubt our allies who dispute it as maybe just over-zealous, over-eager, well-intentioned-but-wrong atheists out to prove what they want to believe rather than to understand the truth. I know I suspected something like that when I first read "As the government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian Religion..." as a quote from the Treaty with Tripoli. And I know of at least one cynical atheist, Frederic Rice (with his own website full of information: <http://www.linkline.com/personal/frice/>).

Mr. Rice has even, in his profound ignorance, called me dishonest and urged me not to use the honorable label "atheist" for talking about the treaty. But careful research into the facts, accompanied by honest presentation of those facts, leads to important support for the thesis that the Constitutional framers intended this nation to have a government strictly neutral regarding religion.

The pirates of the Barbary coast in general and of Tripoli (in what is now called Libya) in particular were destroying U.S. shipping and holding U.S. seamen as prisoners in the 1790s. It was a serious problem and a series of negotiators were sent to try to put together an agreement to improve it.

On 4 November 1796, near the end of George Washington's second term, a treaty with the "Bey and People of Tripoli" was signed, promising cash and other considerations to Tripoli in exchange for peace. Leading the negotiations for the U.S. at that point was Joel Barlow, a diplomat and poet (he wanted very much to be remembered as America's epic poet). Barlow was a friend of Thomas Jefferson and of Thomas Paine. (Paine hurriedly entrusted the manuscript of the first part

of the Age of Reason to Barlow when Paine was suddenly arrested by the radicals of the French revolution.)

Barlow was very likely by 1796 a deist, though he had served earlier as a military chaplain. There is considerable dispute about whether the Arabic version of the treaty read and signed by the representatives of Tripoli even had the famous words included (they are not present, as was discovered in about 1930, in the surviving Arabic version). No one knows why. The treaty remained in effect for only four years, replaced, after more war with Tripoli, with another treaty that does not have the famous words included. One or two later treaties even allude to the Trinity. If the major claim of separationists regarding the treaty were a legal one, these facts might be fatal. But no one claims that the treaty was the basis for our government being non-Christian—it is the godless Constitution, which calls on no higher power than "We the People," that is the necessary and sufficient legal basis. What the treaty does is to powerfully reaffirm what the Constitution and First Amendment intended. (The references in one or two later treaties to things such as the Trinity occurred in treaties with Great Britain and Russia, both officially Christian nations at the time; no declarations that the U.S. is a Christian nation were included.)

When I first read the words "As the government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian Religion..." I was, as I said, skeptical. Why would such a thing be in a treaty? Why would some have claimed, as I later learned, that George Washington wrote them? (Apparently only because the words were written during Washington's second term.) Was there controversy in the Senate when the treaty was ratified, or did the language even appear in the version ratified? Or was it buried deep within a long, complicated treaty

where perhaps it wasn't even noticed? Did the public even know the treaty was passed or what it contained, and what was the reaction? Was it possible for the public to know who voted for it, and what price did those supporting it pay?

Fortunately for me, my son (and only child), Michael, lived for several years in Washington, DC, only two blocks from the Library of Congress, and my wife and I visited him frequently. When we did, I spent time at the L of C, much of it reading up on the treaty. I found some answers in the official Journal of the Senate.

The President (by then John Adams) sent the treaty to the Senate in late May 1797. It was, according to the official record, read aloud (the whole treaty was only a page or two long), including the famous words, on the floor of the senate and copies were printed for every Senator. (It should be noted that the controversy about the Arabic version is irrelevant here: all official treaty collections from 1797 on contain the English version, and all include the famous words of Article XI.) A committee considered the treaty and recommended ratification. Twenty-three Senators voted to ratify: Bingham, Bloodworth, Blount, Bradford, Brown, Cocke, Foster, Goodhue, Hillhouse, Howard, Langdon, Latimer, Laurance, Livermore, Martin, Paine (no, not Thomas Paine), Read, Rutherford, Sedgwick, Stockton, Tattnell, Tichenor, and Tracy. We should ask ourselves whether we should not consider these 23 (and President Adams) great freethought heroes. In a very public way, they voted to say that "As the government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian Religion, ..." the Muslims of Tripoli therefore need not fear a religious war from the U.S.

The vote was recorded only because at least a fifth of the Senators present voted to require a recorded vote. This

The Treaty with Tripoli (*continued*)

was the 339th time (I went through the Journal for the first five Congressional sessions and counted them myself) that a recorded vote was required. It was only the third time that a vote was recorded when the vote was unanimous! (The next time was to honor George Washington.)

There is no record of any debate or dissension on the treaty.

President Adams signed the treaty and proclaimed it to the nation on 10 June 1797. His statement on it was a bit unusual: "Now be it known, That I John Adams, President of the United States of America, having seen and considered the said Treaty do, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, accept, ratify, and confirm the same, and every clause and article thereof. And to the End that the said Treaty may be observed and performed with good Faith on the part of the United States, I have ordered the premises to be made public; And I do hereby enjoin and require all persons bearing office civil or military within the United States, and all other citizens or inhabitants thereof, faithfully to observe and fulfill the said Treaty and every clause and article thereof."

What happened then? Did our heroes pay a heavy price? Skeptical that the public even knew about the treaty, I went to the periodicals reading room of the Library of Congress in, appropriately enough, the Madison Build-

ing. After some poking about I found out how to get access to newspapers of the 1790s, mostly on microfilm, but in a few cases I saw the actual papers of the day.

I found the treaty and Adams' statement reprinted in full in three newspapers, two in Philadelphia and one in New York City and, in one case, held the actual newspaper (the Philadelphia Gazette and Universal Daily Advertiser for Saturday, 17 June 1797) in my hands. There is no record of any public outcry or complaint in subsequent editions of the papers.

And what of our heroes? Well, none suffered any known negative consequences, and I've read biographies of each. One Senator, Theodore Sedgewick of Massachusetts, went on to become the Speaker of the House. (Imagine Newt Gingrich endorsing such a treaty! Henry Clay is the only other American in history to be first a Senator, then Speaker.) Another, Isaac Tichenor, became Governor of Vermont, and then returned to the Senate for many years. Georgia's Senator, Josiah Tattnall (Georgia's other Senator was absent), did not return to the Senate, but he did serve thereafter as one of the youngest Governors in Georgia's history, and has a county in Georgia and a number of streets, squares, etc., named after him. (His father was a Tory; his son by the same name was a famous officer in the Con-

federate Navy.)

From our perspective these men may be heroes, but in truth the vote they cast was ordinary, routine, normal. It was, in other words, quite well accepted, only a few years after first the Constitution and then the First Amendment were ratified, that "the Government of the United States of America was not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."

After a bloody and costly civil war and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment determined that citizens of the United States cannot have their rights abridged by state or local governments either, religious liberty for all was established. Governmental neutrality in matters of religion remains the enduring basis for that liberty.

For Further Information:

"Does the Treaty of Tripoli say that 'The Government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion?'" by Tom Peters, at <http://candst.tripod.com/tnppage/tripoli.htm>

"The Government of the United States of America Is Not, in Any Sense, Founded on the Christian Religion," by Jim Walker (webpage link from the *Freethinkers Home Page*; Website: <http://www.nobeliefs.com/Tripoli.htm>

"Joel Barlow and the Treaty of Tripoli," by Rob Boston. *Church & State*, Vol. 50, No. 6 (June 1997), pp. 11-14; <http://www.au.org/c&sjun6.htm>

AU of Ga. to have a booth at Atlanta Pride Festival

The Georgia Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State will have a booth at the Atlanta Pride Festival in Piedmont Park on Friday through Sunday, June 22, 23 and 24. Ed and Diane Buckner, Jeff Selman, and several others are al-

ready planning to man the booth, but they are looking for additional volunteers. If you would like to help out, please contact any AFS officer. The hours for the festival are 6pm - 11pm on Friday, and 11am - 11pm on Saturday and Sunday.

Even if you can't volunteer at the booth, come to the festival and enjoy the many attractions. Admission is free. There is more information at: http://www.atlantapride.org/info/festival/where_when/index.php.

Here are a few interesting websites on freethought issues:

See the 15 Answers to Creationist Nonsense here:

http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?chanId=sa013&articleId=000D4FEC-7D5B-1D07-8E49809EC588EEDF&modsrc=most_popular

See "Atheism: A Rough History of Disbelief," an excellent video by Jonathan Miller, from BBC Channel 4:

<http://www.veoh.com/series/briefhistoryofdisbelief>

Herb Silverman's Speech at the Rally For Reason

On May 28, Herb Silverman, President of the Secular Coalition for America, gave the following speech outside the Answers in Genesis Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. The museum opened that same day.

As President of the Secular Coalition for America, an umbrella group of eight national nontheistic organizations, I am pleased to see theists and non-theists cooperating on an important issue. Today, you will hear from scientists, educators, concerned parents and grandparents, as well as from secular and religious leaders. We are all working together for a more educated America.

As a card-carrying member of the ACLU, I support the right of the Creation Museum to promote its views, just like I had supported the right of the American Nazi Party to march in Skokie. Which do I consider more dangerous? Surprisingly, it is these people who believe Genesis is a science book. I'm not particularly concerned about the American Nazi Party, despite losing relatives in the Holocaust, because almost nobody takes them seriously anymore. A politician who would say he was a Nazi sympathizer, or that the Holocaust didn't exist, would be drummed out of any political party.

On the other hand, three presidential candidates recently said in a nationally televised debate that they didn't believe in evolution. Three men seeking to lead the last superpower on Earth reject the scientific consensus on cosmology, geology and biology. How scary is that!

Ken Ham, who operates this museum, disagrees with people who call scientific creationism "bad" science. I disagree also, but for entirely different reasons. Creationism is not good enough to be considered bad science. Bad science uses the scientific method, but contains some subtle errors. Creationism is not science. In memory of Isaac Asimov, I have to say that creationism isn't even sound enough to be

considered good science fiction, though it most certainly is fiction.

Genesis, like Greek mythology, might deserve a place in a literature class or a mythology class, but not in a science class. For decades this country has had a failed war on drugs and, I believe, is now engaged in a failed war in Iraq. However, what concerns me today is the War on Science that is taking place here, and is being promoted in some of the highest levels of this administration. And such a war, if continued, will have a devastating effect on science education and the scientific advances of this country for years to come.

Outside of this museum, people of reason accept the scientific evidence that the universe is billions of years old, that fossils are the remains of animals living hundreds of millions of years ago, and that life's diversity is the result of evolution by natural selection. But inside the museum, they are teaching that the Earth is 6,000 years old and that dinosaurs frolicked with humans and all other species on an ark built by a 600 year old man named Noah. The "science" book they rely on was written 2000-3000 years ago in what the rest of us call a pre-scientific era.

That so many people take this museum seriously is both sad and frightening. It shows that the United States is losing thousands of students not just to pseudo-science, but to evangelical pseudo-science. People inside the museum may claim that the majority of Americans believe either that evolution should not be taught in public schools or that it should be taught along with so-called "Scientific Creationism." But science is not democratic anymore than mathematics is democratic. As I tell my math stu-

dents, even if everyone in the class believes a wrong thing, it is still a wrong thing. Creationism is an alternative to Zeus or Krishna, but not to Darwin. Creation science should no more be taught as an alternative to evolution than should the "Stork theory" be taught as an alternative to sexual reproduction.

Ken Ham and his followers have the free speech right to insist their creationist mythology is fact. However, we have the free speech right and the obligation to truth to call a foolish idea "foolish." Today, in a variety of ways, you will hear why such creationist ideas are both foolish and dangerous. And the arguments used by us will be backed by documented evidence, not by blind faith.

Conflicts between science and religion are as old as science itself. Fundamentalists 600 years ago found Biblical justification to insist that the Earth was flat; 400 years ago, they insisted that a stationary Earth was at the center of the universe; and 100 years ago, they tried to replace the number pi (which is the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter) with what they determined was the Biblically justified whole number 3 [1 Kings 7:23]. I suspect that even those inside the museum have cut and run from the geocentric battle of the Middle Ages for an Earth-centered universe. Future generations likely will look back in equal amazement at our twenty-first century "evolution battle." The REASON you hear from today's speakers will eventually prevail over the faith-based scientifically illiterate forces. I can only hope we will succeed in a more timely fashion, and with less collateral damage, than occurred during the Dark and Middle Ages.

Regarding the Sept. 11 terrorist attack: "The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'" — Jerry Falwell, who, as of May 15, will no longer be making such statements.

Americans United Statement on the Death of Jerry Falwell

Moral Majority Founder was Face and Voice of The Religious Right

Dr. Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority and one of the key architects of the rise of the Religious Right, died on May 15 at age 73.

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United, released the following statement:

"Jerry Falwell politicized religion and failed to understand the genius of our Constitution, but there is no denying his impact on American political life. He will long be remembered as the face and voice of the Religious

Right.

"Falwell manipulated a powerful pulpit in exchange for access to political power and promotion of a narrow range of moral concerns. I appeared with him on news programs dozens of times over the years and, while I disagreed with just about everything Falwell stood for, he was a determined advocate for what he believed.

"Falwell reached his apex of power in the 1980s. Since then, leadership of the Religious Right has passed to

James Dobson, Pat Robertson, Tony Perkins, Donald Wildmon and others. However, Falwell remained influential in politics, with Republican presidential candidates seeking his support this year.

"Americans United extends its condolences to members of Dr. Falwell's family, the congregants of Thomas Road Baptist Church and the students and staff of Liberty University."

[From a May 15 AU Press Release.]

"There [are] four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking."

— Christopher Hitchens, from *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 2007, p. 4.

Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Ed Buckner's letter (below) was in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on May 30.

Ed Buckner's letter (at right) was in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on May 27.

Thomas honored Falwell by lying

DEAR EDITOR:

It is somehow fitting to "honor" Jerry Falwell by repeating some of his lies after his death, but columnist Cal Thomas probably misled readers by doing so ("Falwell's Legacy," May 21 MDJ).

Thomas asserted, "The outlawing of prayer in public schools in the early '60s had deeply affected them (religious conservatives). They had prayed as children and wondered why the Supreme Court would not allow their children to pray or read the Bible in public schools."

But no court has been asked to do any such thing nor has any ever ruled that way. Public school students

can pray before algebra tests, though studying more would be more likely to help, or before lunch. They can bring Bibles or Korans to school and study them during breaks. Teachers, too, can pray anytime they wish (who could stop them?).

What has been outlawed, rightly and wisely, is government-led, forced group prayer. The religious liberty of religious conservatives and of everyone else depends directly on keeping government out of the business of making religious decisions for citizens.

Ed Buckner
Treasurer, Atlanta Free
thought Society
Smyrna

Critics' knowledge gap does Bible a disservice

I'm not surprised that most of your letter writers have not yet read Christopher Hitchens' book "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything," but most of them seem not even to have read the AJC excerpt they're critiquing or the Bible they claim to rely on for moral guidance.

To take only two instances: One letter writer declares that the Bible "sets forth an example of how God wants us to treat our fellow humans" but ignores entirely the substantial biblical support for human slavery (see Exodus 20:17 and 21:2-11; Leviticus 25: 44-50; or 1 Corinthians 7:20-24). And the questions another writer thinks would rebut Hitchens are answered partially in the excerpt and fully in the book.

Hitchens needs no support from me against his detractors.

On the other hand, if there were any reason to believe there is a God, He could sure use some better supporters.

ED BUCKNER

Buckner is treasurer of the Atlanta Freethought Society.

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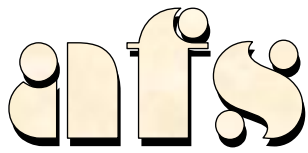
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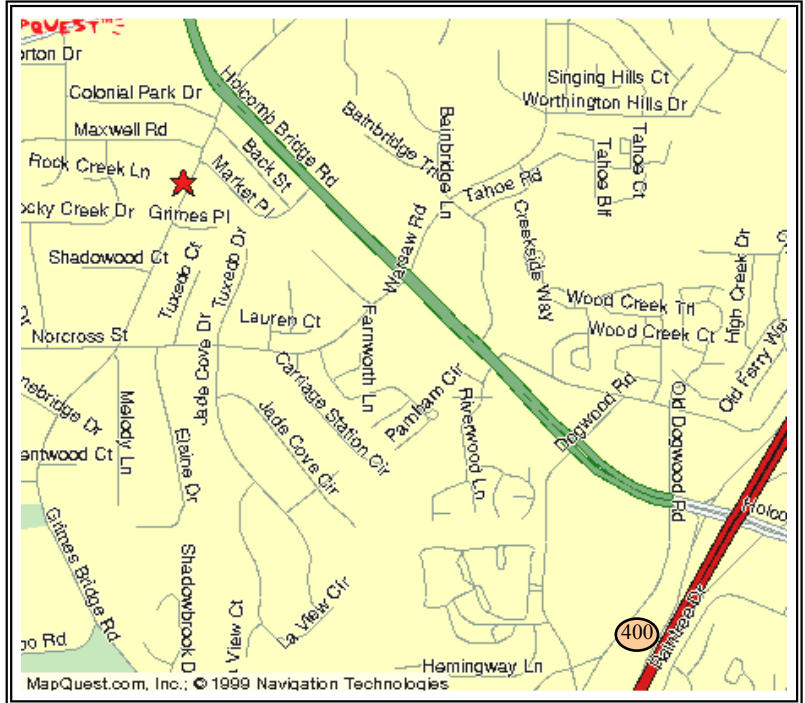
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**Atlanta
Freethought
Society**

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

**This Month's Speaker:
Dr. Stephen Burnett**



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