

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 13 Number 7 • July 2007

The July AFS Meeting

The July 8 AFS meeting will feature a talk by **Bob Collins**, an ex-fundamentalist, on "More Bible Contradictions."

Bob Collins, a member of the Alabama Freethought Association, is a longtime freethinker and experienced activist. He saw the light of reason while he was in seminary studying to become a Reformed Presbyterian minister.

Bob is the author of hundreds of letters published in Alabama newspapers, and has helped effectively oppose Creationist bills in the Alabama legislature even though they were actively promoted by national far-right groups.

Bob's education includes a Bachelor of Science from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and a Master's degree from Washington University in St Louis School of Medicine. He manages a team of mainframe computer programmers at a major insurance company. He is also a single parent to two freethinking children.

Bob has made an extensive study of the Bible and has found that many of the clearest and most persuasive arguments against the Bible are found in the Bible itself. Practical knowledge of the Bible's errors and contradictions can help freethinkers effectively oppose the religious right, and can help religious people make better informed decisions about their own beliefs.

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 July AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Friday, July 20, at 7:00 PM.

The July Atheist Meetup

There will be a "meetup" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, July 29, 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, July 15, 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/?gj=sj8>

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the AF Center on Sunday, July 15, at 12:30 PM. Their speaker will be Tony Springer, a UU lay minister, who will speak on "Why I am a Humanist."

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.

AFS Meetings and Activities

July 8: AFS Board Meeting at AF Center, 11:00 AM.
July 8: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.
July 13: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

Latest Data From The Barna Group

A new survey by the Barna Group of Ventura, CA, indicates that about 9% of Americans have "no faith." The category includes those who identified themselves as an atheist, an agnostic, or who specifically said they have "no faith." So, in a nation of more than 220 million adults, those of no faith include roughly 20 million people.

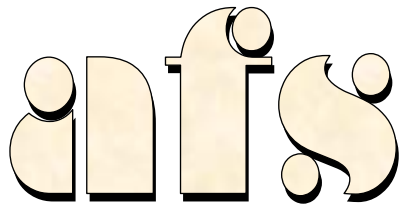
The no-faith audience is younger, and more likely to be male and unmarried. They also earn more and are more likely to be college graduates.

The no-faith group also is more likely to say they are into new technology (64% vs. 52% for active-faith adults) and is more likely to assert that they adapt easily to change (81% vs. 66%).

The research shows that there is an increasing size of the no-faith segment with each successive generation. Currently, the no-faith percentage is 6% for those with ages 61 or higher, 9% for ages 42-60, 14% for ages 23-41 and 19% for ages 18-22. When adjusted for age and compared to 15 years ago, each generation has changed surprisingly little in no-faith percentage over the past 15 years.

[From a June 11 report at <http://www.barna.org> .]

See "Atheism: A Rough History of Disbelief," an excellent video by Jonathan Miller, from BBC Channel 4 at: <http://www.veoh.com/series/briefhistoryofdisbelief>



**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.

July 8: Robert Collins will speak on "More Bible Contradictions."

Aug 12: Ed Buckner will speak on "Secular Schooling," which is the topic of the chapter he wrote in the recently-published book *Parenting Without Belief*.

Sept 9: AFS member Doug Hattersley, a retired geologist, will speak on "A Geological Perspective of Current Events."

Oct 14: (tentative) Dr. John Henderson will speak on his new book *Judging God*.

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

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Supreme Court Nixes Taxpayer Challenge to Faith-Based Initiative

Religious Right Cheers; Separation Endangered

On June 25, the U.S. Supreme Court denied taxpayers the right to challenge President Bush's federal faith-based initiative that uses public money to subsidize religious charities and social programs.

The 5-4 decision in *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation* (U.S. No. 06-157) circumvented most of the substantive Establishment Clause questions, and instead focused on the perennial bug-a-boo of whether the original plaintiffs in the case had "standing," the legal right to have the case heard. The court majority cited a 1968 case, *Flast v. Cohen*, which declared that taxpayers could sue when Congress provided financial assistance to private religious schools. Justice Samuel Alito used that as a rationale to turn down the *Hein* challenge, though, writing that *Flast* dealt only with a "specific congressional appropriation" rather than action by the executive branch.

Indeed, just weeks after his inauguration, President Bush used his power of Executive Orders to create the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and then instructed the major federal departments to begin making money available to churches, mosques, temples and other religious groups. There was never any congressional approval. The decision upholds Mr. Bush's authority in the matter, but does not protect actions by states and municipalities that operate their own faith-based funding schemes. Critics also charge that the ruling is in line with an emerging Supreme Court majority that seems intent on codifying stronger powers for the executive branch of government.

According to attorney David Shapiro who filed the American Atheists "Amicus" (friend of the court) brief in *Hein*, the 5-4 decision was "severely fractured."

"The overall outcome is twofold. First, taxpayer standing is intact as a means of challenging, on Establishment Clause grounds, spending pro-

grams directly created by Congress. Second, there is no taxpayer standing to challenge the Executive Branch's use of funds it receives from Congress through general appropriations.

Five Justices held that taxpayer standing did not exist, but these five Justices were divided into two blocs. The first bloc (Roberts, Kennedy, Alito) held in an opinion authored by Justice Alito that taxpayer standing did not exist under the facts of this case. In an opinion by Justice Scalia, the second bloc (Scalia, Thomas) took the radical position that the entire doctrine of taxpayer standing should be discarded and *Flast v. Cohen*, which created such standing, should be overruled. Four Justices (Souter, Stevens, Ginsburg, Breyer) stated in a dissent by Justice Souter that they would have found taxpayer standing.

It is the view of the Alito bloc that creates binding precedent because it is more narrow than the view of the Scalia bloc. According to Justice Alito's opinion, *Flast* only allows challenges to spending programs specifically mandated by Congress. Justice Alito viewed the President's decision to fund faith-based conferences as an exercise of Executive discretion unconnected to a specific Congressional appropriation. The fact that the President used general Executive branch funds that had been appropriated by Congress did not provide a sufficient link to Congressional action. In essence, Justice Alito demanded, as a prerequisite to taxpayer standing, that the challenged expenditure involve funds earmarked by Congress for a particular program. The fact that Congress gave undifferentiated funds to the Executive Branch, which the Executive Branch then directed for an arguably impermissible purpose, did not suffice to confer standing.

The four dissenters argued that there is no meaningful distinction between the harm that taxpayers suffer when the Legislative Branch uses funds in violation of the Estab-

lishment Clause and the harm they suffer when the Executive Branch does the same thing. As such, the dissenters would have found taxpayer standing in this case."

Mr. Shapiro, though, remains optimistic and sees a silver lining in the otherwise gloomy *Hein* ruling: "The good news from today is that a majority of Justices reaffirmed the doctrine of *Flast* that taxpayers have standing to challenge specific Congressional appropriations on Establishment Clause grounds. The four dissenters (Souter, Stevens, Ginsburg, Breyer) plainly would have applied and even extended *Flast*. While the lead opinion (Roberts, Kennedy, Alito) expressed some skepticism of *Flast*, and noted that it "has largely been confined to its facts," (p. 19), the lead opinion also refused to overrule *Flast*, stating "[w]e do not extend *Flast*, but we also do not overrule it. We leave *Flast* as we found it" (p.24). Critically, Justice Kennedy added an opinion on behalf of only himself which both stated that he joined the lead opinion in full and stressed that *Flast* was correctly decided: "In my view the result reached in *Flast* is correct and should not be called into question" (Kennedy concurrence, p.1).

Thus, a majority of the current Court (Kennedy, Souter, Stevens, Ginsburg, Breyer) is on record as supporting the holding in *Flast* that Congressional spending programs can be challenged on Establishment Clause grounds. Two Justices (Roberts, Alito) refused to overrule *Flast* in this case but did not fully endorse it either. Finally, two Justices (Scalia, Thomas) took the radical position that *Flast* should be overruled, but such a break with precedent is extremely unlikely given the current composition of the Court and the views expressed.

One important qualification: The Court's decision limiting taxpayer standing does not affect plaintiffs' ability to bring Establishment Clause suits outside of the taxpayer standing context. Thus, even Executive action

Supreme Court Nixes Taxpayer Challenge (*continued*)

unrelated to congressional spending programs confers standing to sue if the plaintiff is subjected to an injury unrelated to the plaintiff's standing as a taxpayer."

RELIGIOUS RIGHT CELEBRATES RULING

President Bush glorified the *Hein* ruling, saying it was "a win for the thousands of community and faith-based nonprofits all across the country that have partnered with government at all levels to serve their neighbors."

The president added, "Most importantly, it is a win for the many whose lives have been lifted by the caring touch and compassionate hearts of these organizations."

Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) was jubilant over the high court opinion. Chief Counsel Jay Sekulow eagerly boasted to reporters, "This is a very significant victory that sends a powerful message that atheists and others antagonistic to religion do not get an automatic free pass to bring Establishment Clause lawsuits. The Supreme Court got it right in determining that the plaintiffs who challenged the President's faith-based initiative had no legal standing to do so."

Sekulow added that the *Hein* ruling "will have serious ramifications for separationist attempts to claim special privileges to sue as taxpayers without showing that a law or government activity actually injured them in any way. This is an important victory for the judicial system and for the President's faith-based initiative. By reject-

ing a claim to special treatment for atheists and other separationists, the high court took an important step toward restoring equity to the legal system with respect to federal challenges in the Establishment Clause arena."

Ironically, by drawing a strict interpretation of *Flast* in the *Hein* decision, the high court may also be circumscribing the ability of groups like the ACLJ to contest the use of public funds when un-orthodox, fringe sects—perhaps Scientology, Wicca or even Muslim charities—line-up at the treasury for their share of money from the controversial Bush program. Televangelist Pat Robertson was an early skeptic of the Bush faith-based program, and even suggested that funds be disbursed only to established, mainstream groups. Critics quickly pointed to Robertson's abysmal lack of legal knowledge, noting that such discrimination would likely not pass constitutional muster. Robertson's "Operation Blessing" then received a \$500,000 grant from the federal program, and the combative preacher quickly toned down his criticism of the Bush scheme.

THE (FOR NOW) MINORITY SPEAKS

Despite the 5-4 ruling in *Hein*, there are still members of the high court who would extend the rights enunciated in *Flast* to cases which challenge presidential use of public tax money to subsidize religion-based social programs.

Dissenting Justice David Souter, joined by Justices John Paul Stevens, Stephen Breyer and Ruth Bader Gins-

burg, disagreed with the Alito/Scalia clique in its attempts to insulate spending by the executive branch from constitutional review.

"When executive agencies spend identifiable sums of tax money for religious purposes, no less than when Congress authorizes the same thing, taxpayers suffer injury."

For now, the White House aid-to-religion scheme remains on track and not subject to judicial check; but the interpretation of the *Flast* decision could change if there is a disruption in the make-up of the Supreme Court, and if one or more justices would be replaced. It remains unclear if President Bush—who up to now has enjoyed considerable success with his appointments to the high court—will end up naming one or more new justices to the bench who reflect the same ideological coloration as Alito and Scalia.

Dave Silverman, Communications Director for American Atheists, told media that the decision in *Hein* will not resolve the issue of Executive Branch funding of religion.

"Millions of Americans, including those who are Atheists, Freethinkers, and Humanists, won't stand idly by as our money is laundered through the public treasury and used to support religion-based social programs."

See the full transcript of the majority opinion and dissents in the case at: <http://www.supremecourtus.gov/opinions/06slipopinion.html>.

[From American Atheists' AANEWS, 6/27/2007.]

FFRF Responds to *Hain* Decision

Executive Actions to Promote Religion Ruled Beyond Court Scrutiny

The U.S. Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in *Hein v. FFRF* granting the executive branch the freedom to violate the separation of church and state without court review spells "imperial presidency," charges the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

"Had Justice O'Connor remained on the court, as she was when we filed this lawsuit, we are confident this

would have been a 5-4 decision in our favor. Kennedy has become a swing vote to overturn well-established precedent," said Annie Laurie Gaylor, Foundation co-president and a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

"This means we have a constitutional separation between church and state, but no way to enforce it if the executive branch chooses to violate it

with 'discretionary' actions," added Dan Barker, a plaintiff and Foundation co-president. The Foundation is the largest association of atheists and agnostics in the U.S., whose 10,000 members work to keep church and state separate.

The Foundation brought suit in 2004 to challenge the government preference for religion shown by the

FFRF Responds to *Hain* Decision (continued)

creation of “faith-based” offices by the White House and federal cabinets by executive order. The suit challenged an internal “faith-based” bureaucracy within the federal government, which exists to promote faith-based funding, shows preference to funding religious over nonreligious groups, and holds conferences for faith-based groups, which has cost taxpayers multimillions, if not billions, of tax dollars.

Significantly, the high court upheld the precedent of *Flast v. Cohen* (1968), granting federal taxpayers the right to challenge unconstitutional acts of Congress to promote religion. Today’s Court interpretation, however, limits *Flast v. Cohen* to acts of Congress explicitly appropriating money used to promote religion, or funding specific programs which promote religion.

“Today’s unjust decision doesn’t even allow us into a courtroom to plead our case. But not overturning *Flast v. Cohen* is the silver lining,” said Barker.

The Supreme Court in effect ruled that the Bush Administration may use taxpayer money to support religion without complaint by taxpayers. The decision makes the violation impervious to court review, since no one besides taxpayers could have standing to challenge the appropriations.

“The only remedy left, since individual Americans are being barred from challenging this violation, is for Congress to de-fund the Office of Faith-based Initiatives at the White House and Cabinets,” said Barker. “Let Congress provide the oversight that the Court is refusing to give!”

The Foundation noted that all five voting against the right of federal taxpayers to sue in this case are practicing Roman Catholics. Roman Catholics, numbering five justices, now dominate the court. They are Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Alito, who wrote the decision, Scalia, Thomas, and Kennedy.

There are “imperial presidency” ramifications to the decision for the country beyond the fact that it will make it impossible to challenge many egregious violations of the Establishment Clause, Gaylor stated. In his concurrence, Justice Kennedy warns of “a real danger of judicial oversight of executive decisions,” and “constant intrusion upon the executive realm.” She pointed to Alito’s wording that we need to keep “courts within certain traditional bounds.”

“Separation of powers is supposed to provide checks and balances. It is quite an oversight to deny oversight!” Barker commented.

The decision is a wake-up call to voters and Congress, Gaylor said, noting that voters often overlook the fact that the most important domestic power a U.S. president possesses is to nominate Supreme Court justices.

The punchy and powerful dissent, written by Justice Souter and signed by Justices Ginsburg, Breyer, and Stevens, notes: “If the Executive could accomplish through the exercise of discretion exactly what Congress cannot do through legislation, Establishment Clause protection would melt away.” Souter wrote: “I see no basis for this distinction in either logic or precedent, and respectfully dissent.”

Souter quoted James Madison’s Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments, in which Madison wrote that the government in a free society may not “force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of any one establishment” of religion.

Richard Bolton, the Foundation’s attorney of counsel, said, “We are disappointed with the Supreme Court’s decision, particularly given the Court’s long commitment to the principle that taxpayers should not be forced to contribute even three pence to the government’s support of religion. The Court’s ‘three pence’ refer-

ence in *Everson* has become one of the Court’s most recognized pronouncements. For the Court to now conclude that taxpayers have no such standing to object to the use of their ‘three pence’ for the support of religion renders the Constitutional prohibition meaningless. The Court’s opinion simply cannot be reconciled with previous precedents. It cannot be squared with a commitment to enforcing the Establishment Clause.”

Scalia, in his concurrence signed by Thomas, dismisses taxpayer concerns as mere “Psychic Injury.”

“Scalia incorrectly asserts that our injury ‘consists of the taxpayer’s mental displeasure that money extracted from him is being spent in an unlawful manner,’” said Barker. “It is the U.S. Supreme Court that ought to have been ‘displeased’ that tax money is being spent unlawfully to promote religion!”

The Supreme Court’s action overturned the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, which in 2006 ruled that the Foundation and its taxpayers had the right to sue over allegations that the faith-based offices and their conferences have become government “vehicles of religious propaganda.”

The case is one of 11 lawsuits the Foundation has taken challenging various parts of the faith-based initiative. So far, the Foundation has won five significant victories in federal court, with four additional ongoing lawsuits. That litigation includes a new federal lawsuit filed recently challenging government appropriations to a church-run “ranch” in North Dakota which exists to bring children “to the Lord Jesus Christ” and which forbids non-Christian worship on its premises. A Foundation case filed in May challenges the controversial and first-of-its-kind creation of a chaplaincy to minister to state workers in Indiana.

[From an FFRF June 25 Press Release.]

“Humanism, the concept that humanity must be responsible for its own actions, morality, well-being, and environment, must replace theism if mankind is to prosper and live in peace... Humanism, not theism, will be the savior of mankind.”

—Dr. John Henderson, from his book *Fear, Faith, Fact, Fantasy*, 2003, pp. 222, 229.

Current Status of Abortion Rights in Georgia

Each quarter, Planned Parenthood of Georgia sends its supporters the latest news and information about the issues affecting choice and reproductive health care in Georgia. Here is a summary of their July 2 report.

HB 147, the ultrasound bill requiring that women be offered the "opportunity" to view an ultrasound and listen to heart sounds before receiving an abortion, went into effect. The woman must certify that she has declined to look at or listen to the ultrasound before the procedure is done.

The bill allows non-medical, unregulated "crisis pregnancy centers" run by anti-abortion staff and volunteers to provide ultrasounds to women as they make the decision to have an abortion. The true intent is to confuse and pressure women to forgo receiving the abortion regardless of *why* they sought this option to begin with.

Not surprisingly, HB 147 provides no exception for women who are victims of rape or incest, no exception for a woman facing a fetal anomaly, and no exception for medical emergencies

or ectopic pregnancies.

Taking HB 147 a step further, Georgia Right to Life (GRTL) and their supporters in the General Assembly introduced a ban (HB 1) earlier this year that would completely outlaw abortion in Georgia and impact some methods of contraception. As if that wasn't enough, they later introduced HB 536, a constitutional amendment to establish the "personhood" of each citizen from fertilization until natural death, making abortion a felony punishable by the death penalty or life imprisonment. This stronger amendment to ban abortion in Georgia is intended to become the legal vehicle to challenge and overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

According to an article in the June 20 *Coastal Empire* newspaper, Josh Brahm, a spokesman for GRTL, said that his organization was encouraged

by their success on the ultrasound bill and will be ready next year to push for passage of the constitutional amendment stating that life begins at fertilization.

Abortion is already heavily regulated in Georgia and violates the fundamental right to privacy and the right of a woman to make her own healthcare decisions with her doctor and family.

If some elected officials truly cared about reducing the number of abortions, they would work with Planned Parenthood to increase access to initiatives like birth control and sex education that prevent unintended pregnancies.

You can find out more about these issues at the PPGA Action Center: <http://www.ppgaction.org/ppga/>.

CSH and Richard, Elaine Hull Sue the State of Florida

On June 8, the Council for Secular Humanism, Richard Hull and Elaine Hull filed suit against the Florida Department of Corrections, the Florida Comptroller, a group called Prisoners of Christ, and Lamb of God Ministries. The suit requested that the State of Florida discontinue providing aid to two sectarian institutions.

The Florida Constitution has what is called a No-Aid Provision in Article I, Section 3, which reads "No revenue of the state or any political subdivi-

sion or agency thereof shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution." The lawsuit claims that the No-Aid Provision was violated.

The lawsuit also alleges that contracts with the Department of Corrections were violated when Prisoners of Christ and Lamb of God Ministries were reimbursed for what amounts to "illegal expenditures." Both groups

have contracts with the Department of Corrections "to provide Faith Based Substance Abuse Post-release Transitional Housing Program Services."

The petitioners in the lawsuit asked for a declaratory judgment and permanent injunctive relief to require the State of Florida to discontinue payments of State revenue under the illegal contracts.

Court dates for the case have not yet been determined.

Congratulations to Ed Buckner, whose Letter-to-the-Editor (below) was published in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on June 19.

Evidence for belief inadequate at best

DEAR EDITOR:

Adolph Hitler claimed to be a Christian. Stalin was raised as a Christian and attended a Christian school before becoming an atheist. Neither of them was, nor ever pretended to be, a secular humanist.

Despite Harry Hagan's illogical rant (Letters, June 14 MDJ),

belief and nonbelief in God have been debated for centuries, with no conclusive evidence available for either side. The debate cannot be won by either Hagan or me simply declaring that we're obviously right. Recent books like those by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris show that the evidence for

belief is, at best, inadequate — and everyone, on any side of this long debate, should read widely and consider carefully before reaching any conclusion.

History makes abundantly clear that neither religious faith nor lack of faith is by itself sufficient as a basis for morality.

And Mr. Hagan is equally misguided in insisting that lack

of religious faith is itself a matter of faith. If that is so, anyone who doesn't believe in Zeus or Thor or astrology must be said to be exercising "faith" rather than drawing conclusions based on the lack of evidence.

Ed Buckner
Atlanta Freethought Society
Smyrna

Stanley Fish on the New Atheism

From the June 13 weblog of Massimo Pigliucci (<http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com/>)

I'm getting a bit tired of reading reviews and commentaries about the recent surge in openly atheist books. Most of these commentaries splendidly make Richard Dawkins' point that it is simply unacceptable—even by progressives—to question religion. Which is, of course, good enough reason to question religion.

One of the latest entries in this increasingly popular genre of anti-atheist "criticism," is a rant by Stanley Fish, a professor of law, and with what he admits is a "small store of theological knowledge," not to mention a hopelessly flawed logic—a troublesome feature for someone who teaches law.

After starting his piece in the New York Times with an ad hominem attack (a logical fallacy), in which he accuses authors Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens of writing their books for the pure pursuit of notoriety, Fish suggests that what all these people are missing is the fact that believers are not at all oblivious to the criticisms raised against them (and hence don't need atheists to remind them). On the contrary, according to Fish, the essence of religious discourse is to be found precisely in how people of faith deal with such criticisms. Let's take a look at some examples.

After relating a story from Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* where the "hero" abandons wife and children because an evangelist tells him to run toward eternal life, Fish says that the author has incorporated criticism of the action inside the story itself, as evidenced by the fact that friends of the hero in question say that he must have been taken by "some frenzy distemper ... into his head." Right, too

bad that such "criticism" is then immediately dismissed by the same friends, who conclude that the fool is in fact "wiser ... than seven men that can render a reason," because, as we all know, breaking the trust of your beloved ones for no reason whatsoever is the most highly commendable action a human being can undertake.

Fish admits that Dawkins has a good question when he asks why Adam and Eve were punished so harshly for disobeying a rather insignificant rule, eating from a fruit tree (tellingly, a fruit that would give them knowledge). Most of us would be content with a slap on the wrist, but God—in his infinite lack of wisdom—had to go the whole nine yards and punish not only the perpetrators, but all their descendants too. But, Fish remarks, this problem has in fact been pondered by believers, and answers have been offered. The brilliant conclusion of such analysis? "It is important that the forbidden act be a trivial one; for were it an act that was on its face either moral or immoral, committing it or declining to commit it would follow from the powers of judgment men naturally have." Yeah, god forbid humans (hopefully Fish meant to include women as well and just forgot to slip out of Biblical mode) actually use reason—rather than faith—to decide the course of their lives.

It doesn't end there, unfortunately. Fish quotes Hitchens as asking (again, seems to me, reasonably) why it is that God needs constant praise from us, he being all-powerful and all that. The faithful, again, are not caught off guard: "God is the epitome of the rich relative who has everything; thanks and gratitude are the only coin we can tender." How humiliating for human-

ity, and how absurdly narcissistic of God.

No such list of nonsense would be complete without a reference to Hitler and the Holocaust. Harris properly asks in his book, where in the universe was God when his chosen people were being sent to the crematoria by the millions? A logical question, and therefore one not worth asking, according to Fish. The believer, as usual, has a ready "answer": "evil proceeds from the will of a creature who was created just and upright, but who corrupted himself by an act of disobedience that forever infects his actions and the actions of his descendants." "Himself"? I thought it was all the woman's fault... At least Fish has the decency to admit (in parenthesis) that this retort is anything but satisfactory. Needless to say (or is it?), just punishment ought to extend to the perpetrators of an act, not to their descendants in perpetuity (as in "forever"). To act as God is allegedly acting is monstrous and must be resisted at all costs.

Fish concludes by saying that atheists just don't understand. No, we don't. We cannot understand because we live by the apparently misguided idea that belief ought to be proportional to evidence, that one of the best attributes of humanity is its ability to reason, and that blind faith is not worthy of praise, but rather is the sort of evil that brings people to slam airplanes into skyscrapers, killing thousands whose only "sin" was to be born in a different culture. As Blaise Pascal (a highly religious philosopher) put it, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." Ponder that one, Mr. Fish.

"And the day will come, when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as His Father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter." *

— Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to John Adams, Monticello, April 11, 1823

* One of the many virgin birth myths/sagas of the pre-Christian world. Minerva, Roman goddess of wisdom, came from (i.e., was born from) the head of her father, Jupiter.

Concern About Hate Crime Laws By Steve Yothment

Religious organizations such as the American Family Association (AFA) and the Family Research Council (FRC) are talking a lot these days about a supposed threat to their free-speech right to bash gays and atheists. The threat, they say, is in the form of legislation called "Hate Crime Laws."

For example, in a June 14 "Action Alert" to its members, the AFA's main article was titled "A bill in Congress could make it a crime for pastors and churches to speak against homosexuality." The article centered on Senate Bill S. 1105, called the "Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2007."

The AFA says in their Action Alert that "If pastors and other Christians don't aggressively oppose a bill now in Congress, in the near future they could be subject to huge fines and prison terms if they say anything negative about homosexuality. The proposed law could make it a crime to preach on Romans Chapter 1 or 1 Corinthians Chapter 6. Or even to discuss them in a Sunday School class. If churches and individuals want to keep the government from telling them what they can and cannot preach and teach about homosexuality, they better get involved now!"

The Action Alert continues, "Senate bill S. 1105 could make negative statements concerning homosexuality such as calling the practice of homosexuality a sin from the pulpit, a 'hate crime' punishable by law. This dangerous legislation could take away your freedom of speech and your freedom of religion."

The Action Alert then highly encourages the reader to sign a petition to oppose the bill, and to support the AFA's cause financially.

The Family Research Council is now also into the act. Their July 2 mailing to people on their email list was titled "Spread the Word About Hate Crimes Laws." In it they said, "As we reflect on the Judeo-Christian beliefs our American government was built upon, let us be ever-vigilant

against eroding liberties we have long valued and practiced. Americans, even today, are having their freedoms threatened because of their religious beliefs and association. Left-wing extremists are slowly and methodically challenging the liberty of those who speak out against homosexual behavior. Through so-called 'hate crime' laws, our nation, like others before it, is moving toward the creation of un-American offense of 'thought crimes' and other curtailments of freedom of speech... As Dr. D. James Kennedy has warned, expanded hate crimes laws have the potential to 'shut down churches and send pastors to prison for simply reading part of the Bible.'"

The article goes on, inviting the reader to receive a 40-minute video on the subject for "a donation of any amount."

So, what about it? Is Congress writing laws to curtail religious expression? Is free speech really in jeopardy?

The Snopes.com website, also known as the Urban Legends Reference Pages, addresses this very issue. For the claim that "A bill before Congress would make it a 'hate crime' for pastors and churches to speak against homosexuality," they indicate a status of "False." See the webpage at <http://www.snopes.com/politics/sexuality/hatecrime.asp>.

The site indicates that "The proposed Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2007 (H.R. 1592/S.1105) currently before Congress would not criminalize negative comments concerning homosexuality. The bill seeks to amend Title 18, Chapter 13 of the U.S. Code by adding a section on 'Hate crime acts' that specifies criminal penalties for:

Whoever, whether or not acting under color of law, willfully causes bodily injury to any person, or, through the use of fire, a firearm, or an explosive or incendiary device, attempts to cause bodily injury to any person, because of the actual or perceived religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender

identity or disability of any person." (Editor's note: The proposed law also includes penalties for kidnapping or an attempt to kidnap, aggravated sexual abuse, or an attempt to kill.)

The Snopes.com website continues, "The bill addresses 'willfully causing bodily injury to any person' (as well as 'attempts to cause bodily injury to any person') because of 'actual or perceived...gender, sexual orientation, [or] gender identity.' The bill does not 'criminalize negative comments concerning homosexuality,' nor would it make 'calling the practice of homosexuality a sin from the pulpit a 'hate crime'.' The bill has nothing to do with the issue of speech; it only prescribes criminal penalties for the willful infliction of bodily injury on others."

The site continues, "In fact, the version of the bill passed by the House of Representatives on 3 May 2007 includes a clause that specifically precludes it from applying to conduct protected by free speech and free exercise of religion provisions of the Constitution:

Nothing in this Act, or the amendments made by this Act, shall be construed to prohibit any expressive conduct protected from legal prohibition by, or any activities protected by the free speech or free exercise clauses of, the First Amendment to the Constitution."

So, it appears that the AFA and FRC are representing the proposed legislation incorrectly. Or, is there more to the story? They sure seem to be taking the proposed bill personally. Do they think that they, or their people, would be guilty of hate crimes? What aspects of the bill do they really find offensive? Is it the part about not being able to inflict bodily injury? Or is it the inability to kidnap, or sexually abuse others? Or is it the inability to cause bodily injury based on the religion of the victim?

I'll give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that they just did it to rile up their members so that they donate more money.

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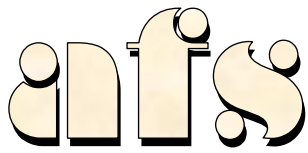
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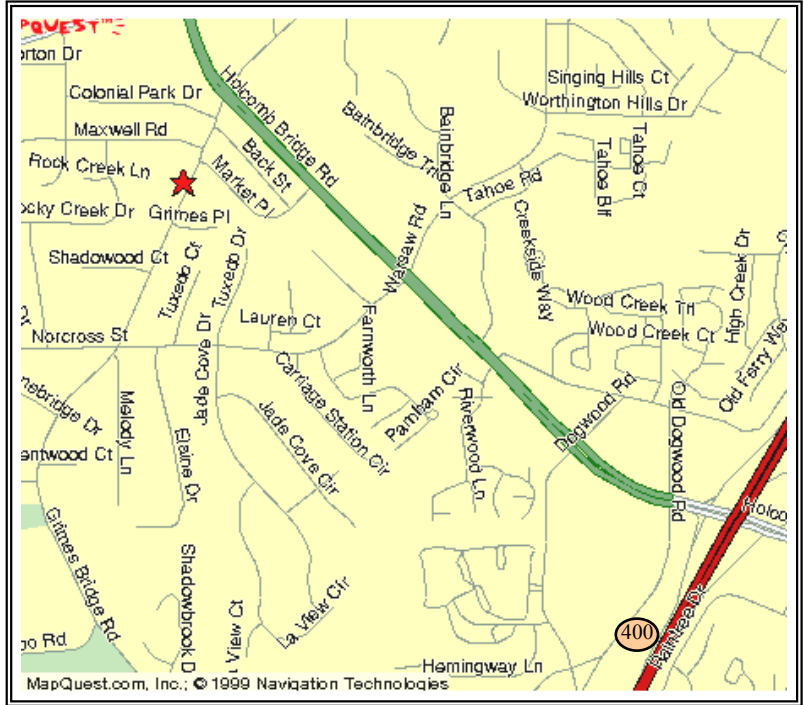
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**This Month's Speaker:
Robert Collins**



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