

# Atlanta Freethought News

*Dare to Think for Yourself*

An AFS Publication • Volume 13 Number 12 • December 2007

## The December AFS Meeting

The December 9 AFS meeting will include a Potluck Lunch at 1:00 (see the article below), and then a talk at 2:00 by **Dr. John Henderson** on his latest book, *Judging God*.

Dr. Henderson is a retired Air Force Flight Surgeon and General Surgeon. He and his wife Ruth live in Asheville, NC. During his Air Force career, he served in England, Spain, Japan, and in various states across the USA.

Regarding his latest book, Henderson says, "Religions and their gods have been judging man since man created his first god thousands of years ago. It is now our turn to judge gods. We cannot afford a god who does not live up to our standards of justice and morality. No longer can we afford a god who incites and condones intolerance, hatred, and killing. If there is to be peace on earth, we and we alone must define morality and strive to enforce justice among human societies. Gods have failed to do so. This book dares to criticize the god in common usage today."

The meeting will be 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 December Potluck Lunch

Before the December meeting, we will have a **Potluck Lunch**, starting at 1:00. Join AFS members and guests for some good food and great socializing. Please bring food according to the first letter of your last name as follows:

A-G: Bring a side dish;

H-P: Bring a main dish;

Q-Z: Bring a dessert.

AFS will provide drinks, plates and silverware.

## The December AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Friday, December 14, at 7:00 PM.

## The AFS Reading Group

The **AFS Reading Group** meets monthly to discuss interesting books covering a variety of topics, including arguments in favor of freethought, the political and social impact of fundamentalism, alternative religions, philosophy, evolution, and other topics of interest to participants.

The group's next meeting will be on Thursday, December 13, at 7:30 PM at Borders Books & Music (4745 Ashford-Dunwoody Rd, Atlanta GA 770-396-0004).

The group is now reading *Atheist Manifesto* by Michael Onfray, and will discuss the book at the December meeting.

For more information, please visit the AFS website or contact the Reading Group Co-Chairs, Forrest Greene and Brian Shriver, at [bookclub@atlantafreethought.org](mailto:bookclub@atlantafreethought.org).

## Watch "The Golden Compass"

AFS members will see the movie **The Golden Compass** on Saturday, December 15, at 4:00 PM at the AMC 14 Theater in Phipps Plaza, 3500 Peachtree Road, in Atlanta. (Check to verify the time for the movie at 404-816-4262.)

After the movie, let's go to Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Rd, for refreshments and discussion of the movie.

## AFS Meetings and Activities

Dec 9: AFS Board Meeting at AF Center, 11:00 AM.

Dec 9: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.

Dec 13: AFS Reading Group at Borders Books, 7:30 PM.

Dec 14: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

Dec 15: See the movie "The Golden Compass," 4:00 PM.

## Other Meetings of Interest

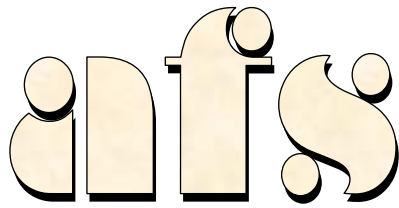
The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of every month at 1:00 PM at the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 1025 Mount Vernon Hwy, in Atlanta. For details, see <http://www.fellowshipofreason.com>.

The **Alabama Freethought Association** will have a **Winter Solstice** celebration at Lake Hypatia, AL, on December 22 and 23. The program is titled "Cultivating the Sensual: A Two Day Feast of the Senses," and will feature Diane Ackerman's book *A Natural History of the Senses* as a guide for participating in and enjoying the Feast. For a schedule and registration form, send email: [bbraypolitical@yahoo.com](mailto:bbraypolitical@yahoo.com).

The **Secular Organizations for Sobriety** meets at the Atlanta Freethought Center every Tuesday evening at 8:00 PM. SOS is the secular substitute for Alcoholics Anonymous.

There will be a "**meetup**" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, December 9, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur, GA.

Yet another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for December 23 at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Road, in Atlanta. This meetup will include a freethought gift exchange, so bring a gift worth about \$10.



**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.

Dec 9: Dr. John Henderson will speak on his new book *Judging God*. This meeting will include a Potluck Lunch.

Jan 13: An Iranian speaker will speak on "Growing Up in a Theocracy."

Feb 10: AFS member Bruce Herr will speak.

Mar 9: TBD

Apr 13: Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church/State will speak.

## AFS Email Lists

The **AFS eNews** Announcement list provides subscribers with reminders and updates on AFS activities and news. The **AFS Forum** is a place for discussions of freethought, atheism, agnosticism, church-state separation, and religion. Visit the AFS website at [www.AtlantaFreethought.org](http://www.AtlantaFreethought.org) for more info or to subscribe.

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)  
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**Visit our World Wide Web site at**

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**AFS Webmaster:** Walter Bell

Call and leave messages on the

**AFS Info Line:** 404-A THEIST

# AFS Protests Governor Perdue's Prayer Meeting

**O**n Tuesday, November 6, Georgia governor Sonny Perdue called for a prayer service on the Capitol grounds to pray for rain. In response, the Atlanta Freethought Society, along with the Council for Secular Humanism and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, called for a peaceful protest of the prayer service.

AFS Treasurer Ed Buckner filed for the permit on that Wednesday. An AFS press release stated:

The Governor of Georgia, Sonny Perdue, has called for a prayer service on the Georgia Capitol grounds, Washington Street side, at 11:45 AM on Tuesday, 13th November 2007 to pray for rain. This is embarrassingly foolish, a great mistake, a waste of taxpayer money, and unconstitutional on its face.

The Atlanta Freethought Society, along with two of the biggest and best national organizations for free-thinkers, the Council for Secular Humanism (headquarters in Amherst NY), and the Freedom From Religion Foundation (headquarters in Madison WI)—will engage in a polite and peaceful protest on next Tuesday, 13 November at the Georgia Capitol Building in downtown Atlanta...

AFS President Steve Yothment noted, "Let ministers and churches call people to prayer. The Governor should work with the surrounding

states' leaders and with water management authorities to ensure adequate water for Georgia and not rely on prayer as a water management strategy."

...This protest will be directed at the Governor's actions on the basis both of violations of religious liberty and on the basis of absurd religious ideas. Deeply religious Christians and other believers should take offense at this as bad religion and as a threat to religious liberty. Deeply irreligious Georgians should take offense that someone representing us should engage in such illogical non-

sense, with the potential to embarrass us all internationally.

Georgians of all religious or irreligious beliefs and of every political philosophy should take offense at this waste of our tax dollars and plain violation of separation of church and state and of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and straightforward violation of the Georgia Constitution, Article I, Section II, Paragraph VI:

"Para. VI. Separation of church and state. No money shall ever be taken from the public treasury, directly or indirectly, in aid of any church, sect,



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## The AFS Protest (continued)

cult, or religious denomination or of any sectarian institution.”

A rally permit has been issued by the Georgia Capitol Police/Georgia Building Authority as of 9<sup>th</sup> November—granting us approval. The Georgia Building Authority is expecting a large crowd and extensive media coverage, so please come early... We have gotten some fairly nasty e-mails about this already, so please be prepared for the possibility of hostile counter-protestors. We must remain peaceful and polite, even if others aren't.

Jack McKinney and Ed Buckner came up with many suggestions for signs to be used in the protest. These were posted on the AFS website for members to consider. Walter Bell updated the website continually regarding the planned protest.

On the weekend before the protest, Ed Buckner and Steve Yothment were

interviewed by several local and national news agencies, and appeared on local TV news programs. Ed was on the local CBS News affiliate, saying, “We didn't elect that guy as a preacher. He has no right to make a religious statement on behalf of Georgians.” Steve was on Fox 5 News that Saturday, saying, “Let the religious leaders call prayer meetings. Let the government work on secular matters, in particular, in this case handling the water management situation.”

The protest occurred as planned. We had about 24 people in the protest. Most were AFS members, but there were a few FFRF members and 1 other person who joined us.

The protesters met at the corner of Washington Street and Martin Luther King Drive, which is still on the Capitol square. But as the protest started, policemen moved us away from that intersection about a half-block away

from the square, so that we were no longer in view of the crowd that was there for the prayer service. This was very frustrating, because our permit was for “Capitol Square, Washington Street.” We were moved to a location that was not on Washington Street and not at the Capitol square! However, we didn't have the permit document at the protest. The permit was mailed to Ed and didn't arrive until after the prayer meeting, even though he filed for the permit almost a week earlier! We only had a verbal OK to protest, with a promise that the permit was in the mail. The delay in receiving the actual permit and our being moved away from the square is a concern for which AFS may seek legal action.

From the day of the protest until the following weekend, Ed and Steve continued to be interviewed for many radio and TV news and talk programs.

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## The FFRF Billboard

**T**he Freedom From Religion Foundation, which has many members in Georgia, has unveiled a new non-theistic billboard in the Atlanta area.

The whimsical full-color 14x48-foot billboard message mimics a stained-glass window and suggests: “Imagine No Religion.” The billboard includes the Freedom From Religion Foundation's name and its website, [FFRF.org](http://FFRF.org).

The Foundation placed its first billboard in Madison, Wis. in October, employing the same stained-glass motif but bearing the message: “Beware of Dogma.”

“Our goal is to put up a freethinking billboard somewhere in every state,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, Foundation co-president.

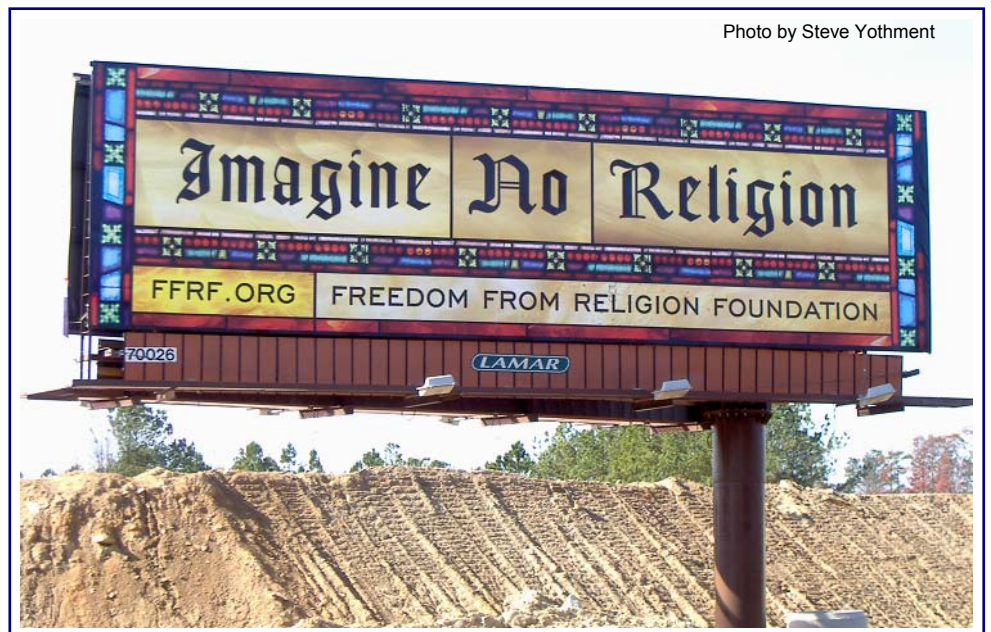
“We are pleased to choose Georgia as the second state, thanks to enthusiastic response from area FFRF members and the Atlanta Freethought Society, who did the legwork and made contributions. With the Governor of Georgia appearing to mix up his job with that of ‘preacher in chief,’ we think it's important that the views of

Georgia's many nonreligious citizens be advertised.”

The message went up on Nov. 27 on a Lamar billboard and will stay up through Dec. 25 on the West side of Peachtree Industrial Blvd, 1/2 mile north of the South Berkley Lake Road crossing in Norcross, GA.

“We thank FFRF member David Driscoll for his help, and the wonderful activists at the Atlanta Freethought Society who contributed generously toward this billboard display,” co-presidents Barker and Gaylor said.

AFS and individual AFS members contributed \$591 toward the sign.



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# AFS Releases FAQ on the Prayer Meeting Protest

The following FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions), written on Nov. 14 by Ed Buckner and reviewed/edited by Steve Yothment, was sent by email to hundreds of questioners about our Prayer Service Protest.

We received hundreds of e-mails, telephone calls, and comments from inquirers all over the U.S. (and beyond) about our recent protest. Some of these were rude or angry or even vicious, including one person who thought enough of his own crude, obscene message to submit it 163 times. (His service provider has been notified.) Some were grateful, supportive messages, including at least a few from religious people who believe in prayer but who realize that Governor Perdue's unconstitutional actions threatened their rights as well as ours. We are most grateful for the support we have received. We had no idea that we would get world-wide attention as a result of our protest, but we are glad of the opportunity to learn and to educate others—that is and always has been our core purpose.

Many of the messages, especially among the majority that did not support us, asked us questions, some polite and reasonable, some less so. We have no staff—AFS has never had even a part-time employee; we function as an entirely member-run, volunteer organization—and could not reasonably get around to providing a personal reply to every question.

We appreciate the chance, using these Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) with our answers (below) to respond to most of the questions. Some questions take books (we can recommend many—and have published several), not mere sentences, to answer. More detailed answers to some of the questions can be found at our website, [www.atlantafreethought.org](http://www.atlantafreethought.org), or by going to <http://www.secularhumanism.org/columns.php#buckner>. If anyone sends us a *relevant* question that is *not* addressed below and can be answered quickly, we will attempt to reply and perhaps to add it to a future FAQ list.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

1. "Why does AFS oppose people's right, including the Governor's, to pray?"

We don't. Religious liberty, certainly including the right to pray for everyone who believes in prayer, is a fundamental American principle, protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and by the Constitution of the State of Georgia. Most if not all members of AFS think that prayer does little good beyond occasionally helping the person offering the prayer think more carefully about something, and few if any of us pray. But we value religious liberty for all, including those who disagree with us. What we protested and vigorously disapprove of is having an elected official, a secular governmental leader, organizing a prayer service on the Georgia Capitol grounds. No such official in this nation, including Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia, has the right to make any religious decisions on behalf of American—including Georgian—citizens.

Any citizen, including Governor Perdue, has the unquestionable right to pray, to seek religious leaders of his choice to lead or join him in prayer, and to engage in similar religious practices. But *as Governor*, he must represent all the people and he must not represent his personal religious beliefs as the official ones for his state. Try a simple thought experiment (suggested by AFS director Jack McKinney): imagine in the future a Governor is elected who is an atheist (or perhaps some other non-Christian). Would he have the right to call together a group of prominent atheistic leaders to a public meeting at the state capitol and proclaim that "CHRISTIANITY IS A MYTH" and "NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER"? After all, just because the Governor is a representative doesn't mean his freedom to ridicule prayer should be taken away, right? We assert that the hypothetical Governor has no right to do that, for exactly the same reason Governor Perdue has no right to convene religious services on the state capitol grounds.

2. "Why is AFS any better than those crazies who picket soldiers' funerals?" OR "Have some decency and respect—don't interrupt or protest against or distract from a prayer service." OR "Why does AFS ridicule religious beliefs and practices? Aren't religious people entitled to respect?" OR "Why does AFS insult religious people and their practices?"

We do not advocate (and have never practiced) protesting against private, non-government-sponsored prayer services in homes or institutions of religion, or going door-to-door to advocate against religion. AFS members have a wide range of opinions about most issues, including the war the U.S. is conducting in Iraq, but none of us would interfere with or protest at a soldier's funeral. Religious people have exactly the same—no more but also no less—right to have their beliefs and ideas treated with respect as do irreligious people. If ideas (ours included) are brought into the public arena and claimed to be valuable, correct, desirable ideas, they must be open to criticism and argument. Some religious people are insulted because we don't accept their beliefs, because we exist—and we cannot help that—but we are not interested in gratuitous insults of religious believers. Hundreds of churches and temples and mosques, and thousands of Georgians had been praying for rain for many months—and we never protested that praying. It was the Governor, not us, who turned the prayers for rain into a political spectacle, a publicity stunt.

3. "What could it possibly hurt to pray for rain? What have we got to lose?"

When the prayers don't end the drought, the Governor—and Georgia—look primitive and silly. When the Governor—not just a religious leader—lets the world think that Georgians are part of a primitive, pre-scientific culture, it embarrasses and harms all Georgians. When the Gov-

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## FAQ on the Prayer Meeting Protest (*continued*)

error violates principles proven by long experience to protect everyone's religious liberty, everyone loses. When the Governor acts as if his prayers, his service led by preachers he picked, can work, while prayers of ordinary Georgians have failed, he insults Georgians and mocks any god that might exist.

### 4. "Why does AFS hate God?" "Don't you realize you'll all wind up roasting in hell if you mock God?"

We don't. We don't see any good reason to believe any god exists. We know we're in the minority in Georgia—but majority votes cannot settle religious questions and individual religious rights of each citizen outweigh majority votes. We're certainly aware of the interpretation of many fundamentalist Christians that suggests that God is a petty, spiteful tyrant who will arrange for eternal, horrific punishment for people who dare to say He has no clothes. We do not accept the probability that there is a god—but it seems even less likely that any god that might exist would be so absurdly human in his pettiness. It is in any case a risk we take knowingly, and we wonder why anyone thinks their all-powerful god needs help harassing us.

### 5. "Why should anyone pay any attention to a small group of troublemakers [that was one of the more polite names we were called] like AFS members?"

Religious liberty is important to everyone, no matter what their beliefs or lack of them. It is worth defending even if unreasonable people call you names.

### 6. "Don't you know that separation of church and state is not even in the Constitution; and besides, that it only means that government cannot interfere with churches or choose denominations?"

This question is based on common but thoroughly discredited notions that imply that constitutional concepts can only be represented by the shorthand labels often used to express them; and that religion can get government support under the Constitu-

tion. Crucial constitutional principles are often not addressed in the Constitution with the precise words that we usually use for them. Thomas Jefferson, as President, in a carefully worded formal letter sent in 1802, not long after the First Amendment was ratified, popularized the words we now use for the constitutional protection of religious liberty: "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibit the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state."

The words "religious liberty" and "freedom of religion" are also not in the documents, along with many other ideas of the most basic importance to our rights as U.S. citizens (a right to privacy, a right to vote, "innocent until proven guilty," etc. Any who want more examples (and discussions of each of them) can go to <http://www.usconstitution.net/constnot.html> if you have access to the Internet.

Baptist preachers were among the fiercest, strongest advocates of separation of church and state in the 1780s and 1790s. One, John Leland, wrote in 1791, "Let every man speak freely without fear—maintain the principles that he believes—worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods; and let government protect him in so doing, i.e., see that he meets with no personal abuse or loss of property for his religious opinions." The principle plainly precludes a Governor from making religious decisions for citizens of his state, especially in light of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. These ideas are well established constitutional law—and even the words "separation of church and state" are in the Georgia Constitution.

### 7. "Haven't you got anything better to do? Why don't you get a life?"

It strikes us as odd that someone who takes the time and effort to rail against us in outrageous ways believes it is we who need to get a life.

Most AFS members could not attend the protest because they had to work on a Tuesday, but those of us who protested generally have rich, fulfilling lives—and protecting religious liberty and our right to live free of government-sponsored religiosity is one of the reasons we think our lives are worthwhile.

### 8. "How dare you call yourself 'freethinkers' when you won't even allow anyone to disagree?"

We call ourselves freethinkers because we sincerely believe that thoughts are clearer and lives better when religious orthodoxy and religious authorities are set aside, when we are free from religion. We have no illusions about the number of people who disagree with us. We don't think we have the power to force anyone to agree with us, and we certainly don't seek such power.

### 9. "Why would freethinkers, who don't even believe in the Bible, quote Bible verses like Matthew 6:5-6 out of context at a protest and on your web site? Isn't that hypocritical?"

We do not accept the Bible as valid as an authority, but we did *not* use Matthew 6:5-6 out of context or inappropriately. We made it clear in interviews that we do not accept biblical authority, but we do think some valid ideas are included therein. Hypocrisy is in fact the "sin" described in Matthew 6:5-6 and sums up exactly one of the key reasons the prayer service should not have been held. If I said publicly, "I rely on the Boy Scout Oath to guide me" and someone else—who happens not perhaps to be a Boy Scout fan—pointed out that I'm not "brave, clean, and reverent," he is not being hypocritical, whether or not he is correct.

### 10. "Why does AFS complain that there was not broad enough representation of different faiths at the Governor's prayer service, when everyone knows you wouldn't be satisfied no matter how many religions were represented?"

Indeed we would not be satisfied no matter how many faith communities were represented, because the Gover-

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## FAQ on the Prayer Meeting Protest (*continued*)

nor has no authority to call a prayer service at the state capitol or to choose which religious leaders will speak at such a service. The fact that Governor Perdue only had a few faiths represented (some news reports said only three clergy, all of them Protestant ministers, spoke) does, however, show more clearly that the Governor was only trying to promote his own religion.

### 11. "Do you really think the world would be better off without religion—what about morality?"

Yes. Much good and much evil is done in the name of religion and in the name of other absolutist orthodoxies, but we like what Nobel-Prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg said: "With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion." To those who claim that reliable, consistent, absolute morality can only come from a god, we ask why the moral standards (not just the moral behavior) of religious people vary so widely from group to group and historical period to historical period. For example, the great majority of Christian preachers here in Georgia in the 1840s and 1850s preached, loudly and frequently, that human slavery was an institution provided by and approved of by Almighty God. They easily produced many biblical verses to support that assertion. Contemporary Christians nearly all reject such a claim, as we do. And apparently sincere modern Christians disagree, as we do, on abortion, capital punishment, gun control, war, stem cell research, death with dignity, and much more.

### 12. "We prayed for rain—and it rained! It worked! What's your problem with that?"

It's early yet, but the few sprinkles we have had so far were predicted *before* the prayer service was announced (Coincidence? You decide!) and have not begun to solve the drought problem. We have no doubt that if and when enough rain comes to really do

some good, the Governor and some simplistic Christians will claim the prayer service or God caused it—but we also have no doubt that the Governor and his supporters will refuse to blame any failures on the prayer service or their God. The hits will be counted and the misses ignored, to Georgia's continuing shame.

### 13. "We elected Governor Perdue, not you—and he's a good man. Where do you get the right to say he embarrasses you or Georgia?"

Probably most AFS members did not vote for Perdue (we do have some Republican members), but, once elected, he is required to serve *all* Georgians and to obey the Georgia and U.S. Constitutions. If the Governor or some other elected official committed some other form of fraud or foolishness, these same questioners would probably disclaim association with him. (Imagine a future Democratic or Independent leader of Georgia has an indiscreet, messy affair while in office—do you suppose Republicans would be embarrassed at the shame brought on our state?)

### 14. "The news media reported you were out of sight of the prayer service—why?"

Only Governor Perdue and the capitol police know for sure, but we had an approved (by the Georgia Building Authority/Georgia Capitol Police) permit to meet on "Washington Street, Georgia Capitol" to hold our protest—and when we assembled there, well away from the service but in sight of it and on our capitol grounds, we were moved by capitol police. They refused to give any reason, saying "We're just following orders. You have to move or we'll arrest you and take you to jail." At that point, we were still in sight of the service—but not for long. After only a very few minutes, we were moved again, down the block, out of sight of the service (and no longer on Washington Street nor on the grounds of the capitol). We never got loud enough to disrupt or even disturb the

service, nor had we intended to—in fact we had said, to the police and to the media, repeatedly, that this would be a polite, peaceful protest and that we would in no way disrupt the service. It is speculation on our part to say so, but the most likely explanation seems to be that the Governor did not want to see us. If he had been at a religious service, in a private, non-governmental place, that would have been quite reasonable—but the Governor, not the AFS, made this into a political event.

### 15. "Why all the quotes from and interviews with Ed Buckner—who is just your treasurer, after all?"

The protest happened to be my (Ed Buckner's) idea. It was approved by the AFS officers before we proceeded, but my name was first on the first e-mails going out seeking support—and the media therefore called and interviewed me (dozens of times). Our president, Steve Yothment, approved of the protest as soon as he learned of the idea, and he has been interviewed many times as well, as have some of our other leaders. Ed and Steve and no doubt others are still available for interviews, talks to groups (religious or not), debates, and more.

### 16. "If a Muslim Governor called for prayers to Allah, would you have the guts to oppose that?"

Yes.

### 17. "Why don't you answer *my* question?"

We have no paid staff, only volunteers. We have tried to answer, here, most of the questions we've received. Some questions have been so utterly groundless—like "Why do you people hate America?" or "Why does AFS support terrorism?" that they don't deserve answers. Some seemed not to be seeking answers at all—like "Why don't you bastards go f\*\*k yourselves?" Some few would take many books—books that are in fact readily available—to answer. But if we missed your sincere, relevant question, please try again.

## Progress made in separation of church and state

Even though I am not the one who is being addressed by a letter of Nov. 8, I could not help as an observer of religion in general and fundamentalist Christianity in particular to be moved to comment on it.

The writer seems particularly frightened by the overall progress that has been made in our society over the past 40 years to ensure the separation of church and state.

And he seems quite alarmed that his version of Christianity is not the one that should be observed by everyone else.

It's a matter of perspective isn't it? There may be quite a few things within our culture that even to me is banal and simply stupid. And many may agree or disagree on what exactly those things are. Some of those things may be in need of improvement, but it does not necessarily follow that we are suffering from an overall culture decay.

According to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) of 2001, (adults 18 and over) the U.S. population is composed of 76.5 percent Christians, other religious groups, 2.3 percent and the non-religious total 14.1 percent.

Some Christians feel and say they are experiencing bigotry and hatred. But when the ARIS survey of 2001 indicates that 76.5 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian, I fail to see how a minority of Americans who are of other religions or no religion at all are discriminating against Christians, when in fact Christians make up a larger percentage of the population in almost any social or political setting one can think of.

If there is any discrimination going on, it is mostly Christians against other religions and the nonreligious.

Religious freedom does not belong to Christians alone; it also applies to those of other religions and of no religion as well. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Wiccans, and Pagans have as much right to their religious practices and observances as Christians do.

And nonbelievers have a right to be free from religion.

Since the Church of Jesus Christ as a "body of believers," as mentioned, is in the sense of anyone who believes Jesus to be the Son of God, then that must include every denomination, every sect, every small group of Bible believers that historical schismatic Christianity has produced.

But if you could ask any inerrant-believing Bible-thumper from the Baptist Evangelical tradition whether a Catholic is a Christian or not, I bet my bottom dollar he or she would say "no".

There will always be disagreement among the "the body of Christ" who is or is not of that body.

So you have situations where the arm disagrees with the leg but will at times plot with one another to chop off a right digit, as their history has often shown.

I do not advocate that Christians should be doormats; neither do I recommend nonbelievers to be doormats for Christians. Why should the nonreligious allow anyone of any religion to impose themselves upon us?

It's a two-way street. If you take great umbrage as a believer that your faith is in peril, then you must understand that there is a shoe on the other foot.

We nonbelievers sometimes feel threatened by the zealotry among the religious. So I advocate and encourage non-believers reading this letter to join together in community and fight discrimination and First amendment violations.

Public schools are facilities paid for by tax dollars that our government has collected to house and educate our youth for eight hours a weekday. If I may remind the Christians, they are not the only ones funding that public educational system.

Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Pagans, Wiccans and Freethinkers are contributing their money to that same pot, too. And because of

that fact, it was deemed inappropriate that all of us should be funding the promotion of one segment of our society's religious faith. Why should one group have special privileges and not the others?

It's better that our publicly funded schools be religiously neutral. You don't want your children reciting a teacher-led Wiccan blessing at Halloween, and if I had any children I would not want them reciting a teacher-led Christian prayer at Christmas.

And if you are going to have Bible readings in school and teacher-led prayer, then whose version of the Bible will you be using, and which catechism and prayer book is the official one?

Many fundamentalists still insist on viewing the Constitution backwards and upside down. They continue to make the mistake of being confused about the separation of government from religion.

A wall, by its definition, is a thing which keeps two other things separated from each other. Government cannot and should not tell you how to worship or who or what to worship. And religious groups, bodies, or institutions have no right to impose their dogma as laws enacted by Congress and enforced by the Executive on a religiously plural nation.

Gov. Perdue's recent violation of state as well as federal constitutional law by holding a religious service on state property and funding that service only further underscores the Christian misunderstanding of the First Amendment establishment clause.

As long as some of you Christians continue to make that mistake, I and others who are mindful of that fact will continue to remind you and protest that it is a mistake.

If there are 20 million Christians who do not vote, then there must be another few million that do not vote who are not Christians. Imagine the kinds of influential voting blocks and alliances there would be if you make them angry.

Are Christian values the only values? Is it not absurd to suggest that people of other faiths or no faith at all have no values simply because they are not Christian and therefore of no importance?

There are many values that we hold in common for many different reasons.

Should we not concentrate on those things that unify us as human beings (altruism, veracity, kindness, honor, forbearance, tolerance, etc.) instead of concentrating on narrow-minded things which divide us? Christians do not hold a monopoly on values, family or otherwise.

I suspect that the reason some Christians are feeling a bit nervous now is because they are aware that they are not in total control anymore like the good ol' days of heretic hunting and inquisition.

They are unsettled because more and more the nonreligious are becoming quite vocal in questioning their authority.

Books like Sam Harris's "Letter to a Christian Nation" (#7 in New York Times Best Seller List, Oct. 2006) and Richard Dawkins, "The God Delusion" (reached #4 early December 2006) have captured a lot of people's attention, leading people to rethink their beliefs and attitudes.

Add to that the failure of a religiously led Republican government and the implosion of that party, things are not looking so good for the Religious Right at this time.

The Nov. 8 letter writer says that his Lord never said that Christians should sit back and allow him to be their guard dog. So would the reverse be true? Should Christians be their God's guard dog, baring their teeth when it suits their agendas?

And why should a supposedly all powerful god have need of protectors anyway? Ah, questions. I surmise that it is questions themselves which unsettle the faithful. Don't question. Just believe.

Why should I?

William A. King, Toccoa



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## Letters to the Editor (continued)

Jack McKinney's letter was in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on November 28.

Ed Buckner's letter was in the *Savannah Morning News* on November 28.

### Right to Assemble Tarnished

If your columnist, Don McKee, (Prayer protest raises eyebrows, MDJ, 11/14) had spent the time and effort defending something worthwhile, instead of the miss-begotten senate chaplains, Georgia would be a better state for it.

I'm referring to the Georgia Constitution, specifically to Article 1, Section 1:

*The people have the right to assemble peaceably for their common good and to apply by petition or remonstrance to those vested with the powers of government for redress of grievances.*

Your journalist, Jon Gillooly, reported: "Around the block out of sight from the prayer service stood about 20 protestors from the Atlanta Freethought Society, a secular group that promotes separation of church and state." (Gov. Perdue leads hundreds in prayer for rain outside Capitol, MDJ, 11/14/2007)

I was a part of that group. We were moved twice by capitol police. It was obvious that Perdue made certain that we would be completely out of sight of he and his group. If we had been allowed to assemble at a respectful distance and then became loud or rowdy then, yes, we could have been moved. But to make it plain that we were unworthy of exercising the same location for peaceful assembly as numerous other organizations is outrageous. To deny us visibility is to censor our message and is tampering with our freedom of assembly.

Both the Marietta Daily Journal and Don McKee should be as appalled by this matter as I am.

Jack McKinney, Kennesaw, GA

Member, Board of Directors, Atlanta Freethought Society

### Cubbedge misreads Constitution

Nancy Cubbedge ("Constitution allows public prayer," Letters, 24 Nov 07) correctly claims that vain repetition will deceive some into accepting a lie as true, but it is she who is doing the false repetition.

The Constitution certainly does allow public prayer, but that has nothing to do with objecting to prayer before government meetings. The First Amendment's prohibition is not against prayer, whether public or private, but against governments making religious decisions for individual citizens.

Men like Jefferson, Madison and Franklin were not merely eager to prevent governmental interference with churches; they were also quite determined to protect the rights of individuals from majorities, to keep majorities from using the power of government to support their religion.

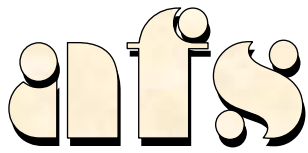
No government leader in his official capacity, whether a governor convening a prayer service for rain or a planning commission opening a meeting, has the authority to offer prayer on behalf of citizens.

It has nothing to do with political correctness, it has no connection to atheists or others being "fragile flowers," and it is not intended to be a restriction on the ability of any official to pray.

Separation of church and state is not just a popular phrase but a phrase used since Jefferson to sum up the meaning of the First Amendment; and the words even appear in the Georgia Constitution. Separation of church and state is the most original American principle and the one most strongly needed for religious liberty for all, including for Ms. Cubbedge.

Ed Buckner

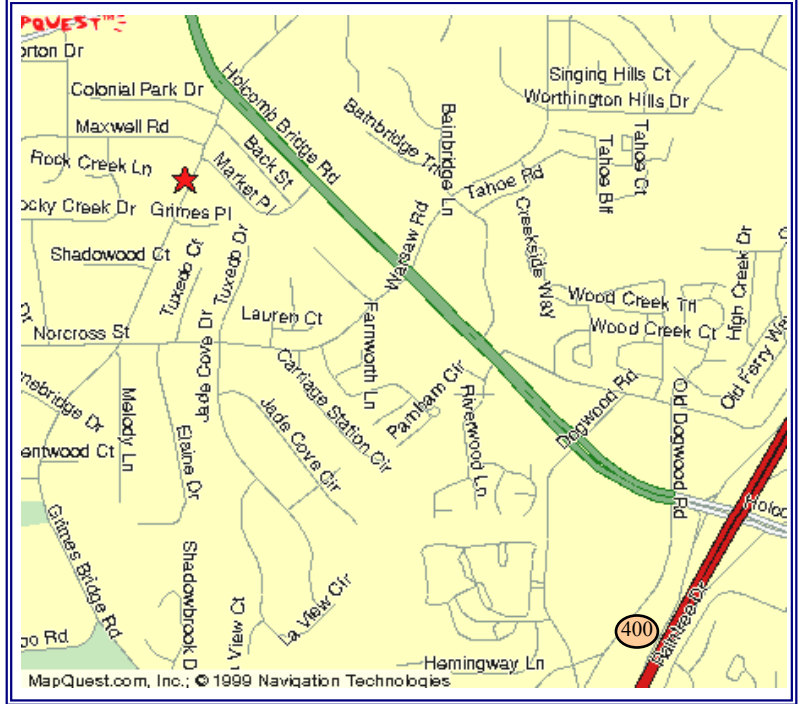
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**This Month's Speaker:**  
**Dr. John Henderson**



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