

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication

• Volume 14 Number 5

• May 2008

The May AFS Meeting

The May 11 AFS meeting will feature a talk by **Dr. Austin Dacey**, a representative to the United Nations for the Center for Inquiry. Dr. Dacey is also on the editorial staff of *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry* magazines. His writings have appeared in numerous publications including the *New York Times*. His new book is *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life*. For more on Dacey and his book, see <http://www.austindacey.com/index.html>.

The meeting will be at 1:00 at the **Atlanta Freethought Center**, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA. (Feel free to arrive early for discussion and snacks.) To get there from Atlanta, take I-400 north past I-285 by 8 miles to Exit 7B, which is GA-140. Take GA-140 (Holcomb Bridge Road) west about 1 mile and turn left at Grimes Bridge Road. Go 0.2 miles to 1170 Grimes Bridge Road.

The May AFS Social

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

“Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.”
—Martin Luther King Jr., from *Strength to Love*, 1963

A Visitor From Germany

Also at the May AFS meeting will be a visitor from Germany: **Bjoern Mastiaux**. Bjoern is working on a doctorate dissertation at Düsseldorf University on the motivation of secular/atheist organizations in Germany and the United States. He would like to interview some of our members on their views about religion and non-religion. If you are interested in helping him in his research, please email him at mastiaux@phil-fak.uni-duesseldorf.de.

The AFS Reading Group

The **AFS Reading Group** will meet on Thursday, May 22, at Wordsmiths Books, 141E. Trinity Place, in Decatur, GA. (404-378-7166) The group is reading and will discuss the book *Infidel* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Also, a video of Ms. Ali appearing at last year's Atheist Alliance International Convention in Washington, D.C. will be shown. Space is limited, so please RSVP to Forrest Greene or Brian Shriver at bookclub@atlantafreethought.org.

AFS Meetings and Activities

May 11: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.

May 16: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

May 22: AFS Reading Group, Wordsmith Books, 7:30 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 **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at John Barnes' property on May 17 in Woodbury, GA. The outdoor event will start at noon and will include a dinner at 5:00 PM. Dr. Andrew Cohen (a professor of Philosophy at GSU) will speak. For details, contact Steve at steveyoth@aol.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.

A new group, **GUST** (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will have it's first meeting at Unitarian Universalist

Church of Gwinnett (12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville) on Wednesday, May 14, at 7:00 PM. For more information on this group, see <http://gust.domek.org/>.

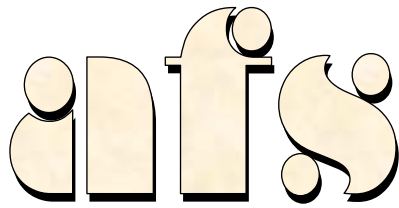
A **Freethought Discussion Group** meets in Fayetteville, GA on Wednesdays at 7:30 PM at Starbucks on Hwy 54. The group also meets for lunch on the first and third Saturday of the month. For more information, contact Shelby Weddle, the group's leader, at freediscussion@hotmail.com.

There will be a “**meetup**” for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, May 11, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur, GA.

Yet another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for Sunday, May 25, at 4:00 PM at Charlie Mopps Public House, 5830 Roswell Rd. NE, in Atlanta.

“In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing.” — *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 1924

“Man is kind enough when he is not excited by religion.” — Mark Twain, from *A Horse's Tale*, 1907



**Atlanta
Freethought
Society**

Programs and Speakers

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

May 11: Dr. Austin Dacey, author of *Secular Conscience*, will speak.

June 15: Tony King, on "Sumerian Influence on Religion and Western Culture."
This meeting will include a potluck lunch at our new property.

July 13: (tentative) Secular lobbyist Lori Lipman Brown will speak.

Aug 10: TBD

Sept 14: TBD

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 <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 free-thinkers, 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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Evidence Once Again Shows Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs Don't Work

From an April 23 ACLU Press Release at <http://www.aclu.org>

The U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform held a hearing on April 23 titled "Domestic Abstinence-Only Programs: Assessing the Evidence." The ACLU applauds Chairman Henry Waxman (D-CA) for bringing new attention to this deeply troubling policy and the committee's willingness to examine the public health policy implications of abstinence-only programs. Scientists, clinicians, researchers and youth activists provided testimony on the failures of abstinence-only education programs.

Their testimony is supported by research which has repeatedly shown that, at best, abstinence-only programs do not delay sexual initiation and, at worst, may actually cause harm by providing young people with dangerously inadequate and inaccurate information. A troubling recent report

found teens in Florida, a state that relies on abstinence-only programs, who believed drinking a can of Mt. Dew would prevent unintended pregnancy, or drinking a capful of bleach would prevent HIV/AIDS.

In addition to the clear and compelling public health concerns of abstinence-only programs, the ACLU submitted a statement to the committee addressing the civil liberties concerns raised by these programs. Abstinence-only programs censor information, reinforce gender stereotypes, provide inaccurate and misleading information, promote religion, serve a narrow ideological agenda, stigmatize lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, and jeopardize the well-being of young people.

"The evidence leads to only one conclusion: abstinence-only programs represent a failed policy," said Vania

Leveille, legislative counsel at the ACLU Washington Legislative Office. "They are driven by ideology and politics, rather than by science or good public health policy, and our young people are suffering as a result. Most troubling, they represent a purposeful campaign to mislead, distort, stifle and censor, and are part of a disturbing trend to politicize science. The ACLU urges congressional action to bring this failed policy to an end."

Since 1996, the U.S. government has poured more than a billion dollars into abstinence-only education programs so ineffective and dangerous that seventeen states have refused funding. At a time when the administration emphasizes accountability in funding only programs with demonstrated success, the continued funding of unproven abstinence-only programs is unacceptable.

The ACLU's Written Statement For a Hearing on Domestic Abstinence-Only Programs: Assessing the Evidence

Submitted to the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Wednesday, April 23, 2008

On behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a nonpartisan public interest organization dedicated to protecting the constitutional rights of individuals, and its hundreds of thousands of members, activists, and 53 affiliates nationwide, we would like to thank Chairman Waxman, Ranking Member Davis, and the esteemed Committee on Oversight and Government Reform for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record of this hearing on "Domestic Abstinence-Only Programs: Assessing the Evidence."

Since 1996, Congress has appropriated more than a billion dollars for educational programs that focus exclusively on abstinence and censor other information that can help young people make responsible, healthy, and safe decisions about sexual activity. While federal funding for abstinence-

only-until-marriage programs has increased steadily to more than \$176 million annually, there are no federal funds dedicated to supporting sexuality education programs that teach both abstinence and contraceptive use.

We applaud the Committee's timely and appropriate scrutiny of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Scientific evidence has accumulated over the past years that casts serious doubts upon the effectiveness of these programs and calls into question the wisdom of a substantial federal investment exceeding one billion dollars. Indeed, the evidence points to but one conclusion: abstinence-only programs represent a failed and ideologically-based policy. They are not based on science or on good public health policy. Most troubling, they represent a purposeful campaign to mislead, distort, stifle and censor;

they encourage a disturbing trend to politicize science; and they express a disdain for knowledge and the free exchange of ideas that stands at the heart of our democracy and historical traditions.

Let us be clear: where local communities choose to offer young people instruction and guidance about human sexuality, abstinence should be an important component of that educational program. However, federally funded programs focusing exclusively on abstinence work against good public health policy and also raise serious civil liberties concerns. Congress ought not to support programs that censor information, reinforce gender stereotypes, provide inaccurate and misleading information, promote religion in the classroom, serve a narrow ideological agenda, and jeopardize the well-being of young people.

The ACLU's Written Statement (*continued*)

Funding for abstinence-only programs should end immediately.

Some Abstinence-Only Programs Impermissibly Promote Religion

In violation of First Amendment guarantees, some federally funded abstinence-only programs contain religious teachings about proper sexual behavior and values.

The Supreme Court has made clear that religion is impermissibly advanced, and the Constitution violated, when government aid is used to fund "specifically religious activit[ies]" even within "an otherwise substantially secular setting." *Bowen v. Kendrick*, 487 U.S. 589,621 (1988) Indeed, it was in *Bowen*, a case challenging the constitutionality of the Adolescent Family Life Act and its appropriation of funds for abstinence-only education, that Justice O'Connor emphasized, "any use of public funds to promote religious doctrines violates the Establishment Clause." *Id.* at 623 (O'Connor, J. concurring).

Although federal funding guidelines do not permit abstinence-only grantees to convey overt religious messages or to impose religious viewpoints, in practice, many of these programs do precisely that. For example, in *ACLU v. Leavitt*, the ACLU showed how federal dollars were supporting an overtly religious abstinence-only program called the silver ring thing, which had been awarded more than \$1 million dollars in federal money in the prior three years.

During the Silver Ring Thing's flagship three-hour program, members testified that accepting Jesus Christ improved their lives, quoted bible passages, and urged audience members to ask the Lord Jesus Christ to come into their lives. As a result of the ACLU's lawsuit, federal officials suspended federal funding of the Silver Ring Thing. And, in February 2006, the ACLU announced a settlement with HHS, under which HHS agreed that it would not fund the program as currently structured.

Most recently, in May 2007, the ACLU expressed concern to HHS about the misuse of abstinence-only

funds by two grantees funded by the federal Community Based Abstinence Education Program (CBAE). Specifically, one Oregon grantee created the *Stop and Think* abstinence program and contracted with another grantee to teach the program in various venues across the country. In order to use the program, the second grantee had to sign a contract containing the following conditions:

- 1) The presenter and supervisor
 - a) possess an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ
 - b) possess knowledge of the word of God, and the ability to communicate it's [sic] truth
 - c) exhibit a loving and merciful spirit
 - d) attend a Bible believing local church or fellowship

This contract was provided to HHS as part of the second grantee's application for CBAE funding. Moreover, an advertisement by one of the grantees for a full-time abstinence director "responsible for overall implementation of the *Stop & Think* [program]" directed applicants to send a resume and "letter of Christian testimony."

A direct grant of government dollars violates the Constitution when it is used to fund specifically religious activities. In the cited circumstances, one grantee required, and another agreed, that all presenters of the federally funded *Stop and Think* program hold particular religious beliefs. Additionally, proselytization was an essential component of the *Stop and Think* program and the program contained religious or sectarian messages. As a result of the ACLU's complaint, HHS conducted investigations of both grantees and reported that the Oregon grantee would require "all abstinence education program staff to sign a statement of understanding that they may not proselytize while working with any federally funded program." In addition, HHS found that though the other grantee, which had been organizing "purity balls," "took steps to separate [religious and non-religious] programs, the separation between the two events could in the future be

strengthened."

Abstinence-only Programs Censor Information

Statistics reveal that teens need information about contraception and sexual health: nearly two thirds of all high school seniors in the U.S. have had sexual intercourse; approximately 822,000 pregnancies occurred among 15-19 year old women in 2000; and each year, approximately 9.1 million 15-24 year olds are infected with sexually transmitted infections.

However, recipients of abstinence-only funds are censored in the information they can provide to students. Federal funding can be used solely to offer programs with the "exclusive purpose" of teaching the benefits of abstinence programs. In the context of these programs, grantees may not provide a participating adolescent with any information that is inconsistent with the narrow eight-point definition of abstinence-only education. These programs thus leave teens without information critical to protecting their health and preventing pregnancy.

The government's mandate thus censors the transmission of vital information about human sexuality and reproduction. And in the schools, this funding serves to force many teachers to avoid providing educational information they consider valuable to teens. A 1999 nationally representative survey of 7th-12th grade teachers in the five specialties most often responsible for sex education found that a strong majority believed sexuality education courses should cover birth control methods (93.4%), factual information about abortion (89%), where to go for birth control (88.8%), the correct way to use a condom (82%), and sexual orientation (77.8%), among other topics.

The federal government should not censor educational programs concerning the communication of vital information to young people.

Abstinence-only Programs Provide Inaccurate, Misleading Information

Many federally funded abstinence-only programs present teens with inaccurate information. A study con-

The ACLU's Written Statement (*continued*)

ducted by the House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform found that 11 of the 13 abstinence-only curricula used by CBAE programs "contain major errors and distortions about public health information," including HIV and other STD prevention, pregnancy prevention, and condom effectiveness. The problems have not gone away.

Most recently, the ACLU conducted investigations into HHS violations of a federal law relating to medical accuracy of educational materials. Specifically, by letter dated April 25, 2007, the ACLU called on HHS to take immediate action to remedy its ongoing violations of 42 U.S.C. § 247b-17(c)(2), a federal statute that requires that a broad category of educational materials must include medically accurate information about the effectiveness of condoms in preventing STDs.

In that letter, and other supporting documents, we addressed a number of abstinence-only materials that are covered by 247b-17(c)(2), but failed to meet its requirements. Instead, they omitted vital information about condom effectiveness and contained inaccuracies suggesting that condoms fail to protect against infection, when in fact they are highly effective at doing so. Following that initial complaint, the ACLU communicated over the course of several months with officials at ACF in order to ensure that particularly problematic curricula identified in its letter were either corrected or no longer funded. While the entity that produced one of those curricula, *Teen-Aid Inc.*, is no longer a CBAE grantee, the other, *Why kNOw*, continues to receive federal funds. Some improvements to the *Why kNOw* materials were made after our complaint. But, as we have advised HHS, serious inaccuracies remain—despite HHS's assurances that it reviews for, and demands, medical accuracy in all grantees' educational materials. Thus, it is clear that HHS is unable, or simply unwilling, to ensure that abstinence-only grantees satisfy minimum standards of scientific and medical accuracy.

Congress should not support the dissemination of medically inaccurate and misleading information. Rather, it should fund programs that provide teens with medically accurate and complete information about abstinence as well as contraceptives.

Abstinence-Only Programs are Ineffective

There is no conclusive evidence that abstinence-only programs, which teach students to abstain from sex until married and generally only teach about contraceptive failure, reduce the rate of unintended pregnancy or STDs.

Moreover, studies show that most abstinence-only programs do not help teens delay having sex, and some show evidence that these programs actually deter teens who become sexually active from protecting themselves from unintended pregnancy or STDs.

In April 2007, a long-awaited study by Mathematica Policy Research Inc., on behalf of HHS, showed that abstinence-only programs don't work. This congressionally commissioned study, *Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs*, evaluated several federally funded programs and found that teens who participated in them were just as likely to have sex as teens who did not participate. Specifically, the report concluded that, "[f]indings indicate that youth in the program group were no more likely than control group youth to have abstained from sex and, among those who reported having had sex, they had similar numbers of sexual partners and had initiated sex at the same mean age."

In light of recent research highlighting the lack of medical accuracy of these programs, and at a time when the Administration emphasizes accountability in funding only programs with demonstrated success, the continued funding of unproven programs is deeply troubling.

Many Abstinence-Only Programs are Hostile to Gay and Lesbian Youth

Federally funded abstinence-only programs marginalize gay and lesbian

students and stigmatize homosexuality by requiring programs to teach that a "mutually faithful monogamous relationship in [the] context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity." Such a message rejects the idea of sexual intimacy for lesbians and gays, ignores their need for critical information about protecting themselves from STDs in same-sex relationships, and creates a hostile learning environment.

Indeed, a study of Ohio abstinence-only programs concluded, "one of the greatest flaws of abstinence programs is their inherent exclusion of [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] youth." A recent review of the leading abstinence-only curricula found that most address same-sex sexual behavior only within the context of promiscuity and disease, and several are overtly hostile to lesbians and gay men.

For example, in its parent-teacher guide, an abstinence-only program called "Facing Reality" instructs educators to teach students that homosexuals with AIDS are now suffering for the "choices" they made regarding their sexual orientation. Materials from an abstinence-only program used recently in Alabama state that "same sex 'union' cannot provide an adequate means of achieving a genuine physical relationship with another human being because this type of 'union' is contrary to the laws of nature." By positioning sexual relations within a heterosexual marriage as the "standard" for sexual activity and teaching that STDs are a form of moral punishment for homosexuality, abstinence-only programs undermine efforts to educate students about protecting their health and create a hostile learning environment for lesbian and gay students or the children of lesbian, gay and/or single parents.

Federal funding of such programs should not be tolerated.

Conclusion

The ACLU applauds the Committee's examination of abstinence-only programs and urges continued action to bring this failed policy to an end.

The April Meeting, in Pictures



Our April Speaker, Rob Boston of Americans United



Doug Hattersley ties down the AFS banner



AFS members listen to the speaker



Lunch after the meeting



Here is Bjoern Mastiaux, who will visit AFS from Germany

Lessons From Lauren: What I Learned In My Tenure At Americans United

By Lauren Smith, Communications Assistant for Americans United for Separation of Church and State

Today is my last day at Americans United. Before I go off to law school, I want to reflect on the many valuable lessons I've learned in my three years as a communications assistant here.

1) People aren't afraid to tell you to go to hell, so don't take it personally.

Part of my job here entailed fielding calls, letters and email from the public. I started a week before the U.S. Supreme Court decided the Ten Commandments cases in 2005, so I learned quickly how vituperative people can be. Talk about baptism by fire! Here's part of an e-mail I received that first week:

"I hate your souls with a white-hot, fire-breathing passion... May all of you burn in a Living, Eternal Hell-fire... Eat the flames of Hell, you rotten [bleep]."

Here's one from Christmas 2006:

"You are truly bottom feeders! Go to Hell, Slimebags!"

Well, Merry Christmas to you, too, buddy!

And I know you all remember Wiley Drake's prayer¹ that my colleagues and their families—the "emies of God," as Drake put it—suffer horrible fates.

2) The devil's in the details.

Remember the blog I wrote last week about Focus on the Family's factually challenged response² to a recent federal court decision? That's just one example of how people's reckless disregard for the truth hampers constructive discussions about church-state separation. Facts matter, but I can't tell you how many times I've responded to nasty accusations based on bad information.

And it's not all the Religious Right's

fault. The media's also partly to blame for Americans' piecemeal understanding of current church-state issues. I've learned in this job that there are always several sides to a story and you're lucky if the media reports two of them. Do your research!

3) Education is essential.

This is the most common e-mail AU receives:

"As you are well aware, the 'separation of church and state' is NOT in our Constitution. Your platform is un-Constitutional."

I am indeed aware that the phrase "separation of church and state" is not in the Constitution. I am also aware of the fact that we are governed by more than the document's text. Our law is shaped by how the U.S. Supreme Court interprets that text, and it has said for more than 60 years that the First Amendment requires the separation of church and state.

I also know that there are many common phrases used to describe what's in the Constitution but aren't actually in the text. A "right to a fair trial," for example, isn't in there. I'd hope the person who says there's no such thing as church-state separation wouldn't say the same about the right to a fair trial, but I can't be sure.

This is another common e-mail:

"This is a Christian nation, founded on the Bible."

A poll conducted by the First Amendment Center in 2007 found that 65 percent of American adults believe the Founders intended the United States to be a Christian nation and 55 percent believe the Constitution actually establishes it as such.

The Founders had every opportunity to do that if they wanted to,

but the Constitution never mentions Christianity or its teachings; it is a secular document through and through.

Attempts to add "Jesus Christ" to the 1786 Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (so it would read: religious coercion is "a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion") were overwhelmingly rejected. This was evidence, Thomas Jefferson later wrote, that the legislature "meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mohammedan, the Hindoo and Infidel of every denomination."

A treaty with Tripoli³ ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1797 says "the government of the United States of America is not founded in any sense on the Christian religion."

And what about the Declaration of Independence, that document that "Christian nation" advocates cite as "proof" that the country was founded on religion? True, it mentions a creator, but do they know the original text was edited because it sounded too religious? Jefferson's first draft⁴ of the Declaration said: "We hold these truths to be *sacred and undeniable...*" but Ben Franklin suggested the more secular sounding "self-evident" we have today.

Not only have I learned that education is essential, I've learned that teaching is the best teacher. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to share and expand my knowledge of religious liberty issues.

4) The Religious Right will never truly die.

The Religious Right isn't just a political movement, it's a mentality. Books abound about the movement's

Footnotes:

1. See <http://blog.au.org/2007/08/15/curses-not-foiled-again-dr-drakes-diabolical-diatribes-wont-stop-americans-united/>.
2. See <http://blog.au.org/2008/04/23/the-big-lie-religious-right-prevarications-proliferate/>.
3. See http://www.au.org/site/DocServer/Treaty_With_Tripoly.pdf?docID=143.
4. See <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ruffdrft.html>.

Lessons From Lauren (continued)

demise, but I'm not buying it. The movement's political power has waxed and waned over the past three decades and it will continue to do so. In the meantime, I'm more concerned about the mentality.

Here's an e-mail I received a few weeks ago:

"Go away. Real Americans don't want or need you."

And one from 2005:

"Congratulations on being the most satanic organization on earth. I'm sorry there is no reward for that ...Americans United for the Separation of Church and State is the most unpatriotic group I have ever seen

...Your picture is also beside 'terror-ism' and 'unpatriotic.'"

As long as that mentality survives, the Religious Right will never truly die. Enough said.

5) Religious liberty is, at its heart, about equality - and we're not there yet.

Roger Williams, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson knew that equality lay at the heart of what they created. It depresses and discourages me to think that so many Americans don't understand—or don't accept—this concept.

Governments in the United States don't have religious opinions because

they must treat every citizen equally. Justice Hugo Black wrote in 1963 that "[w]hen the power [and] prestige...of government is placed behind a particular religious belief, the indirect coercive pressure upon religious minorities to conform to the prevailing officially approved religion is plain."

Black's observation defines why I've spent three wonderful years at Americans United. We have a long way to go, but I'm confident AU's work—and your support—will get us there.

Take care, Lauren

[From <http://blog.au.org/author/smith>.

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Court Agrees Public Schools Cannot Hand Out Bibles to Students

From an April 22 Press Release by the ACLU at <http://www.aclu.org>

The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana ruled on April 22 against a public school in Tangipahoa Parish of New Orleans that handed out Bibles to 5th-graders, saying the school infringed the students' religious freedoms. On May 9, 2007, the principal at Loranger Middle School invited the Gideon group into the school to distribute Bibles. Students were pulled out of class, brought outside of the principal's office and put in a line to receive Bibles.

The ACLU brought the lawsuit after a family, who remained anonymous in the case, contacted them.

"The family was uncomfortable that their daughter was asked to accept a Bible in school," Marjorie R. Esman, Executive Director of the ACLU of Louisiana, explained. "A child shouldn't have to choose between her family's beliefs and the wishes of school administrators."

"We couldn't find a single case from any court in this country holding that Bible distribution to grade school students is constitutionally permissible," Esman continued. Judge Carl Barbier agreed that the school's actions violated the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and amounted to religious coercion.

The ruling says the school's defense—that a student could choose not to accept the Bibles—is not enough, given the enormous pressure most children feel to fit in with classmates or follow teachers' wishes.

"This is the second time we have had to stop public schools from handing out Bibles, and the *fifth time* we've had to sue the Tangipahoa Parish School Board for violating the rights of students," Esman said. "We will continue to fight for the religious freedoms of everyone."

See Judge Barbier's decision at:

http://www.laclu.org/PDF_documents/Role_MSJ.pdf

Interesting Links:

- Read "A Values Voter's Trap" by Austin Dacey, from the April 28 issue of *USA Today*: <http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2008/04/a-values-voters.html#more>.
- Read the introduction to Austin Dacey's book *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life* at: <http://www.austindacey.com/writing.html>.
- Read about Ben Stein's new move in "*Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed - Scientific American's Take*" at: <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=sci-am-reviews-expelled>.
- Read "Six Things in *Expelled* That Ben Stein Doesn't Want You to Know" at: <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=six-things-ben-stein-doesnt-want-you-to-know>.
- Read "Evolution: 24 Myths and Misconceptions" at: http://www.newscientist.com/channel/life/dn13620-evolution-24-myths-%20and-misconceptions.html?DCMP=ILC-%20rhts&nref=ts1_head_Evolution:%2024%20myths%20and%20misconceptions
- Ellen Johnson is no longer president of American Atheists. See the May 2 entry here: <http://www.atheists.org/nogodblog/>.
- So what was Ellen doing when the announcement was made? See here: <http://alabamatheist.org/fw2k8/>.
- Read "Sonny Perdue's Argument Against Sunday Sales of Beer, Wine, and Such" at: http://www.ajc.com/metro/content/shared-blogs/ajc/politicalinsider/entries/2008/03/27/sonny_perdues_argument_against.html.

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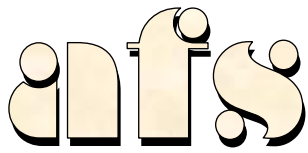
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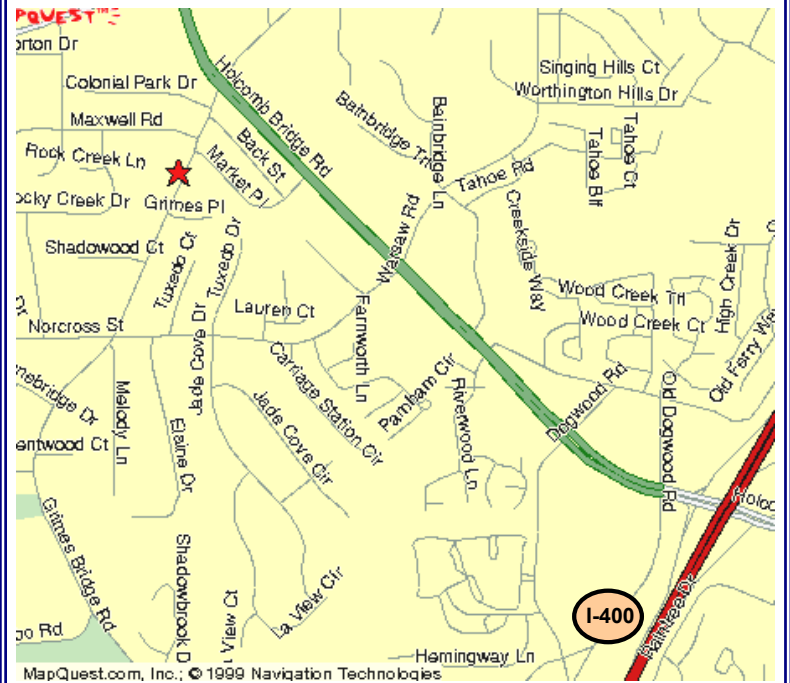
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Atlanta Freethought Society

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

**This Month's Speaker:
Austin Dacey**



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