

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 14 Number 10 • October 2008

The October AFS Meeting

The October 12 AFS meeting will feature our own **Ed Buckner**, speaking on "Reasons for the Separation of Church and State." His talk will include a discussion and Q&A regarding the details of Church/State separation. What are the reasons for it, pro and con? How have other countries fared when allowing religion in government? Can you think of a reason for *not* wanting Church/State separation? And why *are* U.S. citizens so religious?

(Dr. Neill Shanks was going to speak at this meeting, but he contacted AFS recently with news of an illness and doctor's orders to not travel. So, thanks to Ed for filling in.)

This meeting will also include **nominations** for AFS officers and board members for 2009!

Also, join us for lunch after the meeting! We typically go to a local restaurant for food and more discussion.

The meeting will be at **Atlanta Freethought Hall**, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, Smyrna, GA, at 1:00 PM.

To get there, take I-285 (the perimeter road around Atlanta) to Exit 16 (Atlanta Road). Turn toward Atlanta. Go ½ mile and then turn right onto N. Church Lane. Go only 300 feet to Atlanta Freethought Hall, which is on the left.

The AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Friday, October 17, at 7:00 PM.

Nominations at October Meeting

The AFS bylaws require nomination of officers and board members for each year at the October meeting. Please think about whom you would like to nominate. (Current officers and board members are listed on page 2.)

Officers have 1-year terms; board members have 2-year terms. Lew Southern, Diane Buckner and Tony King will continue their 2-year terms into next year.

The AFS Yard Sale: Results

Much thanks to all who participated in and contributed items for our September 20th Yard Sale. After all was said and done, AFS showed a profit of about \$620. We also got to meet many of our neighbors, including Harold Smith, former mayor of Smyrna, and Mary Rose Barnes, head of the Oakdale Community Association.

We still have a table and a dresser with hutch left over from the sale. If you would like to have these items, please feel free to take them away!

AFS Meetings and Activities

Oct 12: AFS Board Meeting at AF Hall, 11:00 AM.
Oct 12: AFS General Meeting at AF Hall, 1:00 PM.
Oct 17: AFS Social, Panahar Restaurant, 7:00 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 **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at the AF Hall on Sunday, October 19 at 12:30 PM. Marie Pearson Shockley, a Peace Corps Volunteer, will speak on "Still Asking What You Can Do For Your Country?"

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, October 12, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur, GA.

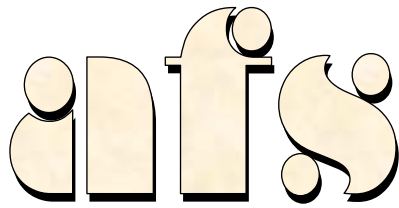
Yet another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for Sunday, October 26, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta.

GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Gwinnet (12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville) on Wednesday, October 8, at 7:00 PM. For details, see <http://gust.domek.org/>.

A **Freethought Discussion Group** meets in Fayetteville, GA on Wednesdays at 7:00 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.

Evolution Revolution: Science Changing Life is a major public symposium at Emory University on October 23 and 24 regarding "how new research into the origins of life and our evolutionary inheritance may transform our lives and change our very definition of life." **E. O. Wilson** will give the keynote address on Thursday, Oct 23 at 7:00 PM in Glenn Auditorium. The meeting is free and open to the public. See www.emory.edu/evolution/ for more information.

"The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one. The happiness of credulity is a cheap and dangerous quality." —George Bernard Shaw, from *Androcles and the Lion*, Preface (1916)



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.

Oct 12: Ed Buckner will speak on "Reasons for Separation of Church and State." This will be more of an interactive meeting on Church/State separation.

Nov 9: Blair Scott, National Affiliate Outreach Director and Alabama State Director for American Atheists will speak.

Dec 14: TBD

Jan 12: 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

Editor

Steve Yothment

How to Contact the Editor

Send correspondence to AFS at:
4775 N. Church Lane SE
Smyrna, GA 30080-7224
or phone Steve at 678-364-8703
or send e-mail to SteveYoth@aol.com.

Atlanta Freethought Society

President

Steve Yothment – 678-364-8703

VP for Internal Communication

Judy Thompson – 404-296-2020

VP for External Communication

Freya Harris – 404-845-2276

Secretary

Dennis Martin – 404-817-0413

Treasurer

Ed Buckner – 770-432-3049

Board of Directors

Mark Banks – 770-354-1546

Diane Buckner – 770-432-3049

Bill Burton – 770-469-1228

Tony King – 706-886-9224

Jack McKinney – 770-424-5004

Lew Southern – 770-509-8272

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

Add \$15 to receive AFNews by mail.

Sustaining members (individual) \$100 and sustaining members (households) \$125.

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afs@atlantafreethought.org.

AFS Webmaster: Freya Harris

Call and leave messages on the

AFS Info Line: 404-A THEIST

American Atheists Names Ed Buckner as President!

Congratulations, Ed!

American Atheists announced on September 12 that they have selected our own Ed Buckner (a current AFS officer) as their new president!

In a press release, AA spokesman David Silverman introduced Ed, saying, "Many of you who are active in the movement will know of Dr. Buckner's accomplishments, originating in the Atlanta Chapter of the Society of Separationists (then an American Atheists affiliated corporation), helping to grow the Atlanta Freethought Society through its formative years, and then most recently serving as the Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism."

"...We had a FANTASTIC response from world-class atheist leaders for this position, and on behalf of the Board of Directors I thank every applicant. Please help me welcome Dr. Ed Buckner, President of American Atheists!"

Ed wrote the below email to AFS members via the AFS Forum email list, and wrote the letter to the right to American Atheists members.

12 September 2008

Friends, family, neighbors, media, and opponents--all,

I have just signed a contract to become the latest in a distinguished line of powerful leaders, beginning with founder Madalyn Murray O'Hair, to lead, as president of American Atheists, the most forthright defense of the rights and reputations of Americans who lack religious beliefs. I hope to be worthy of the responsibility I have agreed to shoulder, and I am honored to have been given this chance.

Our defense of atheism will continue to be an assertive, logical, consistent one that acknowledges that we are in the minority in the U.S. It will also be one that strongly supports religious liberty for all, without regard to what religious beliefs any American holds or defends.

We will not retreat.

With regards to all (and love to many),

Ed Buckner
President,
American Atheists

Dear American Atheists Members, Volunteers, and Supporters,

I'm deeply honored to have been named as President of American Atheists by the Board. I'm determined to show all of you, in due course, that the Board, which had an important but difficult decision, was wise to choose me. I don't know all the details of who else applied, but I know enough to know that the list of applicants included many Atheists of the first order, men and women of great promise, intelligence, creativity, and accomplishment, including leaders from within American Atheists and from beyond. While this makes me even prouder of being chosen, it also puts great pressure on me to work hard.

I promise—

1. I will put American Atheists and her members first.
2. The many other leaders and supporters of the group who make themselves available to help, with advice or work or financial contributions, will be welcomed and encouraged.
3. Communication will be a top priority, especially with Atheists wise and strong enough to be card-carrying members. The excellent blog that David Silverman edits will be a major part of that—I will read and take seriously what all of you choose to say there. I will at least occasionally contribute to the comments, always openly and under my own name. The American Atheist web-site will, with the help of many, be kept up to date.
4. American Atheists will remain true to its proud heritage as the vanguard of American atheism and religious liberty; we have always been the most forthright, unabashed, unapologetic, confident people in this nation who have no religion, and that will continue.
5. American Atheists will openly cooperate with and support other groups, local, national, or international, to the extent that doing so will serve the interests of our philosophy and our members. The only exceptions to this promise will come where there are conflicts with # 4, above.
6. If a local group of American Atheists anywhere in this nation wants me or some other official representative of the organization to visit, to speak or to debate against some bombastic preacher or condescending media personality, we will do everything we can to fulfill that want.
7. If a newspaper, radio program, TV program, or Internet show anywhere in this nation invites me or some other official representative of the organization to speak or to debate against some religious leader, we will do everything we can to fulfill that invitation.
8. The Center in Cranford New Jersey, including our fine library, will be protected and enhanced to improve its usefulness to members and to future Atheists.

I'm not Frank Zindler or Ellen Johnson or Jon Murray or Madalyn Murray O'Hair, and I won't pretend to be—but I hope to demonstrate that the best days of American Atheists are ahead, not historical. I'm grateful, and I think all of us should be profoundly grateful, to our previous leaders, who have stood strongly and proudly for us, helping us protect our rights, our reputations, and our freedom. All of them have demonstrated wonderful creativity, wit and humor, extraordinary intelligence, and profound courage on our behalf.

Anyone who wants to know more about me can send me an e-mail message and I'll send you a copy of what I submitted to the board when I applied.

I invite you to hold me accountable.

Sincerely,
Ed Buckner
President,
American Atheists, Inc.

Americans United Urges IRS To Take Action Against Six Churches That Joined Pulpit-Politicking Scheme

Church-State Watchdog Group Criticizes Religious Right Lawyers For Luring Congregations Into Intentional Violation Of Federal Tax Law

Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed complaints with the Internal Revenue Service on Sept. 29 about six churches whose pastors endorsed candidates from the pulpit during a mass defiance of federal tax law.

The Alliance Defense Fund (ADF), a Religious Right legal group in Scottsdale, Ariz., urged pastors to defy federal tax law by endorsing or opposing candidates during a so-called "Pulpit Freedom Sunday" Sept. 28. Under the IRS Code, churches and other 501(c)(3) tax-exempt groups may not intervene in elections.

"These pastors flagrantly violated the law and now must deal with the consequences," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. This is one of the most appalling Religious Right gambits I've ever seen. Church leaders are supposed to tend to Americans' spiritual needs, not behave like partisan political hacks. I urge the IRS to act swiftly in these cases."

Lynn also scored the ministers who took part in the ADF gambit.

"A pastor who knowingly violates federal tax law is setting a poor example for his or her congregation," Lynn said. "Every pastor who took part in this stunt ought to be ashamed."

The ADF overture has been roundly criticized. Many pastors refused to take part, arguing that America's pulpits should not be politicized. In addition, three former IRS officials have filed a complaint asserting that the ADF has violated ethics standards governing tax attorneys by urging clients to violate the law.

The six churches reported to the IRS by Americans United were:

- Bethlehem Baptist Church, Bethlehem, Ga.: According to press accounts, Pastor Jody Hice "urged his congregation to vote for Sen. John

McCain and to not vote for Sen. Barack Obama."

- Fairview Baptist Church, Fairview, Okla.: The Associated Press reported that Pastor Paul Blair "says he told his congregation that as a Christian and as an American citizen, he would be voting for John McCain."

- Warroad Community Church, Warroad, Minn.: Pastor Gus Booth told his congregation, "We need to vote for the most righteous of candidates. And it doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure that out. The most righteous is John McCain."

- Calvary Chapel, Philadelphia, Pa.: The Rev. Francis Pultro told the congregation, "As Christians it's clear we should vote for John McCain. He is the only candidate I believe a Christian can vote for."

- First Southern Baptist Church, Buena Park, Calif.: The Rev. Wiley Drake said, "I am angry because the government and the IRS and some Christians have taken away the rights of pastors. I have a right to endorse anybody I doggone well please. And if they don't like that, too bad. ...According to my Bible and in my opinion, there is no way in the world a Christian can vote for Barack Hussein Obama. Mr. Obama is not standing up for anything that is tradition in America."

- New Life Church, West Bend, Wisc.: Speaking from the pulpit, Pastor Luke Emrich said, "I'm telling you straight up I would choose life. I would cast a vote for John McCain and Sarah Palin."

Said AU's Lynn, "When five of the six pastors choose to endorse John McCain, it's hard not to see the ADF scheme as partisan in character."

In complaint letters filed with the IRS, Americans United urged swift investigations of the churches and appropriate penalties.

In another press release on October 3, Americans United said that they asked the IRS to investigate yet another church whose pastor called for the election of John McCain from the pulpit on September 28.

The Rev. Dan Fisher, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Yukon, Okla., trumpeted his endorsement in a press release issued by his church. The church release says, "After comparing and contrasting the candidates' views with the Bible, Pastor Fisher unabashedly proclaimed that he believes Christians cannot, in good faith, vote for Barack Obama and must cast their votes in favor of John McCain."

The church's Oct. 1 press release was disseminated by e-mail to news outlets in the state.

Said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director, "Trinity Baptist is a church, not a political action committee. Pastor Fisher has deliberately violated federal tax law, and his church ought to face appropriate penalties."

"The Religious Right desperately wants to mold fundamentalist congregations into a partisan juggernaut that controls all elections and ultimately the government itself," Lynn continued. "That's a frightening prospect in a pluralistic nation that safeguards freedom of conscience for persons of all faiths and none."

This is the seventh church that Americans United has reported to the IRS for endorsing candidates as part of the ADF scheme.

Americans United sponsors [Project Fair Play](#), a program that educates religious leaders about federal tax law governing political activity. As part of the program, flagrant electioneering violations by religious groups are reported to the IRS.

[From press releases on Sept 29 and Oct 3 by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.]

Atheist Soldier Sues Over Mandatory Prayer Sessions

By Jason Leopold, of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation

The U.S. Army has been subjecting soldiers to fundamentalist Christian prayer ceremonies against their will during mandatory military events in violation of their basic constitutional rights, according to a new lawsuit filed against Secretary of Defense Robert Gates by a U.S. Army soldier.

On at least three occasions beginning in December 2007, Army Spc. Dustin Chalker claims he was directed to attend military events, one of which was a barbecue, where an Army battalion chaplain led a Christian prayer ceremony for military personnel. Chalker, who said he is an atheist, asked his superiors for permission to leave the prayer sessions and on each occasion his request to be excused was denied, according to the lawsuit.

Despite Chalker's objections to being subjected to fundamentalist Christian prayer sessions, his Army superiors continuously forced him to attend other military events where the prayer ceremonies continued.

"The requirement for plaintiff Dustin Chalker to attend military functions and formations where sectarian Christian prayers are delivered is evidence of a pattern and practice of constitutionally impermissible promotions of religious beliefs within the Department of Defense and the United States Army," the lawsuit says. Chalker is stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas.

"Plaintiff Chalker is an atheist and as such does not voluntarily participate in religious services, ceremonies or rituals that are conducted either on and around Fort Riley or other military installations to which he is assigned. Plaintiff Chalker has sought relief from mandatory attendance at the subject functions/formations through his chain of command and the equal opportunity process. Neither have yielded satisfactory results."

The government watchdog group

Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), is also a plaintiff in the lawsuit. Mikey Weinstein, the founder and president of MRFF, said "the purpose of the lawsuit is to make it clear to the Pentagon that "Jesus' will" is not an acceptable American military policy," Weinstein said.

"This historic litigation we have filed today will incontrovertibly demonstrate a pervasive and pernicious pattern and practice of unconstitutional religious discrimination," he said. MRFF has leveled a blow in Federal Court against the unlawful religious bigotry and persecution that is sadly systemic in today's armed forces."

The lawsuit asks a federal court to grant an injunction to prevent Christian prayers from being delivered at mandatory military events. In his complaint, Chalker states his atheism has not resulted in "diminished performance" of his duties or compromised his ability to take commands.

Weinstein, a former White House attorney under Ronald Reagan, general counsel H. Ross Perot and an Air Force Judge Advocate (JAG), is credited with exposing what appears to be widespread constitutional violations by military officials involving proselytizing among active-duty soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since he launched his watchdog organization more than three years ago, Weinstein said he has been contacted by nearly 9,000 active duty and retired soldiers, many of whom served or serve in Iraq, claiming that they were pressured by their commanding officers to convert to Christianity.

Chalker, 23, who has served in Iraq and Korea since February 2002 and was awarded a Purple Heart and a Combat Medic Badge, is the second Fort Riley soldier to file a lawsuit against Gates alleging civil rights violations.

Spc. Jeremy Hall, who is also an atheist, sued the defense secretary and

his supervising officer last year for allegedly trying to force him to embrace fundamentalist Christianity and then retaliating against him when he refused. That lawsuit was amended in March. MRFF is also listed as a plaintiff in the lawsuit. The case is still pending in federal court.

Hall's decision to become a plaintiff with MRFF in a lawsuit against the Pentagon has had repercussions. Last September, while Hall was still stationed in Iraq, he said other U.S. soldiers physically threatened him after word spread that he and MRFF sued the Pentagon and the secretary of defense. On popular military related blogs, such as military.com, individuals who claimed they were active-duty soldiers posted comments threatening Hall with "fragging," a term used by the military in which an unpopular soldier could be killed by intentional friendly fire during combat. The comment received widespread attention on blogs and in November Hall was transferred from Combat Operations Base Speicher to Fort Riley, Kansas.

Recently, officials with The California Council of Churches IMPACT (CCCI), one of the country's largest Christian organizations, consisting of 21 denominations representing 5500 congregations and 1.5 million members within the mainstream, progressive Protestant community, said they intended to file a "friend of the court" legal brief in support of MRFF and Hall's lawsuit.

"Our alignment with the Military Religious Freedom Foundation is on behalf of religious freedom for all people, regardless of belief or non-belief," said CCCI Board President Rev. John Freeseemann. "It is not the function of the U.S. military to proselytize our troops but to protect our constitutional freedoms."

CCCI's endorsement of MRFF's lawsuit is significant, Weinstein said, in that it marks the very first time that

Atheist Soldier Sues Over Mandatory Prayer Sessions (*continued*)

a major Christian organization has agreed to lend its support to the military watchdog's efforts.

"Our basic mission is not at all about waging a war against Christianity; rather it is about upholding the foundational laws outlined in Clause 3, Article 6 of the United States Constitution (specific prohibition of a "religious test") and the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights (establishing a wall of separation between church and state)," Weinstein said. "Without that clear wall of separation of church and state in the U.S. military, continued unconstitutional violations recklessly embolden terrorist extremists by sending an unmistakable message that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are really about Christianity versus Islam; essentially a modern day Crusade."

To support claims that the military permits a "pattern and practice of constitutionally impermissible promotions of religious beliefs within the Department of Defense and the United States Army" Chalker and MRFF included more than a dozens of

examples in their lawsuit, such as dipping the American flag before the altar at the chapel at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md, which, as a result of complaints by MRFF, has been suspended.

Additionally, a Pentagon's inspector general report released in August 2007, based on a complaint filed in 2006 by MRFF, concluded that Defense Department officials violated military regulations by appearing in a video promoting a fundamental Christian organization.

The 47-page report was highly critical of senior Army and Air Force personnel for participating in the video while in uniform and on active duty.

The report recommended that Air Force Maj. Gen. Jack Catton, Army Brig. Gen Bob Caslen, Brig. Gen. Vincent Brooks, Maj. Gen. Peter Sutton, and a colonel and lieutenant colonel whose names were redacted in the inspector general's report, "improperly endorsed and participated with a non-Federal entity while in uniform" and the men should be disciplined for misconduct. Caslen was formerly the

deputy director for political-military affairs for the war on terrorism, directorate for strategic plans and policy, joint staff. He now oversees the 4,200 cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point Caslen told DOD investigators he agreed to appear in the video upon learning other senior Pentagon officials had been interviewed for the promotional video.

The inspector general's report recommended the "Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff of the Army take appropriate corrective action with respect to the military officers concerned."

The Army generals who appeared in the video appeared to be speaking on behalf of the military, but they did not obtain prior permission to appear in the video. They defended their actions, according to the inspector general's report, saying the "Christian Embassy had become a 'quasi-Federal entity,' since the DOD had endorsed the organization to General Officers for over 25 years."

[From a MRFF press release at <http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org>.]

Thunder From Sky, But Not From Pulpit

Lori Lipman Brown, Director of the Secular Coalition for America, had this letter-to-the-editor Printed in the *Wall Street Journal* on September 27.

Allowing religious leaders to endorse candidates from the pulpit ("Politics From Pulpit Will Deliver Challenge to IRS," U.S. News, Sept. 24) would unfairly and dangerously privilege religious groups over other nonprofits. If religious institutions are allowed to become partisan political actors, tax-deductible contributions could be used to support campaigns, but with no public disclosure require-

ments.

Religious leaders have tremendous latitude to discuss political issues from the pulpit. Abortion, global warming, gay marriage, war—no public policy topic is off limits. Religious leaders, like all Americans, can also establish political organizations if they wish, and need only comply with the same rules the rest of us do.

Let's not further advantage religious

institutions by allowing their leaders' sermons to become partisan campaign ads supported by tax-deductible contributions that fall outside of the purview of campaign-finance disclosure and limitations.

Lori Lipman Brown

Director

*Secular Coalition for America
Washington*

Thanks to Dennis Martin for quickly organizing a movie night for Oct 1 for AFS members to see the Atlanta premiere of the movie *Religulous*. He used the AFS Forum and Announcements email lists to notify members that he had free tickets for the movie. 30 AFS members and friends came to the showing. (Unfortunately, 6 people were turned away due to overbooking of the movie.)

Listen to The Great Debate: Does God Exist?, a recent debate between John Lennox and Michael Shermer at the Wesley Conference Center in Sydney, Australia, at <http://www.brianauten.com/Apologetics/lennox-shermer-debate.mp3>.

Religion as Ethical Misdirection

by Greta Christina

Ever since I started writing about atheism and religion, I've been troubled by the idea that being a strongly religious person, in and of itself, makes you a good person.

I've been troubled by the idea that phrases like "person of faith" or "man of God" are supposed to be understood to mean "good person" pretty much by definition.

Well, there's a story in the news that's turning this irritation into a full-blown outrage. And it's making me realize exactly what it is about this trope that I find so troubling.

From the AP, via PageOneQ¹ (via a comment on the Daylight Atheism website², where I got this story as well as the idea for this piece), we have the charming story of David Davis. He's a Florida high school principal who, when a student told him that she was being harassed by other students for being a lesbian, told her that homosexuality was wrong, told her to stay away from children, and outed her to her parents.

And who, when the girl's friends expressed their support for her by wearing gay pride T-shirts and buttons, interrogated them about their own sexuality and the sexuality of other students... and in some cases, suspended them.

And we have the story of the community who, when the school district was sued by the ACLU for this behavior, and Principal David was reprimanded and demoted, expressed righteous outrage and anger towards the girl's family and the ACLU, and backed Davis up... because he was a Christian.

Saying things like:

"David Davis is a fine man and good principal, and we are a gentle, peaceful, Christian, family-oriented community."

So today, I want to talk about religion as misdirection.

In stage magic, misdirection is a central skill in which the audience's attention is focused on one thing to distract their attention from something else. You do something that looks big and interesting and important with your right hand; people don't notice the less flashy but genuinely important thing you're doing with your left.

I bring this up because I think religion often causes ethical misdirection. It creates an illusion of good, ethical behavior... which distracts the observer from the question of whether this person's actions really are, in any useful, real-world way, ethical and good.

Think about the quote above. Think about what it means to look at Principal Davis's actions, and call them fine and good, gentle and peaceful.

What is gentle and peaceful about responding to a teenage girl who tells you in confidence that she's being bullied—by bullying her some more? By blaming the victim? By ignoring her complaint, betraying her confidence, and telling her that she's a bad person who can't be trusted around children?

And what is gentle and peaceful about using your position of power to silence the girl's supporters—a.k.a. your retractors—by interrogating them about their own sexuality and kicking them out of school? It's not even Christian; at least if you take the whole "Turn the other cheek" thing to heart. (And, as my friend Ingrid points out, it's more than a little sexually creepy as well. In any other context, a high school principal going around asking his underage students about their sexual practices would be fired so fast it'd make your head spin.)

And yet, the people of this Florida community have been misdirected into thinking that Davis is a gentle, peaceful person. He's a Christian, after all. And in their mindset, "Chris-

tian" means "gentle, peaceful person," de facto and by definition.

Religion, essentially, is serving here as the big flashy gesture done with the right hand, that distracts from the actual immoral behavior that's being done with the left. It's the shiny show of fineness and goodness, gentleness and peace, that keeps people from seeing that the actions being done are, in fact, brutal, hurtful, domineering, and evil.

And it creates a misdirection so strong that it can effectively replace the entire notion of right and wrong. When hard-line religious believers slander atheists by saying that we have no morality³, insisting that there can be no morality without belief in God... well, what is that but a substitution of ethics via religion? What is that but a replacement of your own moral instincts and perceptions with obedience to somebody else's code?

This is a point Ingrid keeps making. When religious believers accuse atheists of taking the easy way out, her reply is, "Do you know how hard it is to live the way I do? It would be so much easier to just do what some book says—or to do what some leader tells me about what the book says. And it would be so much easier if I could always convince myself that God wanted me to do what I do. To actually think about my hard moral choices? And take responsibility for them? And live with them for the rest of my life? That's not the easy way out. That's harder than you will ever know."

I'm not saying all religious believers do this. There are certainly believers—usually of the more progressive, less fundamentalist variety—who think that God created them with a moral compass and bloody well expects them to use it themselves. I'm not saying all religion involves ethical misdirection. I'm saying that some of

¹See http://pageoneq.com/news/2008/Florida_town_backs_antigay_witchhunt_pr_0820.html.

²See <http://www.daylightatheism.org/2008/08/imaginary-virtues.html>.

³See http://gretachristina.typepad.com/greta_christinas_weblog/2007/12/thou-shalt-not.html.

Religion as Ethical Misdirection (*continued*)

it does. Way, way too much of it.

And I'm not saying this misdirection is conscious, either. Most of the time, I think it probably isn't. I think many religious believers themselves are convinced that they are good people, and that the strength of their religious faith makes them so.

But in a way, that actually makes it

more insidious. After all, if someone consciously knows that they're being deceptive, there's always a chance that their conscience will catch up with them. But if they're completely mired in their own rationalization, it becomes a self-perpetuating circle that's almost impossible to break.

Religion can create an ethical mis-

direction so powerful, it fools even the magician. And that scares the crap out of me.

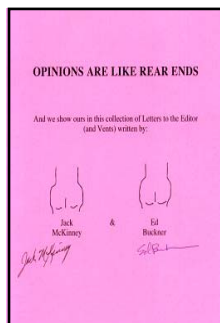
(These ideas were largely inspired by the Imaginary Virtues⁵ piece on the Daylight Atheism website. Go read it now!)

[This article is from Greta Christina's blog at <http://gretachristina.typepad.com/> and is reprinted here by permission.]

⁴See http://gretachristina.typepad.com/greta_christinas_weblog/2008/01/mistakes-were-1.html.

⁵See <http://www.daylightatheism.org/2008/08/imaginary-virtues.html>.

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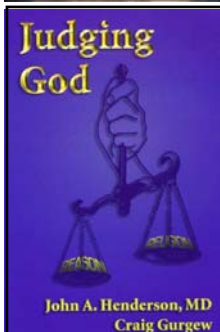


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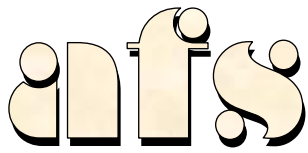
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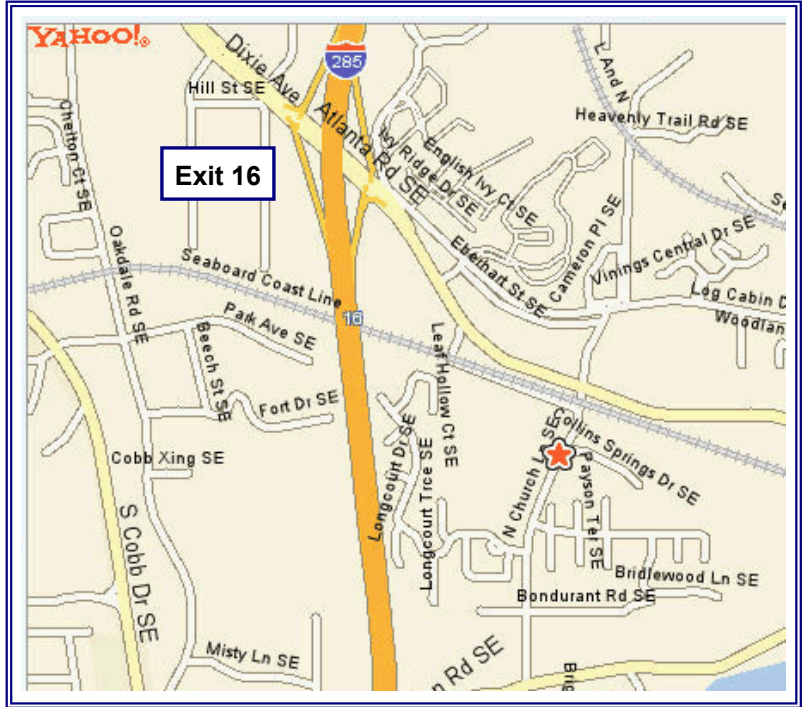
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Dr. Ed Buckner**



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