

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 14 Number 11 • November 2008

The November AFS Meeting

The November 9 AFS meeting will include a talk by **Blair Scott**, the National Affiliate Outreach Director for American Atheists. He will speak on American Atheists and their affiliates program. American Atheists is a nationwide organization which defends the civil rights of nonbelievers, works for the separation of church and state, and addresses issues of First Amendment public policy. The current AFS Treasurer, Ed Buckner, is president of American Atheists.

Blair is an atheist activist with a history of organizing freethought/atheist groups. He started the North Alabama Freethought Association in Huntsville, AL. He is also the Alabama State Director for American Atheists.

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, November 14, at 7:00 PM.

AFS Elections

AFS officers and board members for next year were nominated at the October meeting. (Elections will be by mailed ballot this month.) The nominees are:

President: Steve Yothment

Vice President, Int. Communication: Judy Thompson

Vice President, Ext. Communication: Freya Harris

Treasurer: Diane Buckner

Secretary: Dennis Martin

Board Members: Mark Banks, Doug Hattersley,
Steve Fant, Jack McKinney

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; three more board members will be voted in.

AFS Meetings and Activities

Nov 9: AFS Board Meeting at AF Hall, 11:00 AM.

Nov 9: AFS General Meeting at AF Hall, 1:00 PM.

Nov 14: 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, November 16 at 12:30 PM. Bob Berlin, a Humanist Celebrant, will speak.

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, November 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 Sunday, November 23, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta.

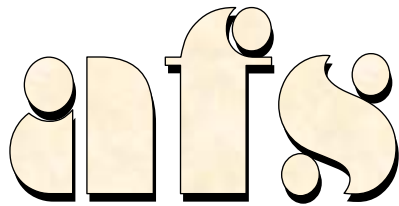
GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Gwinnett (12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville) on Wednesday, November 12, at 7:00 PM. (See <http://gust.domek.org/>.)

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.

The **Tellus Northwest Georgia Science Museum** in Cartersville, GA is scheduled to open on January 16. The museum has been under construction for the past 2 years! The 82-foot long Apatosaurus (a dinosaur) exhibit is now completed. They will also have large Appalachiosaurus and Elasmosaurus exhibits. Also included: a Planetarium and Observatory.

The Tellus Museum website (<http://www.tellusmuseum.org/>) encourages visitors to “Explore the Earth and Search the Stars” in four galleries of the museum: Transportation, Dinosaurs and Fossils, Hands-on Science, and Gems and Minerals.

Read about the pagan origins of the Christ myth at <http://www.pocm.info/>.



**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.

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

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Steve Yothment

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AFS Webmaster: Freya Harris

Call and leave messages on the

AFS Info Line: 404-A THEIST

Federal Appeals Court OKs Cobb Meeting Prayers

On October 28, the federal appeals court in Atlanta upheld Cobb County's practice of allowing predominantly Christian prayers to open commission meetings.

In the 2-1 decision, the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said that the prayers are allowed because they do not improperly advance one religion over another, even though about 70% of the prayers are clearly Christian.

The original lawsuit, *Pelphrey v. Cobb County*, was filed in 2005 by seven Cobb residents seeking to halt the prayers before board of commissioners' and planning commission's meetings. The suit, filed by Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the American Civil Liberties Union, claimed that overtly Christian prayers are an unconstitutional establishment of religion.

Said Cobb Commission Chairman Sam Olens, "The county's position has consistently been that it is constitutional to provide invocations as long as all religious faiths are included."

Judge Bill Pryor wrote the opinion on the decision. Pryor, formerly the

attorney general of Alabama, is known for his activism on behalf of Religious Right causes during his tenure in that state. He vigorously defended Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, who sought to maintain a Ten Commandments monument in the state Judicial Building.

Pryor said there is no clear consensus among the country's appellate courts about sectarian references being uttered in prayers given at legislative meetings, such as Cobb's commission meetings. The 11th Circuit, Pryor said, chooses not to be an "ecclesiastical arbiter" and draw a line of demarcation as to what is or is not sectarian.

"Whether invocations of 'Lord of Lords' or 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Mohammed' are 'sectarian' is best left to theologians, not courts of law," Pryor said.

U.S. District Judge Donald Middlebrooks of West Palm Beach, Fla., sitting on the 11th Circuit panel as a visiting judge, dissented. Middlebrooks noted that U.S. Supreme Court precedent should not be read so broadly to allow prayers at virtually

every governmental meeting. Such prayers, he said, amount to government sponsorship and make religion "less meaningful through the hollow prayers spoken with the dual purpose of seeking a divine audience and appealing to a secular one."

Americans United Legal Director Ayesha N. Khan said the ruling in the case conflicts with a 1983 ruling by the Supreme Court declaring that prayers used before government meetings must be non-sectarian. Other federal courts have upheld that decision. "Citizens of all faiths and none should feel welcome at county council meetings. When meetings begin with sectarian prayers, some people are inevitably going to be left out. That needlessly divides the community," she said.

"The Constitution gives government officials no authority whatsoever to prefer one religion over others," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. "This decision is very disappointing."

[From an Oct. 29 Americans United press release and other news sources.]

Americans United Blasts Bush Administration For Report Urging More Tax Aid To Religious Schools

Keep Emphasis On Public Education, Says Church-State Watchdog Group

Americans United for Separation of Church and State criticized the White House on Oct. 7 for issuing a report calling for massive new forms of tax funding of religious schools.

The 164-page report¹, "Preserving a Critical National Asset: America's Disadvantaged Students and the Crisis in Faith-based Urban Schools," was produced by the White House Domestic Policy Council. It calls for a sweeping plan of public subsidy of religious education through vouchers, tax credits and other forms of tax aid at both the federal and state levels.

"Government officials should focus on improving public schools, not subsidizing religious education," said the

Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "The American people want programs that boost public schools, not a bailout for private schools that are unaccountable to the public."

The report calls for more voucher plans, blithely ignoring the fact that there is little public support for them and that objective research shows that existing voucher plans do not boost student performance.

Going further, the report also calls for "faith-based" charter schools that would advance religion. It offhandedly notes that such schools "would likely require a number of changes in Federal and State law" but fails to

point out that rewriting the First Amendment would be among them.

"This report is the last gasp of an administration stubbornly convinced there is a faith-based solution to every problem," Lynn remarked. "Given the state the Bush administration is in, I expect the report to be quickly forgotten and that's for the best."

Lynn pointed out that 90 percent of American schoolchildren attend public schools. He said the next administration should stop obsessing over private education and return the focus to public education.

[From an October 7 press release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.]

¹<http://www.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/faithbased/index.html>

Religious Leaders Tell Pollsters That Their Churches Do Not Endorse Political Candidates

Most Clergy Have Rejected Religious Right Drive To Push Churches Into Partisan Politics, Says AU's Lynn

The overwhelmingly majority of America's religious leaders have apparently rejected the Religious Right's efforts to politicize their pulpits, according to Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

A new poll by LifeWay Research has found that 95 percent of pastors strongly disagree that their church has provided any endorsements. Baptist Press, the news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, reported Oct. 30 that 53 percent of Protestant pastors affirmed that they have "personally endorsed candidates for public office this year," but only outside of their church roles.

Said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director, "I have always believed that the vast majority of America's clergy had no

interest in politicizing their houses of worship. Pulpit partisanship divides congregations and communities and jeopardizes the integrity of religious institutions."

Lynn said the Religious Right's aggressive efforts to lure churches into partisan politics and violate federal tax law have been largely unsuccessful this year.

The Alliance Defense Fund (ADF), one of the nation's largest and most influential Religious Right groups, urged evangelical pastors to intervene in the election by endorsing or opposing candidates from the pulpit on Sept. 28. Only 33 did so.

Americans United has filed eight complaints with the Internal Revenue Service about churches that participated in the ADF's so-called "Pulpit

Freedom Sunday."

Americans United this year has also distributed some 100,000 letters to Christian, Jewish and Muslim houses of worship about provisions of the federal tax law governing candidate endorsements by tax-exempt groups.

Said AU's Lynn, "This is the last weekend before Election Day. I'm sure there may be a few misguided clergy who cross the line and endorse candidates from the pulpit. But I am confident that most will obey the law."

"Americans United," he said, "has chapters, members and supporters in all 50 states. If we learn of tax law violations, we will contact the IRS. I hope we don't have to."

[From an October 31 press release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.]

Americans United Asks IRS To Investigate N.C. Baptist Group That Hosted Obama Rally

Event Featuring Michelle Obama May Have Violated Federal Tax Law, Says Watchdog Group

The General Baptist State Convention of North Carolina may have violated federal tax law by hosting Michelle Obama, wife of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, at an event that appeared to be little more than a campaign rally, says Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

During her October 29 appearance before the group, Obama praised her husband and told the crowd he is qualified to be president because of his past struggles. "Don't we deserve a president with that kind of experience?" she asked. "Barack Obama gets

it because he's been there."

Obama also told the crowd, "I also come here as a wife who loves my husband, and I believe my husband will be an extraordinary president."

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United, said the event was not the type of non-partisan activity that churches are permitted to host.

"This was an Obama campaign rally taking place during the meeting of a religious group," Lynn said. "Federal tax law simply does not allow religious organizations to sponsor events like this."

In a letter¹ to the IRS on October 30, Lynn requested an investigation of the matter.

"This appearance took on the trappings of a campaign rally, and during it Ms. Obama promoted her husband's candidacy and appealed for votes," wrote Lynn in the letter.

Americans United maintains a special initiative, Project Fair Play², designed to educate religious leaders about the requirements of federal tax law. In cases of egregious violations of the law, AU asks the IRS to intervene.

[From an October 30 AU press release.]

¹ http://www.au.org/site/DocServer/NC_Baptists_10.30.08.pdf%20%20%20%20?docID=3281&JServSessionIdr001=7aws7s59b1.app13a

² <http://projectfairplay.org/>

"I cannot see how a man of any large degree of humorous perception can ever be religious — unless he purposely shut the eyes of his mind & keep them shut by force." — Mark Twain, from *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals* (1979),

August 1887-July 1888, quoted from James A. Haight, "Breaking the Last Taboo" (1996).

See <http://web.archive.org/web/20070313080530/www.newwave.net/~haught/breaking.html>.

Ten Questions, and Answers, About Evolution

“Ten questions to ask your biology teacher about evolution” is a document by Jonathan Wells, a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based group that advocates intelligent design. It aims to highlight the weaknesses in evolutionary theory. Here are his questions, along with responses compiled by the National Center for Science Education. See more questions at <http://www.iconsofevolution.com/>, Dr. Wells’ website. See more information about biological evolution at <http://nationalacademies.org/evolution/>.

1. Origin of life. Why do textbooks claim that the 1953 Miller-Urey experiment shows how life’s building blocks may have formed on the early Earth—when conditions on the early Earth were probably nothing like those used in the experiment, and the origin of life remains a mystery?

N.C.S.E. answer: Because evolutionary theory works with any model of the origin of life on Earth, how life originated is not a question about evolution. Textbooks discuss the 1953 studies because they were the first successful attempt to show how organic molecules might have been produced on the early earth. When modern scientists changed the experimental conditions to reflect better knowledge of the earth’s early atmosphere, they were able to produce most of the same building blocks. Origin-of-life remains a vigorous area of research.

2. Darwin’s tree of life. Why don’t textbooks discuss the “Cambrian explosion,” in which all major animal groups appear together in the fossil record fully formed, instead of branching from a common ancestor—thus contradicting the evolutionary tree of life?

A. Fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals all are post-Cambrian. We would recognize very few of the Cambrian organisms as “modern”; they’re in fact at the roots of the tree of life, showing the earliest appearances of some key features of groups of animals - but not all features and not all groups. Researchers are linking these Cambrian groups using not only fossils but also data from developmental biology.

3. Homology. Why do textbooks define homology as similarity due to common ancestry, then claim that it is evidence of common ancestry — a cir-

cular argument masquerading as scientific evidence?

A: The same anatomical structure (such as a leg or an antenna) in two species may be similar because it was inherited from a common ancestor (homology) or because of similar adaptive pressure (convergence). Homology of structures across species is not assumed, but tested by the repeated comparison of numerous features that do or do not sort into successive clusters. Homology is used to test hypotheses of degrees of relatedness. Homology is not “evidence” for common ancestry: common ancestry is inferred based on many sources of information, and reinforced by the patterns of similarity and dissimilarity of anatomical structures.

4. Vertebrate embryos. Why do textbooks use drawings of similarities in vertebrate embryos as evidence for their common ancestry—even though biologists have known for over a century that vertebrate embryos are not most similar in their early stages, and the drawings are faked?

A: Twentieth-century and current embryological research confirms that early stages (if not the earliest) of vertebrate embryos are more similar than later ones; the more recently species shared a common ancestor, the more similar their embryological development. Thus cows and rabbits - mammals - are more similar in their embryological development than either is to alligators. Cows and antelopes are more similar in their embryology than either is to rabbits, and so on. The union of evolution and developmental biology—“evo-devo”—is one of the most rapidly growing biological fields. “Faked” drawings are not relied upon: there has been plenty of research in developmental biology since Haeckel (long-discredited drawings

that were used in textbooks 20 years ago) and in fact, hardly any textbooks feature Haeckel’s drawings, as claimed.

5. Archaeopteryx. Why do textbooks portray this fossil as the missing link between dinosaurs and modern birds—even though modern birds are probably not descended from it, and its supposed ancestors do not appear until millions of years after it?

A: The notion of a “missing link” is an out-of-date misconception about how evolution works. Archaeopteryx (and other feathered fossils) shows how a branch of reptiles gradually acquired both the unique anatomy and flying adaptations found in all modern birds. It is a transitional fossil. These fossils are not direct ancestors of modern birds but relatives, and, as everyone knows, your uncle can be younger than you!

6. Peppered moths. Why do textbooks use pictures of peppered moths camouflaged on tree trunks as evidence for natural selection—when biologists have known since the 1980s that the moths don’t normally rest on tree trunks, and all the pictures have been staged?

A: These pictures are illustrations used to demonstrate a point—the advantage of protective coloration to reduce the danger of predation. The pictures are not the scientific evidence used to prove the point in the first place. Compare this illustration to the well-known re-enactments of the Battle of Gettysburg. Does the fact that these re-enactments are staged prove that the battle never happened? The peppered moth photos are the same sort of illustration, not scientific evidence for natural selection.

7. Darwin’s finches. Why do textbooks claim that beak changes in Galapagos finches during a severe drought

Ten Questions... (continued)

can explain the origin of species by natural selection—even though the changes were reversed after the drought ended, and no net evolution occurred?

A: Textbooks present the finch data to illustrate natural selection: that populations change their physical features in response to changes in the environment. The finch studies exquisitely documented how the physical features of an organism can affect its success in reproduction and survival, and that such changes can take place more quickly than was realized. That new species did not arise within the duration of the study hardly challenges evolution!

8. Mutant fruit flies. Why do textbooks use fruit flies with an extra pair of wings as evidence that DNA mutations can supply raw materials for evolution—even though the extra wings have no muscles and these disabled mutants cannot survive outside

the laboratory?

A: In the very few textbooks that discuss four-winged fruit flies, they are used as an illustration of how genes can reprogram parts of the body to produce novel structures, thus indeed providing “raw material” for evolution. This type of mutation produces new structures that become available for further experimentation and potential new uses. Even if not every mutation leads to a new evolutionary pathway, the flies are a vivid example of one way mutation can provide variation for natural selection to work on.

9. Human origins. Why are artists’ drawings of ape-like humans used to justify materialistic claims that we are just animals and our existence is a mere accident—when fossil experts cannot even agree on who our supposed ancestors were or what they looked like?

A: Drawings of humans and our

ancestors illustrate the general outline of human ancestry, about which there is considerable agreement, even if new discoveries continually add to the complexity of the account. The notion that such drawings are used to “justify materialistic claims” is not borne out by an examination of textbook treatments of human evolution.

10. Evolution a fact? Why are we told that Darwin’s theory of evolution is a scientific fact—even though many of its claims are based on misrepresentations of the facts?

A: In the last century, some of what Darwin originally proposed has been augmented by more modern scientific understanding of inheritance (genetics), development, and other processes that affect evolution. What remains unchanged is that similarities and differences among living things on Earth over time and space display a pattern that is best explained by evolutionary theory.

FFRF Sues Over National Day of Prayer Proclamations

The Freedom From Religion Foundation filed a federal lawsuit on October 3 challenging the federal law designating a National Day of Prayer and requiring a National Day of Prayer Proclamation by the President.

Public Law 100-307 sets the first Thursday in May as “National Day of Prayer.” The Foundation is seeking a declaration that the law violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

“Mandated Prayer Proclamations by the President exhorting each citizen to pray constitutes an unabashed endorsement of religion,” contends the Foundation complaint.

The suit alleges that a task force associated with Focus on the Family is “working hand-in-glove” with the government in organizing the event.

The Foundation charges that the government “aligns and partners” with the NDP Task Force as the official organizer of the National Day of Prayer. The NDP Task Force identifies

itself online as “The National Day of Prayer ‘Official Website.’” The task force has close ties to Focus on the Family. Its chair person, Shirley Dobson, is married to Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, and the task force is located in the Focus on the Family headquarters.

The task force proposes the wording of proclamations and chooses a yearly theme and bible quote to be recited by the President and Governors.

The Foundation Complaint contends that the Establishment Clause “prohibits government officials and persons acting in joint and concerted action with government officials from taking actions that endorse religion, including specific religions in preference to others, as well as preferring religion over non-religion.”

“Exhortations to pray in official Presidential proclamations do not constitute ceremonial deism solemnizing some other occasion,” the Foundation asserts, but “constitute an end in

itself intended to promote and endorse religion.”

The suit alleges that the NDP Task Force pressures governors from all 50 states to issue official proclamations, acting “in concert” to be aligned with “the Judeo-Christian principles on which the Task Force is based.”

“The concerted actions by these Governors to include the NDP Task Force theme and Biblical reference are not accidental or coincidental; they are the result of joint action with the NDP Task Force.” The proclamations “convey to nonreligious Americans that they are expected to believe in God,” and send a message that “religion is preferred over non-religion.”

“Designations of an official Day of Prayer by Presidential and Gubernatorial proclamations and encouraging celebration of prayer create a hostile environment for nonbelievers, who are made to feel as if they are political outsiders,” says the complaint.

[From an Oct. 3 FFRF press release.]

Bush Aides Say Religious Hiring Doesn't Bar Aid

In a newly disclosed legal memorandum, the Bush administration says it can bypass laws that forbid giving taxpayer money to religious groups that hire only staff members who share their faith.

An October 17 *Washington Post* article by Charlie Savage noted that the administration made the claim in a 2007 Justice Department memorandum from the Office of Legal Counsel. It was quietly posted on the department's website this week.

The statutes for some grant programs do not impose antidiscrimination conditions on their financing, and the administration had previously allowed such programs to give taxpayer money to groups that hire only people of a particular religion.

But the memorandum goes further, drawing a sweeping conclusion that even federal programs subject to antidiscrimination laws can give money to groups that discriminate.

The document signed off on a \$1.5 million grant to World Vision, a group that hires only Christians, for salaries of staff members running a program that helps "at-risk youth" avoid gangs. The grant was from a Justice Department program created by a statute that forbids discriminatory hiring for the positions it is financing.

But the memorandum said the government could bypass those provisions because of the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act. It sometimes permits exceptions to a federal law if obeying it would impose a "substantial burden" on people's ability to freely exercise their religion. The opinion concluded that requiring World Vision to hire non-Christians as a condition of the grant would create such a burden.

But several law professors who specialize in religious issues called the argument legally dubious. Ira C. Lupu, a co-director of the Project on Law and Religious Institutions at George Washington University Law School, said the opinion's reasoning was "a very big stretch."

And Marty Lederman, a Georgetown University law professor who worked in the Office of Legal Counsel from 1994 to 2002, said the memorandum's reasoning was incompatible with Supreme Court precedent. He pointed to a 2004 case, in which the court said government scholarships that could not be used to study religion did not substantially burden recipients' right to practice their religion because they could still study theology with their own money.

In the same way, Mr. Lederman said, World Vision is free to have an anti-gang program that hires by faith without using taxpayer money.

The Justice Department "stands strongly behind the opinion, which is narrowly drawn and carefully reasoned," Erik Ablin, an agency spokesman, said in an e-mail message. "Most of the criticisms that have been outlined against the opinion are thoroughly addressed in the opinion itself. Each of them lacks merit."

Carl H. Esbeck, a University of Missouri law professor and architect of the religion-based initiative movement, also defended the opinion, saying the Religious Freedom Restoration Act compelled the department's conclusion. "I understand that liberal law professors don't like this," he said. Why, he asked, should World Vision "be denied the opportunity that everyone else has to compete for funding simply because of their religion?"

The Office of Legal Counsel issues interpretations of the law that are binding on the executive branch and often rules on matters that are difficult to get before a court. Under the Bush administration, it has drawn sharp criticism for issuing opinions that provide legal cover for controversial policies preferred by administration officials.

Christopher E. Anders, senior legislative counsel to the American Civil Liberties Union, said he was alarmed by the 2007 memorandum's conclusion that the government does not have a "compelling interest" in en-

forcing a federal civil rights statute.

"It's really the church-state equivalent of the torture memos," Mr. Anders said. "It takes a view of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act that allows religious organizations to get federal funds without complying with anything."

Professor Lupu did not go that far, but said the opinion made "an aggressive reading of 'substantial burden' in a way that is not consistent with what courts and other agencies have done in the past, and it is designed to serve the president's political agenda."

Mr. Bush, whose strongest political base has been religious conservatives, has made lowering barriers to government financing of such groups a priority.

In January 2001, Mr. Bush's first two executive orders created an Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in the White House and in five federal agencies, telling them to ease the way for church groups to win grants for social work, like homeless shelters.

Mr. Bush also asked Congress to make it legal for religious groups to win grants even if they discriminate against people of other faiths when hiring for taxpayer-financed posts. He said it was not fair to force them to give up their identities in order to compete for grants. When Congress failed to pass such a bill, Mr. Bush issued an executive order that made the changes on his own for most federal programs.

But statutes trump executive orders, and a few grant programs—including the one involving World Vision—had independent antidiscrimination requirements. Since then, some social conservatives have advanced the view that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act might be used to nullify such restrictions.

In 2003, Mr. Lupu said, the Department of Health and Human Services issued a regulation for substance abuse and mental health program grants that advanced such a view, and

in 2007—several months after the Office of Legal Counsel memo was secretly completed—the Justice Department quietly changed its grant application rules to reflect that view.

But the release of the 25-page opinion recently is the “most elaborate and carefully reasoned effort by the Bush administration to justify its conclusion” that such grant conditions are legally obsolete, Mr. Lupu said.

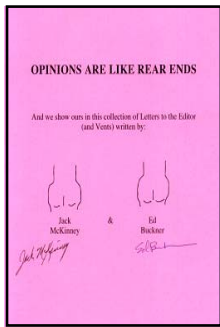
The next administration would be

free to rescind the memorandum. Both major party nominees for president have said they would continue allowing religion-based groups to participate in federal grant programs. But Barack Obama has said taxpayer money would not go to programs that discriminate by faith in hiring, a condition John McCain has not embraced.

Barry Lynn, president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said he hoped the opinion

would not stand. “The Bush administration has been trying to allow religious recipients of tax dollars to discriminate in hiring,” he said. “No Congress intended that. The Constitution does not permit it. And this memo is just one more example of this administration subverting Congressional and constitutional intent in pursuit of a forbidden goal: discrimination in hiring.”

The Atlanta Freethought Society is pleased to have the following books for sale at the next AFS meeting:



Opinions Are Like Rear Ends

By: Ed Buckner and Jack McKinney \$8 each

This book is filled with funny and thoughtful ideas and remarks by our own Ed Buckner and Jack McKinney. It includes many of their Letters to the Editor and Vents published by different newspapers in the Atlanta area.

The book includes sections on religious liberty, Ten Commandments postings, morality, defending science and decrying irrational ideas. It shows the reader how to write letters-to-the-editor that really get published, with many tips to ensure success.



GOD.COM - A Deity for the New Millennium (2nd edition)

By: Dr. John Henderson, MD \$16 each

This book was written to help people overcome their fear of a vengeful, cruel God that they have been taught to believe in in childhood. It also encourages the reader to speak out when they hear religious leaders incite cruelty and hatred.

The author believes that harmful, intolerant religious beliefs, which are the causes of so much strife and warfare, must be contained. If there is ever to be peace in the world, religions must be kept in the churches, synagogues, and temples.

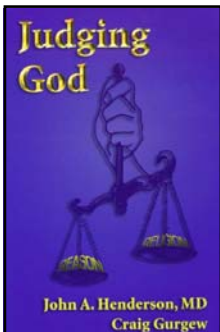


Fear Faith Fact Fantasy

By: Dr. John Henderson, MD \$18 each

In this book Dr. Henderson examines the role of religion in society, and discusses the good and bad sides of religion, calling attention to the catastrophic effects of mindless faith.

Fear Faith Fact Fantasy is a witty, accessible, provocative book that encourages readers to use their critical thinking and logic skills in looking at religion.



Judging God

By: Dr. John Henderson, MD and Craig Gurgew \$18 each

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.

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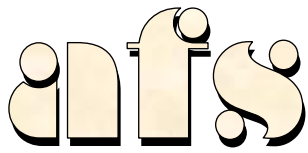
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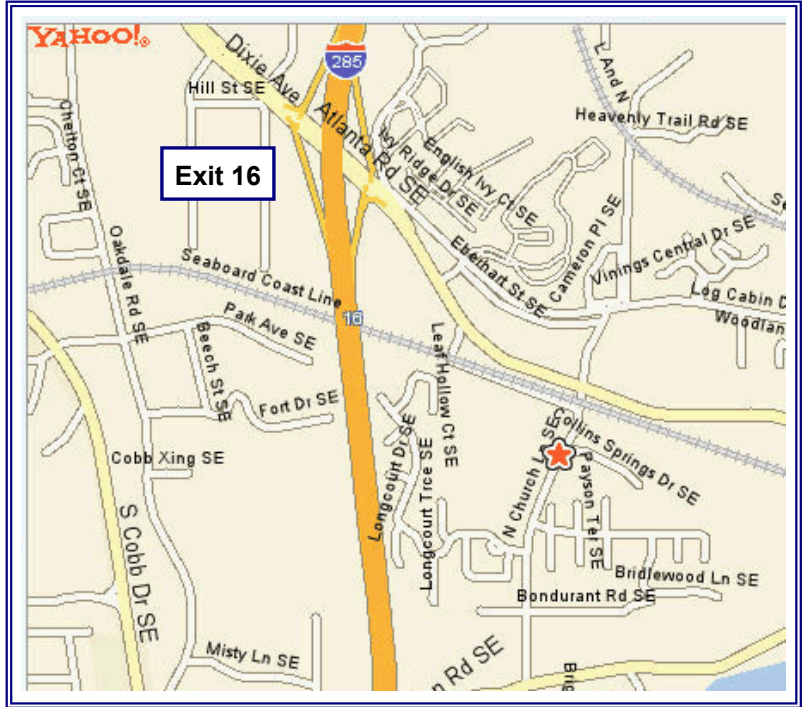
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**The November 9 Meeting:
1:00 at our New Location
4775 N. Church Lane SE
Smyrna, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Blair Scott**



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