

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

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The December AFS Meeting

The December 14 AFS meeting will include a Lunch and Party at 1:00 (see the article on this), and then a talk at 2:00 by **Bob Collins** on "My Favorite False Bible Prophecies."

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

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

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

The meeting will be at **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, December 19, at 7:00 PM. (Please suggest a new location for our Social: there will be a new location for it in January.)

The December Lunch and Party

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

A-G: Bring a side dish;

H-P: Bring a main dish;

Q-Z: Bring a dessert.

AFS will provide drinks, plates and silverware.

AFS To Sell Roswell Property!

The Atlanta Freethought Society is scheduled to close on selling the two office condominiums formerly known as the Atlanta Freethought Center on Thursday, December 11! (We will announce if the sale was finalized at the December meeting.) The AFS board debated much by email on counter-offer prices and conditions of the sale, but by December 5th there was agreement between the buyer and AFS. This sale will allow several creditors to be reimbursed for their loans to AFS. We will be very pleased when the sale is completed! This is yet another reason to celebrate at the December AFS Lunch and Party!

AFS Meetings and Activities

Dec 14: AFS Board Meeting at AF Hall, 11:00 AM.

Dec 14: AFS Lunch and Party at AF Hall, 1:00 PM.

Dec 14: AFS General Meeting at AF Hall, 2:00 PM.

Dec 19: 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 NOT meet this month.

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.

There will be a "**meetup**" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, December 14, 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, December 21, 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, December 10, at 7:00 PM. (See <http://gust.domek.org/>.)

Visit freethinker John de Waal's excellent blog at <http://ethicaljohn.blogspot.com/>.

(He is a friend of AFS member Hank Shiver in Chapala, Mexico.)

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



Programs and Speakers

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

Dec 14: Bob Collins will speak on "My Favorite False Bible Prophecies."

Jan 12: Steve Yothment will speak on "Views on the Historicity of Jesus."

Feb 8: Lori Lipoma, an English professor at the Univ. of West Georgia, will speak.

Mar 8: TBD

Apr 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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Call and leave messages on the

AFS Info Line: 404-A THEIST

American Atheists Sues Kentucky Over Religion Clause

A group of atheists filed a lawsuit on December 2 seeking to remove part of a state anti-terrorism law that requires Kentucky's Office of Homeland Security to acknowledge it can't keep the state safe without God's help.

American Atheists Inc. sued in state court over a 2002 law that stresses God's role in Kentucky's homeland security alongside the military, police agencies and health departments.

Of particular concern is a 2006 clause requiring the Office of Homeland Security to post a plaque that says the safety and security of the state "cannot be achieved apart from reliance upon almighty God" and to stress that fact through training and educational materials.

The plaque, posted at the Kentucky Emergency Operations Center in Frankfort, includes the Bible verse: "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain."

"It is one of the most egregiously and breathtakingly unconstitutional actions by a state legislature that I've ever seen," said Edwin Kagin, national legal director of American Atheists. The group claims the law violates both the state and U.S. constitutions.

But Democratic state Rep. Tom Riner, a Baptist minister from Louisville, said he considers it vitally important to acknowledge God's role in protecting Kentucky and the nation. (He is the architect of the wording in question in the anti-terrorism law.)

"No government by itself can guarantee perfect security," Riner said. "There will always be this opposition to the acknowledgment of divine providence, but this is a foundational understanding of what America is."

Riner is known for his persistence, having pushed for over three decades to keep religion in public schools and in the courthouse.

"If we don't affirm the right to recognize divine providence, then that puts that right in jeopardy," said Riner. "It's part of our history. Whether we believe it personally or not, it's what America is. And in the struggle to sanitize our classrooms, courtrooms and public buildings of all references to God, we are in many cases suppressing the ability of our young people and others to know our history."

As Andrew Koppelman, a Northwestern University law professor, points out, one man's "suppression of history" is another's "abiding by the First Amendment."

"It is so flagrantly unconstitutional that it's hard to imagine how a responsible executive could comply with it," Koppelman said of the Kentucky law. "If there is anything that this law accomplishes it's that it lets the state officially stick it to the atheists. But the First Amendment means that the state is not allowed to stick it to the atheists."

Clearly, however, the presence of that pesky amendment doesn't stop people like Riner from trying, over and over again.

The lawsuit indicates that the plaintiffs fear "their very safety as residents of Kentucky may be in the hands of fanatics, traitors or fools."

One set of those hands belongs to Rep. David Floyd.

"No Christian minds being called a fanatic in the service of God," said Floyd, who disagrees with the notion that the U.S. Constitution requires a wall of separation between church and state. "But the term 'traitor or fool'? Well, this lawsuit is either constitutional or it's personal. It would seem by the phrasing of the lawsuit that it's personal."

"We're not trying to be nice," said David Silverman, national spokesman

for American Atheists. "These people are breaking the law. They're breaking the law knowingly. They are trying to get sued."

Kentucky has been at the center of a series of legal battles involving religious issues in recent years, most involving displays of the Ten Commandments in public buildings. One case went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in 2005 that such displays inside courthouses in two counties were unconstitutional.

Kentucky isn't the only state dealing with religious issues, but Ed Buckner, president of American Atheists, said it's alone in officially enlisting God in homeland security.

"I'm not aware of any other state or commonwealth that is attempting to dump their clear responsibility for protecting their citizens onto God or any other mythological creature," Buckner said.

State Rep. David Floyd, R-Bardstow, said the preamble to the Kentucky constitution references a people "grateful to almighty God," so he said he sees no constitutional violation in enlisting God in the state's homeland security efforts.

But state Sen. Kathy Stein, D-Lexington, said Homeland Security should worry about public safety threats instead of preaching religious homilies.

"It's very sad to me that we do this sort of thing," said Stein, a frequent critic of efforts to mix religion and government. "It takes away from the seriousness of the public discussion over security, and it clearly hurts the credibility of this office if it's supposed to be depending on God, first and foremost."

[From Dec. 4 articles in the Kentucky Herald-Leader, Chicago Tribune, Fox-News.com and an American Atheists press release.]

"Fables should be taught as fables, myths as myths, and miracles as poetic fancies. To teach superstitions as truths is a most terrible thing."

"All formal dogmatic religions are fallacious and must never be accepted by self-respecting persons as final."

– Hypatia of Alexandria, Greek mathematician (370 - 415 AD)

Humanists Launch Godless Holiday Campaign

From a Press Release by the American Humanist Association

“Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness’ sake,” proclaims a new holiday ad from the American Humanist Association. The ad first appeared in the New York Times on November 11; it was then shown on the sides, taillights, and interiors of over 200 Washington DC Metro buses.

It’s the first ad campaign of its kind in the United States, and the American Humanist Association predicts it will raise public awareness of humanism as well as controversy over humanist ideas.

“Humanists have always understood that you don’t need a god to be

good,” said Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association. “So that’s the point we’re making with this advertising campaign. Morality doesn’t come from religion. It’s a set of values embraced by individuals and society based on empathy, fairness, and experience.”

At a press conference on November 11 launching the campaign, large displays were featured showing the ads in the New York Times and Washington Post, the bus posters, and how the posters will look mounted on the side of a bus and inside, behind the driver’s seat. (See high resolution pho-

tos of the posters, including images of them mounted on and in a bus, at <http://www.whybelieveinagod.org/moreabout.html>.) The posters started appearing on buses in Northwest Washington on Tuesday, November 18. The interior posters began on December 1 in the Northwest and Southeast.

“We expect these bus signs to generate a lot of public interest,” said Fred Edwards, director of communications for the American Humanist Association. “Some folks may be offended but that isn’t our purpose. We just want to reach those open to this message but unaware how widespread their views are.”

‘Christian’ License-Plate Controversy Moves To Federal Court Showdown in South Carolina

Americans United Argues That ‘I Believe’ Plate Shows Unconstitutional State Preference for Christianity

A federal district court ruling is expected soon in a South Carolina controversy over a “Christian” license plate commissioned by the state legislature.

On Dec. 11, U.S. District Court Judge Cameron McGowan Currie will hear arguments in Columbia, S.C., on whether the state should be allowed to issue license plates that feature the words, “I Believe,” accompanied by a depiction of a yellow Christian cross superimposed on a multicolored stained-glass church window.

State authorities have indicated plans to start issuing the plates in mid December.

Earlier this year, Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed a lawsuit on behalf of several religious leaders and minority communities whose First Amendment rights are infringed by the proposed plate.

The *Summers v. Adams* lawsuit charges that the Christian plate gives preferential government treatment to one faith in violation of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Plaintiffs in the case include four South Carolina clergy, the Rev. Dr. Thomas A. Summers, Rabbi Sanford T. Marcus, the Rev. Dr. Robert M. Knight and the Rev. Dr. Neal Jones, as well as the Hindu American Foundation and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

The measure authorizing the special plates was passed unanimously by both houses of the legislature, with the active support of Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer.

As Americans United noted in its motion for preliminary injunction, some legislators candidly admitted that they would not vote for similar plates for minority faiths.

Asked by a reporter if he would support a license plate for Islam, Rep. Bill Sandifer replied, “Absolutely and positively no.... I would not because of my personal belief, and because I believe that wouldn’t be the wish of the majority of the con-

stituency in this house district.”

Oral argument on Americans United’s motion for a preliminary injunction stopping issuance of the plates is scheduled for Dec. 11 at the federal courthouse in Columbia, S.C.

Attorneys working on the case include Americans United Legal Director Ayesha N. Khan and AU Madison Fellow Elizabeth J. Stevens. Aaron J. Kozloski of Capitol Counsel, a Columbia, S.C. law firm, is serving as local counsel.

[From a December 8 press release by Americans United for Separation of Church and State.]



Once Upon a Time the Religious Right Demonized Christmas, Even Banning Its Celebration

Here's the Christmas tale the Religious Right doesn't want you to hear. By Rob Boston

It is ironic to hear Religious Right groups portray themselves as the great defenders of Christmas — their spiritual forebears hated the holiday and even banned its celebration.

The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay frowned on Christmas revelry, considering the holiday a Roman Catholic affectation. A law in the colony barred anyone from taking the day off work, feasting or engaging in other celebrations on Christmas, under penalty of a five-shilling fine.

The law was repealed in 1681, but Christmas celebrations remained unpopular in New England and other colonies for many years. That did not change after the Revolution, because many Americans viewed Christmas as a Tory custom, a reminder of the expelled British.

Although Christmas became popular in the South as early as the 1830s, other regions were apathetic. Writer Tom Flynn notes in his 1993 book *The Trouble with Christmas* that Congress did not begin adjourning on Christmas Day until 1856. Public schools in New England were often open on Dec. 25, as were many factories and offices. Many Protestant churches refused to hold services, considering the holiday “popish.”

Not until after the Civil War did Christmas begin to seriously affect American cultural and religious life. European immigration increased sharply after the war, and many of the newcomers came from countries with strong Christmas traditions. Germans, Italians, Poles, Swedes, Norwegians and others brought the holiday and many of its features, including Christmas trees and Santa Claus, to America in a big way.

The celebration spread, and in 1870 Christmas was declared a federal holiday by Congress. But practices in the states continued to vary. As late as

1931, Flynn reports, nine states still called for public schools to remain open on Christmas Day.

It might also surprise Religious Right activists to learn that many of the Christmas traditions they defend so vociferously have, at best, a tenuous connection to Christianity.

Several of the holiday's most common features grow out of pre-Christian religions. The ancient Romans celebrated Saturnalia in mid-December, a time of general merriment, feasting and gift exchanges. Slaves were given time off and were even permitted to play dice games in public. During this period, many Romans decorated their homes with evergreens as a reminder that life would persevere through the dark days of winter.

Evergreen trees had long been viewed as a symbol of fertility by Pagan peoples. When winter came and most trees lost their leaves and appeared to die, the evergreen was a reminder that life would endure and that long days, warmer weather and a harvest would come again. Germans were early boosters of the Christmas tree and brought it to America. (The pious legend that Martin Luther decorated the first Christmas tree is not taken seriously by scholars.)

Candles, a necessary item during the dark winter period, were a common Saturnalia gift. Some scholars consider them a precursor to Christmas lights.

Originally celebrated on Dec. 17, the Roman Saturnalia eventually expanded to last an entire week, ending on Dec. 23.

So where did the Dec. 25 date for Christmas come from?

Many scholars believe that date came from another Roman festival, one that became popular around the middle of the third century — the feast

of Sol Invictus, the unconquered sun.

During this festival, various gods related to the sun in the Roman pantheon were honored. The festival was most popular during the reign of the emperor Aurelian (270-275 A.D.), who attributed his military victories to the sun god and may have wanted to establish a solar deity as supreme in the Roman pantheon. Images of Sol Invictus remained popular and appeared on Roman coinage even during the reign of Constantine the Great (306-337 A.D.).

There is some evidence that early Christians celebrated the festival alongside Pagans, and that church leaders, seeing these practices under way, simply appropriated the date for the birth of Jesus as Christianity grew and became the dominant religion of the empire throughout the fourth and fifth centuries.

Michael Grant, the late scholar of the ancient world, noted in his 1985 book *The Roman Emperors* that Dec. 25 was “a bequest of the solar cult to Christianity, converted into Christmas Day.”

Legal codes laid down by the emperors Theodosius I and later Justinian made Christianity the state religion and banned Paganism. Church leaders were generally tolerant of people taking old practices and adding a Christian gloss to them. Overt worship of Pagan gods disappeared but the Dec. 25 date — and many residual practices associated with the old festival — remained.

As strange as it may seem, when Religious Right legal groups go to court to battle the “War on Christmas,” they may really be defending practices historically associated with the worship not of the son of God but the sun in the sky.

[Rob Boston is associate editor for *Church and State* magazine.]

“It is difficult, none the less, for the ordinary man to cast off orthodox beliefs, for he is seldom allowed to hear the other side. ...Whereas the Christian view is pressed on him day in and day out.” —Margaret Knight, British freethinker (1903-1983)

For Secular Americans, Lip Service Beats No Service

As a “Guest Voice” for *Washingtonpost.com*’s On Faith section, Secular Coalition for America President Herb Silverman explains his dilemma as an atheist voter. (Published on Nov. 6)

About a month before this recent election, some local progressives in South Carolina asked if I would help Democrat Linda Ketner in her Congressional campaign against conservative incumbent Republican Henry Brown. At first they thought I was joking when I said I didn’t even plan to vote for her, and would leave blank that portion of my ballot. They ticked off a number of issues on which Ketner was better than her opponent. I agreed, even adding a couple of my own. My problem with Ketner was a 30-second TV ad in which she proclaimed her love of God three times.

I have gradually begun withdrawing support from otherwise acceptable candidates who make personal religious beliefs a focal point of their campaigns. In taking a longer view, I described how the Religious Right moved beyond merely saving souls to becoming a formidable political force. My friends discounted this reasoning. The Religious Right may have been thrown a few crumbs by politicians, they said, but mainly all they have received in return for their support is lip service. When my companions asked if I, an atheist, would settle for so little, I replied without hesitation: “YES! We’ll take lip service!”

I would be thrilled to see politicians court us by accepting invitations to speak at atheist and humanist conferences, as they do at religious events. I would love to hear them say we were founded as a secular nation, with no mention of any gods in our Constitution, and speak about the value of separating religion from government. I’d be delighted to hear them defend atheists and agnostics from our detractors, reminding Americans that freedom of conscience extends to citizens of all faiths and none.

Yes, even if their words changed nothing about public policy, lip service would be a wonderful new di-

mension in the relationship between politicians and secular Americans—it would mean public acknowledgement that we exist. It might even lead to the occasional political crumb: an elected official hiring advisers who are openly humanist, for example. Just this minimal level of recognition could go a long way toward changing the hearts and minds of people who assume god belief to be a prerequisite for morality and ethical behavior.

Why would secular Americans like me set the bar so low? Because we have no direction to go but up. Political candidates are happy to accept our contributions, our volunteer hours, and our votes—as long as we put bags over our heads. (“Thanks,” they say quietly. “You understand why I can’t ...”) They behave this way partly because they underestimate our numbers, partly because polls show that Americans fear and distrust atheists, and partly because they think we have nowhere else to go.

What has generally been viewed as the most scurrilous activity of the 2008 campaign season occurred in North Carolina when an ad put out by the Elizabeth Dole campaign accused opponent Kay Hagan of associating with known atheists, implying that Hagan herself might be “godless,” and that she might have promised something in return for the support of such “vile, radical liberals.” Hagan’s campaign responded that she is not an atheist and, in fact, is an active Christian.

That just sets the record straight; no problem so far. But then Hagan filed a lawsuit, claiming defamation of her good name and reputation in the community.

To see why atheists might be saying, “A plague on both your houses,” consider this unrealistic hypothetical: Candidate A accuses Candidate B of consorting with Jews, and possibly even being one. Candidate B says she

is a Christian, not a Jew, and files a defamation lawsuit because of the damage to her reputation in the community. Of course, no Candidate A in this country, at least not in this century, would attempt such an accusation; and no Candidate B would react as if the label “Jew” were understood by all to be an insult. You may substitute just about any other minority for “Jew” in this scenario to get a sense of the secular community’s reaction to the squabbling between Dole and Hagan. If merely associating with nonreligious Americans is political suicide, and being mistaken for one of us constitutes “defamation,” it’s not hard to imagine many North Carolina voters making the same painful choice I did on November 4: leaving that part of the ballot blank.

More than 16% (over 50 million) of Americans are nontheistic. There are more atheists and agnostics than there are Jews, Presbyterians, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Roman and Greek Orthodox combined in the United States. Some of these people were Elizabeth Dole’s constituents, and now they are Kay Hagan’s. In fact, secular Americans are a significant and growing part of every politician’s constituency, and they deserve—and are beginning to insist upon—the same consideration politicians give to other citizens.

Lip service is where it will begin. Perhaps, one day, respect will follow.

[Herb Silverman teaches mathematics at the College of Charleston and is a former South Carolina gubernatorial candidate. He is also a member of the American Humanist Association board of directors, founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and founder and faculty adviser to the College of Charleston student Atheist/Humanist Alliance.]

“To rule by fettering the mind through fear of punishment in another world is just as base as to use force.” —Hypatia of Alexandria

Is Belief in God Essential for Moral Virtue?

by Paul Kurtz

A growing sector of world civilization is secular; that is, it emphasizes worldly rather than religious values. This is especially true of Europe, which is widely considered post-religious and post-Christian (with a small Islamic minority). Secularist winds are also blowing strong in Asia, notably in Japan and China. The United States has been an anomaly in this regard, for it has suffered a long dark night in which evangelical fundamentalism has overshadowed the public square, with its insistence that belief in God is essential for moral virtue. This is now changing and secularism is gaining ground.

The “new atheists” have attempted to balance the scales, for religious dissent until now has been largely muffled. They have appealed to science to criticize the unexamined claims of religion. This has shocked conservative religionists, who respond that atheists are “too negative.” Perhaps, but this overlooks the fact that there are varieties of unbelief and that secular humanists (the *bete noire* of fundamentalists during the Reagan years) define their outlook affirmatively in the light of positive ethical values, not by what they are against but what they are for.

Secular humanists are generally nonreligious, yet they are also good citizens, loving parents and decent people. They look to science, the secular arts and literature for their inspiration, not religion. They point out that religious belief is no guarantee of moral probity, that horrendous crimes have been committed in the name of God, and that religionists often disagree vehemently about concrete moral judgments (such as euthanasia, the rights of women, abortion, homosexuality, war and peace).

The ethics of secular humanism traces its roots back to the beginnings of Western civilization in Greece and Rome, through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the scientific and democratic revolutions of the modern

world. Secular humanists today affirm that every person should be considered equal in dignity and value and that human freedom is precious. The civic virtues of democracy are essentially humanist, for they emphasize tolerance of the wide diversity of beliefs and lifestyles, and they are committed to defending human rights.

But, “how can you be ethical if you do not believe in God?” protests the believer. Perhaps such a person should enroll in an elementary course in ethics, where there is a rich philosophical literature dealing with this question. The good is usually defined as “happiness” though there are differences between the eudemonistic, emphasizing enriched self-development, and the hedonistic, particularly American, brand of intemperate consumption. Perhaps a harmonious integration of the two theories can be achieved. I would call it rational exuberance. Philosophers have emphasized the importance of self-restraint, temperance, rational prudence, a life in which satisfaction, excellence, and the creative fulfillment of a person’s talents is achieved. It does not mean that “anything goes.” Humanist ethics focuses on the good life here and now.

Secularists recognize the centrality of self-interest. Every individual needs to be concerned with his or her own health, well-being, and career. But self-interest can be enlightened. This involves recognition that we have responsibilities to others. There are principles of right and wrong that we should live by. No doubt there are differences about many moral issues. Often there may be difficulties in achieving a consensus. Negotiation and compromise are essential in a pluralistic society.

However, there is now substantial evidence drawn from evolutionary biology that humans possess a moral sense (see Marc Hauser, Steven Pinker, and David Sloan Wilson). Morality has its roots in group survival;

the moral practices that evolved enabled tribes or clans to survive and function. This means that human beings are potentially moral. Whether or not this moral sense develops depends on social and environmental conditions. Some individuals may never fully develop morally—they may be morally handicapped, even sociopaths. That is one reason why society needs to enact laws to protect itself.

There is also of course cultural relativity, but there are, I submit, also a set of common moral decencies that cut across cultures—such as being truthful, honest, keeping promises, being dependable and responsible, avoiding cruelty, etc., and these in time become widely recognized as binding. Herein lie the roots of empathy and caring for other human and sentient beings. Such behavior needs to be nourished in the young by means of moral education. In any case, human beings are capable of both self-interested and altruistic behavior in varying degrees.

Secular humanists wish to test ethical principles in the light of their consequences, and they advise the use of rational inquiry to frame moral judgments. They also appreciate the fact that some principles are so important that they should not be easily sacrificed to achieve one’s ends.

To say that a person is moral only if he or she obeys God’s commandments—out of fear or love or God or a desire for salvation—is hardly adequate. Ethical principles need to be internalized, rooted in reason and compassion. The ethics of secularism is autonomous, in the sense that it need not be derived from theological grounds. Secular humanists are interested in enhancing the good life both for the individual and society.

Today, a new imperative has emerged: an awareness that our ethical concerns should extend to all members of the global community.

This points to a new planetary ethics transcending the ancient religious, ethnic, racial, and national enmities of the past. It is an ethic that recognizes our common interests and needs as part of an interdependent world.

(Professor Paul Kurtz is the chair

man and founder of the Center for Inquiry-Transnational, Editor-in-Chief of FREE INQUIRY magazine, and professor emeritus of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo. For 40 years, Kurtz has been a leading organizational and intellect-

tual figure in the humanist and skeptical movement. His new book, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism* is published by Prometheus Books.)

[From a "Guest Voices" post to the On Faith section of Washingtonpost.com.

Published on November 24.]

Texas State School Board Should Uphold Sound Science, Reject Creationism, Says Americans United

Religious Right Push For Creationist Concepts In Texas Science Standards Could Damage Textbooks Nationwide, Says AU's Lynn

Americans United for Separation of Church and State urged the Texas State Board of Education on November 19 to stick to sound science and reject creationist concepts when revising its science standards.

The state school board is currently examining the science curriculum, which is reviewed and updated every 10 years. The Seattle-based Discovery Institute and other Religious Right forces are seeking to include loopholes that undermine instruction about evolution and open the door to creationist ideas.

Scientists, teachers, mainstream religious leaders and civil liberties activists want to improve the Texas standards to ensure that the public school classroom does not become a vehicle for religious indoctrination.

"Public schools should educate, not indoctrinate," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. "The Religious Right is exploiting Texas public schools to push a narrow viewpoint and in the process is doing a great disservice to its students, not to mention undermining the mandates of our Constitution."

The battle in Texas is focused on Religious Right-backed language cur-

rently in the standards that requires schools to teach the "strengths and weaknesses" of evolution. That wording, experts say, is an invitation to introduce creationist concepts based on fundamentalist religion, not science.

"Let's just hope members of the Texas school board recognize the 'strengths and weaknesses' language for what it is," Lynn concluded. "If they don't, they could be inviting public school districts to face some costly litigation."

In its letter to the board, Americans United made it clear that litigation may result if religious beliefs are introduced into public school science classrooms.

The board's decision, which is expected to be made in March, could influence science instruction across the country. Texas is the second largest purchaser of textbooks, after California. To meet Texas standards, textbook producers may include creationist concepts in books that would circulate nationally.

Various groups met with the state school board on Nov. 19 in Austin to discuss the science curriculum.

Religious Right groups have already succeeded in pushing through

their agenda in Louisiana, which now allows science teachers to use "supplemental materials" to teach the "strengths and weaknesses" of evolution. AU is closely monitoring whether religious beliefs are being introduced unconstitutionally as science by teachers in Louisiana.

The federal courts have repeatedly struck down other tactics used by the Religious Right to push religion in public science classes. In 1987, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Edwards v. Aguillard* invalidated a Louisiana statute requiring science educators to "balance" teaching evolution concepts with "creation science" concepts.

In 2005, a federal district court said in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* that Pennsylvania public schools cannot teach "intelligent design," a creationist concept that claims the universe and living things were created by an "intelligent cause." The court ruled "intelligent design" unconstitutional for use in public schools because it is unscientific and religious.

[From a November 19 press release by

Americans United for Separation of Church and State. For updates on this story and other breaking news, go to

<http://www.au.org/>]

"From the first moment I looked into that horror on September 11th, into that fireball, into that explosion of horror, I knew it, I recognized an old companion. I recognized religion." — Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete (born January 7, 1941), a Roman Catholic priest and American theologian, Chairman of the Board of Advisors of Crossroads Cultural Center.

The World's Need

So many gods, so many creeds; So many paths that wind and wind,

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Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1815-1919)

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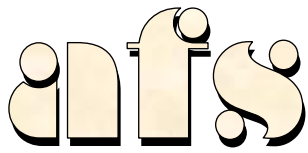
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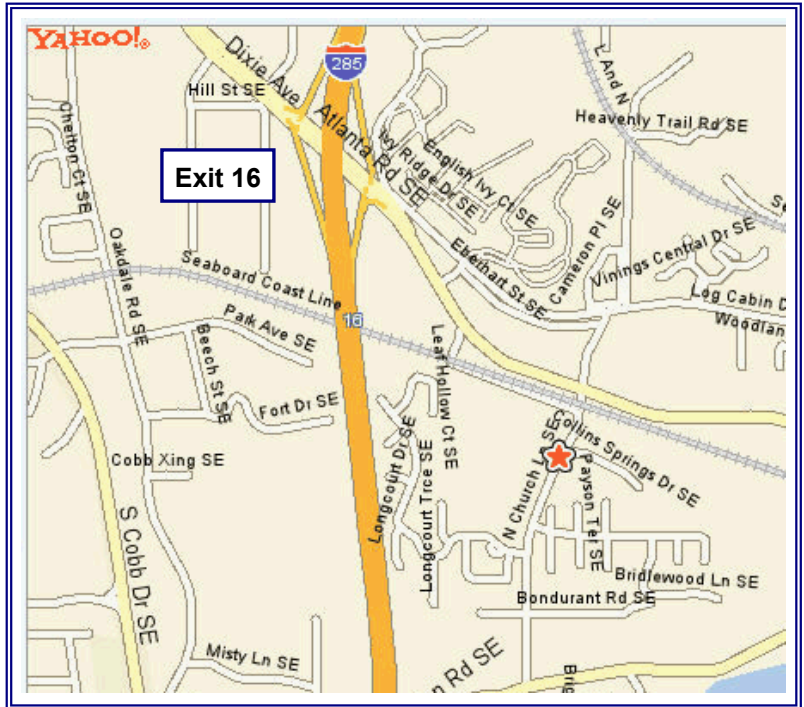
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**This Month's Speaker:
Bob Collins**



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