

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication

• Volume 15 Number 7

• July 2009

The July AFS Meeting

The July 12 AFS meeting will include a Potluck Lunch at 1:00, and then a talk at 2:00 by our own Tony King on "Ancient Egyptian Religion: An Introduction."

The meeting will be at **Atlanta Freethought Hall**, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, Smyrna, GA. Please feel free to arrive early for snacks and conversation.

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 July Potluck Lunch

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

A-G: Bring a main dish;

H-P: Bring a dessert;

Q-Z: Bring a side dish.

Also, please bring folding chairs if you can!

AFS will provide drinks, plates and silverware.

A Detour to AF Hall!

North Church Lane will be closed to thru traffic between Atlanta Road and Collins Springs Drive from June 1st to October 28th for bridge replacement over the CSX railroad.

To get to AF Hall from I-285, you can still take Atlanta Road towards Atlanta, but continue past N. Church Lane to Plant Atkinson Road. Turn right and go to N. Church Lane and turn right again. AF Hall will be on the right.

The AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be at Las Margaritas Restaurant, 1842 Cheshire Bridge Road, Atlanta, on Friday, July 17, at 7:00 PM. To get there, take I-85 to the Cheshire Bridge Road exit (Exit 88) in north Atlanta. Turn east at the light and go 1.5 miles. The restaurant will be on the right.

AFS Meetings and Activities

July 12: AFS Board Meeting, AF Hall, 11:00 AM.

July 12: AFS General Meeting, AF Hall, 1:00 PM.

July 17: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00 PM.

Other Meetings of Interest

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at AF Hall on Sunday, July 19, at 1:00 PM. Todd Daniel of the Sierra Club will talk about the World Population Explosion. For details, see his blog at <http://www.goosed-log.blogspot.com>.

The **Fayette Freethinkers** meet in Peachtree City, GA on Wednesdays at 7:00 PM at the Orthodontist's Office on Peachtree Pkwy near Crosstown Road. The group also meets for lunch on the first and third Saturday of the month at the Irish Bred Pub, 275 Hwy 74 N. For details, contact Shelby at freediscussion@hotmail.com.

There will be a "**meetup**" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, June 12, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur, GA.

There's another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists scheduled for Sunday, June 26, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta.

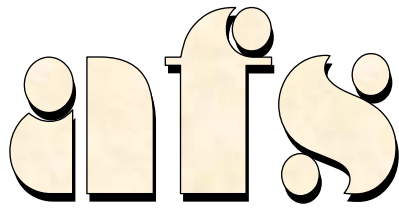
GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Gwinnett (12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville) on Wednesday, July 15, at 7:00 PM. (See <http://gust.domek.org/>.)

SOS, the Secular Organizations for Sobriety, is not having regular meetings, but if you would like to learn about the group, email Donna Gore at donnajgore@yahoo.com.

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 **First Annual Conference of Black Nontheists** will be in Atlanta on Friday, August 7, and Saturday, August 8, at the Atlanta Fulton Public Library, Central Downtown Branch Auditorium. Gary C. Booker will host the event. His website (<http://www.garybooker.org>) notes that "Even after many centuries of being disappointed and miserably failed by organized religion, Black Americans continue to be extremely devout and show blind faith in self-destructive ways. Religious fundamentalism and bigotry continue to promote sectarianism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and anti-intellectualism in Black American communities. Mental Liberation is the final frontier of the civil rights movement." See the website for details. Norm Allen of African Americans for Humanism will also be there.

"All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of humankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God." —Thomas Jefferson, from his last letter, to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826



**Atlanta
Freethought
Society**

Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at the AF Hall, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, Smyrna, GA, unless otherwise noted. Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

July 12: AFS board member Tony King will speak on "Ancient Egyptian Religion: an Introduction." This meeting will include a Potluck Lunch.

Aug 9: (tentative) Norm Allen, president of African Americans for Humanism, will speak on Religion in African American Culture.

Sept. 13: TBD

Oct 11: 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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Darwin: Behind the Myths

By Dr. A. Bowdoin Van Riper, from his talk at the June 14 AFS meeting

A lot of what “everybody” thinks they know about Charles Darwin isn’t true:

- He was a lousy student who went into science almost by accident.
- He had the idea of evolution flash into his mind on the Galapagos Islands.
- He wrote that humans were descended from apes... or was that monkeys?
- He coined the phrase “survival of the fittest.”
- He believed that the poor and the weak should be allowed to perish (social Darwinism).
- He lost his faith to science.
- He reconverted to Christianity on his death bed.

Lots of this (and others I haven’t mentioned) come from three meta-myths:

- 1) Darwin was an accidental scientist.
- 2) Darwin was a lone genius.
- 3) Darwin was a social radical.

What I would like to do in this talk is to take apart those three meta-myths one by one, and, in the process, show you something of the “real Darwin” behind them.

DARWIN THE ACCIDENTAL SCIENTIST

Myth: Darwin was an indifferent student, until he went to sea on the Beagle and was whacked upside the head by nature in the Galapagos.

Darwin has nobody but himself to blame for the first half: He created the image of himself as proto-slacker in his widely read autobiography. The second half grows out of our conviction that science is a matter of immersing yourself in the data and waiting for inspiration to strike.

Darwin’s education—his learning to be a scientist—was intense and ongoing. His father was an eminent physician; his grandfathers were both fellows of the Royal Society and the Lunar Society of Birmingham. Dad sent him to the University of Edinburgh to become a doctor and then (when Charles turned out to hate the sight of blood) to Cambridge University to become a clergyman. He thus had access to the two best scientific

educations in Britain. He read voraciously, he went out collecting, he hung around museums, and he found mentors:

- Robert Grant (Edinburgh): Invertebrate zoology, field methods, how to see like a scientist.
- Adam Sedgwick (Cambridge): Geology, geological field methods, fossils.
- John Henslow (Cambridge): Botany, and a model for the kind of person he wanted to be.

These men were the tops in their field, and Darwin was very sharp—a quick study. When the navy went looking for a gentleman-naturalist to sail aboard the *Beagle*, and asked Henslow, Darwin was the obvious choice. He was already a rising star.

The *Beagle* was his graduate school: His chance to collect, observe, make notes, and draw conclusions for himself, without a teacher looking over his shoulder. He also acquired a mentor-at-a-distance: Charles Lyell, one of Britain’s leading geologists, whose book *Principles of Geology* became a huge influence on Darwin. (He took volume 1 on the *Beagle*.)

The *Beagle* made Darwin a scientist, but not completely an evolutionist. He had inklings and flashes of ideas and suspicions that the distribution pattern of different varieties of mockingbirds in the Galapagos said something about them being closely related... but he wasn’t sure. The finches didn’t register yet, and his specimens were incomplete and poorly labeled (what island was that one from again?).

Yes, he’d started to grasp evolution... but it was more of an idea in the making than a clear, fully formed concept.

DARWIN THE LONE GENIUS

Myth: Darwin conceived and developed the theory of evolution in the privacy of his own mind. Cut off from the world in his country house at Down, he polished and tweaked it until he was ready to let it loose on an unsuspecting world.

Darwin stepped off the *Beagle* and into the arms of a scientific community that knew his name and wanted to meet him. He had, after all, seen more environments by age 25 than most scientists saw in a lifetime. He returned to Cambridge, reconnected with Henslow, met Lyell for the first time, and was introduced into the scientific world of London. He attended meetings, gave papers, got to know everybody who mattered.

But he did more than meet them: He worked with them. The boxes and boxes of specimens he’d collected on the *Beagle* had to be “worked up”: named, classified, described, and their significance assessed. Darwin enlisted the help of the best scientific minds in London: John Gould (Britain’s leading ornithologist) for the birds, Richard Owen (Britain’s leading comparative anatomist) for the fossil reptiles, and so on. Out of that came five thick volumes on the scientific results of the voyage, edited by Darwin and written by his experts.

In **addition** to that, in the decade after the voyage, he published 37 scientific papers, wrote three books on geology, and served as secretary of the Geological Society from 1838 to 1842. Like Babe Ruth, who was a star pitcher for the Red Sox before he was a slugger for the Yankees, Darwin was a geologist before he was an evolutionist. Like Ruth’s career as a pitcher, Darwin’s as a geologist is largely forgotten... but would have brought him lasting fame all by itself.

Darwin moved to the countryside (16 miles from London) in 1842... but he wasn’t isolated. He met with and wrote to and talked with an inner circle of young, on-the-rise scientists who helped him polish his ideas: Joseph Hooker, T. H. Huxley, John Tyndall and John Lubbock... along with Asa Gray (America’s leading botanist) and Charles Lyell (Britain’s leading geologist). He corresponded with *anyone* who might have useful information: scientists, museum keep-

Darwin: Behind the Myths (continued)

ers, animal breeders, farmers, pigeon fanciers, regimental surgeons, sailors.

A torrent of information flowed into Darwin's study. Organized, synthesized, and yoked to a theory whose basic structure he'd worked out between 1838 and 1844, that information became the core of *Origin of Species*, written in a headlong rush between mid-1857 and early 1859.

Origin depended on the work of many... but only Darwin could have written it.

DARWIN THE SOCIAL RADICAL

Myth: Darwin was a bomb-throwing revolutionary who intended the Origin to promote a radical vision of humans and human society. He promoted a godless universe in which humans, being nothing more than slightly upgraded apes, are free to engage in racism, militarism, cutthroat competition, involuntary sterilization and even genocide.

This particular myth is, for the most part, the creation of Darwin's critics. Like the two before, there's an element of truth behind it... but only a small element.

Origin did indeed present two revolutionary ideas:

1. A single process—evolution by natural selection—is sufficient to account for the origin of every species, including humans. The taxonomy,

geographic distribution, and historical succession of life on Earth can all be explained in terms of that process.

2. Evolution has neither direction nor purpose. It does not follow a predetermined path or lead to a specific goal.

There is no question that Darwin included humans in both of these: That he saw humans as the product of the same natural processes that produced every other species, and that he dethroned them from their privileged status as the goal—the point—of evolution. This was the single most serious challenge that *Origin* posed to orthodox thinking... the one where his mentor Charles Lyell and his colleague Alfred Russell Wallace declined to follow him.

He barely hints at the idea in *Origin*, though. Surveying the likely impact of his ideas in the last paragraph of the book, Darwin suggests that: "Light will be thrown on the origin of man and history." That's it. No suggestion that evolution should or can be used to justify specific social or political policies.

• No social Darwinism... though the wealthy and powerful seized on Darwin's ideas to assure themselves that they were rich (and others were poor) because they deserved to be, and to campaigns for social justice as

a perversion of nature.

• No racism... though, for a century before and after Darwin, racists appealed to science to justify what the hierarchy of races (white always at the top, black always at the bottom) that seemed self-evident to them.

• No eugenics... though Darwin's cousin Francis Galton had evolution in mind when he wrote that the best and brightest should "improve the race" by intermarrying and having many children, as did later "reformers" who sterilized, or exterminated, those they believed were "unfit" to reproduce.

• No atheism... though Darwin himself buried his faith in a loving, activist God along with his beloved 10-year-old daughter Annie.

CONCLUSION

Natural processes, though directionless and impersonal, are capable of bringing forth all the magnificent diversity of the living world. "There is," Darwin wrote in the concluding paragraphs of *Origin*, "a grandeur in this view of life."

And so there is.

Two centuries after Darwin's birth, "this view of life" is the view of virtually all those who take science seriously. We look at creatures, living and dead, and instinctively see the grandeur of the natural processes that created them. That is Darwin's legacy.

News from the Secular Coalition for America



The Secular Coalition for America, a Washington advocacy group for non-theists, announced in June that they now have a new Executive Director. He is Sean Faircloth, a past state legislator for Maine, the founder of the Maine Children's Museum, and an avid non-theist. He turned down a post in the Obama administration so he could take this position with the SCA. (Lori-Lipman Brown was the previous Executive Director.)

The SCA also announced in June that American Atheists is their newest

member group. So, the SCA is now composed of 10 member groups:

- American Atheists
- American Ethical Union
- American Humanist Association
- Atheist Alliance International
- Camp Quest
- Freedom From Religion Foundation
- Institute for Humanist Studies
- Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers
- Secular Student Alliance
- Society for Humanistic Judaism

"The result of your fifty or sixty years of religious reading, in the four words, 'be just and honest,' is that in which all our inquiries must end." — Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to John Adams, January 11, 1817

FFRF Gives Alabama Its First Ever Atheist Billboard

From a June 25 press release at <http://www.ffrf.org>.

A 14x48-foot billboard showing the John Lennonesque message, "Imagine No Religion," and a stained-glass window backdrop, went up on June 25 for one month on I-20 near the Riverside exit en route to Talladega.

Drivers going to Talladega from Atlanta or Birmingham will pass the billboard, believed to be the first such freethought (atheist, agnostic) message ever placed in Alabama.

The colorful billboard went up just in time for the annual "Glorious 4th" celebration in rural Talladega sponsored by the Alabama Freethought Association this year on July 3-5. The event is held at a freethought "advance" (not retreat), which includes a lake, and air-conditioned auditorium and facilities. The event has attracted as many as 200 freethinkers from the South and all over the United States.

The billboard is part of a national educational campaign sponsored by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the nation's largest association of freethinkers, which works to keep state and church separate. The watchdog group has 13,600 members, and the Alabama Freethought Association is an FFRF chapter.

"There are many atheists and agnostics in America, including Alabama, and we want them to know they are not alone. We'd also like to invite believers to imagine a world free from religious wars, sectarian strife, and superstition," said Annie Laurie Gaylor, the Foundation's Co-President.

"We can have a better world without religion, by placing our energies

in making this world, our only world, a better place, instead of investing our best efforts in trying to get to achieve a make-believe afterlife."

"Like John Lennon, I've found that nature and reality are enough for me. I, too, like to imagine no religion, no hell below us, above us only sky. The only afterlife that should concern us is a secure and pleasant future for our descendants," said Dan Barker, author of *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of Americas Leading Atheists*.

MAN WANTS BILLBOARD TAKEN DOWN

On July 1, a Talladega man began to circulate a petition asking the Alabama Freethought Association to take down the billboard on I-20.

"I didn't really pay any attention to it at first, but then after I read about it in the newspaper, I found it really offensive," said Joseph Weldon, who launched the petition drive. "You know, you see church billboards all up and down the interstate inviting people to come pray with them and listing service times, things like that. And if this had been an ad for one of their meetings asking people to join them, I'd be fine with that. But it's not. I've spoken to many, many people, and all of them felt offended. It's just really inappropriate."

Weldon took the idea of a petition drive to the Coosa Valley Baptist Association, which will be circulating it within its membership.

"Everyone should respect everyone else's beliefs and opinions," Weldon said. "That's fine. But this is wrong. I

don't know if they put it up to be a catalyst, to stir controversy, or they just didn't think about it. And I know geography really shouldn't play into it, but it does. Alabama is a Southern state. Most people here do believe in God, and religion is a part of the culture. Having this billboard up there over the interstate feels like a slap in the face. It's blasphemous, but they don't see that because they don't believe."

Weldon said he does not have a home church himself. "I don't go to any one church, and I'm more spiritual than religious. But I'm also gay, and when I came out, I was asked to leave my church. But that did not shake my faith or my belief in God. I know people are going to say that I have no room to talk because I'm living in sin, but my preference has nothing to do with my personal relationship with God... Scripture says if you deny (Jesus) before your friends, He will deny you before his father. I suppose you could say I had a reason to abandon religion and turn my back on God, but I didn't."

Weldon emphasized he believes freethinkers should be able to advertise themselves like churches. "If they just wanted people to not worship because they don't do that but just to gather and share ideas, that would be one thing. But this, saying 'Imagine No Religion,' is blasphemous to me."

The billboard is rented through the end of July.

[From a July 1 article by Chris Norwood at <http://www.dailyhome.com>.]

Read the excellent article in the July/August 2009 issue of *Church & State* magazine by Rob Boston of Americans United. The article is "Religious Right Cowboy David Barton's Fixin' To Rewrite The Social Studies Textbooks In the Lone Star State (And Maybe Your State Too)." See it here: <http://www.au.org/media/church-and-state/archives/2009/07/texas-tall-tale.html>

Read the July 3 article "Rediscovering Secular America" by Katrina Vanden Heuvel of *The Nation* at: http://www.thenation.com/blogs/edcut/448533/rediscovering_secular_america

Read the June 26 article "Why Do Atheists Have to Talk About Atheism?" by Greta Christina at: http://www.alternet.org/story/140914/why_do_atheists_have_to_talk_about_atheism/?page=2

Read the June 29 article "Study Finds Widening Generation Gap in US" by the Associated Press at: <http://www.365gay.com/news/study-finds-widening-generation-gap-in-us/>

Read the June 29 article "Paleontology and Creationism Meet but Don't Mesh" by Kenneth Chang of the *New York Times*: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/30/science/30muse.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1

Laughter, the Best Islamic Medicine

By Herb Silverman, President of the Secular Coalition For America

Given the election-related turmoil in the Islamic Republic of Iran, can democracy ever take hold in a theocracy? How should the Obama administration respond to the disputed election and to Iran's ruling clerics?

Embedded in the question are some slippery slopes. A country may have a democratic theocracy or a theocratic democracy. The former system allows people to vote for candidates within certain religious constraints, while the latter would occur if people selected rulers who chose to govern according to the perceived wishes of a deity or holy book.

Recent surveys in the Islamic world have shown that the majority would like a democratic theocracy. Most admire aspects of democracy, such as freedom of speech, but want a model that incorporates shariah law, based on the Koran. Surprisingly, the United States is not much different. A scary 2006 Gallup Poll showed that 55% of Americans would like to see the Bible as a source of legislation, with 9% wanting it to be the only source of legislation.

We've had numerous attempts to turn our secular democracy into a theocratic democracy, including various "Christian Amendment" proposals. One introduced in Congress in 1941 stated explicitly that all laws of the United States should be subject to the "Word of God and his son, Jesus Christ." Fortunately, such amendments continue to fail. Many politicians may feel such an amendment unnecessary, including presidential candidate John McCain, who said, "the Constitution established the Uni-

ted States of America as a Christian nation," without citing as evidence any passage in our godless Constitution.

As for the turmoil in Iran, I confess to a certain thrill of hope watching demonstrators protest against a despotic and corrupt government, much like with the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. On the other hand, Iran will remain a theocracy whether reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi or incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is declared the winner. The right for Iranians to have every vote counted is not the same as the right for Iranians to choose the candidates who run. This is now decided by the Islamic Guardian Council.

An analogy closer to home would be a theocratic United States with the two presidential candidates chosen by Pastor Rick Warren (host, not decider, of a McCain/Obama 2008 candidates forum). My own democratic vote, were our government theocratic, would become less than satisfying. For an atheist like me to imagine living in any theocracy is tantamount to a Christian having to live in an Islamic theocracy.

As for how the Obama administration should respond to events in Iran, I offer the advice doctors give some patients diagnosed with prostate cancer: Watchful Waiting. Trying to re-

move perceived evil can do more harm than good. Foreign interventions, overt or clandestine, have often given despots an excuse to further restrict the rights of citizens.

Whether theocracy or democracy prevails in Iran or elsewhere, even more fundamental to me is respect for human rights. Such rights would include equality and due process under the law, protection of minority rights, freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. So far, Iran has badly failed this human rights test.

Though democratic countries may have their failings (remember, Hitler became chancellor of Germany by free elections), a democracy is more likely to grant human rights to its citizens than a theocracy. While a democratic society can easily accept differences of opinion, a theocracy cannot. Few citizens would argue that a Constitution is an infallible document, which is why there are mechanisms to change it. On the other hand, accepting as inerrant the writings of a book written thousands of years ago leaves no room for change.

A good rule of thumb for me is whether a country allows its citizens to poke fun at its leaders and its "sacred cows," including sacred religions. Freedom of speech must include freedom to laugh.

[From a June 16 "On Faith" article at <http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com>.]

Robert G. Ingersoll's Predictions By Steve Yothment

Reading from Robert Ingersoll recently, I was a bit surprised to find a prediction, a prophecy if you will, that he made in 1876, on the 100th Anniversary of the United States. It was from his lecture titled "Declaration of Independence¹." It reads:

"Standing here amid the sacred memories of the first (century), on the

golden threshold of the second, I ask: Will the second century be as grand as the first? I believe it will... We are just at the commencement of invention. The steam engine, the telegraph, these are but the toys with which science has been amused. Wait: there will be grander things; there will be a wider and higher culture, a grander standard

of character, of literature and art."

Well, was he right? I think he was! Science and invention took off in the 2nd US century. Civil rights, especially for blacks and women, improved greatly. Literature and art advanced significantly.

As far as I can tell, Ingersoll's predictions came true better than those of any Old Testament prophet.

¹Read it here: http://www.edwardtbabinski.us/lectures/declaration_independence.html

Conversations with the Faithful: A Christian Nation

By John Carver, from the June/July issue of *Freethought Today* (See <http://www.ffrf.org>)

A long-time freethinker and humanist, John Carver enjoys corresponding with religious high school classmates. This column discusses that dialogue, this time about how some Americans are energized and united by their Christianity.

An old classmate emailed me a rousing video clip of a song that confused being a good American with being a good God-person. Its lyrics had references to “no separation [of church and state], we’re one nation under him,” “folks want to push him out, they’re silencing his word,” “here in America it’s God we still trust,” and so forth. Throughout the video, beautiful American scenes were shown, including one of Niagara Falls. My friend lamented that “major radio stations wouldn’t play it because it was considered politically incorrect,” then added, “Let us cease being the silent majority and join together as Americans!”

I thought his effort to enlighten me called for a response. So I responded:

“Thanks for the song. The lyrics were testimony to how unifying it is for a nation to have a shared superstition. It really is a gratifying, powerful, unifying force, like it was in Nazi Germany, still is in present Iran and North Korea, in past centuries in England and France, and throughout history back to the primitive tribes who at least had the excuse of ancient ignorance.

It alternately amuses me and infuriates me when religious folks think their religion is what this country is all about. They seem to be unable to understand that this country is *not* about their belief in a god, but about their *right* to believe or not believe in a god. And it doesn’t even have to be about a particular god or the god of the majority. *That* is what the country is about, among a few other things; *that* is what the Constitution guarantees. Does freedom of religion matter only when you are in the minority? Some of the people most concerned about freedom of religion in the early

years of the republic were Baptists! Yet Baptists are among those stifling freedom of others from their religion when their numbers will allow them to do so.

Our early settlers in New England made that mistake. The Southern Baptist Convention gave a perfect exhibit of that mistake within this past year, succeeding in having the legislature prevent communities in Georgia even having the *option* of choosing to sell beer on Sunday. They did that because *their* religious interpretation is that God is anti-alcohol—or, at least, one-seventh anti-alcohol. Not only were they happy to impose their values on non-Christians, but on huge numbers of Christians who didn’t agree with them.

My experience of religious people is that many, perhaps most of them, are quite comfortable forcing others to comply with their beliefs. They often do it intentionally, unaware that they are bullying. In countless ways—issues like gay marriage, Sunday blue laws, religion in schools, ‘under god’ in the pledge, the morning-after pill, birth control, pornography—the force of law or other government action spring from basically religious ideas and taboos which are pushed onto everyone. I remember a church leader in my youth who said religious freedom shouldn’t extend to Catholics, but just to churches that were “right.” I wonder if fundamentalist Muslims think religious freedom is allowing women to wear whatever color burkha they choose.

To hear songs like you sent me complaining of the feigned victimization of Christians, one would think Christmas and Christians really are under attack. I suppose they are if “attack” means some hefty proportion of

the population has finally rebelled at Christians making the rules for everyone else. And in Christians’ frantic fear of losing their civic hegemony, no amount of misrepresenting the facts seems to strain their version of morality. If there were actually any truth that someone is setting out to keep children from privately praying in school, or to keep you from worshipping in your church and home any way you wish, or to stop you from posting your religious messages and symbols on your private property, or to stop you from presenting your religious ideas as truth, then I’ll be there shoulder-to-shoulder with you to protest that your rights really are being violated.

If, however, you want the civil government to support your religious ideas in language or in symbols, to teach public school children your religious dogma, to suppress or modify scientific findings to fit your religious ideas, or to subject candidates for public office to a religious test, then I’ll be there to protest that you are destroying the most precious of our founders’ bequests. Christianity is not under attack. Undeserved, bullying Christian civil control is and should be. If it were up to the people who push this misguided godliness, our great country would be a theocracy where Christian imagery and phrases would be so prevalent as to make Mao’s and Stalin’s ubiquitous portraits of yesteryear look positively unobtrusive by comparison.

Oh, just a side note. The beautiful video accompanying the song portrayed, among other gorgeous sights, Niagara Falls—the *Canadian* side of Niagara Falls!

[Thanks to John and FFRF for letting us reprint his article in *AFNews*.]

“To discriminate against a thoroughly upright citizen because he belongs to some particular church, or because, like Abraham Lincoln, he has not avowed his allegiance to any church, is an outrage against that liberty of conscience which is one of the foundations of American life.” —Theodore Roosevelt, in a letter to J. C. Martin, November 9, 1908

Oklahoma Resolution Blames Recession On Gays, Secularism, Abortion and “Debauchery”

From a July 1 American Atheists News Release

A resolution introduced in the Oklahoma legislature by GOP State Rep. Sally Kern blames the nation’s economic woes on gay pride celebrations, lack of public prayer, abortion and “debauchery.”

Dr. Ed Buckner, president of American Atheists, said that the bizarre claim “betrays not only intellectual bankruptcy, but insults the intelligence of voters in Oklahoma and the rest of the country who want real solutions to the serious economic difficulties that face our nation. The resolution offered is not only counter-productive, it severely misquotes key founding fathers. Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, and probably Washington as well would be appalled at being falsely claimed by these anti-American yahoos.”

The “Oklahoma Citizen’s Proclamation for Morality” singles out President Obama for recognizing June as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and

Transgendered) Pride Month, and charges that America is in economic peril because of “abortion, pornography, same-sex marriage, sex trafficking, divorce, illegitimate births, child abuse and many other forms of debauchery.”

“With all of the recent scandals involving self-righteous politicians, I first thought this Resolution was talking about religious Republicans,” quipped Dave Silverman, Communications Director for American Atheists. “Political leaders, especially those wrapping themselves in the rhetoric of the religious right, are the last people who should be trying to dictate how Americans should live their lives.”

Mr. Silverman expressed skepticism that the measure would be approved, though. The Religious Right is in their last throes of life, and this is just their latest attempt to make news and get attention. This is unimportant,

not only because it means nothing, nor because it will do nothing, nor because it will promote yesterday’s bigotry, but rather because it is just plain ridiculous. This is not an issue to fight, but rather one to watch with amusement, and to remind us of how far we as a country have evolved.

The Resolution ends with a call for God to “have mercy on this nation, to stay His hand of judgment and grant a national awakening of righteousness and Christian renewal as we repent of our great sin.”

Edwin Kagin, National Legal Director for American Atheists, said that Rep. Kern’s Resolution “is all about Demagoguery, not debauchery.”

“Once again, we’re blaming complex social problems on the religious right’s idea of sinful behavior,” said Kagin. “It appears that Rep. Kern and her supporters know less about economics than they do using religion to promote a theocratic social agenda.”

A Letter from the AFS President

You may have noticed that access to the AFS building is hindered a bit due to the Cobb County DOT work on the nearby bridge over the CSX railroad. This is very significant work and is much needed. But the final result for AFS should be very positive! The DOT will put in a guard rail and a sidewalk along our side of N. Church Lane. The road will be widened and repaved. The bridge is being replaced. The DOT is also installing a wall along part of our property to compensate for our parking lot and the new road being at different levels. This work, which should be completed by November, will increase the appeal and the value of our property.

A temporary disadvantage of all the renovations is that our building is not accessible from Atlanta Road. This hinders our efforts to rent out our building, since people usually prefer to access N. Church Lane from Atlanta Road. Also, the clutter due to the construction makes the property less desirable for renting at this time.

With this in mind, please consider helping AFS financially. Is your membership nearing the expiration date?

Renew it! Are you not a member, yet? Maybe now is the time to become a member! Another choice is to donate money or assets or volunteer time to AFS.

Remember that donations to AFS are tax deductible if you itemize your deductions since we are 501(C)(3) educational organization. AFS does not have any paid employees; all efforts are from volunteers. This means that 100% of donations are applied to the general operations of our organization and the paying down of the debt on our building.

Please also consider including AFS in your will. (Have you generated a living will? It’s a good thing to consider doing to ensure that your assets are distributed the way you want them to be after you are gone.)

Thank you for your support for AFS. We will continue to promote freethought and the separation of church and state by having thought-provoking speakers, debates, discussions, letter writing campaigns, peaceful protests and social activities.

- Steve

Become a Member!



(Or renew your membership with this form or online at www.AtlantaFreethought.org!)

If you've enjoyed what you've read, we enthusiastically invite you to join the Atlanta Freethought Society. Every month you will get our acclaimed monthly newsletter, the *Atlanta Freethought News*, voting rights in the organization—and enjoyment of the superb speakers we have coming up, as well as the social and activist events that we sponsor!

Individual memberships: One person can become a member for \$25 per year.

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Paper Newsletters: Due to printing and mailing expense, we add a surcharge of \$15 for members to receive a paper newsletter in the mail rather than our email version newsletter. We encourage all members to receive the newsletter by email to save on paper, postage and printing expenses.

International members: Because of international postage rates and special handling, we have been forced to add a surcharge of \$5 for members in Canada or Mexico, and \$10 for other foreign addresses for members who receive the paper newsletter.

Thank you for all your support! We look forward to your being with us in the coming months!

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“Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect.” —James Madison, 1774

We still have these great books for sale:

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Quotations That Support the Separation of State and Church (2nd edition) — \$11

Compiled by **Edward M. Buckner** and **Michael E. Buckner**; ammunition against Christian-nation mythologists. Quotes from America's revolutionaries, constitution framers, Presidents, court decisions. Sources carefully documented; extensive index. Comb-bound—lies flat for easy copying.

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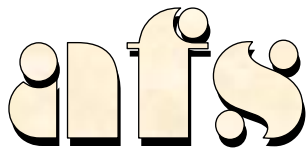
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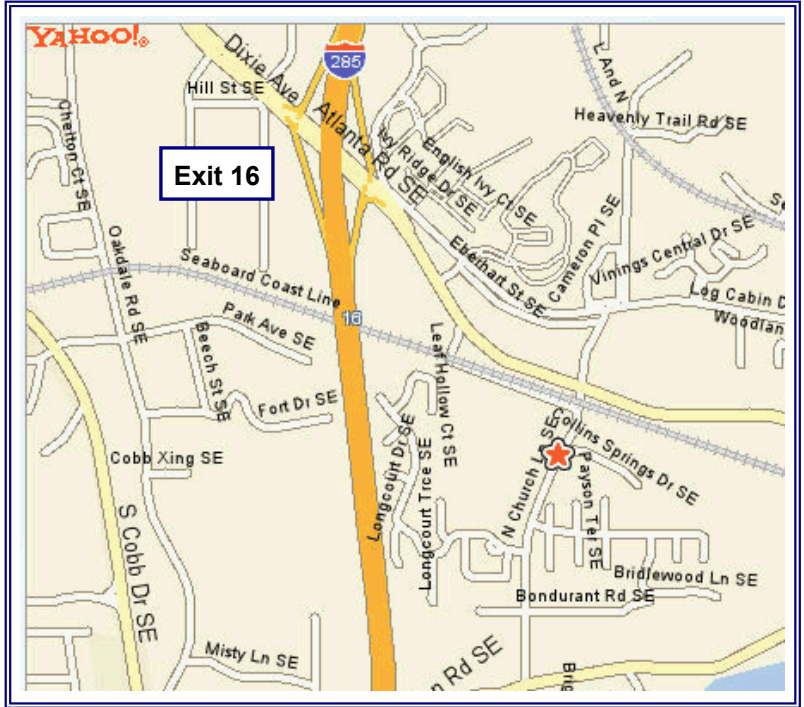
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**The July 12 Meeting:
1:00 at AF Hall
4775 N. Church Lane SE
Smyrna, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Tony King**



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