

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication • Volume 15 Number 11 • November 2009

The November AFS Meeting

The November 14 (Saturday!) AFS meeting will include a talk by **Dr. Massimo Pigliucci** on "Reason: What Is It? Who Needs It?" Dr. Pigliucci is a professor of Ecology and Evolution at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and the chair of the Department of Philosophy at Lehman College. He is an outspoken advocate of science education. His website is <http://www.rationallyspeaking.org>.

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

To get there, take I-285 (the perimeter road around Atlanta) to Exit 16 (Atlanta Road). Turn toward Atlanta. Go about 1.2 miles 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, Nov 20, 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 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: Lew Southern, Jack McKinney,
Tony King, Michael Buckner

Officers have 1-year terms; board members have 2-year terms. Mark Banks, Steven Fant and Doug Hattersley will continue their 2-year terms into next year; three more board members will be voted in.

AFS Meetings and Activities

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

Nov 14: AFS General Meeting, AF Hall, 1:00 PM.

Nov 20: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00PM.

Other Meetings of Interest

Dr. Massimo Pigliucci will speak at several Atlanta locations on Nov 13, 14 and 15. Here is part of his itinerary: (Contact gregcarr81@gmail.com for details of KSU events, or steveyoth@aol.com for AFS or Fayette Freethinker events.)

Friday, Nov 13:

9:00 AM to 11:00 AM: Talk to Biology students at KSU.

7:00 PM to 10:00 PM: Talk to the **Skeptics in the Pub** at

Manual's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave., in Atlanta.

Saturday, Nov 14:

9:00 AM to 11:30 AM: *Denying Evolution* Book Discussion

Breakfast at J. Christopher's in Kennesaw.

1:00 PM to 3:00 PM: Talk to **Atlanta Freethought Society**

4:00 PM to 7:00 PM: SCI (Student Coalition for Inquiry)

Keynote Address at KSU.

Sunday, Nov 15:

10:00 AM to 12:00 AM: Talk to **Fayette Freethinkers** on

"Critical Thinking as Intellectual Self Defense," Peachtree City. (Limited seating. Contact Steve for details.)

The **Fayette Freethinkers** host a lunch that is open to the public at El Reposo Restaurant in Peachtree City, GA, on every first and third Saturday at 12:00 noon. For details, send an email to freediscussion@hotmail.com or visit their website at <http://www.fayettefreethinkers.org>.

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at AF Hall on Sunday, November 15, at 1:00 PM. See more about their program at <http://humanistsofga.esmartdesign.com>.

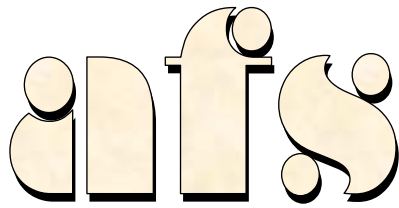
GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Gwinnett (12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville) on Monday, November 9, at 7:00 PM. (See <http://gust.domek.org/>.)

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 Atlanta Skeptics have a meetup, called **Skeptics In the Pub**. Their next meetup is on Saturday, November 14, at 7:00 PM at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave., in Atlanta. For more info, go to <http://www.atlantaskkeptics.com> or <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaSkeptics/>.

There will be a "**meetup**" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, November 8, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur, GA.

There's another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists scheduled for November 22, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta.



**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.

Nov 14: Massimo Pigliucci, noted Evolutionary Biologist, will speak on "Reason: What is It? Who Needs It?" Note: this is a Saturday meeting.

Dec 13: Todd Stiefel, former executive of Stiefel Labs, will speak on how he would like to bring his business experience to the freethought movement.

Jan 10: Darrel W. Ray will speak on his new book *The God Virus: How Religion Infects Our Lives and Culture*.

Feb 14: Mark Banks will speak on Astronomy.

Mar 14: Sean Faircloth, Exec. Dir. of the Secular Coalition of America, will speak.

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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Suffer The Little Children

A Florida school district recently enlisted third graders to proselytize against separation of church and state. What in the name of God is going on in our nation's classrooms?

By Conrad F. Goeringer, from the October 6 issue of AA News, the newsletter of American Atheists.

It has been nearly half-a-century since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a battery of practices that turned public school classrooms into churches by promoting prayer, religious instruction and display of religious iconography. The landmark cases were a clear victory on behalf of state-church separation. The justices took a dim view of activities like unison Bible verse recitation, or forcing youngsters to pledge allegiance to the American flag "under God." The involvement of younger impressionable children raised the bar for judicial scrutiny. Courts rightly noted how peer pressure and the threat of social ostracism—even violence—meant that religious activities in the classroom could be especially divisive and inappropriate.

You would think, then, that school boards, administrators and teachers would have understood the message. Many have, but across the country there has been a campaign of defiance that has kept First Amendment watchdog groups like American Atheists busy trying to uphold the intent of those Supreme Court decisions. "Religious freedom" groups meanwhile have resorted to every conceivable ploy and legal strategy to smuggle religious exercise back into the public schools. Student led prayer, "spontaneous" praying at athletic events or holding student votes on whether to have a religious message delivered at graduation ceremonies have become strategies in this culture war fracas. Courts have not seen the end of this contentious effort, and there is good evidence that fundamentalist Christians—especially those who hold positions of authority as administrators, teachers and school board officials—are not giving up in their campaign to "take back our schools for Jesus."

All of this makes what has recently occurred in Florida particularly outra-

geous.

The case began when unidentified plaintiffs (fearing, as in so many First Amendment disputes, retaliation by the faithful) filed for a Preliminary Injunction against the St. John's County School District and officials at the Webster Elementary School. They charged that the school had third-grade students practice a song titled "In God We Still Trust" to be performed at an end-of-year assembly.

This was not high church music or a classic rivaling Handel's Messiah. The piece had been composed and performed by the award winning American country music band Diamond Rio. The group, founded in 1984, had carved out a niche in the country genre blending several music influences with religious themes. Early tunes boasted titles like "Oh Me, Oh My Sweet Baby" and "This Romeo Ain't Got Julie Yet." Two years later, Diamond Rio released a compendium of country-Gospel music fusion. The band signed with Word Records, a Christian music label in 2007.

The Lyrics of "In God We Still Trust" were blatantly Judeo-Christian, and demonstrated clear hostility toward the First Amendment:

You place your hand on His Bible
When you swear to tell the truth.
His name is on our greatest monu-
Ments, and all our money too.
And when we pledge allegiance
There is no doubt where we stand.
There's no separation;
We are one nation under Him.
In God we still trust.
Here in America, He's the one we
turn to when the going gets tough.

According to documents, the song was played during regular classes three times, and sung at least once by the class of third graders. Students were told that they had the option of participating in the practice sessions

and at the school Assembly, or being excluded. Parents of two of the students filed a complaint in federal court asking for an immediate injunction, arguing that school officials were imposing sectarian religious beliefs onto the children thus violating their rights under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. The school immediately removed the song from the Assembly program schedule.

Judge Harvey E. Schlesinger, an appointee to the federal bunch of former President George H.W. Bush, saw the need to excoriate school administrators and teachers because of the important First Amendment issues involved. In a 24-page opinion granting an injunction, Schlesinger described the words of the offending song as "patently religion" and "proselytizing," and added, "The lyrics take aim at one (of) our nation's fundamental principles: the separation of church and state."

While admitting that "Religion has been closely identified with the development of our history and government, it is, in fact, the religious persecution suffered by our forefathers that makes the freedom to religious opinion a cornerstone of our national identities." Quoting the historic opinion from *School Dist. Of Abington Twp. Pa v. Schempp* (1963), Schlesinger added: "It is axiomatic to this identity that 'the government remains neutral, and while protecting all (religions), it prefers none and disparages none.'"

Schlesinger also cited the "three-prong test" for the Establishment of religion outlined by the high court in the historic 1971 opinion in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*.

"Through a series of cases, the Supreme Court has established a framework for analyzing claims under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Under the *Lemon* test,

Suffer The Little Children (*continued*)

the Establishment Clause is violated if the government's primary purpose is not secular-based, if the principal effect is to aid or inhibit religion, or if there is any 'excessive (government) entanglement' with religion."

Schlesinger's 24-page ruling in support of the Injunction reads like a legal treatise on the First Amendment. School officials blatantly endorsed sectarian religion, and compelled youngsters to participate in the process. Students who might hesitate and find the lyrics offensive had "heightened susceptibility to pressures of conformity and possible ostracism." The lyrics were propagandistic, noted Schlesinger, and took aim at the separation of government and religion:

"By encouraging students to sing 'there is no separation, we are one nation under Him,' the school is effectively enforcing a religious view that is contrary to well-established constitutional law."

Although Webster School administrators supposedly removed the offensive song from the Assembly program on the same day Judge Schles-

inger issued his order—April 15, 2009—the case did not end there. A week later, attorneys for the Plaintiffs were back in court seeking another injunction against a "blatantly sectarian" song. The Diamond Rio piece may have been on the back burner; but now a music instructor had students practicing "Chatter With the Angels." The plea for the new injunction stated that this second song had been selected as "retaliation" against the Plaintiffs and complaining students.

There is a political sub-text here that goes deeper than the trenchant analysis of First Amendment law by Judge Schlesinger. Some teachers and officials at St. John's School District are clearly engaged in theo-political "warfare," practicing "acts of resistance" to the requirements of secular, constitutional law. It is a pattern that has emerged throughout the nation, with only a few examples reaching the courts and news media. In the latter cases, legal advocacy groups like the Alliance Defense Fund stand ready to assist a teacher who blatantly proselytizes on behalf of "creationism" in

science class, or uses a Bible to "teach history." Indeed, those engaged in such behaviors have won significant legal victories, skillfully and persistently arguing that "religion has a place in our classrooms." The religious content is artfully camouflaged as being historically significant or providing students with an "alternative" view of looking at the world.

The Webster School case, however, betrays something starker and more authoritarian. Religious partisans may speak of a high-school student's right to learn about "alternatives" to Darwinian evolution, or insist that these same students have a right to vote on issues like graduation ceremonial prayer. Are third graders equipped to make such judgments, though? Do they even know about the intricacies of First Amendment law—a subject that engages some of the best legal minds on both sides of the ideological divide? Is this education or proselytizing? Or should we call it what it is—sectarian indoctrination?

—Conrad Goeringer,
AANews editor

Great Links on the Internet:

See Richard Dawkins speaking on Darwin's Universal Impact at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6h2ODBQ6Nk>.

See "The Origin of Life - Abiogenesis" by Dr. Jack Szostak at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6QYDdgP9eg>.

See Pat Condell on "Wake Up, America" (Oct 22, 2009), at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjSjpNe1-Vc>.

See Gary Whittenberger's debate with Dr. Furcan Aydiner on "Does God Exist?" (and a blog regarding the debate) at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/furkanaydiner1> and <http://theistvsatheist.blogspot.com/>.

Read "Seeing and Believing: The Never-Ending Attempt to Reconcile Science and Religion, and Why it is Doomed to Fail" at The New Republic's website: <http://www.tnr.com/article/books/seeing-and-believing>

Read "Beyond the Grave: How Visions of What Awaits Us After Death Have Changed Across the Ages" from the Wall Street Journal's website at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704471504574444922696737360.html>

Read a new AFS member's blog and other writings at <http://shaunphilly.wordpress.com> and <http://www.examiner.com/x-11708-Philadelphia-Reason--Religion-Examiner>

Coming On Television:

- November 3: On PBS: Nova presents "Becoming Human," Part 1, the story of human evolution.
- November 10: On PBS: Nova presents "Becoming Human," Part 2, the story of human evolution.
- November 17: On PBS: Nova presents "Becoming Human," Part 3, the story of human evolution.
- December 29: On PBS: Nova presents "What Darwin Never Knew," which reveals answers to evolutionary questions that even Darwin couldn't explain.

“You Can’t Disprove Religion”: Three Counter-Examples

By Greta Christina, from her blog at <http://gretachristina.typepad.com>. Reprinted by Permission.

“You can’t disprove religion.” I’m seeing this trope a lot these days. “You can’t disprove religion. At least—not my religion.”

“Well, of course,” it continues, “many outdated religious beliefs—young-earth creationism, the universe revolving around the earth, the sun being drawn across the sky by Apollo’s chariot—have been shown by science to be mistaken. But modern progressive and moderate beliefs—these, you can’t disprove with science. These are simply matters of faith: things people reasonably choose to believe, based on their personal life experience.”

Then there’s the corollary to this trope: “Therefore, atheism is just as much a matter of faith as religion. And atheists who think atheism is better supported by evidence are just as dogmatic and close-minded as religious believers.”

The usual atheist reply to this is to cry, “That’s the God of the Gaps¹! Whatever phenomenon isn’t currently explained by science, that’s where you stick your God! What kind of sense does that make? Why should any given unexplained phenomenon be best explained by religion? Has there ever been a gap in our knowledge that’s eventually been shown to be filled by God?”

Which is a pretty good reply, and one I make a lot myself. But today, I want to say something else. I want to point out that this is simply not the case.

The fact is that many modern progressive and moderate religions *do* make claims about the observable world. And many of those claims are unsupported by science... and, in fact, are in direct contradiction of it.

I want to talk today about three specific religious beliefs. Not obscure cults or rigid fundamentalist dogmas; not young-earth creationism, or the doctrine that communion wafers liter-

ally and physically transform into the human flesh of Christ, or the belief that the human mind has been taken over by space aliens. I want to talk about three widely held beliefs of modern progressive and moderate believers: beliefs held by intelligent and educated believers who respect science and don’t think religion should contradict it.

And I want to point out that even these beliefs are in direct contradiction of the vast preponderance of available evidence... almost as much as the obscure cults and the rigid fundamentalist dogma.

So let’s go! Today’s beliefs on the chopping block are:

1) Evolution guided by God, also known as “theistic evolution.” Among progressive and moderate believers, this is an extremely common position on evolution. They readily (and rightly) dismiss the claims of young-earth creationists that humanity and all the universe were created in one fell swoop 6,000 years ago. They dismiss these claims as utterly contradicted by the evidence. Instead, they say that evolution proceeds exactly as the biologists say it does... but this process is guided by God, to bring humanity and the vast variety of life into being.

It’s a belief that is almost as thoroughly contradicted by the evidence as young-earth creationism is.

Nowhere in anatomy, nowhere in genetics, nowhere in the fossil record or the geological record or any of the physical records of evolution, is there even the slightest piece of evidence for divine intervention.

Quite the contrary. If there had been a divine hand tinkering with the process, we would expect evolution to have proceeded radically differently than it has. We would expect to see, among the changes in anatomy from generation to generation, at least an occasional instance of the structure

being tweaked in non-gradual ways. We would expect to see—oh, say, just for a random example—human knees and backs better designed for bipedal animals than quadrupeds. (She said bitterly, putting an ice pack on her bad knee.) We would expect to see the blind spot in the human eye done away with, perhaps replaced with the octopus design that doesn’t have a blind spot. We would expect to see the vagus nerve re-routed so it doesn’t wander all over and be gone before getting where it’s going. We would expect to see a major shift in the risk-benefit analysis that’s wired into our brains, one that better suits a 70-year life expectancy than a 35-year one. We would expect to see... I could go on, and on, and on.

And it’s not just humans. We’d expect to see whales with gills, pandas with real thumbs, ostriches without those stupid useless wings.

We don’t see any of this. What we see instead is exactly what we would expect to see if evolution proceeded entirely as a natural, physical process. We see “designs” of living things that are flawed and inefficient and just plain goofy²: “Designs” that exist for no earthly reason except the slow incrementalism that’s an inherent part of the physical process of evolution. We see anatomical adaptations severely constrained by the fact that each generation can only be a slight modification on the previous generation, with no sudden jumps to a different basic version. We see anatomical adaptations severely constrained by the fact that each new version has to be an improvement on the previous version (or at least, not a deterioration from it). We see a vast preponderance of evidence showing that evolution proceeds very slowly, very gradually, with the anatomy of each generation being only slightly altered (if at all) from that of the previous generation.

And that isn’t how things designed

¹ See http://rationalwiki.com/wiki/God_of_the_gaps.

² See http://gretachristina.typepad.com/greta_christinas_weblog/2009/01/stupid-design.html.

“You Can’t Disprove Religion” (continued)

by a conscientious designer, or even things tinkered with by a conscientious designer, should work.

Even when a designer is stuck with the outlines of a previous design, they can still make significant, non-incremental changes. They can tear out the cabinets and replace them with windows, and move the stove to the other side of the room where the fridge is now. They’re not stuck with moving the stove one inch at a time, once every week or year or twenty years. And they’re not stuck with a system in which every inch that the stove moves has to be an improvement on the previous inch. They’re not stuck with a system where, if the stove has been moving across the floor in a series of incremental improvements, it’s going to have to stop if it starts blocking the door... because blocking the door is a serious disadvantage.

And if a designer is omnipotent, they’re not even stuck with the outlines of a previous design. They’re not stuck with anything at all. Why on earth would an all-powerful and benevolent god, a god who’s capable of magically altering DNA, bring life into being by the slow, cruel, violent, inefficient, tacked-together-with-duct-tape process of evolution in the first place?

Now, it’s true that we do see some evidence for what are sometimes called “jumps” in the fossil record: evidence that evolutionary changes sometimes happen very slowly, and sometimes happen more rapidly. (It’s a controversial position, but it is one held by some respected evolutionary biologists.) And some believers in theistic evolution leap onto this hypothesis and hang on like it’s the last helicopter out of Saigon.

But the “rapid jumps” thing is very misleading. “Rapid,” in evolutionary terms, means “taking place over a few thousand years instead of a few hundred thousand” (or “a few hundred thousand years instead of tens of mil-

lions of years.”) And as recent research has repeatedly shown, evolution can take place in smaller organisms surprisingly rapidly, in a matter of decades... and still be an entirely natural process of small changes, incremental alterations in each generation from the previous one. Exactly as we would expect if evolution were an entirely natural, physical process of descent with modification. So even if this “punctuated equilibrium”³ hypothesis is true, it still doesn’t point to theistic evolution. Not even a little bit.

Again: There is not the slightest bit of evidence supporting the idea of evolution guided by God. And there is a significant body of evidence that strongly suggests the contrary⁴.

2) An immaterial soul that animates human consciousness.

I will acknowledge freely: We don’t yet understand consciousness very well. The sciences of neurology and neuropsychology are very much in their infancy, and the basic questions of what exactly consciousness is, and where exactly it comes from, and how exactly it works, are, as of yet, largely unanswered.

But research is happening. The foundations for our understanding of consciousness are beginning to be laid. There are a few things that we do know about consciousness.

And among the things we know is that, whatever consciousness is, it seems to be an entirely biological process. A massive body of evidence points to this conclusion.

When we make physical changes to the brain, it changes consciousness. Drugs, injury, surgery, sensory deprivation, electrical current, magnetic fields, medication, illness, exercise—all these things change our consciousness. Sometimes drastically. Sometimes rendering an entire personality unrecognizable. Even small changes to the brain can result in massive changes to consciousness... both temporary and permanent.

Magnetic resonance imagery has

shown that, when people think different thoughts, different parts of their brains light up with activity. Changes in thought show up as changes in brain activity, just as changes in brain activity show up as changes in thought.

And, of course, we have the drastic change in consciousness created by the very drastic change in the physical brain known as “death.”

All the available evidence points to the conclusion that, when the brain dies, consciousness ends. (And by “when the brain dies,” I don’t mean, “when the brain is temporarily deprived of oxygen for a short time,” a.k.a. “near death experiences.” I mean when the brain dies, permanently.) The belief that consciousness survives death has probably been researched more than any other supernatural hypothesis—nobody, not even scientists, wants death to be permanent—and it has never, ever been substantiated. Reports of it abound... but when carefully examined, using good, rigorous scientific methodology, these reports fall apart like a house of cards.

Everything we understand about consciousness points to it being a physical, biological process. Physical changes cause observable effects. When we see that in any other phenomenon, we assume that what’s going on is physical cause and effect. We have no reason to think that anything else is going on with the phenomenon of consciousness.

And there is not a single scrap of good evidence supporting the hypothesis that consciousness is even partly a supernatural phenomenon. There are many gaps in our understanding of consciousness—that’s a massive understatement—but there is not one shred of solid, rigorously gathered evidence suggesting that any of those gaps can and should be filled with the hypothesis of an immaterial soul. There’s not even a good, testable theory explaining how this immaterial soul is supposed to interact with the

³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punctuated_equilibrium.

⁴ See “Stupid Design” at http://gretachristina.typepad.com/greta_christinas_weblog/2009/01/stupid-design.html.

“You Can’t Disprove Religion” (continued)

physical brain. All there is to support this belief is a personal intuitive feeling on the part of believers that the soul has to be non-physical because, well, it just seems like that... plus thousands of years of other believers with a similar intuitive feeling, who have told it to one another, and taught it to their followers, and made up elaborate rationalizations for it, and written it into their holy texts.

Again: There is not the slightest bit of evidence supporting the idea of an immaterial soul that animates human consciousness. And there is a significant body of evidence that strongly suggests the contrary.

3) A sentient (conscious) universe.

You might ask why I’m including this particular belief in my Big Three Targets. You might wonder why, among all the widely held religious beliefs in the world today, I’m aiming my sights at this New Age/NeoPagan/Wiccan belief in a World-Soul.

My answer: I live in Northern California. ‘Nuff said.

So that’s why I want to debunk this belief. And I’m pretty much going to repeat what I said in #2 above:

We don’t yet understand what consciousness is. But we do know that, whatever it is, it seems to be a biological product of the brain.

And the universe does not have a brain. The universe does not have a physical structure capable of supporting consciousness. The universe does not have neurons, dendrites, ganglia. The universe has stars, and planets, and other astronomical bodies, separated by unimaginably vast regions of empty space.

And stars and planets and so on do not behave like neurons and dendrites and so on. They behave like stars and planets. They behave like objects that, as nifty as they are, are not alive, by any good definition of the word “life.”

If consciousness is a biological process—as an overwhelming body of evidence suggests, see #2 above—then the universe, not being a biological entity, cannot possibly be conscious. To say that it is would mean

radically redefining what we mean by “conscious.” And we have no reason to do so... other than a wishful desire to think of the universe as sentient.

Consciousness has, for a long time, been a mysterious and utterly ineffable phenomenon. People recognized a tremendous variety and mind-boggling complexity to life. But, like the variety and complexity of life, consciousness is no longer ineffable. The unexplainable is being explained. And it is being explained as a biological phenomenon—as physical cause and effect.

Again: There is not the slightest bit of evidence supporting the idea of a sentient universe. And there is a significant body of evidence that strongly suggests the contrary.

Now, I can hear the chorus already. “How can you prove that? You don’t know that with absolute certainty! God could be intervening in evolution—just in ways that are indistinguishable from natural selection! There could be some sort of immaterial soul interacting with the biological process of consciousness, in ways we don’t yet perceive! There could be some weird form of consciousness that we don’t understand, one that’s generated by stars and planets and lifeless astronomical bodies! You can’t prove with absolute certainty that there isn’t! Your non-belief is just an article of faith!”

My answer: No. We can’t prove it with 100% certainty.

But neither can we prove with 100% certainty that the universe wasn’t created 6,000 years ago, by a god who deliberately planted the fossil record and the genetic record and the geological record and the laws of atomic decay, all to test our faith. (Or all of which was planted by Satan, to trick us and tempt us into disbelief.) We can’t prove with 100% certainty that the earth goes around the sun, and that all our senses and logical abilities haven’t been fooled by some trickster god into thinking that it does.

But it doesn’t matter. 100% unshakeable certainty is not the objective

here. Reasonable plausibility, supported by carefully gathered and rigorously tested positive evidence, is the proper objective.

If you’re going to accept that young-earth creationism has been conclusively disproven by a mountain of scientific evidence, even though we acknowledge a .00001% hypothetical possibility that it might be true... then, if you’re going to be consistent, you have to apply that same standard, that same willingness to accept the reasonable conclusions of science about *which* ideas are and are not plausible, to all religious beliefs.

Including your own.

Especially your own.

Not everything is a matter of opinion or perspective. Not everything can turn into something completely different if you just look at it differently. Some things are either true or not true. It is not true that the universe was created 6,000 years ago. It is not true that the sun goes around the earth. And it is not true that evolution is shaped by the hand of God, or that consciousness is animated by an immaterial soul, or that the universe is sentient.

These things aren’t true for exactly the same reason that young-earth creationism isn’t true. They aren’t true because the evidence simply doesn’t support them. They aren’t true because the evidence actively contradicts them.

If you’re going to be a moderate or progressive religious believer; if you’re going to be a religious believer who respects and supports science instead of treating it as the enemy; if you’re going to be a religious believer who wants their beliefs to at least not directly contradict the available scientific evidence... then you need to be willing to consider the possibility that your own beliefs are every bit as contradicted by that evidence as the beliefs of the fundamentalist crazies.

And if the answer is “yep, that belief seems to be contradicted by the evidence”... then you need to be willing to let go of that belief.

Letters to the Editor (from AFS Members)

Tony King's letter was in *The Toccoa Record* on October 29.

Fundamentalists Trying to Create a Theocracy

Were you ever curious as to why we have Halloween?

Ancient Celtic religion was polytheistic and animistic, which varied slightly in beliefs and practices from tribe to tribe, but they overall held a belief in what they called the Otherworld. The Festival of Samhain (pronounced sow-in, "summer's end") was celebrated by the Gaels (Irish, Scots, and Manx) on three nights, which included Nov. 1, the Celtic New Year.

This marked the end of summertime and the harvest season.

Samhain was a harvest festival that also had the aspects of a festival for the dead. It was also on this day that the pagan Irish worshipped the goddess Mongfind (a deified Irish queen).

Even after the Roman Empire became Christianized the church had a difficult time dissuading converted pagans from their old habits; therefore Christianity incorporated pagan rites and dressed them in Christian clothes when Pope Boniface IV established All Saints Day to commemorate the souls of the blessed dead.

The church also had a tough time with the converted pagan Celts celebrating their Samhain. So it was logical for the church to integrate Samhain with All Saints Day to encourage those Celtic Christians to observe proper Christian rites. The ancient folkways, nevertheless, continued unabated.

The night before All Saints Day was once called All Hallows Evening. In its shortened form, it was known as All Hallows Eve, or Hallowe'en. Therefore, Oct. 31 is Halloween.

The ancient Celts believed that the head was the center of the soul, emotions and life, a symbol of divinity, and held the powers of the Otherworld. So they practiced headhunting in warfare, nailing the severed heads of their enemies upon their door lintels. This was remembered in their descendants' folk-lore, and eventually they began using rutabagas and turnips as replacements, carving facial features upon them.

The old Irish folktale of Stingy Jack, a greedy, gambling, hard drinking old farmer, relates how he tricked the devil into climbing into a tree, where he trapped him by carving a cross into it's trunk. The devil took revenge by cursing Jack to wan-

der the earth forever at night with only one light: a hollowed turnip with one candle inside. So his name was Jack O'Lantern.

When Irish immigrants came to America, they found the pumpkin more readily obtainable and easily carved than turnips. So, pumpkins became popular as Jack O'Lanterns.

The tradition of dressing in costume for Halloween goes back to the old custom of disguising oneself as a harmful spirit to avoid harm. In Scotland the spirits were impersonated by young men dressed in white with masked or blackened faces.

While most Christians view Halloween as a harmless act of play with no negative connotations, there are those who consider it very incompatible with their faith, calling it a day which originated with the devil, which is quite amusing since it was Christians who incorporated pagan rites and festivities into their religion in the first place.

Halloween is associated with horror, yet the horrors which Christianity has inflicted upon the world are much greater: cultural and religious antagonism, disruption of native cultures through mission work, as well as heretic and witch hunting.

Imagine the sheer horror of being accused of devilry and heresy, knowing and protesting your innocence, which fell upon deaf ears, only to be faced with such devices and techniques as the Judas Cradle, rack, pear of anguish, foot roasting, saw torture, etc., that were used in the four Inquisitions.

Some may say that is the past. But I say dogmatic organized Christianity is always capable of erupting into nightmare.

America with its Constitutional protection of freedom of religion and church-state separation has maintained a society where individuals are free to worship and choose any faith community, or not.

What is missing among conservative Christians is respect for others who are not exactly like them. There is beauty in infinite diversity and infinite combinations. But the fundamentalists, evangelicals, and dominionists are too busy telling others what to believe and do while they attempt to establish a theocracy.

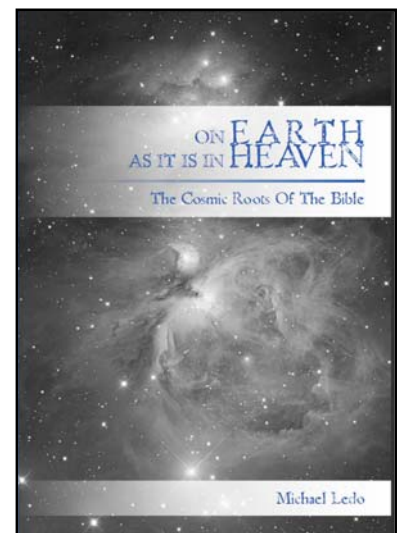
William A. King, Toccoa

On Earth As It Is In Heaven: A new book by Michael Ledo

AFS member Michael Ledo is finally publishing his book *On Earth As It Is In Heaven: The Cosmic Roots of the Bible*. He's been working on it for several years! The rear cover reads: "Can the truth about the Bible be found in the stars? In *On Earth As It Is In Heaven*, author and biblical scholar Michael Ledo explores the provocative connections between cosmic mythology and religious study. Written in clear, reader-friendly prose, this thought-provoking book looks at how cultural and historical influences and equinox precession actually caused the Hebrews to add passages to their texts, expanding basic stories into something more monumental. He shows how Greek cosmic myths can be tied to Hebrew myths and explores how even parts of the gospels of Jesus were representations of a Greco-Roman interpretation of the constellations. Biblical students and readers interested in the Bible will be fascinated at this radical and relevant reinterpretation of one of the world's most treasured and important books."

Michael says that printed books will be available soon on Amazon.com and Booksurge.com. There will also be a Kindle version downloadable from Amazon.com.

We hope that Michael can tell us more about his book as a speaker at an AFS meeting.



Americans United Executive Director Barry Lynn Thanks Religious Right Group For Prayer

Watchdog Group Leader Says Liberty Counsel's 'Adopt a Liberal' Program Beats Prayers For His Death

Americans United for Separation of Church and State Executive Director Barry W. Lynn said on October 1 that he's thankful for the prayers being said on his behalf by supporters of a Religious Right group.

Liberty Counsel, a far-right legal organization affiliated with the late Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, has unveiled a program called "Adopt a Liberal." Supporters are exhorted to pray for one of 11 liberals on a list.

Lynn is the only person to appear on the list who is not an elected leader or government official.

"This is quite an honor," Lynn said. "I'm pleased that Liberty Counsel considers me such a threat that I rank alongside President Barack Obama, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid

and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi."

Liberty Counsel hopes the prayers of its supporters will lead Lynn and the others to change their political views.

"Please pray daily for the liberal(s) of your choice, so each can become a good influence on our Nation's culture," says the group. "Prayer is powerful! It allows God to change the minds of those for whom we are praying. In fact, we fully expect that many of our adoptees will 'graduate' from this prayer program with vivid testimonies of God having changed their lives and worldviews!"

Recently, two Religious Right activists, Gordon James Klingenschmitt of Colorado and the Rev. Wiley Drake of

California, have announced that they are praying for Lynn's death. Lynn said he much prefers the approach of the Liberty Counsel.

"As a Christian minister, I obviously believe in the power of prayer," Lynn said. "I'm also thankful to live in a country where, thanks to the separation of church and state, people have the right to pray whenever, however and for whatever they like."

But Lynn added that Liberty Counsel shouldn't expect him to change his views. He also noted that any Liberty Counsel supporter who chooses to adopt him had better be prepared. "I like to stay up late, and I'm not doing any chores around the house," Lynn quipped.

[From an Oct. 1 AU press release.]

Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network Warns Americans of "Demonic" Halloween Candy

AU's Lynn Says Religious Broadcaster Should Send 'Trick Or Treat' Goodies Over To His House

Put aside your fears of swine flu. TV preacher Pat Robertson's website has just issued a bulletin warning Americans of the real threat we face this season: Demons may be lurking in our Halloween candy.

In a column on the Christian Broadcasting Network's website, writer Kimberly Daniels asserted that "demons" sneak into bags of Halloween candy at grocery stores.

"[M]ost of the candy sold during this season has been dedicated and prayed over by witches," Daniels wrote. "I do not buy candy during the Halloween season. Curses are sent through the tricks and treats of the innocent whether they get it by going door to door or by purchasing it from the local grocery store. The demons cannot tell the difference."

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, urged

Robertson and Daniels to lighten up.

"I've heard of the devil being in the details, but to think he's lurking inside a Snickers bar is a little too much," Lynn quipped. "Pat Robertson has always peddled some scary stuff, but this is over the top."

Added Lynn, "I hate to see all of that candy go to waste. I wish Robertson would send it to me, because I'm throwing a Halloween party and could use it."

Daniels asserted that far from being harmless fun, Halloween is a veritable doorway to hell, full of literal monsters. "Halloween is much more than a holiday filled with fun and tricks or treats," she wrote. "It is a time for the gathering of evil that masquerades behind the fictitious characters of Dracula, werewolves, mummies and witches on brooms. The truth is that these demons that have been presented as scary cartoons actually exist.

I have prayed for witches who are addicted to drinking blood and howling at the moon."

Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition and an influential player in American politics, has long opposed Halloween. As far back as 1982, he attacked the holiday as a "Satanic ritual" and said on the air, "I think we ought to close Halloween down."

CBN later produced a pamphlet titled "Hallowed or Harmful: Christian Perspective on Halloween." It asserted, "During Halloween, little children in particular are the weak ones."

Lynn urged Robertson to take a deep breath and try to relax.

"I think Pat has been watching too many scary movies," Lynn said. "Still, if he doesn't want to celebrate Halloween, that's fine with me, but he should quit trying to spoil everyone else's fun."

[From an Oct. 29 AU press release.]

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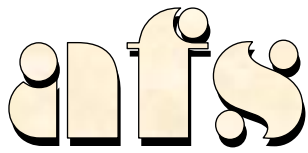
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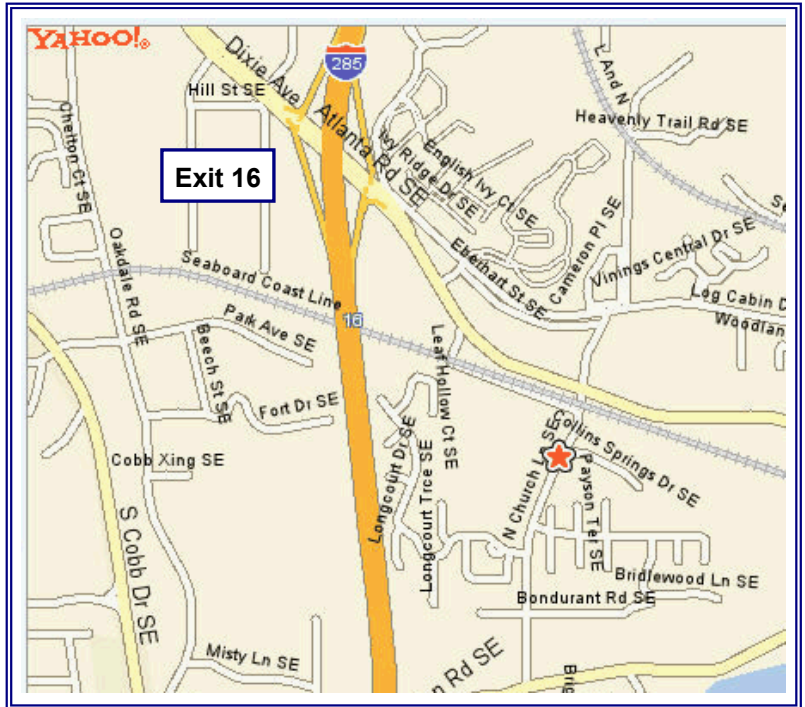
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**This Month's Speaker:
Massimo Pigliucci**



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