

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication • Volume 15 Number 12 • December 2009

The December AFS Meeting

The December 13 AFS meeting will include a talk by Todd Stiefel, a former executive of Stiefel Laboratories, who will speak on how he would like to bring his business experience to the freethought movement.

The meeting will be at 1:00 at **Atlanta Freethought Hall**, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, Smyrna, GA. (Arrive early if you like for snacks and conversation with other freethinkers!)

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, Dec. 18, 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

Dec 13: AFS General Meeting, AF Hall, 1:00 PM.

Dec 18: AFS Social, Las Margaritas Restaurant, 7:00PM.

About Our Speaker...

Todd Stiefel lives in Raleigh, NC with his wife, Diane, and two small children. He graduated cum laude from Duke University and worked 12 years for Stiefel Laboratories, holding positions in marketing, sales operations and strategy. He was the Chief Strategy Officer and a member of the executive committee of the Board. He was responsible for 250 people and managed finance, strategy, risk, facilities, administration and programs. He co-led the team that sold Stiefel Laboratories this year to GlaxoSmithKline.



Todd is also a secular humanist, an atheist and full-time freethought activist. He is the Founder and President of the Stiefel Freethought Foundation. He serves on the development committee of American Atheists and the advisory board of the Secular Student Alliance.

Todd's mission is to gain respect for freethinkers and ensure the complete separation of church and state. Todd envisions a world where government favors liberty over dogma and freethinkers are overt, united and influential.

Other Meetings of Interest

The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of every month at 12:30 PM. Their December meeting was at AF Hall and future meetings may be there too! To find out more, see <http://www.fellowshipofreason.com>.

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** meet on the third Sunday of the month at AF Hall, but will have no meeting this month.

GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Gwinnett (12

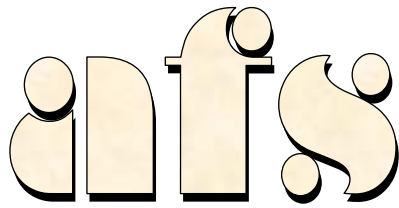
Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville) on Wednesday, December 16, at 7:00 PM. (See <http://gust.domek.org/>.)

The Atlanta Skeptics have a meetup, called **Skeptics In the Pub**. Their next meetup is on Saturday, December 19, at 7:00 PM at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave., in Atlanta. For more info, go to <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com> or <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaSkeptics/>.

There will be a "meetup" for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, December 13, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur, GA.

There's another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists scheduled for December 20, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta.

"Ever since puberty, I have believed in the value of two things: kindness and clear thinking. At first these two remained more or less distinct; when I felt triumphant I believed most in clear thinking, and in the opposite mood I believed most in kindness. Gradually, the two have come more and more together in my feelings. I find that much unclear thought exists as an excuse for cruelty and that much cruelty is prompted by superstitious beliefs." — Bertrand Russell



**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.

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.

Apr 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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Creationists Add to Darwin Book

A Christian group brought its anti-evolution campaign to the University of Georgia campus in an unusual way on November 18, passing out 2,000 free copies of the book usually credited as the foundation of the Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection.

But the 150th-anniversary copies of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* that students carried away weren't like most editions of the science classic.

This edition featured a 54-page introduction refuting evolutionary thinking by a creationist, California minister and evangelist Ray Comfort, who links evolutionary thinking to Adolf Hitler's plan to exterminate Jews.

Living Waters, a publishing and evangelism organization Comfort founded, said it distributed 170,000 copies of the book on college campuses across the country in November, 150 years after Darwin's book was first published.

Atheists had threatened to burn or deface the Comfort edition, according to Living Waters.

But the distribution at UGA went off without any major confrontations, said Bobby McCreery of Winder, one of 11 volunteers from the area who

passed out copies near busy bus stops on Sanford Drive at the Tate Student Center and Sanford Stadium.

Several volunteers were from McCreery's church in Monroe, Walker Baptist Church, which uses some of Comfort's teaching materials, while others heard about the book giveaway and decided to come help, he said.

"At this point, I'm not debating anyone. I'm here to give away books," McCreery said.

"One guy threw the 50 pages (Comfort's introduction) back in the box," said another man passing out the books, Mike Dodson of Monroe.

Many students declined the free copy. "If you take that introduction out, I'll take it," said one, senior biochemistry major George Zohrabyan.

On the Origin of Species is a book about observing nature, and Comfort's introduction twists the meaning of Darwin's book, Zohrabyan said. "It alters the original idea."

Eugenie C. Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education, wrote a scathing article about Ray Comfort and his book project for *US News and World Report*. (See the links below.) Scott charged that the controversial reprint of *On The Origin of Species* omits key sections, including material that constitutes

Darwin's most compelling arguments for evolutionary science. Scott said that her advance copy of the Comfort edition "is missing no fewer than four crucial chapters, as well as Darwin's introduction... Two of the omitted chapters, Chapters 11 and 12, showcase biogeography, some of Darwin's strongest evidence for evolution. Which is a better explanation for the distribution of plants and animals around the planet: common ancestry or special creation? Which better explains why island species are more similar to species on the mainland closest to them, rather than to more distant species that share a similar environment? The answer clearly is common ancestry. Today, scientists continue to develop the science of biogeography, confirming, refining and extending Darwin's conclusions."

In response, Mr. Comfort admitted that his bowdlerized edition lacked material presented in Darwin's original copy, but said that subsequent printings would include the missing chapters.

For more on the controversy surrounding Mr. Comfort's campaign, visit the websites indicated below.

[From a Nov 19 article by Lee Shearer at www.onlineathens.com and the Nov 12 issue of *American Atheists News*.]

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/jacketcopy/2009/11/creationists-charles-darwin-origin-of-species.html>

<http://www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country/2009/10/30/how-creationist-origin-distorts-darwin.html>

<http://www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country/2009/11/02/ray-comfort-responds-to-genie-scott-on-creationist-origin-of-species.html>

Religious License Plate Banned in South Carolina

Private group hopes to resurrect "I Believe" plate

A federal judge has ruled that South Carolina vanity license plates inscribed with a cross and the words "I believe" violate the First Amendment's requirement of separation of church and state.

In a 57-page ruling, Judge Cameron Currie of the U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina said that the "I Believe" Act, under which the plates were created, is "clearly unconstitutional," since it "promote[s] a spe-

cific religion, Christianity." The Act, passed in 2008 after a similar law was struck down in Florida, made no attempt to create license plates centered around other religions.

Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer, who was the driving force behind the law, dismissed the ruling as that of an activist judge bent on destroying Christianity. In a statement, Bauer called Currie a "liberal judge appointed by Bill Clinton who is using her personal wishes

to overrule the Legislature and the will of the thousands of South Carolinians who want to purchase the tags," and said her ruling was nothing less than "another attack on Christianity."

Bauer said he has asked South Carolina Attorney General Henry McMaster to appeal the ruling. McMaster is reportedly considering his options. Bauer and McMaster are both running to replace disgraced Gov. Mark Sanford. Indeed, in her ruling, Judge

License Plate Banned (*continued*)

Currie questioned whether Bauer was “motivated by sincerely held Christian beliefs or an effort to purchase political capital with religious coin.”

Whether or not McMaster appeals the ruling, the issue is far from resolved. Immediately after the ruling, the Palmetto Family Council, a private group, announced its “Plan B” to resurrect the plate with private dollars. Under South Carolina law, private groups can apply to have specially-created vanity plates issued. Whether such a scheme would pass constitutional muster is unclear. If such a plan involved significant state

action—for example, if the DMV was the ultimate issuer of the plate—the plate could be again invalidated.

While Bauer said he was “personally offended” at Judge Currie’s act of “awarding legal fees to the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and Americans United for Separation of Church and State,” the suit was originally brought on behalf of a Methodist minister, a Christian minister, a rabbi, and a Unitarian pastor. The Hindu American Foundation and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee were later joined as parties.

Judge Currie said the suit amounted to a waste of taxpayer money. Her ruling noted that, despite the clear language of Supreme Court First Amendment cases, “this state’s limited resources have been used to promote, pass, and defend a state law ... [which] amounts to state endorsement not only of religion in general, but of a specific sect in particular.” She issued a permanent injunction barring the defendants from issuing or manufacturing the plates, and from taking applications or money for future orders. [From a Nov 15 article by Jon Hood at <http://www.ConsumerAffairs.com>.]

Atlanta Bus Driver Holds Passengers Hostage for Prayer

On November 3, LeRoy Matthews, a driver for the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), apparently decided that he and his passengers were in urgent need of prayer. So around 7:30PM, he pulled his bus over to the side of the road, stood up and blocked one passenger from leaving, and then asked them all

to hold hands and join him in prayer.

Four or five minutes were spent in prayer before Matthews returned to his duty and allowed his passengers to return to theirs.

At least one filed a complaint with the transit authority.

Since Matthew’s behavior was a violation of MARTA’s policy, the six-

year veteran driver was placed on a five day suspension. Lyle V. Harris, a spokesman for MARTA, said that it was unclear what Matthews was praying about. He also said that it was unclear whether this kind of behavior has happened before.

[From a November 7 article by Hugh Kramer on www.examiner.com.]

Great Links on the Internet:

How the Religious Right Stole Christmas: <http://www.alternet.org/story/144431/>

Is Belief in God Hurting America? According to a new study, prosperity is highest in countries that practice religion the least: <http://www.alternet.org/story/144174/>

Does the Vatican Have a Say in Your Health Decisions?

http://www.alternet.org/reproductivejustice/144244/does_the_vatican_have_a_say_in_your_health_decisions

How Does a Religious Cult Have the Clout to Delay Health Care Vote?

<http://www.alternet.org/bloggers/www.alternet.org/143797/>

Going Undercover in the Crazy, Tragic World of Christian Gay-Conversion Therapy:

http://www.alternet.org/sex/144390/going_undercover_in_the_crazy_tragic_world_of_christian_gay-conversion_therapy/?page=entire

Those Stories About Religious Groups Taking Over the World with Birth Rates are for Suckers.

Many have fallen sway to demographic data about cultural or religious birth rates. Here’s why it’s a fool’s game: http://www.alternet.org/world/143913/those_stories_about_religious_groups_taking_over_the_world_with_birth_rates_are_for_suckers/

A brilliant response to Ray Comfort's nonsense about Darwin (Eugenie Scott does it again!):

<http://www.dontdissdarwin.com/video.php>

Back to the Basics for the Church: With the death of theology, churches in the US have strayed into social activism:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/dec/06/religion-america-theology>

Catholic Church Emerges as Key Player in Legislative Battle:

http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB125781425786840005-IMyQjAxMDI5NTE3MDgxMTA0Wj.html

Hear AFS member David Driscoll’s podcasts: As co-host of American Freethought Podcast: www.americanfreethought.com

As host of the Secular Nation Podcast: www.atheistalliance.org/podcast

CATHOLICISM V. ATHEISM: *Which Is More Reasonable?*

A DEBATE:

DR. ED BUCKNER, President of American Atheists, will debate **CHARLES GERNAZIAN**, Director of Catholic-American Center on Law and Religion

JOINTLY SPONSORED BY THE CATHOLIC-AMERICAN CENTER ON LAW AND RELIGION INC. (www.Catholic-American.org) and AMERICAN ATHEISTS, INC. (www.atheists.org)

Location: St. Andrew's Catholic Church - PARISH HALL (www.standrewcatholic.com)
675 Riverside Road, Roswell, Georgia 30075

Date: **Thursday, January 21, 2010**

Time: 7:30 – 8:30 P.M. – Main Debate (Followed By a Break)
8:40 – 9:30 P.M. – Question and Answers with Audience Participation

Format: A non-confrontational and respectful debate in which the two opposing worldviews are presented, assessed, and challenged. Audience participation will be encouraged. A question and answer session will follow the debate.

Admission Fee: No admission fee. An optional donation to the sponsoring organization of your choice will be appreciated as well as shared with St. Andrew's Catholic Church for hosting the event. All contributions to the sponsoring organizations are tax deductible:

Catholic-American Center on Law and Religion, Inc.
PO Box 49213, Atlanta, GA 30359

American Atheists, Inc.
PO Box 158, Cranford, NJ 07016

Is House Health Care Bill a Threat to Our Constitution?

The following speech was delivered by Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State at a press conference at the National Press Club on November 16. The topic was the anti-choice amendment authored by Rep. Bart Stupak that was attached to the House health-care reform bill.

In the United States, the institutions of government and religion are separate. This is not just my opinion. It is the law of the land. Our Constitution prohibits Congress from making laws "respecting an establishment of religion." The Supreme Court has stated more than once that laws must not advance religion or have a religious purpose.

How surprising and appalling, then, to see that a provision designed to curtail a women's right to abortion was slipped into the health-care bill at the behest of a powerful religious group, a provision that reflects the doctrines of that group.

A few days ago, Rep. Bart Stupak, the prime mover of this provision,

told the Associated Press, "The Catholic Church used their power—their clout, if you will—to influence this issue. They had to. It's a basic teaching of the religion."

Therein lies the problem. It is not the job of government to enforce religious teaching. Abortion is a constitutionally protected medical procedure in this country. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church has sought to change that fact, but the bishops have been unable to persuade the American people that their view is correct. Indeed, polls show that the church hierarchy has been unable to persuade even its own members to adopt the church's narrow view on abortion.

The church hierarchy now seeks

through legislative action to accomplish something it has failed to get through its own efforts at moral suasion. Is it any wonder that those of us who are not even members of the church are upset and angry about this? We wish to live in the 21st Century, not an echo of medieval Spain. We do not wish to have the doctrines of the Catholic Church—or indeed any faith—imposed on us through law

I understand the desire of the House leadership to pass a health-care bill. The issue has been on the national agenda in some form or another since the days of Theodore Roosevelt.

But health-care reform that attacks the rights of more than half of the population by subjecting some of their

House Health Care Bill (*continued*)

basic and most intimate decisions to a large and powerful church's governing body is not reform at all. It is a huge step backward. As the director of a constitutional rights group—and I say this sadly—it would be better to dump the entire bill than to allow it to become law with these noxious provisions intact.

I suppose those of us standing here today may be accused of “anti-Catholicism” for what we have said. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We know that across this country, Catholics of goodwill have joined us in opposing this heavy-handed move by the bishops and their Washington lobbyists. You can feel the anger stirring across the land; a backlash is building. It will not be silenced, and we are here today to give voice to that movement.

I have always taken as one of my

guiding lights America's first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy. In a famous 1960 speech he said, “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act.... I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish, where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source—where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials....”

Those were wise words. We best honor them today not by enshrining them in books and nodding in agreement when we read them. We honor those words by putting them into

practice and ensuring that America upholds the separation of church and state.

That's why we are calling on the Senate to not include this amendment in their version of the bill. There is still time to stop this from becoming law.

This lobbying effort by the Roman Catholic Church was as well-orchestrated and ruthless an assault on the rights of the poor as any campaign waged by any other corporation. At a minimum, the church should voluntarily register as a federal lobbyist and disclose the costs of this attack on women's constitutional rights. This would be consistent with an ethos of transparency, without even raising the specter of undue government interference with religion.

[See <http://www.au.org> for other issues addressed by Americans United.]

Catholic Church Uses D.C.'s Homeless As Pawns in Gay Marriage Debate

By **Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux**, from <http://www.care2.com/causes/human-rights/blog/>

After November 7, when Catholic bishops used their Congressional influence to push the Stupak amendment, I am not feeling particularly kindly toward the Catholic Church. But an article¹ published on Nov 13 in the *Washington Post* is just appalling. On Nov 11, the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. announced that it will not continue the social service programs it runs for the District if the city doesn't change a proposed same-sex marriage law. This is a change, needless to say, that would affect tens of thousands of D.C.'s most vulnerable citizens, especially the one-third of D.C.'s homeless who go to city-owned shelters managed by the Church. Overall, the Catholic Church serves 68,000 people in the city.

The Archdiocese is justifying its stance by saying that although under the new bill, religious institutions would not be required to perform same-sex marriage services, they would have to comply with city laws regarding discrimination against gay

men and lesbians, i.e., they couldn't discriminate anymore. “If the city requires this, we can't do it,” Susan Gibbs, spokeswoman for the archdiocese, told the *Post*. “The city is saying in order to provide social services, you need to be secular. For us, that's really a problem.”

Except—the law wouldn't really require secularism, would it? Because the Catholic Church would not be required to marry same-sex couples, and Catholic churches and cathedrals would be free to deny their spaces to anyone but heterosexual couples. I don't want to start pointing fingers here, and I certainly don't want to sound anti-religious—in fact, the Mormon Church of Latter-Day Saints recently upheld a piece of Salt Lake City legislation that prohibited bias based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Michael Otterson, the director of public affairs for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints said: “The church supports these ordinances because they are fair and reasonable and

do not do violence to the institution of marriage.” Surely, this outlook should make sense also to the Catholic Church, since the proposed D.C. law does not require them to readjust their stance on marriage.

But arguments about how the law will affect the Church aside, let's think for a minute about the devastating impact that a removal of Church support would have on Washington, D.C. itself. Tens of thousands of people depend fully on Church-run services to survive. The idea that the Church would put those people in jeopardy because of an ideological difference is absolutely appalling. And the idea of using these vulnerable people as pawns in a political game simply reflects badly upon the Church—which is so often lauded for its focus on good works and charity. Where is the Church's moral obligation to feed the hungry and care for the sick? Are they really going to let go of that fundamental tenet in order to make a point about gay marriage?

¹See <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/11/AR2009111116943.html?nav=hcmodule&sid=ST2009042801406>

Opening Comments: “Is American a Christian Nation?”

On October 29, Herb Silverman (president of the Secular Coalition for America) debated Chaplain E. Ray Moore at the University of South Carolina on “Is America a Christian Nation?” About 300 people attended the debate, which was sponsored by a student atheist group. Here are Herb’s opening comments.

America is a *Christian Nation* in the same way that America is a *White Nation*. The majority of Americans are both White and Christian. However, we are not now, nor have we ever officially been, a White Nation or a Christian Nation. Those who believe America was once a Christian nation may be hearkening back to the first Europeans who settled here. These Pilgrims and Puritans were not the people we call our founders, like Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, and so forth. I’ll talk about our founders in a minute.

The Pilgrims and Puritans were religious dissenters from Europe who sought freedom of worship here for their own religion, but most definitely not for other religions. They had no use for religious liberty. The early colonies were mostly theocracies, where those of the “wrong” religion were excluded from government participation and were also persecuted. For example, the Puritans, who established Massachusetts Bay colony in 1630, required all Massachusetts citizens to pay a tax to the Puritan Church. Those who didn’t pay went directly to jail, without passing Go. This church-state union led to the Salem witch trials of 1692, which were based on the biblical mandate: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Most of our early colonies also made blasphemy a crime, an offense that could be punishable by death.

In the American Revolution that started in 1776, political leaders began to construct a new federal government. The soon-to-be United States of America not only declared independence from England, but also declared something even more radical—that “Governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Americans rejected kings, crowned by bishops, who had been vested with a god-given authority to rule through “divine right.”

The framers of our U.S. Constitution wanted no part of the religious intolerance and bloodshed they saw in Europe and also in our own early theocratic colonies. They wisely established the first government in history to separate church and state. James Madison, affectionately known as the Father of our Constitution, said, “The purpose of separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the endless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries.” Our founders understood the devastating nature of holy wars. They wisely established a secular nation whose authority rests with “We the People” (the first three words of the U.S. Constitution) and not with “Thou the Deity.”

In the process of coming up with this new federal government, a minority faction in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 sought some recognition of Christianity. But more enlightened founders like our own Charles Pinckney, a SC delegate to the Constitutional Convention, disagreed, and he even recommended language prohibiting religious tests for federal office. This became Article 6 of the United States Constitution, a Constitution adopted in 1789 as a purely secular document.

Unambiguous language from our founders really should settle this debate over whether America is a Christian nation. In 1797 the Treaty of Tripoli was negotiated by George Washington, signed by John Adams, and ratified unanimously by the United States Senate. This trade treaty stated in part: “The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” I wonder what part of “not” Chaplain Moore doesn’t understand.

While the federal government was certainly not a Christian nation, it didn’t initially prohibit states from establishing their own state churches. Some early state constitutions limited

public office to Christians or even to the correct religious denomination. Such provisions represented a more intolerant time in our history. States with government-favored religions gradually began moving toward separating religion and government, with the last state disestablishment occurring in Massachusetts in 1833.

When it comes to determining what the laws of the United States mean, the only document that matters is the U. S. Constitution. Our founders created a Constitution in which the government acknowledged no gods, the better to ensure that all citizens have freedom of conscience. In our own time, some countries, such as the former Soviet Union, have been hostile to religion. Many others, such as Iran, now meld church and state. America’s founders wisely chose a middle course—neither for nor against religion. Neutrality protects everyone.

The founders wrote the Constitution as a secular document not because they were hostile to Christianity or religion, but because they did not want the new federal government to have authority over or meddle in religion. And it’s important for you to understand that government neutrality is not government hostility toward religion. Our secular laws are based on the human principle of “justice for all,” and our civil government enforces these laws through a secular criminal justice system.

Our government should not speak on religious matters. It should not favor one religion over another, or believers over nonbelievers. No one’s religious liberty is threatened in the slightest when the wall of separation between government and religion is kept strong. As Thomas Jefferson said, “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

No one is deprived of worship in America. Separation of church and

“Is American a Christian Nation?” (continued)

state allows for free speech in public, as we see with bumper stickers, billboards, and 24 hour a day religious TV and radio programs. Politicians may and do talk freely about their own religious beliefs, and they almost always close their speeches with some variation of “God bless America.”

But one of our most cherished freedoms is the freedom from state sponsored religion. We each get to personally pick and choose the sort of religion we prefer. And who would want the government to make those choices for us? There is only one “religious liberty” we lack: The freedom to enlist the government to force others to acknowledge or support our own religious ideas. Your freedom, like mine, depends on maintaining this limitation. Religious liberty is threatened by government endorsement of any religious view. And religious liberty is a right guaranteed by the Bill of Rights.

Nevertheless, there have always been people who falsely maintain that the founders intended to establish a Christian nation. But our framers were careful and thoughtful writers. Had they wanted a Christian republic, it seems highly unlikely that they would somehow have forgotten to include their Christian intentions in the supreme law of the land. The U.S. Constitution contains not a single mention of God or Jesus.

I hold in my hand a godless document, the United States Constitution. And I’ll offer \$1000 to Chaplain Moore, or to anyone in the audience who can find the words “God” or “Jesus” in the Constitution.

Our founders valued religious liberty. That’s why there are only two references to religion in the Constitution, and both are exclusionary. One is in the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of relig-

ion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This guarantees American citizens freedom of conscience, the right to practice any religion or no religion. The other is in Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution: “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”

I know Article 6 quite well. I discovered in 1990 that our S.C. State Constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office, which I knew was an obvious violation of Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution. When I then applied to become a notary public, former Governor Beasley, supported by other Christian Conservatives, rejected my application. It took many years of litigation, and a unanimous verdict of the South Carolina Supreme Court, to strike down this unconstitutional provision in our state constitution. In the process, the state of South Carolina wasted about one hundred thousand of your hard-earned taxpayer dollars trying to keep me from becoming a notary public.

I wonder if my worthy opponent would disagree with this Supreme Court decision, and, instead, side with those Conservative Christians who believe atheists should still be prevented from holding public office. Would he also want to exclude Jews, Muslims, and all people of faith who are *not* Christians?

There have been numerous amendments proposed to turn our secular country into a bible-based Christian nation. Thankfully, all such attempts at official establishment have failed. In an 1856 letter to his wife, Robert E. Lee said: “Is it not strange that the descendants of those Pilgrim Fathers who crossed the Atlantic to preserve their own freedom of opinion have always proved themselves intolerant of the spiritual liberty of others?” And

Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, made this chilling statement on his return in 1939 from spending six months observing Hitler’s rise in Germany: “When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the American flag carrying a cross.”

Some Christian nation advocates would like to impose their particular interpretation of morality on the rest of us. In this country, in my lifetime, they have used the Bible to justify keeping women “in their place,” subjugating blacks, and oppressing gays and lesbians. Scientific advances are particular targets. When a science book is found to be wrong, the mistake is corrected in subsequent books. But for biblical literalists, if the scientific evidence contradicts the Bible, it is the evidence that is thrown out.

As wonderful as our Constitution is, no American would call it an infallible document, as Chaplain Moore claims about the Bible. The framers understood the need for future changes in the Constitution, and set forth mechanisms for achieving them. Scientific and humanistic advances make it desirable to incorporate new information and adjust our worldview and behavior. Like the Bible, the Constitution once condoned slavery. Our Constitution was rightly amended, but not the Bible.

You will not find any support in the Bible for treating with respect those who have different or no religious beliefs. If such Christian nation advocates were ever to have their way, millions of loyal and patriotic Americans would be turned into second-class citizens. That would no longer be the America I love, nor would it be the secular nation our founders so proudly formed.

“Take from the church the miraculous, the supernatural, the incomprehensible, the unreasonable, the impossible, the unknowable, the absurd, and nothing but a vacuum remains.” —Robert G. Ingersoll, from *Ingersoll’s Works*, Vol 1, p. 285.

Coming On Television: December 29 on PBS: Nova presents “What Darwin Never Knew,” which reveals answers to evolutionary questions that even Darwin couldn’t explain.

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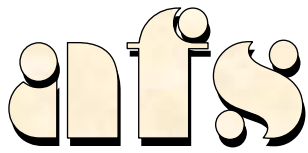
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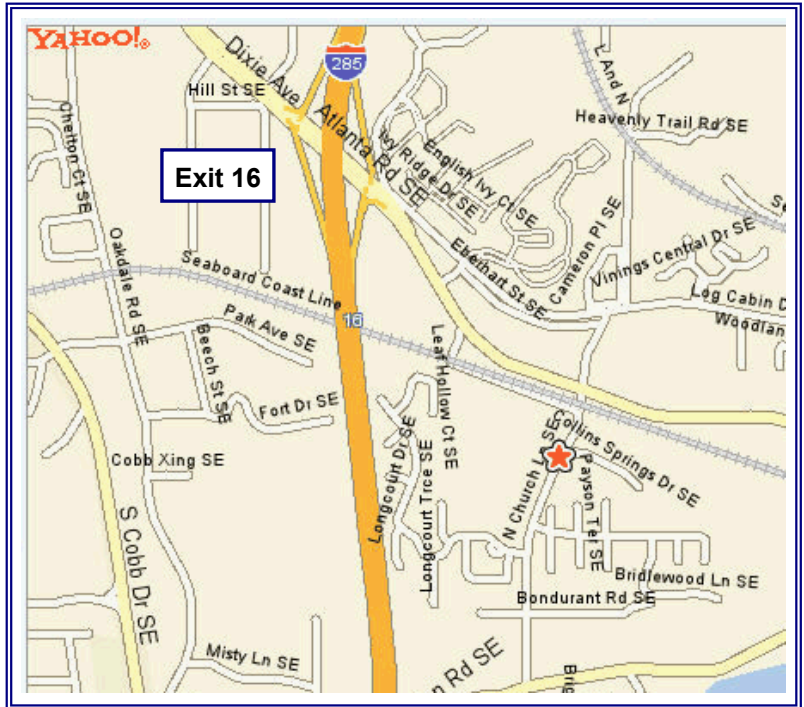
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This Month's Speaker:

Todd Stiefel



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