

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication

• Volume 16 Number 7

• July 2010

The July AFS Meeting

The July 11 AFS meeting will feature **Dr. Scott Lilienfeld**, Professor in the Dept. of Psychology at Emory University, speaking on his new book, *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology*, which he co-authored with 3 other professors.

The book uses popular myths as a vehicle for helping laypersons to distinguish science from pseudoscience. See <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-140513111X.html> for a description and several reviews of the book.

Dr. Lilienfeld is a past president of the Society for a Science of Clinical Psychology, and a Fellow of the Association for Psychological Science. His principal areas of research are personality disorders, psychiatric classification and diagnosis, pseudoscience in mental health, and the teaching of psychology.

The meeting will be at 1:00 at Atlanta Freethought Hall, but please feel free to arrive early for refreshments and conversation with other freethinkers.

Atlanta Freethought Hall is located at 4775 N. Church Lane SE, in Smyrna, GA. 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. Atlanta Freethought Hall is on the left.

AFS Social: Copeland's Restaurant

The next AFS Social will be at Copeland's Famous New Orleans Restaurant and Bar, 3131 Cobb Pkwy SE, in Smyrna, GA, on Saturday, July 17, at 1:00 PM. Food at this place is said to be very good. This should be a nice treat for all.

Secular Tuesdays at AFS

Dr. Dennis Martin's class on **An Introduction to Secular Humanism** continues at AF Hall on Tuesday nights at 7:00 PM. The class started on June 8, and will continue through Tuesday, July 13. Email Dennis at DrDennisMartin@gmail.com if you would like to attend the last sessions. For each meeting you plan to attend, Dennis will email you an outline and/or short document which you can read before the meeting. This way, more meeting time can be spent in discussion rather than exposition.

AFS Meetings and Activities

July 11: AFS General Meeting, AF Hall, 1:00 PM.

July 17: AFS Social, Copeland's Restaurant, 1:00 PM.

Other Meetings of Interest

The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of every month at 10:30 AM at AF Hall. They also have meetings for book discussion, philosophy, a classic film course, and other events. See <http://www.fellowshipofreason.com>.

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet at AF Hall on Sunday, July 18, at 1:00. Debbie Seagraves, Executive Director of the ACLU of Georgia will speak. Discussion will follow on church/state separation, human rights and Arizona's new immigration bill. (<http://humanistsofgea.esmartdesign.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, visit their website at <http://www.fayettefreethinkers.org>.

The **Fayette Freethought Society** meets on the first and third Thursday of each month at 7:00 PM at the Mellow Mushroom on Hwy 74 in Peachtree City, GA. For details, send an email to fayfreethinkers@gmail.com.

The **Atlanta Skeptics** will have their **Skeptics in the Pub** meetup at 7:00 PM on Saturday, July 17, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave, in Atlanta. Bob Blaskiewicz will talk on "Hiding in Plain Sight: Ubiquity and Invisibility for the Novice." See <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com> for details.

The **Atlanta Science Tavern** meetup will be at 7:00 PM on Saturday, July 24, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave NE in Atlanta. Dr. Dante Fenilio of the Atlanta Botanical Garden will speak on "Amphibians In Your Own Backyard." Details: <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaScienceTavern/>.

There will be a **meetup** for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, July 11, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur. (<http://www.meetup.com/Atlanta-Atheists/>)

And another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for Sunday, July 25, at 6:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta. (<http://www.meetup.com/>)

"At least two-thirds of our miseries spring from human stupidity, human malice and those great motivators and justifiers of malice and stupidity: idealism, dogmatism and proselytizing zeal on behalf of religious or political ideas."

- Aldous Huxley, from his book *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1952)



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 11: Dr. Scott Lilienfeld will talk about his new book, *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology. Widespread Misconceptions about Human Behavior.*

Aug 8: John Snider and David Driscoll of AmericanFreethought.com will speak.

Sept 12: TBD

Oct 10: Joel Kollin will speak on "36 Hours in the Rice Street Jail."

Nov 14: 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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Nothing Fails Like Prayer in the Gulf of Mexico

A June 22 Statement by Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF Co-President

Well, it's been two days since Louisiana lawmakers' pompous day of prayer to stop the oil gusher in the Gulf of Mexico, and nearly a week since our President directed Americans to pray over it on June 15.¹ New York Times columnist Gail Collins² pointed out there were no less than "17 references to God, prayer, blessings or faith" in President Obama's address.

And yet the oil keeps gushing. Nothing fails like prayer, as Anne Nicol Gaylor, Freedom From Religion Foundation Co-President often says.

Louisiana Senate Resolution³ #145, which declared Sunday, June 20, 2010 as a "Statewide Day of Prayer for Louisiana," was introduced by Senator Robert Adley and adopted by Louisiana state senators. The resolution made the usual human-as-worms allusion, saying "a Statewide Day of Prayer provides each of us with a powerful opportunity to humble ourselves before our Almighty God."

And it makes the usual unconstitutional exhortation to citizens: "The citizens of Louisiana are urged to pray for a solution to this crisis . . . a crisis that remains unaffected by the efforts of mortal man."

The usual primitive and superstitious invocations are offered that "prayers woven together through common effort can themselves become an awesome and powerful force . . . [advocating] a day of unified, intercessory prayer, by and for those people living in the regions around the Gulf of Mexico, to pray for an end to this environmental emergency." (Isn't it blasphemous for these senators to propose that a united humanity is actually more powerful than the god they believe in, that by sheer wishful thinking such "humble" humans can force their god to stop the gusher over which he previously has chosen not to intervene?)

Most absurdly, the resolution urges "the citizenry of the state and all people of faith throughout the United States and the world to give personal thanks . . . for God's continued guidance." (Don't these senators sense a contradiction in their concept of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good god? President Obama, in his speech, did not offer the expectation that God will intervene, but simply calls it a "blessing that He is with us.")

Instead of pointless prayer, how about adopting the attitude of Bill Nye, the Science Guy? When asked about the oil disaster at the recent American Humanist Association convention where he was named Humanist of the Year, Nye proposed that we turn this crisis into "an opportunity." In this case, an opportunity to prevent future such catastrophes. Nye noted, chillingly, that there are hundreds of similar deep-sea oil drilling operations on ocean floors. Nye pointed out that "it's easier to go to the surface of the moon than to the ocean floor."

Even President Obama acknowledged in his address last week, "Because there has never been a leak this size at this depth, stopping it has tested the limits of human technology." Yet the U.S. Administration is expected to resume issuing new permits for deep-sea oil drilling after the six-month moratorium expires. If the technology does not exist or cannot be relied upon to stop deep-sea oil leaks, what are we doing drilling for oil on the ocean floors in the first place? This ghastly and unending disaster was utterly predictable, even inevitable, and it should alarm us all that similar disasters are equally predictable and inevitable.

Prayer is what politicians fall back on when they don't want to offer true leadership. Are we prepared to learn anything from this disaster? Or are we just going to pray about it?

NOTHING FAILS LIKE PRAYER IN THE GULF OF MEXICO, PART II (JUNE 25)

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has sent letters chiding Govs. Bob Riley (Alabama), Haley Barbour (Mississippi), Bobby Jindal (Louisiana) and Rick Perry (Texas) for calling for a "useless" day of prayer about the Gulf oil spill disaster on Sunday.

"Under our secular Constitution, elected officials have neither the moral nor the constitutional authority to dictate to constituents to pray, much less to set aside a day to pray about the oil leak crisis."

"Last week, President Obama, in an address making no less than 17 references to god, prayer, blessings or faith, already called on Americans to pray. Yet the oil leak keeps gushing. Last Sunday, the Louisiana Senate called for an elaborate day for 'intercessory prayer.' And the oil just keeps gushing," noted Foundation Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor in separate letters to each governor."

"Nothing fails like prayer," they added.

"Our membership believes not in useless prayer, but in good works and action. We believe in public officials taking responsibility for the actions or inactions which have led to such crises. Prayer is the ultimate political copout. Prayer is what politicians fall back on when they don't want to offer true leadership."

"Please stop misusing your public office to inappropriately inveigh and exhort your constituents to pray. Instead we urge you to view this environmental disaster as a wake-up call and an opportunity to ensure that you will do everything in your executive power to ensure such disasters do not recur, and thereby to safeguard our future, our public waterways and our coastal areas from reckless and incompetently regulated drilling."

¹See remarks by the President at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-nation-bp-oil-spill>.

²See Gail Collins' article The Boring Speech Policy at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/17/opinion/17collins.html>.

³See Louisiana Senate Resolution #145 at <http://www.legis.state.la.us/billdata/streamdocument.asp?did=718485>.

FFRF Stops Alabama Teacher's Bible Distribution

An Alabama fourth-grade teacher has been ordered to stop giving bibles to her students after the Freedom From Religion Foundation wrote a letter of complaint on behalf of a parent.

In December 2009, the parent reported, the teacher, Debbie Reynolds, gave bibles stuffed inside Christmas stockings as gifts to all her students at Forest Hills Elementary in Florence. Two previous complaints weren't acknowledged by the school, the parent said.

In a June 5 letter of complaint to Superintendent Kendy Behrends, FFRF Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert noted that federal courts have uniformly ruled that bible distributions to students at public schools during instructional time is prohibited: When that occurs, elementary schoolchildren are given the "impression that the

school endorse[s] a particular religious belief: Christianity."

Schools cannot allow teachers or other school officials to give students "holy books" as gifts, Markert said, because that places an official "stamp of approval" on religious messages.

In a June 6 reply to FFRF, Behrends said she was unaware of previous complaints to the school principal.

"Ms. Reynolds will be notified this week of her wrongdoing," Behrends said. "It will be requested in writing that she cease and desist the distribution of any religious materials or any discussion of religion unless it abides by the State of Alabama approved courses of study that cover religion. She will also be given professional literature to read that is designed for educators, whereby her responsibilities are made clear regarding the separation of church and state."

While the superintendent has laudably taken action, she complained that had the situation been brought to her attention immediately, she could have taken care of it when it occurred.

Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president, said that public officials may not understand why people don't complain directly to schools or other agencies, especially if they're unsure of their rights or whether the law is being violated.

"Going against the grain when you're in the minority isn't easy, particularly when it may stigmatize your children," Gaylor said. "People don't always feel free to speak up, and there's no guarantee your anonymity will be maintained when you do inquire. That's why people come to us to work on their behalf."

[From a June 7 press release by the Freedom From Religion Foundation.]

Congratulations to AFS member Tony King, whose letter below was printed in the June 10th Toccoa Record. (Article title is from the editors.)

We atheists should be held responsible for our actions

Mr. Zec Austin's anger (The Toccoa Record, April 22) over criticism of Christianity is unwarranted, especially since his response was a failure to understand the facts.

First fact: atheism is NOT a belief system. It is an absence of theism.

Some religionists continue to ignore this and make a false claim through their willful ignorance.

The second mistake that both Mr. Austin and Mr. Holt (The Toccoa Record, February, 2010) made is to assume that since all A are B, then all B are A.

It may be true that all communists are atheists. Yet, not all atheists are communists or Marxists.

Some are socialists, others are libertarians, while still many others accept and support the ideals of liberty, justice, and democracy.

I am of the latter. The belief many hold that all atheists are communists who seek the downfall of the West and are a threat to society is without foundation.

Mr. Austin heaps scorn upon atheists by stating that since despots who were atheists were responsible for deaths of innocents, a fact I do not deny, then all atheists must be bad.

I consulted <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat0.htm> and did some number crunching.

Though some of the estimates may be off for various reasons, the most reasonable numbers that can be offered show that the total number of people killed by Christians since its founding (1st Century CE) is in the range of around 42 million.

The number for those killed by a few atheist dictators combined is a higher number, around 246 million.

But what must be kept in mind is that that last number is due to the following factors: world population rose from 300 million in 1 CE to 6 billion in 2000 CE, and also there are more effective methods of killing because of our technological advancement, and those killed by the despots mentioned by Mr. Austin all occurred in the 20th Century CE.

Christians have performed murder much longer.

Mr. Austin left out the context of the French Revolution. In 1789 France was a stratified society under an absolute monarchy: the clergy and nobility ruled over the common people.

The nobles dominated the clergy, and both composed two-thirds of the Estates-General, the legislative body of the French government serving at the pleasure of the king.

The Catholic Church greatly influenced government and was the single largest landowner. Protestants experienced discrimination and persecution.

In that time a financial crisis and a famine were occurring. There was a growing resentment towards the ruling classes, the monarchy, and Catholicism. These conditions set the stage for the French Revolution which did devolve into the Reign of Terror.

What Mr. Austin also neglected to mention was that the September Massacre that broke out in Paris, which killed about 1,000 people, including more than 200 priests, was conducted by an angry mob.

The killers could not all have been atheists. This episode of history underscores the importance of the principle of the separation of religion from government.

Despite what Mr. Austin attempted to claim, I for the record would like to state that I do not condone those murders, no matter who committed them.

Our actions as atheists do matter just like Christian actions matter. We all should be held responsible for our actions no matter who we are.

There are certain laws that should be upheld for the common good.

Furthermore, I have the right to call Christianity violent not only because it is the truth, but also because of the free speech clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. If that makes people angry, so be it; let's call it even, because there have been many things that some Christians have said and done that have made me very angry.

William A. King
Toccoa, GA.

Sunday Sacrilege: So Alone

By P. Z. Myers, from his June 27 Pharyngula Blog (<http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/>)

Scientists and atheists do something that many believers find repellent: we shatter their perception of their relationship to the universe. And understandably, they don't like that.

Most religious people in the West have a very specific model of the way the world works that is based on our cultural history as the progeny of nomadic herdsman, and that still resonates strongly with all of us—the father-child relationship, the patriarchy. We have a wise leader who guides us all, punishes us when we stray, offers largesse to those in his favor, and unites the whole tribe in common cause. Those bronze age shepherders lived this way, and it made sense. It was a strategy for survival that worked well, and that shaped the way we see the world even now. Ask any Christian on any Sunday morning about flocks and sheep and shepherds, and they will understand the metaphor even if it is highly unlikely that any of them have been in contact with any animal other than a household pet.

It's also a powerful idea because it posits a set of very personal relationships. The father is remote because of his great responsibilities, but at the same time, we all want that pat on the shoulder, the encouraging word, the opportunity to serve and win distinction in Father's eyes by virtue of our dutifulness. It's a *familial* relationship, tightly-knit and long-established, in which we are respectful dependents and the leader of the tribe relies on our service.

Beyond just the family and tribe, though, this vision has been extended to the entire universe. There is a great Patriarch in the Sky, who is our leader and guide, responsible for making the grand strategic decisions about where our tribe will go, and is also watchfully making sure the unity of the tribe is not disrupted by wayward ideas from nonconformists. He has a

central concern that we all share, that our people should thrive, and even if he is stern at times, it is because he cares so much that we succeed. And of course, he knows each one of us personally, just as the leader of a tribe or clan in our pastoral days would have, and he can give us an approving stroke or a damning angry smiting, depending on whether we help or hinder the work of getting the flocks to the summer pasturage.

Read your bible. It's saturated with this primitive herdsman mentality: God the Father, sheep and goats, lost lambs and the Lamb of God, flocks and herds. It's anthropologically fascinating, and it's also not necessarily an evil metaphor (unless, of course, you are a woman—the patriarchy is also deeply misogynistic). One of its most appealing aspects is that it makes the relationship with the universe a close and personal one, of a very simple kind of relatedness, that of father and child. It's one metaphorical generation, direct and immediate, and it colors everything about how we view our place in the world: dominant and submissive, leader and follower, wisdom and naiveté, master and servant, command and obedience. It also tangles up our relationship with the world in those paternal virtues of love and concern and discipline, and often with those less savory issues of the complicated relationships many people have with their fathers, because, face it, sometimes men are jerks. Which also fits with the portrait of the omnipotent god painted by the Bible.

I can sympathize. I loved and respected my father, and any attempt by an outsider to defame or complicate or diminish that relationship would trigger a resentful response from me. Christians and Muslims and Jews have been told from their earliest years that God is their father, with all the attendant associations of that argument, and what are we atheists doing? Telling them that no, he is not,

and not only that, you don't even have a heavenly father at all; the imaginary guy you are worshipping is actually a hateful monster and an example of a bad and tyrannical father, and you aren't even a very special child—you're a mediocre product of a wasteful and entirely impersonal process.

It makes that whole business of breaking the news about Santa Claus look like small potatoes. Reality is harsh, man.

But it is reality. We've done the paternity tests, we've traced back the genealogy, we're doing all kinds of in-depth testing of the human species. We are apes and the descendants of apes, who were the descendants of rat-like primates, who were children of reptiles, who were the spawn of amphibians, who were the terrestrial progeny of fish, who came from worms, who were assembled from single-celled microorganisms, who were the products of chemistry. Your daddy was a film of chemical slime on a Hadean rock, and he didn't care about you—he was only obeying the laws of thermodynamics.

You aren't you because of some grand design, but because of chance, contingency, and selection. Your genome is a mess of detritus with a tiny fraction of well-honed functionality, and your body is cobbled together from the framework of a tetrapod—you bear the scars of chance throughout, and you are mostly unaware of them because selection, that is the death of millions, has patched them over...but they're there to the eye that will look. You aren't even the best at much of anything; you're weaker, slower, more fragile, clumsier than the other species we compete with, and although you've got a bigger brain, the majority of Americans, at least, consider it a virtue to keep it ignorant and unused—and universal-ly, we have difficulty thinking in the long term while we are very good at

exploiting our environment in the short term, which is leading to some interesting and possibly fatal consequences.

The legacy of good husbandry, we are not. Our cosmic father did not and does not exist, which is a good thing, because if he did, he's the kind of lazy, destructive deadbeat we'd be ashamed of.

This is our new heresy. We have killed our heavenly father, demolished that cozy personal (but imaginary!) relationship with a great and caring being. We are alone, orphans in an indifferent universe. We atheists must be a cold and broken people, without hope, without love.

But of course, we're not, and I think this change in our vision of our relationship to the universe is humankind's great good hope. Primitive monotheistic religions have shackled us to a limited metaphor and model,

the father and child, and erected an entire invisible heavenly mouthpiece to help us maintain that comfortable delusion—but it's like relying on the Great and Powerful Oz to help us out of our problems, when Oz is only a sham and a show. We have to escape out of this narrow perspective.

Reality doesn't just destroy the patriarchal model, it gives us new and better ways to visualize our relationship with the universe. Father and child is inadequate; we have to think in terms of populations and species interacting (not dominating), of being part of an environment. There is more to life than the father and child bond. I am the outcome of a trillion coalescing possibilities, with a vast population of brothers and sisters acting out our brief lives on a background of gas and stone, water and light, grasses and fishes, and my responsibilities are far greater than obedience to a father

figure. Breaking that illusion of a personal tie to a grand elder lord can briefly leave us feeling abandoned and alone and lost, and I can understand how some people find severing that imaginary relationship a horrible prospect.

But here's the wonderful revelation. If you're a well-adjusted person, once you've discarded the unhealthy fictitious relationship with a phantasm, you can look around and notice all those other people who are likewise alone, and you'll realize that we're all alone together. And that means you aren't alone at all—you're among friends. That's the next step in human progress; getting away from the notion of minions living under a trail boss, and onwards to working as a cooperative community, with no gods and no masters, only autonomous agents free to think and act.

The Lake Hypatia July 4th Celebration

“It's an Advance, not a Retreat!”

Celebrate Freethought and Independence Day this July 4th with the **Alabama Freethought Association** and the **Freedom from Religion Foundation** at the Freethought and Independence Day Gala Weekend at **Lake Hypatia**, near Taladega, AL.

The July 2 – July 4 event will include these speakers:

- **Pat Cleveland**, Introductions and Welcome
- **Bob Truett**, on “Strange Animals of the Bible and Other Mediterranean Myths”
- **Karon Park**, on a “Colorful and Creative Art Session”
- **Ed Buckner**, Emcee and host, Freethought Trivial Pursuit
- **Rob Pinthal**, also an Emcee.
- **Jeremy Hall**, “Iraq Vet: an Atheist in Foxhole Live Story”
- **Darrell W. Ray**, on “The God Virus”

- **Blair Scott**, on “North Alabama Freethought Association and Their Winning Growth”

- **Alice Cleveland**, on Poetry

Presentations take place in the spacious, air-conditioned **Lake Hypatia Freethought Hall**. Inexpensive catered meals are held at a beautiful lakeside pavilion.

Swimming, paddling, boating, hiking, poetry-reading, relaxing and socializing are all on the agenda. Other fun events include:

- Atheists vs. Agnostics softball tournament
- Freethought Trivial Pursuit competition

Hotels are nearby for a comfortable overnight stay. A new Holiday Inn Express has special rates for this event.

For registration: <http://www.ffrf.org/outreach/lake-hypatia/>

Interesting New Videos and Links on the Internet:

Michael Shermer: The pattern behind self-deception: (Filmed in Feb 2010, Posted in June 2010)

http://www.ted.com/talks/michael_shermer_the_pattern_behind_self_deception.html

“We're All Born Atheists” – A Religious Person Defends Non-Belief:

<http://blogs.alternet.org/speakeasy/2010/06/16/atheists-are-beautiful-a-religious-person-defends-atheism/>

“Science will win,” says Stephen Hawking in ABC interview on Science vs. Religion:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/10/stephen-hawking-on-religion_607753.html

This author wants the Catholic Church to be destroyed:

<http://www.opednews.com/articles/At-Long-Last-the-Catholic-by-Gregory-Paul-100608-58.html>

Why God Doesn't Listen To Your Prayers:

<http://blogs.alternet.org/speakeasy/2010/06/23/god-doesnt-play-favorites-a-religious-person-rethinks-prayer/>

The Unchristian Roots of the Fourth of July

By Michael E. Buckner (written in 1999)

The United States Constitution is, of course, literally a “godless” document: the word “God” (like the words “Jesus,” “Christ,” “Christianity,” or “Bible”) simply doesn’t appear anywhere in our country’s fundamental legal document. If the Founders of the United States meant to establish this as a “Christian Nation” in any constitutional, legal, or political sense, they neglected to mention it in the document from which our federal government derives its authority.

Often, though, supporters of the “Christian Nation” ideology claim that the Declaration of Independence is the document that establishes this country as distinctively Christian. Leaving aside the fact that the Declaration, however important it may be in our history, technically has no legal standing in our government, this is at least superficially a more convincing claim. After all, the Declaration does at least use the word “God,” and uses synonyms thereof three more times later in the Declaration. To be sure, none of these words or phrases (“Nature’s God,” “Creator,” “Supreme Judge of the World,” “Divine Providence”) is specifically Christian—there are no references to Jesus Christ or the Holy Trinity—but none of them is necessarily incompatible with Christianity either.

It should be pointed out that Thomas Jefferson, the principal drafter of the Declaration, although he often referred to himself as a “true Christian,” did not accept the doctrines of the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus, the divinity of Jesus, or any miracu-

lous powers ascribed to Jesus, nor did he believe in original sin or justification by faith.¹ Given Jefferson’s religious beliefs and the lack of any distinctively Christian language in the Declaration, many have argued that the theism of the Declaration is the religion of Deism and not the religion of Christianity. (Deism was a rationalist, monotheistic faith associated with the 18th Century Enlightenment in Europe; Deism had no creeds or dogmas, but in general Deists, while believing in God as Creator of the Universe and even as author of moral laws, rejected belief in miracles and considered reason and experience rather than revelation and faith to be the proper sources of religious truth. The modern Unitarians are probably the closest heirs to the Deists of Jefferson’s day.) It’s also true that the Declaration contains no scriptural citations or even any obvious allusions to the Christian Bible, which is certainly peculiar for an ostensibly Christian document. However, what’s most important to look at in the Declaration of Independence are the basic *ideas* it embodies, rather than the rhetoric with which they are presented.

In addition to numerous condemnations of the policies of King George III, which need not concern us here, the Declaration of Independence is most famous for setting forth a basic philosophy of government: people have certain natural rights deriving from their Creator; in order to preserve those rights, people establish governments; since governments derive their power from the establish-

ment of the people, the people therefore retain an inherent right to change or even overthrow any government that no longer carries out its original purpose of protecting the rights of the people. This is far from an entirely atheistic or materialist philosophy—the Declaration does derive those natural rights from an endowment by a Creator—but it is far from being a Christian or Judeo-Christian view of government either. In the Old Testament, the ideal form of government is literally a theocracy. The laws of the ancient Israelites are handed down directly by God, not written by human legislators answerable to the people at large. The purpose of the laws is not to protect the inalienable rights of the people but to ensure that the Israelites would remain “a people holy to the Lord” (Deuteronomy 14:2; all Bible quotes are from the *New English Bible*, published by Oxford University Press). The leaders of the people—Moses, Aaron, Joshua—are selected by the deity, not elected (Exodus 2:14, 3:11-12, 4:14; Numbers 27:15-21; Joshua 1:1-2). When Israel first becomes a kingdom, the Bible teaches that Samuel—a prophet chosen by God and not responsible to any human constitution or institution—selects a king on divine instruction (I Samuel, chapter 8; this chapter also reveals the ambivalence of the Biblical writers towards the whole institution of human kingship, which in the Old Testament is at times portrayed as tyrannical and even an affront to God; clearly, though, what is being preferred over monarchy is not a democratic republic

¹Although Jefferson often referred to himself as a “Christian,” he viewed Jesus of Nazareth as a great man, and a moral and religious reformer, and not as the Christ or Messiah. In a letter to William Short, October 31, 1819, Jefferson lists doctrines which he explicitly rejects: “the immaculate conception of Jesus, his deification, the creation of the world by him, his miraculous powers, his resurrection and visible ascension, his corporeal presence in the Eucharist, the Trinity; original sin, atonement, regeneration, election, orders of the Hierarchy, etc.” In a later letter to Short in 1820, Jefferson even wrote “[i]t is not to be understood that I am with him (Jesus Christ) in all his doctrines. I am a Materialist; he takes the side of Spiritualism; he preaches the efficacy of repentance toward forgiveness of sin; I require a counterpoise of good works to redeem it....” Both of these letters are excerpted in *Quotations That Support the Separation of State and Church*, Second Edition, 1995; Edward M. Buckner and Michael E. Buckner, editors; published by [and available from] the Atlanta Freethought Society.)

but a continued theocracy in which divinely chosen priests, prophets, or “judges” rule by God’s power.) Later, when the first king (Saul) is abandoned by God, a new king (David) is again chosen by direct, divine intervention (1 Samuel 16:1-2). When kings of Europe claimed that the proper form of Christian government was a monarch who ruled by “divine right” as the “Lord’s anointed,” they were putting forth a view of government that is genuinely in accord with Biblical, Judeo-Christian values.

The New Testament also upholds the view that government is an institution of God, not of the people. Romans 13:1-2 clearly forbids rebellion against the established authorities and was, moreover, written about the pagan government of the Roman Empire, which actively persecuted Christians: “Every person must submit to the supreme authorities. There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him; consequently, anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution, and those who so resist have themselves to thank for the punishment they will receive.” George III, it should be noted, was a Christian monarch; if Paul commanded obedience by Christians to the pagan and tyrannical Roman emperors, surely he would have demanded equal obedience by Christians to the avowedly Christian (and far less cruel or oppressive) British king and parliament. The New Testament does, of course, present a major shift in viewpoint from the Old; now, obedience to secular authorities is commanded not

so much because they rule over a divinely ordained theocracy as it is because secular authorities, along with everything else in the world, will soon be swept away by the Second Coming. Christians should act morally—which to Paul included obedience to a corrupt and tyrannical state-in preparation for judgment day, which he preached was quite near at hand in the first century (Romans 13:7-14).

The theory of government presented in the Declaration of Independence, then, represents a radical break from Judeo-Christian traditions that went back thousands of years. Government, it asserts, derives its powers not from the will of God but from the consent of the governed. From being an instrument of God’s wrath, government is demoted to an invention of human beings, to be altered at the will of its creators. Our Constitution goes even further than the Declaration in its godlessness, not even bothering with a ceremonial invocation of God or “Divine Providence” in vesting ultimate authority in “We, the people.” As James Madison, principal drafter of the Constitution, said, “religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together” (Letter to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822; excerpted in *Quotations That Support the Separation of State and Church*). John Adams, second President of the United States, wrote that “Although the detail of the formation of the American governments is at present little known or regarded either in Europe or in America....[i]t will never be pretended that any persons employed in that service had inter-

views with the gods, or were in any degree under the influence of Heaven, more than those at work upon ships or houses, or laboring in merchandise or agriculture; it will forever be acknowledged that these governments were contrived merely by the use of reason and the senses” (“A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America,” 1787-1788; excerpted in *Quotations That Support the Separation of State and Church*).

This country went on not only to found what is likely the first entirely secular government in human history but also to guarantee religious liberty for all in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Article VI of the Constitution, in barring any religious test or oath for federal office, and the First Amendment, in protecting freedom of religion and the separation of church and state which guarantees that freedom, ended the long “Judeo-Christian” tradition of persecution, torture, and death for differences of opinion in matters of religion—a tradition that began with the Bible itself, which calls on the faithful worshippers of God to denounce even their own parents and children and to cast the first stone in putting them to death if they deviate from the “true” religion (Deuteronomy 13:6-11). That we do not have a government based on the Bible, or “God’s law,” or “Judeo-Christian values,” is something that all Americans can be grateful for every Fourth of July: grateful not to any god, but to the human beings who established this country as a free country, and not a Christian nation.

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http://www.rapidcityjournal.com/news/article_b83cc2fe-74e4-11df-804c-001cc4c002e0.html

The Center for Inquiry releases a position paper on Acupuncture: A Science-Based Assessment:

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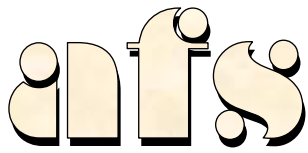
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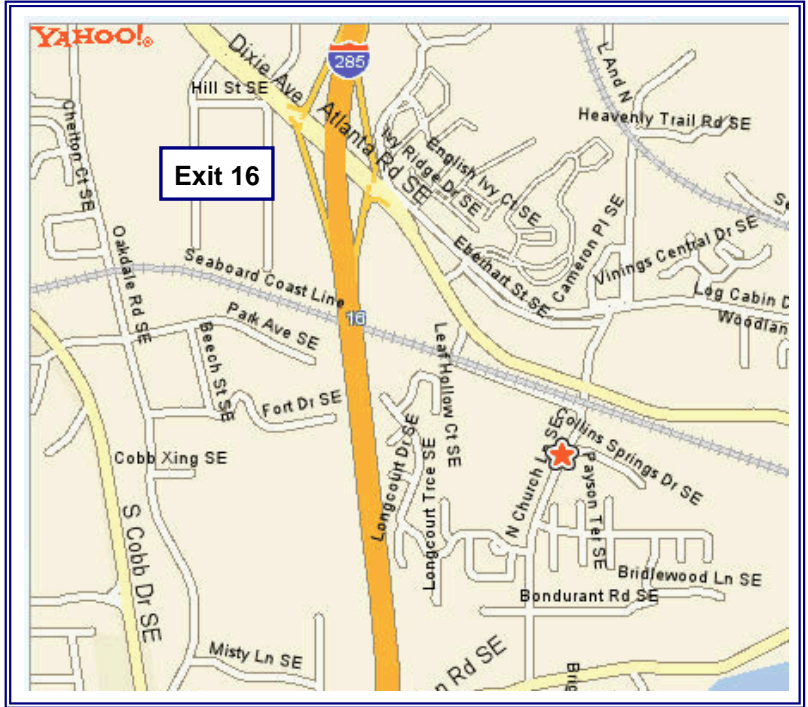
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Dr. Scott Lilienfeld



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