

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication • Volume 16 Number 11 • November 2010

The November AFS Meeting

The November 14 AFS meeting will feature a talk by **David Silverman**, president of **American Atheists**, on "Getting the Movement Going."

Silverman, 44, earned his BA from Brandeis University and his MBA from Penn State. A Massachusetts native, he moved to NJ in 1992 and has been married to magazine publisher Hildy Silverman (not an atheist) for 19 years. They have a daughter who, having been given a choice, is an out-and-proud atheist.

Silverman has been with American Atheists since 1996, holding positions of NJ State Director, Communications Director, National Spokesperson, Board Member, and Vice President. He hosts the Atheist Viewpoint TV program, blogs on the NoGodBlog, has appeared on numerous public affairs and news programs, and has debated religious apologists across the country.

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.

The November AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be a Fish-Fry on Saturday, Nov. 20, at 12:00 noon at Atlanta Freethought Hall. Join AFS members and guests for some good food and great socializing. AFS will provide the food, drinks, etc. The cost is \$10 per person. (Lew Southern is the chef for the fish-fry.)

If attending, please RSVP to afs@atlantafreethought.org.

A Second November Meeting!

Right after the AFS Social, AFS members will meet at AF Hall at 1:00 to hear Dr. Hector Avalos, a professor of Religious Studies at Iowa State University, who will speak on "Can Science Prove that Prayer Works?"

Dr. Avalos has a Doctor of Philosophy in Hebrew Bible and Near Eastern Studies from Harvard University (1991), a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School (1985) and a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from the University of Arizona in 1982. He was named Professor of the Year at Iowa State University in 1996.

AFS Meetings and Activities

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

Nov 20: AFS Social at AF Hall, 12:00 noon.

Nov 20: AFS Second Meeting, AF Hall, 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, Nov 21 at 1:00. Brandon Givens, an atheist libertarian who ran for political office in Georgia, will speak on "An Atheist's Guide to Becoming More Politically Relevant." For details, see <http://humanistsofga.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 noon. They also meet on two Thursdays per month for dinner and conversation at 7:00PM. <http://www.meetup.com/Fayette-Freethought-Society/>.

The **Atlanta Skeptics** are sponsoring a 3-hour workshop on Scientific Paranormal Investigation featuring Ben Radford of the Center for Inquiry at 12:30PM on Saturday, Nov. 13, at 990 Hammond Drive, Suite 500, Atlanta. (\$30) See <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaSkeptics/calendar/15135620/>.

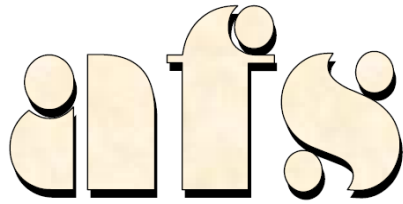
GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet on Saturday, Nov. 20 at 7:00 PM at the Olde Towne Tavern & Grill, 835 Lawrenceville/Suwanee Rd, in Lawrenceville. See <http://gust.domek.org/>.

The **Atlanta Skeptics** will have their **Skeptics in the Pub** meetup at 7:00 PM on Saturday, Nov. 20, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave, Atlanta. Bart Farkas of JREF will speak. See <http://www.atlantaskoptics.com>.

The **Atlanta Science Tavern** meetup will be at 7:00 PM on Saturday, Nov. 27, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave NE in Atlanta. David Butler, Conservation Chair for the Atlanta Audubon Society, will speak on the decline of common birds. <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaScienceTavern/>

There will be a **meetup** for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, Nov. 14, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur. (<http://www.meetup.com/Atlanta-Atheists/>)

Another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for Sunday, Nov 28, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta. (<http://www.meetup.com/>)



**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: David Silverman, President of American Atheists, will speak.

Nov 20: Dr. Hector Avalos will speak on "Can Science Prove that Prayer Works?"

Dec 12: Henrietta Moore will speak on the conditions in Haiti.

Jan 9: TBD

Feb 13: Mark Braverman will speak. (<http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/294468-1>)

Mar 13: 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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Atheist Billboard to Challenge the Christian Monopoly on “Christmas”

“You KNOW it’s a myth! This season, celebrate REASON!”

That will be the message thousands of people in the New York City area will be seeing on an enormous billboard starting Tuesday, November 23, 2010 at the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel. Sponsored by American Atheists, the sign will invite people to examine their beliefs about the Christian holiday season according to Dave Silverman, the group’s new president.

“Our message is targeted at people who ‘go through the motions’ but really don’t believe in the Christmas story fable,” Silverman said. “A lot of people follow religions and observe rituals they really don’t believe in. They go along to get along which simply leads to more prejudice and bigotry.”

Silverman thinks that many Americans are “closeted atheists” who may even attend religious services and observe holidays like Christmas. The billboard campaign is directed at them, but it also seeks to educate a wider audience on the real origins of the Christian holiday season.

“None of the traditional Christmas season practices originated with Christianity,” Silverman observed. “What we call Christmas has its origin

in secular events like the Winter Solstice and the change of seasons, as well as Pagan holidays like Yule.”

Indeed, the period around December 25 has been celebrated by an astonishing array of cultures, including a number which pre-date the Christian religion. The most significant were festivities commemorating the Winter Solstice, that time when the Sun reaches the lowest point of its annual journey across the sky in the northern hemisphere. According to historians and anthropologists, the Solstice was an event marking the depths of winter. Many societies saw this as a celebratory season leading to spring, the renewal of crops and vegetation, and an integral part of the rhythmic cycle of the seasons.

Artifacts like the Yule log and evergreen tree were common, along with practices such as the giving of gifts and communal meals; and a number of ancient deities were said to have been born around this time of year.

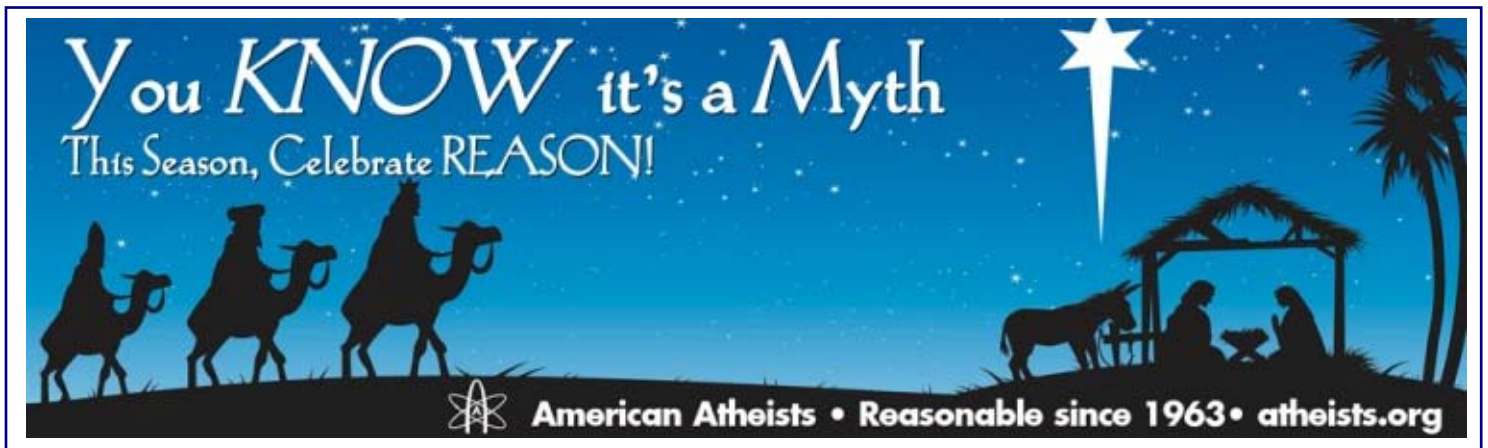
Early Christians did not celebrate the birth of their messiah, Jesus Christ. As the church achieved political and cultural hegemony, though, the fable of Christ’s alleged birth was framed in the earlier context of pagan gods, and

“Christmas” was eventually observed on December 25.

In the United States, the growth of secularism and a thriving religious pluralism has led to charges by fundamentalist Christian groups that there is a “War on Christmas.” Substituting “holiday” for “Christmas” is cited as further evidence that the Christian roots of American society are “under attack,” and further proof that the United States is not observing its alleged “Christian heritage.”

Concern about the historicity of Christmas isn’t the only message that atheists and other non-religious groups have been putting out. Hundreds of billboards have been erected by secular groups assuring the public that “You can be good without god” or defending the separation of church and state. Some have been defaced, and most attract considerable media attention, further spreading the message of secularism and reason. The Lincoln Tunnel billboard will hopefully attract a vibrant response from the public, and, if Mr. Silverman is correct, encourage “closeted” atheists to come out into the open.

[From the Nov 5 issue of *AANews*.]



A few words on our “Second Meeting” speaker...

Dr. Hector Avalos, a professor of Religious Studies at Iowa State University, will be in Atlanta on November 20 to speak at a conference of the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta. We were very fortunate to get him to speak to AFS.

Dr. Avalos is a staunch critic of Intelligent Design, and was featured in the movie *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*. His book *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (2005) offers a scathing critique of religionist scholars who defend biblical violence and genocide. His book *The End of Biblical Studies* (2007) argues that academic biblical scholarship is primarily an apologetic religionist enterprise meant to provide the illusion that the Bible is still a culturally and morally superior authority. See more about him at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hector_Avalos and <http://www.philrs.iastate.edu/avalos.shtml>.

Proposition 8 Ban On Same-Sex Marriage Has No Legitimate Basis, Americans United Tells Appeals Court

Like Historic Opposition To Interracial Marriage, California Measure Is Based On Intolerance, Pseudo-Science And Religious Dogma, Says AU Brief

California's ban on civil marriage for same-sex couples is based on intolerance, pseudo-science and religious dogma, not legitimate public policy concerns, Americans United for Separation of Church and State has told a federal appeals court.

In a friend-of-the-court brief¹, Americans United advised the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that opposition to marriage equality for gay couples reflects the same baseless and inappropriate considerations that once were used to deny marriage rights to slaves and interracial couples.

The brief was filed in *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*, a closely watched lawsuit that challenges Proposition 8, a California referendum that revoked the right of same-sex couples to obtain civil marriages. The drive to enact the measure was funded and staffed primarily by fundamentalist Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons).

Said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director, "American law should be based on equality and fairness, not the doctrines of aggressive religious groups. Proposition 8 is grounded in intolerance and sectarian dogma, and the appeals court should reject it."

The brief, filed jointly Oct. 25 with

the Howard University School of Law Civil Rights Clinic, notes that historically opponents of marriage rights for slaves and interracial couples argued that such unions were a threat to the social order and the institutions of marriage and family. They also claimed that such marriages violated their interpretation of the Bible.

Observes the brief, "Even though reliance on religious doctrine as the basis for public policy is as improper today as it was in the days of anti-miscegenation laws, today opponents of marriage between two persons of the same sex use (their) Biblical interpretations to suggest that homosexuality is unnatural because it is against God's will. Indeed, like their anti-miscegenationist counterparts, opponents of marriage for same-sex couples almost always attempt to clothe their arguments in literal and selective interpretations of the Bible."

Asserts the brief, "Today, while there is no longer any serious claim that marriage rights should be denied on the basis of race, opponents of marriage equality have attacked same-sex couples, using precisely the same flawed arguments that once were used to justify racial slavery and apartheid. We are now long past the time when anyone would seriously claim that race-based marriage equali-

ty threatens the moral fabric of our civilization, is contrary to nature, or is harmful to children.

"Therefore," the brief concludes, "the onus should be on opponents of marriage equality to demonstrate how arguments that time and experience have so thoroughly rejected in the context of race should now be dug up, dusted off, and given any consideration, much less credibility, in the context of marriage for same-sex couples."

In addition to AU and the Howard Civil Rights Clinic, six professors at Howard University School of Law and four law student organizations also expressed support for the brief.

The brief was written by Aderson B. François, Civil Rights Clinic Supervising Attorney at Howard University School of Law, in cooperation with Americans United Legal Director Ayesha N. Khan and attorneys with the firms of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips LLP and Kecker & Van Nest LLP.

Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.

[From an Oct. 26 AU press release.]

¹See <http://www.au.org/media/press-releases/archives/2010/10/prop-8-amicus-brief-10-25-10.pdf>.

In the News:

Atheist Ministers Struggle With Leading the Faithful: Two Active Ministers Say They No Longer Believe in God But No One Knows: <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/atheist-ministers-leading-faithful/story?id=12004359>

A Pie in the Face for Controversial Belgian Catholic Archbishop: <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2010/11/06/pie-in-the-face-for-controversial-belgian-catholic-archbishop/>

No Sanctuary at This Church in Haitian Storm: <http://www.aolnews.com/world/article/no-sanctuary-at-leogane-haiti-mormon-church-during-hurricane-tomas/19706704>

Supreme Court to Decide on Government Scholarships to Religious Schools: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/03/high-court-to-decide-if-s n 778314.html>

An ungodly row: Dawkins sues his disciple: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/an-ungodly-row-dawkins-sues-his-disciple-2115632.html>

Atheist Scholar Ken Pulliam Dead is Very Sad News: <http://www.opposingviews.com//atheist-scholar-ken-pulliam-dead>

Oh God, Just What We Needed: More Religion In America!

From the October 12 FFRF Blog, by Annie Laurie Gaylor (<http://www.FFRF.org/blog/>)

When I saw the promos for “God in America” I had the same reaction as one of our members, who e-mailed me, “Why doesn’t PBS do a series called ‘*Godless in America*’?”

Dan (my husband) and I dutifully sat down to watch “A New Adam,” the first of a six-part segment which aired on PBS last night, while yearningly eyeing our Netflix mailer—the last thing either of us wanted after an 11-hour workday was to be confronted with more state/church problems!

Yet we hoped for the best. Alas, the best was not to be. “God in America” is filmed and edited in slow motion. Actors slowly kneel in prayer, sit in contemplation or literally look up slowly and soulfully to “the heavens.” Actors in costumes are awkwardly juxtaposed with cheerleading interviews of annoying real-life professors. There are endless cutaways of slow surf, slowly waving tree tops and slowly panning views of mountains. But aside from the pretentious filmmaking is the real problem: The filmmaker David Belton, who wrote, produced and directed “God in America,” unfortunately appears to literally see everything through the lens of “God.”

And that’s no surprise, given the title. Chief editorial consultant Dr. Stephen Prothero, from Boston University, told Huffington Post¹ the point of the TV series is “to educate on the role God has played in American history.”

This is an embarrassing admission. Folks, there is no god. *Believers* and *belief* in a god have played a major role in history (not always admirable), but “God” hasn’t. Wouldn’t this be a little like producing a film called “Thor in Pre-Christian Norway” or “Zeus in Ancient Greece” which is predicated on the real existence of Thor or Zeus?

Here is a sample of what we “learned” from the first segment of “God in America”:

- Just about everybody who came to this land “yearned” (or still yearns)

for God. And when I say “yearn,” I mean they really feel it. We are told by Stephen Prothero “There’s this wrestling match between you and God. And are you going to keep fighting God? Are you going to collapse into the arms of God?”

- It was the born-again ministers—not freethinker Thomas Paine and his ilk—who really fomented the American Revolution. Thomas Paine does not exist in the world of “God in America”—his name wasn’t even uttered! This is rewriting history.
- Despite the land being utterly steeped in religion, according to the filmmaker, we needed even more religion and so we had the Great Awakening, filmed in a deadly dull manner that made it seem like the Great Stupification. (Or was that the Great Stupification?) One minister’s conversion experience during a forest revival takes at least 20 slow-paced minutes to depict! Then we get to watch him slowly ... so slowly ... wade into a river and look soulful as he splashes water on himself. During the portrayal of evangelist George Whitefield (the actor recited his real words from sermons), I finally turned to Dan and remarked: “This is one of the reasons why I’m not religious! Religion is so painfully boring!”

The so-called Great Awakening was a big deal, but why is it described in the miniseries uncritically, devotionally? Why were the dissenters left out? People like Emily Dickinson, who cringed at the coercion? People like Frances Wright, an infidel and abolitionist who was the first woman to speak publicly before male and women audiences in the United States (1828), in lectures against the clergy specifically meant to counter religious revivals and spare women from religious bondage? Why are the sheep glorified and the thinkers ignored or minimized?

- It was the Baptists who really deserve the credit for the Virginia Statute for

Religious Freedom, not so much Thomas Jefferson. While this point of view is not strictly inaccurate, it still represents quite a “spin” of history. We are treated to a few of those lovely lines from the Statute, such as that no one “shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever.” But the filmmaker leaves out all the Jeffersonian indictments on religion (particularly but not limited to religion in government), from his letters and his book, *Notes on Virginia*. In a series about “God in America,” isn’t it relevant that our 4th president had counseled his nephew, Peter Carr, to “Question with boldness even the existence of a God”?

In *Notes on Virginia*, in part the chronicle of the sorry history of church/state unions, Jefferson points out: “Millions of innocent men, women and children since the introduction of Christianity have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned. Yet have we not advanced one inch towards uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites. To support roguery and error all over the earth...”

There’s nominal reference to Jefferson cutting up the bible to produce his famous “Jefferson Bible” and delete the miracles, but an interviewed “expert” still maintains Jefferson kept the “divine” parts. This is academic treason. Jefferson specifically believed the non-divine Jesus “ascribed to himself every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other” (Letter to Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803).

Frederick Clarkson in Daily Kos has already helpfully pointed out a major boo-boo, when the miniseries claims “in not one of the seven articles [of the original Constitution] was there any guarantee of religious liberty or other individual rights.”

How could the filmmaker overlook Article 6, Section 3 ensuring there can

¹See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-mcswain/god-in-america-the-pbs-sp_b_757098.html.

Just What We Needed... (continued)

be no religious test for public office? It would have been far more accurate to note there is no god in the Constitution, pre- and post-Bill of Rights.

But the bogus claim that makes me indignant is the miniseries' assertion that once "Awakened," these born-again Christians promptly turned not just to charity, reforming prisons and feeding the hungry, but began to work for abolition, women's rights and educational reform!

Not so! The word "infidel" was so tied to the early abolition cause that the word "abolitionist" was considered synonymous with it! It was Thomas Paine, who wrote the *Age of Reason* renouncing the bible, who was one of the first to publicly call for abolition. At most, early abolitionists were religious dissenters such as Quakers. Even then, Quakers silenced and shunned their women activists, caring more about women "keeping

in silence" than in helping to free the enslaved. The mainstream churches and religionists were Johnny-come-latelies in the abolition movement, because in fact the bible sanctifies slavery.

And it was women dissenters who called for women's rights, not conforming Christians. It was the hysterical ministers and seminarians who mobbed the women's rights conventions, and the religious press that hurled invectives against such early reformers as Wright. It was infidel Elizabeth Cady Stanton who was the first to call for women's right to vote (1848). She recalled in *The History of Woman Suffrage* how "the bible was hurled at us from every side." The organized patriarchal religions were the primary opponents of women's rights, as they still are worldwide today.

To be fair, there is of course valid history in "God in America." It opens

with a sympathetic portrayal of Pueblo Indians who revolted against Catholic conquistadors and their priests. It portrays Anne Hutchinson (while greatly diminishing her suffering and failing to mention her short-lived colony, which was the first to separate government from sect).

But my confidence in this miniseries has been lost with its patently dishonest perpetuation of the myth that it is religion that has reformed society. The truth is that it is the heretics who have (somewhat) reformed religion, primarily by our work to keep religion out of government.

If you share my concerns, you can comment at the PBS website².

[Annie Laurie Gaylor is Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a national association of free-thinkers based in Madison, Wis., that has been working since 1978 to keep church and state separate.]

²See <http://www.patheos.com/Topics/All-Topics/God-In-America.html/>

Americans United Asks IRS To Investigate Florida Church Whose Pastor Endorsed Slate of Candidates

Sun City Christian Center Violated Federal Law, Says Watchdog Group

The Internal Revenue Service should investigate a Wimauma, Fla., church whose pastor endorsed a slate of Republican candidates during Sunday services, says Americans United for Separation of Church & State.

In a Complaint¹ filed with the IRS on October 28, Americans United noted that Pastor Arlen Beck of Sun City Christian Center told congregants on Oct. 24 that he had prepared a list of candidates that he intends to vote for and placed copies of the list in the back of the church for their use.

Beck's actions were reported in the

St. Petersburg Times, which quoted an attendee who was offended by Beck's endorsements.

According to the Times, Beck said, "If you're conservative you might want to pick one of those up. If you're liberal you might not want to stop by there."

Beck later told the newspaper that he does not care if the IRS revokes his church's tax exemption.

Federal law states that all 501(c)(3) organizations, which includes houses of worship, must refrain from intervening in politics by endorsing or op-

posing candidates for public office as a condition of having tax exemption.

"Pastor Beck is dragging his church into a partisan swamp," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. "He has no right to do this while claiming tax-exempt status."

Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.

¹See the complaint at <http://www.au.org/media/press-releases/archives/2010/10/sun-city-letter-to-irs.pdf>.

"The notion that faith in Christ is to be rewarded by an eternity of bliss, while a dependence upon reason, observation and experience merits everlasting pain, is too absurd for refutation, and can be relieved only by that unhappy mixture of insanity and ignorance, called "faith." —Robert Green Ingersoll, from *The Gods* (1872)

"Religion is violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children." —Christopher Hitchens, from *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2008)

Religious Rhetoric and Superstition Taint Story of Heroic Mine Rescue (It was Technology, Reason, Science And Evolution That Saved Lives!)

By Conrad Goeringer, from the October 14 issue of *American Atheist News*

As the last of the 33 miners trapped for 69 days under the Chilean desert was pulled to safety, it was difficult to resist the contagious enthusiasm and sense of exhilaration pervading the rescue scene.

The images were flashed live around the world; and what had begun as a local calamity in Chile was transformed into a story that riveted the attention of people everywhere. One by one, the miners emerged from a 28-inch hole in the Earth, riding over 2,000 feet to the surface in a cramped steel cage. The hugs of relatives and friends, the shouts of joy, the heartfelt embrace by the President of Chile—all of it became the evocative iconic imagery of a global media event.

Dramas like this frequently stir discussion over the most profound existential issues. Did religious faith steel the miners to not abandon hope and instead struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds in anticipation of being rescued? Did prayer attenuate psychological depression for this small band of human beings encapsulated deep beneath the surface with few supplies and pervading darkness? Did the desperate prayers of sympathetic people, from close relatives to distant strangers, somehow convince a god to spare the lives of these 33 trapped men?

Indeed, according to Google, over 16,500 news stories in print and electronic media have mentioned terms like “god,” “faith” and “prayer” in coverage of the Chilean rescue. This is not surprising. Calamity seems to bring out the most primitive instincts, and a feeling that, somehow, human life is at the mercy of a capricious deity or group of deities, and that good fortune—even life itself—can be attained by sufficiently zealous supplication.

We could careen off here into a discussion of bronze-age superstitions, and offering animals (even human beings) to appease a supernatural over-

lord. The faithful are right—religion is easily forgotten when the world seems to be a safe and secure place. Introduce war, chaos or tragedy, and people quickly rediscover their religious roots. They speak of “miracles” and prayers being answered and, as shown in the case of the rescue of the brave Chilean miners, the real causes of success are subsumed in a flood of religious narratives.

News commentary often fuels this process. “God talk” seems as much of a part of the story as the rescue itself.

In truth, the dramatic and “miraculous” events at Camp Esperanza—“Camp Hope,” the impromptu name given to the site of the mine cave-in and subsequent rescue effort—was a compelling example of how Reason, technology and human solidarity made possible the saving of these 33 lives. There was no “miracle” here, nor evidence that any deity heard the supplications of the religious, or responded to them. Instead, what we saw this week in those images being beamed around the globe, was a splendid example of human knowledge and engineering skill safeguarding lives. Chilean naval experts used their acumen to design and fabricate a sturdy and safe rescue vehicle. Mining engineers drilled shafts to lower video cameras, food, medicine and other supplies to the trapped miners. The Chilean government put the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to shame, organizing a coherent rescue plan that took into account everything from the physical health of those trapped in the mine collapse to the men’s psychological state. Doctors are amazed at the physical vitality and attitude of these men who endured horrific conditions for over two months.

If humanity rescued its own, it is important to remember that human greed and folly are probably at the root of the disaster. This was likely a preventable accident. On a global

scale, coal mining is a particularly deadly occupation. Now, some religious people claim that social breakdown and other maladies have increased since the Supreme Court “kicked god out of public schools.” There are many arguments to counter such nonsense; but it is worth noting that mortality rates in the United States in the coal mining industry have dropped considerably since the mid-1930s when there was a yearly average of over 1500 deaths, to the 2009 figure of 18. Other countries reflect a similar drop. Even China, which despite its “Communist” label is a state that brutally disciplines and punishes the working class, has slashed the number of deaths in mining tragedies in half since 2000.

There are multiple reasons for this, everything from greater oversight and supervision of an industry that often attempts to overlook the safety of workers, to increased understanding of the mining process, more emphasis on safety, and the vigilance of groups like the United Mine Workers Union. Technology plays a Herculean role here not only in the mining process but in rescue efforts. In the case of the recent Chile events, equipment, personnel and expertise poured in from countries around the globe.

Evolution likely played a startling role here, too. While the subject is denounced from many pulpits and podiums, evolution may well have provided the Chilean miners—and most other human beings—with survival mechanisms like cooperation, empathy and solidarity. Of course these men were trained professionals; but as the days passed, the miners bonded and formed a “brotherhood under stress” that fostered mutual support, advice and sympathy. This process has been repeated throughout history; but recent research into primate behavior confirms what Peter Kropotkin, the 19th century social activist

and author of "Mutual Aid" so forcefully argued. "Competition" and natural selection work to propel evolutionary change; but we are now beginning to understand that cooperation, empathy and solidarity sustain and nourish us, especially in dire times.

Still, the irrational parts of our evolutionary heritage die hard and assert themselves when our world is thrown into chaos. We often pray to supernatural beings, participating in a one-sided bargain. Pray and sacrifice, and maybe the world will be made right again. One of the rescued miners summarized his underground experience and rescue; "I've been near God, but I've also been near the devil," he said. "They fought, but God won."

There is no evidence to suggest that any Christian (or other) deity "fought"

the very incarnation of evil he supposedly created, an "adversary" seeking to destroy human beings. If God existed, why did he permit the disaster in the first place? What possible reason, what cosmic plan—supposedly inscrutable to the best human minds—could he have had in permitting this, or any other tragedy he was and is capable of preventing in the first place? Why allow such excruciating torture of his favored creatures? Is it all a plea, as the Old Testament suggests, for more prayers and sacrifice?

We should not blame or fault, and certainly not insult, the miners, the families, and anyone else who prayed that this tragedy end on a positive note. It certainly did, and any empathetic human likely felt relief, joy, compassion and happiness as the rescuee (dubbed Phoenix), returned

and descended into the Earth as it slowly transported its human cargo. Praise not "god," but the engineers, technicians, scientists, government leaders, rescue workers and anyone else who was part of the effort. Out of this tragedy, for a while anyway, perhaps our planet—so fragile, so divided by competing faiths and ideologies—was truly one. Make no sacrifice and give no thanks to a deity. Celebrate, instead, that part of humanity which unites us and gives us cause to care for other human beings.

As Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the founder of American Atheists declared, "All we have is each other."

If you want proof of that fact, remember the events and the people at Camp Esperanza.

—Conrad Goeringer

Editor, AANEWS

New Videos and Articles on the Internet:

Voices of Reason – Sam Harris: The Moral Landscape: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTKf5cCm-9g>

Crystal Cathedral megachurch files for bankruptcy: http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20101018/ap_on_re_us/us_crystal_cathedral

Phil Plait's "Don't Be A Dick" talk at TAM8:

<http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/1065-phil-plaits-dont-be-a-dick-talk-at-tam8-now-online.html>

Can Civilization Survive Without God? A Conversation with Christopher and Peter Hitchens:

<http://pewforum.org/Belief-in-God/Can-Civilization-Survive-Without-God-.aspx>

"A Universe From Nothing" by Lawrence Krauss, AAI 2009: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ImvIS8PLl0>

Christine O'Donnell on the Constitution: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miwSliJAzqg>

Neil deGrasse Tyson and Richard Dawkins speak on The Poetry of Science:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RExQFZzHXQ&feature=autofb>

<http://richarddawkins.net/videos/536409-the-poetry-of-science-richard-dawkins-and-neil-degrasse-tyson>

Sam Harris's public lecture about his new book, "The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTKf5cCm-9g>

The six hour PBS series on "God in America": <http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/view/>

Just for Fun: Jesus Loves You!: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4R4VMMyGc>

Normal Bob Smith reveals the source of Christian anti-intellectualism:

http://www.normalbobsmith.com/satanssalvation/pfss_comic220.html

Column: Science and religion aren't friends: http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2010-10-11-column11_ST_N.htm

Atheist students say good morals can be practiced without the Bible:

<http://www.asuherald.com/features/atheist-students-say-good-morals-can-be-practiced-without-a-bible-1.2386392>

"Moment of silence" law upheld for Illinois schools:

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/education/ct-met-moment-of-silence-20101015.0.3040030.story>

If students don't want to hear prayers over PA system, they can "put their fingers in their ears." AJC (blog)

http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2010/10/21/if-students-dont-want-to-hear-christian-prayers-over-pa-system-they-can-%E2%80%9Cput-their-fingers-in-their-ears/?cxntfid=blogs_get_schooled_blog

Can Atheism Be Proven Wrong? By Greta Christina:

http://www.alternet.org/belief/148670/can_atheism_be_proven_wrong/

The American Atheists' No Gog Blog: <http://nogodblog.com>.

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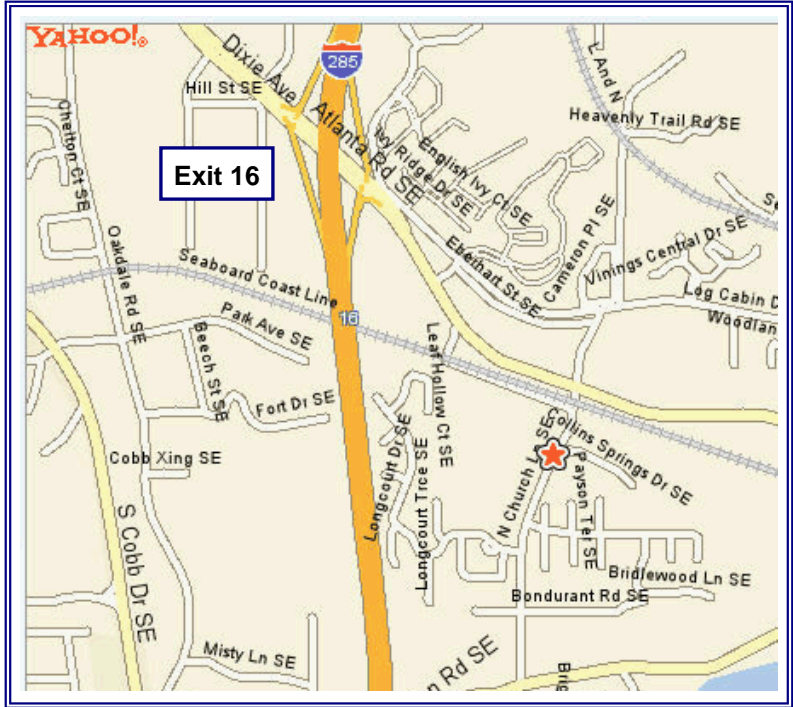
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This Month's Speaker:
David Silverman



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