

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication • Volume 17 Number 2 • February 2011

The February AFS Meeting

The February 13 AFS meeting will include a talk by **Al Stefanelli**, founder of United Atheist Front and author of the upcoming book, *A Voice of Reason in an Unreasonable World*. United Atheist Front is an international civil rights organization founded in 2005 to address discrimination of non-theists. UAF has a podcast, videos, Action Alerts, and a publication, *The New Atheist Times*. Read more about AI and the UAF at <http://www.UnitedAtheistFront.com>.

The 1:00 program will also include a Darwin Day celebration with cupcakes, coffee and lots of Darwin literature.

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, Feb. 19, at 1:00 PM. AFS members report that food at this place is very good. Come and enjoy the food and conversation with other freethinkers!

Buckner to Speak at Emerson UU

Our own Ed Buckner will speak on "This is a Free Country, Not a Christian Nation," at the 10:00 AM service and an 11:30 AM adult education class at Emerson Unitarian Universalist Church on Sunday, February 27. The service and class are free and open to the public.

Emerson UU is located at 2799 Holly Springs Road in Marietta, GA.

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 on Sunday, Feb 20, at 1:00 at AF Hall. Bob August will talk about Beethoven and present music from three periods of Beethoven's life. See their new website at <http://www.georgiahumanists.org/>.

The **Fayette Freethought Society** hosts a lunch at El Reposo Restaurant in Peachtree City, GA, on every first and third Saturday at noon. They also meet on other days for Book Club, philosophy and science discussions and civic activities. <http://www.meetup.com/Fayette-Freethought-Society/>.

The **Atlanta Skeptics** will have their **Skeptics in the Pub** meetup at 7:00PM on Saturday, Feb. 12, at Manuel's Tavern,

602 N. Highland Ave, Atlanta. Jonathan Strickland of How StuffWorks.com will talk about gadgets and devices based on pseudoscientific claims. See <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com>.

The **Atlanta Science Tavern** meetup will be at 7:00 PM on Saturday, Feb 26, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave NE in Atlanta. Betul Arslan of the Georgia Institute of Technology will talk about her work resurrecting ancient genes and creating a bacterial Jurassic Park in the laboratory. RSVP at <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaScienceTavern/>.

There will be a **meetup** for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, Feb. 13, 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, Feb. 27, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta. (<http://www.meetup.com/>)

The **Fayette Freethought Society** will have a **Darwin Day Celebration** in Peachtree City on Saturday, Feb. 12, at 7:00 PM at the Starbucks on Hwy 54 near Steinmart. Barnes & Noble will have a terrific assortment of books for sale, and you can take the "evolution trivia" quiz to test your knowledge of some evolutionary facts. The highest score will receive a prize!

Atlanta Freethought Society has for the first time been offered a matching donation to encourage donations made specifically to pay down our debt on the hall. An anonymous donor has pledged a dollar-for-dollar match of up to \$45,000 for all contributions made in 2011 designated to pay toward the debt.

Each \$10,000 raised this way will reduce AFS costs by \$900 per year going forward and will free up future income for more progressive causes, such as activism or publishing.

To be eligible for the matching funds, donations must be clearly marked for the Pay Down the Debt Drive and must be received by the last day of 2011.



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 usually start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

Feb 13: Al Stefanelli, founder of United Atheist Front, will tell us about UAF and its role in the atheist community. (See <http://www.UnitedAtheistFront.com>.)

Mar 13: Dr. Richard Jakiel and Pixie Bruner of the Atlanta Astronomy Club will speak on "Ancient Astronomical Knowledge."

Apr 10: TBD

May 8: 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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High School Biology Teachers Reluctant to Endorse Evolution in Class

The majority of public high school biology teachers are not strong classroom advocates of evolutionary biology, despite 40 years of court cases that have ruled teaching creationism or intelligent design violates the Constitution, according to Penn State political scientists. A mandatory undergraduate course in evolutionary biology for prospective teachers, and frequent refresher courses for current teachers, may be part of the solution, they say.

Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer, professors of political science at Penn State University, noted in a January 28 article in *Science* magazine that “considerable research suggests that supporters of evolution, scientific methods, and reason itself are losing battles in America’s classrooms.”

The researchers examined data from the National Survey of High School Biology Teachers, a representative sample of 926 public high school biology instructors. They found only about 28 percent of those teachers consistently implement National Research Council recommendations calling for introduction of evidence that evolution occurred, and craft lesson plans with evolution as a unifying theme linking disparate topics in biology.

In contrast, Berkman and Plutzer found that about 13 percent of biology teachers “explicitly advocate creationism or intelligent design by spending at least one hour of class time presenting it in a positive light.” Many of these teachers typically rejected the possibility that scientific methods can shed light on the origin of the species, and considered both evolution and creationism as belief systems that cannot be fully proven or discredited.

Berkman and Plutzer dubbed the remaining teachers the “cautious 60

percent,” who are neither strong advocates for evolutionary biology nor explicit endorsers of nonscientific alternatives. “Our data show that these teachers understandably want to avoid controversy,” they said.

The researchers found these teachers commonly use one or more of three strategies to avoid controversy. Some teach evolutionary biology as if it applies only to molecular biology, ignoring an opportunity to impart a rich understanding of the diversity of species and evidence that one species gives rise to others.

Using a second strategy, some teachers rationalize the teaching of evolution by referring to high-stakes examinations.

These teachers “tell students it does not matter if they really ‘believe’ in evolution, so long as they know it for the test,” Berkman and Plutzer said.

Finally, many teachers expose their students to all positions, scientific and otherwise, and let them make up their own minds.

This is unfortunate, the researchers said, because “this approach tells students that well established concepts can be debated in the same way we debate personal opinions.”

Berkman and Plutzer conclude that “the cautious 60 percent fail to explain the nature of scientific inquiry, undermine the authority of established

experts, and legitimize creationist arguments.” As a result, “they may play a far more important role in hindering scientific literacy in the United States than the smaller number of explicit creationists.”

The researchers noted that more high school students take biology than any other science course, and for as many as 25 percent of high school students it is the only science course they will ever take, even though a sound science education is important in a democracy that depends on citizen input on highly technical, consequential, public policies.

Berkman and Plutzer said the nation must have better-trained biology teachers who can confidently advocate for high standards of science education in their local communities. Colleges and universities should mandate a dedicated undergraduate course in evolution for all prospective biology teachers, for example, and follow up with outreach refresher courses, so that more biology teachers embrace evolutionary biology.

“Combined with continued successes in courtrooms and the halls of state government, this approach offers our best chance of increasing the scientific literacy of future generations,” they concluded.

[This story provided by Pennsylvania State University on January 27.]

¹ See <http://www.physorg.com/news/2011-01-high-school-biology-teachers-reluctant.html>.]

Visit AFS on the Internet!

The Atlanta Freethought Society is increasing content on its website, <http://www.AtlantaFreethought.org/>. We are working to add a podcast and other features! Also, Laura Ross maintains our Facebook page. Visit <http://www.Facebook.com/> and do a search for Atlanta Freethought Society. Both locations have up-to-date information on AFS activities.

Also happening this month in the Atlanta area...

Dale McGowan will give a talk about nontheistic parenting and humanist charitable giving on Sunday, Feb. 13, at 1:30 PM at Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, 1911 Cliff Valley Way NE, in Atlanta. Dale wrote the books *Parenting Beyond Belief* and *Raising Freethinkers* for parents and families who wish to raise their children without religion. His books offer solutions to the unique challenges secular parents face and provide specific answers to common questions.

GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet on Monday, Feb. 14 at 7:00 PM at UUCG, 12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville. The topic for this session: “Pagans, Neo Pagans, Wiccans, New Agers and Others.”

Secular Coalition Opposes Reaffirmation of ‘In God We Trust’

House Judiciary Members Sent Letters Urging Them to Focus on Issues Inclusive of All Citizens

On Friday, February 4, 2011, the Secular Coalition for America sent letters¹ to members of the U.S. House Judiciary Committee urging them to oppose a resolution that would unnecessarily reaffirm the phrase “In God We Trust” as our nation’s official motto. House Concurrent Resolution 13 also calls for the support and encouragement of the public display of the national motto in all public buildings, public schools, and government institutions.

The Secular Coalition told House Judiciary members that the motto is

not inclusive of the beliefs of all Americans, including millions of atheists, agnostics, humanists, and other nontheists, as well as millions of other Americans whose non-Judeo-Christian beliefs do not entail the use of the word “god.”

According to the letter, the resolution’s passage “would continue to alienate millions of Americans from their government and encroach further on the nation’s tradition of separation of church and state.”

The phrase “In God We Trust” has had a short history as the nation’s

motto, adopted only in 1956 during the height of the Cold War. The previous de facto motto was “E pluribus unum,” which is Latin for “Out of many, one.”

The Secular Coalition asked the Committee members to “focus on protecting the rights of all U.S. citizens and the integrity of the Constitution,” rather than wasting time on a resolution that does not alter law in any way.

[From a Feb. 7 SCA press release. For more, see <http://www.secular.org/>.]

¹The text of the letter sent to House Judiciary members can be found at <http://www.secular.org/InGodWeTrustLetter>.

Americans United Applauds Decision Striking Down Ohio Judge’s Ten Commandments Display

Courts Should Provide Equal Justice For All, Not Promote Religious Law, Says AU’s Lynn

A federal appeals court made the right call in requiring a state judge in Ohio to remove a Ten Commandments display from his courtroom, says Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled on February 2 that James DeWeese, a judge of the Richland County Court of Common Pleas, ran afoul of the Constitution when he put up a display entitled “Philosophies of Law in Conflict” that contrasted the “Moral Absolutes” of the Ten Commandments with the “Moral Relatives” of humanism.

“Judge DeWeese was improperly promoting his personal religious beliefs in his courtroom, and I’m glad the appeals court put a stop to it,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United, which filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the case.

Added Lynn, “Our courts are supposed to provide equal justice for all,

not promote religious law. Judges should never send the message that some religious traditions have a preferred place in the courtroom.”

The case goes back to 2000, when DeWeese hung a poster of the Ten Commandments opposite a poster of the Bill of Rights, presenting each as “the rule of law.” The American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio sued and won. In response, DeWeese created the new display. The ACLU sued over that as well.

Ruling in *American Civil Liberties Union v. James DeWeese*, the appeals court found that DeWeese sought to endorse religion through his actions.

“[T]he poster in this case is not merely a display of the Ten Commandments in Defendant’s courtroom,” wrote Judge Eric L. Clay for the unanimous three-judge panel. “It sets forth overt religious messages and religious endorsements. It is a display of the Ten Commandments editorialized by Defendant, a judge in

an Ohio state court, exhorting a return to ‘moral absolutes’ which Defendant himself defines as the principles of the ‘God of the Bible.’ The poster is an explicit endorsement of religion by Defendant....”

DeWeese was represented in court by TV preacher Pat Robertson’s American Center for Law and Justice.

Last year, Americans United filed a friend-of-the-court brief urging the appeals court to stop DeWeese from promoting religion in his courtroom. (The brief was joined by The Interfaith Alliance, the Anti-Defamation League, the Hindu American Foundation and the Union for Reform Judaism.)

Americans United pointed out on its website that DeWeese has been affiliated with Christian Reconstructionism, the most extreme manifestation of the Religious Right. Reconstructionists believe in imposing “biblical law” on America based on the legal code of the Old Testament.

[From a Feb. 2 AU press release.]

Dr. Stephen Burnett, professor of biology at Clayton State University, speaks on “Your Inner Chimp” at the old Atlanta Freethought Center: <http://www.youtube.com/user/livesimply2day#p/u/0/L3Sa9c8dqqQ>

Evolution Made Us All: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFFhSz5yyHU>

Defeating Creationism in the Courtroom, But Not in the Classroom: <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/331/6016/404>

New Alabama Governor Disses Non-Christians

“Anyone here today who has not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, I’m telling you, you’re not my brother and you’re not my sister, and I want to be your brother.”

Newly sworn-in Alabama governor Robert Bentley said he plans to be the governor of all Alabamians and be color-blind, but also said that people who aren’t “saved” Christians aren’t his brothers and sisters.

Bentley told a large crowd on Martin Luther King Day (January 17) at Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church that he believed it was important for Alabamians “that we love and care for each other.”

“Once I became governor ... I became the governor of all the people. I intend to live up to that. I am color-blind,” Bentley said in a short speech given about an hour after he took the oath of office as governor.

Then Bentley, who for years has been a deacon at First Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, gave what sounded like an altar call.

“There may be some people here today who do not have living within them the Holy Spirit,” Bentley said. “But if you have been adopted in God’s family like I have, and like you have if you’re a Christian and if you’re saved, and the Holy Spirit lives within you just like the Holy Spirit lives within me, then you know what that makes? It makes you and me brothers. And it makes you and me brother and sister.”

Bentley added, “Now I will have to say that, if we don’t have the same daddy, we’re not brothers and sisters. So anybody here today who has not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, I’m telling you, you’re not my brother and you’re not my sister, and I want to be your brother.”

Asked later if he meant to be insulting to people of other faiths, Bentley replied, “We’re not trying to insult anybody.”

Asked about Bentley’s comments, the governor’s communications director, Rebekah Caldwell Mason, said, “He is the governor of all the people, Christians, non-Christians alike.”

In his speech marking observances

of the Rev. Martin Luther King’s birthday in the church where King was once pastor, Bentley also told the crowd, “I think that Dr. Martin Luther King was one of the greatest men that has ever lived.”

“I appreciate what he has done for not only the African-American community but for the white community, because he helped everything to change, even though he had to give his life for it,” Bentley said.

American Atheists responded in a press release the next day. “Gov. Bentley is recklessly dividing the people of his state into two camps based upon religion,” said Dave Silverman, President of American Atheists. “He’s saying that in his state, people are not equal, and that those who embrace Christianity are presumably more valued by the highest elected political official in Alabama.”

“The governor was elected to uphold the Constitution, not rate the citizens of his state based upon their religious beliefs or the lack thereof,” Silverman added.

Blair Scott, a resident of Alabama and Communications Director for American Atheists, expressed disappointment that the governor made such contentious remarks at a gathering celebrating the heritage of the late Dr. Martin Luther King.

“Even though he was religious, Dr. King was also a believer in unity and equality, not division. He wanted people to be judged on their character, not on factors like skin color or their private convictions in respect for religion.”

“It’s not the job of our governor to be promoting religion,” said Scott. “He was elected governor of all the people, not just those who meet some religious statistical profile.”

Scott urged the governor to apologize to the 300,000 Alabamians who profess no religion, and others in the state who are members of non-Christian faiths.

Two days later, the governor did give a limited apology, saying “If anyone from other religions felt disenfranchised by the language, I want to say I am sorry. I am sorry if I offended anyone in any way.”

But, in a press release, the American Humanist Association said it was not satisfied with the apology.

“His apology may mollify some religious minorities but it’s a second slap in the face for non-religious people,” said Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association. “Governor Bentley not only failed to acknowledge the non-religious among the offended constituents, but also shirked off responsibility for his comments.” Speckhardt explained, “Bentley’s initial comments imply that Christianity is the exclusively correct path and made a call to convert others. A true apology would have acknowledged that he made a mistake, and address the people he slighted; it would not just say sorry if the words caused offense. When you look at the numbers, the governor’s weak apology only covered about a quarter of those he maligned.”

According to the 2010 Pew Religious Survey, 4.7% of Americans identify with a religion other than Christianity, while 16.1% of Americans are unaffiliated with any religion—translating to about 35 million Americans.

“Since his inauguration, President Obama has taken the lead in acknowledging nonbelievers as citizens deserving of respect and recognition,” said Speckhardt. “It’s time for other politicians to get with the program and start recognizing their nontheistic constituents. We’re a large and growing bloc of voters, even in the heart of the South. And for a country attempting to unite and progress, this inclusiveness is vital.”

[From a Jan. 18 story in the Huffington Post, a Jan. 19 press release by American Atheists, and a Jan. 20 press release by the American Humanist Association.]

An Open Letter to Governor Bentley

From the No God Blog at <http://atheists.org/blog/>, Jan. 20, 2011.

Dear Governor Bentley,

As you may know, there are 300,000 nonreligious people in the great state of Alabama—six times as many as there are Jews. As a result, we are confused by your apology to Jewish leaders, claiming to be everyone's Governor, while you completely ignored this much larger segment of your constituency.

Intolerance toward atheists runs deep in some areas of our government, so your response to smaller minorities as you ignore the larger bloc is very troublesome. Many atheists doubt the sincerity of your apology.

I write today to offer you an opportunity to right yourself with the nonreligious population of Alabama by issuing a statement to be read at our upcoming Regional Convention on January 30. I will personally read the statement

to the attendees, who will include many leaders from organized atheism around the state. I further offer to meet with you to discuss the issue face-to-face on Monday the 31st, which will give you the opportunity to quell opposition as we learn about each other's concerns.

We both know politics is serious business, and we also know that people hold grudges, especially when they have ethical concerns about their leadership. As a Republican, I ask you to work with me to avoid any undue criticism against you and our party.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

David Silverman

President, American Atheists, Inc

A Look at Early Christian History

A Poem by Ron Crowe

The thing about Emperor Constantine,
besides being Christian and killer obscene,
was, in Nicaea a council he did call
in three twenty-five, a year few recall.

And while some thought it wrong or odd,
the council voted that Jesus be God.
So we're indebted to killer of wife and child
for promotion to godhood of our Savior mild.

But this settling of Christ's divinity,
while adding a theological amenity,
left something of an abnormality,
as it formed but a godly duality.

And since even-numbered godheads are no fun,
Christians fretted until three-eighty-one,
when in Constantinople another council,
to which Theodosius played host,
met and added the Holy Ghost
(for whom the delegates had an affinity
as it provided them a mystical Trinity).

In A.D. 326, for reasons unknown, Constantine ordered the execution of his second wife Fausta and his eldest son, the deputy Emperor Crispus. The reason? Historians think that maybe Crispus was suspected of having an affair with his stepmother Fausta.

But each time the councils a dilemma solved,
they created a problem contrary;
for example, when they made Jesus God,
Then what did that make Mary?

For fifty years the debate raged on,
until at Ephesus in four-fifty-one
Theo the second a council called,
whose sages with many a wink and nod,
promoted Mary to Mother of God.

Thus council after council church fathers invited
till all questions on Jesus were finally decided.
Today you may think this all an inanity,
but that's how they finalized Christianity.

Those who disagreed? They're mostly mystery;
for 'tis winners write the final history.
And the followers? They followed as followers do,
though Protestants protested a tenet or two.
Only skeptics called it a sham and a pity
to create a god by vote of committee.

See Pat Condell on The Criminal Truth: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEkelAsmcf4>

Bill O'Reilly vs. David Silverman: <http://richarddawkins.net/videos/573665-bill-o-reilly-vs-david-silverman-you-know-they-re-all-scams>

Stephen Colbert reviews Bill O'Reilly's statements; Neil Degrasse Tyson also comments:

<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/370183/january-06-2011/bill-o-reilly-proves-god-s-existence---neil-degrasse-tyson>

As Colbert points out, it all boils down to "There must be a God, because I don't know how things work":

<http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/373357/february-03-2011/crisis-in-egypt---anderson-cooper---bill-o-reilly>

Ethan Siegel explains the tides: http://scienceblogs.com/startswithabang/2011/02/science_bill_oreilly.php

Why I Am an Atheist

by Ricky Gervais, excerpted from the Wall Street Journal blog, <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy2010/12/19>

Why don't you believe in God? I get that question all the time. I always try to give a sensitive, reasoned answer. This is usually awkward, time consuming and pointless. People who believe in God don't need proof of his existence, and they certainly don't want evidence to the contrary. They are happy with their belief. They even say things like "it's true to me" and "it's faith." I still give my logical answer because I feel that not being honest would be patronizing and impolite. It is ironic therefore that "I don't believe in God because there is absolutely no scientific evidence for his existence and from what I've heard the very definition is a logical impossibility in this known universe," comes across as both patronizing and impolite.

Arrogance is another accusation. Which seems particularly unfair. Science seeks the truth. And it does not discriminate. For better or worse it finds things out. Science is humble. It knows what it knows and it knows what it doesn't know. It bases its conclusions and beliefs on hard evidence - evidence that is constantly updated and upgraded. It doesn't get offended when new facts come along. It embraces the body of knowledge. It doesn't hold on to medieval practices because they are tradition. If it did, you wouldn't get a shot of penicillin; you'd pop a leech down your trousers and pray. Whatever you "believe," this is not as effective as medicine. Again you can say, "It works for me," but so do placebos. My point being, I'm saying God doesn't exist. I'm not saying faith doesn't exist. I know faith exists. I see it all the time. But believing in something doesn't make it true. Hoping that something is true doesn't make it true. The existence of God is not subjective. He either exists or he doesn't. It's not a matter of opinion. You can have your own opinions. But you can't have your own facts.

Why don't I believe in God? No, no no, why do YOU believe in God?

Surely the burden of proof is on the believer. You started all this. If I came up to you and said, "Why don't you believe I can fly?" You'd say, "Why would I?" I'd reply, "Because it's a matter of faith." If I then said, "Prove I can't fly. See, see, you can't prove it, can you?" You'd probably either walk away, call security or throw me out of the window and shout, "F—ing fly then, you lunatic."

This is of course a spirituality issue, religion is a different matter. As an atheist, I see nothing "wrong" in believing in a god. I don't think there is a god, but belief in him does no harm. If it helps you in any way, then that's fine with me. It's when belief starts infringing on other people's rights when it worries me. I would never deny your right to believe in a god. I would just rather you didn't kill people who believe in a different god, say. Or stone someone to death because your rulebook says their sexuality is immoral. It's strange that anyone who believes that an all-powerful all-knowing, omniscient power responsible for everything that happens, would also want to judge and punish people for what they are. From what I can gather, pretty much the worst type of person you can be is an atheist. The first four commandments hammer this point. There is a god, I'm him, no one else is, you're not as good and don't forget it. (Don't murder anyone, doesn't get a mention till number 6.)

When confronted with anyone who holds my lack of religious faith in such contempt, I say, "It's the way God made me."

But what are atheists really being accused of?

The dictionary definition of God is "a supernatural creator and overseer of the universe." Included in this definition are all deities, goddesses and supernatural beings. Since the beginning of recorded history, which is defined by the invention of writing by the Sumerians around 6,000 years ago,

historians have cataloged over 3700 supernatural beings, of which 2870 can be considered deities.

So next time someone tells me they believe in God, I'll say "Oh which one? Zeus? Hades? Jupiter? Mars? Odin? Thor? Krishna? Vishnu? Ra?..." If they say "Just God. I only believe in the one God," I'll point out that they are nearly as atheistic as me. I don't believe in 2,870 gods, and they don't believe in 2,869.

I used to believe in God. The Christian one, that is.

I loved Jesus. He was my hero. More than pop stars. More than footballers. More than God. God was by definition omnipotent and perfect. Jesus was a man. He had to work at it. He had temptation but defeated sin. He had integrity and courage. But He was my hero because He was kind. And He was kind to everyone. He didn't bow to peer pressure or tyranny or cruelty. He didn't care who you were. He loved you. What a guy. I wanted to be just like Him.

One day when I was about 8 years old, I was drawing the crucifixion as part of my Bible studies homework. I loved art too. And nature. I loved how God made all the animals. They were also perfect. Unconditionally beautiful. It was an amazing world.

I lived in a very poor, working-class estate in an urban sprawl called Reading, about 40 miles west of London. My father was a laborer and my mother was a housewife. I was never ashamed of poverty. It was almost noble. Also, everyone I knew was in the same situation, and I had everything I needed. School was free. My clothes were cheap and always clean and ironed. And mum was always cooking. She was cooking the day I was drawing the cross.

I was sitting at the kitchen table when my brother came home. He was 11 years older than me, so he would have been 19. He was as smart as anyone I knew, but he was too cheeky. He would answer back and get into

trouble. I was a good boy. I went to church and believed in God – what a relief for a working-class mother. You see, growing up where I did, mums didn't hope as high as their kids growing up to be doctors; they just hoped their kids didn't go to jail. So bring them up believing in God and they'll be good and law abiding. It's a perfect system. Well, nearly. 75 percent of Americans are God-fearing Christians; 75 percent of prisoners are God-fearing Christians. 10 percent of Americans are atheists; 0.2 percent of prisoners are atheists.

But anyway, there I was happily drawing my hero when my big brother Bob asked, "Why do you believe in God?" Just a simple question. But my mum panicked. "Bob," she said in a tone that I knew meant, "Shut up." Why was that a bad thing to ask? If there was a God and my faith was strong it didn't matter what people said.

Oh ... hang on. There is no God. He knows it, and she knows it deep down. It was as simple as that. I started thinking about it and asking more questions, and within an hour, I was

an atheist.

Wow. No God. If mum had lied to me about God, had she also lied to me about Santa? Yes, of course, but who cares? The gifts kept coming. And so did the gifts of my new found atheism. The gifts of truth, science, nature. The real beauty of this world. I learned of evolution—a theory so simple that only England's greatest genius could have come up with it. Evolution of plants, animals and us – with imagination, free will, love, humor. I no longer needed a reason for my existence, just a reason to live. And imagination, free will, love, humor, fun, music, sports, beer and pizza are all good enough reasons for living.

But living an honest life – for that you need the truth. That's the other thing I learned that day, that the truth, however shocking or uncomfortable, in the end leads to liberation and dignity.

So what does the question "Why don't you believe in God?" really mean? I think when someone asks that they are really questioning their own belief. In a way they are asking,

"What makes you so special? How come you aren't brainwashed with the rest of us? How dare you say I'm a fool and not going to heaven!"

Let's be honest, if only one person believed in God he would be considered pretty strange. But because it's a very popular view it's accepted. And why is it such a popular view? That's obvious. It's an attractive proposition. Believe in me and live forever. Again, if it was just a case of spirituality this would be fine.

"Do unto others ..." is a good rule of thumb. I live by that. Forgiveness is probably the greatest virtue there is. But that's exactly what it is – a virtue. Not just a Christian virtue. No one owns being good. I'm good. I just don't believe I'll be rewarded for it in heaven. My reward is here and now. It's knowing that I try to do the right thing. That I lived a good life. And that's where spirituality really lost its way. When it became a stick to beat people with. "Do this or you'll burn in hell."

You won't burn in hell. But be nice anyway.

Jack Kingston: 'I Came From God, Not From a Monkey'

During an appearance on HBO's "Real Time with Bill Maher" on January 28, Rep. Jack Kingston (R-Ga.) stated clearly that he does not believe in the process of evolution¹.

"I believe I came from God, not from a monkey so the answer is no," he said, laughing, when asked if he subscribes to the theory. Later in the segment he added, "I don't believe that a creature crawled out of the sea and became a human being one day."

According to a December Gallup poll², 40 percent of Americans believe

God is responsible for creating human life in its current form roughly 10,000 years ago.

The survey found that only a minority of Americans hold the "secular evolution" view that humans evolved with no influence from a god, but the number has risen from 9% in 1982 to 16% today. At the same time, the 40% of Americans who hold the "creationist" view is down from a high point of 47% in 1999. There has been little change over the years in the percentage holding the "theistic evolution"

view that humans evolved under God's guidance.

American's views on human origins vary significantly by level of education and religiosity. Those who are less educated are more likely to hold a creationist view. Those with college degrees and postgraduate education are more likely to hold one of the two viewpoints involving evolution. And Americans who attend church weekly are most likely to select the creationist alternative for the origin of humans.

¹See the video of Kingston's remarks here: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/30/jack-kingston-evolution_n_815909.html

²Read about the recent Gallup poll here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/145286/Four-Americans-Believe-Strict-Creationism.aspx>

Judgment Day? By the Thinking Atheist: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJQFVqnlZTw>

The 25 Most Influential Living Atheists: <http://www.superscholar.org/features/influential-atheists/>

Why are You an Atheist? By PZ Myers: http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2011/02/why_are_you_an_atheist.php

More Atheists to Come Out in 2011: <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/01/04/more-atheists-to-come-out-in-2011-leader-predicts/>

Cherokee School Board to Keep H.S. Graduation at Church: <http://www.11alive.com/news/local/story.aspx?storyid=174004&catid=40>

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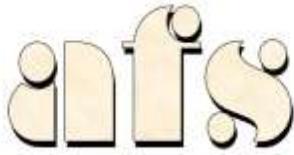
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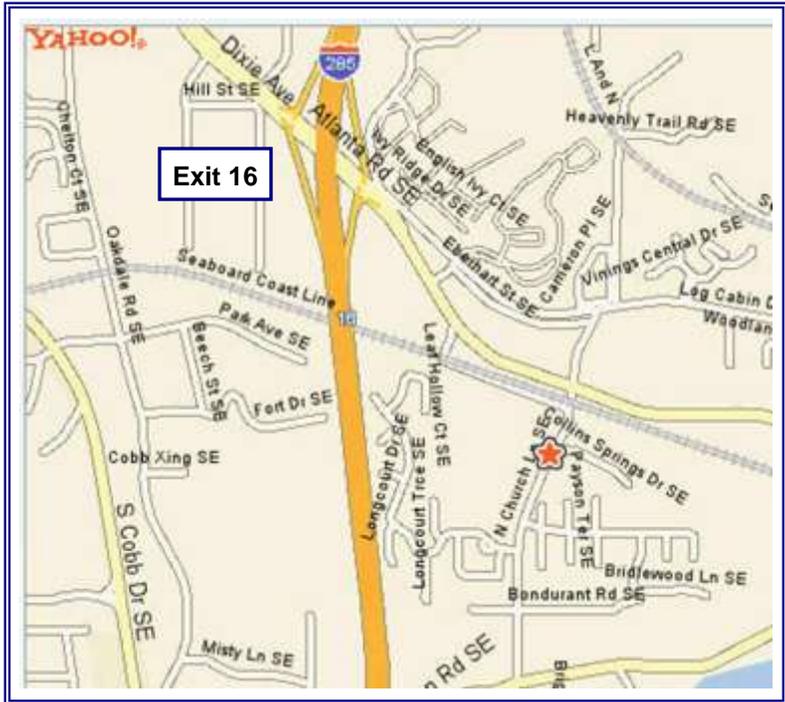


Atlanta Freethought Society

The February 13 Meeting:
1:00 at AF Hall

4775 N. Church Lane SE
Smyrna, GA

This Month's Speaker:
Al Stefanelli



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