

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication • Volume 17 Number 3 • March 2011

The March AFS Meeting

The March 13 AFS meeting will include a talk by **Dr. Richard Jakiel** and **Pixie Bruner** of the Atlanta Astronomy Club on "Ancient Astronomical Knowledge."

Dr. Jakiel is a research scientist for the State of Georgia's Radiation Protection Program. He taught astronomy and physics at the University of West Georgia in 1997-2002. He has contributed over 60 articles to magazines and journals on astronomy. His current research interests include ancient (Greco-Roman) astronomy.

Pixie Bruner is an author, poet, historian, mother, and arts model. She is very active with the Atlanta Astronomy Club and the Meteorite Association of Georgia.

The meeting will be at 1:00 at Atlanta Freethought Hall. Arrive as early as 12:00 for refreshments and conversation.

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 March AFS Social

The March AFS Social will be at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy, Atlanta, on Saturday, March 16, at 1:00 PM. This restaurant features Bangladeshi food (different!) and is an old favorite of AFS members.

An AFS Yard Sale

The Atlanta Freethought Society will have a **Yard Sale** on the 3rd Saturday in April (April 16) at the AF Hall Pavilion. It will start at 10:00 AM and will be over by about 2:00 PM.

We are looking for lots of things to sell, so please bring all your unneeded items. We can store them in the building if you bring them to the April AFS meeting.

Please contact Steve Yothment if you can attend and help out at the yard sale. Thanks!

Learn more about the Atlanta Astronomy Club at:

<http://www.atlantaastronomy.org/>.

See the latest Atlanta Astronomy Club newsletter at:

<http://www.atlantaastronomy.org/FocalPoints/WFP-201102.pdf>.

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, March 20, at 1:00 at AF Hall. John Snider will speak on "20th Century Twain: Mark Twain's Final Years and Freethought Legacy." See their website: <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 7:00 PM on Saturday, Mar. 19, at Manuel's Tavern,

602 N. Highland Ave, Atlanta. Eve Siebert will discuss The Shakespeare Conspiracy. "Come for the strawman; stay for the red herring." See <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com>.

The **Atlanta Science Tavern** meetup will be at 7:00 PM on Saturday, Mar. 26, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave NE in Atlanta. Steven Platek, a Psychology professor at Gwinnett College will talk on "Who's Your Daddy? Neural Correlates of Female Infidelity and Male Certainty." RSVP at <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaScienceTavern/>.

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

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.

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

Apr 10: Benjamin Burchall, Executive Director of Black Nonbelievers of Atlanta and former leader of the Long Beach Freethought Society, will speak on "Thoughts of a Black Atheist." (He recently moved to Atlanta.)

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

Editor

Steve Yothment

How to Contact the Editor

Send correspondence to AFS at:
4775 N. Church Lane SE
Smyrna, GA 30080-7224
or phone Steve at 678-364-8703
or send e-mail to SteveYoth@aol.com.

Atlanta Freethought Society

President

Steve Yothment – 678-364-8703

VP for Internal Communication

Judy Thompson – 404-296-2020

VP for External Communication

Michael Buckner – 404-633-2486

Secretary

Dennis Martin – 404-817-0413

Treasurer

Diane Buckner – 770-432-3049

Board of Directors

Mark Banks – 770-354-1546

Steven Fant – 678-793-5662

Tony King – 706-886-9224

Laura Ross – 404-634-1005

Lew Southern – 770-509-8272

Atlanta Freethought News

Vol. 17, Number 3, March 2011

Copyright © 2011 by the

Atlanta Freethought Society, Inc.

Signed articles are all copyright ©
2011 by their respective authors.

Membership in AFS is \$25/year for individuals, \$35 for households, and \$10 for students/low income/under 21. Membership includes AFNews by email.

Add \$15 to receive AFNews by mail,

\$20 to Canada/Mexico, \$25 elsewhere.

Sustaining Members (individual) \$100.

Sustaining Members (households) \$125.

Life Membership is \$1000.

Subscriptions only are \$10 for 12 issues.

Please make checks and money orders payable to Atlanta Freethought Society.

Visit our website at

<http://www.AtlantaFreethought.org/>.

See AFS events and member views at:
[facebook.com/AtlantaFreethought](https://www.facebook.com/AtlantaFreethought).

Send E-mail to

afs@atlantafreethought.org.

AFS Webmasters: Freya Harris
and Michael Buckner

Appeals Court Considers Law Crediting God for Kentucky's Security

Edwin Kagin, Legal Director for American Atheists, presented oral arguments to uphold the ruling.

According to the lawyers on opposing sides, the decision will be as easy as either affirming what everybody learns in grade school or dismissing a profession of faith in the "Flying Spaghetti Monster."

But it won't be easy for the ones who actually have to decide the issue, says the head of a three-judge panel of the Kentucky Court of Appeals.

The panel heard oral arguments on Feb. 24 over whether Kentucky law can mandate that the state declare its reliance upon "Almighty God" for its safety and security.

"The court is struggling with a difficult decision," Senior Judge Ann O'Malley Shake said after lawyers quoted numerous court precedents that either allow or restrict the expressions of religion in the government sphere.

"The distinctions have been drawn with difficulty over the years, and will be in this case, I'm sure, as well," Shake said.

At issue are laws passed in 2002 and 2006—after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

A 2002 "legislative finding" says the "safety and security of the commonwealth cannot be achieved apart from reliance upon Almighty God."

And a 2006 act creating the state Office of Homeland Security requires its executive director to publicize this "dependence on Almighty God" in agency training and educational materials, and through a permanent plaque at the entrance to its emergency operations center.

Ten Kentucky residents—one of whom has since died—filed suit in 2008 to challenge the law after it received publicity for the first time.

The appeals panel was hearing an appeal of Franklin Circuit Court Judge Thomas Wingate's ruling in 2009 that declared the law to have

"created an official government position on God," in violation of the Kentucky and U.S. constitutions.

But Special Assistant Attorney General Tad Thomas said there are more than 200 years' worth of court decisions saying that governments have the right to make references to God in their documents. He cited the national motto, "In God We Trust," and the Declaration of Independence's opening words that people "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."

"We have all heard these words since grade school," Thomas said. He added that it would be "irrational" to interpret the Kentucky constitution's section on religious freedom as barring references to God when the current version of the constitution itself contains such a reference.

Shake pointed out that the state's emergency-management laws, which include the statutes in question, carry a misdemeanor charge for anyone who violates them. She questioned what would happen if an atheist became executive director of the Office of Homeland Security and balked at requirements to post the plaque and annual reports crediting Almighty God.

But Thomas said the law doesn't require anyone to profess trust in Almighty God—it only reflects the statement of the legislators who passed the Homeland Security laws.

"It does not require the executive director to hold those beliefs," he said.

He said the Homeland Security director serves at the governor's pleasure and that it would be up to the governor to deal with a director who refused to credit Almighty God.

But Edwin Kagin, the legal director for American Atheists, said the law's intent was clear.

"Not religious?" he asked. "They

have to be kidding. Of course it's religious. It is part of a years-long attempt by the religious right in this commonwealth to violate the Constitution of the United States (and of Kentucky). ... If it is simply harmless as they say, why are they making such a fuss out of it? Why not take (the plaque) down?"

He said if the law professed reliance on the Flying Spaghetti Monster—a fictional deity recently invented by a group of religious skeptics—"it would be obvious to everyone that this was improper and nonsensical."

Kagin cited the Supreme Court's 2005 decision barring displays that include the Ten Commandments in McCreary County, Ky., as allowing courts to consider whether lawmakers' had religious intentions in passing a law. He said that motivation was clear in a friend-of-the-court brief filed by 96 of the state's 100 state representatives in support of the belief that the United States is a "Christian nation." Thirty-five of the 38 state senators signed on to a similar brief.

Thomas cited another Ten Commandments case—in which the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a display in Mercer County, Ky.—as affirming "200 years of U.S. Supreme Court jurisprudence that says government has every right to acknowledge the existence of an Almighty."

Judge Thomas Wine questioned why the law declared faith in one God rather than including various deities. Thomas cited the long history of government documents referring to a single God.

Also serving on the panel was Judge Laurance VanMeter.

Shake said the panel would decide the matter as quickly but as carefully as it could.

[From a Feb. 24 article by Peter Smith in the Frankfort, KY *Courier-Journal*.]

A video of the court proceedings has been made available by Kentucky AA State Director Ed Hensley.

To see the video, go to <http://www.photoshop.com/users/edwinhensley>, then select "AA vs KY."

For background on the lawsuit, see http://www.atheists.org/Kentucky_Homeland_Security_Lawsuit.

Other articles: <http://www.legalnewsline.com/news/231357-atheists-no-dependence-on-god-in-war-on-terror>

http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2011/02/24/Court-weighs-God-in-homeland-security/UPI-69021298587516/

The U.S. Supreme Court “Gets It Right” on Snyder v. Phelps

Even though the results are unpopular, the case is a victory for Free Speech rights

Last week’s Supreme Court ruling in the case of SNYDER v. PHELPS ET AL has generated surprisingly sparse comment in America’s freethought community.

This may be attributed to the fact that PHELPS is the Rev. Fred Phelps of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church, which for two decades has conducted a “sidewalk ministry” picketing funerals and other events to express its distaste for homosexuality. Garish signs carried by this group declare “God Hates Fags” and claim that natural disasters, military deaths and other calamities are “God’s punishment” upon the country for accepting and tolerating un-biblical conduct.

The in-your-face attitudes and pugnacious sloganeering of the Westboro Church demonstrators have outraged most Americans, and even many on the religious right, including those who may agree with Phelps’ existential view that disobedience to Jehovah is literally calling down the wrath of God.

Pat Robertson has become an almost-comic figure for asserting that prayer can alter the trajectory of hurricanes, or that natural disasters directed against tolerant, freewheeling communities like New Orleans are the lord’s way of balancing the morality ledger.

As distasteful and irrational as Robertson’s eccentric eschatology may be, however, it doesn’t quite approach the extreme theatrics and hate-filled bravado of the Phelps clan—especially when the pickets and anti-gay chants take place at military funerals.

That is precisely what happened when the Westboro demonstrators went to Maryland to protest at the burial of Marine Corps Corporal Matthew Snyder, who had been killed in the line of duty while serving in Iraq.

Snyder’s father filed suit against Rev. Phelps and the Westboro Church for infliction of emotional distress, intrusion upon seclusion and civil conspiracy. The church, however, maintained its right to speak out under the

First Amendment. The facts of the case reflected that the Westboro activists were on public land located nearly 1,000 feet from the burial plot, and peacefully displayed their brutish and distasteful signs declaring “Thank God for Dead Soldiers” and “Fags Doom Nations.” Mr. Snyder admitted that he saw only the tops of the signs briefly while driving into the cemetery, and did not learn of their noxious content until later.

Indeed, all arrangements in connection with the Westboro Church picket were under the planning and supervision of the local police.

The facts of the case, however, do not attenuate questions about whether all speech is protected. America has a checkered relationship with the First Amendment, which in the past has been confined and diminished in scope by local, state and federal laws seeking to regulate everything from erotica to radical political speech, unpopular plays and books, even lectures by advocates of libertinism and birth control. Government, especially the judicial system, while being the theoretical guardian of the Bill of Rights, has rarely played that role. Robust expression, be it sexual, religious, political or whatever has rarely found protection in the highest level of the court system, and only in recent decades. Government abuses of the Bill of Rights abound, as any historian of our civil liberties knows.

Thaddeus Russell, in his provocative book *A Renegade History of the United States*, chronicles how the freedoms enunciated in our nation’s founding documents, especially the Bill of Rights, were practiced and defended not always by the Founders and subsequent ruling elites, but by populist fringe-elements, nonconformists, rabble-rousers and others who gravitated away from the mainstream of an increasingly bourgeois cultural order. Activities like dancing, gambling and carousing, the practices of artistic and literary license and many more emerged as the most radical el-

ements of a new social space that went beyond the self-imposed limits of professional associations, markets and the salons of polite society. Their fight was later taken up by feminists, anarchists and other political dissidents, labor union activists, advocates of racial equality, gays and others willing to the test the constitutional mettle, even if it meant ignoring the probity and sensibilities of the mainstream culture.

A Founding dynasty of gentlemen patrician merchants, plantation farmers and Enlightenment era thinkers may have inspired the charter which guaranteed Americans a shockingly wide range of civil liberties; but the practice of such rights often ran afoul of the legal codes and restrictions imposed by municipalities, states and even the Federal government, erected frequently at the behest of religious and political elites.

So, it should be no shock that a historic affirmation of the First Amendment’s Free Expression Clause was the result of the outrageous deeds of a fanatical, intolerant and homophobic religious sect. The unsavory signs and chants of the Westboro Baptist Church severely tested the limits of both social tolerance and the guarantees of liberty and free expression. On this, nearly the entire high court—both liberals and conservatives—agreed, save Justice Antonin Scalia.

The consequences of the Supreme Court ruling in SNYDER v. PHELPS go far beyond the specifics of this case, or the right of a religious fringe group to protest at funerals or other public events. With different circumstances, this case could have involved atheists demonstrating against a papal visit or Islamic demands to enact blasphemy statutes, or teachers in Madison, Wisconsin yelling out on behalf of labor rights like collective bargaining. These actions, and many more, are protected by the First Amendment no matter how “offensive” or annoying the message is.

Would we really have it any other

way?

The justices took full measure of the “reasonable” limits that exist in any First Amendment dispute—the content, form and context of the speech act—and found that in *SNYDER v. PHELPS*, the church had every right to express its views, no matter how noxious or controversial or insulting. This was all about expressing beliefs and personal opinions in the public square.

“The ‘context’ of the speech—its connection with Matthew Snyder’s funeral—cannot by itself transform the nature of Westboro’s speech,” declared the Syllabus statement of the ruling. “The signs reflected Westboro’s condemnation of much in modern society, and it cannot be argued that Westboro’s use of speech on public issues was contrived to insulate a personal attack on Snyder from liability.”

Even more pertinent: “Because this

Read the Supreme Court Decision here: <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/10pdf/09-751.pdf>

NPR comments on the case: <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/05/134287458/westboro-case-strengthens-free-speech-rights-for-all>

Nation has chosen to protect even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that public debate is not stifled, Westboro must be shielded from tort liability for its picketing in this case.”

Indeed, the majority opinion in *SNYDER v. PHELPS* is an elegant and forceful declaration of the virtues in our First Amendment. The defendants in this case were, and are, to be sure, reactionary in their views on homosexuality and other issues. We can find their ideas repugnant, disgusting, highly offensive and provocative; but like Voltaire, we are charged to respect their right to express them in a peaceful fashion.

Atheists, freethinkers and other secularists should applaud the ruling in *SNYDER v. PHELPS*. We live in a time where throughout much of the world, especially South Asia and the Middle East, there are calls for blasphemy statutes which would bestow special status to the teachings of

organized religions. There are often accompanying pleas by those who suggest that “hurtful” statements and “hate speech” should not be considered worthy of legal protections. It is a small leap from the latter to declaring that any expression, whether electronic, verbal or in print, that erodes the sanctity of religious creeds and institutions deserves to be criminalized and sanctioned by the State.

This case is a victory for the Bill of Rights, and bolsters the bulwark of legal precedent that ensconces the right to freedom of expression for everyone, not just the Westboro Baptist Church protesters. America has won an important affirmation of its First Amendment; and so have all of us who so vigorously exercise that same right to freedom of expression in service to the cause of reason, liberty and secularism.

[Written by Conrad Goeringer, from the March 6 issue of AANEWS.]

Center For Inquiry Launches National Ad Campaign

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) has launched a national multimedia ad campaign, with the message that it is possible to live a fulfilling life without God. Three major U.S. cities will be home to the advertisements and billboards which proclaim “You don’t need God—to **hope**, to **care**, to **love**, to **live**.”

Washington, D.C., is the first of the trio of cities to host the advertisements. As of March 1, the ads are featured on 15 buses and in two well-traveled Metro stations. Drivers in **Indianapolis** and **Houston** will begin seeing billboards the week of March 7.

“With this campaign, we are aiming to dispel some myths about the nonreligious,” said **Ronald A. Lindsay**, CFI president & CEO. “One common myth is that the nonreligious lead empty, meaningless, selfish, self-centered lives. This is not only false, it’s ridiculous. Unfortunately, all too many people accept this myth because that’s what they hear about nonbe-



lievers.”

The campaign was created with the goal to reach different areas of the United States, with a city in the heartland (Indianapolis) and the largest city in the Bible Belt (Houston) supplementing the nation’s capital. Other cities may be added as the campaign progresses.

The campaign website has more information about nonreligious Americans, including their numbers. Roughly 16 percent of Americans have no religious affiliation, according to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), and about 10 percent reject belief in God, based on surveys

conducted in association with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

“Most everyone in the United States knows someone who is not religious, whether they’re aware of this or not,” observed Lindsay. “We’re your friends, neighbors, and colleagues—and we have similar hopes and concerns. Irrational prejudice against nonbelievers has no place in twenty-first-century America.”

To view the ad and a short video, and for more information, please visit: <http://www.livingwithoutreligion.org>.

[From a March 1 CFI press release at <http://www.centerforinquiry.net>.]

The Abortion Issue Is a Giant Distraction From Making Life Better for American Children

The problem with the pro-life movement is that their concern for “life” ends at birth.

While writing a story about the famed Octomom (who living up to her comic book villain moniker managed to incense both pro-life and pro-choice groups), one of the pro-life advocates I interviewed explained they were concerned with “life that needs to be protected and children’s welfare.” Then realizing the slip, she quickly corrected, “We don’t agree with welfare though.”

So in their view every pregnancy **MUST** be brought to term—but after that it’s hands off and there’s “freedom” from intervention. Then you should have your rights to privacy. Then you should make your own decisions.

The wedge issue of abortion is a red herring. It’s a giant distraction—a shiny thing we all focus on and a drain on resources which could actually be going to making “life” better for American children.

The easiest example is how the House GOP, riding on a wave of fiscal outrage with the promise of jobs, has spent their precious little time in session trying to criminalize a procedure for which only a minority of Americans are even eligible. Plus, studies have shown that the numbers of abortions per year don’t change even with changing legality or availability of abortions. This means no matter how much money is thrown at making abortion not exist, the same amount of abortions will still take place.

So no amount of activism or mouth foam has made the numbers of abor-

tions fewer. But it still eats up plenty of legislative time around the country.

The Florida legislature recently passed a bill requiring any woman who seeks an abortion to get an ultrasound. (Gov. Rick Scott will probably sign the bill.) South Dakota tabled a law allowing certain people related to a fetus to be able to kill an abortion provider. Nebraska then introduced a bill to de-criminalize murder if the victim is an abortion provider. How pro-life is that?

What we lack in this country is a pro-quality-of-life movement. You know what’s killing children more than abortion? Obesity. Lack of health care. Poverty.

I don’t understand how the Christian religion can be used as grounds to take a hard line on abortion, while simultaneously giving widespread poverty a pass because it’s a “personal responsibility” issue. The poor have no more famous an advocate than Jesus Christ. However, there’s a big swath of Christians who are like die hard Michael Jackson fans that have never heard his music: They admire the man but are missing what he was all about.

I don’t understand how people who are so revved up over what a woman does in the privacy of her doctor’s office can just sit back and watch an entire generation of American children be doomed to a shorter lifespan than their parents. Obesity is more than a big health issue—it’s a big death issue. Condemning a woman’s

right to choose an abortion while letting “choice” be the permission for an epidemic of overweight kids is like being a school administrator who’s really only concerned with chalk.

I don’t understand how the title of “pro-life” can be claimed for any movement which does not march on the Capitol in support of better health care for post-partum kids.

“Life” has to mean more than just treating women like public incubators. Truth be told, a big factor in the one out of every five pregnancies ending in abortion is—unemployment. Lack of money. Lack of resources. Being pro-life is short-sighted when it comes to living. If the goal of pro-lifers is eliminating all abortions, they should start by eliminating the reasons for abortions. Unwanted pregnancy is number one, so they should be *for* birth control. The second is financial. So they should be *for* what the right wing likes to refer to desparingly as “socialism.”

What would a pro-quality-of-life movement support? A living wage for people who work for a living. A viable middle class. An economy that lifts all people, not just the uber-rich. Honest, transparent and accountable corporations and elected officials. Infrastructure. Education. Health care for all. Healthy kids.

Instead, those who call themselves pro-life can’t see the forest through their abortion clinic picket signs.

[From a Mar. 2 article by Tina Dupuy at [http://politicallyillustrated.com/.](http://politicallyillustrated.com/)]

We’re Paying Down Our Debt

By Diane Buckner, AFS Treasurer

As you probably already know, AFS has been offered a matching donation to encourage contributions made 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. The donor will pay the match quarterly, based on the donations from the quarter just completed—so your March gift could make a difference almost right away. Give in March and help us free up even more future income for worthwhile 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.

“Rock Beyond Belief” Canceled – Lawsuit to Follow

Written by Al Stefanelli of United Atheist Front, from his March 4 article at <http://www.examiner.com/>

Rock Beyond Belief has been canceled. This event would have been a great opportunity for secular groups, allowing an awesome show of our strength, resilience and resolve.

The event was to be held at Fort Bragg, a U.S. Army training facility in central North Carolina.

To give you some background about what this event was all about, we have to go back to September of last year. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association held a concert on the Fort Bragg Main Parade Field that was billed as “Rock the Fort.” The Graham event was specifically and unashamedly evangelical. It was actively promoted via letters sent to the community by the Senior Fort Bragg Chaplain. The Billy Graham people hailed it as an event to add new members to the local churches and it was fully supported and endorsed by the United States Army. The result was a government sponsored church service that the Department of Defense paid for.

When the event organizer, Sgt. Justin Griffith, brought up the fact that U.S. Army support, endorsement and financial backing of the Billy Graham event was blatantly in violation of the First Amendment, the military leaders said they would support a similar event by non-Christian group. In fact, this promise was put in writing by the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate at Fort Bragg to the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Thus, Rock Beyond Belief, a secular program, was born.

An incredible amount of work went into this event, including the scheduling of speakers that included Dan Barker, Ed Brayton, Richard Dawkins, Margaret Downey, Jen McCreight, Dale McGowan, Hemant Mehta, Al Stefanelli, Mikey Weinstein, Michael Werner and others, as well as musical performances by Baba Brinkman, Jeffrey Lewis, Spoonboy and others. To say the least, the resistance to this event was significant. In fact, it was just last week that the events founder

and coordinator, Justin Griffith, made it past what was thought to have been the last obstacle to make this event a reality when the powers that be at Fort Bragg, NC, gave their approval for the date.

A Little About Sgt. Justin Griffith

If you remember, it was Sgt. Griffith who initiated action on another violation of the First Amendment by the US Army regarding the highly controversial Soldier Fitness Tracker, which is a mandatory survey to measure an individual soldier’s competency in four areas; emotional, social, family and spiritual. Justin, being an atheist, was deemed “unfit” to serve specifically because he is a non-believer. The US Army has taken the position that a soldier who lacks belief will somehow compromise their principles and values. The media coverage on this issue was good. Action was immediately taken by the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers(MAAF), Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), American Atheists (AA), the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), the Foundation Beyond Belief, the United Atheist Front, Inc (UAF) and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (AU). It drew the ire of several high-profile individuals that have since also become personally involved, such as Hement Mehta, Ed Brayton, Mikey Weinstein (MRFF), Annie Laurie Gaylor (FFRF), Chris Rodda, Todd Stiefel, David Silverman and Kathleen Johnson (AA), and myself. Justin has subsequently been interviewed and featured on MSNBC, The Humanist Hour, Frostcall and other venues.

Everything was pretty much set and done for this event to proceed on April 2nd. Then came the salvos that have all but confirmed that atheists are not welcome in the U.S. Armed Services.

• The U.S. Army changed the venue from the outdoor main parade field, which would easily accommodate the

thousands of people who were expected, plus vendors and equipment, to one of two indoor theaters, and the largest one only being able to fit roughly 700 people.

- Sgt. Griffith was told to include a disclaimer that states explicitly that this event is not endorsed by US Army, specifically Fort Bragg. However, the Billy Graham event was endorsed by Fort Bragg, as evidenced by the letters sent out to area pastors by the Chaplaincy, on Army stationery, asking for help with the evangelical event.
- Fort Bragg decided to renege on their promise to cover any of the costs for Rock Beyond Belief, in spite of the fact that it paid over fifty thousand dollars for the evangelical “Rock the Fort.”

Apparently the US Army is either not familiar with our Keynote Speaker, Dr. Richard Dawkins, and the fact that at almost every event he has appeared at has required people to be turned away for lack of room. Putting Rock Beyond Belief in a room that is smaller than the auditorium at many high schools is not only an affront to Dr. Dawkins, but an indoor auditorium is a completely inadequate venue for an eight-hour event with vendors, food, equipment and other amenities.

Needless to say, Justin Griffith is heartbroken. He has personally invested both time and money in this event and others have as well. This last minute maneuver has left him with no options but to pursue litigation.

Mikey Weinstein, the founder and President of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, is an ardent supporter of Sgt. Griffith and is the legal arm of the alliance. His response to the problems: “We’re not going to negotiate our constitutional rights. We’re going to federal court.”

Weinstein added in a recent interview that “There is a DoD Directive which says that the Department of Defense may never provide a selective benefit for one entity and not provide

the same benefit for another, and the Billy Graham Evangelical Society received a benefit that was not afforded to Rock Beyond Belief.”

Weinstein pointed out that they are going to be filing their suit for failure to comply with a number of DoD Directives, but the main Directive is 5410.18. In the most recent version it states:

“4.2.9. Selective Benefit and Preferential Treatment. Community relations activities shall not support, or appear to support, any event that provides a selective benefit to any in-

dividual, group, or organization, including any religious or sectarian organization, ideological movement, political campaign or organization, or commercial enterprise, to include a shopping mall or motion picture promotion. When DoD support is provided to one non-Federal entity, the DoD Component commands or organizations providing such support must be able and willing to provide similar support to comparable events sponsored by similar non-Federal entities.”

Regarding use of facilities:

“4.2.4.1.5. The DoD Component command or organization is able and willing to provide similar support to comparable events...”

The U.S. Army should have known that the alliance of the above organizations, along with thousands of individual supporters and Sgt. Griffith, himself, were not kidding around when we said we would not stand for discrimination against anyone.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation is now at bat, and they’ve got a pretty big bat.

— Al Stefanelli

Letters to the Editor from AFS Members

Congratulations to Jack McKinney, whose letter was printed in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on February 12, and to Ed Buckner, whose letter was printed in the *Marietta Daily Journal* on February 14.

A ‘televangelist in politician’s clothing’

DEAR EDITOR:

Re: Story, “East Cobb Rep Franklin’s take on gays, gold, goats and God,” Feb. 7 MDJ

It’s like being at a smorgasbord: I hardly know where to begin. Obviously Franklin missed his calling. He’s a televangelist in politician’s clothing.

Among his many references to God, he reportedly said “We (elected officials) take an oath to God to uphold the Constitution.” Wrong! The Georgia Oath of Office does not mention God. It simply calls for the support of the U.S. and Georgia Constitutions and, “conduct conducive to the interests and prosperity of this state.” The oath he takes is to the voters and citizens of

Georgia, applied equally regardless of race, religion, sexual persuasion or political alliance.

His claims that he is defending the Constitution appear bizarre. Maybe that’s his version of “tough love.”

He is quick to proselytize where his religion is concerned, but appears to be paranoid about his personal life and background. Who knows what skeletons might tumble out of his closet if reporter Jon Gillooly made a few discrete inquiries?

If you don’t like our Constitution, Mr. Franklin, as the hard right is fond of saying, “Delta’s ready when you are.”

Jack McKinney
Kennesaw

Washington agrees: U.S. not a Christian nation

DEAR EDITOR:

MDJ columnist Nelson Price has again (“Crusaders weren’t the only ones committing atrocities” Sunday’s MDJ) revisited the history of the Crusades and the later era of the Islamic Barbary Pirates, again with some accurate observations and an interesting omission. He’s right that both Islam and Christianity have been entangled with horrific atrocities, that religion has been a major — though not the only — factor in these wars, and that much in today’s headlines is not really new. He fails to say so, but a commitment to secular government is the key to resolving all of this.

Price also omitted, as he always does, one of the most interesting documents related to all this, a treaty from 1796-97 in which the United States gave assurances to Islamic Tripoli that it need not fear religion-based war from America. Article 11 of that treaty famously began, “As the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion ...” That treaty, originally agreed to while George Washington was still president, was unanimously ratified by the U.S. Senate and signed by President John Adams on 10 June 1797.

Ed Buckner
Smyrna
Former President (retired)
American Atheists Smyrna

The American Atheists Convention, April 21-24 in Des Moines, Iowa: http://www.atheists.org/events/National_Convention
Richard Carrier on “Are Christians Delusional?": http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28PjVaW4kKI&feature=player_embedded
Massimo Pigliucci on In-Your-Face Atheism: <http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com/2011/01/some-thoughts-about-in-your-face.html>
Ed Buckner responds to Massimo’s blog: <http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com/2011/01/some-further-thoughts-about-in-your.html>
David Silverman responds to both blogs: <http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com/2011/01/some-further-further-thoughts-about-in.html>
The Judgment Day Road Trip: <http://www.cnn.com/2011/LIVING/03/06/judgment.day.caravan/index.html?hpt=C1>

Become a Member!



(Or renew your membership with this form or online at www.AtlantaFreethought.org!)

If you've enjoyed what you've read, we enthusiastically invite you to join the Atlanta Freethought Society. Every month you will get our acclaimed monthly newsletter, the *Atlanta Freethought News*, voting rights in the organization—and enjoyment of the superb speakers we have coming up, as well as the social and activist events that we sponsor!

Individual memberships: One person can become a member for \$25 per year.

Household memberships: A household is defined as two members sharing one newsletter, and is available for \$35 per year. Since some of our households have additional members, there will be a \$5 per year charge for each additional voting household member.

Paper Newsletters: Due to printing and mailing expense, we add a surcharge of \$15 for members to receive a paper newsletter in the mail rather than our email version newsletter. We encourage all members to receive the newsletter by email to save on paper, postage and printing expenses.

International members: Because of international postage rates and special handling, we have been forced to add a surcharge of \$5 for members in Canada or Mexico, and \$10 for other foreign addresses for members who receive the paper newsletter.

Thank you for all your support! We look forward to your being with us in the coming months!

Annual dues are:

Membership	Dues	# of mems	Total	
<input type="checkbox"/> Individual	\$25	_____	\$_____	Name _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Household (2 members)	\$35	_____	\$_____	Address _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Additional household mems	\$5	_____	\$_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Low Income/ Student/under 21	\$10	_____	\$_____	Phone H: _____ W: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Paper version of newsletter	\$15	_____	\$_____	Email addr: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Subscription only	\$10	_____	\$_____	Please list names of additional household members: _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Member	\$100	_____	\$_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Household	\$125	_____	\$_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Life Member	\$1000	_____	\$_____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Postage for Canada/Mexico	\$5	_____	\$_____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Postage for other foreign addresses	\$10	_____	\$_____	
<input type="checkbox"/> Extra donation (thank you!)		_____	\$_____	
TOTAL:			\$_____	

Please send this form with payment to:
 Atlanta Freethought Society
 4775 N. Church Lane SE
 Smyrna, GA 30080-7224

Atlanta Freethought Society

4775 N. Church Lane SE Smyrna, GA 30080-7224

www.atlantafreethought.org afs@atlantafreethought.org

“Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect.” —James Madison, 1774

Why I Am Not A Christian — \$8

Lucid, comprehensive, engaging answer to Christian apologists by **Keith Parsons**. Respectful but devastating to all Christian claims. A wonderful follow-up to Bertrand Russell's great essay with the same title.

An Uppity Old Atheist Woman's Dictionary — \$8

By the late, great **Carol Faulkenberry** (illustrated by Amanda Faulkenberry); like Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary* —but better: more biting, funnier. Guaranteed to make you laugh out loud and to challenge at least one idea you hold.

Quotations That Support the Separation of State and Church (2nd edition) — \$11

Compiled by **Edward M. Buckner** and **Michael E. Buckner**; ammunition against Christian-nation mythologists. Quotes from America's revolutionaries, constitution framers, Presidents, court decisions. Sources carefully documented; extensive index. Comb-bound—lies flat for easy copying.

Please add:

\$4 TOTAL S&H Charge for up to 2 books.

\$1.50 EACH S&H Charge for 3 to 9 books.

No S&H Charge for 10 Books or more.

(All Merchandise will be shipped USPS Priority Mail)

Send check or money order to:

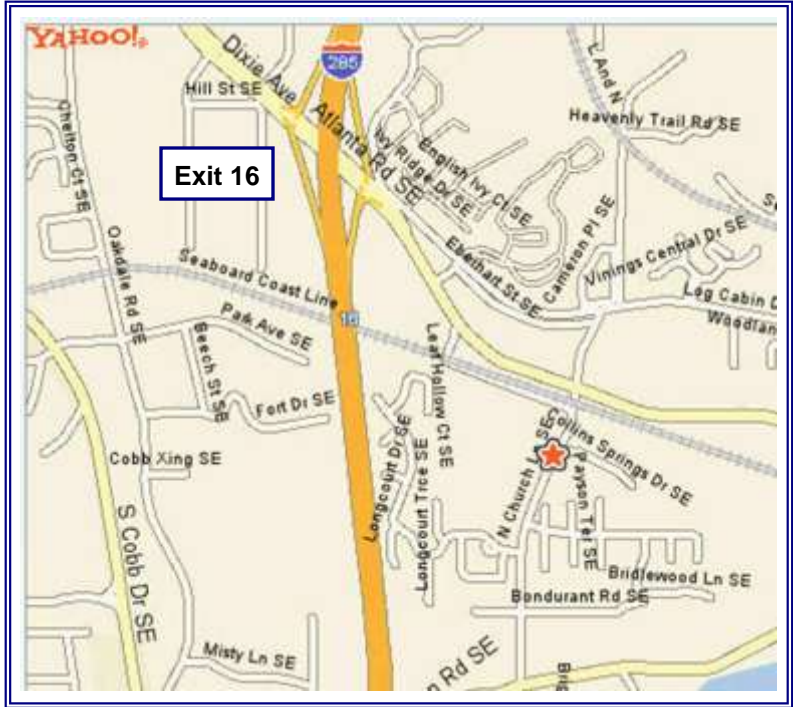
ATLANTA FREETHOUGHT SOCIETY
4775 N. Church Lane SE Smyrna, GA 30080-7224



Atlanta Freethought Society

**The March 13 Meeting:
1:00 at AF Hall,
4775 N. Church Lane SE
Smyrna, GA**

**This Month's Speakers:
Dr. Richard Jakiel
and Pixie Bruner**



Atlanta Freethought News is produced by the Atlanta Freethought Society, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit, member-run, educational organization created to advance freethought and protect freethinkers. Any freethought, atheist, secular humanist, agnostic, or rationalist group is granted permission to reproduce anything from our newsletter not expressly labeled otherwise (acknowledgement of AFS and author appreciated). Articles published represent the official opinion of AFS only when that is clearly stated; all other opinion is that of the individual author.



If your label indicates "2011" or earlier, please renew. Thanks.

Atlanta Freethought News
Atlanta Freethought Society
4775 N. Church Lane SE
Smyrna, GA 30080-7224