

# Atlanta Freethought News

*Dare to Think for Yourself.*

An AFS Publication • Volume 17 Number 5 • May 2011

## The May AFS Meeting

The May 8 AFS meeting will feature a talk by our own **Ed Buckner** on "To the Shores of Tripoli..." Ed will draw connections between American history over 200 years ago and current events. (You can read an earlier version of this talk at [http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/buckner\\_tripoli.html](http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/buckner_tripoli.html).)

Ed Buckner is the former president of American Atheists and is currently the Chair of the AFS Activism Task Force.

The meeting will be at 1:00 at **Atlanta Freethought Hall**, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, in Smyrna, GA. Arrive earlier if you like for refreshments and conversation with other free-thinkers. 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 May AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be a Fish-Fry on Saturday, May 14, at 1:00 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](mailto:afs@atlantafreethought.org).

## The Cobb Prayer Breakfast Protest

AFS is protesting The Cobb County Prayer Breakfast on Thursday, May 5, at 7:00 to 9:00 AM. (See the article on page 3.) The protest will be on the sidewalk under the pedestrian overpass in front of the Cobb Galleria Centre, at 2 Galleria Parkway, in Atlanta.

Bring your sign and join us if you can!

Smyrna Atheist Helps Revive 140-Year-Old Primitive Baptist Church:

<http://smyrna.patch.com/articles/smyrna-atheist-helps-revive-140-year-old-primitive-baptist-church>

AFS to Protest Cobb County Prayer Breakfast: <http://www.ajc.com/news/cobb/atheist-groups-to-protest-911334.html>

## 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 have their summer party at John Barnes' place in Woodbury, GA on the banks of the Flint River on Saturday, May 21, all day. This has also turned into a Judgment Day party, since Harold Camping has declared that Jesus will return on that day! See <http://www.cnn.com/2011/LIVING/03/06/judgment.day.caravan/index.html> and email John ([jobar2@earthlink.net](mailto:jobar2@earthlink.net)) for details on the party.

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, May 14, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave, Atlanta. Jennifer Henning, a chemical engineer in the nuclear industry, will speak on "The Fukushima Nuclear Disaster." <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com>.

The **Atlanta Science Tavern** meetup will be at 7:00 PM on Saturday, May 21, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave NE in Atlanta. This month: The Science Trivia Challenge, with prizes of \$50, \$30 and \$20 in Manuel's gift certificates. See <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaScienceTavern/>.

There will be a **meetup** for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, May 8, 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, May 22, 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 start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

May 8: Ed Buckner, former president of American Atheists, speaker and debater in many places across the U.S. and in the United Kingdom, will speak on "To the Shores of Tripoli..."

Jun 12: TBD

July 10: TBD

Aug 14: TBD

## AFS Email Lists

The **AFS eNews** Announcement list provides subscribers with reminders and updates on AFS activities and news. The **AFS Forum** is a place for discussions of freethought, atheism, agnosticism, church-state separation, and religion. Visit the AFS website at <http://www.atlantafreethought.org> for more info or to subscribe.

The Atlanta Freethought Society is a member-run organization dedicated to advancing freethought and protecting the rights and reputation of free-thinkers, agnostics, atheists and humanists.

We welcome anyone who is interested in learning about living a good life free from religion through attending AFS speeches, debates, and discussions. We employ protests, letters to the editor, broadcast appearances, and any other reasonable and civil means available to achieve our mission.

We define *freethought* as "the forming of opinions about life in general and religion in particular on the basis of reason and the evidence of our senses, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief."

We actively support a strict separation of church and state as the best means to guarantee liberty for all, regardless of religious belief or lack of belief.

We seek to educate ourselves on many topics but especially on religion and non-religion. We do this through a series of thought-provoking speakers and programs, and by maintaining a web forum and an extensive library of freethought, religious, and related books, pamphlets, videotapes, and audiotapes.

We provide an organization where freethinkers and non-theists can develop friendships, talk freely, socialize and enjoy each other's company. We do not discriminate against anyone on such irrelevant grounds as race, sexual orientation, age, gender, class, or physical disability. We welcome members and leaders of all political parties and preferences.

Because we are designated by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) educational organization, contributions to AFS are tax deductible.

Any who are like-minded are welcome to join us.

## Atlanta Freethought News an AFS publication

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Steve Yothment

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## Atlanta Freethought News

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Membership in AFS is \$25/year for  
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\$20 to Canada/Mexico, \$25 elsewhere.  
Sustaining Members (individual) \$100.  
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and Michael Buckner

# The Cobb County Prayer Breakfast – And Protest!

By Steve Yothment, AFS President

The Atlanta Freethought Society and American Atheists will protest the Cobb County Prayer Breakfast this coming Thursday, May 5, at 7:00 to 9:00AM in Atlanta.

So how did this all come about and why the protest?

Cobb County has had their Prayer Breakfast on the “National Day of Prayer” for many years. AFS has protested the Prayer Breakfast in the past since we’re pretty sure that the event is organized and run out of a Cobb County government office. So, this year, Ed Buckner called around to find details on the event.

Judy Humphries, Executive Secretary to the Cobb County Manager, sent Ed the below flyer for the event by email from her Cobb County email address. With a little checking, we found that the phone number on the flyer for obtaining more information belongs to the Cobb County Support Services Agency, a government office which includes Tax Assessor, Purchasing for the county, Fleet Management, Records Management, etc.

The director of the Cobb County Support Services Agency is Virgil Moon, who is also president of the Cobb County Prayer Breakfast Committee. It appears that he is organizing and running the Prayer Breakfast out of this Cobb County government office. (Compare the phone number with that shown here: <http://supportservices.cobbcountyga.gov/>)

I called the phone number on the flyer and left a message asking for a registration form for the event. They faxed me a form using a separate Cobb County government phone line (the same fax number as shown on their website) and, I would assume, a Cobb County-owned fax machine.

So, AFS issued the following press release on April 15:

(Smyrna, GA) Atlanta Freethought Society President **Steve Yothment** said today that a protest will be held on Thursday morning, 5 May, on the sidewalk in front of the Cobb Galleria Centre (eastern side of U.S. 41/Cobb Parkway – across from Cumberland Mall) from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. Yothment said, “This rally, led by both AFS leaders and former American Atheist President Dr. **Ed Buckner**, will express our anger at the Cobb County government’s support for a religious exercise. We are taxpayers in this county and we resent our money being spent to promote prayer.” Buckner added that “The hypocrisy of Cobb officials is apparent as they promote prayer for their own political purposes and with *our* government facilities even while they make a show of their piety. They should read and heed Matthew 6:5-6 if they really are the Bible-believers they pretend to be.”

The rally and protest will start just before the unconstitutional breakfast does and will continue throughout the breakfast. It will be held in the space closest to the event (where the Cobb County police will permit it to be held). The intention is to make clear to participants and to other Cobb citizens that having the Cobb Finance Department as a sponsor for this openly religious event and using government telephones and fax machines – and government employees – to promote religion is illegal and dangerous to the liberty of all.

The Atlanta Freethought Society is a member-run (all volunteer) non-profit, 501(c)(3) educational organization. The freethought hall that AFS owns and pays real estate taxes to Cobb County on, was a church from 1866, when it was built, until 2001. Regular AFS meetings, free and open to the public, are held on the second Sunday afternoon of every month, with a variety of other events and activities each month as well. The regular meeting usually features a speaker (often nationally known) on religion, freethought, science, history, or some combination of these. AFS has published, under the auspices of its press – Freethought Press – seven books and dozens of calendars, brochures, and flyers. AFS has often led protests against church-state violations.

The *Marietta Daily Journal* covered the story<sup>1</sup> on April 19. In their article, Virgil Moon confirmed that the phone number on the flyer “is run out of his office, and that his administrative staff is in charge of answering messages re-

Join us for the 27th Annual Cobb County Prayer Breakfast

**Keynote Speaker – Shan Cooper**  
Vice President of Lockheed Martin Aeronautics  
General Manager  
Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Marietta

Cobb Galleria Centre - Two Galleria Parkway  
Atlanta, Georgia  
Coffee/Social: 6:30 a.m.  
Breakfast/Program: 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.

For more information, call  
**770.528.3328**

COBB COUNTY PRAYER BREAKFAST RESERVATION FORM  
Advance Reservation Deadline April 19  
Tickets will be mailed April 25

Please reserve \_\_\_\_\_ seats @ \$20.00 per person, or \_\_\_\_\_ table(s) @ \$200.00 per table of ten  
Name \_\_\_\_\_ Company \_\_\_\_\_  
Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone (office or home) \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Return this form with a check made payable to the Cobb County Prayer Breakfast Committee, Inc.  
Mail to: P.O. Box 4264, Marietta, Georgia 30061

**THURSDAY, MAY 5, 2011 · NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER**

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questing information. Moon said that the department has operated the line since at least 2004, and that while staff work the lines, all work related to the breakfast is done during non-county working hours and they are reimbursed by the (Prayer Breakfast) committee for hours worked." (Of course, we would have to ask, "How do they know beforehand if the call is regular county business or is business related to the Prayer Breakfast?")

The article continues: "Last year, Moon said the committee paid staff \$524.95 for work performed organizing the breakfast. The phone line costs 20 cents a month and the committee

also reimburses the county for the \$2.40 it takes to keep phone lines open throughout the year."

The article quoted Steve Yothment, who said, "In our opinion, local governments should not be running religious services. Churches should do that. It's not an appropriate role for them to be using county resources for a religious event."

When asked if Moon viewed the county's participation as a violation of the separation of church and state, he said in the article that he did not. "It's a non-denominational event, and mostly, the people who make up the committee are business people. The

Board (of Commissioners) passed a proclamation in the '80's saying they support this event as a way for the community to come together." Moon also said the county is not donating any money to the breakfast.

We at AFS do not accept having a Cobb County government phone number on the flyer. And we don't accept having Cobb County employees answering the phone and emailing or faxing documents in support of the Prayer Breakfast. Let's keep local government out of the religion business! Let's keep church and state separate!

The protest is on! Bring your sign and join us in the protest if you can!

<sup>1</sup>See [http://mdjonline.com/view/full\\_story/12840746/article-Atheists-will-protest-prayer-meeting](http://mdjonline.com/view/full_story/12840746/article-Atheists-will-protest-prayer-meeting)

See <http://www.11alive.com/news/article/187958/3/SMYRNA-Atheist-group-to-protest-Cobb-Prayer-Breakfast>

Political Insider Jim Galloway's blog: <http://tinyurl.com/3kfx4d3>

Don McKee for Cobb Prayer Protesters: <http://tinyurl.com/3apzkxe>

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## Are Local Officials Ignoring the Separation of Church and State?

### Why Political Involvement in the "National Day of Prayer" is a Cause for Concern to Everyone

**F**or some reason, a lot of people around these parts simply refuse to accept that church and state are supposed to be separate in this country. The fact that it was the very first thing mentioned in the very first governing tract in our nation's modern history should be a pretty big clue to that testament. Like I said, should be.

And so, on May 5 a number of community members will plop down a few bucks to partake of a breakfast seminar at the Cobb Galleria Centre, for a government recognized celebration called "The National Day of Prayer." The breakfast, which features a keynote address by Lockheed Martin Aeronautics Vice President Shan Cooper, is the county's 27<sup>th</sup> annual banquet to celebrate the congressionally acknowledged observance.

The first "National Day of Prayer" was held in 1952, and has been celebrated and criticized ever since. In 1998, the American Civil Liberties Union condemned Cobb County officials for funding the annual event. In 2000, the Cobb County Board of Commissioners were threatened with legal action after it was revealed that the Cobb County Finance Department co-

ordinated and sold tickets to that year's banquet.

And this year, the annual breakfast is going to have some *outside* attendees.

Members of the groups American Atheists and the Atlanta Freethought Society have both made their intentions to protest the breakfast public. In a region with so many supposed Constitutionalists, I wonder where all of the other freedom lovers and advocates of democracy are hiding.

Very rarely does one see a blatant First Amendment violation of such a magnitude. It's absolutely unquestionable that the "National Day of Prayer" celebration is an illegal act of state sponsored religion, and the active involvement of Cobb County officials in the annual event is a direct encroachment of not only federal, but state legislation.

From paragraph six of the Georgia State Constitution, Article I, Section II: "No money shall ever be taken from the public treasury, directly or indirectly, in aid of any church, sect, cult or religious denomination or of any sectarian institution."

It simply doesn't get any more cut

and dry than that. So, we have a clear and unmistakable abuse of local governance, and nobody in town wants to cry "foul" here?

People in Cobb County take their religion very seriously. In fact, they often take it so seriously that they wish it had oversight of American law. Remember 2006's flap over the text book warnings on biology books that had the audacity to state that human life may or may not have begun exactly as Genesis stated? Well, the United States Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals determined that the majority opinion of Cobb County residents was unconstitutional in *Selman v. Cobb County School District*.

Just because something is the popular idea among a mass of people doesn't mean that popular idea should be forced upon everyone in the area. Lest we forget Sonny Perdue's infamous decision to "pray for rain" during a prolonged drought in 2007—It was an act which not only made the citizens of the state look like a bunch of laughably superstitious buffoons; it, of course, ultimately proved to be fruitless.

According to the framers of both

our national and state Constitutions, government and religion should under no circumstances intermingle. If that's the case, I wonder what Tom Jefferson and Ben Franklin would think if they saw the myriad banners on county government property advertising (or in the case of the Frank Moore Judicial Center in Cartersville, actually hosting) "National Day of Prayer" functions. Something tells me they wouldn't be smiling about our

casual abandonment of that trifling "Establishment Clause" in our Bill of Rights.

Do, we, as individuals, have the right to practice whatever religion we choose? Absolutely. Should we have the ability to flaunt our religion in the faces of others, even if they really don't want to hear it? Without question. As citizens, we have that entitlement, but as active members of government, we simply do not.

Sponsorship, and most certainly advocacy, of the government for any sort of religious cause isn't just poor policymaking, it's flat out dangerous violations of civil trust.

And if the religiously motivated actions of our elected leaders don't have you concerned about our future as a community, I hope you will think more about it.

[Written by James Swift on April 20, from <http://kennesaw.patch.com/>.]

## American Atheists Expands Billboard Campaign

### No Apocalypse, No Rapture. Countering 2000 Years of "Almost Any Day Now" Deception

American Atheists has launched another round in its "Myth" billboard campaign with signs going up in late April in Oakland, Houston and Ft. Lauderdale. The message declares: The Rapture: You KNOW it's Nonsense. 2000 Years of "Any Day Now."

That's because some terrified Christians believe that Saturday, May 21, 2011 is the end of the world as we know it. Jesus is supposedly set to return, and when he does, the souls and bodies of the saved will go flying off to heaven in an event known as The Rapture<sup>1</sup>. This colorful and highly imaginative scenario is based on predictions culled from the Bible by a minister named Harold Camping<sup>2</sup> who runs Family Radio. Camping's warning is being taken seriously by a rapidly growing and surprisingly large segment of fundamentalists and evangelicals, and is being fueled by a lavish billboard campaign throughout the country.

"This is nothing new," said American Atheists President Dave Silverman. "Self-declared Christian prophets have a long track record predicting the end of the world. What distinguishes this latest round of warnings, though, is the sheer scale, and the cultural backdrop of 'gloom and doom' over everything from the economy to the environment."

Mr. Silverman added: "Every time



someone has predicted the rapture they've been wrong, but most of the time the preachers make a lot of money in the process. In my opinion, it's an excellent scam—if you can handle the complete lack of ethics involved."

So, the atheists are countering what they see as hysteria and foolishness. Atheists will be hosting "Rapture Parties" in cities like Ft. Lauderdale, Oakland and Houston<sup>3</sup>.

Last Christmas, American Atheists erected an enormous billboard at the entrance to New York City's Lincoln Tunnel with a depiction of the nativity scene, the star of Bethlehem and the statement: "You Know It's a Myth<sup>4</sup>."

Says Silverman, "We know from the response to our billboard campaign that there are large numbers of 'closet atheists' and religious skeptics who are afraid of 'coming out' to their families and friends. We hope to en-

courage and support them by revealing the fact that, yes, they are atheists, and can be proud of the fact."

Blair Scott, Communications Director for American Atheists, said that Camping and other Christian extremists have every right to make such predictions, but "they should be aware of the fact that there are emotionally-troubled individuals who might take these warnings seriously and cause harm to themselves and others."

"There are already reports of people selling their property, quitting jobs, and taking other reckless actions because they believe Jesus is returning and their problems will disappear."

"We could be looking at another Heaven's Gate<sup>5</sup>," Scott warned. The reference is to a 1997 religious cult that committed suicide to free their souls and join an alien spacecraft trailing the Comet Hale-Bopp.

[From the April 24 issue of *AA News*.]

<sup>1</sup>See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rapture>

<sup>2</sup>See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold\\_Camping](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Camping)

<sup>3</sup>See [https://atheists.org/events/Rapture\\_RAMs](https://atheists.org/events/Rapture_RAMs)

<sup>4</sup>See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1334040/You-know-myth-Atheist-banner-causes-storm-entrance-New-York-tunnel.html>

<sup>5</sup>See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heaven%27s\\_Gate\\_%28religious\\_group](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heaven%27s_Gate_%28religious_group)

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# FFRF: NDOP Lawsuit Overturned

**Annie Laurie Gaylor says “‘No law’ (from the First Amendment) should mean no law!”**

A panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago ruled<sup>1</sup> 3-to-0 on April 14 that the Freedom From Religion Foundation and its plaintiffs do not have standing to continue their historic challenge of the 1952 congressional act declaring an annual National Day of Prayer and requiring the president to issue a proclamation exhorting citizens to pray.

FFRF announced immediately it will seek a rehearing by the entire Seventh Circuit (an “en banc” review).

The appeals court overturned the district court’s strong ruling in favor of FFRF’s challenge, *FFRF v. Obama*, by U.S. District Judge Barbara Crabb in April 2010. Crabb ruled the National Day of Prayer as enacted by Congress was unconstitutional: “In this instance, the government has taken sides on a matter that must be left to individual conscience.” Crabb added: “The same law that prohibits the government from declaring a National Day of Prayer also prohibits it from declaring a National Day of Blasphemy.”

Crabb noted a National Day of Prayer was no more within the purview of government to declare than encouraging “citizens to fast during the month of Ramadan, attend a synagogue, purify themselves in a sweat lodge or practice rune magic.”

Foundation Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor condemned the appeals court decision as cowardly. She said it is clear that had the appeals court panel ruled on the merits instead of throwing the case out on standing, FFRF would have won, as it did in federal district court.

“Our challenge is so strong, our claim is so correct. The First Amendment says, ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.’ ‘No law’ should mean no law!” Gaylor said.

The National Day of Prayer was enacted by Congress in 1952 at the

behest of Rev. Billy Graham and modified at the behest of Christian evangelicals in 1988. The law orders the president to set aside the first Thursday in May every year “as a National Day of Prayer, on which the people of the United States may turn to God in prayer and meditation at churches, in groups and as individuals.”

“Congress and the president of the United States have no business telling me or any other citizen to pray, ‘to turn to God in prayer at churches,’ much less setting aside an entire day for prayer every year and even telling me what to pray about,” said Gaylor. She and Dan Barker, who co-directs FFRF, are two of six FFRF officers or board members who are individual plaintiffs in the historic lawsuit.

Barker said: “The Seventh Circuit’s decision today would seemingly allow Congress to declare a national religion as long as no one is forced to participate directly in the religion’s practices!”

“We are very troubled by the court’s conclusion that congressionally mandated endorsements of religion by the president amount to no more than ‘hurt feelings,’” commented Richard L. Bolton, FFRF’s litigation attorney.

“We have been told recently by the Supreme Court in *Winn v. Arizona* that taxpayers cannot complain about the use of tax appropriations for alleged religious preferences. Now, the Seventh Circuit closes the courthouse door to the intended audience of presidential proclamations exhorting religion. The courts are effectively eviscerating the Establishment Clause of any practical significance by making it unenforceable by anyone,” Bolton said.

“By making coercion the only touchstone for accountability under the Establishment Clause, outright governmental endorsement of religion is deemed a matter of no concern to the courts,” Bolton added.

FFRF is also challenging the National Day of Prayer at the gubernatorial level in Colorado, and in a federal lawsuit filed last month seeking an injunction ordering Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer not to issue her usual Arizona Day of Prayer on the first Thursday in May.

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Americans United for Separation of Church and State said the ruling establishes a dangerous precedent.

“This decision is part of an ominous trend in the federal courts to deny Americans the right to challenge church-state violations,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United, which filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the case. “I don’t want the government telling me when, how or whether to pray.

“Under the court’s logic, Congress could order the president to declare the United States a Christian nation—and no one could challenge it in court,” Lynn continued. “That, to be blunt, makes a mockery of the First Amendment’s religious liberty protections.”

Lynn objected to the court’s assertion that religious proclamations issued by government cause people no harm. Rather, he said, they create the impression that some people (those who choose to pray) are insiders while everyone else is an outsider.

“Government shouldn’t be in the business of advising people to pray, period,” Lynn said. “Americans who want to engage in religious activities are quite capable of consulting the religious leaders of their choice.”

The original ruling for *FFRF vs. Obama* back in April of 2010 sparked hostile comment from many in Congress and was appealed by the Obama administration. Americans United filed a friend-of-the-court brief before the 7th Circuit, asserting that the NDP is unconstitutional.

[From April 14 press releases by FFRF and Americans United.]

<sup>1</sup>See the rulings at <http://ffrf.org/uploads/legal/A1180676.PDF> and <http://ffrf.org/uploads/legal/SummaryJudgementNDP.PDF>

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# Tornados and Other Acts of God — and the Bible Belt

By Conrad Goeringer, from the April 29 issue of *American Atheist News*

**I**t is hard not to notice, but the part of the country being devastated by a slew of floods, tornados and other natural disasters seems to be, well, the most religious.

On Wednesday, for instance, the Southeast—those states that just have never gotten beyond the glorification of the “lost cause” and its entrenched authoritarian Christian values—experienced the worst twister disaster since 1932. The death toll presently stands at 330 people, 200 of them in Alabama alone; thousands of homes have been destroyed, and the season for this type of havoc is far from over. In the community of Coleman, Alabama, all three churches were destroyed, and hundreds of citizens left homeless. Gov. Robert Bentley visited Coleman on Wednesday, and lamented that the twisters left the community looking “like a war zone.”

Elsewhere, the weather is bringing comparable perdition. There are droughts and wildfires in Texas (Gov. Perry even called for citizens to pray for rain), and some people are describing these meteorological events in Biblical and apocalyptic terms. All of this may fuel growing interest in the May 21st “Judgment Day” prophecy of evangelist Harold Camping of Family Radio. He is predicting that worthy Christians will laterally disappear on that day as part of a Rapture and ascend into heaven. Six months later, says Camping, Jesus will return. Those floods and tornados fit nicely into the template of apocalyptic excitement, and the narratives in the Old and New Testaments about plagues and locusts and famine and other decimation.

There is also debate over whether the sudden spike in such events, particularly in the American heartland and Southeast, is the result of global warming. This may be likely; skeptics, though, point to cycles of tornado activity, the fact that we can detect tornados far better than half-a-century ago, and that populations have geo-

graphically expanded. Humans are living in flood-prone areas. Home insurance may even be a factor, allowing people to rebuild on land that will surely flood again.

Has anyone noticed, though, that these recent natural calamities happen to impact a part of the country where the population is the most god-fearing and church-attending? You might suppose that if these states are heavily populated with religious believers, God—assuming he is an evangelical Christian like so many in those states are—would be more receptive and sympathetic to their religious devotion.

Wikipedia notes that the Bible Belt includes “most of Texas and Oklahoma in the southwest, and in the states south of the Ohio River, and extending east to include central West Virginia, Virginia south of Northern Virginia, and parts of Maryland. In addition, the Bible Belt covers parts of Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. A 1978 study by Charles Heatwole identified the Bible Belt as the region dominated by 24 fundamentalist Protestant denominations.”

This part of the country was heavily Anglican in the early years of the American Republic; it was later swept by waves of religious revivalism. A virulent form of Christianity was part of the cultural milieu leading up to (and beyond) the Civil War that rationalized the social and economic institutions associated with slavery and the plantation system. The glorification of “the Lost Cause” included the notion that, particularly in the South, there had been a White, Christian civilization destroyed in the “War of Northern Aggression.”

The Ku Klux Klan emerged as a domestic revanchist terror movement directed at Reconstruction and, later, the incursion of northern liberalism. Religious fundamentalism found fertile soil here too.

Other evidence suggests at least a statistical link between recent devas-

tating weather and religiosity. A 2007 study indicates that the most religious states are Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, and Arkansas. The survey noted: “...the relative importance of religion in Americans’ lives has interesting geographical differentiation. Clearly, Southern states are populated by residents with relatively high religiosity, as are several other states in the middle of the country, stretching from Texas through Oklahoma to Kansas and the two Dakotas. At the same time, states whose residents are least likely to report that religion is important tend to be concentrated in New England and the far West (with the exception of Utah). Additionally, levels of religiosity are lower in several Mid-Atlantic states.”

Of course we know that floods, tornados and other weather-related disasters are the result of measurable factors (like humidity, air temperature, currents) that atmospheric scientists, for the most part, understand. Remote sensing has allowed meteorologists to provide early warnings of when such calamities may strike, something that has saved countless lives.

Still, the faithful often sense a prophetic aspect to all of this. Those moving isobars and temperature fluctuations discussed on the evening news are really the hand of god inflicting his wrath on the sinful and spiritually restless—or so say televangelists and self-described prophets looking for signs of the end times. Why, though, would Jehovah literally rain down such destructive malevolence on regions populated heavily by his followers? Why not wipe those populations where large percentages of the inhabitants practice or tolerate homosexuality? (Think San Francisco and maybe even New Orleans.) Why not land a twister right on top of the American Museum of Natural History, one of the great international showcases eloquently explaining the veracity and power of Darwinian evo-

lution, in New York City? What about Las Vegas—sweep away those prostitutes and degenerate gamblers, and purify the Nevada desert like a spiritual Hydrogen bomb!

It appears that things are just the opposite. God, if he exists and plays with the weather like an all-powerful juvenile delinquent—seems intent on punishing the very regions of the country that are most devout. Could it be that it is Allah or some other dei-

ty, and not Jehovah, who is up there letting loose these thunderbolts aimed straight at the most godly and god-fearing part of our nation?

Following natural disasters like the one earlier this week, we often encounter a scripted performance by religious and political leaders. The former pray for the dead, or grovel even more in hopes that, maybe, their god will hear prayers and take a “time out” from his vengeful indulgences. The

politicians may take an equally expedient path, calling for public prayer. Sometimes they pray for rain, other times they implore the deity to stop torrential floods.

Perhaps one day, if anyone is really “up there”—this elusive and clearly mischievous and confused “god” will get it right. If not, well, the devout don’t have a prayer.

Conrad Goeringer  
Editor, AANEWS

# Freethinker: Reason leaves no room for resurrection

**Gary’s article was in the Tallahassee Democrat on April 28, four days after Easter!**

By Gary Whittenberger  
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Freethinkers’ Forum

## OPINION

Every year around this time, we are told by some religious leaders that a first-century Jewish man was killed and then came back to life.

This alleged event is celebrated as “Easter.” Do we wish that it happened? Perhaps. Should we believe it happened? No. The alleged resurrection of Jesus almost certainly never happened.

We all have had family members, friends and acquaintances who have died and not come back to life. Also, we know famous people who have died and not come back to life. In the last 50,000 years of human history during which an estimated 100 billion people have died, there is not a single confirmed case of a person coming back to life.

We know from modern biology that when all signs of death are present, including rigor mortis, people do not come back to life. So, generalizing from this evidence alone, we should believe that Jesus fit the same pattern.

But what about those

Gospel narratives in which Jesus is described as coming back to life? Do they provide evidence sufficient to overturn our justified belief that he didn’t? No, they do not. The authors of the narratives neither write in the first person nor identify themselves within the texts; we don’t know who they were. All the narratives were written 30 to 70 years after Jesus’ death and in a language not used by him and his disciples. There are no good reasons to believe that any of these narratives was written by an eyewitness.

There are many significant inconsistencies and contradictions in the four different Gospel stories pertaining to Jesus’ death and its aftermath. Some major details or events are mentioned in one narrative and not in the others. These are details which, had they actually occurred, would have been noticed, remembered and thought to be significant and thus would be mentioned in more than one narrative if not in all four.

For example, only one

narrative mentions saints coming out of their graves around the time of the crucifixion. Only one mentions that there were guards placed at the tomb, and this alleged posting was many hours after the burial, too late to prevent a theft of the body had it occurred.

Only one mentions that Jesus was poked with a spear while on the cross. For single narratives to mention major details like these, which are not mentioned in the other narratives, would be like one author saying that three planes, rather than two, flew into the Twin Towers on 9-11. It just doesn’t make sense.

How could people in the first century come to believe that Jesus came back to life if he didn’t? There are so many ways this might have happened. Some people might have misinterpreted recovery from a coma as a resurrection. Overwhelmed by

grief, one or more persons might have had a hallucination of Jesus after his death. (The content of the hallucination may have even included not only Jesus but some of his disciples.)

Somebody might have told a lie that others strongly wanted to believe was true. Some persons might have been the victims of a hoax. Some writer might have used “resurrection” as a metaphor to describe enduring and loving memories of Jesus. Perhaps more than one of these led to the origin and maintenance of a belief in an actual resurrection. Which is more probable, an actual coming back to life of a man or a misunderstanding, misperception, hallucination, lie, exaggeration, rumor, hoax or metaphor? Any of the latter is more probable. It is extremely unlikely that Jesus came back to life and we should not believe that he did.

We are sometimes told that we should ignore the good evidence that people have not come back to life and we should instead embrace the speculations

and rumors that Jesus did rise from the dead. We are sometimes told to just accept it on faith. But this would be neglecting our intellectual responsibility and showing a disrespect for truth.

Even though we might wish that a man came back to life because this would give us some hope that we too might come back to life someday, we should resist the temptation to believe a claim that goes against reason. Neither wishing nor tradition make it so. And the popularity of an assertion doesn’t make it true either.

If you are ready for a new type of celebration this time of year, then join me and celebrate the wonderful tool of reason.

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See Dan Barker: [http://teaneck.patch.com/articles/ex-evangelical-preacher-to-talk-atheism-at-ethical-culture-society#youtube\\_video-5567146](http://teaneck.patch.com/articles/ex-evangelical-preacher-to-talk-atheism-at-ethical-culture-society#youtube_video-5567146)

Barry Lynn on “In God We Trust”: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/51427.html>

Santorum “appalled” at JFK church/state comments: [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-20043553-503544.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20043553-503544.html)

See and hear the April 7 debate between William Lane Craig and Sam Harris at University of Notre Dame: <http://apologetics315.blogspot.com/2011/04/william-lane-craig-vs-sam-harris-debate.html>

Georgia Church Prays For Lower Gas Prices: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/13/church-group-gas-prices-pray\\_n\\_848690.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/13/church-group-gas-prices-pray_n_848690.html)

Nick News: Freedom to Believe...Or Not: <http://www.nick.com/videos/clip/nick-news-freedom-to-believe-or-not-full-episode.html>

The Official National Day of Prayer video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSEdh7A4Bu8>



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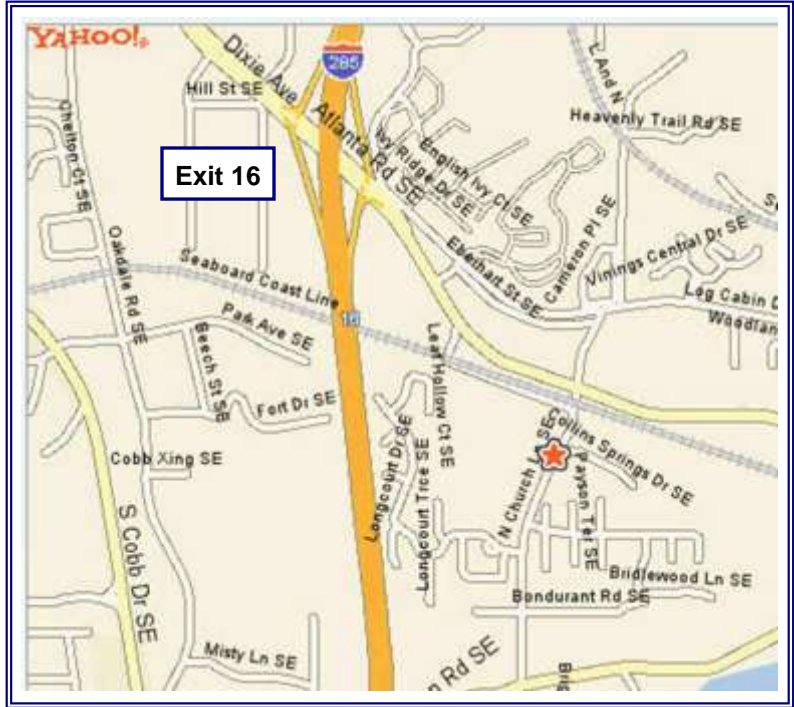
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**The May 8 Meeting:  
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**This Month's Speaker:  
Ed Buckner**



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