

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication

• Volume 17 Number 7

• July 2011

The July AFS Meeting

The July 10 AFS meeting will feature **Frank and Mary Hamilton** presenting "Freethought in Song and Story." The Hamiltons will talk about their mission to "share our love of the world's folk music and promote unity and healing" and will share many songs with us.

Frank and Mary have been involved with folk music for most of their lives. Frank was a performer in the folk group *The Weavers* and played with Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Hamilton_\(musician\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Hamilton_(musician)))

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 July AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be on Saturday, July 16, at 1:00 at Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q, 4574 S. Cobb Drive, Smyrna, GA. Come and enjoy the food and conversation with other free-thinkers! (Yes, they serve beer too!)

AFS Meetings and Activities

July 10: AFS Board Meeting, AF Hall, 11:00 AM

July 10: AFS General Meeting, AF Hall, 1:00 PM

July 16: AFS Social, Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q, 1:00 PM

"I have never seen the slightest scientific proof of the religious ideas of heaven and hell, of future life for individuals, or of a personal god. So far as religion of the day is concerned, it is a damned fake... Religion is all bunk."

— Thomas Edison

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, July 17, at 1:00 at AF Hall. See <http://www.georgiahumanists.org/>.

The **Black Nonbelievers of Atlanta** will meet on Sunday, July 17, at 2:00 at the Tenth Amendment Media Group's Conference Room, 2245 Godby Road, Ste. 111, in College Park, GA. See <http://blacknonbelievers.org/> for details.

The **Fayette Freethought Society** hosts a lunch at El Rancho 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/>

GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet on Monday, July 11 at 7:00PM at UUCG, 12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville, GA. <http://gust.domek.org/>

The **SOS (Secular Organizations for Sobriety)** meets on Tuesdays at 7:30PM at McAlister's Deli on Holcomb Bridge Road in Roswell. For more info: donnaigore@yahoo.com

The **Atlanta Skeptics** will meet at 7:00 PM on Saturday, July 16, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave, Atlanta. Scott Little will speak. <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com/>

The **Atlanta Science Tavern** meetup will be at 7:00 PM on Saturday, July 23, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave NE in Atlanta. Dr. Mindy Maris of Gwinnett College will speak on "The Promises and Uncertainties of Stem Cell Biology." <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaScienceTavern/>

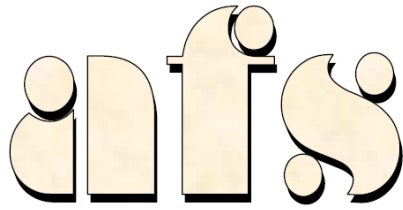
There will be a **meetup** for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, July 10, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur. (<http://www.meetup.com/Atlanta-Atheists/>)

Another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for Sunday, July 24, 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.



Atlanta Freethought Society

Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at the AF Hall, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, Smyrna, GA, unless otherwise noted. Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

July 10: Frank and Mary Hamilton will entertain us with folk music, freethought commentary and their life story.

Aug 14: "Brother Richard" Haynes, founder of Atheist Nexus, will speak.

Sept 11: TBD

Oct 9: 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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Vol. 17, Number 6, June 2011

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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.

Send E-mail to
afs@atlantafreethought.org.
AFS Webmasters: Freya Harris
and Michael Buckner

The Georgia Car Tag Vote

Georgia is holding an online vote for car tag styles, some of which include “In God We Trust”

The state of Georgia is holding a design competition for a new standard issue license plate. Three of the eight final designs currently up for online voting¹ display the words, “In God We Trust.” Voting will be open until July 8, and finalists will be announced July 11. Republican Gov. Nathan Deal will, on July 15, choose the design which will go into production in 2012.

Under current Georgia law, all free license plates include a county name. But as of January 2011, residents have been able to purchase a sticker reading “In God We Trust” for a nominal fee, which they may apply to their license plates, in place of the name of their county. The contest guidelines state that each entry must include “the county name or ‘In God We Trust’ label at the bottom.” Neither the contest guidelines nor the materials on the voting website indicate whether the designer’s choice of words on the license plate footer will impact the standard issue plate.

On June 28, 2011, Annie Laurie Gaylor (Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation) sent a letter to the Commissioner of the Department of Revenue, Doug MacGinnitie, opposing the default inclusion of “In God We Trust” on license plate designs. In the letter, Gaylor compared official sanctioning of “In God We Trust” to official use of phrases such as “Praise Allah,” “In Buddha We Trust,” or “There is No God.”

A June 28 editorial² in the Athens Banner-Herald gives some background on the local political implications of this competition. The Banner-Herald, as well as other press coverage of this vote, assumed that the new standard-issue license plate would automatically include the phrase, “In God We Trust.” Seen in this light, the election acts as a referendum on Georgia’s religious identity. According to the Banner-Herald, it is “hard to envision Deal, as a conservative Republican, opting for a plate design without that phrase.”

Karen Ashley-Lucas, marketing coordinator for the Department of Revenue, was quoted in the comments of the Banner-Herald editorial above saying, “The ‘In God We Trust’ phrase is there simply to demonstrate what the optional sticker that is already available would look like on that entry. Confusing, to say the least.” However, in the

press release³ announcing the online vote, Commissioner MacGinnitie said, “We encourage everyone to vote for their favorite design that best represents the state of Georgia.” Many Georgia residents feel that their religiosity is vital to their identity as Georgians, so even if the license plate policy will not change, “In God We Trust” is certainly influencing the outcome of this election!



VOTE

Voting in this competition is not restricted to Georgia residents. Go to <https://etax.dor.ga.gov/TagContest.aspx> and vote for your favorite “God”-free design, since the vote, inadvertently or not, seems to be a vote on the inclusion of “In God We Trust.” The site will allow any computer to vote at least once per day, so keep coming back, and make sure to also let your secular friends and acquaintances in Georgia know about this online vote!

[From a June 28 FFRF press release.]

¹See <https://etax.dor.ga.gov/TagContest.aspx>

²See http://www.onlineathens.com/stories/062811/opi_849660474.shtml

³See <https://etax.dor.ga.gov/pressrel/DORrel62411.pdf>

For Your Consideration... by AFS President Steve Yothment

Regarding the above article, how ethical (or legal) would it be for the state of Georgia to force people to have the religious statement “In God We Trust” on their vehicle’s license plate? It appears to me that this would be a major violation of church/state separation; it would infringe greatly on religious freedom. If the “In God We Trust” license plate is implemented in 2012 as the *only* license plate available to vehicle owners, I think there will be several lawsuits. The “vote” in the above article does not make it OK! Government officials need to be careful here to ensure that a legal fiasco is avoided. The best choice would be to not have any “In God We Trust” license plate at all.



Announces Its FIRST EVER

FAMILY WEEKEND CAMP!

Where Fun, Friends and Freethought Meet Family!

What: The South Carolina Camp Quest weekend camp will be a mini-Camp Quest – all the fun and excitement of a week-long camp will be condensed into a super-duper-fun weekend!

Who: The entire family! Everyone from the youngest baby to the oldest grandparents is welcome!

When: October 1 – 2, 2011

Where: Camp Long in Aiken, South Carolina

Why: Because what could be better than a weekend of fun, friends, freethought, and family?

How: Learn more, register your family, or apply to volunteer at: www.CampQuestSC.org

Camp Quest builds a community for children and teenagers from humanist, atheist, and other freethinking families. We provide campers a place to explore their developing worldviews, ask questions, and make friends in an environment supportive of critical thinking and skepticism.

Camp Quest is open to campers of all backgrounds. We encourage campers to think for themselves, be comfortable with who they are, and engage respectfully with people who have different views.

Cost: \$50 per person ages 4 years old and up; FREE for children 0-3 years old. Price includes all food, activities, and lodging.

Highlights include parents' presentation by Dale McGowan, co-author of Parenting Beyond Belief and Raising Freethinkers!



Look for more information later on in the year for Camp Quest South Carolina's first-ever week-long camp for kids ages 8-17 years old, coming summer 2012!!

It's beyond belief!

Texas Governor Rick Perry Initiates Day-Long Christian Rally

Many Secular Groups Urge Him to Stop His Sponsorship and Promotion of the Event

Americans United for Separation of Church and State sent a letter¹ on June 9 to Texas Gov. Rick Perry, urging him to drop his sponsorship and promotion of a fundamentalist Christian prayer rally.

Perry initiated the August 6 event, called The Response², and has invited the nation's 49 other governors to endorse it and attend. The day-long Christian rally is scheduled to take place at Houston's Reliant Stadium. Attendees are asked to fast and bring Bibles.

On The Response's website³, Perry writes, "Right now, America is in crisis: we have been besieged by financial debt, terrorism, and a multitude of natural disasters. As a nation, we must come together and call upon Jesus to guide us through unprecedented struggles, and thank Him for the blessings of freedom we so richly enjoy."

Americans United is urging Perry to stop using his public office for the advancement of his personal religious beliefs.

"Rick Perry is sounding more like a TV preacher than a governor," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "He needs to stop meddling in religion and focus on things like the budget and job creation. His reckless mixture of religion and government is as insensitive as it is reckless."

In the letter, Lynn wrote, "To be blunt, you have overstepped your constitutional bounds. I am a Christian minister and would like to remind you that it is not the job of government officials to call people to pray, recommend that they fast or prod them to take part in other religious activities. That job belongs to me and my fellow clergy. We are capable of doing it without government

'help' or interference. We are offended when you attempt to usurp our role."

The Response's website includes the American Family Association's statement of faith which, among other things, calls the bible the "only infallible, authoritative Word of God," and talks about "the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ" and his "virgin birth, His sinless life, His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, His bodily resurrection, His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and His personal return in power and glory." It states several times that the event is designed to promote Christian principles.

Lynn told Perry that he needs to remember that he is the governor of a state whose residents come from many different faiths and some who follow no spiritual path at all.

"Your job as a public servant is to represent all of the people of Texas—even those with whom you personally disagree," Lynn wrote. "Your promotion of this event sends the message that certain Texans—those who are in sympathy with the religious/political sentiments being expressed by the rally's sponsors—are better than others. This is a dangerous message for any government official to send."

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) also sent a letter⁴ to Gov. Perry, asking him to disassociate from the prayer conclave and to rescind his Prayer Proclamation⁵ calling August 6 a "Day of Prayer and Fasting for Our Nation's Challenges."

In the letter, Foundation Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor wrote, "As governor you represent not only Christians but atheists and agnostics, Jews, Muslims, Wiccans, and other minority religious views. Your initia

tion of the prayer gathering in your official capacity, unabashedly promotes not just a religious event but a Christian event, sending an official message of endorsement of Christianity and of exclusion to many of your constituents."

"Nothing fails like prayer," she added. "Our membership believes not in useless prayer, but in good works and action. We believe in public officials taking responsibility for the actions or inactions which have led to such crises. Prayer is the ultimate political copout. Prayer is what politicians fall back on when they don't want to offer true leadership."

FFRF called on Perry remove himself as an endorser of the event and to "stop misusing your public office to inappropriately inveigh and exhort your constituents to pray."

The Houston Clergy Council in mid-June issued a statement condemning Perry's proclamation of prayer and fasting, noting the American Family Association's anti-gay and anti-Muslim record, and saying, "We ask that Rick Perry leave the ministry to us and refocus his energy on the work of governing our state."

FFRF, which has taken the lead in challenging the National Day of Prayer, noted in its letter to Perry that his prayer proclamation misleadingly implied that the U.S. founders had prayed during the Constitutional Convention. There was no such prayer, which is "no surprise, as our U.S. founders wisely adopted an entirely godless and secular Constitution, whose only references to religion in government are exclusionary."

On June 6, the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) urged the nation's governors to reject the invitation from Gov. Perry to attend the prayer gath-

¹See the Americans United letter at <http://www.au.org/media/press-releases/archives/2011/06/letter-to-gov-perry-re.pdf>

²See the "The Response" website at <http://www.theresponseusa.com>

³See Gov. Perry's appeal at <http://theresponseusa.com/leadership.php>

⁴See the FFRF June 22 letter at <http://ffrf.org/uploads/action/The%20Response%20letter.pdf>

⁵See the Prayer Proclamation on the governor's website at <http://governor.state.tx.us/news/proclamation/16247/>

ering in Houston.

"The last thing our officials should do in times of national struggle is promote a divisive religious event that proposes no real solutions to our country's real-world problems," said Sean Faircloth, executive director of the Secular Coalition for America.

"Our nation's governors represent Americans of all beliefs, not simply Christians. We urge all elected officials to reject Governor Perry's invitation to attend this explicitly Christian platform for theocratic grandstanding that does nothing to offer substantive solutions to our country's problems. By its own description, this event privileges Christianity over other religions and beliefs."

The SCA is urging all its supporters to contact their governors and ask that they stand up for all Americans, regardless of religion or worldview, by rejecting Perry's invitation to this divisive, extremist-sponsored event and ask elected officials to work on solutions to substantive problems that face all Americans.

"Calling upon all Americans to embrace Perry's personal belief system is an insult to the millions of upstanding citizens who practice religions other than evangelical Christianity, as well as the millions of secular Americans who contribute to society without pushing their views on others," Fair

cloth said. "Religion should be a private matter, especially for elected officials in a secular government. Rather than lament that our nation's challenges are insurmountable and ask that all Americans turn to an evangelical version of Christianity for solutions, our governors should instead focus on finding real-world solutions to real-world problems."

Perry, who is rumored to be considering a run for president, earlier this year issued an official proclamation urging Texas residents to pray for rain as a solution to the state's drought and wildfires. Last year, he claimed the Gulf oil spill might have been "just an act of God" that could not have been prevented.

(The Secular Coalition for America is a 501(c)4 organization that serves as the national lobby for atheists, agnostics, humanists, and other secular Americans. Composed of 10 diverse member organizations, SCA works to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government as the best guarantee of freedom for all. See www.secular.org for more information.)

In a related story, USA Today reported⁶ on June 22 that Gov. Rick Perry will headline the annual dinner of Cornerstone Action on October 28 in New Hampshire. This is considered a sign that he may be strengthening his

ties with extremist conservative groups ahead of a possible bid for the White House.

Cornerstone Action has been very active in opposing same-sex marriage in New Hampshire and is leading the charge to repeal it. It is closely linked to anti-gay groups like the Alliance Defense Fund, the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family, and has endorsed discredited "ex-gay" therapy groups such as Exodus International, Love Won Out, PFOX, and the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality.

Perry regularly associates with radical social conservatives like Rev. John Hagee—the televangelist who believes that Katrina was God's punishment⁷ to New Orleans for hosting a gay pride parade and has said⁸, "Hitler was a hunter" sent by God in order to get "the Jewish people" to "come back to the land of Israel."

Perry has also partnered with Doug Stringer, the Texas "apostle," who publicly declared⁹ the United States had only itself to blame for the Sept. 11 attacks because of its acceptance of homosexuality and the general "licentiousness or moral looseness" it brings to society.

[From a June 9 AU press release, a June 22 FFRF News Release, a June 6 SCA press release, and a June 22 article in USA Today.]

⁶See the USA Today article at <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/onpolitics/post/2011/06/rick-perry-presidential-race-new-hampshire-1>

⁷See Rev. Hagee's views on Katrina at <http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2008/04/23/22152/hagee-katrina-mccain/>

⁸Hear Pastor John Hagee's views on Christian Zionism at <http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6097362>

⁹Perry Partners With Apostle: <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/content/rick-perry-partners-apostle-who-blames-america-september-11-attacks>

In the News...

Ohio House Approves Abortion Ban: <http://news.yahoo.com/ohio-house-votes-ban-abortions-detectable-heartbeat-223151023.html>

Oh, no! The Irish Abandon Mother Church: http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2011/06/oh_noes_the_irish_have_abandon.php

PZ Myers responds to a Ken Ham trick: http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2011/06/dear_emma_b.php

Tim Minchin will perform in Atlanta on July 14: <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com/2011/06/23/tim-minchin-coming-to-atlanta/>

Florida Suit Says Arrests Are Retaliation for Atheism: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/25/us/25atheist.html?_r=2

The Founding Fathers Were Not Christians: <http://dim.com/~randl/founders.htm>

Visit the new Atheist Nexus website: http://www.atheistnexus.org/?xg_source=msg_mes_network

Global Survey of Evangelical Protestant Leaders:

<http://pewforum.org/Christian/Evangelical-Protestant-Churches/Global-Survey-of-Evangelical-Protestant-Leaders.aspx>

Missouri Rep: Liberals Have "Hatred For God":

<http://www.care2.com/causes/missouri-rep-liberals-have-hatred-for-god-video-but-has-his-own-pledge-issues.html>

Independence Day Is Not A Religious Holiday

By Al Stefanelli, July 4, 2011

Today is Independence Day here in the United States. Unfortunately, many of our citizens have little or no understanding of the purpose behind the American Revolutionary War. They do not understand why we endured those bloody battles or the reason we decided that we could no longer be part of the Monarchy of United Kingdom in its form at the time. There are many in this country who have either chosen to ignore, were taught incorrectly or simply were never told why we felt it mandatory to dissolve our connection to the British Monarchy and its history of repeated violations to the basic human rights of those under its rule.

Perhaps these people need to be reminded that those under Crown rule at that time were the subjects of absolute tyranny, and that the Monarchy was hostile to what was wholesome and necessary for the public good. Perhaps they forgot that the residents of the original thirteen colonies were denied protection unless they agreed to relinquish the right of representation. Perhaps they forgot how fortunate we are to have a representative government that checks and balances itself and does not allow for entire legislative bodies to be relieved of their duties because they are not in agreement with a supreme ruler. Perhaps they do not realize what it meant to be under martial law, even in times of peace, and that the members of a standing army were held immune to prosecution no matter how heinous the crimes against the Subjects of the Crown were.

Contrary to what many believe, the American Revolution was not about taxes alone and it had nothing at all to do with establishing a Christian nation. As the Declaration so aptly states, it was about being deprived of such things as the benefits of trial by jury, for taking away our charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the forms government without any input from

the people. It was about the Crown suspending its own legislatures and declaring itself invested with power to legislate in all cases whatsoever. It was about the ability of the Monarchy to wage war on its own citizens and, without reservation, to plunder our seas, ravage our coasts, burn our towns, and destroy the lives of our ancestors without any judicial or legislative regulation.

The list of charges levied toward the Monarchy, and specifically King George III, in the body of the Declaration are numerous and largely unknown by our own citizenry. The crimes against humanity that were committed by the Crown were egregious and many. But instead of recognizing the Declaration of Independence as an important document stating our insistence to individual freedom and a government of the people, by the people and for the people, it has been relegated by the religious right as a weapon to promote their desire to bring the United States back to a form of government that is almost identical to the one we originally fought so hard to be free of. The sole purpose of the Declaration was to “dissolve the political bands,” not to set up a religious nation. Its authority is based on the idea that “governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,” which is contrary to the biblical concept of Theocracy that the Religious Right and people like Palin, Buchanan and others would impose upon us.

Fundamentalist Christians work hard to convince us that the founding fathers intended to establish this country on “biblical principles.” History does not support this. Aside from the fact that a vast majority of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence were not bible-believing Christians, we are governed by the Constitution, which is a secular document and very purposely begins with “We the people” and does not

contain any mention of God or Chris-



tianity. Its only references to religion are exclusionary and the very first amendment made to our constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In fact, the presidential oath of office, the only oath detailed in the Constitution, does not contain the phrase “so help me God” or any requirement to swear on a bible.

The 1797 Treaty with Tripoli declares that “the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion” and was written under Washington’s presidency and approved by the Senate under John Adams. In fact, the author of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson, was a Deist and vehemently opposed to orthodox Christianity as well as the supernatural. The famous quote of Thomas Jefferson, which includes the phrase “a wall of separation between church and state” was part of a letter to the Danbury Baptists in 1802. They had asked President Jefferson to explain the First Amendment, to which he replied, “the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions.”

Our government has no right to promulgate religion. The Supreme and lower courts have used Jefferson’s “wall of separation” phrase repeatedly in major decisions upholding neutrality in matters of religion. In 1971, referring to the Lemon v. Kurtzman

decision, the Supreme Court forged what is known as the “Three Part Lemon Test” to determine if a law is permitted under the First-Amendment religion clause:

1. A law must have a secular purpose.
2. It must have a primary effect which neither advances nor inhibits religion.
3. It must avoid excessive entanglement of church and state.

The billboards that are popping up all over the country that exclude “Under God” from a portion of the Pledge of Allegiance are very patriotic and true to the principles that our country was founded upon, which is contrary to the propaganda of the Religious Right. The United States of America is NOT one nation under God, but one nation under a *Constitution*. The Declaration of Independence served an honorable purpose and paved the way for the drafting of our awesome Constitution, which was immediately and specifically amended with the Bill of Rights to uphold individual and minority rights. The fact that a majority of our citizens are Christian does not make us a Christian nation and on constitutional matters there is no majority rule. The majority has no right to tyrannize the minority on matters such as race, gender, or religious belief or the lack of religious belief. The wisest policy is the constitutional one, and that is neutrality.

The Religious Right is behaving like a group of petulant, spoiled children. Nobody is deprived of worship in America. Tax-exempt religious organizations are everywhere. The state has almost no say about private religious beliefs and practices. The Christian Fundamentalists are behaving like the Monarchy was in the Revolutionary days and they cannot even see it because they are blinded by their own ignorance. They seem to have forgotten (or just don’t know) about the

“due process” provided by the 14th Amendment, which assures no public official—from the governor all the way down to the public school employee—may violate the human rights embodied in our Constitution. At every level, the government must respect the separation of church and state.

The billboards that remove the words, “*under God*” from the Pledge of Allegiance reflect the fact that those words did not appear until 1954, under McCarthyism, which was not one of our finer moments as a nation. Likewise, “*In God We Trust*” was absent from paper currency before 1956. Our original motto chosen by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson was “*E Pluribus Unum*” (Of Many, One) and was meant to celebrate plurality, not theocracy.

I also remind those who believe that our laws are based on the Ten Commandments that the first four Commandments are religious edicts having nothing to do with law or ethical behavior. Only three (homicide, theft, and perjury) are relevant to current American law, and have existed in cultures long before the fictional character of Moses was invented. It’s ironic that during this recession if we honored the commandment against “coveting,” it would probably cause our economy to completely collapse.

Our secular laws are based on the secular humanist principle of “justice for all” and they provide protection against crimes that our secular government enforces through a secular criminal justice system. The religious fanatics are ignoring history, law and fairness in their efforts to turn America into the Christian nation that it never was. Fundamentalist Christians would like nothing more than to deny the constitutional freedoms that are guaranteed to all Americans, including non-Christian religious minorities

and unbelievers. What they refuse to acknowledge is that history shows that only harm comes from uniting church and state. The aforementioned actions of the Religious Right are mirroring the tyranny of the 18th century British Monarchy. And ignorance of history may very well result in its repetition.

America has never been a Christian nation. It was not founded on Christian or Biblical principles. The founding fathers were not all Christians. We are and must remain, at all costs, a free nation. Anne Gaylor, founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, points out: “*There can be no religious freedom without the freedom to dissent.*” As Americans, we must continue to uphold the principles of individual freedom that our country was founded upon. As Atheists, we must work against the real enemies of the state, those who would see our great nation transformed into a Theocracy.

While we are eating our barbecue this afternoon and watching the fireworks tonight, it would do good to remember that the blessings we enjoy as Americans do not come from some imaginary sky-daddy but from the guarantees that are set forth in our secular Constitution. There is no room in this holiday for the arrogance of religion and the doctrine that a “*chosen few*” who walk some ridiculous “*narrow path*” are responsible for what this nation is, nor that our problems have anything to do with a lack of religious belief by any of our citizens. Independence Day is not a religious holiday. We are a secular nation and it is a uniquely secular holiday.

[From Al’s blog¹. Al spoke to AFS at the February meeting and is author of the book *A Voice of Reason in an Unreasonable World: The Rise of Atheism on Planet Earth*.]

¹See <http://alstefanelli.wordpress.com/> and <http://alstefanelli.wordpress.com/2010/07/04/independence-day-is-not-a-religious-holiday/>

Periodic Table of Atheists: <http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-Bay4ITZyHTE/TgYmEIFDbbl/AAAAAAAAAEM/uk50wWHaofw/s1600/tableofatheists150.jpg>

Religion and its Disconnect from Reason: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5EpcIF8VEk&feature=youtu.be>

Miss USA 2011: Should Evolution Be Taught in Schools? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkBrmhM0R2A0&feature=share>

John Snider on “Is America a Christian nation?” (Scroll to July 4): <http://www.americanfreethought.com/wordpress/>

The Southern Baptist Convention reaffirms the existence of hell: <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1214>

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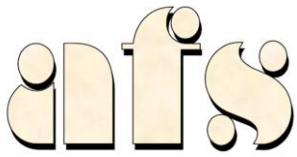
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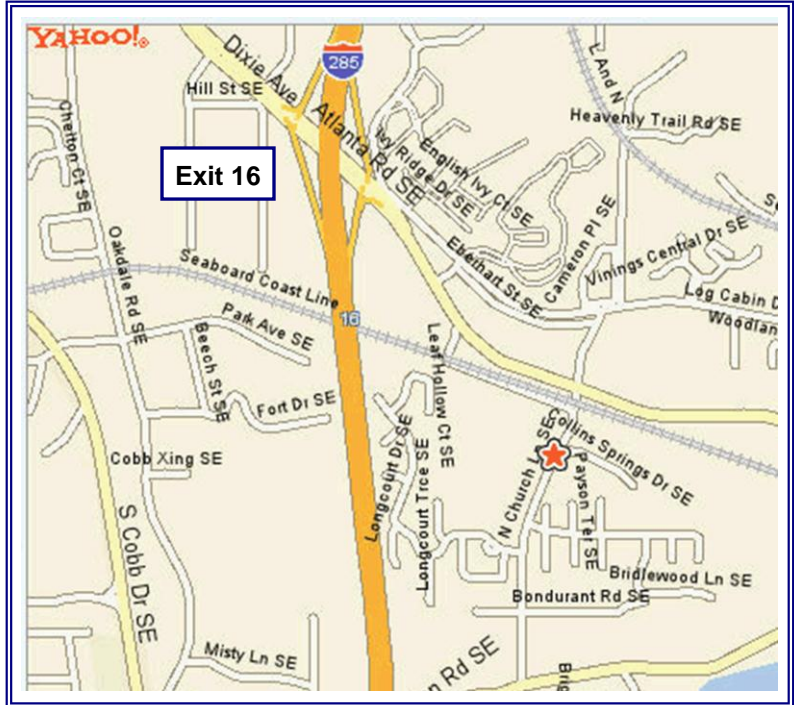
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**This Month's Speakers:
The Hamiltons**



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