

# Atlanta Freethought News

*Dare to Think for Yourself.*

An AFS Publication • Volume 17 Number 8 • August 2011

## The August AFS Meeting

For the August 14 meeting at Atlanta Freethought Hall, we will have a Potluck Lunch at 12:00 and then the regular meeting at 1:00, which will include a talk by **Richard Haynes** (a.k.a. Brother Richard) on "There and Back Again."

Richard is a writer and public speaker living in Atlanta, GA. Raised nonreligious, he was "born again" as a teenager and became an evangelist. He went on to receive a Bachelor of Science in Biblical Studies, and became an associate minister in a 12,000 member Atlanta mega-church.

In 1993, he and his wife Angella left the church and began their arduous journey to rationality and non-theism.

Richard has dedicated himself to building non-theist communities and encouraging others to "come out" of the atheist closet. He maintains the blog [LifeWithoutFaith.com](http://LifeWithoutFaith.com); co-hosts the podcast at [AtheistNews.org](http://AtheistNews.org), (voted "Best Religion / Inspirational Podcast" of 2010); and is President of [AtheistNexus.org](http://AtheistNexus.org), the largest social network for non-theists.

## The August Potluck Lunch

Before the regular August meeting, we will have a **Potluck Lunch**, starting at 12:00. Join AFS members and guests for some good food and great socializing. Please bring food according to the first letter of your last name as follows:

A-G: Bring a main dish;

H-P: Bring a dessert;

Q-Z: Bring a side dish.

AFS will provide drinks, plates and silverware.

## The August AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be on Saturday, August 20, at 1:00 at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy NE, Atlanta. Panahar will have a Lunch Buffet, so there is little waiting. Come and enjoy the delicious food and conversation with other freethinkers!

## Other Meetings of Interest (See more on page 5)

The **Humanists of Georgia** will meet on Sunday, August 21, at 1:00 at AF Hall. Max Tromblee will talk on "200 Years of Western Classical Music." <http://www.georgiahumanists.org/>

The **Black Nonbelievers of Atlanta** will meet on Sunday, August 21, 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/>

The **Atlanta Skeptics** will meet at 7:00 PM on Saturday, August 20, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave, in Atlanta. Ken Garrison will speak on "The 2008 Financial Crisis – the Man Responsible." <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com/>

**GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths)** will meet on Monday, Aug. 22 at 7:00PM at UUCG, 12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville, GA. <http://gust.domek.org/>

The **Atlanta Science Tavern** will meet on Sat., August 13, at 6:00PM at 5 Seasons Brewing, 1000 Marietta St., Atlanta. They will have a microbrewery tour and a talk on beer. On Sat., August 27 at 7:00PM, they will meet at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave NE, in Atlanta. Prasad Telali of Georgia Tech will speak on "Catching Kangaroos." (It's a math subject.) <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaScienceTavern/>

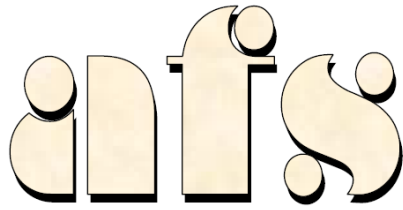
There will be a **meetup** for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, Aug. 14, at 6:00 PM at Thinking Man Tavern, 537 W. Howard Ave, in Decatur. (<http://www.meetup.com/Atlanta-Atheists/>)

Another **meetup** for Atlanta atheists is scheduled for Sunday, August 28, 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 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.

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

Sept 11: Dr. Ken Penegar on his book *The Political Trial of Benjamin Franklin*.  
(See <http://www.algora.com/347/book/details.html> )

Oct 9: TBD

Nov 13: Bill Glasser will speak on his new book *Autobiography of Satan*.

## 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

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## Atlanta Freethought News

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Sustaining Members (individual) \$100.

Sustaining Members (households) \$125.

Life Membership is \$1000.

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and Michael Buckner

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# Air Force Pulls Christian-Themed Ethics Training for Nuclear Missile Officers After Publication of Truthout Report

From a July 30 article by Jason Leopold at <http://Truthout.org>

The Air Force, in response to an exclusive report<sup>1</sup> published by Truthout.org on July 27, has withdrawn materials used in a training session that relied upon Bible passages and a quote from an ex-Nazi SS officer to teach missile officers about the morals and ethics of launching nuclear weapons.

The Nuclear Ethics and Nuclear Warfare training “has been taken out of the curriculum and is being reviewed,” said David Smith, chief of public affairs of Air Education and Training Command at Randolph Air Force Base in Texas. “The commander reviewed it and decided we needed to have a good hard look at it and make sure it reflected views of modern society.”

Smith said the ethics training has been in place for “20-plus years” and given to about 150 officers a year. The decision to suspend the ethics course was made one day after Truthout’s report was published. He added that it will now be “given thorough scrutiny” and “folks will be appointed to look at what we have and determine its utility and if they think it’s useful to continue having an ethics course they will develop a new course.”

The course was led by Air Force chaplains and took place during a missile officer’s first week in training at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. Officers who train to be missileers were required to attend the ethics course, which included a PowerPoint presentation<sup>2</sup> on St. Augustine’s “Christian Just War Theory”<sup>3</sup> as well as numerous examples of characters from the New and Old Testament the training materials asserted engaged in fighting wars in a “righteous way.”

St. Augustine’s “Qualifications for Just War,” according to the way the

Air Force characterized it in the 43 PowerPoint slides used in the ethics training, are: “to avenge or to avert evil; to protect the innocent and restore moral social order (just cause)” and “to restore moral order; not expand power, not for pride or revenge (just intent).”

One of the PowerPoint slides also contained a passage from the Book of Revelation that claims Jesus Christ, as the “mighty warrior,” believed some wars to be just.

At the conclusion of the ethics training session, missile officers were asked to sign a legal document stating they will not hesitate to launch the nuclear-armed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) “if lawfully ordered to do so by the President of the United States or his lawful successor.”

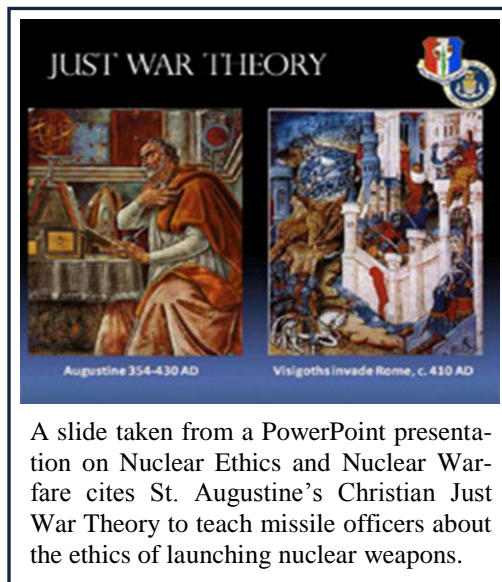
The use of religious imagery in the slides and the numerous references to the New and Old Testament would appear to constitute a violation of the First Amendment establishing a wall of separation between church and state and Clause 3, Article 6 of the Constitution, which specifically prohibits a “religious test.”

The PowerPoint was included with more than 500 pages of other documents pertaining to a missile officer’s first week in training that was released by the Air Force under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and provided to Truthout by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), a civil rights organization.

Another PowerPoint slide quoted Wernher Von Braun, a former member of the Nazi Party and SS officer who is regarded as the father of the US space program. Von Braun was not cited in the PowerPoint as a scientific expert, rather, he was specifically being referenced as a moral authority,

which is remarkable considering that the Nazi scientist used Jews imprisoned in concentration camps, captured French anti-Nazi partisans, civilians and others to help build the V-2, a weapon responsible for the death of thousands of British civilians.

MRFF President Mikey Weinstein



said more than 30 missile officers contacted his organization over the past week to complain about the Christian imagery and biblical passages in the ethics training. He said the decision by the Air Force to pull the ethics course material is a “great victory for the Constitution.” [Full disclosure: Weinstein is a member of Truthout’s Board of Advisers.]

“We are not going to commend the Air Force for doing something they should have done a quarter-century ago,” Weinstein said. “It’s an outrage and a deliberate attempt to torture and distort our Constitution when the US Air Force mandatorily teaches its nuclear missile launch officers that fundamentalist Christian theology is inextricably intertwined with the ‘correct’ decision to launch nukes.”

<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.truth-out.org/air-force-cites-new-testament-ex-nazi-train-officers-ethics-launching-nuclear-weapons/1311776738>

<sup>2</sup>See [http://truthout.org/files/nuclear\\_ethics.pdf](http://truthout.org/files/nuclear_ethics.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>See [http://catholicism.about.com/od/beliefsteachings/p/Just\\_War\\_Theory.htm](http://catholicism.about.com/od/beliefsteachings/p/Just_War_Theory.htm)

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# Reschedule APPROVED for “Rock Beyond Belief” Secular Festival at Ft. Bragg, NC

By Al Stefanelli, from an August 2 article at <http://www.examiner.com/atheism-in-national/>

**M**arch 31st, 2012 is the date when Fort Bragg will host **Rock Beyond Belief**, featuring keynote speaker Dr. Richard Dawkins and a mystery-celebrity who has vowed to throw an unforgettable warm-up party a few days prior! (See <http://www.rockbeyondbelief.com/> for details and background for this event.)

Weather permitting, Fort Bragg’s prestigious Golden Knights parachute team (<http://www.armyggk.com>) have been requested for an epic jump. This event is organized for the benefit of all unbelievers, who are promised a great day of music, speeches and vendor arts, crafts and other relevant merchandise.

Sgt. Justin Griffith, the founder of Rock Beyond Belief, states on the RBB website that, “Colonel Sicinski, Fort Bragg’s Garrison Commander, has now approved the event in full, and we’re extremely grateful to him for this opportunity.”

The sheer determination that it took to not only organize an event like this, but just to step out and suggest it in the first place is epic. Spread the word and get as many people to attend as possible. There’s plenty of room on the Fort Bragg Main Post Parade Field, as it is also home to the annual 4th of July celebration that draws tens of thousands of attendees.

Rock Beyond Belief cannot raise funds at the event, but they are going to be setting up a canned-food drive for the homeless. Many of the homeless are Veterans of the Vietnam War and have been struggling for decades with disabilities, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

The opportunity here is phenomenal, and the success of the event will be part and parcel to the organization

of future events down the road. This event promises to be a great day of fun and a show of our strength, resilience and resolve.

The Current Lineup:

**Dan Barker** - Former evangelical preacher turned atheist, and Co-president of Freedom From Religion Foundation (<http://FFRF.org/>). Author of *Godless* and *The Good Atheist*.

**Ed Brayton** - President of Michigan Citizens for Science and co-founder of The Panda’s Thumb. He maintains <http://scienceblogs.com/dispatches/>.

**Richard Dawkins** - Author of *The God Delusion* and *The Greatest Show on Earth*. See <http://richarddawkins.org/>.

**Margaret Downey** - Former president of Atheist Alliance International, founder of the Freethought Society (<http://www.ftociety.org/>).

**Jen McCreight** - blogger at BlagHag (<http://www.blaghag.com/>).

**Dale McGowan** - co-author of *Parenting Beyond Belief* and *Raising Freethinkers*. He is executive director of Foundation Beyond Belief, a secular nonprofit group that champions a rotating roster of deserving charities. (<http://www.foundationbeyondbelief.com/>)

**Hemant Mehta** - of the immensely popular [FriendlyAtheist.com](http://FriendlyAtheist.com) blog, and author of *I Sold My Soul on Ebay*.

**Al Stefanelli** - Georgia State Director, American Atheists ([www.atheists.org](http://www.atheists.org/)), Founder of the United Atheist Front (<http://www.unitedatheistfront.com>), writer for the National Atheism Examiner and author of *A Voice of Reason in an Unreasonable World*.

**Todd Stiefel** - Todd Stiefel has been a cornerstone in the Rock Beyond Belief movement from the very beginning. Over 5 months ago Todd’s organization, the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, pledged \$10,000 to make this

event a reality. Todd has shared the stage with Richard Dawkins, and has spoken across the globe on behalf of the growing secular movement. We are proud to have him speak at our event.

**Mikey Weinstein** - President of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (<http://militaryreligiousfreedom.org/>).

**Michael Werner** - Former president of the American Humanist Association (<http://www.americanhumanist.org/>).

Musical Performers:

**Baba Brinkman** - A Canadian rap artist, writer and actor. He is best known for his award-winning shows *The Rap Canterbury Tales* and *The Rap Guide to Evolution*, which interpret the works of Chaucer and Darwin for a modern audience. See <http://bababrinkman.com/>.

**Roy Zimmerman** - One of the most hilarious singer/songwriters around. See <http://www.royzimmerman.com/>.

**Words Such As Burn** - This band is led by **Todd Stiefel**, who comes from a musical family. (Who knew?) See <http://stiefelfreethoughtfoundation.org/>.

**Jeffrey Lewis** - Singer/songwriter, indie comic book artist and anti-folk legend. See <http://thejeffreylewisite.com/>.

**Spoonboy** - David Combs’ balances the deep philosophical questions of the day with the optimism of youth. See <http://iloveyouthisisarobbery.com/>.

Child care is being worked out, and a ‘kiddie land’ will be available with bounce houses and face painting. Vendors are going to be hawking godless books, stickers, t-shirts and, of course, food and drinks. A large presence from just about every large secular organization is expected, as well.

If you are anywhere near Fayetteville, North Carolina on March 31st, 2012, you should make it a point to show up and show your support.

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Michael Savage Attacks Mikey Weinstein of MRFF Over Stopping of Air Force “Jesus Loves Nukes” Training: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-rodda/michael-savage-attacks-mi\\_b\\_919798.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-rodda/michael-savage-attacks-mi_b_919798.html)

How Fundamentalist Religion is Destroying the World: [http://www.alternet.org/belief/151505/how\\_fundamentalist\\_religion\\_is\\_destroying\\_the\\_world](http://www.alternet.org/belief/151505/how_fundamentalist_religion_is_destroying_the_world)

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# Fire and Brimstone Delivered at Public Graduation

## FFRF Contests North Carolina Preacher's Speech

**T**he Freedom From Religion Foundation filed a complaint on behalf of its North Carolina members about a fire-and-brimstone commencement speech by a Baptist preacher to the nine graduating seniors and the audience June 4 at Nantahala High School in Topton, N.C. The school is part of Macon County Schools.

During the speech, according to an account in the Smoky Mountain News<sup>1</sup>, Rev. Daniel "Cowboy" Stewart bound a volunteer on stage with ropes while proclaiming, "The devil is out to destroy you, to tie you up. These people who took drugs, overdosed and died didn't mean to. They got tied up."

The newspaper called the overall speech, with repeated biblical references, "a rousing sermon." Stewart himself called it a sermon.

Religion in Macon County Schools is "out of control," according to FFRF's complainant.

In her June 29 letter<sup>2</sup> to Superintendent Dan Brigman, FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert noted that the school can't legally schedule pray

er as part of its graduation ceremonies, and added that Stewart "obviously abused his speaking opportunity to proselytize a captive audience."

According to the newspaper, Brigman "conceded that describing the [actual graduation] scene might sound strange, but being there, it wasn't anything out of the ordinary."

"The kids get to choose who the speakers are year by year," said Brigman, and because Stewart was chosen by the students, he didn't see a constitutional conflict inherent in the sermon."

Markert wrote that the district should have realized that Stewart was apt to view the speaking engagement as "a carte blanche invitation to abuse the situation to proselytize," and noted that Brigman's public statements about the sermon expressed no disapproval.

It's no defense that the students invited Stewart, Markert added, because the graduation was ultimately a school-sponsored event.

"I respectfully request that you take immediate steps to ensure that prayer

is not scheduled at future commencement ceremonies. What many districts have done to avoid such a problem is adopt a written policy to give to speakers. Please inform me in writing of the steps you are taking to remedy these concerns at your earliest convenience."

In an editorial headlined "Graduation not a time for sermons," the Andrews [N.C.] Journal said, "We doubt Nantahala will be challenged for this violation of the Constitution. However, public schools and religious leaders cannot continue to flaunt [sic] the rule of law—even if they believe it is unjust."

"Talk about a captive audience!" said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, referring to the pastor's bizarre rope trick. "The focus of public high school graduates ought to be on students, their achievements and futures, in keeping with our secular public education. The district may countenance this off-the-wall sermon disguised as a speech, but our Constitution does not."

[From a July 9 FFRF press release.]

<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.smokymountainnews.com/news/item/4345-cowboy-preacher-delivers-maverick-graduation-speech>

<sup>2</sup>See [http://ffrf.org/uploads/legal/nantahala\\_letter.pdf](http://ffrf.org/uploads/legal/nantahala_letter.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.theandrewsjournal.com/articles/2011/06/17/opinions/doc4df8e77599cb8436739988.txt>

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## More Atlanta Area Meetings of Possible Interest to Freethinkers

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 **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](mailto:donnaigore@yahoo.com)

Al Stefanelli on "The Evil of Evangelism": <http://alstefanelli.wordpress.com/2011/08/07/the-evil-of-evangelism/>

As Atheists Know, You Can Be Good Without God: (by Jerry Coyne):

[http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2011-07-31-atheism-morality-evolution-religion\\_n.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2011-07-31-atheism-morality-evolution-religion_n.htm)

Why We Should Worry About Right-Wing Terror Attacks Like Norway's In the US:

<http://www.truth-out.org/why-we-should-worry-about-right-wing-terror-attacks-norways-us/1311521911>

Violence Is Not the Answer (Pat Condell): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVbUzbLC5GE>

Fox News Facebook Page Full of Death Threats Against Atheists:

<http://www.atheistrev.com/2011/07/fox-news-facebook-page-full-of-death.html>

Curiosity: The Question of Life (by Stephen Hawking):

<http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2011/08/08/curiosity-with-stephen-hawking/>

Why "Religion Is Useful" Is a Terrible Argument for Religion (by Greta Christina): <http://www.alternet.org/belief/151833>

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# Freethinkers Censored at Tallahassee Democrat

Gary Whittenberger wrote to members of the Tallahassee (Florida) Freethinkers list on August 4 saying that the editors of the Tallahassee Democrat newspaper would no longer print the weekly "Freethinkers' Forum" column in their paper. The last column to be printed was on July 21. It included Gary's views on a woman's right to abortion. Gary was informed of the cancellation of the column on July 27, 6 days after the article was printed.

Gary says, "We had a good run, and I have thanked all of our writers for their excellent articles... I will appeal [the editor's] decision through the "chain of command" at the Democrat, but I do not expect her decision to be reversed... Also note that [the editor] rejected an article Richard Hull and I had written and submitted. This may have been "the straw that broke the camel's back."

The unpublished article is shown below.

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## "God's Presence" Has Another Interpretation

By Richard Hull and Gary Whittenberger

In her essay in the Faith section of the Tallahassee Democrat of 7/16/2011, religion editor Sharon Kant-Rauch presented a fascinating account of some of her own experiences at Jewish religious retreats which she has attended over the past 15 years. One of the earliest of these experiences had a profound effect on her worldview - a removal of her ambivalence about belief in God, apparently affirming to her that God indeed does exist. While her experience was undoubtedly real, there is another interpretation of it which might actually fit better than her own. Examination of Ms. Kant-Rauch's case can illustrate how unusual experiences can have alternative explanations, some religious and others secular.

Her turning-point experience occurred during a week-long retreat in the Catskill Mountains of New York state. As part of the retreat she isolated herself from the trappings of modernity (cars, TV sets, etc), spent some time with other persons immersed in a religious frame of mind, and also spent some time alone. On Shabbat morning, after singing with others, she prepared herself for the *amidah*, the central Jewish prayer. The importance of this event to her is well described in her own words: "Everything in the service leads up to this central moment, when we stand before God." As was apparently typical for some attendees at this moment, she walked off by herself to an open field. After lifting up her arms to the sky, she had an intense emotional experience in which she cried profusely

and felt "a powerful presence sweeping through me." She apparently thought that this presence was God. Her ambivalence was gone.

To feel that somebody is present when nobody is present is a fairly common human experience. Somehow the feeling of presence, subsumed by special neural circuitry, which is ordinarily activated by the actual presence of another person is instead activated by something else. These feelings have been experienced by persons of all religious persuasions, by persons in grief or under the influence of some drugs, and even by persons who voluntarily submit themselves to magnetic stimulation of their brains. (For more about this, read Chapter 2 of the excellent book *Mindfield: How Brain Science is Changing Our World* by Lone Frank, a neuroscience writer who spoke here in Tallahassee in March). This feeling of presence is apparently involved in alleged encounters with ghosts, aliens, demons, and even dead relatives. But what was responsible for the activation of Ms. Kant Rauch's feeling of presence and her religious interpretation of it? It was primarily expectation. She expected to encounter God at the retreat, all her peers at the retreat expected the same thing, and one part of her brain (the one producing the feeling of presence) obliged another part (the one holding the expectation). Another factor which probably played a role was sensory deprivation or low stimulation. It has been shown experimentally that various types of hallucinations occur under

these conditions.

Ms. Kant-Rauch placed herself in circumstances in which she was primed to have the feeling of presence, she interpreted that feeling as a visit by God (who is in her opinion the most important person who exists), and then she had an intense emotional reaction which was proportional to that interpretation. Other persons have similar reactions when they are in the presence of a queen or king, president or prime minister, pope or famous evangelist, or even a rock star. Ms. Kant-Rauch said "The formula is simple - slow down, keep distractions to a minimal and open the heart. God will show up." She is correct that the formula is simple - if you want to increase the likelihood that you will have a feeling of presence and interpret that feeling as a visit by God, regardless of whether God actually exists, then immerse yourself in a supernaturalist worldview for many years, build up your expectations that you will meet God, go off on a retreat and surround yourself with others with similar expectations, and then get off by yourself for at least a little while. If you prime it, the feeling will come.

Ms. Kant-Rauch's interpretation of her experience could be correct; maybe God did visit her that day in the Catskills. But there seems to be a better explanation, one more probably true, and it is a secular one.

[Richard Hull, a retired professor of philosophy, and Gary Whittenberger, a retired psychologist, are members of the Center for Inquiry - Tallahassee.]

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# American Atheists Files Suit to Stop Display of World Trade Center “Cross”

From a July 25 Press Release by American Atheists (<http://www.atheists.org/>)

American Atheists filed a complaint on Monday, July 25, in an effort to block display of the “World Trade Center Cross” which is scheduled to be part of a memorial display commemorating the 9/11 attacks.

The “cross,” one of many thousands of T-joints in the WTC construction, is part of the debris found at Ground Zero. From the moment it was “discovered” in the rubble, the cross has attracted devoted followers and worshipers who offer various supernatural interpretation of its significance.

Plaintiffs in the state court lawsuit include American Atheists and four New York City residents. The attorney for the action is Edwin Kagin of Union, Kentucky.

Dave Silverman, president of American Atheists, said that any government enshrinement of the cross was an impermissible mingling of church and state. The “cross,” which had been displayed appropriately at a church, was moved to the 9/11 memorial on July 23, 2011.

“The WTC cross has become a Christian icon. It has been blessed by so-called holy men and presented as a reminder that their god, who couldn’t be bothered to stop the Muslim terrorists or prevent 3,000 people from being killed in his name, cared only enough to bestow upon us some rubble that resembles a cross. It’s a truly ridiculous assertion.”

Mr. Silverman added, “This cross is now a part of the official WTC memorial. No other religions or philosophies will be honored. It will just be a Christian icon, in the middle of OUR memorial. As a public accommodation, the memorial must allow us (and all other religious philosophies) to include our own display of equal size inside the museum, or not include the cross. Equality is an all-or-nothing deal.”



On July 28, Dave Silverman noted the following in his [atheists.org](http://www.atheists.org/) blog:

The suit has been filed, the news has hit, and reactions are coming in. Now that everything has started in this unfortunate but necessary case, I thought I’d take a moment to reflect on some of the feedback we’ve gotten and the progress we have already made.

For the most part, the feedback is what we’d expected – religious people hate us, but seculars understand and support it. I am very pleased at the breadth of the secular support for this important suit, and as usual I don’t care much about what the theists think.

Christianity, and in particular St. Peter’s Church, have deified this piece of rubble because it looks like their symbol, and therefore were going to install this cross as a sole symbol of Christianity in the memorial.

At first, they claimed it wasn’t a religious symbol at all, just a piece of debris that others found significant, but since we complained they changed their tune and conceded that this is religious in nature (otherwise, it’s just scrap metal).

New reports<sup>1</sup> are saying that they will be allowing the Jews to have a memorial as well. (You’re welcome.)

This was a strategic move on their part, because adding the Jews as another token religion makes them appear inclusive. However, according to our calculations, between 15 and 33% of the people who died in 9/11 were atheists. That’s far more than those who were Jewish and Muslim, combined, so they’ve just strengthened our case.

This case is important for the precedent it will (or would have) set, from the perspectives of secularizing the cross and equality. If we’d let this alone, the cross would have been placed on public land, with public money, but remember the original assertion was that the cross was “secular.” We maintain that the Cross always is Christian, and that calling it secular does not allow a government body to place it on public land without regard to church/state separation or Equal Access. As of now, the church/state separation part of our concern *has already been conceded* because they brought in the Jewish element of the memorial to cover themselves constitutionally. Now, all that remains is Equality.

Equality doesn’t mean bringing in one other religion and calling it over. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists died on 9/11, and bringing in

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://abcnews.go.com/US/atheists-sue-cross-world-trade-center-museum/story?id=14169830>

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just Christians and Jews to have prominent symbols is just adding insult to injury. We demand recognition of those atheists who died if the Christians and Jews get such recognition. Otherwise, it all has to go, and we will

have a dignified religion-neutral memorial.

The News spin is all over the place on this one, as we knew it would be, but remember, we're the good guys here, demanding nothing but equali-

ty. We are happy to donate a suitable and respectful display and pay all associated costs, and we won't stand idly by while atheists and their families are discounted. We seek only fairness.

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## Now is Not the Time for Atheists to Back Down

**Why We Need to Kick It Up a Notch... by Al Stefanelli**

The American Atheists, Inc. lawsuit regarding the 17-foot-tall Christian Cross Memorial<sup>1</sup> has generated a lot of buzz about the method that some of us use to advance our cause. There are those who are adamant that we should be non-aggressive, respectful and tolerant of those who hold religious beliefs and that we should not be outspoken. However, there are those of us who just cannot adopt the "live and let live" philosophy, because the favor is not returned. While there is a place in our cause for diplomacy in certain situations, it is painfully obvious that in most areas diplomacy has miserably failed. Diplomacy only works when both sides are willing to compromise. While some may choose to remain silent or non-confrontational, there are a growing number of us who have decided that the time has come to no longer sit back and let the theocrats run the show.

The growing problem of the steady inclusion of church and state in the United States needs to be addressed with more urgency than many Atheists are affording it because the problem is increasing at very disturbing levels. As Atheists, we already face an uphill battle for acceptance in the

court of public opinion because nearly every single time we protest one of these violations, we end up, for lack of a better word, crucified. Unfortunately, there is no real way to avoid that.

Not only do individual Atheists have to deal with unavoidable negative publicity, but those groups that serve as our advocates, such as American Atheists, Inc., Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, Freedom from Religion Foundation and several others are also offered up for the same treatment.

Willful ignorance abounds about the religious beliefs of many of our founding fathers, and the erroneous conception that the US was founded as a Christian nation. This is more than just an inconvenience. It is causing blatant violations to the First Amendment rights of not only Atheists, but anyone else who is not Christian. This country is systematically being converted into the exact opposite of what the authors of our Constitution intended it to be.

Our freedoms are being steadily stripped away and our precious Constitution is being ignored. In order to

stem the tide that is destroying the United States as a secular nation, along with our precious First Amendment rights and protections, we must continue our concerted and organized efforts.

We cannot afford to go quietly into that good night. We cannot afford to be silent and watch our rights to freedom continually eroded. We cannot afford to do little or nothing about the fact that we remain the least trusted group of people in America. We need to stand, be counted and continue to raise our voices in unified reason and not go away until every American citizen realizes that we are sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, aunts and uncles. We are politicians, doctors, lawyers, managers, employees, politicians, friends and neighbors. We need to stay in the public eye and keep in the forefront of the minds of America that we are no longer willing to put up with the abrogation of our Constitutional rights.

[Al Stefanelli is the Georgia State Director for American Atheists, and is the author of *A Voice of Reason In An Unreasonable World*. He also writes for the *National Atheism Examiner*.]

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<sup>1</sup>See [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/29/nyregion/atheists-sue-to-ban-display-of-cross-shaped-beam-in-911-museum.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/29/nyregion/atheists-sue-to-ban-display-of-cross-shaped-beam-in-911-museum.html?_r=2)

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Here are some recent articles on Rick Perry and his August 6 prayer meeting:

Texas Rally Renews Debate Over the Boundaries of Perry's Faith:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/us/politics/06perry.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/us/politics/06perry.html?_r=1)

The Biggest Religious Movement You Never Heard of: Nine Things You Need to Know about Rick Perry's Prayer Event:  
<http://www.alternet.org/news/151911>

Rachel Maddow on Rick Perry: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26315908/vp/43734392#43734392>

Rick Perry's Divine Calling: <http://www.readersupportednews.org/off-site-opinion-section/72-72/6718-rick-perrys-divine-calling>

And just for fun:

Jesus Turns Water Into Wine: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgrSyokK6H0&feature=youtu.be>



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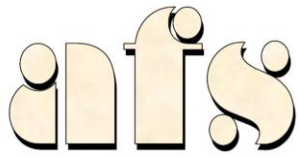
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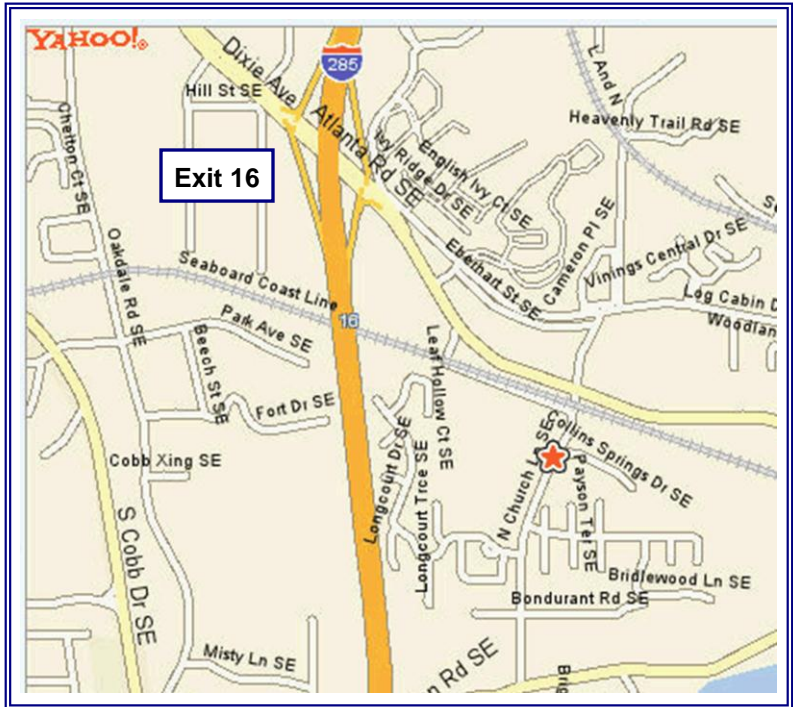
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**This Month's Speaker:  
Richard Haynes**



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