

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself.

An AFS Publication • Volume 17 Number 9 • October 2011

The October AFS Meeting

The October 9 AFS meeting will include a Potluck Lunch at 12:00 and then a talk and discussion with **Dr. Dennis Martin** on "A New Debate Strategy in Existence-of-God Discussions" at 1:00. In an announcement of the meeting, Dennis had the following to say:

"I always try to bring some original thinking to AFS. Lately, I've been considering a new way to discuss the non-existence of God with theists. It starts with a fairly simple question. I need your help with a Socratic flushing out of this idea."

"In the first half hour of October's meeting, I'd like the audience to assume the theists' point of view and respond to the question. During the second half hour, I'd like us to brainstorm how we, as freethinkers, would/could/should answer the question. The Question? Come to the meeting!"

Dr. Dennis Martin has a mathematics degree from Georgia Tech, and a PhD in philosophy from Emory University. He teaches at three colleges in the Atlanta area and for three colleges online. He serves as AFS secretary.

The meeting will be at 1:00 at **Atlanta Freethought Hall**, 4775 N. Church Lane, in Smyrna, GA. If you miss the Potluck lunch, you can still come a bit early for snacks and conversation with other Freethinkers.

Two AFS Meetings in November!

AFS will have two meetings in November.

On Sunday, Nov. 6, **Bill Glasser** will speak on his book *Autobiography of Satan*. Bill received his PhD in English, with a minor in Comparative Religions, from the University of Iowa. He has written two books on literary criticism: *Reclaiming Literature* and *The Art of Literary Thieving*. He is President Emeritus of Southern Vermont College.

On Sunday, Nov. 13, **Maaneli Derakhshani**, a physics PhD student at Clemson University, will speak on the Philosophy of Physics.

The October Potluck Lunch

Before the regular October 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:

A-G: Bring a dessert;

H-P: Bring a side dish;

Q-Z: Bring a main dish.

AFS will provide drinks, plates and silverware.

Nominations at October Meeting

The AFS bylaws require nomination of officers and board members for each year at the October meeting. Please think about whom you would like to nominate. (Current officers and board members are listed on page 2.)

Officers have 1-year terms; board members have 2-year terms. Mark Banks, Steven Fant and Laura Ross will continue their 2-year terms into next year.

The October AFS Social

The next **AFS Social** will be an **Open Mic Night** on Saturday, October 15, at 7:00PM. AFS will provide snacks and soft drinks for a small cover charge. Bring your own refreshments if you like. This is an opportunity for AFS members and friends to share their jokes, poetry, music, or whatever you like.

AFS Meetings and Activities

Oct. 9: **Potluck Lunch**, AF Hall, 12:00 noon

Oct. 9: **AFS General Meeting**, AF Hall, 1:00 PM

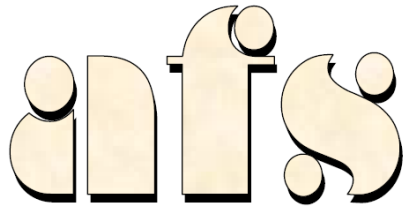
Oct. 15: **Open Mic Night** at AF Hall, 7:00 PM

The Pay Down the Debt Drive!

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.

Oct 9: Dennis Martin will speak on "A New Debate Strategy in Existence-of-God Discussions." Audience participation and discussion is encouraged!

Nov 6: Bill Glasser will speak on his new book *Autobiography of Satan*.

Nov 13: Maaneli Derakhshani, a physics Ph.D. student at Clemson University, will speak on The Philosophy of Physics.

Dec 11: Phil Sacco will speak on "The Study of Ancient People via Mythology."

Jan 8: Mark Zumbach, President of the Triangle Freethought Society, will speak.

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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Sustaining Members (individual) \$100.

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Life Membership is \$1000.

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Alabama Town's "Jesus or Jail" Policy Violates the Constitution, Says FFRF, AU

Bay Minette, AL, May Not Force Offenders to Choose Between Going to Jail or Going to Church

The Freedom From Religion Foundation sent a strong complaint letter¹ on Sept. 22 to Bay Minette, Ala. judges regarding an off-the-wall proposal from Bay Minette Police Chief Mike Rowland to have first-time offenders attend church services in lieu of incarceration. FFRF issued the letter to Municipal Judge Bayless Biles, State Circuit Court Judge James Reid and District Court Judge Jody Bishop.

FFRF Staff Attorney Patrick Elliott noted in the letter that that Rowland is working to implement a program called "Operation ROC: Restore Our Community," which would put offenders under the supervision of pastors and require them to attend church services for one year, in place of jail.

"We want to teach them that they're valuable, that God has a plan, God has a purpose. That they can be successful, that they possibly can become the person that God wants them to become," Pastor Bruce Hooks said on a Local 15 (Mobile, AL) TV news program². The report said 56 churches have already agreed to sponsor the program.

"This proposal is an egregious violation of the First Amendment. It is a bedrock principle of constitutional law that the state cannot coerce citizens to participate in religious prac-

tices," noted Elliott. As the Supreme Court states in *Lee v. Weisman*, "It is beyond dispute that, at a minimum, the Constitution guarantees that government may not coerce anyone to support or participate in religion or its exercise, or otherwise act in a way which 'establishes a religion or religious faith, or tends to do so.'"

By instituting this program, Bay Minette would also be in violation of the Alabama Constitution Article 1, Elliott said. "... no preference shall be given by law to any religious sect, society, denomination, or mode of worship; that no one shall be compelled by law to attend any place of worship."

"Even those persons in your community who have violated the law cannot be subject to violations of their right of conscience. They must always be free to choose whether or not to attend church without government interference," noted Elliot.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State also sent a letter³ to officials in Bay Minette regarding the program on Sept. 26.

"I have just two words for this ill-considered scheme: blatantly unconstitutional," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "Government simply can't

put people in a position where their only choice is Jesus or jail."

Americans United says Bay Minette is offering no real choice at all and that the scheme will clearly have the effect of funneling people into houses of worship.

In the letter, attorneys with Americans United urged the town to drop the plan. "Under well-established decisions, the City may not force individuals - even those convicted of crimes - to choose between religion and jail," reads the letter. "The Program would be unconstitutional even if participants could, as the City has asserted, attend the religious service of their choice. For one, any such choice is purely theoretical: only churches participate in the Program and so in practice defendants must attend Christian services. In any event, the Program would violate the Constitution even if other religions did participate because the First Amendment also requires the government to remain neutral between religion and non-religion."

Americans United's letter was drafted by Gregory M. Lipper, AU litigation counsel, and AU Legal Director Ayesha N. Khan.

[From a Sept. 22 FFRF press release and a Sept. 26 AU press release.]

¹See the FFRF letter at <http://ffrf.org/uploads/legal/BayMinette.pdf>

²See <http://www.local15tv.com/news/local/story/New-Sentencing-Option-Church-Instead-of-Jail/0RzNQPUB0-OqADCfXW3LA.csp>

³See the Americans United letter at <http://www.au.org/media/press-releases/archives/2011/09/operation-restore-our.pdf>

Mississippi Residents to Vote on "Personhood Amendment"

Due to the handiwork of a religious activist, Mississippians will soon vote on an initiative that would ban abortions

The most controversial item on the Mississippi ballot this fall is not a politician but rather an idea. In November, Mississippians will vote on an amendment to change the meaning of the word "person" in the state constitution. Under the new language, human life would begin not at birth but at the moment of fertilization. If the amendment passes, it will outlaw

abortion in the state entirely, even in cases of rape or incest. It might even leave some forms of contraception, and procedures such as in vitro fertilization, on life support.

Ballot Measure 26, the "Personhood Amendment," has drawn the endorsement of celebrities including Mike Huckabee and Brett Favre's wife, Deanna. The Tupelo-based

American Family Association (AFA), one of the nation's leading social-conservative organizations, is teaming up with the Republican gubernatorial nominee, Lt. Gov. Phil Bryant, to secure its passage. In mid-September, Mississippi's attorney general, Jim Hood, announced his support for the measure.

But for all the momentum it has

gained, the amendment is in large part the handiwork of one lesser known figure, an activist named Les Riley. A tractor salesman, former candidate for agriculture commissioner, and chair of the state Constitution Party, Riley is steeped in fringe politics. He founded the group Personhood Mississippi, drafted the amendment's language, started the signature drive that got it on the ballot, and promoted it statewide starting June 2 with an inflammatory campaign called the "Conceived in Rape Tour."

The idea behind the amendment is simple: If by law life begins at fertilization, then abortion (and human cloning) would become legally impossible. In an interview with the AFA this summer, Riley asserted that his amendment would have "international implications" and could become "the biggest news in the pro-life movement in 20 years." If all goes as planned, it will launch a court challenge that will end with *Roe v. Wade* itself being overturned.

As radical and grandiose as that may sound, it fits with fringe views from Riley's past. A neo-secessionist, Riley once supported an effort to form an independent theocratic republic in South Carolina, and he belonged to an organization—the League of the South—dedicated to forming a "free Southern Republic" built on biblical law.

Prior to forming Personhood Mississippi in 2009, Riley was, for a brief period, a blogger for a fledgling secession movement in South Carolina called Christian Exodus. The movement was founded with the goal of "forming an independent Christian nation that will survive after the decline and fall of the financially and morally bankrupt American empire."

But Christian Exodus never got any traction, and it no longer has support.

Mississippi only has one facility that provides abortion, the product of years of restrictive legislation. But more than abortion is at stake with Ballot Measure 26, says Bear Atwood, legal director for the Mississippi ACLU. If it passes, it would have a "chilling effect" on women's health

care access—including seemingly unrelated procedures such as in vitro fertilization. "When you have in vitro fertilization, multiple eggs will get fertilized, but not all of them can be implanted," she explains. "And now you have that problem of eggs which can't be implanted, or of implanting too many or all of them, which would put the woman's health at risk. So really, the only choice a woman would have would be to not to go forward."

A major concern for some people is that the new law would result in an abortion ban even in cases of rape or incest. Riley's Conceiver in Rape Tour was an attempt to counter the notion, held even by many pro-lifers, that abortion is acceptable in cases of rape or incest. Those are "a tragic occurrence," he says, "but you don't execute the product of the crime, and that's what abortion does."

Since the language of the amendment is so broad, it could force state agencies to revisit and revise any regulation that includes the word "person," according to Jordan Goldberg, an attorney at the Center for Reproductive Rights. It would impact regulations on "the number of people who could ride a bus and the number of people who would be permitted to ride in a car," she says, or any statute that involves the collection of census data, such as redistricting. "It sounds absurd, but frankly so is this proposal," she says.

The movement Riley created in Mississippi is the latest in a parade of efforts over the last year to curtail reproductive rights through radical legislation. In February, South Dakota and Nebraska both considered bills that would have made it a "justifiable homicide" to kill an abortion doctor. In March, a Louisiana state legislator introduced a bill that would have classified abortion as "feticide." Ohio is considering a measure known as the "Heartbeat Bill," which would ban abortions once a heartbeat is detected. At Sen. Jim DeMint's presidential forum in South Carolina in September, candidates were grilled on whether they supported applying 14th Amendment protections to fetuses. Riley's ef-

fort takes it to the level of granting not just fetuses but also zygotes the same rights as people.

The ACLU of Mississippi, Planned Parenthood, and the Center for Reproductive Rights filed a joint lawsuit to block the measure from appearing on the ballot, but earlier this month, the Mississippi Supreme Court ruled that the referendum could proceed as scheduled. Writing for the 7-2 majority, justice Randy "Bubba" Pierce explained that the body didn't have the authority to evaluate the merits of a provision before it went into effect: "Pre-election challenges of voter initiative proposals are subject only to the review of the sufficiency of the petition itself (i.e., its form) and not its constitutionality," he wrote.

But abortion rights supporters may get some tacit help from an unlikely source: the pro-life movement itself. The only other state to hold a referendum on personhood is Colorado, which voted down constitutional amendments by a 3-1 margin in both 2008 and 2010. As those numbers suggest, the more radical approach has caused a schism among anti-abortion activists, with some high-profile leaders arguing that the proposals could be counterproductive.

Phyllis Schlafly, founder of the far-right Eagle Forum, warned in a 2010 newsletter that Colorado's personhood drive was "a gimmick that wastes money and harms pro-life candidates." James Bopp, the conservative lawyer behind the *Citizens United* ruling and counsel to National Right to Life, has argued that "significant damage would be done" if a personhood amendment were to be challenged in federal court—which it almost certainly would.

But Riley apparently sees a worthwhile gamble in pursuing the dream of overturning *Roe v. Wade*. "You don't even know who's gonna be on the Court, who's gonna be in good health and living, who's gonna get confirmed," he says. "You can't predict those things; it's like wagering in Vegas."

[From a Sept. 27 article by Tim Murphy at motherjones.com.]

Obama's 9/11 Remarks Honor One Nation, Divisible

By Dan Barker, from his September 12 FFRF blog¹

Over the course of our history, hundreds of millions of prayers have been uttered for the United States. Numerous petitions – including a yearly National Day of Prayer proclamation issued by the President and hundreds of mirrored state pronouncements by governors wishing to appear pious, or at least pretend they are doing something useful “in these troubled times” – have constantly beseeched a power beyond nature to “bless America” and keep us from harm. To no avail.

The governor of Texas has publicly asked “Divine Providence” for rain during that state’s worst dry spell since 1895. His prayers were followed by wildfires that this year have burned an area greater than half the size of Lake Erie, destroying more than 1,500 homes.

Ten years ago, on a crisp, clear September morning when a good percentage of the occupants of the World Trade Center, residents of New York City, workers at the Pentagon, and passengers on flights AA11, AA77, UA175, and UA93, had sought “God’s protection” over their families, our country witnessed a horrific failure of prayer in the form of a faith-based attack on American lives, property and ideals. There can be no doubt that in light of this tragedy of religious terror, prayer is the last thing this country needs right now.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has sent a letter of congratulations² to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg for possessing the good judgment and the courage to insist that the city-arranged ceremonies marking the tenth anniversary of the nightmare of 9/11 remain entirely secular. This time, no religious leaders were invited to preach lofty sermons, perform holy rituals, or intone sanctimonious incantations. The event, orchestrated by a secular government, was for all the people, not just believ-

ers. Feeling neglected and insulted, many in the religious right had complained bitterly about their inability to mark the occasion with their stamp of godliness.

But Bloomberg held his ground—his ground zero. Instead of a narrow and divisive faith-based spectacle, we observed a broader and inclusive human-based commemoration. Poems were read. Secular songs were performed. Even George W. Bush, the champion of faith-based initiatives who likes to quote Jesus, chose to read the words of Abraham Lincoln. All seemed to be going well, but just when we thought we could relax and enjoy the truly respectful ceremony, who should step up to the podium to mar the occasion by reading from the bible? Not a priest, pastor, rabbi or slick megachurch evangelist. It was none other than President Obama, the leader of our secular nation, who decided to inject his own personal god into the public proceedings. Not only was this very bad taste—akin to someone inviting a former abusive husband to make comments at your second wedding—it was grossly insensitive to the spirit of the occasion. Obama’s entire remarks consisted of reading Psalm 46 (from the Protestant New King James Version of the Bible):

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea. Though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling, there’s a river whose streams shall make glad the City of God, the holy place of the Tabernacle of the Most High. God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God shall help her just at the break of dawn. The nations raged, the kingdoms were moved. He uttered his voice. The earth melted. The Lord of Hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is

our refuge. Come behold the works of the Lord who has made desolations in the Earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the Earth. He breaks the bough and cuts the spear in two. He burns the chariot in fire. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the Earths. The Lord of Hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Of course, it is obvious that the biblical deity is *not* “a very present help in trouble.” He was no help when the planes hit those buildings, and is no help today. If we take this scripture seriously, we must conclude that God is the *source* of the trouble: “Come behold the works of the Lord who has made desolations in the Earth.” This is confirmed by Isaiah, three books later, in a passage that is even more relevant to terror falling from the skies: “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things. Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness.” (Isaiah 45:7,8) It was righteousness, after all, that the hijackers were “pouring down” that day. If the god of the bible claims “I create evil,” who is Obama to pretend otherwise?

And with what authority does the President of a secular nation, at a non-religious event, presume to administer a biblical edict from the god of just some of the citizens? “Be still and know that I am God,” we are commanded. “I will be exalted among the nations.” Based on the brutally successful terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists, those words could be attributed just as easily to Allah as to Yahweh. Who gave Obama the right to pick which god gets to speak?

Or the right to pick *any* god to speak? Nonbelievers were also murdered on 9/11. Atheists and agnostics were in the audience to whom Obama was speaking. He seems not to know that just seven psalms later we atheists

¹See the FFRF blog at <http://ffrf.org/news/blog/obamas-9-11-remarks-honor-one-nation-divisible/>.

²See the letter at http://ffrf.org/uploads/legal/bloomberg_letter.pdf.

are unjustifiably maligned by the same holy book: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. Corrupt are they, and have done abominable iniquity: there is none that doeth good." (Psalm 53:1)

There are no atheists who do good? We are all corrupt? It wasn't nonbelievers who committed the "abomina-

ble iniquity" of 9/11. What moral right does the president have to quote from a book that so unfairly blames the wrong party, staining a pure ceremony with a divisive sectarian message? Or did he consider the unifying memorial to be a campaign opportunity to pander piously to religious right voters?

One of the great principles of American liberty is the freedom to disagree about religious matters. When our democratically elected President publicly takes sides in the argument, he dishonors not only millions of good citizens who do not share his personal beliefs, he also dishonors our Constitution.

FFRF Threatens Suit Over Tennessee Water Tower Cross

Whiteville, TN, officials are told that if they don't remove the cross, they will be sued

A national state/church watchdog group has put town officials in Whiteville, Tenn., on notice that if they don't remove the illegal cross atop the town's water tower, it will file suit.

"If you fail to comply with this demand within thirty days from the date of this letter, the FFRF and its Whiteville member will have little choice but to sue you and the Town in the United States District Court for the Western District of Tennessee," wrote attorney Alvin Harris, Nashville, on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

FFRF had sent three previous letters of complaint on behalf of a local resident to Mayor James Bellar of Whiteville, Tenn. regarding the display of a cross on top of the town water tower.

FFRF first wrote a complaint letter¹ in December 2010. Three letters to Bellar have gone without response to date.

FFRF, a state/church watchdog based in Madison, Wis., is the nation's largest association of atheists and agnostics with more than 17,000 members, including over 220 in Tennessee.

FFRF has asked that Bellar remove the cross from Whiteville property immediately, or direct the display to be moved to a more appropriate private location.

"It is unlawful for the Town of Whiteville to display a patently religious symbol such as a Christian cross on public property. The Whiteville cross, displayed on the Town water tower, unabashedly creates the perception of government endorsement of Christianity. It conveys the mes-

sage to the twenty-six percent of the U.S. population who are not Christians that they are not 'favored members of the political community,'" said FFRF Senior Staff Attorney Rebecca Markert.

The cross that sits on top of the Whiteville water tower was illuminated at night, making the display even more noticeable to Whiteville citizens and passersby. The illumination ceased at least temporarily sometime after FFRF letters of complaint.

"No court of final resort has ever upheld the government's permanent display of a Latin cross on public land as constitutional. The inherent religious significance of the Latin cross is undeniable and is not disguisable," noted Markert.

[From an Oct. 3 FFRF press release.]

¹See the letter at <http://ffrf.org/uploads/legal/Whiteville%20TN.pdf>

Late-breaking news: Whiteville Mayor Bellar said on Oct. 4 that the cross will be taken down and moved to private property near the highway. See <http://www.wreg.com/news/wreg-whiteville-to-remove-cross-from-water-tower-20111003.0.5501601.story>

Is MDJ Columnist Anti-American?

Congratulations to Ed Buckner, whose letter-to-the-editor (below) was printed in the Sept. 27 issue of the *Marietta Daily Journal*.

DEAR EDITOR:

It is surprising that, even in the interest of being "balanced," the Marietta Daily Journal would carry a columnist who is openly anti-American. Imagine a writer attacking every American who gets Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, G.I. Bill benefits, or any other kind of entitlement — about 90 percent of all Americans. Or who declares that public roads, public bridges, public schools, public parks, and public libraries should all be scrapped in favor of unfettered free enterprise.

What kind of writer could do all that and still hold his head high? I won't bias anyone's answer by suggesting an answer to this question, but it deserves to be asked. If you look in every Sunday's Marietta Daily Journal, at the foot of the editorial page, seeking a preacher who neither cares about nor understands American society or governance, but who writes about them anyway, perhaps you can guess.

Ed Buckner, Smyrna

former president of American Atheists

This letter resulted in many comments in the online version of the *Marietta Daily Journal*, including comments from AFS members. See more here:

http://mdjonline.com/view/full_story/15680906/article-Is-MDJ-columnist-anti-American-?instance=secondary_story_left_column#ixzz1ZeLwWPte

Other Meetings of Interest in the Atlanta Area

The **Humanists of Georgia** will have a picnic on Sunday, Oct. 16, at 12:30 at AF Hall. <http://www.georgiahumanists.org/>.

The **Black Nonbelievers of Atlanta** will meet on Sunday, Oct. 16, 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 **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 **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 **SOS** (Secular Organizations for Sobriety) meets on Tuesdays at 7:30PM at McAlister's Deli on Holcomb Bridge Road in Roswell. For more info: donnajgore@yahoo.com

GUST (Gwinnett: Understanding Secular Truths) will meet on Monday, Oct. 10, at 7:00PM at UUCG, 12 Bethesda Church Road, in Lawrenceville, GA. <http://gust.domek.org/>

The **Atlanta Skeptics** will meet at 1:00 PM on Saturday, Oct. 22, at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave, Atlanta. Reps from James Randi Educational Foundation will speak on "The Truth About ESP." <http://www.atlantaskeptics.com/>

The **Atlanta Science Tavern** will meet on Sat., Oct. 22, at 7:00PM at Manuel's Tavern, 602 N. Highland Ave NE, in Atlanta. Ignacio Taboada, a professor at Georgia Institute of Technology, will speak on "Neutrino Astrophysics at the South Pole." <http://www.meetup.com/AtlantaScienceTavern/>

There will be a **meetup** for Atlanta atheists on Sunday, Oct. 9, 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, Oct. 23, at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewery, 5600 Roswell Rd, in Atlanta. (<http://www.meetup.com/>)

The **Center for Inquiry Institute** and **CFI-Tallahassee** will host a two-day institute on "Science for Everyone" on Friday, Oct. 14 (reception) and Saturday, Oct. 15 (program) at the Aloft Hotel in Tallahassee, FL. Speakers include Richard Carrier, Sir Harry Kroto, Joe Nickell, John Shook and Rebecca Watson. See more at <http://www.centerforinquiry.net/tally>.

The West Alabama Freethought Association is hosting a campout at Lake Hypatia (near Talledega, AL) on the weekends of October 8 and 22. AFS members are invited. See details on the event at <http://www.thewafa.org>.

Bob Collins (author of *100 False Bible Prophecies* and *100 Bible Math Mistakes*) will debate James Drake (director of UAB Campus Crusade for Christ) on "Christianity vs. Secularism: Which Provides a Better Moral Foundation?" at Alumni Auditorium at University of Alabama at Birmingham on Monday, September 20, at 7:30PM. See <http://www.thewafa.org>.

Congratulations to Kelli Cooke, whose documentary "Godless" will be shown at the 4th Annual Texas Freethought Convention, co-sponsored by the Atheist Alliance of America, on October 7-9. Kelli is a member of the Fayette Freethought Society. FFS members viewed the documentary on October 1. The documentary includes perspectives from many Freethought leaders, including Dan Barker, Daniel Dennett, Margaret Downey, Michael Shermer and others. Learn more at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Godless/213794238641140> and see a preview at <http://www.imdb.com/video/wab/vi4199717913/>.

In the News, Online:

Pope Seeks Protestant Allies to Combat Secularism:

http://www.washingtonpost.com/on-faith/pope-seeks-protestant-allies-to-combat-secularism/2011/09/23/gIQAWKqLrK_story.html

10 Myths Many Religious People Hold About Atheists, Debunked:

http://www.alternet.org/story/152395/10_myths_many_religious_people_hold_about_atheists%2C_debunked/?page=1

The ACLU is Suing School District for Ten Commandments Display:

<http://www.thenewamerican.com/usnews/constitution/9009-aclu-suing-school-district-for-ten-commandments-display>

ACLU Says School Violated Constitution:

http://www.thecherokeechronicle.com/view/full_story/15798000/article-ACLU-alleges-school-violated-Constitution?instance=home_news_lead

The Blaze vs. Al Stefanelli: <http://freethoughtblogs.com/assassin/2011/09/24/the-blaze-vs-al-stefanelli/>

Al Steffanelli on the Janet Mefferd Radio Show:

<http://www.janetmefferdpremium.com/2011/09/19/janet-mefferd-radio-show-20110919-hr-3/>

Top Air Force Official Issues Religious Neutrality Policy in Wake of Truthout's "Jesus Loves Nukes" Expose:

<http://www.truth-out.org/aftermath-jesus-loves-nukes-scandal/1316010154>

Here Be Dragons: An Introduction to Critical Thinking: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=752V173e31o>

Galileo Unchained: Confused Thinking About Homosexuality:

<http://galileounchained.com/2011/10/03/confused-thinking-about-homosexuality/>

Private forgiveness doesn't equal public justice

In her story "Journey of Peace" in the Aug. 28 Democrat, managing editor Rebecca Cantley presented

an in-depth report about a murder case affecting our community. In my opinion, this case was handled poorly in many ways. Although

my opinions are not likely to sit well with the victim's and offender's parents, the offender and others, I think they reflect those of many people in our community.

First, a 20-year prison sentence (plus ten years' parole) is not a just punishment for murdering another human. Conor McBride shot his 19-year-old girlfriend, Ann Grosmaire, in the face, and she died five days later. This was a horrendous crime, and there



Gary Whittenberger

My View

are no excuses for Conor's behavior. Not only did he take the life of a beautiful, talented, upstanding and promising young woman, he created immense sadness for her family and friends, impaired the peace and security of our community, and presented a model of inappropriate behavior to other men.

I am sad that the victim's parents pushed for an outcome contrary to true justice, which would have been perfectly compatible with the concept of "restorative justice" as defined by Howard Zehr in Cantley's article.

Assistant State Attorney Jack Campbell shirked his duty. He said, "There's no way I would have — based on these facts and circumstances — agreed to a sentence this lenient had they (the parents) not asked me and sincerely expressed to me how important it was to them to allow them to heal."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Campbell is supposed to represent the interests of the entire community, to seek justice and to promote the deterrence of other men who might be tempted to assault their girlfriends or wives, not to submit to the wishes of the victim's or offender's parents.

Second, the families of the victim and offender should have no control over sentencing, especially in a murder case. This doesn't mean they should be forbidden from presenting impact statements to the court, but it means that they should not be recommending, demanding or negotiating for a particular sentence.

The parents are too emotionally involved in the case and too focused on

their narrow interests to render unbiased, reasonable judgements about just punishment. Usually in murder cases, the parents of the victim are demanding that the state impose the death penalty; rarely do the parents of the victim recommend or demand no or light punishment, as was the case here. But either way, the parents' opinions about the extent of punishment should be irrelevant.

Penalties for crimes should be stipulated in advance by rational decisions of the community, as reflected in laws that embody determinate sentencing. This need not ignore circumstances; it can easily specify punishments for specific crimes under classes of circumstances.

The Grosmaires are entitled to forgive Conor if they wish, if "forgive" means "to give up one's resentment of an offender,"

but they are not entitled to "forgive" if it means "to reduce or influence a reduction in the just punishment of the criminal." The parents and the state attorney should not conspire to impose an unjust light punishment in order to help the parents through grief. The state should help the parents to heal after it ensures true justice.

Finally, people should not use their religious beliefs to determine sentencing, as the Grosmaires did here. In her report, Cantley said, "Forgiveness is a tenet of many religions, and the Grosmaires, as devout Catholics, have studied it for years." In one of the video clips provided with the report, Mr. Grosmaire piously said, "and so I felt like it was Christ that was telling me to forgive Conor."

If forgiveness here meant only that the victim's parents set aside their resentment of the

offender, allowing them to achieve a modicum of peace, who could object? But, when they interfere with the sentencing process, thinking that they know what Christ, God or any other god wants, that is not right. If God exists, the victim's parents, just like everyone else, do not know God's will for a penalty. They should let God handle the situation when the offender dies, if there is an afterlife. In the meantime, let the human community implement justice here on Earth.

The Grosmaire-McBride case is a bad example of "restorative justice," since true justice was not done through the judicial process. The sentence was too light, the State Attorney's Office did not do its job, the victim's parents interfered with sentencing, and they were motivated by their religious beliefs, thinking that they knew the will of God.

Interesting Links:

An Open Letter to Reuel Johnson of the American Cancer Society from Todd Stiefel:

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2011/09/28/an-open-letter-to-reuel-johnson-of-the-american-cancer-society-from-todd-stiefel/>

Rising Atheism in America Puts Religious Right on the Defensive: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/oct/01/atheism-america-religious-right>

I Survived the Creation Conference: <http://galileounchained.com/2011/10/04/i-survived-the-creation-conference-1-of-2/>

Columbus Church Must "Render Unto Caesar": <http://ffrf.org/news/releases/columbus-church-must-render-unto-caesar/>

From the Other Side: "How the Devil's Law Firm Helps to Corrupt Kids": <http://www.onenewsnow.com/Perspectives/Default.aspx?id=1431638>

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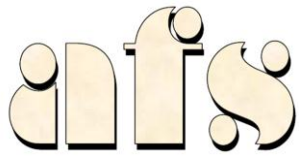
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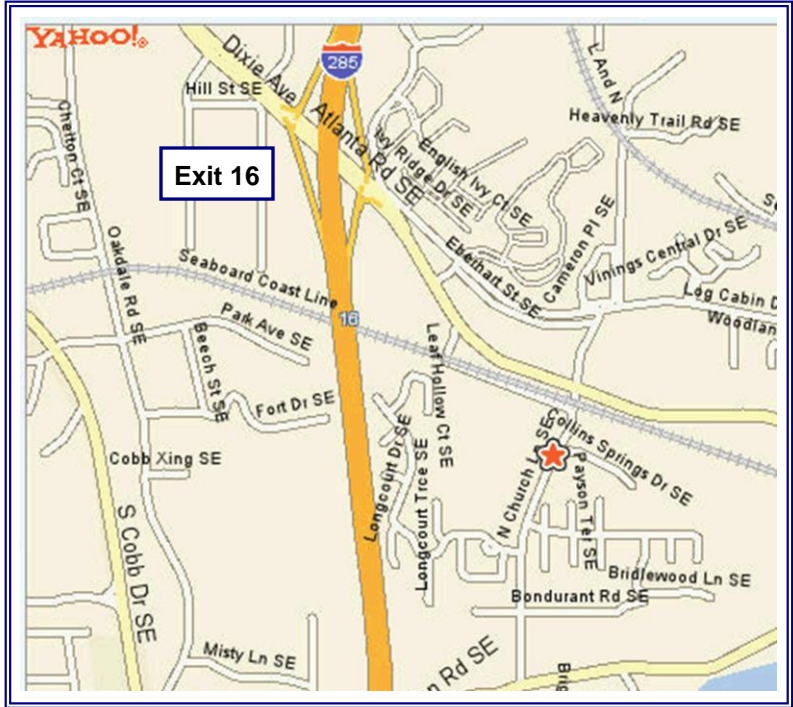
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**This Month's Speaker:
Dennis Martin**



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