

Atlanta Freethought News

Dare to Think for Yourself

An AFS Publication • Volume 11 Number 11 • November 2005

The November Meeting

The November 13 AFS meeting will feature **Eric Segall**, speaking on the federal courts and constitutional law.

Professor Segall is a graduate of Emory University and Vanderbilt Law School where he was the Research Editor for the Law Review and Order of the Coif. He clerked for the Honorable Charles Moye, Jr., Chief Judge for the Northern District of Georgia, and Albert J. Henderson of the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals. He then worked for Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, and the United States Department of Justice, before joining the GSU faculty in 1991.

Professor Segall teaches federal courts and constitutional law, and is also Co-Director of the Externship Program. His articles on constitutional law have appeared in the UCLA Law Review, the George Washington Law Review, the University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law, the University of Pittsburgh Law Review, and the Florida Law Review. He has given numerous speeches both inside and outside the academy on constitutional law questions and the Supreme Court.

The AFS meeting will be at 1:00 at the Atlanta Freethought Center, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA. (Feel free to arrive early for discussion and snacks.) To get there from Atlanta, take I-400 north past I-285 by 8 miles to Exit 7B, which is GA-140. Take GA-140 (Holcomb Bridge Road) west about 1 mile and turn left at Grimes Bridge Road. Go 0.2 miles to 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, which is on the right.

AFS Activities

The next **AFS Social** will be at **Athens Pizza House**, 1341 Clairmont Road, on Friday, November 18, at 7:00 PM. (It's on Clairmont Road near North Decatur Road in Atlanta.)

To get there, take I-85 to Exit 91, the Clairmont Road exit. Turn east at the light and go 3.5 miles to Athens Pizza House, which is on the left before you cross N. Decatur Rd.

The **AFS Discussion Group** will meet at the AF Center on Sunday, November 20. In addition to discussion, Judy Thompson will talk about her vacation in Germany and her experience with the German healthcare system.

The **Tuesday Lunch Bunch** meets every Tuesday at 12:30 at Panahar Restaurant, 3375 Buford Hwy in Atlanta.

AFS Meetings and Activities

Nov 13: AFS General Meeting at AF Center, 1:00 PM.

Nov 18: AFS Social, Athens Pizza House, 7:00 PM.

Nov 20: AFS Discussion Group at AF Center, 4:00 PM.

Humanists of Georgia Meeting

The **Humanists of Georgia** will not have a regular meeting in November, but will have a social outing at the home of Fred and Kathy Sayeg in Griffin, GA on November 12 at 4:00PM. Contact David Patterson for more information. (meshmonster@yahoo.com)

SOS Meets at AF Center

The **Secular Organizations for Sobriety** meets at the Atlanta Freethought Center every Tuesday evening at 8:00pm. SOS is the secular substitute for Alcoholics Anonymous.

Fellowship of Reason Meeting

The **Fellowship of Reason** meets on the first Sunday of every month at 12:30 PM at the Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 1025 Mount Vernon Hwy, in Atlanta. For details, see www.fellowshipofreason.com.

The November Atheist Meetup

Atlanta Atheists will have a "meetup" on Sunday, November 27 at 4:00 PM at Five Seasons Brewing, 5600 Roswell Road, in Atlanta. The phone there is 404-255-5911.

AFS Elections

AFS officers and board members for next year were nominated at the October meeting. (Elections will be by mailed ballot later this month.) The nominees are:

President: Steve Yothment

Vice President, Int. Communication: Judy Thompson

Vice President, Ext. Communication: Freya Harris

Treasurer: Ed Buckner

Board Members: Diane Buckner, Dennis Martin,

George Page, Lew Southern

Officers have 1-year terms; board members have 2-year terms. Bill Burton, Jack McKinney and Jim Middleton will continue their 2-year terms into next year; three more board members will be voted in.

New President for Internet Infidels

Freethought activist and longtime Internet Infidels Publicity Director **Clark Adams** began a two-year term as President of **Internet Infidels** on November 1, succeeding retiring President Jim Lippard. A grassroots organizer for the last 15 years, Adams also serves as President of the Las Vegas Freethought Society.

The Internet Infidels website (www.infidels.org) is the most comprehensive and frequently visited freethought resource on the Internet with over 80,000 "hits" per day.



Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at the AFS Center, 1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Roswell, GA, unless otherwise noted. Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

Nov 13: GSU law professor Dr. Eric Segall will speak on constitutional law.

Dec 11: Dr. Richard T. Hull, organizer of the CFI Florida Tallahassee Community, will speak on the medical ethics related to when a fetus becomes an individual human being.

Jan 8: Dr. David R. Koepsell, Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism, will speak on freethought issues.

To join the AFS Forum e-mail list, send a blank message to AFSforum-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To join the AFS Announcements list, send a blank email to afs-announce-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To join the Georgia Freethinkers Letter Writing Cooperative, send a blank email to flwc-ga-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

You can unsubscribe by sending an email to xxxx-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Atlanta Freethought News
an AFS publication

Editor

Steve Yothment

How to Contact the Editor

Send correspondence to AFS at:
1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite 500
Roswell, GA 30075-3905
or phone Steve at 678-364-8703
or send e-mail to SteveYoth@aol.com.

Atlanta Freethought Society

President

Steve Yothment – 678-364-8703

VP for Internal Communication

Judy Thompson – 404-296-2020

VP for External Communication

Freya Harris – 770-454-7545

Treasurer

Ed Buckner – 770-432-3049

Board of Directors

Diane Buckner – 770-432-3049

Bill Burton – 770-469-1228

Jack McKinney – 770-424-5004

Joel Kollin – 770-392-7958

Jim Middleton – 404-377-1511

Lew Southern – 770-509-8272

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Vol. 11, Number 11, November 2005
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1170 Grimes Bridge Road, Suite
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Send E-mail to
afs@atlantafreethought.org.

AFS Webmaster: Freya Harris
Call the **AFS Infoline:** 770-641-2903

Backward, Christian Soldiers! By Kurt Andersen

Why must intelligent design be stopped? Because this could be the moment when the theocratization of America makes a real advance.

Will the Yankees win the pennant and the World Series? Don't know, don't really much care. It's the same with religion: I just don't get it. There may be a God or—I was raised Unitarian—a “divine oneness of creation,” but I have no conviction one way or the other, nor any itch to shuck off my uncertainty in favor of either atheism or firm belief.

I realize I'm a freak, entirely out of step with the mainstream. According to the polling data, about 5 percent of Americans say they don't believe in God, and only another 5 percent—my 5 percent—aren't sure. But almost the whole other 90 percent subscribe to some flavor of (Christian) faith. Most of those say that the Bible is literally true, and a good 30 percent believe that it was dictated by God.

And whether they are strict scriptural literalists or not, a supermajority of Americans believe in—what else can you call it?—magic: 61 percent think the world was created in six days, 70 to 78 percent say that hell and the Devil and angels exist, 81 to 85 percent believe in Heaven. If opinion polling had existed in the Middle Ages, it's hard to imagine that the numbers would have been much higher.

For practical reasons—reasons both of politics and civility—it ordinarily behooves our tiny minority of reality-based infidels to keep quiet about our astonishment that most of our fellow citizens are in thrall to fantastic medieval fever dreams, just as it behooves secular minorities in Islamic countries to keep their modern sentiments to themselves. In countries like ours, the Iraqs and Afghanistans and USAs, liberals need to pick their battles.

So complaining about “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance really isn't worth the trouble. I'm pleased, of course, when judges declare the display of the Ten Commandments on public property unconstitutional, but

even there I'm not quite willing to go to the mat, especially concerning the rules about stealing, killing, and filial respect. How about the giant menorah over the door of the Municipal Building on Centre Street [in New York] every December? Whatever. Discretion is the better part of valor.

But not always and no matter what. Sometimes we have to make an impolitic stink in support of the Enlightenment, and of the pieces of the Constitution—like the first words of the Bill of Rights, about government making “no law respecting an establishment of religion”—that are its revolutionary political expression. Intelligent design (ID), the hot new rebranding of Christian creationism, is extremely clever, profoundly disingenuous, and, I think, dangerous. It must be beaten back and kept out of the public schools.

Why have I gotten so riled now? Because when and if, God forbid, the history of America's theocratic transformation is written, these past few months will be seen as a turning point. When I read in June that the Discovery Institute, the Seattle think tank behind intelligent design, was premiering its new movie, *The Privileged Planet: The Search for Purpose in the Universe*, at the Smithsonian, I literally moaned and shouted. In his inaugural Mass last spring, the new pope had included a sentence dissing evolution, but in July, Cardinal Schonborn, his close friend and doctrinal Kommandant, elaborated the Church's aggressive new anti-Darwinism in a Times op-ed—an article placed, it turned out, through the offices of the Discovery Institute.

Then came August, when I discovered that Bill Gates's foundation is a principal funder of the Discovery Institute (although not primarily its intelligent-design work). And watched the president say that the decision whether to teach evolutionary biology or faith-based pseudoscience should

be made by local school districts, but that “both sides ought to be properly taught . . . so people can understand what the debate is about.” And watched Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, the Harvard Medical School graduate, scramble onto the bandwagon. And then, depressingly, watched the hard-truth-telling maverick John McCain do the same. Finally, at the end of the month, the [New York] Times ran a friendly three-part series on intelligent design. The barbarians had breached the gate.

So now my interest in the outcome of *Kitzmiller et al. v. Dover Area School District*—the federal trial of a lawsuit over a Pennsylvania school system's embrace of intelligent design—is intense. Dover is close [for me], only two hours beyond Philadelphia. Instead of rooting for Derek Jeter this fall, every joule of my home-team passion is going to the heroic team of dissenters in Dover—not just Tammy Kitzmiller and her ten fellow parents who filed suit, but Bertha Spahr and her six fellow teachers who declined to go along with the school board's crypto-Christian meddling in their science curriculum.

This is the anti-evolution disclaimer the Dover teachers were ordered to read to their ninth-grade classes before they could teach evolution: “Because Darwin's Theory is a theory, it continues to be tested as new evidence is discovered. . . . Gaps in the Theory exist for which there is no evidence. . . . Intelligent design is an explanation of the origin of life that differs from Darwin's view.” In a letter to the school superintendent explaining their refusal, the teachers at one point became especially emphatic: “INTELLIGENT DESIGN,” they wrote, caps lock on, “IS NOT SCIENCE. INTELLIGENT DESIGN IS NOT BIOLOGY. INTELLIGENT DESIGN IS NOT AN ACCEPTED SCIENTIFIC THEORY.”

The teachers are right; the school

Backward, Christian Soldiers! (*continued*)

board—and Bush, Frist, and McCain—are simply wrong. Creationists, now reborn as “design theorists,” imagine that finally, instead of merely ignoring or denying evolutionary science, they are using bona fide but Genesis-friendly science to discredit it. Their crucial, we-are-not-insane concession is that the Earth really is a few billion years old, rather than only a few thousand.

“Evolution is a theory, not a fact,” say the stickers that another school system, in Cobb County, Georgia, affixed to textbooks. But all scientific knowledge “continues to be tested as new evidence is discovered,” and therefore all science is nominally theory—theory that exists along a spectrum, however, from deeply knowledgeable speculation (like superstring theory in particle physics) to virtual certainties (such as evolution). In science, there is no such thing as fixed, irrefutable truth. That’s the difference between empiricism and faith.

So here’s a compromise: I’m willing to print the reasonable-sounding liberal core of the Cobb County disclaimer on every textbook in America—“This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered”—as soon as the Christians agree to put the same sticker on all of their Bibles. Disingenuous? Sure, just like the ID movement’s apparently liberal, apparently evenhanded strategy to sneak religious ideas into the classroom by saying they want to “teach the controversy.” In fact, the brilliance of the IDers (and of the new New Right generally) has been to recast all sorts of old liberal paradigms and habits for their own ends. We say intelligent design is camouflaged religion, and therefore a violation of the First Amendment? Well, says one of

Discovery’s directors, the Dover case is indeed about adhering to the First Amendment—by protecting the right to “free speech” in public-school classrooms.

For several decades the philosophical ground has been softened up by the relativism and political correctness of the secular left, which succeeded in undermining the very idea of objective reality and of calling a spade a spade—so now, in the resulting marsh, fantasies like intelligent design (or Scientology or feng shui or 9/11 as a CIA plot) take root and spread like weeds. Liberals pioneered squishy-minded indulgence of their key constituencies’ unfortunate new ideas, like reparations and criminalized hate speech; now it’s the right’s turn.

The ID people, I’m afraid, remind me of Holocaust deniers. They’re not evil, but they are distorting and ignoring a century and a half of overwhelming empirical evidence to make it easier for people to believe in a historical miracle, just as Holocaust deniers distort and ignore half a century of overwhelming empirical evidence to make it easier for people to disbelieve a historical crime. Both are enemies of truth.

John E. Jones III, the judge hearing *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, is an active Republican whom Bush appointed. Still, so far he has ruled in favor of the teachers, and it would be shocking if he issued a verdict that the school system is behaving constitutionally—in other words, if he ruled that intelligent design has a bona fide secular purpose and is not intended to advance religion. Those are the constitutional tests that the big lie of ID was designed to end-run.

Whatever his verdict, the losing side will undoubtedly appeal the case

up to the Supreme Court. The last time the court ruled on creationism, overturning a Louisiana education law in 1987, the vote was 7-2, with Justices Scalia and Rehnquist dissenting. That court didn’t include Clarence Thomas—who in last year’s “one nation under God” case made the Taliban argument that the First Amendment’s “establishment clause” applies only to the federal government and was never meant to prohibit individual states from adopting official religions. But even in the unlikely event that both Chief Justice Roberts (an observant Catholic) and, say, Harriet Miers (a born-again Evangelical) voted with Scalia and Thomas to allow intelligent-design provisos in science classes, the court would presumably still be 5-4 in favor of keeping church and state separated.

So we are probably safe for now—as a jurisprudential matter. But politically, secularism will lose no matter what. If it’s decided correctly, *Kitzmiller v. Dover* can become a new *Roe v. Wade*, a landmark judicial bone in the craw of Christian America, a fresh means for right-wingers to depict their children as victims of godless liberals. At least on *Roe v. Wade*, a big majority of Americans have consistently supported the decision. As far as teaching straight science goes, however, the big majority is against us. According to a new Pew Research Center poll, 64 percent of Americans are in favor of having creationism and evolution taught in school—and it seems most of those would actually prefer to replace evolution altogether with scriptural teaching. Like I said, those of us who believe wholeheartedly in science and the First Amendment are the freaks.

[From the Oct 17 issue of *New York* magazine. Reprinted by permission.]

“Religious controversies are always productive of more acrimony and irreconcilable hatreds than those which spring from any other cause.” —George Washington, letter to Sir Edward Newenham, June 22, 1792. From “2000 Years of Disbelief” by James A. Haught

“I wish the view I heard expressed by Lewis Black, the stand-up comedian, was more widely shared. He said he won’t even debate evolution’s detractors because “We’ve got the fossils. We win.” —Sean Carroll, in his article “Endless Forms Most Beautiful,” *Skeptical Inquirer*, November 2005, page 50.

Living With Religion

From a book still being written, by Jim Middleton

To discuss religion is to discuss perhaps some of the unhappiest times of my life—especially in retrospect. Sometimes the full misery is not comprehended until one learns what could have been.

My mother and father attended church, but not compulsorily. I have some memories of the family's attending church, but have no recollection of hell-fire or the like. It seems it was a happy time. That was my real mother—but she died when I was only five years old.

My father re-married when I was seven. His bride was a Baptist, reared in a very fundamentalist Southern Baptist family. Her father thought he was god himself, or at least the appointed spokesman for god; and, her mother was little better, taking for herself the role of being right in all matters, with no need to speak *ex cathedra*.

This Baptist joined our Methodist family, and announced that she would become Methodist. You know what they say about the proselyte, and she bore out the worst expectations. She kept the institutional thinking of the Baptists, and added doctrine of the Methodists, both well tied with conservative Christian beliefs.

Many will think that Christian doctrine cannot hurt, since it is based on love. Those people have overlooked the Pauline doctrines, and have not realized what can be done with a doctrine of inerrancy in the hands of a self-centered interpreter of that doctrine. One should first be reminded that Paul believed that every normal desire of the flesh was a sin; further, when a person sins, the person must confess his sin, feeling contrite and vowing not to sin again. What must happen to a person's self respect when that person finds that he sins, repents, and always sins again? Just in case there is any remnant of the self, however, Jesus said that one must "deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." So the last vestiges

of humanity are gone.

As a seven-year-old, I didn't have a chance. My siblings and I were forced to attend Sunday School every Sunday. Further, we were exhorted, in loud and forceful tones, to study in advance for Sunday School. After Sunday School, of course we went to church; and, we returned to the church in the evening for whatever they called the religious program, followed by another church service. We can't forget the Wednesday night prayer meeting at the church, and untold numbers of other church activities that seemed to keep us at church more than anywhere else.

All this indoctrination had its effect. As a very shy child I had no means for checking the truth or validity of what I was told. People at church said it was true, and at home we were told it was true, so how could it be doubted? Just in case some doubt arose, I was constantly reminded that it was not within my abilities to make any determination concerning right and wrong, or god, or almost anything else. Thus, I believed most of what I was taught. I couldn't believe all of it because I had so little respect for my stepmother that I could not believe everything she said. My father was very weak, however, and he fell under her spell, and passed along the Word to me.

Only a child, or a child-like person, could really believe all I was told. Once believed, however, it is one of the worst curses imaginable. All one's healthy appetites are sinful—even having the desire is a sin. If one then succumb to the desire it is worse, and one must repent or burn in hell. That's quite a trammel on a child. As a shy child unable to discuss such matters with anyone rational, I was doomed.

I did not become a true ascetic, but I withdrew to the point there was little psychological difference. Only in this withdrawn state could I avoid most of the sins, so it "worked." As a

result, I was a "good" child who never got into trouble. How could I, when I could not do anything that was fun—or normal.

There is a down side to the withdrawal. Imagine a person who knows that he is worth nothing, who then withdraws from the world to keep from doing anything wrong, then imagine this person in school. Obviously there is very little mental energy, or personal motivation, to do school work. I managed to be a C student, or somewhere close. My siblings also were C students, so no one thought to suggest that I could do better, and I received no promptings from anyone to do better.

As I grew older, something made me think about some of the things I had been told. I recall one thing that surely contributed: a Sunday School teacher actually suggested to the class that the stories in the *Holy Bible* might actually be subject to different interpretations, and may not be literally true. Well, that was a revelation! And, once one begins to think along this line, how can it stop?

I still had the problem of shyness, and could not talk to anyone about my thoughts of the re-interpretation of the Bible. Silently, I gathered more facts, and thought about the old stories, and my thoughts were changing. Gradually, I had considerable doubts about the truth of the entire religion, though I kept them and pondered them in my heart.

My brother is older than me, and he went to college. After his first quarter of college he brought home his beginning philosophy textbook—some dialogues of Plato. In my desire to learn, I read the book and discovered that a highly respected thinker questioned everything. He was a pre-Christian, so he did not know Jesus, yet he had a high moral code. This was better than an epiphany. After the next quarter, I got my brother's next book, which was Aristotle. Aristotle had the audacity to attempt to determine the na-

Religion (*continued*)

ture of god, and the nature of the soul, through thought. And he, too, was a respected thinker. Perhaps there really is salvation somewhere.

In my early years of high school, the old teachings still had a hold. Even though I had doubts about the teachings, I found I was simply a slightly liberal Christian. The negative teachings still held sway, and still prevented real enjoyment of life because of the fear of always being wrong. And, still, normal appetites are sinful. The next drive towards reality was science.

It was wonderful. Science was demonstrable, and testable—and best of all, it was logical. Unfortunately, science also allows logic-tight compartments, so knowledge of science does not necessarily preclude belief in Christianity. As insecure as I was, and as well indoctrinated as I was, I retained the Christian beliefs through high school, even though strong doubts had arisen. At least, the doubts, and the belief in science, allowed some escape from the dismal prison of total belief.

Then I went to college, to study engineering. The science learning continued, but there were also some English courses in which we learned critical thinking, and in which we read some of the Pre-Socratic philoso-

phers. The combination was overwhelming. I remember particularly Democritus. Here was a thinker many years before the Christian era who determined that everything was made of atoms. And I thought that was a recent discovery. Furthermore, this thinker determined through thought and logic, based on some observations, the nature of god, the soul, and other mysteries of the world, and had an ethical code that sounded better than the Christian one.

It was with fear and trepidation that I finally decided to give up Christianity: give up the prayers; give up the dependency on God/Jesus; give up the certainty of Truth; give up the gifts to the church; and, give up the threats of Hell. After all, what if I were wrong? I had always been assured that I could do nothing—that only Jesus did things through me. I had been worthless all these years; did I dare to act as if I were of some value? Fear took hold in all areas. Instead of merely making plans, I made plans, made first alternative plans, and made second and third alternative plans in case something went wrong. In financial planning, the budget was so close I had to watch every penny, because I knew that God had made the money left over after the church gift go further than I could

if I kept the whole amount. The fear that that may be true made for careful, stingy, planning.

As reason would have it, all fears were unfounded. Depending on myself rather than Jesus worked well—and the first plan worked so there was no need for the alternative plans. I had more time because I did not have to fix problems caused by unanswered prayers. The stingy financial planning was tighter than it had to be, and I found that I had enough money to live comfortably instead of barely existing as I had for many, many years. Reason is wonderful.

Of course some time was required to mature in my newfound freedom, but I had a lot of friends to help. The Pre-Socratics, and Socrates and Aristotle were of great help, and Bertrand Russell was wonderful. Russell even demonstrated the creation of a moral code without a god, and this reinforced Plato's creation of laws, which is about the same thing. Eventually I found live friends with whom I could discuss philosophy, and these helped to develop my complete philosophy.

This story will continue until the end of life, but now it is life, whereas it previously was a form of death—especially when looking back from such total happiness and mental ease to the time of mental hell.

ALC's Larry Darby Resigns; Will Seek Public Office

From an Atheist Law Center Press Release

On November 4, the Atheist Law Center in Montgomery, AL announced a change in leadership with the resignation of Larry Darby, who has served as its president since the Center's founding on September 11, 2002. Carol Moore, a founder and officer of the non-profit firm, replaces Mr. Darby, who is considering a run

for public office in the 2006 elections in Alabama. Under Moore's leadership the Center intends to continue its advocacy for the separation of religion and government, and other individual liberties guaranteed by the Constitution.

John Nielsen, who also serves as editor of the Center's electronic news

publication, the *Atheist Daily Briefing*, will continue as the Center's vice-president. The *Atheist Daily Briefing* is sent to readers throughout the United States and nearly two dozen other nations.

Mr. Darby says he is planning to enter the Democratic primary for state attorney general, scheduled for June 6.

“The Gothic idea that we are to look backwards ... for the improvement of the human mind, and to recur to the annals of our ancestors for what is most perfect in government, in religion, and in learning, is worthy of those bigots in religion and government, by whom it has been recommended.” —Thomas Jefferson, January 27, 1800. From *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* by Julian P. Boyd, 31:341

“Christianity, as it ruled the world in the time of Constantine, was indeed a blasting power. It was the greatest curse that ever came upon humanity. It destroyed life, it destroyed science, it destroyed civilization.... Christianity is the most cruel religion that has ever blackened the pages of history.” —Samuel Putnam, from *400 Years of Freethought* by Samuel P. Putnam, 1894, p. 27.

FEMA Covers Faith-based Losses

Religious schools and other private, nonprofit organizations that provide government-type services are eligible for federal grants and loans to rebuild facilities damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Bush administration said on October 18.

"President Bush believes that hurricanes, floods and earthquakes don't discriminate on the basis of religion and that government's response to them should not either," said Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Mr. Towey said the policy permitting such federal disaster aid has been in effect since 2002, when Mr. Bush changed Federal Emergency Management Agency rules to allow a \$550,000 grant to rebuild a Hebrew school in Seattle that was destroyed in an earthquake.

Mr. Bush ordered the policy change after a Justice Department review determined that providing federal disaster assistance to rebuild the Hebrew school would not violate the constitutional requirement for separation of church and state.

The Justice Department "felt this was analogous to providing them with police and fire protection," Mr. Towey said.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the policy change has never been challenged in court but is of dubious constitutional merit.

"If it's a religious building, in general, the courts have not allowed the use of tax dollars to build it or renovate it," Mr. Lynn said, "and a natural disaster does not destroy basic constitutional principles."

Mr. Bush has been pushing to expand government funding for faith-based initiatives since taking office nearly six years ago, but has met resistance in Congress. Supporters have suggested that churches' roles in helping hurricane victims may ease that opposition.

Mr. Towey said the White House has received numerous inquiries about federal reconstruction aid from Catholic Church officials in New Orleans, where roughly half the students attend parochial schools, and

from Orthodox Jewish groups and Christian evangelical groups.

"The aftershocks of the Seattle Hebrew Academy policy will be felt now in the Gulf states, as we make sure that any of the faith-based educational facilities, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, critical care facilities ... know they are eligible to participate," he said.

Mr. Towey said state emergency offices will be holding meetings to help such groups apply. He said the organizations would be eligible for FEMA grants only for facility losses not covered by insurance or by disaster loans available from the Small Business Administration.

For mixed-use buildings, Mr. Towey said, eligibility would be determined by the facility's primary use. A community center that housed a job training program during the week and was used for worship services on the weekend probably would be eligible, he said, but buildings used primarily for religious worship services would not.

[From an October 19 AP article.]

Jeb Bush's Contest Promotes Religious Book

In an October 20 letter to Florida Governor Jeb Bush, Americans United for Separation of Church and State called a state-sponsored contest promoting a religious book constitutionally problematic.

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United, said Bush's "Just Read, Florida!" contest employs government channels to encourage state students to read C.S. Lewis' Christian allegory, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

"Gov. Bush's contest to promote a religious story is an offense to the First Amendment," Lynn said. "It's simply not the function of state officials to promote religion. This contest should be opened up to include non-religious books as well."

The Florida reading contest coincides with the major motion picture

release based on the book. According to the governor's Web site, the contest asks students in grades 3-12 to submit essays, artwork or videos after reading the Lewis book, in which a group of children face good and evil in a fantasy land filled with talking animals known as Narnia. The book is a Christian allegory that many religious leaders use to introduce children to Christianity.

The awards for the winners include a private movie screening in Orlando, a two-night stay at a Disney resort, gift certificates to Borders and Starbucks and a copy of the book signed by the governor and his wife.

In his letter, Lynn noted that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is part of the 7-book Narnia series "widely recognized as a Christian" based collection. Lynn's letter cited a

2005 National Review article that states "the fundamental purpose of the Narnia stories is to convey the reality of Christian truth."

Lynn wrote that the state's contest featuring the book "creates the appearance of a governmental endorsement of the book's religious message" in violation of the separation of church and state.

"The contest is another example of Jeb Bush's long running effort to fund and promote religion," Lynn added.

Since the start of his administration, Bush has pushed a sweeping state-wide school voucher program that funnels millions of public dollars to private sectarian schools. The constitutionality of Bush's so-called "A+ Plan for Education" has been challenged and is before the state's supreme court. *(continued)*

Contest (continued)

During the summer, Bush unveiled his "All Pro Dad" program calling on the state's public schools to host a Christian-based program to encourage fathers to become more involved in their children's lives.

The governor has also staunchly called for prison ministry programs, opening the nation's first "faith-based" prison.

"Bush appears intent on running roughshod over a fundamental consti-

tutional principle," Lynn added. "He should change course now and correct the constitutionally suspect state-sponsored book reading contest."

[From an October 20 Americans United press release.]

Letter to the Editor

Jack McKinney's letter was in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on November 4, 2005.

... And a Letter *from* the Editor

Did you catch the incorrect article in last month's issue of Atlanta FreeThought News? On page 4, the article titled "Robertson Blames Hurricane on Choice of Ellen Degeneres to Host Emmys" was wrong, bogus, incorrect.

Snopes.com debunked the article, which appeared on many websites before it was printed in AFNews. See <http://www.snopes.com/katrina/satire/robertson.asp> for details of the hoax article.

The AFNews editor wrote an email

about the error to other Freethought organizations so that they don't repeat it in their newsletters.

Congratulations to John Snider and Ed Buckner, who recognized the hoax article. And, yes, please do notify the editor if you find something incorrect in the newsletter!

The editor thinks it is important to be accurate in what we say in the newsletter, and offers his sincere apology. We will strive for more accuracy in the future!

Let us pray for a vote

I resent that one penny of tax money will be spent by Cobb County to fight a federal lawsuit aimed at stopping overtly Christian prayers at commission meetings ("Cobb fights suit vs. prayer," Metro, Nov. 2).

I would like to ask all Cobb officials this question: "Do you believe government, at any level, has the right to force religion on citizens in order for said citizens to do business with a governmental entity? Answer yes or no only." And I would like to see each vote publicized.

JACK MCKINNEY
Kennesaw

October Board Meeting Minutes

Present: Steve Yothment (President), Ed Buckner (Treasurer), Diane Buckner, Bill Burton, Jack McKinney, Jim Middleton
Date/Time: October 16, 2005, 2:00 PM

Minutes: The minutes of the September meeting were approved as presented.

Treasurer's Report: Ed Buckner stated that he did not have a formal report prepared; however, we have about \$1600 in checking, around \$150 to be deposited, and about \$500 in Pay Pal. He has paid the Fulton County tax, and all current bills are paid. Insurance will be due soon, but we do not yet have a new policy.

Insurance: Jack suggested that we get other quotations on insurance. Diane moved that Ed be charged to get some quotations, and change insurance as appropriate. Bill seconded the motion, and the motion carried.

Rental: Ed further reported that he had talked to Dr. Tu about his lease, and proposed a 6-month extension at the present rate, or a 1-year extension at an increased rate. Dr. Tu said he will decide later.

AFS Debt: The present debt was discussed, and Jack pointed out that we have one loan at 10% interest, and suggested that one or more members should be able to lend money at a lower rate to pay off the present loan. The board agreed in principle, but left

the subject for future consideration.

Election: The membership has made nominations for the new officers and board members. Now, we must send ballots to all members and subsequently count all ballots. It was agreed that Steve will print the ballots and bring them to the AF center before the next AFS meeting. The board members and officers will assist in stuffing and addressing envelopes, and the envelopes can be distributed to all members who attend the meeting. The remaining envelopes will be mailed to the members. Steve appointed Jack McKinney to chair the election process, with Jim Middleton's assistance.

Publicity: Bill informed the board of the Candler Park Festival. There was interest in having a booth at next year's festival, subject to obtaining additional information about booths, costs etc.

Social: Steve reported that he was the only person at the last social. In an effort to get better attendance, the next social will be at Athens Pizza. Diane suggested that we have a hike as a social, and some interest was expressed.

Highway Cleanup: Steve reported that the highway cleanup is only four times per year, so the next cleanup will be next spring.

Board Meeting: It was unanimously agreed that there will be no board meeting next month.

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(Or renew your membership with this form!)



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

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

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

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

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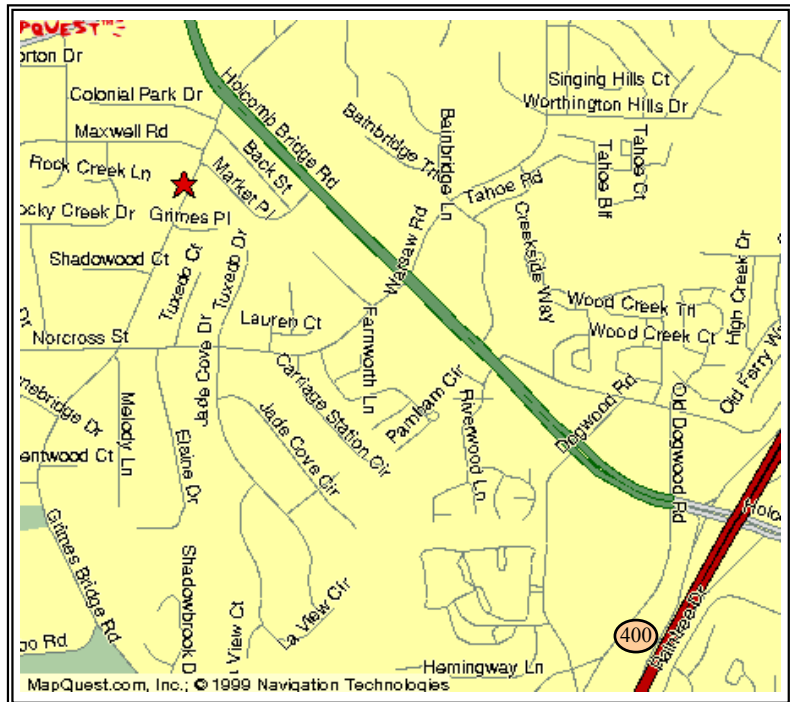
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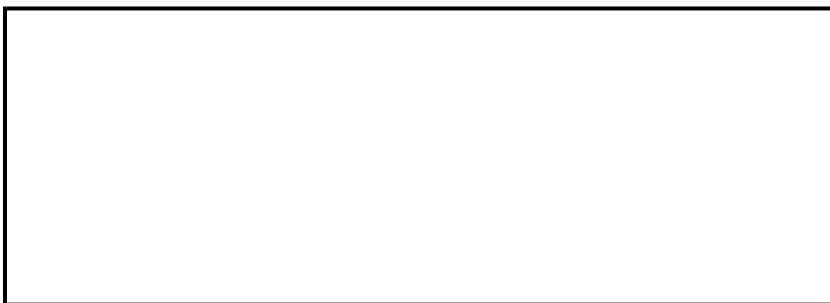


**The November Meeting:
Sunday, November 13
1:00 at the AF Center
1170 Grimes Bridge Road
Roswell, GA**

**This Month's Speaker:
Dr. Eric Segall**



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