

First Coast

FREETHINKER

The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society



March, 2005

Volume 3, Issue 3

Students apathetic on rights

Citizens of the future not too concerned with First Amendment issues.

By Hugo Borresen

MANY HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS think censorship of newspapers isn't a bad thing, according to a recent nationwide survey.

A third thinks the First Amendment goes too far in guaranteeing freedom of the press. Only 83 percent think people should be allowed to express unpopular views.

Three-fourths of respondents believe burning the flag is illegal and half believe the government can restrict indecent material on the Internet.

Three-fourths take the First Amendment for granted and do not know how they feel about it. They do not know it protects freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly. More than a third think the First Amendment "goes too far."

These results come from a 2004 survey of more than 100,000 students, nearly 8,000 teachers, and more than 500 administrators at 544 public and private high schools.

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation sponsored the \$1 million survey.

"These results are not only disturbing; they are dangerous. Ignorance about the basics of this free society is a danger to our nation's future," said

Hodding Carter III, president of the foundation.

Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia wants schools to teach about the Constitution on September 17, the date it was signed in 1787. That date falls on a Saturday.

Aren't these the freedoms we're so eager to fight for?

Students often embrace these concepts if they are taught about them, but many schools do not make them a priority.

Those who work in student newspapers and television production are more likely to support First Amendment concepts. But a fifth of schools offer no such opportunities; two-fifths of these schools eliminated them in the last five years.

Most principals also think students should learn journalism skills but most lack money to incorporate such programs.

"The last 15 years have not been a golden era for student media. Programs are under siege or dying from neglect. Many students do not get the opportunity to practice our basic freedoms," said Warren Watson, director of the J-Ideas project at Ball State University.

Several reasons explain the igno-

rance and indifference. The general public may be just as ignorant of these freedoms as are these high-school students. Only a few organizations express concern, such as the ACLU and People for the American Way.

Ironically, many religious groups want the Ten Commandments displayed in public but do not want the same display for the Bill of Rights, not even in schools.

Television and films do not deal with the subject because they seek to entertain rather than inform.

Schools are pressured to emphasize reading, writing, and math in order to score passing grades on assessment tests. American government courses take a back seat along with music and the arts.

Schools should be encouraged to
See "Students," page 3

March meeting

Guest speaker:
Anthony Rossi, Ph.D.
of University of North Florida

"Global Warming: Potential shifts in biological processes."

Monday, March 14
6:30 p.m.

Unitarian Universalist Church
7405 Arlington Expressway
in the sanctuary

President's message

Let's look at the data before drawing conclusions

"ENVIRONMENTALISM SEEMS to be the religion of choice for urban atheists ... a perfect 21st-century remapping of traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs and myths," author Michael Crichton said in a 2003 speech to San Francisco's Commonwealth Club.

He also said second-hand smoke is not a health hazard and the evidence for global warming is far weaker than its detractors will ever admit.

Rather than basing their beliefs on scientific reality, Crichton said, environmentalists are essentially ignorant about the science behind their beliefs — just as fundamentalist Christians are ignorant of the source of the 19th-century idea of the Rapture, .

Crichton's comments added more fuel to the fire in the battle between industrialists and environmentalists. He challenges the scientific validity of environmentalism and the true motivation of its adherents.

As both an urban atheist and an environmentalist, I am more than a little surprised to be put in the company



Susan Allen

of fundamentalist Christians.

But he has a point.

I agree with Crichton that few of us really understand the science behind many of the concepts taken as gospel by the environmentalist movement. We take them on faith and often fall short of investigating the causes and solutions of the many environmental catastrophes occurring on our planet. When cornerstone theories such as global warming are challenged, we are ill-prepared to defend them.

In a more recent speech to Harvard Medical School's Center for Health and the Global Environment, journalist Bill Moyers decried the rapture-believing one-third of the American electorate that welcomes environmental destruction as a sign of the coming apocalypse.

Our President proclaims to be one of them.

So does James Inhofe (R-Okla.), Senate environment and public works committee chair, who called global warming "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people."

To rapturists, there's no point in protecting the environment. In their view, the sooner we destroy the planet, the sooner we'll all see Jesus.

Ronald Reagan's secretary of the interior, James Watt, declared: "After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back." This was the person entrusted with protecting our natural resources.

Now these folks would have us believe global warming is a myth. Let's let the facts be our guide.



First Coast **FREETHINKER**

The *First Coast Freethinker* is published for members of the First Coast Freethought Society, other freethinkers and potential freethinkers. We exchange newsletters with other freethought groups and obtain information from many sources.

Readers are invited and encouraged to reprint our original materials provided they give credit to this publication.

The officials of the FCFS are not responsible for opinions or other statements expressed in this newsletter. It is intended to convey ideas to stimulate discussion on a variety of subjects.

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We welcome submissions. Deadlines are the second week of the month for the following month. Submit contributions by e-mail to Hugo or Michael (see above), or mail to Hugo Borresen, 8831 Taurus Circle, South, Jacksonville, FL 32222. Web site submissions: Carrie Renwick, carrieren@att.net.

U.S. charity not tops, as apologists claim

T-U readers eagerly parrot the official party line.

LETTERS FROM READERS on the op-ed pages of *The Florida Times-Union* can provide insight into the mindset of the typical Jacksonville — and how eager he or she is to parrot the party line

In the January 4 edition, two misinformed *T-U* readers praised American generosity as the best in the world.

“We must remember that, unlike many other Western countries, our country, America, leads the way, as it should, in charitable giving,” wrote Joni B. Hannigan of Jacksonville.

Amelia Gaillard, also of Jacksonville, took the hype a leap further. “In truth, we are, by far, the most financially benevolent country the world has ever known.”

They are parroting claims by President George W. Bush that we are “a very generous, kind-hearted nation.”

Well, yes and no.

Neither reader bothered to support her claim with any figures.

The U.S. gave close to \$2.5 bil-

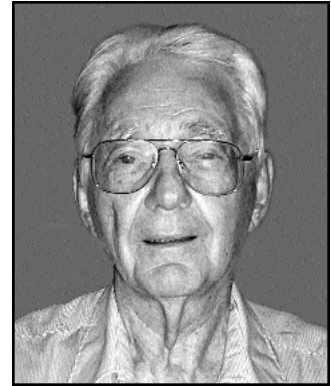
lion in 2003, 40 percent of which went to various relief programs. But much of it went as grants, loans, and in other forms — with strings attached.

“When ranked among 21 wealthy nations of the world, the U.S. is *not* at the top of the list of givers — it is ninth.”

Much U.S. aid goes to military uses, especially in Israel and Egypt.

The average amount given in humanitarian relief per U.S. citizen is slightly more than 2 cents per person per day. When ranked among 21 wealthy nations of the world, the U.S. is not at the top of the list of givers, it is ninth. We give less than Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Netherlands, Belgium, United Kingdom

Editor's Corner



Hugo Borresen

and Finland. Most of these are small countries with small populations.

In the U.S., church-affiliated organizations get 77 percent of Americans' contributions to charity, which helps many people.

The recent outpouring of generosity to help the victims of the tsunami is admirable but not the “most financially benevolent” — not by a long shot.

UPDATE:

According to a January 4 report in the *Guardian*, the U.S. had pledged \$250 million in tsunami relief by that date.

It had also spent \$148 billion on the war against Iraq.

In other words, spending on tsunami relief is the equivalent of 1-1/2 days' spending on the war. —MF

Students not concerned with First Amendment issues cont'd from p.1

teach the Bill of Rights. Arent't these the freedoms we're so eager to fight for?

The First Coast Freethought Society should send a copy of the Knight report summary along with a cover letter with several dozen signatures to John Fryer, superintendent of Duval County Public Schools, urging him to have high schools give this their attention. Our members should write

to the *Florida Times-Union* as well as contact radio and television stations to bring attention to the problem.

We should challenge churches that announce they want to display the Ten Commandments in public places, pointing out that the First Amendment was adopted specifically for the benefit of U.S. citizens; the Ten Commandments were not.



Religion a thriving industry in Jacksonville — especially for Baptists

By Michael R. Fitzgerald

NO QUESTION ABOUT IT: Jacksonville's a Baptist town.

A quick survey of listings in the Yellow Pages under "churches," "synagogues" and "religious organizations" easily substantiates this assertion. Of 1,060 listings, 341 — or 32 percent — were Baptist.

The second-largest block with 142 listings (13.4 percent) are the various Pentecostal groups, including 44 Holiness churches, 28 Churches of Christ, 27 Assemblies of God and one Brethren congregation. This indicates there is a substantial number of people who favor active, "charismatic" participation rather than the passive participation of the older, more reserved Protestant sects. In addition to these there are seven sects listed under the heading "charismatic," including one Catholic and one Episcopal.

The third-largest category was "independent and non-denominational Protestant" groups with 141 listings (13.3 percent). These entries do not constitute a block because they're not affiliated with one another in any way other than being nominally Christian. Still, one conclusion that could be drawn is that our area has an "entrepreneurial" bent in producing free-wheeling religious organizations. As Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard said, the fastest way to get rich in America is to start your own church.

As a block, the "mainline" Protestant groups tie with the mavericks as a distant third to the Baptists. These tend to be reserved in their worshipping practices and also tend to be composed largely of people of



Northern European (Teutonic and/or British Isles) descent. Mainline Protestant groups total 141, or 13.3 percent of the market. Of these,

As Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard said, the fastest way to get rich in America is to start your own church.

Methodists comprise the second-largest single denomination with 58 listings; Presbyterians are third with 32; Episcopalians have 30, and Lutherans 21.

African-American churches as a block comprise 4.5 percent with 48 listings under headings such as African Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ and Primitive Baptist.

Catholic churches, which also include Arabic Maronite and Syriac groups, with 29 listings (2.7 percent), are outnumbered by Baptist churches 11 to 1 and by total Protestant sects

23 to 1.

There are 10 synagogues (0.9 percent), but there is no indication which are Orthodox, Conservative or Reform. One of them is Messianic, a schismatic sect that accepts Jesus as the Messiah.

Other categories comprising 1 percent or less: seven LDS (Mormon) churches; six Orthodox churches including one Greek; three Muslim groups; three Christian Science groups; two Metaphysical Science groups; two Unitarian congregations; two Buddhist congregations; and one each of the following: Hindu, Mennonite, Quaker, Spiritualist, Eckankar and Bahai.

The data is taken from what is called a *convenience survey*. There are inherent problems with such surveys. For example, they're *self-selecting*, meaning only organizations that *want* to advertise are represented; some — such as Sikhs, Jains, Scientologists, Ontologists, Hare Krishnas, Wiccans, Thelemites, Church of the Creator, Church of Satan, etc. — may not wish to be found quite so easily, yet there are quite possibly members of those groups in our area.

Another statistical problem is the data does not account for the *size* of each denomination listed. For example, some of the Baptist congregations, especially First Baptist Church, are huge (Jacksonville's First Baptist is the largest single congregation of any kind in the state). This missing data would presumably include many more non-attending members.

Such additional numbers would probably skew the figures even more in the Baptists' favor.



Passion plays: the real deal

Some of Jesus's followers have been as eager to mete out harsh punishment as his own tormentors were.

by Fred W. Hill

According to Christian lore — as vividly portrayed in Mel Gibson's blood-drenched cinematic epic, *The Passion of the Christ* — Jesus died a horribly painful death to atone for the sins of all mankind.

The apparent purpose of the film is to remind us mortals just how much Jesus suffered for us, sacrificing his life to save our souls.

Never mind that dying for someone else's crimes makes a mockery of justice.

Never mind that according to Christian tenets, God and Christ are one — so in effect, he sacrificed himself to himself to appease his own anger at his creation.

Never mind that if Jesus were resurrected, then there was no real sacrifice — it hardly constitutes a sacrifice when you immediately get back what you give.

And never mind that the historical evidence proves beyond doubt that the followers of Jesus have not been any more humane than the people who reputedly tormented him during his last mortal days.

Hypatia's passion

The story of Hypatia provides one gruesome example from the earliest years of Christian dominance of the Roman Empire.

Hypatia, born circa 355 CE, was a leading philosopher, mathematician, astronomer, orator and teacher in



Alexandria, the preeminent city of intellectual study in the ancient Greco-Roman world. She was a strongly independent-minded woman who refused to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus.

If Christian doctrine — that God “sacrificed” himself for us — is true, then Jesus's suffering was no more than a brief annoyance for an almighty God slumming as a mortal.

She was also a close friend of Orestes, the Imperial Prefect of Alexandria. All of this made her suspect in the eyes of zealous proponents of Christianity, the official religion of the empire as declared by Emperor Constantine in 312.

Cyril, the Archbishop of Alexandria, saw Hypatia as an impediment to his goal of ridding Alexandria of opposition to Christian dominance of

the city and. In her biography, *Hypatia of Alexandria* (Harvard University Press, 1995) historian Maria Dzielska writes Cyril spread rumors that Hypatia was a Satanic witch who cast evil spells on people.

In 415, a Christian mob inflamed by Cyril's diatribes pulled Hypatia off of her chariot, dragged her to a nearby church, stripped her and murdered her by skinning her with sharp objects (oyster shells or tiles) and tearing her body apart.

Cyril went on to be canonized a saint by the Catholic church.

So many scholars left Alexandria in the wake of Hypatia's murder that the city ceased to function as a center of ancient wisdom, writes historian Jennifer Michael Hecht, in *Doubt, a History: The Great Doubtters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*, (Harper San Francisco, 2003).

Bruno's passion

Nearly 1,200 years later, Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno received a similar dose of Christian passion. Bruno, a former Dominican monk, thrived on controversy, having managed to be accused of heresy and excommunicated by the Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran churches as well as arousing the pique of Oxford theologians while living in exile in England.

Bruno fearlessly, even recklessly, espoused the heretical ideas that the universe was infinite, that — as Copernicus proposed — the Earth went around the sun rather than vice-versa, that life existed on other planets, that God *was* the universe rather than its creator, and that Jesus Christ

See “Passion,” p. 6

Upcoming book discussion

Review by Jewell Cross

Dumbth: The Lost Art of Thinking by Steve Allen, presented March 20.

THIS IS CRITICAL THINKING in an easy-to-read package. Television personality and author Steve Allen catalogues a host of hilarious encounters with widespread problems of bad service, failures of communication and a general breakdown in the capacity to reason.

He offers solutions, explaining simple techniques for improving the ability to think. The first eight are:

- Think positively; you *can* learn to reason better.
- Learn a bit about how the brain works.
- Don't rush to judgment.
- Don't fall in love with your first answer.
- Be aware of the assumptions you make.
- Be wary of making predictions bas~d on insufficient evidence.
- Acknowledge your superstitions for what they are.
- Recognize and deal with your personal prejudices.

Allen offers lots of practical things to do such as visit museums, listen to news, avoid crass television, read more, take notes and keep a dictionary at hand.

The humanist book discussion group meets at 2 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month at Borders Books, 8801 Southside Blvd. You can buy most books at Borders. For more information contact Jewell Kross at 904-996~1553 or jewellkross@yahoo.com.

INVITATION

To: All freethinkers, FCFS members, friend and guests.

What: Dinner and socializing at the Steak and Ale restaurant, near Baymeadows Road and Interstate 95 South.

When: Tuesday, March 22 (fourth Tuesday of each month). Gather at 6:00 p.m. for cocktails in the lounge; 7:00 p.m. for dinner.

RSVP to Carrie Renwick at 268-8826, or e-mail carrieren@att.net. Deadline is Sunday, March 20.

Passion: The sequels cont'd from p. 5 was "merely an unusually skilled magician" (Hecht, p. 293).

For these and other thought-crimes, Bruno was arrested in 1593 by the Inquisition and thrown into a prison in Rome. Given an opportunity to recant by inquisitor Cardinal Robert Bellarmino, Bruno refused, was found guilty of heresy and was executed by *auto da Fe* — burned at the stake. But first his tormentors nailed his tongue to his jaw to prevent him from speaking (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giordano_Bruno).

Bellarmino would join Cyril in the ranks of Catholic Saints, waging war against free speech. apparently being one sure sign of saintliness among the church hierarchy.

HYPATIA AND BRUNO were only two among countless victims of Christian passion gone murderous. Whether Jesus really suffered as much as depicted in Mel Gibson's modern passion play, the fact remains that adherents of his faith have been just as eager to mete out unusually harsh punishments as were his own tormentors.

If Christian doctrine — that God "sacrificed" himself for us — is true, then Jesus's suffering was no more than a brief annoyance for an almighty God slumming as a weak mortal.

Hypatia and Bruno had no such guarantees of immortality. Their passion to be true to themselves, to speak freely what they believed despite all dangers, strikes me as far more laudable.

THE AMAZING RANDI Coming to Jacksonville!

Speaker: **James Randi**, professional magician and famous debunker of psychics and other charlatans

Topic: "**An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural**"

Time: **Wed., March 9, 2005 at 7:00 p.m.**

Place: **University Center** (building closest to the Kernan St. Entrance) of **University of North Florida**

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 • (904) 288-6291

2005 Membership application



Name		Date	
Home address	City	State	ZIP
E-mail address	Home phone	Business phone	
Occupation	Areas of interest and/or expertise		

How did you hear about us? _____

Membership level (please select one):

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Regular (\$30/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Carl Sagan (\$50/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Charles Darwin (\$200/yr.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student (\$15/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Bertrand Russell (\$75/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Robert Ingersoll (\$500/yr.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Senior (\$15/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Thomas Paine (\$100/yr.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Lifetime (\$1,000) |

I'm interested in getting involved in the FCFS as a:

- General member Committee member Officer Financial supporter

Do you object to your name appearing on our membership list, which is only distributed to other members? YES

Comments: _____

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the First Coast Freethought Society is to serve the needs of the non-religious population of Northeast Florida, to promote freethought and secular humanism, to provide a place for agnostics, rationalists, atheists, skeptics and other freethinkers.

Meetings

The FCFS meets the second Monday of every month at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, 7405 Arlington Expressway, Jacksonville, FL 32211. (904) 725-8133
 Meeting time: 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Our motto: "To question is the answer."

humanist book discussion group



When: 2:00 p.m., third Sunday of each month.

Where: Borders Books, 8801 Southside Blvd.
519-6500. Books are usually in stock.

What: Books planned for discussion:

- **March 20** — *Dumbth: The Lost Art of Thinking* by Steve Allen
- **April 17** — *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* by Carl Sagan

For more information, contact moderator
Jewell Cross at 996-1553

First Coast Freethought Society 2005 EVENTS

March 14 — Monthly meeting
March 20 — Book discussion group
March 22 — Social at Steak and Ale

April 11 — Monthly meeting
April 17 — Book discussion group
April 26 — Social at Steak and Ale

May 9 — Monthly meeting
May 15 — Book discussion group
May 24 — Social at Steak and Ale

Monthly meetings are held at the
Unitarian Universalist Church,
7405 Arlington Expressway.

Return service requested

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
8831 Taurus Circle, South
Jacksonville, FL 32222