

First Coast

# FreeThinker



The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

September 2005

Volume 3, Issue 9

## What is Atheism?

Inside this issue: **Earl Coggins**

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**Y**ou're not going to find the correct definition for the word atheism in the dictionary because it's the most misunderstood word in the world. A Jacksonville clergyman recently described evolution as atheism masquerading as science.

The best way to define atheism is to look at what it is not. It is not a belief in Satanism, nor is it a belief in Communism. A lot of atheists may think like scientists, but that doesn't make them scientists. As a matter of fact, atheism is not a



usage as opposed to literal or intended use, which means we have a definition that is more about how some people feel versus the true meaning of the word. [Ed. Note: When does "current usage" evolve into the true meaning of a word? —H.B.]

belief in anything.

Atheism originates from the Greek *atheos* which is a combination of the negative prefix *a* and the root *theos* which means god. Today, the word atheism still uses the negative prefix *a*, meaning without, but now it is combined with the word *theism*. Unfortunately, the dictionary speaks mostly about current

Theism, in its least complicated form, is a belief in the existence of a god or gods. Therefore, atheism in its least complicated form is the lack of a belief in the existence of a god or gods. That's about as simple as it gets etymologically.

There are indeed atheists who believe that god does not exist, but this form of atheism

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*"It appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against Christianity and theism produce hardly any effect on the public; and freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds which follows from the advance of science."*

—Charles Darwin

### September 2005 Meeting

Guest speaker: Jay Mooney

## Losing God saved my life:

How an ex-Congressional aide overcame addiction through Free Thought

Monday, September 19, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Pablo Creek Regional Jacksonville Public Library (New Location!)

is one of many and should not be used to describe all atheists.

The first form, implicit atheism, is the absence of theistic belief WITHOUT a conscious rejection of it. An implicit atheist is a person who does not believe in a god or gods. BUT, he or she has not explicitly rejected or denied the tenets of theism.

An example of an implicit atheist is a person who has never been exposed to the "god concept" and hence, cannot and does not believe in a god or gods. Neither does this person explicitly deny the existence of god.

This person does not believe in a god, so he or she is not a theist. This person does not reject theism, so according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, this person is not an atheist. Nor does this person claim that

the existence of a god or gods is unknowable, which excludes them from the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition of an agnostic.

Implicit atheism also applies to the person who is familiar with theism but neither rejects nor accepts it due to a lack of evidence either way. This person has refused to commit to either concept even though he or she has been exposed to both. This person may be undecided, but the fact remains that by not accepting theism, this person has no belief in a god or gods and is therefore an implicit atheist.

The second form of atheism, explicit atheism, is the absence of theistic belief WITH a conscious rejection of it. In other words, the explicit atheist has been exposed to the concepts of theism and has made a deliberate decision to reject them.

Explicit atheism is often referred to as critical atheism because it is often based on a criticism of theism. An explicit, or critical, atheist does not believe in a god or gods simply because of the failure of theism to provide sufficient evidence in its favor.

Some atheists contend that the god concept is unintelligible and therefore choose not to discuss the existence or non-existence much as someone would refrain from entering a debate about the existence of a leprechaun, Santa Claus, or the tooth fairy. This atheist, in another example of explicit atheism, would say, "The word god makes no sense to me, so I have no idea what you are talking about."

However, explicit and implicit atheism have one very

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## 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 end of the **THIRD** week of the month for the following month. Submit contributions by e-mail to Hugo (see above), or mail to Hugo Borresen, 8831 Taurus Circle South, Jacksonville, FL 32222. Submit Web site contributions by e-mail to Carrie Renwick, carrieren@att.net.

## Religious Martyrs – nutcases on the fringe or the only ones being true to their religion?

Curtis Wolf

**W**hy do some religious people willingly forsake their own lives when they believe that god calls for them to kill or die for his sake? This question came to mind when I read Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels*. For those who never read the book, the Gnostics were a diverse group of people who believed that salvation was available to anyone through self discovery. You came to know god by getting to know the divine spark within you.

According to the book, Ignatius, who was the Christian bishop of Antioch, "accepted the death sentence with joyful exultation as his opportunity to imitate 'the passion of my God!'" after being arrested and tried by a Roman court. He even pleaded with Christians in Rome not to try and stop his execution so that he may "attain to Jesus Christ" through his agonizing death (Pagels pp. 82, 83). After mulling over these words, I do not see the early Christians as very different from the modern Islamic terrorist who straps a bomb to his chest and takes innocent lives along with his own in the name of Allah. Even the ancient Jews were not immune to the siren calls for martyrdom when they were willing to die by Roman swords rather than accept the idolatrous standards brought into Jerusalem by Ro-

man troops (Josephus, War 2.169-174).

To freethinkers, religious martyrdom seems insane. If you only have one life to lead, i.e. no afterlife, why would you throw that life away based on a belief that an unverifiable god commanded you to kill and/or die as a way of proving your loyalty to that god? Could it be that belief in a god who holds the keys to salvation in a glorious afterlife leads people to toss aside their survival instinct and do the unthinkable act of self destruction?

*... sanity prevails among the religious when they do not take their religious beliefs too seriously.*

Does belief in an afterlife loosen our ties to this world and lead to a pathological cult of death?

Of course, not everyone who believes in an afterlife looks for a quick exit from this life. Many Christians, Muslims, and Jews live long lives without any desire to martyr themselves for their gods. As noted in *The Gnostic Gospels*, the Gnostic Christians were less enthusiastic about martyrdom than the "orthodox" Christians.

At the same time, it is not enough to simply dismiss martyrs as nutcases who represent the fringes of religion. If I believe in an afterlife and I believe

in a god that is the gatekeeper to happiness in that afterlife, I would be willing to do just about anything to assure that I remain in good



standing with that god. Far from being an extremist out of touch with the "true" teaching of religion, I would contend that the martyr takes belief in an afterlife tied to absolute loyalty to a god to its logical conclusion. Given that eternity in an afterlife far exceeds the short life that he spends on earth, a martyr simply knows what his priorities should be. It is instructive that sanity prevails among the religious when they do not take their religious beliefs too seriously.

This is one advantage that secular humanism has over religion. We secular humanists live in the here and now. We do not live in a way that assures our position in an afterlife. Therefore, we desire to make this life the best that it can be, here and now. We look for solutions to problems that improve the human condition and leave the earth a little better off for the next generation.

Above all, we do not see death as glorious and purposeful. We see it as a tragedy that ends a life which does not depend upon religious dogma to define its worth.



## Popularly Held Notions and Education

Fred W. Hill

A majority of Americans would prefer that creationism or its fuzzy doppelganger, intelligent design, be taught either alongside or in place of evolution as part of the regular science curriculum in our public schools. Such are the findings of various polls reported regularly by the media (*Teaching of Creationism Is Endorsed in New Survey, August 31, 2005*).

“Well, why not?” the masses apparently reason. If the very concept of evolution, particularly that humans (gasp!) evolved from other creatures, is so troubling to so many people and entirely contrary to their religious tenets, then just who are these scientists to arrogantly insist that only their notions be taught? Shouldn’t public education be based on democratic principles so that the majority will determine what gets taught regardless of the whims of so-called experts?

The problem with this outlook, however, is that reality does not always conform to what any majority may believe. Nearly everyone once believed that the Earth was at the center of a universe that revolved around it; Pope Urban VIII was so wedded to this notion that when Galileo offered the Pope a telescopic view of moons orbiting other planets, Urban not only refused to look but threatened to have Galileo executed for touting notions contrary to biblical “truth.”

Diseases were once widely believed to be due to demons or “humors” being out of balance. A majority of Europeans once believed that all Jews were collectively guilty for the death of Jesus Christ, a belief that culminated in the Holocaust. A majority of Americans once believed that people of African ancestry were sub-humans for whom subjugation was a positive good. There was never any validity to any of these ideas, but all died very slowly among the majorities that once held them.

The real question then is should students be taught

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notions that conform to what the majority would prefer to believe even when contradicted by inconvenient facts and genuine science?

My answer is of course not!

Across the nation, however, citizens who feel otherwise are fighting to ensure that their entirely mythic notions of creationism are given equal standing with the thoroughly validated scientific theory of evolution. This is despite the fact that creationism is only an ancient guess, and intelligent design is only the same guess in an alternative package, and neither qualifies as a scientific

theory.

The debate does not exist within the scientific community. It is entirely political. Moreover, for religious fundamentalists, it is an emotional issue. For them, to acquiesce to allowing their children to be taught scientific data that contradicts what they presume to be the very words of their god is akin to giving in to the devil. Reason and evidence seldom sway them. Worse, they currently hold considerable political clout, though polls vary as to the percentage of Americans who adhere to a strict literal interpretation of the bible, from 30 to 64% (see [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/p/rimetime/US/views\\_of\\_bible\\_poll\\_040216.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/p/rimetime/US/views_of_bible_poll_040216.html) for one example of poll results).

Fortunately, majority beliefs and attitudes can change. Illnesses are rarely blamed on demons and ill-balanced humors anymore. In Europe and America, bigotry is no longer as widely tolerated as in previous centuries. Even most Catholics came to realize Galileo was right centuries before Pope John Paul II publicly admitted it as such and apologized for his predecessor’s vicious bullheadedness. And among the modern, industrialized nations, the U. S. stands out as one of the few in which any form of creationism is given any serious

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## Talk Back

### Curtis Wolf

I have received some good responses to last month's question: What is the best thing about being a freethinker? I appreciate those of you who have responded to this question and supported Talk Back.

Carrie Renwick states, "To me, the best thing about being a freethinker is that I now feel totally comfortable in my mind. In the past, I wasn't comfortable with various religious beliefs, as I had gnawing doubts, wondering how certain basic Christian beliefs could possibly be true. I remained agnostic for many years until I discovered the *Philosophy of Humanism* by Corliss Lamont and *Free Inquiry* magazine. Wow! What a relief to realize I was really a freethinker. Comfortable at last."

Wilhelmina Walton responds, "The best thing about being a

freethinker is the freedom it gives you to be clear in your thinking, to consider the possibilities. Thomas Paine wrote, 'It is necessary to the happiness of man that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.' Somewhere recently I read, 'Faith is believing in the impossible.' Believing in the immaculate conception, the revelation to Moses of the Ten Commandments, and the resurrection from death of a mortal man: those are impossibilities. I cannot be other than a freethinker."

Mark Renwick asks, "What's the best thing about gravity? Blue sky? —It's neither good nor bad, it just is. I didn't decide to be a freethinker, I just am."

Beth Perry replies, "After being a 'devout and ignorant brain-washed Christian' since

birth for half my life, I think the best thing about being a Freethinker is the absolute relief and freedom I felt when finally making up my mind that I could not believe in all those myths of heaven and hell and I wasn't doomed to go to either place upon my death. I would just no longer be. As simple as that."

Curtis Wolf says, "The best thing about being a freethinker is that it provides the freedom for me to question anything and seek out my own answers. My answers are not constrained by convention or dogma. They can go into any directions that reason and evidence take me."

This month's question:

***What do you see as the biggest obstacle to the spread of secular humanism throughout the world?***



### **Popularly Held Notions and Education** (Continued from page 4)

credence as a legitimate alternative to evolution. I am loathe to prognosticate. One hopes that popular belief in creationism will wane to a pittance in the U. S., too, even

though that is likely to take many more decades.

Ultimately, what is taught in our public schools depends largely on popular will. The American people will determine whether our schools will churn out intellectually-stunted

students fed on popular dogmatic tripe or strive to teach students how to think for themselves and to honestly evaluate data and test their ideas. The former path will lead us to a new dark ages, the latter to greater enlightenment.



### First Coast Freethought Society 2005 Events

September	19 - Monthly meeting	18 - Book discussion group	27- Social at Steak and Ale
October	17 - Monthly meeting	16 - Book discussion group	25- Social at Steak and Ale
November	21 - Monthly meeting	20 - Book discussion group	22- Social at Steak and Ale

## **What is Atheism?**

*(Continued from page 2)*

important thing in common: they are both negative in character. They are not positive beliefs. The atheist does not assert the belief in anything, and therefore the burden of proof falls away from the atheist and squarely on the shoulders of the theist. The lack of theistic belief is the essence of atheism.

You are either a theist and believe in a god or gods or you are an atheist and without a belief in a god or gods. Unlike what most dictionaries are telling us, there is no other choice. You either agree with the statement, "God exists" or you don't. If you aren't sure, you still have not agreed with the statement, "God exists" and you are without that belief and therefore an atheist.

A discussion of atheism would not be complete without mentioning agnosticism. Agnosticism is commonly referred to as a third alternative to theism and atheism. I content that this is incorrect.

Agnosticism signifies the impossibility of knowledge in a given area. A person who adopts agnosticism as a world view maintains that the belief or lack of belief in a god or gods is closed to human knowledge. It does not signify whether or not a person believes in a god. Agnosticism, therefore, can be either theistic or atheistic.

The agnostic "theist" believes in a god but contends that the nature of that god is unknowable. The agnostic "atheist" maintains that belief in

the existence of a god or belief that god does not exist is inherently unknowable by the human mind. Since this type of agnostic does not subscribe to or embrace theism as a world view, he or she qualifies as an atheist. Agnosticism can therefore be looked at as a subset of atheism, or better described as implicit atheism.

Thomas Henry Huxley coined the term agnostic in 1869. Huxley claimed he needed a title with which to represent himself. He was an outspoken evolutionist and proponent of the scientific method.

***Atheism is a cultural taboo – a stigma for those who claim it as a world view.***

Here is what he had to say about it:

"They were quite sure they had attained a certain "gnosis," had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble . . . it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty. This is what Agnosticism asserts; and, in my opinion, it is all that is essential to Agnosticism."

Atheism has been condemned throughout recorded history. Socrates was arrested and tried for not believing in the gods of the state, among other things. He was executed.

Many others were executed. Historical records indicate that some governments espousing Christianity did not stop the executions until as recently as 1766, when a French teenager was beheaded on charges that he marred a crucifix. For every execution prior to 1766, hundreds more were jailed, tortured, fined, censured or banished. Atheism is still punishable by death in many Muslim countries.

Some things have improved, but many things remains the same. Atheism is a cultural taboo – a stigma for those who claim it as a world view. If you doubt this to be true, publicly admit you are an atheist and try to get elected to almost any government office.

On August 27, 1987, then Vice-President George Bush, was campaigning for the presidency. When asked what he would do to win the votes of the American citizens who were atheists, he replied:

"I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens."

The Judeo-Christian Bible, along with many of its proponents throughout the last 1700 years is, in my opinion, the greatest single source for the contempt and bigotry atheists have had to suffer:

*The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good. (Psalms 14:1)*

We're not being burned at the stake anymore, but we still have a long way to go.



First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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2005 Membership application



<b>Name</b>		<b>Date</b>	
<b>Home address</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Zip Code</b>
<b>E-mail address</b>	<b>Home phone</b>	<b>Business phone</b>	
<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Areas of interest and/or expertise</b>		

**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(n):**

- 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:** \_\_\_\_\_

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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 meeting place for agnostics, humanists, atheists, skeptics, and other freethinkers.

**Meetings**

The FCFS meets the third Monday of each month at the Pablo Creek Regional Jacksonville Public Library, 13295 Beach Blvd. (between Hodges and Kernan Blvd.), Jacksonville, Florida 32246. (904) 992-7101. Meeting time: from 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

## 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/magazines planned for discussion:

- **September 18** — Aug/Sept issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine
- **October 16** — *Atheism: The Case Against God*, by George H. Smith

For more information, contact moderator Jewell Kross at 996-1553.

We would like to express our condolences to Earl Coggins for the death of his companion Eileen O'Neill. She was a strong supporter of the First Coast Freethought Society even though health problems kept her from being active in the group. Earl, you will not be far from our thoughts as you go through this difficult time.

## KATRINA RELIEF FUND

You can help victims of Hurricane Katrina by contributing to S.H.A.R.E (Secular Humanist Aid and Relief Effort). You can make a donation via the Internet by pointing your browser to [https://secure.ga3.org/05/donate\\_to\\_help\\_katrina\\_victims](https://secure.ga3.org/05/donate_to_help_katrina_victims).

If you prefer to make a donation by mail, send donations to:

**S.H.A.R.E , PO Box 664, Amherst, NY 14226**

## September Social All Welcome!

**Where:** STEAK & ALE at Baymeadows and I-95 South

**When:** Tues., September 27, Gather in Lounge 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

**RSVP:** CarrieRen@att.net (268-8826) by Mon., Sept. 26, if you are attending!

Return service requested

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