

First Coast

# FreeThinker



The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

April 2007

Volume 5, Issue 4

## Inside this issue: **Action Plan for 2007 - How We Can Make a Difference on the First Coast**

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*“The Bible is not a moral guide. Any man who follows faithfully all its teachings is an enemy of society and will probably end his days in a prison or an asylum.”*

*“What then is, or can be called, a moral guide? The shortest possible answer is one word: Intelligence.”*

--Quotations from *What Would You Substitute for the Bible as a Moral Guide?* by Robert Ingersoll

**Curtis Wolf**

**A**t the March board meeting, the FCFS board voted to adopt as a target the following 2007 Action Plan, effective immediately.

The ideas expressed in the plan will be evaluated on an individual basis and implemented as deemed feasible. The action plan is the culmination of a long range planning process that began last year as a way for us to rationally plan for the future so that we can have a strong impact on our community.

Each activity de-

scribed below implements one or more of the five year goals previously approved by the board in January 2007 (See the article “Looking Over the Horizon: What Do We Want To Be Doing In Five Years?” in

***We have the opportunity to make a real difference in our community.***

the October 2006 *FreeThinker*). These activities are based on your ideas provided to me at the July 2006 meeting, as well as my ideas on what we should be doing this year, to get us closer to realizing our goals by the end of 2011.

Many of these activities are first steps that we must take before more public and effective activities can be planned in the future. For example, we need a scientific advisory committee before we can speak out more on pseudoscience. When you build a house, you need to set the foundation before you put up the frame, drywall, and roof. Many of these activities are the foundation for our future. Of course, there are also

*(Continued on page 3)*



### April 2007 Meeting

Ellen Wagner, Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of North Florida

## “Morality and God”

Monday, April 16, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

(Upstairs in the Sanctuary - Doors open at 6:00)

Unitarian Universalist Church • 7405 Arlington Expressway • Jacksonville, FL

## HUMANIST BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP

- When:** 2:00 p.m., the third Sunday of each month.
- Where:** Borders Books, 8801 Southside Blvd., 519-6500, books are usually in stock.
- What:** Books/magazines planned for discussion:
- April 15, 2007 - *A Rulebook for Arguments*, by Anthony Weston
  - May 20, 2007 - *Affirmations: Joyful and Creative Exuberance*, by Paul Kurtz



**P**aul Kurtz is founder and chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), the Council for Secular Humanism, and Prometheus Books, as well as editor-in-chief of *Free Inquiry* magazine. He is also founder and chairman of the Center for Inquiry, Transnational. He is a former Co-President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU).

*Affirmations* is dedicated to the development of human potential. Emphasizing that the good life is achievable by everyone, Kurtz has coined the term “eupraxsophy,” based on Greek roots and meaning “good conduct and wisdom in living.” By using critical thinking, he shows how wisdom can be applied to a life of commitment and passion. Regarding the perennial search for happiness, Kurtz affirms that secularism holds great promise. Through creative action in the pursuit of goals focused on the enhancement of human welfare, each person has the best chance of realizing a meaningful life of joyful exuberance. (Available at Borders only through individual order - \$10.)

For more information, contact moderator Jewell Kross at [JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org](mailto:JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org) or call 904-996-1553.



### 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 diverse 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.

### Newsletter Staff

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We welcome submissions. The deadline is the **FOURTH SATURDAY** of each month for the following month's issue. Submit contributions by e-mail to Hugo (see above), or U.S. mail to Hugo Borresen, 8831 Taurus Circle South, Jacksonville, FL 32222. Submit web site contributions to Carrie Renwick at the e-mail address above.

### ***Action Plan for 2007 - How we can make a difference on the First Coast***

*(Continued from page 1)*

few activities that will bear fruit this year as well.

It is an ambitious plan and will require everyone to join in with their time and money to make it happen. **Let me say this again.** Unless members of this group actively participate in making this action plan a reality, it is really nothing more than so many words on paper.

I hope that in the coming month many of you will pick out an activity and volunteer to get this activity up and running. You can serve on a committee, do research, contribute money, and do many other things that will make this action plan a reality. The activities are spread out throughout the year so that we don't burn out doing them all at once. So if you want to be involved in more than one activities, you are welcome to do so.

One of the projects being considered is a student essay contest in the fall. Last year, a committee worked on the details of the contest. But the Science Under Siege panel discussion took priority over the contest. We couldn't do both with our available staff power and funds. Hopefully, someone will take on the hard work of this committee and see it to the end this year.

We have the opportunity to make a real difference in our community. Science Under Siege was the first of many con-

versations that we should have with the people of the First Coast as we promote reason and science in the years to come. But we need everyone to help out if our voice is to be heard.

#### **Throughout the year**

- Write letters to the editor that express our point of view and submit them to the local newspapers as often as the newspapers will allow it and as time allows.
- Connect FCFS projects to committee membership and fundraising by doing the following:
  - Describe projects planned for this year to the membership through the meeting announcements, newsletter articles, e-mails, etc.
  - Educate the membership on project needs (committee membership, costs, etc.). This includes e-mails, handouts at meetings, cardboard display on an easel presenting our fundraising needs as a progress bar throughout the year, newsletter reminders of fundraising needs, etc.
  - Sending a list of projects that need people and money along with the welcome to FCFS

packet sent to new members.

- Ask FCFS members personally to serve on committees.
- Send newsletters by e-mail to local media contacts. Allow unsubscribing of e-mails if the media contacts do not want to receive the newsletter.

#### **Second Quarter**

- Compile a list of public domain (free) and copyrighted (not free) books, essays, podcasts, and magazine articles to be offered to FCFS members as suggested reading, and links to this material be added to the website. Design it as a course to which members can sign up and complete within a set period of time.
- Create a coalition of local groups who are interested in church/state separation issues. Discussion with other coalition membership should include issues to be handled by the coalition, resources available from coalition groups, leadership, etc.
- Create a scientific/academic advisory committee of local professors and scientists of various disciplines for the purpose of advising FCFS when it challenges pseudoscientific beliefs.

- Investigate the public showing of freethought movies at a movie theatre or other appropriate venue.

### Third Quarter

- Implement the student essay contest in fall 2007 if deemed feasible.
- With the assistance of the Humanists of Florida Association, have one meeting this year dedicated to

activist training.

- Investigate outside sources of funding that are available for FCFS projects.

### Fourth Quarter

- Investigate which target audiences would be interested in our point of view and develop strategies to recruit from these audiences.
- Investigate the usage of

advertisements in the local media that ask provocative questions.

- Compile list of local organizations that provide social services to the public and have needs for volunteers. Make it available to the membership by handout, e-mail or website.
- Identify people capable of debating issues related to humanism and skepticism.



## Ongoing FCFS Activities

### Caring Tree

If a telephone call to any member or anyone interested in our group might serve a purpose--such as a ride to our meeting or some other personal need, please contact **Nita Pitts** at 904-996-0879 or e-mail her at [pitrymnd@comcast.net](mailto:pitrymnd@comcast.net). Otherwise, leave a notation on the sign-in sheet at the front table during one of our meetings.

### Dinners For Atheists (and Freethinkers, Humanists, Agnostics, etc.)

Sign up to attend or host a dinner yourself. Sign-up sheets will be at the back table at the monthly meetings. For further details on how this works, see page 9 of the February 2006 *Freethinker*, or ask the hospitality ladies at the back table.

### Atheist Sunday Morning (or Sunday Morning in the Park)

For those of us seeking more freethought fellowship, conversation and camaraderie, here is an opportunity to get together on Sunday mornings. Contact June Applen at [JApplen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org](mailto:JApplen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org) or call 904-762-0627.

### No Atheist Left Behind (or Are You Going My Way?)

If you are seeking a ride to an FCFS event, contact **Hugo Borresen** at [HBorresen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org](mailto:HBorresen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org) or call 904-779-6883.

# Abraham, Martin and Charles, Part 3: And Now for Something Completely Darwinian

Fred W. Hill

First, allow me a digression: I began this triptych originally to make note of the approaching 200<sup>th</sup> birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin and their connections with free-thought. However, a few racist comments I overheard during the week before the Martin Luther King holiday prompted me to include him in an expanded project. Of course, anyone who knows anything about Dr. King is likely aware that he was a Bible-quoting Christian preacher and might well wonder what possible connection he has with freethought?

The answer lies in his eloquent campaign against the irrational dogmatism of racism, in which regard King promoted not only civil rights, but reason too. Lincoln, a reputed “unbeliever” according to his law partner, William Herndon--but more probably a deist--campaigned against the once widespread dogma that slavery of Negroes was a good thing and ought to be expanded. Lincoln and King were both assassinated for their troubles but largely succeeded in their goals: our country was held together, slavery was abolished, and institutionalized racial discrimination was no longer legally supported by any government in the U.S.

Darwin struggled against the

most entrenched dogma of all: that the Bible is literal truth; and accordingly, all species were separately created by God, have never changed in any significant way, and certainly never evolved into other species. Darwin was not the first to claim otherwise, but he was the first to come up with a theory, natural selection, backed by sufficient evidence to withstand critical scrutiny by the scientific community.

Moreover, since publication of the first edition of his momentous “abstract,” *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, the further supporting evidence brought to light

***Darwin’s theory of natural selection and many of his other ideas have been thoroughly vindicated by modern science...***

is so immense that an objective, rational denial of evolution is not credible, and it has become the linchpin to understanding all aspects of biology, including physiology and even psychology. That all modern species, including humans, evolved from other species, has been largely accepted by most scientifically advanced societies of the world, with one glaring exception: the United States. According to various polls, a majority of Americans still persist in believing that the Bible is literally

true and that evolution must therefore be false, despite all scientific evidence to the contrary.



Prior to formulating his famous theory, Darwin believed that too. His own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, a prominent physician, scientist and poet, had proposed his own speculation on evolution in a treatise called *Zoonomia*, published in two volumes in 1794 and 1796; however, as David Quammen notes in *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin* (2006, p. 28), he “never pressed this idea too far, nor clarified it, nor supported it with evidence...” Erasmus and Robert Darwin (Charles’ father) were both religious skeptics, but Charles was raised to accept the prevailing creationist outlook of his day, and he did, to such an extent that during his voyage on HMS Beagle “he was teased for his Bible-quoting piety.” (Quammen, p. 245).

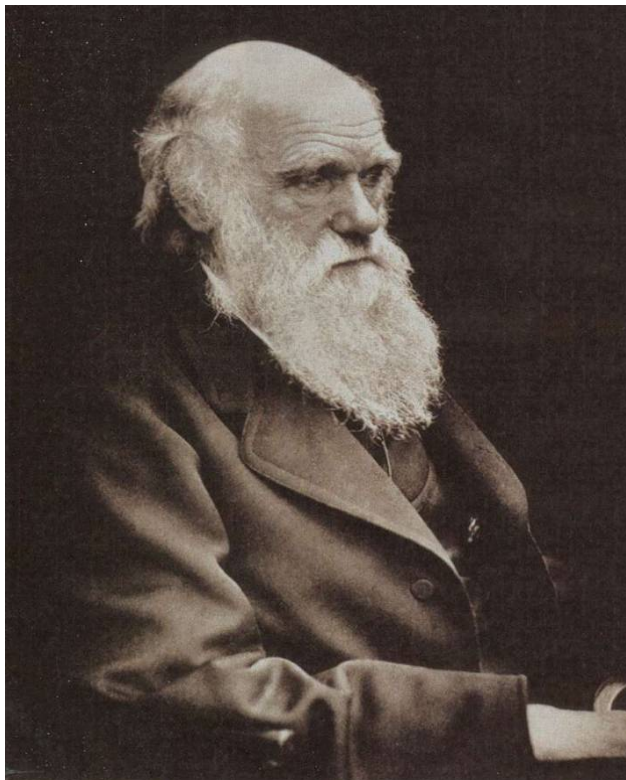
Yet as Darwin matured and methodically studied the natural landscape and the flora and fauna upon it, and read philosophical critiques of religion, he gradually lost his faith. The correlations of the body plans of all vertebrates, the immense, inexplicable waste, such as useless wings of various birds and insects, all pointed towards the reality of evolution and the futility of creationism by any reput-

edly perfect god. Furthermore, he found that it was the existence of God that lacked credible evidence and noted in his autobiography, "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true, for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this includes my Father, Brother and almost all my friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine." (Quammen, p. 245-6)

Several years ago, as I checked out a book about Darwin at a local community college, the librarian primly asserted that Darwin had renounced evolution upon his deathbed. Having heard and read up on that canard before, I informed her that not only was it a lie, but that it did not matter – evolution is true regardless of any death-bed conversion.

Creationists reveal most clearly their lack of understanding of the scientific method when they take the writings of Darwin or anyone else as some sort of holy writ for freethinkers. *Origin of Species* is one of the most

important books ever written but no scientist or other rational person dogmatically reveres it. It was a new beginning to understanding reality as it truly is, not as numerous contradictory religions make it out to be. Darwin's scientific writings were part of



an ongoing process that continues to this day with new discoveries that further fill in the knowledge of life on our world (now and in a past going back billions of years), as well as our genetic connection with all other

living things.

Darwin's theory of natural selection and many of his other ideas have been thoroughly vindicated by modern science. Yet where Darwin was proved to have erred in particular instances, the particular wrong idea was discarded by the scientific community, as Darwin himself expected would happen.

Dogmatists, in contrast, insist that they are never wrong in their big ideas, even in the total absence of any substantiating evidence. They become so wedded to those ideas that they ignore any and all disquieting facts, such as the many errors and contradictions in their adored Bibles, any objective evaluation of which should forever extinguish any claims of their absolute veracity or inspiration by an omniscient god.

They have eschewed freedom of thought to enslave themselves to biblical fantasies, closing their minds to the grandeur of a rational view of the living universe we all share.



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## Cross removed from Starke water tower!

**A**merican Atheists, Inc. and atheist Lon Beville, resident of Starke, FL recently scored a fine victory for Separation of Church and State when Senior U.S. Dis-

trict Judge John H. Moore II of Jacksonville ruled that the huge lighted cross must be removed from city-owned water tower in Starke. Endorsing religion using public funds or public property

clearly violates the federal and Florida state constitutions.

The FCFS has been watching the case with interest and is heartened at the outcome.



# The Bible - Was it a Work in Progress?

Curtis Wolf

Did Jesus actually say, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone?" Did Jesus become angry at a man who asked to be cured of leprosy? Did Paul not want women to speak at church meetings?

Religion professor Bart Ehrman provides surprising answers to these questions in his book *Misquoting Jesus*. Just in case you are wondering, he answers no, yes and no to the preceding questions.

In his book, he makes a strong case for his assertion that we do not necessarily have the original words of the authors of the New Testament. Of all the Greek manuscripts of the books of the New Testament that we have today, there are more variations between the manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament. Why is God's message to us so garbled?

Unfortunately, when we read the Bible, we often look at it through the lens of modern society. Today, with the modern printing press and computer technology, if I want to print off multiple copies of a book, I could do so and have each copy look exactly the same as every other copy. Not so in the ancient world. If a copy of the gospel of Mark was worn out and needed to be replaced, the manuscript

would have to be laboriously copied by hand, word for word.

This was a difficult job for even the most experienced copyist in the ancient world. According to Ehrman, it was likely that the copyists of Christian literature in the first three centuries of the Common Era were probably not the best at what they did. Mistakes in copying the words from one manuscript to another manuscript often were plentiful as copyists found their minds wandering during what must have been a boring and exhausting task.

***What is considered today to be orthodox Christianity was just one of many competing viewpoints on Jesus within early Christianity.***

But it was not just innocent mistakes or sloppy work that Ehrman believes to have contributed to the many variations in the New Testament manuscripts that we have today. Copyists sometimes inserted text into the manuscripts that reflected their own positions on the many theological battles that raged on in early Christianity.

In his book *Lost Christianities*, Ehrman asserts that early Christians, far from being of one mind, often fought with each other about who Jesus was and

what he taught. Ebionites, Gnostics and Judaizers were some of the factions within early Christianity, each of which had its own version of Jesus. What is considered today to be orthodox Christianity was just one of many competing viewpoints about Jesus within early Christianity. After the "orthodox" position finally won the war of ideas, it was able to declare itself as true Christianity and all the other positions as heresy.



As an example of theologically motivated deliberate modification of a New Testament book, one of the verses in the New Testament that Ehrman asserts was not in the original manuscripts is Mark 1:41. In the story from Mark 1:39 - 45, Jesus healed a man with leprosy. In one version of the story found in one of the manuscripts containing the gospel of Mark, Jesus was said to be angry with the man beseeching him for a miraculous healing.

Angry?! That does not sound right, said a copyist with the gospel of Mark in front of him. Let's change the word *becoming angry* with *feeling compassion*. Now the compassion of Jesus comes shining through in this story. And so it went for many other pious modifications.

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First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.  
P.O. Box 550591  
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(904) 288-6291  
<http://firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org>

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the First Coast Freethought Society is to serve the needs of the nonreligious of Northeast Florida, to promote freethought and secular humanism, and to provide an opportunity for agnostics, atheists, skeptics and other free-thinkers to exchange ideas.

### Meetings

The FCFS meets the THIRD Monday of each month at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, upstairs in the sanctuary, 7405 Arlington Expressway, Jacksonville, Florida 32211. (904) 725-8133. Doors open 6:00. Meeting time: 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

### Committees and Chairs

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## April Social - All Welcome!

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

**WHEN:** TUES., April 24, 2007. Gather in Lounge at 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

**RSVP:** [CarrieRen@att.net](mailto:CarrieRen@att.net) (or 268-8826) by April 23, if you plan to attend!

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.  
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2007 Membership Application



Name		Date	
Home address	City	State	Zip Code
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 - 65+ (\$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: \_\_\_\_\_

*You can make a lasting impact on the future of  
freethought and secular humanism in this community  
...if you provide for the First Coast Freethought Society in your Will.*

Your bequest will ensure that the FCFS continues to be a beacon for freethinkers on the First Coast and to remain a vital Voice of Reason in the Northeast Florida area. Several options are available for establishing a bequest (specific, percentage, residual, or contingent). We will be happy to provide the appropriate wording to you and your attorney, depending upon your wishes.

For further information, contact  
Carrie Renwick, P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 or  
904-288-6291 • [CarrieRen@att.net](mailto:CarrieRen@att.net) • <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>  
All inquiries are held in the strictest confidence.

***The Bible - Was it a work in progress?***

*(Continued from page 7)*

We should not take this too far. Ehrman acknowledges that the vast majority of alterations found in the New Testament manuscripts were probably not intentional. However, some of these alterations had important

implications for certain Christian beliefs like the Trinity and the role of women in the church.

This review of Ehrman's book does not even begin to do justice to it. I could say a lot more about this impressive book. I do not agree with every point that he made in the book, but he

makes a compelling argument for believing that we do not have the original words of the books of the New Testament. We certainly do not have the original words of God! It is unfortunate that more Christians do not read books like this. We might just have a lot fewer Christians in the world.



**Next deadline for article submission: April 28, 2007**

**First Coast Freethought Society 2007 Events**

April	16 - Monthly meeting	15 - Book discussion group	24- Social at Steak and Ale
May	21 - Monthly meeting	20 - Book discussion group	22- Social at Steak and Ale
June	18 - Monthly meeting	17 - Book discussion group	26- Social at Steak and Ale

Visit our website at <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>.

(In the Adobe version, the links are **LIVE!** Ctrl & Click will take you there.)

Return service requested



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