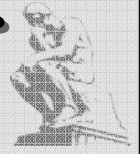


First Coast

FreeThinker



The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

August 2005

Volume 3, Issue 8

Is the U.S. Constitution Christian?

Inside this issue:

Can we disagree? 3

Ten Commandments 4

Podcasting 5

Hugo Borresen

Is the Judeo-Christian heritage the foundation of our democracy?

Lots of Christians think so, but they are wrong. The U.S. Constitution is the basis of our government. It mentions religion only once. Article VI states that “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” The rest is secular, defining power and distributing it among the branches of government.

If it were Christian, the Constitution would refer to God and would rule on religious ques-

tions as state constitutions do. The most important features of the federal government do not appear in the Bible: 1) separation of powers among the three branches of government; 2) a two-chamber legislature branch (i.e.,

“If the Constitution were Christian, it would have mentioned God and Bible verses many times.”

congress); 3) the different modes of representation of the two chambers; 4) a limited executive branch; 5) an independent judiciary branch; and 6) a complex system of checks and balances. Nothing

like this appears in the Bible.

Instead, the Bible describes judges and kings who were both lawmakers and judges. Laws were not separated as secular and religious. There is no bicameral legislature mentioned in the Bible, nor is an independent judiciary.

The New Testament does not contain a model government. One verse is sometimes cited as religious influence: “For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our King; he will save us.” (Isaiah 33:22) In contrast, the Constitution has an elected executive, not a king. The

“I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any Church that I know of. My own mind is my own Church.”

—Thomas Paine in
“Age of Reason”

August 2005 Meeting

Guest speaker:

Ken Hurley, President ACLU of Greater Jacksonville, Florida

“A Double-Super-Secret No-Take-Backs Discussion”

Monday, August 15, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Pablo Creek Regional Jacksonville Public Library (New Location!)

Bible places the three branches under the Lord.

As for the Ten Commandments, the Constitution repudiates the first two by allowing the freedom to worship gods other than Jehovah and to make graven images; it is silent on blasphemy, breaking the Sabbath, dishonoring parents, mur-

der, adultery, stealing, false witness, and coveting.

The Constitution's oath of office (Article II, section 2) is a secular "oath or affirmation." It has no religious references and need not be taken on the Bible. "So help me God" is voluntary and was added later.

The Constitution is so secu-

lar that it allows non-Christians to serve in federal offices and does nothing to promote Christianity. If the Constitution were Christian, it would have mentioned God and Bible verses many times. Interestingly, the Constitution was denounced by the more religious colonial citizens for being too secular. (members.tripod.com)



Talk Back

In an effort to encourage more member dialogue and exchange of ideas, we are starting a new feature this month called "Talk Back" in which we ask a question and will then print comments sent by the readers of the *First Coast FreeThinker* in response to this question. If you have a response to the question, please send it by e-mail to wolfcu@comcast.net or call Curtis Wolf at (904) 573-3847 (please no collect calls!).

You can also submit your comments in writing to any newsletter staff member that you see at the meetings or social events. Please note that we may not always be able to print your comments in their entirety due to space constraints, but we will often print highlights from your comments.

This month's question: What is the best thing about being a freethinker?

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.

Can we disagree without lobbing bombs at each other?

Curtis Wolf

Should we take the gloves off with religion? Should we “bash” Christians? How far should we go in pointing out that the emperor’s new clothes are actually his birthday suit?

These questions were raised by a cartoon that was pulled from the March 2005 *FreeThinker* issue prior to publication. The cartoon depicted the Terminator carrying a naked Jesus from the cross and declaring his intention to keep Jesus from corrupting humankind with Christianity’s absurd message. This cartoon set off a long debate over whether and how we should confront religion. In last month’s *FreeThinker* issue, Earl Coggins staked out his position on the controversy eloquently with his article “Fighting fire (and brimstone) with fire.” In my article, I plan to clarify my position on what I believe should be our approach to critiquing religion and promoting humanism.

Earl blames the rejection of the cartoon on the secular “moderates.” I believe that this reflects a misrepresentation of the motivation behind the opposition of many of us to the cartoon. Actually, Earl and I are really not that far apart on this issue. I agree with him that irrational beliefs should be challenged by all humanists and especially our freethought group.

This should not only include religion, but it should also include pseudoscience and magical thinking. However, I do disagree with Earl over how far we should be willing to go to challenge these beliefs.

What strikes me about the cartoon is how little it really says. Earl claims in his article that the “cartoon ... merely pondered what the world might have looked like had it been free to grow without Christianity.” I think that Earl gives the cartoon too much credit. The cartoon offers no specific criticism of Jesus or Christianity. It merely dismisses Christianity with a profanity. I do agree that the cartoon can hardly be expected to provide a comprehensive discussion of its subject matter. However, it could at least provide us some kind of rationale for its rejection of Christianity. As far as I am concerned, it does not do this and is little more than a cheap shot.

Let’s imagine if the tables were turned. Suppose that a Baptist magazine publishes a cartoon in which the Terminator goes back in history to kill prominent freethinkers such as Voltaire and Thomas Paine so that their “poison” will not infect humankind with its anti-religious bias. Should freethinkers criticize the appropriateness of this cartoon? Absolutely! Just like the anti-Christianity cartoon mentioned above, this cartoon does not

promote discussion of the validity of freethought ideas. Instead, it arrogantly presumes that the world would be better off without these ideas. Is this really how we want to debate ideas in the public arena? I hope not.

What I propose is that we confront religion and superstition by using thoughtfully constructed arguments that illuminate the weaknesses of the theist position. In the last two issues, *The FreeThinker* looked at popes past and present (“The Dark Side of the Pope” May 2005 and “Pope Faces American Dissent” June 2005). In the latter article, I accused the Catholic Church of intellectual cowardice when it suppressed dissent over Catholic doctrine. Harsh? Absolutely! However, I believe that the grounds for this criticism were well documented in the article. If you read back issues of this newsletter, you will find that this newsletter is far from “moderate” in its criticism of religion.

There is no point in making this personal. The goal of this newsletter is not to get even for the oppression of freethinkers throughout the ages. While I agree that Christians have done terrible things in the past two millennia, I have Christian friends and family who are decent people whom I respect. Not all Christians are raging fundamentalists. Some

(Continued on page 5)

A Look at the Ten Commandments

Fred W. Hill

The Ten Commandments have been much in the news lately, with various fervently ho-lier-than-thou judges and politicians wanting to foist their religious mania on all visitors to civic buildings and public spaces, sending the implicit message, “either follow our faith or be prepared to be treated like a leper when you come here expecting justice or fair treatment.”

So far, the Supreme Court has usually found such displays unconstitutional, though it might only take two or three more appointments to the court by President Bush to change that.

Strangely, while most Americans profess to believe in god, and a large percentage of theists believe their bibles to be literal truth, most Americans would also be very hard-pressed to name all ten commandments. It doesn't help that there are several variations of the commandments.

The Jewish, Catholic, and various Protestant bibles all differ, and there are even differing versions within the same bible. As relayed in Exodus, after receiving the first version of the commandments (Exodus 20), Moses in a fit of temper smashed them (Exodus 32:19) and had to go back up the mountain for another set (Exodus 34), which, despite the supposed word of God that “I will write upon these tablets the words that were in the first tablets,” were nevertheless

significantly different. (See <http://www.positiveatheism.org/crt/whichcom.htm> for a comparison of the various sets of commandments). Either God lied or He had a very sloppy stenographer (or someone made it all up, my personal choice).

The second version is generally regarded as applicable only to Jews, including as it does various dietary instructions that nearly all Christians ignore. As general moral instructions, however, even the first version is hardly adhered to even by the most rabidly fundamentalist Christians. Provided below is



that initial version, in italics, as found in the King James Version of the Bible, from the Book of Exodus, Chapter 20, followed by my commentary on their moral usefulness and how closely they are followed by theists:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

This has no moral meaning for anyone who is not Jewish, Christian or Muslim and its enforcement would be unconstitutional. Naturally, some fundamentalists are howling to change those provisions in the Constitu-

tion that allow people to worship other gods or no gods at all.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them for I the Lord thy god am a jealous god.

If this one was taken at its word, all artwork, even those adorning the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, should be destroyed, though I personally don't mind all the Popes being pious hypocrites in this regard.

Moreover, what sort of justice is it that punishes people for the activity of their ancestors? In full, this commandment is a base means to stifle communication and creativity and demand mindless worship of a megalomaniac.

Thou shalt not take the name of the lord thy god in vain.

From this atheist's point of view, all theists take their lord's name in vain each time they pray but they have a First Amendment right to do so, just no legal right to mandate anyone else join them in public schools or anywhere else outside of a church – at least as long as we continue to live in a democratic republic and not a theocracy.

Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all

(Continued on page 6)

Podcasting and Freethought

Curtis Wolf

If you are a techno geek like me, you like to stay on the cutting edge of technology. I have recently stumbled across something on the cutting edge called podcasting.

Podcasting allows anyone with a computer and microphone to put together an audio broadcast that can be accessed by everyone on the Internet. Not only can I listen to your podcast on my computer or mp3 player, but I can subscribe to your podcast and automatically get all of your future podcasts as fast as you can publish them.

Recently, the popular music download program iTunes (downloadable at <http://www.apple.com/itunes/download/>) introduced support for

podcasting with version 4.9. It provides a directory of free podcasts to which anyone can subscribe. Looking through this directory, I came across a number of podcasts that could be of interest to many freethinkers.

First is the Infidel Guy podcast. Hosted by Reginald Finley, this podcast covers a number of provocative questions such as, "Is the soul real?" and "does Christianity have pagan origins?" Guests on the show have included Joe Nickell, Robert Price, and Americans United's Barry Lynn.

Another good podcast is Skepticity. Hosted by Derek and Swoopy, it is an entertaining look at pseudoscience and critical thinking. Past shows have provided insight on alternative medicine, the

Roswell UFO crash and the flat earth believers. I listened to one fascinating interview with author Jennifer Hecht who enumerated many of the skeptics throughout history who spoke those heretical words, "I doubt it."

There are also science-oriented podcasts. My favorite so far is *This Week in Science – The Kick*ss Science Podcast*. Done with a lot of irreverence, it shows that science can be taught in a way that is both fun and informative. It is hosted by Kirsten who is a PhD candidate in neuroscience and Justin who is a non-scientist with a wicked sense of humor.

So embrace your inner geek and listen to podcasts that help you to embrace your inner freethinker as well!



Can we disagree without lobbing bombs at each other? (Continued from page 3)

Christians will find some aspects of humanism appealing if they are presented to them without hostility and mocking cartoons. We really need to leave the anger behind when we write so that we can present a fair and objective critique of religion that

allows people to examine their beliefs.

Finally, it is not enough to kick the crap out of religion. It is not enough to say what we do not believe in. We have to provide a positive alternative to religion and superstition. We need to talk about secular humanism and why it is the better approach to

understanding the universe and our place in it than is religion.

. We need to share our vision for a world that relies upon reason and science to solve problems in the here and now. Above all, we need to do all of this from an attitude of humility because no human being has a monopoly on truth, not even the humanist.



First Coast Freethought Society 2005 Events

August	15 - Monthly meeting	21- Book discussion group	23- Social at Steak and Ale
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

A Look at the Ten Commandments

(Continued from page 4)

thy work. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy god: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

I suppose it helps that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all disagree as to which day is supposed to be the day of rest, but of course not even theocracies have ever strictly enforced this dictate of God, mainly out of fear of being overrun by the enemy armies of different creeds. Certainly, having a day or two off is great, but demanding that everyone take the same day off and do no work whatsoever is impractical as well as foolish.

Honour thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long upon the land which the lord thy god giveth thee.

This reads like a blank check for child abuse rather than a useful moral tenet. Honor mandated thus, on the sole basis of being a mother or father, is meaningless. Genuine honor must be earned by being a caring, responsible parent.

Thou shalt not kill.

Seems straightforward enough, but among religious ad-

herents only the Jainists make a serious attempt to live by this commandment, and they're not even worshippers of the God of Abraham! If Jews, Christians and Muslims lived by this commandment, they would all be pacifist, vegetarian, anti-death penalty and anti-pesticide activists. As it is, despite God's failure to include the exceptions here, theists have found ways to interpret these four words to excuse massive war casualties, genocide, state executions and even terrorism.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Being faithful to one's spouse is a very nice idea, but even many conservative fundamentalists have trouble keeping this one. Consider the examples of Jimmy Swaggart, Jimmy Baker, Newt Gingrich, Henry Hyde, and Strom Thurmond, among many others.

Thou shalt not steal.

Stealing, of course, is universally looked down upon by human societies and universally committed by the same human societies. Nearly all nations around the world were built up by theft, including the United States. Of course, historically, theists have interpreted this commandment to mean, "thou shalt not steal from people who look and think and believe in me, thy god, exactly like you do, otherwise, hey, go ahead, take all you like from the heathens, they'll be going to Hell anyhow!"

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Another decent rule for fostering a civil society though

there has been much disagreement over exactly who counts as a "neighbor." God leaves a gaping hole whereby anyone can tell the most outrageous lies, causing great harm to others, but then truthfully claim, "they aren't my neighbors -- I didn't break that commandment!"

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, his ass nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.

And so God's final commandment gets us for thought-crime – lust and envy are no-no's. No desiring anything that isn't already ours – well, unless it belongs to someone who isn't a "neighbor." Taken at face value, coveting thy neighbor's lawnmower is just as bad as coveting his wife, though coveting the husband and belongings of thy female neighbor apparently gets a green light.

According to the bible, Moses had a hard time selling these to his own people in the distant past and save for obvious prohibitions against murdering, lying and stealing, most of these commandments are morally senseless and taken as a whole are inadequate for any society.

Moreover, it is highly doubtful even the most avid proponents of displaying the commandments in all public places are capable of following all ten to the last godly word. After all, just the act of displaying the Ten Commandments can be interpreted as a violation of the second commandment.



First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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2005 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 (\$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 place for agnostics, rationalists, 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:

- **August 21** — July issue of *Skeptic Magazine*
- **September 18** — Aug/Sept issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine

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

Earl Coggins on TV!

Earl Coggins, spokesperson and founder of the First Coast Freethought Society, will be a guest on **CIVIL Discourse** on **Thursday, August 25, at 6:30 p.m.**, on **Cable Channel 29**. Repeats of the program will continue until September 29.

CIVIL Discourse airs every Thursday and is sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union. **Ken Hurley** (past FCFS board member and August speaker) hosts the program.

August Social - All Welcome!

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

When: **Tues., August 23**, Gather in Lounge 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

RSVP: **CarrieRen@att.net** (268-8826) by Mon., Aug. 22, if you are attending!

REMINDER!

We now meet the **THIRD MONDAY** at the:
Pablo Creek Regional Jacksonville Public Library
13295 Beach Blvd. (between Kernan & Hodges)
If you get lost, call (904) 992-7101 for directions.

Return service requested

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