

First Coast

# FreeThinker



The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

December 2005

Volume 3, Issue 12

## Can we better teach science in Florida?

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**Curtis Wolf**

**F**lorida's Sunshine Science Standards were given a grade of "F" in a Thomas B. Fordham Foundation report on science education (<http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=42&pubsubid=637>). The report convincingly pointed out the shortcomings of Florida's science standards. If you compare Florida's science standards (<http://www.firnedu/doe/curric/prek12/frame2.htm>), to California's science standards (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/b/st/ss/scmain.asp>), you can see why. For example, Florida in its infinite wisdom refuses to

use the word evolution in its science standards; ignore the fact that evolution is a central concept in biology.

California also advances a more thorough understanding of evolution than Florida's few skimpy references to evolution. Compare the following:

### 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade Florida science standards

- [The student should know] that generally organisms in a population live long enough to reproduce because they have survival characteristics.
- [The student should know] that the fossil record provides evidence that changes in the kinds of

plants and animals in the environment have been occurring over time.

### 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade Florida science standards

- [The student should understand] the mechanisms of change (e.g., mutation and natural selection) that lead to adaptations in a species and their ability to survive naturally in changing conditions and to increase species diversity.
- ### 7<sup>th</sup> grade California science standards
- Biological evolution accounts for the diversity of species developed through gradual processes

*(Continued on page 7)*

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*"In fact, there is no war on Christmas. What there is, rather, is a burgeoning myth of a war on Christmas, assembled out of old reactionary tropes, urban legends, exaggerated anecdotes and increasingly organized hostility to the American Civil Liberties Union."*

—Michelle Goldberg,  
*How the secular humanist grinch didn't steal Christmas,*  
Salon.com

December 2005 Meeting

## "Human Light Celebration"

Celebrate the season! Bring a covered dish and beverage of choice.

Monday, December 19, from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m.

Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, 7405 Arlington Expressway

## 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:

- December 18 — *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, by Sam Harris
- January 15 — *Life, Sex, and Ideas: The Good Life without God*, by A.C. Grayling.

Grayling teaches philosophy at the University of London. This book, published in 2005, contains 60 brief essays drawn from works he had published in *The Guardian*, a major British newspaper. A civilized society, says Grayling, is one which never ceases having a discussion with itself about what human life should best be. Essays give a philosophical spin to issues we encounter in life such as sex, marriage, symbols, liberty, slavery, remembrance, and madness. A recurring theme is religion, of which he writes “there is no greater social evil.” He argues that liberal education is better than religion for inculcating moral values.

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



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The **SLATE OF OFFICERS FOR 2006** was elected as presented by the Nominating Committee. President: Carrie Renwick; Vice President: Curtis Wolf; Secretary: Wilhelmina Walton; Treasurer: Susan Allen, CPA; and Herb Gerson: Parliamentarian. **Congratulations, and good luck!**

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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 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.

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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.

## Getting along in America: How we can bridge the gap in the culture wars

Curtis Wolf

Can the religious and the non-religious live in the same country without stepping on each other's toes? Can our country be secular and at the same time respect individual religious belief? Can we have reasoned discussion over subjects like abortion and stem cell research without preachers and scientists throwing rocks at each other?

The so called "culture wars" have gotten so out of hand that it is assumed that someone has to be dead on the battlefield before either side can claim victory. University of Kansas professor Paul Mirecki planned to teach a course called "Intelligent Design and Creationism." It was originally called "Special Topics in Religion: Intelligent Design, Creationism and other Religious Mythologies" before the name of the course was changed by department faculty to the more objective name noted above.

(<http://msnbc.msn.com/id/10252349/>).

Fox News anchor John Gibson's book *The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse Than You Thought* envisions a secular humanist plot to take over America starting with an assault on Christmas (<http://www.heritage.org/Press/Events/ev120605a.cfm>). As if we had that much influence!

In the words of Rodney

King, "Can we all get along?"

I believe that both sides should declare a truce in this cultural slugfest. It is possible to have a secular society without it being openly hostile towards religion. It is also possible for everyone to agree to disagree without anyone violating his or her principles. We can all coexist in this country if we follow several simple rules:

**Do not use the machinery of government to promote one's religious or non-religious beliefs.**

***Government should not be hostile to religion, but also should not put religion on a pedestal above any other viewpoint held by Americans.***

The separation of church and state requires that the government not take sides when religion is involved. As noted in last month's *First Coast Free-thinker* article on the Starke First Amendment case, it is not permissible for Starke city government to place a cross on top of a city owned water tower. People of all faiths and no faith pay taxes. The government represents us all and should remain neutral.

At the same time, the National Endowment for the Arts'

\$15,000 support of Andres Serrano's photograph of a crucifix in urine could be viewed as government support for



art with anti-religious themes. I do believe that Serrano's photograph is protected by the First Amendment. But Serrano should use his own money to express his hostility towards religion. Again, taxes are paid by people of faith who do not want to finance art that is hostile to their beliefs.

**Respect the rights of the religious to practice their beliefs even if it is in the public sphere.**

No one should become temporary atheists when partaking of government services. This is especially true in public schools. The courts have sided with religious school children by allowing them to form religious clubs and pass out religious literature to other students. Students can also pray as long as the prayers do not disrupt school activities, i.e., praying in the middle of math class to avoid being called upon is not permissible! Also, students can express religious points of view in their coursework as long as they are applicable to the assignment given by the teacher.

There are a few caveats to

these rights. Religious practices must be truly voluntary. In *Santa Fe vs. Doe*, the Supreme Court held that students could not broadcast prayers over the school intercom upon the request of school personnel. The prayer may have been the student's words, but otherwise the school determined the time, place, and overall theme of the student's supposedly voluntary speech.

Also, it is common courtesy not to harass people when they are not interested in your religious beliefs. If they ask you to stop talking about religion, do so. If you have a captive audience who has no choice but to listen to you talk, don't view this as a golden opportunity to proclaim the praises of Jesus. The same rule goes for non-believers, too. A little common sense goes a long way when talking with people who do not believe the way that you do.

### **Knowledge is good!**

Whether it is evolution or accurate information about birth control, knowledge that emanates from empirical data and is peer reviewed by experts in the field should not be swept under the rug simply because it violates someone's preconceived belief system. If you dispute someone's viewpoint, let's hear your arguments against it. Ideas are not equally valid, but openly discussing them is preferable to banishing the controversial ones from public discourse.

I also have little patience for those who take short cuts around the experts who spend their entire lives discovering knowledge and instead take it

straight to the public either in the popular press or public schools. Most people do not have enough expertise on scientific matters to recognize the flaws in questionable theories proposed by pseudoscientists. Many well-established scientific theories met with initial skepticism when they were first introduced to the scientific community. As their proponents gathered evidence in the theories' favor, skepticism morphed into acceptance. Intelligent Design should take this lesson to heart: Do the hard work of convincing experts who are not easily fooled by specious evidence before teaching it to school children.

Finally, knowledge about religion is just as important as knowledge about science. A few years ago, I corresponded with Duval County school system personnel about the Introduction to Bible courses offered at Sandalwood and Stanton high schools. At no time did I suggest that teaching about the Bible was wrong. I argued only that the Bible should be taught in an academic manner, not in a devotional manner that is usually practiced in churches. Teaching objectively about religion helps school children to understand the role that religion has played in the history of our planet.

### **The free market means free to make your own decisions.**

The free market is an efficient way of matching customer needs with suppliers of goods and services that meet those needs. Banning products and services simply because they are inconsistent with someone's be-

lief system violates the freedom that comes with deciding for ourselves what is in our best interest.

Banning books illustrates this point. If a book is banned from a public library, this not only takes the decision whether to read the book away from the supporters of the ban (which is probably not a problem for them), but also from the readers who would like to have the opportunity to read the book. By banning books, supporters of the ban have reduced everyone's freedom to read what he or she wants. It is better to let people decide for themselves what they want to read. It is also better to allow the parents of children to decide what their children read rather than to decide for the parents.

### **Make governmental decisions by using reason and human knowledge.**

Governmental policy should be determined by reason and human knowledge, not dogma or sacred writings. Governmental policy should not only have a secular purpose; it should incorporate empirically proven methodologies to reach the goals envisioned by the policy authors.

This is not to imply that religious leaders do not have a say in setting governmental policy. If the Catholic Church proposes a new law, it should not be automatically rejected as religious interference with government. What should be expected of religious leaders is that they provide reasoned arguments for the policy. Bible verses and "God wants this" are not adequate ar-

guments. If "God" has a position on the passage of a particular law as is believed by religious leaders, presumably "God" has reasons for this position. Let's hear the reasons. If the reasons are deemed valid, then the policy should be adopted regardless of its origin within a religious institution.

### **Protect the rights of religious and non-religious minorities.**

The religious diversity of our

nation should be recognized by all Americans. Just because monotheism is the dominant religious viewpoint does not give its proponents the right to drag everyone else along with them.

The Pledge of Allegiance is a case in point. "Under God" in the pledge reinforces monotheism as the patriotic religious viewpoint. To allow opting out of the recitation of the pledge misses the point. The pledge as it is currently written has made second class citizens of anyone

who does not buy into the dominant religion. The pledge should bring us together, not break us apart into separate camps of the "cool kids" vs. "the outsiders."

The basic point in this article is that religion is and should remain a private choice. Government should not be hostile to religion, but also should not put religion on a pedestal above any other viewpoint held by Americans.



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## **2005 - Humanist Year in Review**

### **Hugo Borresen**

**T**his has been an active year for the Humanists of Florida Association. It is in the second year of its five year plan which incidentally few organizations have. Here are some of its accomplishments this year:

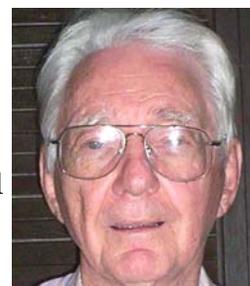
- The year started with a Leadership Retreat in Orlando at which forty activists shared ideas and received training.
- Carl Sagan Academy opened in Tampa to provide humanist education for up to 132 sixth and seventh graders. Grade eight will be added next year.
- The Center for Humanism initiated a lecture series, mass media campaigns, and membership drives for the Humanists of Florida Association.

- The Progressive Information Network provided a clearinghouse for progressive organizers and activists.

In addition to the efforts of the Humanists of Florida Association, humanist advertisements appeared in three liberal publications: *The American Prospect*, *The Nation*, and *The Progressive*. They stated, "What is Humanism? Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity."

Also, a lobbying office for humanism opened in Washington, DC. Named the Secular Coalition for America, it seeks to influence public officials on humanist concerns and promote humanism among the public. The director/lobbyist is Lori Lipman Brown, and the

legislative assistant is Ron Millar. The coalition can be reached at:



P. O. Box 53330  
Washington DC 20009-9997  
(202) 299-1091

info@secular.org.

See [www.secular.org](http://www.secular.org) for more information

Center for Inquiry Florida held a conference in Miami and started new community groups in Miami, Daytona Beach, Tallahassee and Fort Lauderdale. It also started its own half-hour cable program *CFI-Florida Presents* which airs in the Tampa/St. Petersburg area.

Visit the Humanists of Florida Association web site at <http://www.floridahumanist.org/Mambo/>.



## 'Tis the season...

Fred W. Hill

Recently, a co-worker of mine went on a rant about how secularists are trying to do away with references to God in general and Christianity in particular throughout the marketplace and public discourse. Store clerks say “Seasons Greetings” or “Happy Holidays” rather than “Happy Thanksgiving” or “Merry Christmas.” I chalk it up to his blowing up isolated incidents all out of proportion under the influence of conservative hot airbags such as Bill O’Reilly and Rush Limbaugh. Then again, retail managers may recognize that not all of their potential customers are Christians, not even in a bible-belt city like Jacksonville. Certainly, Christians make up a large majority of the citizens of northeast Florida, but there are also many Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and even free-thinkers of various sorts, including, shudder to think, atheists! Such as myself.

Now I’m not so hardcore that I make a scene every time someone wishes me a Happy Thanksgiving or Merry Christmas or says, “God bless you” when I sneeze. I can appreciate the sentiment without getting worked up about the theological implications of the specific words. Furthermore, I can enjoy the holidays and even find meaning in them as an opportunity to slow down the usual grind of earning a living and spend more time with family and friends without giving any credence to the notion that they are solely meant as

special *Holy* days for giving thanks to God and celebrating the birth of his mortal incarnation.

Certainly, I can feel some sense of “thanks” towards many things. I could thank my parents and all their ancestors without whom I wouldn’t exist, although blind fate played as much a role as did biological factors. That I live in a time and place in which I am able to live in at least reasonable freedom and comfort, I can give thanks to those various philosophers of past ages who proposed ideas of better, more equitable societies; those politicians who worked to put those ideas into practice;

***Bumper sticker slogans aside, it is mutual love, respect and courtesy that keeps families together...***

those veterans who fought and even died to support those ideas; and those social agitators who struggled to force our government to better live up to and protect those ideas. Further, I can give thanks to market forces, entrepreneurs and myriad common laborers for the home I live in and the food I eat. And since I am omnivorous, I should also give thanks to the dead animals whose flesh I consumed, not that they could appreciate the sentiment even if they had not been killed for my repast. I can even go so far as to thank nature itself for the sun, earth, water and

everything else that allows life to flourish. Of course, none of these deserving recipients of my thanks did anything specifically for

me, but nevertheless I am a beneficiary of many natural and social forces. Then, there are those people who have done things for me specifically: relatives, friends, co-workers, even people I’ve encountered only by chance and will likely never see again but who nevertheless went out of their way for me purely out of kindness – they all deserve special thanks.

But God? I do not believe in the God of any of the various *holy* books. I do not believe in any sort of supernatural sentient being who created everything out of nothing and who reputedly will condemn me to Hell if I continue to disbelieve in him. Nor do I equate God with nature. God is a product of human imagination. To give thanks to God for anything makes no more sense to me than to give thanks to Woden or Superman.

However, most of the people I know feel very differently. These include my Catholic mother and stepfather with whom I often spend time on the holidays and who generously share repast with me. They pray to their God before every meal and I simply bow my head in mute politeness, seeing no cause to arouse discord by asserting my staunch disbelief in their



God. When it comes to them practicing their standard, ritualistic practices promoted by their church, I've decided to keep silent even if I think they are silly. Fortunately, despite the bumper sticker on their van that reads, "The Family that Prays Together Stays Together", they have not insisted that I actually pray with them, nor have they pressured me to believe as they do, for which I'm thankful as that would assuredly rend the family asunder despite all their prayers. Bumper sticker slogans aside, it is mutual love, respect, and courtesy that keeps families together, in feeling if not always in physical contact.

As for Christmas itself, again I can enjoy the spirit of the holiday even if I don't believe in the Father, Son or Holy Ghost. The end of the year festivities are centuries older than Christianity

itself, having originally been held in honor of the ancient god Saturn and being transmuted into a celebration of the birthday of Christ only for the sake of convenience, there being no evidence at all that Jesus, assuming that he was a historical figure, was born on December 25. Recognizing this, the Puritans who founded colonies in North America and prevailed in the English Civil War banned the celebration of Christmas during their reign. In later centuries, particularly in the late 1800s and early 1900s, secularist marketing forces made Christmas the major holiday it is today far more than religious zeal. Buying and trading gifts became more important than honoring the imagined birth of the Christ child. But then, even in ancient Rome, the Saturnalia was more an excuse for engaging in ram-

phant hedonism than for honoring old, neglected Saturn.

However the holidays are referred to, this past Thanksgiving I did celebrate and feast with my family, and I felt thankful but I did not give thanks to God, and on December 25, I will likely again celebrate with family but I will not take part in any Mass in honor of Christ. Neither will I take offense whenever someone wishes me a Merry Christmas, though in religious terms it means no more to me than wishing me a happy Hanukkah or Ramadan. Except, of course, that I do honor and take part in the good communal spirit of the holiday season, and that requires no adherence to any religious belief -- only a desire, however vain, for good will and peaceful harmony among all people.



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### ***Can we better teach science in Florida?***

*(Continued from page 1)*

- over many generations. As a basis for understanding this concept:
- Students know both genetic variation and environmental factors are causes of evolution and diversity of organisms.
  - Students know the reasoning used by Charles Darwin in reaching his conclusion that natural selection is the mechanism of evolution.
  - Students know how independent lines of evidence from geology, fossils, and

comparative anatomy provide the bases for the theory of evolution.

- Students know how to construct a simple branching diagram to classify living groups of organisms by shared derived characteristics and how to expand the diagram to include fossil organisms.
- Students know that extinction of a species occurs when the environment changes and the adaptive characteristics of a species are insufficient for its survival.

#### **9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade California science standards**

- The frequency of an allele in

a gene pool of a population depends on many factors and may be stable or unstable over time. As a basis for understanding this concept:

- Students know why natural selection acts on the phenotype rather than the genotype of an organism. Students know why alleles that are lethal in a homozygous individual may be carried in a heterozygote and thus maintained in a gene pool.
- Students know new mutations are constantly being generated in a gene pool. Students know variation within a species increases the likelihood that at least

some members of a species will survive under changed environmental conditions.

- Students know the conditions for Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium in a population and why these conditions are not likely to appear in nature. Students know how to solve the Hardy-Weinberg equation to predict the frequency of genotypes in a population, given the frequency of phenotypes.

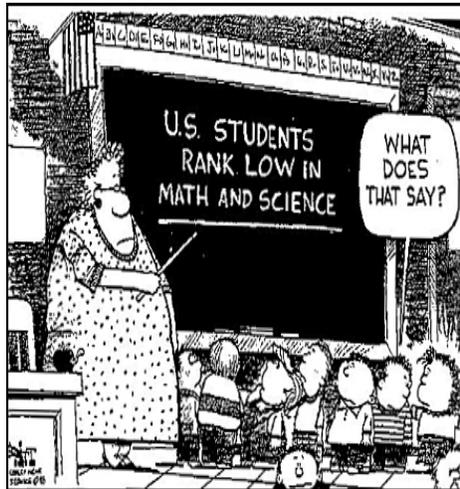
Evolution is the result of genetic changes that occur in constantly changing environments. As a basis for understanding this concept:

- Students know how natural selection determines the differential survival of groups of organisms.
- Students know a great diversity of species increases the chance that at least some organisms survive major changes in the environment.
- Students know the effects of genetic drift on the diversity of organisms in a population. Students know reproductive

or geographic isolation affects speciation.

- Students know how to analyze fossil evidence with regard to biological diversity, episodic speciation, and mass extinction.

Florida can and should do a better job of educating its chil-



dren about science. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scientific literacy is necessary for our children to help them critically analyze the multitude of bogus claims and questionable ideas bombarding them every day. Science education should not be left to politics.

Here is a great opportunity for all of us who believe in sci-

ence to call for the improvement of Florida's Sunshine Science Standards. They are up for review sometime within the next year. Considering the dangers of a Kansas style assault on public school science education (See [http://www.stpetersburgtimes.com/2005/11/05/State/Intelligent\\_design\\_ma.shtml](http://www.stpetersburgtimes.com/2005/11/05/State/Intelligent_design_ma.shtml) and [http://www.sptimes.com/2005/08/31/State/She\\_is\\_no\\_stranger\\_to\\_.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2005/08/31/State/She_is_no_stranger_to_.shtml)), we should be vigilant in protecting the teaching of science in public schools from pseudoscience and politics.

All who believe in science are invited & urged to attend the first organizational meeting of the Florida Science Standards Committee. **Meeting time is December 21, 2005, at 4 p.m.**

The meeting will be at the **CFI Florida office** at:

Bridgeport Center  
5201 West Kennedy Blvd.  
Suite 124  
Tampa, FL 33609

MAP: <http://tinyurl.com/ce4py>

If attending, please **RSVP** to:  
(813) 849-7571 or  
[info@cfiflorida.org](mailto:info@cfiflorida.org).



***The First Coast Freethought Society is homeless no longer! Starting in January 2006, we will be meeting back at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, 7405 Arlington Expressway, upstairs! Directions will be in every meeting notice.***

## December Social - All Welcome!

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

**WHEN:** Tues., December 27, 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 Mon., December 26, if you are attending!

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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

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 nonreligious of Northeast Florida, to promote freethought and secular humanism, to provide an opportunity for agnostics, atheists, skeptics and other freethinkers to exchange ideas.

**Meetings**

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

## Talk Back

Here is the response to the last Talk Back question:

***Have you ever been discriminated against because of your atheism?***

Curtis Wolf says “No. But I have been subjected to insensitive statements by Christians.

For example, upon finding out that I did not believe in God, a women at work said, ‘I never

met someone who was going to hell!’ I suppose that it is par for the course that we get these kinds of responses when we out ourselves as non-believers. I suppose that it is because Christians don’t expect atheists and agnostics to be so normal. It is incomprehensible to them that I could be happy, ethical and caring without God in my life.”

At this time, Talk Back is

being discontinued due to the lack of interest by our readers. We started this column as a way for readers to express their opinions without writing long articles. We would like this newsletter to contribute to a dialogue within the freethought group. This evidently was not the right vehicle for that dialogue. We will try something different in the future.

### First Coast Freethought Society 2005 - 2006 Events

December	19 - Human Light Party	18 - Book discussion group	27- Social at Steak and Ale
January	16 - Monthly meeting	15 - Book discussion group	24- Social at Steak and Ale
February	20 - Monthly meeting	19 - Book discussion group	28- Social at Steak and Ale

Return service requested

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