

First Coast

FreeThinker



The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

January 2006

Volume 4, Issue 1

The Nativity Scene Of The Crime

Inside this issue:

- Science Standards 3
- Fundamentalism Defined 4
- The 'Good' Book 5
- How To Respond 8
- Fortune Cookies 10

Ken Hurley

When I was a child, Aunt Felonious felt the need to teach me manners, especially when we were in public, "Kenny, don't make a scene," she would say. "And by all means, don't make a nativity scene."

From that day forward I have never felt the need to build a nativity scene in public or elsewhere. But others have.

It was a long while before I realized why my Aunt was concerned and what caused nativity scenes in public places to be controversial.

As legend has it,

thousands of years ago, another child, Jesus (from Nazareth), was born into homelessness in Bethlehem, Judah. Everyone has to be born someplace and this kid happened to be born in a barn with sheep, flies, hay, kings, donkeys, an-

The words 'respecting an establishment of religion' are far more encompassing than merely establishing a state religion.

gels, oxen, wise men, shepherds, Joseph, Mary, and a reporter from the Globe. Holy Christ! Others call it a manger or a stable. However, scholars agree with my neighbors, ever

since this child was created, the world has been anything but stable.

About 300 years later, to honor this child, Emperor Constantine, famed for holding the Council of Nicaea, where consensus was sought regarding the

degree of holiness and supernatural powers Jesus was thought to have, tore down one temple and built another called the Basilica of the Nativity in what is claimed

to be the exact spot of Jesus's birthplace.

About 1000 years after that, Francis (from Assisi, a famed Friar), is credited with the first reenactment of the na-

(Continued on page 7)

"After a searching review of the record and applicable case law, we find that while ID arguments may be true, a proposition on which the Court takes no position, ID is not science."

—Kitzmiller, et al, vs. Dover Area School District, et al. In this decision, the teaching of Intelligent Design in Dover Pennsylvania schools was struck down.

January 2006 Meeting

Julie Ingersoll, PhD, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, at UNF

"Examining Fundamentalism"

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

Unitarian Universalist Church 7405 Arlington Expressway Jacksonville, Florida

Please note the meeting location change!

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:

- January 15 — *Life, Sex, and Ideas: The Good Life without God*, by A.C. Grayling.
- February 19 — *The Crisis of Islam*, by Bernard Lewis.

Bernard Lewis is a professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. In *The Crisis of Islam* he examines the historical roots of the resentments that dominate the Islamic world today and that are increasingly being expressed in acts of terrorism. He looks at the theological origins of political Islam and takes us through the rise of militant Islam in Iran, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, examining the impact of radical Wahhabi proselytizing and Saudi oil money on the rest of the Islamic world. The book ranges through thirteen centuries of history, but in particular it charts key events of the twentieth century leading up to the violent confrontations of today: the creation of the state of Israel, the Cold War, the Iranian Revolution, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, the Gulf War, and the September 11th attacks on the United States.

For more information, contact moderator Jewell Kross at 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

Editor:	Hugo Borresen	779-6883
	hborresen@juno.com	
Layout:	Curtis Wolf	573-3847
	wolfcu@comcast.net	
Staff writer:	Fred Hill	358-3610
	fhill90208@aol.com	
Proofreaders:	Wilhelmina Walton	642-8798
	wilwalt@bellsouth.net	
	Carrie Renwick	268-8826
	carrieren@att.net	

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.

Florida Science Standards Committee — A Vision of Science Education in Florida

Curtis Wolf

Science has been the great liberator of our minds from superstition and mysticism in the modern era. It has explained many of nature's mysteries without resorting to the supernatural. It has led to many technological innovations that have immeasurably improved our lives. It has become the gold standard by which the validity of ideas can be judged according to objective standards. Despite all of its obvious benefits to mankind, is science being given its due in the Florida public schools?

There is a movement underway to answer that question and remedy the problem if it exists. I attended the inaugural meeting of the Florida Science Standards Committee on December 21st in the Center for Inquiry office in Tampa, Florida. Nineteen others — mostly CFI supporters — also attended.

The meeting started with a PowerPoint presentation that made the following points:

- Scientific literacy is not particularly good in the United States.
- Science is under attack in our country. Recent examples are Kansas science standards and Dover Pennsylvania support for Intelligent Design.
- There are storm clouds of creationism support in the Jeb Bush administration and State House of Representa-

tives.

- The Florida science standards were given a grade of "F" by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.
- There are better national and state science standards available to guide us in a rewrite of the Florida science standards.
- Science education is too important to Florida to be left to the politicians.

We then discussed matters such as the name of the group, which remained the Florida Sci-

Despite all of its obvious benefits to mankind, is science being given its due in the Florida public schools?

ence Standards Committee, and the purpose of the group, which is to improve science educational standards for Florida schools. There was some difference of opinion as to whether this was the best place to start improving science education, but the consensus was that science standards set the bar high for the educational system as a whole. The educational system will have to improve itself in order to teach the standards correctly.

We also looked at the type of officers we needed for the group and the need for a scientific advisory board composed of compe-

tent scientists in the fields covered by the science standards. The scientific advisory board will be necessary if the committee desires scientific credibility. Not everyone on the committee, including myself, has advanced science degrees.



It became clear from the meeting discussion that most of the committee was not familiar with the Florida science standards and its alternatives. It will be impossible to build a consensus on how or even if the science standards should be improved until every participating member of the committee does their homework on this issue.

I sent out to the committee links to the current Florida science standards and national science standards published by the National Research Council and American Association for the Advancement of Science. There are also well regarded state science standards used by California and Massachusetts.

The Florida science standards are up for review probably in 2007. As chairman of the Florida Science Standards Committee, I encourage everyone to become involved in improving science education in the state of Florida. Pseudoscience, including creationism, continues to be

popular in America. The best way to confront pseudoscience is to cultivate an appreciation for

real science and the scientific method among our fellow citizens. This cultivation must start

with our children who are mankind's future when we die.



Fundamentalism Defined

Former president Jimmy Carter spoke the following words in an address to the Baptist World Alliance in Birmingham, England.

"I would describe fundamentalism as, first of all, a movement led almost invariably by authoritarian males who consider themselves to be superior to others and who have an overwhelming commitment to

subjugate women and to dominate their fellow believers.

"Second, fundamentalists draw clear distinctions between themselves, the true believers, and others. They are convinced that they are right and that everyone who contradicts them is inferior and beyond purview of God's full blessing.

"Third, fundamentalists are militant in fighting against any challenge to their beliefs, are

often angry and sometimes resort to verbal or even physical abuse against those who oppose the implementation of their agenda.

"Finally, they tend to make their self-definition narrow, to isolate themselves, to demagogue social and emotional issues and to view change, cooperation, negotiation, or other efforts to resolve differences as signs of weakness."



It is time to pay 2006 Annual Membership Dues!

The annual membership dues for 2006 are now due. You may pay treasurer, Susan Allen, or any officer at a meeting, or drop your check in the mail.

You may want to consider a higher level of membership. Remember, now that the FCFS is an educational 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization, contributions to the Freethought Society over

and above the minimal dues amount are **tax deductible**.

Please submit a 2006 membership application with your check. Thanks!



Meeting Location — Now Unitarian Church

We are now meeting upstairs in the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, located at 7405 Arlington Expressway in Jacksonville. The meeting date and time

have not changed.

As you may have heard, the public libraries now close at 8:00 p.m., so we can no longer meet there past 7:45 p.m. This would rush our meetings and leave us with less time to ask questions of

our speakers and socialize following the formal meeting.

For those who are concerned about meeting in a church, remember that it is just a building, and it means only what we allow it to mean.

First Coast Freethought Society 2006 Events

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
March	20 - Monthly meeting	19 - Book discussion group	28 - Social at Steak and Ale

The "Good" Book

Fred W. Hill

Many times over I have heard the Christian Bible referred to as the "Good Book." Those who refer to their Bibles as such also invariably insist that it is the very word of God – Moses, Solomon, Mark, John and all the other scribes of the testaments either taking dictation directly from God or being "inspired" by God. Being thereby the work of a "perfect" being, the Bible itself must be inerrant, according to fundamentalist Christian thought. And because God is all "good" the Bible must also be all good. Theoretically, all passages in the Bible must hence be fit reading material for the entire family, children and adult alike. No "for mature audiences only" material in the Good Book, supposedly.

Of course, people who have actually bothered to read the entire Bible already know this isn't so. It has been my experience, however, that many people who believe in the Bible as the actual word of God are very surprised to learn that there are portions of their holy book that contain far greater sex and violence than any R-rated film. Or, if they are so aware, they claim it has to be understood "in context," which I understand very well to mean, "allow us to interpret this passage to mean something other than what it says so that we can make excuses for God which we wouldn't make for any other despot who isn't on our side."

For a start, can any rational person truly believe that there

was ever a time in the history of human existence when, except the immediate members of one family, everyone (including babies and children) were so thoroughly evil that every single one of them all over the world deserved to be put to death? That is the proposition of the story of Noah and the flood taught to children without a second thought as to the horrendous nature of this act of God. Children are taught to focus on the aspect of Noah gathering up all the ani-

They excuse the despicable, despotic behavior of God as portrayed in the Bible as "beyond our understanding" or explain that as our creator God has every right to do with us as He pleases and cannot be held to our paltry standard of morality.

mals on his ark and dissuaded from questioning any of the numerous bizarre aspects of the story. Telling this story as fact, which far too many parents do, is comparable to teaching that all victims of natural disasters, including the thousands whose lives were ended or horribly disrupted by Hurricane Katrina were evil, deserving of their fate. Religious extremists have in fact claimed as much – see <http://keptically.org/hhor/id9.html> –

thereby spreading the values of hatred and intolerance learned from their interpretation of the "good" book.



Another lesson to be learned from the Bible, in Genesis 19: 1-8, is that when you have taken in two angels as houseguests and a mob of men arrive at your house demanding that you give them up so that they may "know them," the proper thing to do is to offer up your virgin daughters instead so that the mob may do "to them as is good in your eyes."

Later in this chapter, children are taught the punishment for disobedience, even just to satisfy curiosity, is to be turned into a pillar of salt, as happened to Lot's wife when she couldn't help but take a peek at the destruction of Sodom and Gamorrah. Then the chapter concludes with a heartwarming family tale of incest between a drunken newly widowed Lot and his daughters who mistakenly assume that they are the only remaining people on Earth. Apparently neither God nor his angels could be bothered to inform them otherwise.

A passage that may cause some confusion or serious excuse-making contextualizing by fundamentalist opponents of abortion is Numbers 5: 11-31, wherein God orders Moses to perform certain procedures on women who have committed

adultery in order to kill the resultant fetus. In a later chapter, 2 Samuel 11: 2-17, that great biblical hero King David commits adultery with Bathsheba and has her husband killed. As a result of David's disregard of God's injunction against adulterous offspring, Solomon was permitted to be born in good health to become another great biblical hero. David got off rather lightly for his adultery – he had to suffer the indignity of his sons making out with his own concubines, but what really set God off was David daring to take a census, for which he had to take the severe punishment of having 70,000 of his men die of pestilence as related in 2 Samuel 24, imparting the lesson that if your king is a philanderer you may get to have some illicit fun in his harem but if he takes a headcount you'd better take extra precautions against plague-carrying fleas.

A particularly useful passage to teach children perspective and respect for their elders is found in 2 Kings 2: 23-24, which relates how God took time out of his presumably very busy schedule to answer a prayer of the prophet Elisha to send "two she bears out of the woods to tare forty and two children of them" who had dared mock him for his bald head. Another tasty passage in 2 Kings, 6: 28-29, brings up cannibalism: "And the king said to her, What aileth thee? And she answered, This woman said unto me, Give thy son that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow. So we

boiled my son, and did eat him, and I said unto her on the next day, Give thy son, that we may eat him: and she hath hid her son."

More divine respect for human life and dignity may be found in Numbers 31, as God instructs the execution of all men, women and children taken captive during a war, with the sole exception of "all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves."

More divine mercy was to come in 1 Samuel 12: 3, wherein God instructed Saul, "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep and camel and ass." And then there's the beautiful passage in Psalm 137 about the joys of killing the children of one's enemies: "Happy shall be he that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones."

More charming family values can be found in the New Testament portion of the "good" book, such as in these quotes attributed to Jesus: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26) and "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in

law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." (Matthew 10: 34-36).

If any of these passages were found in any other book easily available to children in schools and public libraries and promoted as "good" for their education, the fundamentalists would be up in arms against the moral travesty, writing letters to their Congressmen, waiving signs in livid protest. Because they are all in their "good" book, however, they let it pass. They excuse the despicable, despotic behavior of God as portrayed in the Bible by dismissing it as "beyond our understanding" or explaining that as our creator God has every right to do with us as He pleases and cannot be held to our paltry standard of morality. All of which is pure sophisticated bunkum fashioned to pull the wool over those who are carefully taught not to question biblical authority, not even when it is confusing or outright contradictory, and never to doubt that even when it appears to be very bad, it is in fact always good. Maybe extolling such a confusing and contradictory text as the "good" book at least partly explains why so many God-fearing people populate our prisons, convicted of all manner of crimes, from petty theft to murder.

Unlike the Bible-thumpers who are so anxious to ban books they find full of "evil" passages, such as the Harry Potter books, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or

(Continued on page 10)

The nativity scene of the crime

(Continued from page 1)

tivity scene. Shortly after that, Pope Nicholas IV commissioned Arnolfo di Cambio to sculpt life-sized marble nativity figures which are open to public view in Italy every Christmas eve.

By the 17th century, German artisans were making good money carving figures of the nativity from native trees and got paid to decorate churches, homes, and bazaars with their work. They were not the first to profit from the prophets.

In 1741, Moravian Protestants settled Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and brought the nativity scenes and figurines with them. Many Americans have been making a scene ever since.

My dear Aunt was also fond of reading out loud to me in her deep, raspy, L&M voice, the US Constitution, the Bill of Rights, Grimm's Fairy Tales, the scratch sheet for 'the ponies', excerpts from the Good Book, and snippets from a 'better book', *Tropic of Cancer*.

It was then I learned that the First Amendment actually promotes the separation of church and state by neither advancing nor prohibiting religion. It was broadly written intentionally to include more than just preventing the state from establishing a religion. The words 'respecting an establishment of religion' are far more encompassing than merely establishing a state religion. The emphasis in

the clause is on 'respecting', meaning with respect to or regarding an established religion.

However, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Donald Wildmon, Alan Sears, Alan Keys, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, James Kennedy, Jerry Vines and many others with a microphone and a large audience, proffer 'separation of church and state' as a myth. They assert that America was founded as a Christian nation. Occasionally, they may reluctantly say, America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles. Regrettably, those views seem to be a calculated fabrication intended to perpetuate and leverage ignorance. The good news is that separation of church and state is supposed to exist in America. The bad news is that their words and deeds smack of bearing false witness and aid in narrowing the separation gap.

The Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment are generally interpreted that government may not promote one religion over another religion, or religion over non-religion, and essentially must remain neutral regarding matters of religion.

As sure as Christmas, every year we also have the accompanying lawsuits regarding nativity scenes on public property. When is a nativity scene permissible on public property? . . . well that depends. We have to consider: Is the public property open to all comers who seek to display? Is the display secular? Re-

ligious? Privately funded? Funded by the Government? And what would a "reasonable observer" see?

The US Supreme Court opinion, *County of Allegheny vs. American Civil Liberties Union*, 492 U.S. 573, 109 S.Ct. 3086 (1989), put a heavy emphasis on other symbols near the supposedly religious display. That means that a purple TeleTubby or the Bill of Rights next to a nativity scene may well prevent the nativity scene from violating the Establishment Clause and that, as was the case in *Allegheny*, a Christmas tree next to a Menorah makes the Menorah permissible.

The wisdom of the Supreme Court has determined that evergreen trees, Santa's elves, reindeer, Mrs. Claus are secular symbols. Nativity scenes and menorahs tend to be considered religious. These secular symbols have not only been ruled constitutional; their proximity to religious symbols causes the religious symbols to be permissible where if they were standing alone would probably be ruled unconstitutional.

We also should determine whether the display is owned and paid for by the government or by a private entity. Government sponsored displays are more constitutionally suspect than private displays in public places.

We should also look at the fairness of the permitting process when discussing nativity scenes on public property.

Should a municipality allow one private individual to construct a display, then they pretty much have to allow others to, as well; and they should not censor based on the content of the display.

The Reasonable Observer Test devised by the US Supreme Court is fairly simple: Would a reasonable observer of the dis-

play in question believe, even if mistakenly, that the government was endorsing a particular religion or religion in general? However, not all members of the court agree that the reasonable observer test is reasonable.

Today, most nativity scenes are imported from southeast Asia and Aunt Felonious is re-

membered by those whose lives she shook, as the gray old lady who smiled a big yellow-toothed smile, as she sucked smoke from tobacco while reading out loud to the children she loved. One of her favorite quotes is from George Carlin, "Let's leave the symbols to the symbol-minded."



How should we respond to the crèche?

Curtis Wolf

I asked Ken Hurley to write the preceding article in response to the recent news story about the holiday display at the public park adjacent to Neptune Beach and Atlantic Beach. I hoped that his article would help put this news story in perspective. As you can see, he did a great job.

For those who have not read about it, the holiday display originally included only a Christmas tree and a menorah. This was not good enough for Ponte Vedra Beach resident Ken Koenig. He wanted a crèche (see the picture to the right) included in the holiday display.

The beach communities initially rejected the inclusion of the crèche, believing

that it would violate the mandates of the U.S. Supreme Court. However, a federal lawsuit launched by the Orlando based Liberty Counsel eventually convinced them to give in and allow the crèche to be included in the holiday display. The Liberty Counsel is a self described "nonprofit litigation, education and policy organization dedicated to advancing religious freedom, the sanctity of human life and the traditional family". (<http://www.lc.org/aboutus.html>).

So how do we respond as freethinkers? While there are multiple ways that we could respond to this from legal to political protest, I believe that we should respond in 2006 by submitting our own holiday display that represents the ideas of secular humanism and freethought at the appropriate time to the beach communities.

The display could include anything from the Bill of Rights as suggested by Ken Hurley to a secular celebration of the winter solstice as CFI Florida does every year as an alternative to religious holidays. We would have about a year to plan this, and I am sure that our membership would have a lot of good ideas for the display. It is up to us to show that religion is not the only game in town and freethinkers prefer to celebrate reality instead of mythology.



First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
 P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 • (904) 288-6291
 2006 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: _____

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
 P.O. Box 550591
 Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591
 (904) 288-6291
www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

President:	Carrie Renwick	268-8826
	carrieren@att.net	
Vice Pres:	Curtis Wolf	573-3847
	wolfcu@comcast.net	
Secretary:	Wilhelmina Walton	642-8798
	wilwalt@bellsouth.net	
Treasurer:	Susan Allen, CPA	564-2255
	susanalien@comcast.net	
At-Large:	Earl Coggins	519-1890
	infidel@bellsouth.net	
Past Pres:	Susan Allen, CPA	564-2255
	susanalien@comcast.net	
E-mail Sec:	Carrie Renwick	268-8826
	carrieren@att.net	
Parliamentarian:	Herb Gerson	363-6446
	herbge@bellsouth.net	
Founder:	Earl Coggins	519-1890
	infidel@bellsouth.net	

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, Jacksonville, Florida. 32211. (904) 725-8133. Doors open 6:15. Meeting time: from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

The "Good" Book

(Continued from page 6)

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, I would not advocate preventing children from reading any version of the Bible, even if I feel certain it does damage at least a few impressionable young

minds.

On the whole, most children would probably find the Bible boring after the first few chapters; others may actually be inspired to do genuinely good deeds for other people despite all

the horrid nonsense; and at least a few will begin to critically evaluate what they are reading and learn that just because something is referred to as "good" doesn't mean it's always necessarily so.



JANUARY SOCIAL - ALL WELCOME!

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

WHEN: Tues., January 24, 2006. Gather in Lounge at 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

RSVP: CarrieRen@att.net (or 268-8826) by Mon., January 23, if you are attending!

FCFS 2006 Annual Planning Meeting

Sunday, January 22, 2006, at the home of Wilhelmina Walton, at 10:00 a.m.

We will be planning programs and activities for much of the year.

PLEASE MARK YOUR CALENDAR AND PLAN TO ATTEND THIS IMPORTANT MEETING!

Return service requested

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