

First Coast

FreeThinker



The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

March 2006

Volume 4, Issue 3

Bills Before the 2006 State Legislature About Which Freethinkers Should Know

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It's that time of the year again. All the power brokers are headed to Tallahassee to haggle over money and laws. Last year, we looked at bills being considered by the Florida Legislature that would likely be of interest to freethinkers. This year, we're doing it again.

However, this time we are starting at the beginning of the legislative session instead of towards the end of the session.

Also, we need to explain the criteria used to select the bills presented in this article. Clearly, freethinkers are interested in a lot of

things and most of the bills before the state legislature would be interesting to some freethinker out there. As much as I would like to talk about all of these



bills, we just don't have enough room! So we have to be selective. Here are the rules used in selecting bills for this article.

Does the bill advance religion or religious ideas?

Does the bill cover an issue in which religious arguments are presented on one side of the issue?

Does the bill advance or discourage pseudoscience?

With that out of the way, here are bills of interest to freethinkers.

HJR 307 - This bill requires the daily reading of the Pledge of Allegiance which includes 'under God' in the classroom.

HB 233 - This bill

(Continued on page 7)

"This cross has no secular purpose whatsoever and constitutes a tacit endorsement of Christianity by the City of Starke in direct violation of the establishment clause of the U.S. and Florida Constitutions"

—Legal brief, *American Atheists, Inc. and Lon Bevell vs. the City of Starke, Florida*

March 2006 Meeting

Lon Bevell, plaintiff in lawsuit against cross on Starke water tower

“Crossed-up in Starke”

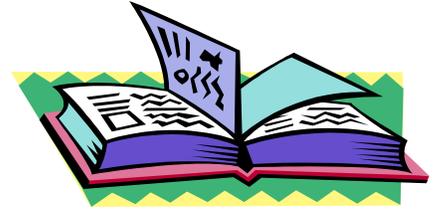
Monday, March 20, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

(Upstairs in the Sanctuary - Doors open at 6:15)

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:
- March 19 — *The Selfish Gene*, by Richard Dawkins
 - April 16 — *One Planet, One People*, by Carl Coon



In this succinct, highly readable overview of the evolution of human society, the author argues that the 21st century will witness a crucially important and difficult transition for the human race. Blending the disciplines of anthropology and evolutionary psychology with over thirty years of experience in the diplomatic corps, Coon traces the evolution of the human tendency to divide others into two groups, “us versus them.” People tend instinctively to behave altruistically toward members of their own in-group, and to react with suspicion, or even hostility, toward outsiders. He points out that complex human societies became possible only when cultural attitudes and mechanisms became accepted that encouraged individuals to define their in-groups in more expansive ways. Today, he argues, we have reached a stage where the whole world must be viewed as “us,” for only a united world community can cope with today’s global challenges.

Coon concludes by discussing the difficulties of making this final transition to a world community and the role the United States should take in leading the way. He deplores the recent unilateral trend of U.S. foreign policy and advocates strengthening the United Nations.

For more information, contact moderator Jewell Kross at 904-608-7937
JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org.



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 at the address above.

This Town Is Not Big Enough For The Both Of Us...

Curtis Wolf

Are science and god compatible? Have scientific discoveries disproved the existence of god? Is the town not big enough for science and god to exist at the same time?

While the answers to these questions are in dispute even among scientists, I believe that science has at least made the existence of god unlikely. This is certainly true of god as described by the three top monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While science cannot completely close the door on the existence of god, many scientific discoveries have added nails to god's coffin. Here are a few examples.

Does god know everything?

While natural phenomena often follows a deterministic path, i.e. everything that happens in nature has a clearly defined cause and its behavior can be predicted if we have complete knowledge of interacting forces and particles, there are times when nature keeps its cards close to the vest. We find this penchant for secrecy in the world of the atom and also in the world of complex systems.

The world of the atom is described by quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics describes a strange world where properties of subatomic particles are undetermined until they are measured. At best, one can state the

probability that an electron will be in a certain position when it is measured.

The Heisenberg Principle also states that there are certain pairs of properties so that when the precision of measurement of one of the properties increases, the precision of measurement of the other property decreases. For example, the more precisely you measure the position of an electron, the less precision you have in the measurement of its momentum. When you know

Until god is defined in ways that can be tested by science, there is really no way to determine with any high degree of certainty whether god exists.

the exact position of an electron, the electron's momentum is completely unknown.

Also, chaos theory states that the evolution of certain systems like the weather is dependent on initial conditions. Even if these initial conditions are measured with high precision, it is impossible to predict the future behavior of these systems. For example, if two weather systems start with the same apparent temperature, pressure, humidity, etc, they may act very differently at a future time. This occurs because every measurement no matter how precise will differ from another measurement of the same

property if you take the measurement down to a sufficient number of decimal points. This difference is then multiplied through the complex interaction of the system's components so that the two systems may behave very differently over time. This is why the TV weatherman only predicts at most five days in the future.

It is important to realize that the uncertainty of these theories cannot be overcome by more precise scientific instruments. Instead, certain aspects of natural phenomena are intrinsically unknowable. How does god know the unknowable?

Is god good and does he care about us?

When an object falls towards the ground, its speed at which it falls changes at a rate of 9.8 m/s^2 . This means that if you fall from an airplane without a parachute, you will be falling at a high rate of speed right before you hit the ground.

Also, when two automobiles collide at high speed, the principle of conservation of momentum guarantees that the momentum of the two automobiles will not dissipate rapidly and lead to only a light bump against each other. When two automobiles collide, conservation of momentum can lead to injury or death



of the occupant when he undergoes a violent change in the direction and speed at which his body is moving.

Of course, none of this means that the laws of nature are out to get us. Falling inanimate objects accelerate at the same rate as human beings. What this suggests is that the laws of nature do not view human beings as being unique and needing their own special set of laws.

Maybe, we are so used to these laws of nature being what they are that we do not realize that things could be different. Let's suppose that instead of accelerating at 9.8m/s^2 we fell at a constant low speed. We would then hit the ground without sustaining serious injury. If we fall from the top of a mountain, it may take a long time to fall to the ground, but at least we would still be alive. So why did god choose physical laws that contribute to the suffering of human beings?

Are we the special creation of god?

The evolution of our species does not speak well of our designer if we have a designer. The fossil record identifies around 14 distinctive species of hominids in addition to our species – homo sapiens - since mankind began its evolution five to six million years ago. These species appeared at different times and their evolutionary lifetimes often overlapped. Far from being a designer tinkering with

one design until he finally got it right with our species, it is more like a designer that started one project, works on it a while, starts on another project, discards the first project, works on the second project for a while, starts a third project, so on and so on. Even homo sapiens were not the designer's sole project until 30,000 years ago when Neanderthals died out after about 70,000 years or more of competition with us for the designer's attention. This doesn't sound like a god who knew what he



wanted when he started creating hominids several million years ago.

Of course, none of this is the final nail in god's coffin. The problem with god is that its amorphous nature always seems to provide it sufficient wiggle room to sidestep contradictions brought up by critics of the god concept. God is like Jell-O in a porous box. The more pressure you put on the box to contain the Jell-O, the more it squirts out the crevices in the box. The improbability of Noah's ark is answered by the assertion that god is all powerful and can make the improbable sea voyage work. Disease and death are the result of the man's fall, but god has a plan to end these human scourges. Quantum mechanics and chaos theory may limit

knowledge of nature for mankind, but not for the all knowing god. How can we know god when god is a constantly moving target without limitations? Science learns just as much about natural phenomena from what it isn't as what it is.

Is it any wonder that science throws up its hands when confronted with the god question? Science ponders testable and falsifiable questions. There is little about god that is testable or falsifiable.

*God is what it is.
Don't try to limit it.
Just embrace it and
accept that some aspects
of god are unknowable.*

This may be fine for the theist, but not for the scientist who requires evidence to

accompany acceptance of a claim.

This leads us to a more serious problem with the god concept. If science cannot be used to understand god, what other methodology do we have to understand its nature? Religion with its contradictory pictures of god? Philosophy with unproved assertions? Until god is defined in ways that can be tested by science, there is really no way to determine with any high degree of certainty whether god exists.

This may be the ultimate fate of the god concept. The door may swing a little more towards its closed position with every new scientific discovery, but it will never shut completely and settle the god question once and for all.



Blasphemous Cartoons

Fred W. Hill

Cartoons have sparked mayhem and murder this past month. People have been rioting this past month in large swaths of the “Muslim world.” Angry mobs in Lebanon, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq, India, Indonesia, Thailand and Somalia have set fire to embassies and businesses associated with the “West,” clashing with police forces and getting themselves killed. In Nigeria, rampaging Muslims murdered neighboring Christians merely for being Christians. In London, 500 Muslims gathered in a protest rally, carrying banners calling on Muslims to “massacre” those who insult Islam and chanting: “Britain, you will pay, 7/7 on its way.” (“Cartoon Controversy Spreads throughout Muslim World,” by Ewan MacAskill, et al, *The Guardian Unlimited*, February 4, 2006). In India and Pakistan, religious and even one government official, the Minister for Minority Welfare and Haj in the Indian province of Meerut, have offered cash rewards for whoever beheads the offending cartoonist(s).

All of this over a few cartoons originally published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in September, 2005. And in my opinion, the cartoons were actually rather mild. Mohammed wearing a turban with a bomb in it. Mohammed on a cloud telling suicide bombers “Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins.” The cartoons were so relatively mild

that Muslims in Denmark who were angered by the cartoons sought out and added other, apparently even more sacrilegious cartoons that had not been published in the papers, to ensure the proper amount of outrage and violent frenzy.

Meanwhile, on February 20, 2006, amateur historian David Irving was sentenced to three years in prison for denying the Holocaust, an event noted by Muslims who wonder why denying the Holocaust is punished but defaming Mohammed is allowed.

From this freethinker's perspective, the riots are all completely irrational and out of proportion to the supposed offense.

A few might even recall that the primary charge against Julius Streicher, one of the former Nazi leaders tried by the Nuremberg tribunal after World War II, was “of educating people, of producing murderers, educating and poisoning them with hate” (*Justice at Nuremberg*, p. 384, Robert E. Conot, Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1986 and through his newspaper, *Der Sturmer*). Streicher had relatively little power within Hitler’s regime but essentially he was found guilty and executed for his leading role in fomenting the social climate of fear and hatred which enabled Hitler to carry out his crimes against humanity and initiate one of the most de-

structive wars in history. Of course, it didn’t help Streicher’s case that Hitler lost that particular war.

Now, nearly 60 years after Streicher’s hanging for his role in the attempted extermination of European Jews, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has publicly declared that the Holocaust was a myth used to justify the creation of the state of Israel and an Iranian newspaper, *Hamshahri*, is sponsoring an international contest of cartoons making fun of the Holocaust, with the intent of testing the West’s tolerance of “free expression” according to graphics editor Farid Mortazavi (“Iran to publish Holocaust cartoons,” *News.com.au*, February 7, 2006).

Such testing of tolerance of all forms of speech, including blasphemy, pornography and hatemongering, has been a recurring feature of the modern, secularist societies of the western Europe and North America, even in the United States, where “free speech” is guaranteed by the First Amendment to our Constitution. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln had editors of pro-Confederate newspapers in the north imprisoned. After U.S. entry into World War I, critics of Woodrow Wilson’s war policies were imprisoned and publications such as the socialist, anti-war magazine, *The Masses*, were shut down. Contributors to *The Masses*, includ-



ing cartoonist Art Young, were prosecuted for “conspiracy to obstruct recruiting” (“Building a Better Abyss,” Noah Berlatsky, *The Comics Journal*, p. 132, January 2006). Eventually the charges against Young and his alleged co-conspirators were dropped and in the decades since, free speech in the U.S. and other democratic nations have been largely expanded, such that even a purposely profane episode of the cartoon series “South Park,” full of profanity and “blasphemous” depictions of holy figures, including Mohammed and Jesus, hardly arouses much comment beyond the ranks of the radical religious right. Even American neo-Nazis are allowed to march through and give hate speeches in neighborhoods full of Jews or African-Americans, as happened today, February 26, 2006, in Tampa, Florida (see

controversy. I disagreed with that decision but could understand the reasoning behind it. The question, as I perceived it, was of whether to promote absolute freedom of speech, including a stridently anti-Christian message, or to promote greater tolerance and understanding for freethinkers among our predominantly conservative Christian neighbors.

On the one hand, of course,



<http://www.blackamericaweb.com/site.aspx/bawnews/orlandomarch224> for a report).

This very newsletter was tested itself by a cartoon submitted to accompany one of my articles last year. The cartoon, which depicted Arnold Schwarzenegger as the Terminator carrying Jesus Christ bare-bottomed over his shoulder, removed from the cross and exclaiming, “I must save humanity from your bull****,” was deemed too inflammatory and so was removed at some cost and further

I’m all for free speech, but on the other hand I realize absolute free speech can have negative consequences. I’m an avowed liberal atheist, but many of my co-workers and family are conservative Christians and I often temper how I respond to some of their pronouncements, for the sake of maintaining civility and avoiding useless arguments.

In the larger world, of course, the stakes are much greater. Allowing unfettered free speech, even that which purposely incites hatred and spreads harm-

ful lies which can and has resulted, however indirectly, in the murder of millions of people, restricting hard won freedoms to placate the threadbare sensibilities of religious extremists? Where should the lines be drawn in our modern free societies?

Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously noted that free speech does not allow for anyone to yell “fire” in a crowded theater when there is no actual fire. But then, those Danish cartoonists called attention to what they perceived as an actual fire, resulting in conflagrations around the world. They weren’t even responsible for calling widespread attention to their cartoons. That was the work of offended Muslim extremists.

From this freethinker’s perspective, the riots are all completely irrational and out of proportion to the supposed offense. Certainly, stereotyping all Muslims as terrorists is grossly offensive, but engaging in destructive behavior is even more offensive. And even if I do exercise some caution as necessary, by my choice, I enjoy the opportunity to exercise my First Amendment right, granted not by any god who requires protection of his honor by his rabid followers, but by progressive legislators and jurists who, however imperfectly, were steadily promoting a more rational, civil society, in which even the irrational can have their say.



Bills Before The 2006 State Legislature About Which Freethinkers Should Know

(Continued from page 1)

provides grants-in-aid for stem cell research.

HB 599 - This bill creates the Florida Faith-based and Community-based Advisory Board which is a codification of Governor Bush's faith-based programs.

HB 625 - This bill requires that parents be informed by the school system of the existence of abstinence-only sex education. They can excuse their children from this instruction if they wish.

HB 1045 - This bill allows inspirational messages to be spoken at secondary school events.

HB 1073 - This bill requires medically accurate sex education in public schools.

HB 1087 - This bill increases the penalties for prostitution if it occurs near a church.

HB 123 - This bill allows the adoption of children by homosexuals under certain circum-

stances.

HB 967 - This bill requires the study of the Declaration of Independence and free enterprise in public schools. The text of the bill contains, "God-given inalienable rights of life, liberty and property."

HB 1261 - This bill provides for licensing of the "Naturopathic Medicine" pseudoscience.

SB 242 - This bill specifies the requirements for accrediting agencies of religious child care programs that are exempt from state regulations.

SB 326 - This bill prohibits the commercial distribution of pornography.

SB 672 - This bill requires that victims of sexual assault be informed of and if requested provided emergency contraception. This is controversial in religious circles because the contraception might end a pregnancy that has already started.

SB 778 - This bill provides \$10 million for stem cell research with NIH restrictions.

SB 740 - This bill protects health care practitioners from discipline for prescribing alternative medical treatments.

SB 1088 - This bill allows local governments to commemorate the religious observance of Three Kings Day.

SB 1610 - This bill eliminates the ban on gay adoptions.

SB 1642 - This bill recognizes April 19, 2006, as Osteopathic Medicine Day. Osteopathic medicine often promotes questionable treatments of medical problems.

If you would like to find out more information about these and other bills, check out the websites

<http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/index.cfm?Mode=Bills&SubMenu=1&Tab=session&Start=2&End=100&Year=2006&Chamber=Senate> and

<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Bills/bills.aspx>. Also, please note that the First Coast Freethought Society neither endorses nor opposes any of these bills. This is for informational purposes only.



The Town That Jesus Built

What would you do if you had an extra \$250 million dollars sitting around and you were a hard core Catholic? If you were Domino's Pizza founder Thomas S. Monaghan, you would create your own Catholic paradise on earth.

(<http://www.comcast.net/news/national/index.jsp?cat=DOMESTIC&fn=/2006/03/01/336051.html>)

Surrounding the Catholic Ave Maria University which is 25 miles east of Naples in southwestern Florida, a town with 11,000 homes, a massive church and 65 foot tall crucifix is

planned. What you will not find in the town is pornography, abortion or birth control. Yes, you have to play by Catholic rules to live in this town.

It is not surprising that someone comes up with an absurd idea that would surely

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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, 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, 7405 Arlington Expressway, Jacksonville, Florida. 32211. (904) 725-8133. Doors open 6:15. Meeting time: 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

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March Social - All Welcome!

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

WHEN: Tues., March 28, 2006. Gather in Lounge at 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

RSVP: CarrieRen@att.net (or 268-8826) by Mon., March 27, if you are attending!

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 - 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: _____

FCFS Presence in the Community Grows!

Carrie Renwick

On March 8, 2006, FCFS spokesperson Earl Coggins and I were interviewed via conference call by Jeff Brumley, the religion editor of the *Times-Union*. He had contacted me in order to "profile" the FCFS in conjunction with the Evolution vs. Intelligent Design debate to be held at JU on 03/14/2006.

I think the interview went well. Your spokesperson and president were prepared. The interviewer wanted to talk with a non-officer as well, and long-time member Dennis Deshaies kindly agreed. Jeff was very nice. He explained that the article will be quite short as it is just part of the article on the debate.

The important thing is that

Jeff was not merely tolerant; he expressed interest in us! The FCFS is now on his radar screen. We are also on the radar screen of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at UNF and with many faculty friends at JU.

Who knows what good results will come of this increased exposure for which we have been so patiently striving??



The Town That Jesus Built

(Continued from page 7)

violate the separation of church and state if it were implemented. However, what is interesting is the response of state governmental leaders. When asked for their responses to the new town, Governor Jeb Bush and Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist hardly seemed outraged by the attempt to create a Catholic Taliban. One

has to wonder that if a secular humanist group decided to do the same thing, how would they respond?

Fortunately, the ACLU was a little more alarmed about the proposed town and predicted a whole lot of face time with a judge for anyone contemplating a Catholic enclave in Florida. This town certainly goes far beyond a cross on a city owned water tower as found in Starke.

It does appear that Monaghan is now backing off his unconstitutional building plans. (<http://www.comcast.net/news/national/index.jsp?cat=DOMESTIC&fn=/2006/03/03/337584.html>). Despite all of the religious challenges to the First Amendment, it is nice to know that the candle of reason still burns brightly today and keeps the darkness of irrationality at bay.



First Coast Freethought Society 2006 Events

March	20 - Monthly meeting	19 - Book discussion group	28- Social at Steak and Ale
April	17 - Monthly meeting	16 - Book discussion group	25- Social at Steak and Ale
May	15 - Monthly meeting	14 - Book discussion group	23- Social at Steak and Ale

Return service requested

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