

First Coast

FreeThinker



The newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

July 2006

Volume 4, Issue 7

Let's stop living in the past!

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Jay Mooney

Last month Dr. Ellen Wagner, professor of Philosophy at the University of North Florida, spoke on the topic: "What Alternative Ethical Systems are Available to Freethinkers? If we do not base

our ethics on 'sacred' texts, upon what do we base them?"

As many others would undoubtedly agree, it was a very interesting discussion.

However, as Dr. Wagner talked about various ethical systems

by philosophical luminaries such as Aristotle and Kant, I couldn't help but wonder why it is so necessary for modern humans to rely so much on the thoughts of ancient humans to address today's issues. After all, Aristotle lived from 384-322 BCE. That's 2328 years ago!



thing useful or instructive to say to those of us now living in the 21st century--they do! So, too, does the Bible. As a free thinker, I can admit that. However, the Bible also has a lot of insanity within its pages, not the least of which is a schizophrenic god who commits genocide in one section and addresses love and compassion in another.

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"The business plan is a necessity. If the person who wants to start a small business can't put a business plan together, he or she is in trouble."

--Robert Krummer, Jr., chairman of the First Business Bank in Los Angeles.

But let's open our minds and believe that we can find answers to the daunting new challenges we face in today's world.

Kant lived more recently, from 1724-1804, but, even there, that was 202 years ago. That's not to say that these geniuses of the past don't have any-

July 2006 Meeting

Curtis Wolf, Chair, Long-Range Planning
and Vice President, First Coast Freethought Society

"Polishing our crystal ball: Planning the future of FCFS"

Monday, July 17, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

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

Unitarian Universalist Church • 7405 Arlington Expressway • Jacksonville, FL

HUMANIST BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP

When: 2:00 p.m., the third Sunday of each month.

Where: Borders Books, 8801 Southside Blvd., 519-6500, books are usually in stock.

What: Books/magazines planned for discussion:

- July 16, 2006 - *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* by John Perkins
- August 20, 2006 - *Values and Virtue in a Godless Universe* by Erik J. Wielenberg



Wielenberg offers readers a cogent explanation of the ethical implications of a view that denies the existence of the supernatural. Human life can still have meaning, humans do have moral obligations, and human virtue is still possible. Morality is objective and independent—it is “part of the furniture of the universe” and does not require God to make it right. See the book discussed online at www.booktalk.org/books.php.

Interestingly, *Values and Virtue in a Godless Universe* dovetails beautifully with the June 2006 meeting presentation given by Dr. Ellen Wagner and the lead story in this issue.

For more information, contact moderator Jewell Kross at JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org or call 904-996-1553.



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.

Humanism and Public Education: Joined at the Hip?

Curtis Wolf

In last month's *Freethinker*, Fred Hill wrote an impassioned attack upon fundamentalist Christians' attempts to destroy public schools. Apparently, they want to end publicly-funded education so that they can take over the education of children in America. The article clearly implies that public education, along with the separation of church and state, is the only way for humanists to keep the fundamentalists from indoctrinating the nation's children with religion.

While Fred and I share a distrust of fundamentalist Christians, we do not share a love for public education. As a libertarian, I would like to see the end of the public education monopoly funded by our tax dollars whether we want to pay for it or not. I also believe that broadening the opportunity for parents to choose their children's schools, even if they are religious schools, would improve K-12 education considerably.

However, this article is not about public vs. private education. While it is an interesting topic, it is clearly outside the scope of this newsletter. What I do want to make a case for is this: Humanism does not require, nor is it necessarily consistent with, public education.

I do agree with the fact that the enforcement of separation of church and state (to varying degrees at least) in public schools

is very attractive to humanists. In my campaign to question how the Bible would be taught in Duval County public schools when they adopted the state-approved "Introduction to Bible" courses, it was nice to have the Constitution on my side when I sparred with school administrators who really wanted me to just go away. I doubt I would have had the same level of success with this issue had I been dealing with a religious school.

However, public schools and their cookie-cutter approach to education limits the ability of parents to raise their children as they see fit. I may cringe when

In the end, schools are accountable only to parents of the children that they educate, not to the government.

Intelligent Design is brought up as an "alternative" to evolution, but I have no desire to drag fundamentalist Christian parents kicking and screaming into the twentieth century when it comes to raising their children.

But that is exactly what is being done since *Kitzmiller vs. Dover* became the law of the land (at least for now) concerning the teaching of Intelligent Design in the public schools. Bible-believing parents have no choice but to allow their children to be taught something that they believe to be atheistic materialism or else to pull them out of

public school for the greener pastures of private Bible-based schools where creationism is taught in "science" class.



One may ask, "These parents are not forced to send their children to schools that offer religion-free education which introduces their children to ideas that they find repugnant--they can send their children to private religious schools, right?"

The problem is that parents must pay taxes for public schools whether they want to or not. While this does not deter the rich from affording private school, many modest-income parents could afford private schools only if they were not charged for public schools to which they do not want to send their children in the first place. There are also other parents who sacrifice a lot to send their children to private schools but still are forced to pay for public education.

While I do agree that the right to something does not require that the government pay for it, we may have little choice but to do this in education. Education probably can be provided more efficiently than we see in public education today, but it will still remain a labor intensive venture. Even with individualized learning in front of

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Let's stop living in the past!

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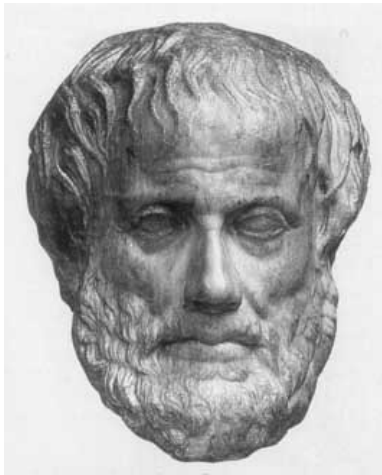
Of course, Christians, Muslims, and other peoples with sacred books believe their literature was inspired by god. Aristotle and Kant never claimed that.

Whether or not there is a god speaking through human beings, we've always had people who were willing and able to write down their thoughts on how humans can lead ethical and moral lives. As life continues to reveal itself on our planet, we gain new insights. Dr. Wagner cautioned us about drawing from a mish-mash of ethical and/or moral theories. She reasons that by having our own, individual, eclectic ethical/moral programs, we could end up with bits and pieces that conflict with each other, which is why she was trying to point us to some existing structures that we could cite when communicating with others in society who believe a supernatural higher power is needed in order for people to live ethical/moral lives.

While I feel Dr. Wagner's remarks pointing to existing non-religious structures were useful, I have some of the same ambivalence I feel when folks talk about how the Bible is a good guide for ethics and/or oral morality. If we assume the Bible was written by ancient people (mostly men) with no special god-breathed revelation, then all we have are words strung together by long-dead humans. Are those words worthy of consideration? Certainly. Are they worth of being enshrined as the **ONLY** path to morality and

ethics? No and neither are the words of Aristotle or Kant, in my view.

As a library professional, I often walk amidst the stacks of books and see many items that address how people can lead happy, productive, ethical and, yes, moral lives, all written by humans, all with strong points and not-so-strong points. Some books are written by supernaturalists who believe they are or were inspired by god, some are written by freethinkers, humanists, atheists, etc. There is no shortage of modern material for people to draw on when developing their own personal code of ethics and/or morality.



About six months ago I finally got around to reading Franklin Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," and I couldn't help but think of that book as I took in Dr. Wagner's presentation. Covey wrote the book in 1990, and it quickly developed an almost cult following.

While I don't have the space here to address all of Covey's "effective habits," I think the key one is number four, "Think win-win." It seems as if so often in

life, we humans want to try to "get over" on each other. By that I mean there is an overall feeling in the world that if someone gets something that means there is less for someone else. However, if I fully embrace Covey's "win-win" habit, I am trying to do what's good for me but not at the expense of somebody else. I am also trying to find a way to help the other person win, too.

Indeed, as Dr. Wagner suggested, there are drastic situations where finding the ethical and/or moral way is difficult to discern. Her discussion of the runaway train that could either go one way and kill five unknown people or the other way and kill a world-renowned doctor who is on the verge of a cure for cancer or something of that ilk, was instructive along these lines. But those are "bang-bang" situations, and all we can do is prepare ourselves as best we can in advance and simply do our best in the moment.

Sure, I believe we modern humans should take into account old sources of wisdom. But we also need to take into account new developments in society. By making sacred or inviolate the writings of people who lived long ago, we develop a self-fulfilling prophecy that instructs us that those of us living today aren't capable of doing what they did back then. Such is the case with our U. S. Constitution. Clearly, it has stood the test of time, but, to me, what makes it great isn't that it is sacrosanct, but that it is elastic enough to allow us to interpret it through the lens of the modern world. We present-

day humans are being told we aren't capable of rising above the ethical abyss and finding win-win solutions. What if the framers of our Constitution had been told that? Maybe they were, but they didn't believe it. Had they believed it, we'd still be subjects of the Queen of England and liv-

ing in the third term of the Blair Administration! And probably still hopelessly mired in Iraq!

Not that our nation's founders were perfect. Their political chicanery on slavery is evidence of imperfection. But they weren't afraid to try new things, to seek out new ways to improve the

lives of human beings.

In conclusion, I say let's continue to draw on old traditions when appropriate. But let's open our minds and believe that we can find answers to the daunting new challenges we face in today's world. Let's really think freely.



Here we go again!

As reported in the June 25th *Florida Times-Union*, Councilwoman Pat Lockett-Felder wants the city to give away a free 1998 Ford bus to the New Bethel Baptist Church of Sweetwater. Maybe a case can

be made for this giveaway, but when Chief Deputy General Counsel Cindy Laquidara criticizes the free gift as illegal direct aid to religion, one has to wonder.

You will recall that Lockett-

Felder was the sponsor of the attempted city financing of a gym on church property which was later turned down by the church after considerable public pressure was brought to bear on the City Council. Can it be she has learned her lesson?



Ongoing FCFS Activities

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

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

Atheist Sunday Morning (or Sunday Morning in the Park)

For those of us seeking more freethought fellowship, conversation and camaraderie, here is an opportunity to get together on Sunday mornings. Contact **John Ruskuski** at ruskuski@ilnk.com or call 904-260-0071.

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

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

Caring Tree

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

Ethics and the Will of God

Fred W. Hill

Raymond, a Haitian man I worked with many years ago, once told me that among the people he most admired in history was Abraham, for having such devotion to and faith in God that he was prepared to sacrifice his “only son” in obedience to God’s command. Raymond considered it irrelevant that the command was of itself immoral by modern standards; what mattered was Abraham’s example of submission to the will of God, even at great personal cost. Essentially, Raymond’s position, shared by millions of people around the world, was that ethics is based entirely on obeying God and accepting the “truth” of the Bible, no matter how absurd and contradictory parts of it are.

Naturally, Raymond and I did not see eye to eye since what he took for historical fact I regard as myth, or at best legend, very loosely based on shards of historical memory. More particularly, I saw nothing heroic about Abraham’s behavior. Certainly, sacrifice for a worthy cause is admirable; but in my view, Abraham merely gave in to the whims of an overbearing bully. Given his situation and the omnipotence of the bully, Abraham rates sympathy, but his willingness to kill his own child at the insistence of his god hardly deserves admiration.

As discussed at length by

Stanford University Professor Carol Delaney, Ph.D., in her book, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (published by Princeton University Press in 1998), the philosopher, Kierkegaard, argued that Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac represents the greater importance of faith over ethics. Which brings up a key point in religious thought: blind faith in God trumps ethics and reason. Islam, after all, literally means “submission to God” and, in most Christian denominations, being “saved” depends entirely on absolute faith in God and acceptance of God’s own “sacrificed son” as your personal savior.

Blind faith in authority, divine or human, has long trumped reason and ethics.

Even when I still vaguely believed in God, however, such arguments struck me as self-serving malarkey.

The story of Abraham is a fairy tale with fairy tale logic. The point of the tale is that God needs to test Abraham’s faith and Abraham needs to prove his faith. Being omniscient, however, shouldn’t God already know the extent of Abraham’s faith without the necessity of demanding that Abraham kill his own child? And why does an omnipotent God who supposedly created everything out of nothing need any sacrifice at all, whether a human child or, as

ultimately accepted in substitution, a ram? The faithful deem such questions unseemly; and answers, when provided, usually sidestep the issues and refer to the “mysteries of faith.”



Moreover, the story exposes the fallacy of the common concept that ethics and laws must be based on the will of God or any other absolute authority. Whichever way modern theists may attempt to spin it, God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac was evil—a morally reprehensible act. Yes, cultural mores were very different for Abraham’s time and place, and human sacrifice was widespread, although Delaney argues that archaeological research provides no evidence that human sacrifice was practiced within the culture Abraham came out of and is “thus of little relevance to the Abraham story.” (See <http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/submitted/delaney/delaneypaper.html>). Yet, even if a particular practice is routine and even claimed to be sanctioned by God or other divine authorities in a particular culture, despite inflicting unjust pain, suffering, and death on others, that does not absolve the practice of being evil.

Admittedly, ethics and determinations of good and evil are subjective and based on a mix-

Ethics and the Will of God

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ture of personal attitudes, cultural mores, and authoritative dictates. Ancient Romans left unwanted babies out to die without compunction; and in modern America, debate rages over abortion which many Christians regard as evil--more so, it seems, out of regard for the "will of God" than out of genuine concern for the potential child.

Indeed, many people believe disobeying the supposed will of God is more evil than murder. Laws in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and many other Muslim nations are based on that very tenet, at least to the extent that the murderer successfully asserts that his victim deserved to be killed due to having committed some "crime against God," God apparently being incapable of looking out for himself.

The mass murder of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and other "undesirables" was routine and perfectly "legal" under Nazi law, which essentially consisted of whatever Adolph Hitler asserted it did. Hitler took advantage of the German military code of honor that regarded disobedience to authority and the breaking of an oath as morally repugnant by having all members of the military swear allegiance to him. Further, Hitler convinced the German masses that he was doing the will of God.

Communist tyrants made no such claims, of course, but tended to claim to represent the absolute will of the "people,"

even if the people were murdered in the millions and otherwise forced to lead impoverished lives with few, if any, meaningful rights. Claims to divine or temporal authority as justification for inflicting pain and suffering on people have typically carried little weight once an atrocious regime has been overthrown; and generally, ethics based on authoritative dictate which do not find mass support within the culture at large, last only as long as the authority can maintain power.



As a mere human concept, God cannot be overthrown or held to account for anything. However, after centuries of devastating warfare over differing interpretations of "God's will," Western European nations and their cultural offspring have predominantly thrown off the yoke of God. Divine rights did not protect absolutist monarchs from revolution and execution, and most modern kings are only figureheads with no real power. Theologians no longer dictate laws except in the most repressive nations. The United States Constitution is based not on interpretations of the will of God but on deliberations as to the

best interests of the citizens of this nation. This very week as I write this, the news has focused on the outcome of the case of Hamdan vs. Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, et al., on June 29, 2006, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that "the Executive is bound to comply with the rule of law," hampering the will of a President who claims to receive communications directly from God.

Blind faith in authority, divine or human, has long trumped reason and ethics. Out of fear or habit, people have too often obeyed without questioning, believing such was their duty and their only salvation from ruin. The will of God has ever been solely the will of humans capable of beguiling others, and people have been conned into committing all manner of atrocities again and again in the name of God. Ever so slowly, however, the rule of law, built on reason and ethics based on compassion and genuine justice, has taken precedence.

Perhaps my old friend Raymond found comfort in the idea of a demanding, all-powerful father figure whose every word must be obeyed because that seems so much easier, and far less hazardous, than having to think for oneself and occasionally muster the courage to oppose capricious, overbearing authority. On the other hand, I would prefer oblivion to an eternity of such obsequious submission to any being, no matter how great its power.



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<http://firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org>

Statement of Purpose

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

Meetings

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

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JULY SOCIAL - ALL WELCOME!

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

WHEN: Tues., July 25, 2006. Gather in Lounge at 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

RSVP: CarrieRen@att.net (or 268-8826) by July 24, if you plan to attend!

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: _____

Humanism and Public Education: Joined at the Hip?

(Continued from page 3)

computers in every classroom, we still have to pay a lot of highly-skilled people to teach a lot of children, especially if we want small class sizes. No matter how efficient schools may become, and even if we no longer are forced to pay for public schools, there will be a considerable number of parents who could not afford quality educa-

tion for their children without monetary assistance. Should the parents' modest income relegate their children to public schools that teach ideas and values that the parents loathe because school vouchers violate an overly strict interpretation of the separation of church and state? Could it be that fundamentalist Christians' constant attempts to introduce religious ideas into public school curricula originate from this quandary?

It was not that long ago

when people were afraid to freely speak their minds concerning religion in case the Inquisition showed up in their villages and they are "ratted out" as heretics by their enemies. Freethought cannot flourish without the freedom to hold a point of view that may be heretical to others. It is the right of fundamentalist Christian parents to insist that the education of their children not contradict their religious beliefs, even if we would like to see the world out-

grow those beliefs.

Will humanist ideas and science fade away as education is taken over by fundamentalist Christians? I have no doubt that once the public school monopoly is ended that humanist schools like the Carl Sagan Academy will pop up everywhere there are humanists or even liberal Christians who do not want to send their children to fundamentalist religious schools. The free market has a way of matching producers of goods and services with consumers who want things their way. Not only will

humanist schools pop up, but they will graduate students who have the knowledge that comes only from the proper application of the scientific method and who will succeed in an economy that thrives on science and technology. When parents see which schools graduate the most productive children, educational market share will shift to the better schools.

Some may question my commitment to the separation of church and state. Let me clarify my position on the First Amendment. I support the idea that

public money should not directly support religious institutions, regardless of whether some politician thinks that religion is good for America. However, I do not agree that public money should not go to religious schools, even if it allows the parent to choose the school that respects his or her values. I believe this despite the fact that it could lead to indirect support for religion. In the end, schools are accountable to the parents of the children whom they educate, not to the government.



First Coast Freethought Society 2006 Events

July	17 - Monthly meeting	16 - Book discussion group	25- Social at Steak and Ale
August	21 - Monthly meeting	20 - Book discussion group	22- Social at Steak and Ale
September	18 - Monthly meeting	17 - Book discussion group	26- Social at Steak and Ale

Return service requested

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