



I don't know!

The limits of human knowledge and why limits are not necessarily a bad thing.

Musings on Politics and Religion and Civil Discourse	5
Short Takes	6
Jimmy Carter and Fundamentalism	10

Curtis Wolf

Does God exist? Do ghosts go bump in the night? Are there mysterious supernatural forces into which we can tap that will get us all the things we want? Is

there an afterlife?

Mankind continues to ask these questions.

They are certainly important questions, because if the supernatural exists, it could have

a significant impact on the natural world. The question is, can we answer these questions?

First, let's agree that some supernatural entities are easier to reject than others. Personally, the monotheistic all-powerful god found in

This is the problem with monotheistic all powerful gods.

Everything is under God's control, so why is there so much evil in the world? At least polytheistic religions could explain evil by attributing it to one or more other deities. Christianity tries to do something like that with Satan; but ultimately, the "buck stops here" at the all powerful god's doorway.

(Continued on page 3)



What we need is a protocol for determining whether the cause of a natural phenomenon is outside the natural world.

"My faith is strong. I don't need proofs, but every time a new fact comes along it simply confirms my faith."

—Palmer Joss in Carl Sagan's book, *Contact*

November 2006 Meeting

Rev. John L. Young, Minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville

“Freethought may be imprisoned because of its need to be ‘free from all religion and spirituality’”

Monday, November 20, 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:

- November 19, 2006 - *Humanism as the Next Step*, by Lloyd and Mary Morain.
- December 17, 2006 - *Letter to a Christian Nation*, by Sam Harris.



Many of us feel depressed by this country's ever-increasing unification of church and state, and the ever-decreasing support for the sciences that deliver knowledge and reduce ignorance. Sam Harris's new best seller *Letter to a Christian Nation* is a challenge to the superstitions and bigotry that have endangered our nation and placed our future in jeopardy. Harris describes a moral and intellectual emergency precipitated by religious fantasies—misguided beliefs that create suffering and rationalize violence. His argument for the morality, the honesty, and the humility of atheism is galvanizing.

Harris's principal point is well encapsulated in his quote, "We desperately need a public discourse that encourages critical thinking and intellectual honesty. Nothing stands in the way of this project more than the respect we accord religious faith." (List price \$17.)

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



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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.

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.

I don't know!

(Continued from page 1)

However, the question on the existence of the supernatural is a more difficult problem to solve. What is the methodology for answering this question? Is there a methodology currently available for answering this question? I personally doubt it. Here is why.

There are four main conclusions that we can make about the supernatural. They are:

1. The supernatural world does not exist. The natural world operates according to its physical laws.
2. The supernatural world exists, but it is completely separate from and does not interact with the natural world. The natural world operates according to its physical laws.
3. The supernatural world exists, and it interacts with the natural world. The natural world operates according to its physical laws, but the supernatural world intervenes from time to time.
4. The supernatural world exists, and it controls every aspect of the natural world. Nothing happens unless something in the supernatural world makes it happen.

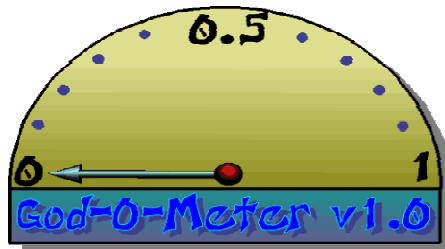
The fourth conclusion can be rejected outright. Science has discovered many of the physical laws that govern the natural world. It has yet to discover any natural phenomenon that is under the complete control of a su-

pernatural force.

The first and second conclusions are functionally the same from our point of view. Why? If the first conclusion is true, we will find no evidence of the existence of the supernatural, because the supernatural does not exist!

The second conclusion will also lead to no evidence of the supernatural because of the impossibility of detecting a supernatural entity without its interacting with the natural world.

Let's suppose that someone develops a God-O-Meter. In order for it to detect God, it has to be made at least in part of super-



natural "stuff." This is necessary since the supernatural world presumably operates by a different set of rules than the natural world does; otherwise, it would be part of the natural world and would operate according to the rules and limitations of the natural world (e.g., conservation of energy). The God-O-Meter would require something from the supernatural world in order to detect God. Now, how could the hybrid God-O-Meter made up of natural "stuff" and supernatural "stuff" work if nothing from the supernatural world interacts with the natural world?

Even if the God-O-Meter was completely made of supernatural "stuff," in order for us to read the God-O-Meter and determine that God exists, light in the proper frequency has to be emitted by the God-O-Meter so that it can be picked up and deciphered by our eyes and brain as a three dimensional image. This in itself requires an interaction of the supernatural world and the natural world.

The viability of the third conclusion depends on how frequently the supernatural intervenes in the natural world and whether this interaction violates the physical laws that govern our natural world. It also depends on whether these interventions are arbitrary acts that do not conform to any consistent pattern.

If the supernatural world interacted frequently with the natural world in a consistent manner, we would have detected it by now. We would detect a natural phenomenon that has no natural explanation. Could we then make a conclusion that this natural phenomenon was caused by a supernatural entity?

Not necessarily. The lack of a natural explanation does not guarantee that a supernatural entity did it. It could be that the natural explanation has not been discovered yet. Any supernatural explanation would have to stand on its own merits in establishing its validity. What we need is a protocol for determining whether the cause of a natural phenomenon is outside the natural world. At this time, I

am not aware of any such protocol. The lack of this protocol is why scientists abstain from talking about the supernatural.

Could the violation of a physical law or well-tested theory be enough evidence for a supernatural cause of natural phenomena? In other words, what if a “miracle” occurred? Again, not necessarily.

First, we would have to be able to establish the facts in the case. Everyone has heard a mysterious story while seated around the campfire that someone claims to have heard from a friend. Needless to say, anecdotes like this are hard to verify and cannot be considered evidence for the supernatural.

Any story that make supernatural claims must be verified. If a miraculous cure of cancer is claimed, can we verify the diagnosis of cancer from the medical records? Was the patient receiving treatment for the cancer that may have played a part in the cancer remission? Has there been sufficient time to ensure that the cure is long lasting? Can we rule out the spontaneous remission of the cancer?

Even if the facts of the case are found to be true, could it be that we do not understand the natural phenomena as well as we thought that we did? In the cancer cure case, could it be that some unidentified natural process within the patient’s body was able to defeat the cancer? When we investigate the cure, we may learn something we never before knew about the human body

that may challenge established beliefs in medical science and have nothing to do with the supernatural. Nature does surprise us from time to time.

The point of this essay is to show some of the difficulties in coming to a firm conclusion on the existence of the supernatural. Occam’s razor by itself favors natural explanations. Why speculate about supernatural entities when it is simpler to find the cause within nature which we definitely know to exist? We should demand extraordinary evidence when presented with extraordinary claims. But if we set the bar too high, we may miss out in an extraordinary discovery — the existence of a supernatural world.

Without a protocol to assist us in determining if a natural phenomenon has a supernatural cause, there is really no way for science to make a firm judgment on the existence of the supernatural. In my opinion, religion and philosophy are no more equipped to provide us an answer on the existence of the supernatural than science is.

This is the reason that I remain an agnostic. While I have doubts about the existence of God and other supernatural entities, I recognize that the existence of the supernatural is an open question that presently cannot be answered. While atheists may question my courage to come out and clearly reject the supernatural, I believe that my position as an agnostic is the only intellectually defensible position I can take.

Is this inability to come to a conclusion on the supernatural necessarily a bad thing? I do not think so. I believe it is not a bad thing to say “I don’t know.” It may not be satisfying for many who want answers now. But, I believe that there is no reason for us to be so impatient.

We should continue to ponder our universe. Its very existence is a deep mystery with no easy answer. We should not be in a hurry to find an answer to this mystery if it leads us to create fanciful mythologies to fill in our gaps in knowledge. It may seem that our progress in understanding our universe, and why it is here in the first place, may seem slow and plodding, but like a house, it must be built brick by brick with a great deal of care so that it will still be standing a hundred years from now.



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★ It’s not too early to begin ★
 ★ thinking about our ★
 ★ favorite **Pagan Holiday** ★
 ★ Yes - Christmas! ★
 ★ Visit Terry Loucks’ ★
 ★ website, The ★
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 ★ out advertising religion. ★

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Musings on Politics and Religion and Civil Discourse

Fred W. Hill

Through experience, I have learned the truth of the axiom that one should avoid talking about religion and politics in polite discussion, at least unless you're willing to risk arousing heated debate even with close family and friends. With some of my relatives, it seems the only "safe" things to talk about are the weather and the antics of our pets. Revealing my disbelief in God, in particular, has at times elicited verbal outrage, as if my mere disbelief in their deity was an attack on their very being.

At least subjection to that sort of reaction is a tremendous improvement over being burned at the stake, as might have been my fate only a few hundred years ago. Even today, expressing disbelief in god remains a capital offense in several Muslim nations, including Pakistan, an ally in President Bush's "War on Terror."

In the modern U.S., however (even in the Bible Belt), I may be scorned and yelled at and be unlikely to win election even to the lowest political office, but thanks to the founding fathers who wrote and passed the First Amendment, I'm not likely to be arrested simply for asserting that the god worshipped so fervidly by millions of my fellow Americans has less substance than the breath of a dead flea.

As described by Michelle

Goldberg in her book *Kingdom Coming*, there are militant Christian Nationalists aiming to make a theocracy of the United States, who would conceivably make it a criminal offense to deny the existence of god if they were able to take over and alter our government more to their liking.

The same First Amendment that protects me also protects the likes of Ann Coulter and Jerry Falwell to express their opinions, just as it would protect Adolf Hitler and Julius Streicher

The First Amendment was a product of the Enlightenment, a period when reason began to clear away the haze of ignorance based on religious dogma.

if they were around to repeat the hate-rousing screeds that helped make possible the Holocaust. We can laugh at the ravings of Ann and Jerry, because however much attention they get, however many millions they rake in, we can still assume with reasonable certainty that rationality and tolerance will prevail and that these individuals will not take over the country. Of course, we should remember that in the 1920s, many also laughed at Adolf and Julius and couldn't conceive that either of them would ever pose any real danger to anyone.

Fortunately, the traditions of tolerance and civil discourse are much stronger in modern America than they were in early 20th century Germany. Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, the Nazi "bible," has been banned in Germany since the end of World War II as part of an effort to prevent the racist political ideology from re-emerging in its homeland, but the book can be found in many large bookstores and libraries throughout the U.S.

Historically, U.S. authorities have been far more troubled by human nudity in art and publications than by graphic violence and the promotion of unreasoning bigotry, as demonstrated by the banning of books such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* for several decades in the mid-1900s due to alleged indecency, while permitting postcards with photographs of actual lynchings attended by throngs of cheering onlookers to go through the mail; or, to cite a more recent example, former Attorney General John Ashcroft's cover-up of a semi-nude statue depicting Justice in 2002 and later, of memos regarding the use of torture by U.S. forces.

And we certainly shouldn't forget that bare Jacksonian nipple displayed during the Super Bowl game in our very own Alltel Stadium that aroused such a



ruckus around the country; men beating up on each other while chasing a ball is fine family entertainment, but a bare female nipple on live television is truly scandalous in the home of the brave.

Yet we persevere and even make some progress here and there, such that despite the wailings of puritanical bluenoses, I can legally peruse the “naughty” passages of *Ulysses* or pictures of nude women, or Hitler’s maniacal diatribes for myself if I so desire. And, yes, I can openly de-

clare that belief in God is irrational, and even potentially pernicious, without fear that the secret police will spirit me away to a concentration camp.

The First Amendment was a product of the Enlightenment, a period when reason began to clear away the haze of ignorance based on religious dogma. However, even the best-intentioned laws cannot eradicate bigotry and ignorance. Moreover, even those laws embedded in the Constitution are vulnerable to the winds of political change in how

they are interpreted and enforced.

Despite the prominence of the likes of Ashcroft and Falwell and Coulter in recent years, I’m not filled with dread that the forces of irrationality will overrun the nation (or already have). Yet neither should they be ignored nor underestimated. The work of clearing away the ancient haze they propagate must ever continue, using the tools of reason.



Short Takes

Did you know...

that an original draft of the Declaration of Independence does not contain the words “endowed by their Creator?” It was Thomas Jefferson’s job to create this draft and his version did not include the religious reference. Only when other members of the committee selected to write the Declaration of Independence began to edit this draft did the reference to God-given rights make it into this document. Of course, the U.S. Constitution, which is the document that really counts in defining our nation, contains no reference to God. <http://www.princeton.edu/~tjpapers/declaration/declaration.html>.

Did you also know...

that two documents believed to be early drafts of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address do not include the words “under God.” These two drafts, which are currently located at the Library of Congress, were originally given to Lincoln’s two private secretaries, John Nicolay and John Hay. The religious reference is found in a copy of the address given to Colonel Alexander Bliss for charitable purposes. This copy is found in the Lincoln room of the White House. However, the copy that was read on November 19, 1863 in Gettysburg is probably lost to posterity forever. For more information, see <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gadd/gadrft.html>.

Doubt is becoming more fashionable...

According to a Harris poll, 42% of American adults are not absolutely certain that God exists. This is compared to 34% of American adults who said the same thing when asked the same question just three years ago. <http://www.breitbart.com/news/2006/10/31/061031235233.s0l4o4wy.html>.

No set of beliefs or code of ethics for all....

In a pluralistic society, no group, no matter how numerous or powerful, has a right to prescribe a set of beliefs or a code of ethics for all. Our individual and institutional efforts dare not betray the spirit of the religion we confess or subvert the Bill of Rights. –Bishop James Armstrong, United Methodist Church, 1975. <http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/quote-a2.htm>



What do you get if you cross an insomniac, an agnostic and a dyslexic?
Someone who stays awake all night wondering about the meaning of dog.

c i v i l discourse

with ken hurley

Finally, controversial issues discussed in a civil manner

Public Access Cable Television

Ken Hurley, now in his sixth term as President of the American Civil Liberties Union of Greater Jacksonville, also hosts a TV program that airs each Thursday on Comcast Cable Channel 29 at 6:30 p.m., in Jacksonville, FL. He interviews fascinating guests and handles a great many pertinent and controversial issues.

Don't miss **c i v i l discourse** !

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 June Applen at JApplen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org or call 904-762-0627.

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.

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

November Social - All Welcome!

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

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

RSVP: CarrieRen@att.net (or 268-8826) by November 27, 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: _____

***You can make a lasting impact on the future of
freethought and secular humanism in this community
...if you provide for the First Coast Freethought Society in your Will.***

Your bequest will ensure that the FCFS continues to be a beacon for freethinkers on the First Coast and to remain a vital Voice of Reason in the Northeast Florida area. Several options are available for establishing a bequest (specific, percentage, residual, or contingent). We will be happy to provide the appropriate wording to you and your attorney, depending upon your wishes.

For further information, contact
Carrie Renwick, P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 or
904-288-6291 • CarrieRen@att.net • <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>
All inquiries are held in the strictest confidence.

Former president Jimmy Carter spoke these words at the assembly of the Baptist World Alliance in Birmingham, U.K.

“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 subju-

gate women and to dominate their fellow believers.

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

“Third, fundamentalists are militant in fighting against any challenge to their beliefs, are of-

ten 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.”



First Coast Freethought Society 2006 - 2007 Events

November	20 - Monthly meeting	19 - Book discussion group	28- Social at Steak and Ale
December	18 - Monthly meeting	17 - Book discussion group	26- Social at Steak and Ale
January	15 - Monthly meeting	21 - Book discussion group	23- Social at Steak and Ale

Visit our website at <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>.

Return service requested

Jacksonville, Florida 32222

8831 Taurus Circle South

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.