



May 2007

Volume 5, Issue 5

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Wilhelmina Walton

Members of the FCFS staffed an information table at the Earth Day Fair held Saturday, April 21, at the Landing. It was a clear, crisp day with a delightful breeze, and our table arrangement was right next to the ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State. The liberal segment of the community was well represented.

Many thanks to the worker bees who assisted at our booth. They were Tom Bowen, Alice Ricker, Beth Perry,

Anita Myrick, and John Ruskuski. We could not have done it without you.

Everyone who actually stopped at our table was very respectful and seemed genuinely interested in getting information about freethinking.

Many people commented that they were glad to know there was an organization like ours in Jacksonville.

It was interesting to watch the expressions on the faces of people who walked by but did not stop. Some just turned their heads.

We passed out about 85 of our brochures and talked to at least that many people. Many peo-

ple commented that they were glad to know there



was an organization like ours in Jacksonville. We had several science teachers who stopped by and related their pleasure at knowing we are active in Jacksonville.

I think we fulfilled one of our main missions: to spread the word that the First Coast Freethought Society is a viable, active presence in the Jacksonville community.

"Humanism is the study of what it means to be a good human being."

"Humanists emphasize reason and scientific inquiry, individual freedom and responsibility, human values and compassion, and the need for tolerance and cooperation."

--from the Humanists of Florida Association website.

May 2007 Meeting

Heather Wellman, Executive Director, Humanists of Florida Association

"The Culture Wars: How Humanism Fits In"

Monday, May 21, 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:

- May 20, 2007 - *Affirmations: Joyful and Creative Exuberance*, by Paul Kurtz
- June 17, 2006 - *Breaking The Spell*, by Daniel Dennett



Daniel Dennett is author of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* and director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. In *Breaking the Spell*, he calls for a scientific, rational examination of religion that will lead us to understand what purpose religion serves in our culture. Much like E.O. Wilson (*In Search of Nature*), Robert Wright (*The Moral Animal*), and Richard Dawkins (*The Selfish Gene*), Dennett explores religion as a cultural phenomenon governed by the processes of evolution and natural selection. Religion survives because it has some kind of beneficial role in human life, yet Dennett argues that it has also played a maleficent role. He pleads for religions to engage in empirical self-examination to protect future generations from the ignorance so often fostered by religion hiding behind doctrinal smoke screens.

“Deftly and lucidly, he contends that the ‘belief in belief’ has fogged any attempt to rationally consider the existence of God and the relationship between divinity and human need.” (Publishers Weekly) (\$16)

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



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.

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We welcome submissions. The deadline is the **FOURTH SATURDAY** of each month for the following month's issue. Submit contributions by e-mail to Hugo (see above), or U.S. mail to Hugo Borresen, 8831 Taurus Circle South, Jacksonville, FL 32222. Submit web site contributions to Carrie Renwick at the e-mail address above.

Dirty Footprints

Hugo Borresen

"Though no one can prove or disprove God's existence, our history reveals the unmistakable footprints of something greater than man."

So says Don Feder, former conservative newspaper columnist at *The Jewish World Review*, where he enjoyed attacking Bill Clinton. His comments in the April 16 *USA Today* are remarkably jumbled, consisting of strange claims and omissions. They bear no threat to skeptics.

Representative Pete Stark (Dem. of CA) is the first member of Congress to announce he does not believe in God. "Probably just looking for a book deal," said Feder who did not state that half of voters in this Christian nation will vote against atheist candidates regardless of their qualifications.

Feder is probably right that "the great enemy of belief isn't disbelief but indifference." Christians are indifferent about many things in our society.

He goes on to state that in the last two hundred years, the death of God has been proclaimed and religion has been declared obsolete by revolution, industrialism, or science. "Yet, early in the 21st century, faith endures," he observes, citing Russia and China as examples.

He continues that the United States has the highest weekly church attendance in the industrialized world despite attacks by Hollywood, academia, and the

judiciary. But he omits stating that European nations have reduced church attendance to approximately five to twenty percent attending church--Ireland the one exception--without any external cause. Their populations just lost interest.

Other Feder quotes include:

"Without God, morality becomes, if not impossible, exceedingly difficult. 'Thou shalt not kill' loses much of its force when reduced from commandment to a suggestion."

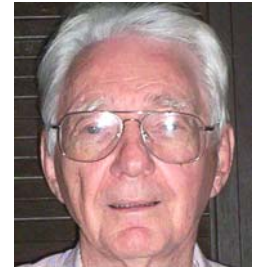


The current super-Godly Republican administration is evidence for failed religious morality.

"A universe that isn't God-centered becomes ego-centered... Such a world view does not naturally lead to benevolence or self-sacrifice ... In terms of morality, a denial of God leads nowhere."

On the contrary, a denial of God often leads to changes that are needed. Examples include overcoming believers' support for slavery, racial segregation, some 4700 lynchings, hanging of

witches, and decimation of Native Americans.



Humanists also challenge Feder's claim that the *"the worst horrors of the modern era were perpetrated by godless political creeds."* The Holocaust was created by the Catholic Adolf Hitler in Christian Germany under Nazi control.

"There are no secular counterparts to Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa, William Wilberforce (the evangelical responsible for the abolition of the British slave trade)..."

But the Pope merely maintained the status quo in the Catholic Church, Mother Teresa only prepared the poor for death, and Wilberforce voted for the corn laws which put a tax on the food which was the staple of the poor.

"There is no irrefutable evidence for God's existence or non-existence. But if you look closely, his footprints can be discerned in the sands of time."

Skeptics would instead see "dirty" footprints in the denial of evolution, hanging of witches, xenophobia, and the dropping two atomic bombs on Japan.

"Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that our churches' pulpits flame[d] with righteousness."

If they did, it was because churches opposed the use of Ben Franklin's lightning rods to pre-

(Continued on page 10)

Mayor Broke the Law and the Law Won!

Carrie Renwick

On April 20th, the Florida Times-Union published the following letter submitted by the First Coast Freethought Society.

In the April 10-16, 2007 edition of *Folio Weekly*, Mayor John Peyton was quoted as he reflected on his first term in office.

At a recent convention in Jacksonville, he said, "I think I'm doing pretty well in politics if the atheists sue me."

Is it possible that Peyton does not understand why the American Atheists, Inc. brought suit against the city of Jacksonville for spending taxpayer money to finance the August 2006 "Day of Faith" prayer rally?

American Atheists sued the city because Peyton violated the U.S. and Florida constitutions. In other words, he broke the law.

So, what Peyton is actually saying is, "I think I'm doing pretty well in politics if I break

the law."

When Peyton took office, he swore to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America and of the State of Florida. Now, he seems to feel proud he has broken his oath and the law.

What is wrong with this picture?

Carrie Renwick
President, FCFS



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)

Freethinkers...let's get acquainted and enjoy intelligent conversation every 4th Sunday of the month (unless inclement weather prevails) at 9 AM 'til ? (your choice) at the pavilion at Losco Park, 10851 Hood Rd., S. between Shad and Losco Roads. Need directions? Call Beth Perry at 733-5489. Bring your own cup and breakfast snack. Most of the time coffee is furnished. Mark your calendar and we hope to see you there.

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.

An Examination of Evil

Fred W. Hill

Monday, April 16, 2007, another day of bloody mayhem, of evil. A young man, Seung Hui Cho, awakens in his dormitory in a sleepy college town in Virginia, dresses himself up to kill, and sets out to expunge a lifetime of pent-up anger by murdering as many people as he can on the campus, (32, as it turned out) before extinguishing his own life.

On the same day, in Baghdad, Iraq, nearly 200 people were murdered, most by suicide bombers. For the inhabitants of Blacksburg, Virginia, the slaughter was a shocking, aberrant act of a deeply troubled, alienated madman. For the people of Baghdad, the mass killings were no less traumatic but an all-too-common part of the sectarian conflict that has ravaged their city and nation over the last four years; and in some quarters, the suicide bombers are revered as heroic martyrs. By any rational, humane outlook, however, the lone gunman in Virginia and the bombers in Iraq are all perpetrators of evil.

Evil may be seen as an amorphous concept, entirely subjective, and generally looked upon as anything that causes us harm, attempts to take something from us, keeps us from getting what we want or otherwise somehow threatens us, or even if it is different from us. As with those suicide bombings in Iraq

and elsewhere, actions we may see as reprehensible may be seen as entirely good, even laudable, by others, giving rise to notions of moral relativism.

Standard dictionary definitions describing evil as “sinful, wicked, of bad character, causing harm” or even “a cosmic evil force” (all from my beaten up old *Webster’s*) aren’t of much help, other than to provide synonyms and generalizations but no exit from the relativist dilemma. Simply stating that evil is “anything that causes harm” is too broad, because by the mere process of maintaining life, all animals must harm other life forms, even if only vegetation.

Expanded empathy may yet be our true salvation.

As Colin Wilson wrote, quoting from Walter Pater’s *Child in the House*, “all living creatures are involved in ‘a vast web of cruelty,’ no matter how gentle and humane they may be.” (Wilson, *The Outsider*, p. 149).

Of course, there are levels of evil and degrees of responsibility. Even though it is difficult to appreciate it if you’ve been grievously harmed, there remain differences, after all, between eating a carrot and eating your neighbor, between killing a common chicken and wiping out an entire species, between accidents and crimes of intent, between destructive acts of nature and

premeditated human violence.

A hurricane that hits a heavily populated coast-line causes much harm, but as a mere phenomenon of weather, it is incapable of any intent whatsoever; it cannot rationally be referred to as “intentionally evil.” Similarly, even the bacteria, fleas, and rats responsible for spreading the bubonic plague across Eurasia, resulting in horribly painful deaths for millions of people, do not merit regard as purposely evil. All were merely going about their natural business of seeking sustenance and breeding, entirely unaware of the massive harm they were causing to the homo sapiens around them.

Likewise, a shark that bites a human swimmer has no comprehension that it is wounding or killing a creature who regards itself as special, possibly a unique creation of some god, with loving friends and relatives and hopes and dreams for the future. All the shark knows is that it has found something that appears to be an available, easy source of food. Chomp!

Yes, I would regard being bitten by a flea, shark, or any other animal, especially a Jeffrey Dahmer, as “evil” as I would thus be harmed, perhaps even fatally. And I would protect myself from such harm, as when I went to some trouble and ex-



pense to exterminate the fleas that once infested my house, because although they were hardly lethal, their bites were extremely annoying to my cats and me. Whatever the extent of the harm they may cause, however, neither other animals nor natural forces are intrinsically evil, at least no more than we are.

But what of murderers such as Cho, Dahmer, or Ted Bundy, or those suicide bombers, or architects of mass slaughter such as Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot? Hitler in particular is widely seen as the embodiment of evil. My mother, among many others, is certain he was possessed by Satan as she can fathom no other explanation for the enormity of his evil.

As an atheist, of course I don't believe in Satan or any supernatural being. Having read a great deal of history, I'm aware that Hitler's crimes were unique in scale but hardly in kind (and Stalin and Mao likely each exceeded his murder count). Nor do I accept the notion of some "evil cosmic force" or the "myth of pure evil," as described by Michael Shermer in *The Science of Good and Evil* (2004, pp. 68-69). Hitler was not a demon or possessed by one or by any force of evil, and for all the monstrosities he directed, all his skills and actions were entirely human, and as with all tyrants, his power was entirely dependent on a mass of subordinates eager to carry out his dictates and the reverent support of too many ordinary citizens.

Certainly, the evil committed by such obvious human monsters as Hitler (or even Cho) are such that no amount of good they may have done in their lives can overcome the blight of their crimes, excepting the likes of Andrew Jackson, for example. He won a great many battles and gained popularity with his mass of supporters *because* of, rather than despite, unjust atrocities committed against hated or inconvenient "others." Yet I believe it is a mistake to simply regard such people as evil and not try to understand what made them capable of such inhumane deeds.



While cultural attitudes and long-entrenched violent or discriminatory behavior against others may help explain the evil, they should never be used to excuse it. Consider the cases where an entire culture seems to support evil, whether the attempted extermination of Jews, Gypsies, and others by the Nazis; the wars and other military action to remove Native Americans from their homelands; slavery and later discriminations and crimes committed against Negroes and other minorities in

the U.S.; or even the regular kidnappings, killings and cannibalism once practiced by the aboriginals of Papua New Guinea, among other "primitives."

I'm sure that even cannibals prefer not to be murdered and eaten themselves and may have at least some inkling that even their enemies might share such attitudes of self-preservation, even if their capacity for empathy is limited to their immediate family or tribe. It was insufficient empathy and excessive greed and incapacity to see the humanity of the despised "others" that allowed slavery to flourish for so long, that ensured the Cherokee Nation would be pushed onto a deadly Trail of Tears, that enabled the Holocaust to be carried out.

The long history of human conflicts is proof of our tendency to demonize "others," even when the "others" have done nothing to warrant reproach beyond holding different beliefs or inhabiting a particular desired piece of land and declining to move from it, or even just by existing. However, people are also capable of great empathy, enough to risk their lives to end slavery, struggle against discrimination, give Jews shelter from Nazis, protest unjust wars, even to preserve natural habitats for wild animals. It is the evil we commit against one another and even against the environment that supports us that may eventually do in humanity. Expanded empathy may yet be our true salvation.



Can Ethics be Reason Based?

Curtis Wolf

Ellen Wagner’s recent talk about the divine command theory got me thinking. Is the only choice we have regarding ethics that it either comes from God or that it is subject to individual choice which is just as valid as anyone else’s choice (i.e., moral relativism)? Is there a reason-based alternative that seeks universal ethics without imposing it as God’s will? I think that it is quite possible to derive an ethical system that meets these requirements.

I want to avoid the trap of proposing an ethical system that reflects my vision of the way things should be. It would then be quite reasonable for someone else to tell me that he does not like my ethical system, and why should I be the one to tell him what to do? He would consider his ethical vision to be just as valid as mine. And he would be right. I can hardly declare myself to be the Grand Poobah of ethics no matter how much I think I may deserve it!

What we need to start with is a series of factual statements that can be empirically validated. From these factual statements, we then logically derive a series of deductive assertions. This reason based framework can be used to construct the scaffold upon which a complete universal ethical system can be built. If any of the factual statements can be shown empirically

to be false or if any of the deductive assertions are not found to emanate logically from these statements, we can then declare the ethical system to be invalid. Therefore, instead of basing ethics on one’s individual preferences, we base it on empirical evidence and logic that can be agreed on by people worldwide.

I hope that this article opens up the discussion of ethical systems that derive from a reason- and empirically-based foundation. If anyone wants to critique my ethical system, please do so by submitting an article to the *First Coast FreeThinker*.

This reason-based framework can be used to construct the scaffold upon which a complete universal ethical system can be built.

The factual statement are as follows:

All men and women are equal to each other in every relevant way.

This does not means that we are exactly alike. We differ in skin color, intelligence, size, gender, and in many other ways. However, these differences pale in comparison to our common genetic makeup. We may have differently colored skin, but we all have skin! There are no criteria that distinguish one set of humans from another in a way

that designates one of the sets as subhuman.

Humans are social animals.

Not only are there advantages for our species in living together in societies, i.e specialization of skills within the society which is increasingly important due to our dependence on technology (how many of you reading this article can troubleshoot a malfunctioning modern automobile engine?), but let’s face it. Being around people is just plain fun. Who can possibly stay sane on a desert island by himself?

My actions have consequences that affect other people’s ability to live happy lives.

While living with others is good, it is impossible for us to go through life without our actions having consequences for others, good or bad. The simple act of driving a car can cause serious injury if I drive recklessly in a way that runs my car into others. Unfortunately, we cannot just assume that we always naturally take these consequences into account whenever we act. Sometimes, we need help and that is where ethics comes in.

Next month, I will talk about the deductive assertions that derive from these factual statements and how we can derive an ethical system from them.



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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, upstairs in the sanctuary, 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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May Social - All Welcome!

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

WHEN: TUES., May 22, 2007. Gather in Lounge at 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

RSVP: CarrieRen@att.net (or 268-8826) by May 21, if you plan to attend!

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
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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.

Dirty Footprints

(Continued from page 3)

vent being harmed by lightning, defying the will of God. Hundreds of bell ringers were elec-

trocuted in the rain storms.

Feder contends that "humility is a religious concept," while nonbelievers would counter, observing that it is

found among most secular people as well. Many of the footprints of God show lack of civilization. Don Feder is neither accurate nor persuasive. He, too, should resign!



Next deadline for article submission: May 26, 2007

First Coast Freethought Society 2007 Events

May	21 - Monthly meeting	20 - Book discussion group	22- Social at Steak and Ale
June	18 - Monthly meeting	17 - Book discussion group	26- Social at Steak and Ale
July	16 - Monthly meeting	15 - Book discussion group	24- Social at Steak and Ale

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

(In the Adobe version, the links are **LIVE!** Ctrl & Click will take you there.)

Return service requested



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