

FIRST COAST FREETHOUGHT SOCIETY

An organization of freethinkers and secular humanists supporting free inquiry, education, and community in the Northeast Florida area



Our Motto: "To Question is the Answer."

Post Office Box 550591 • Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 • Phone: 904-288-6291

BALLOT FOR 2008 OFFICERS

November 11, 2007

Dear Freethinkers,

Vote for one person in each category, write-in a candidate if you choose. If you receive the hard copy version of the *FreeThinker*, note the self-addressed envelope provided. If you receive the e-mail version, you will need to print the ballot and mail it to: Bobbie Nord, Nominating Committee Chair, 5201 Atlantic Blvd., Apt. 254, Jacksonville, FL 32207, by **December 1, 2007**.

If you are not a member, your vote will not be counted. If you would like to **JOIN AND VOTE**, just include an application (found in newsletter and on web site) and your check with the ballot. If you join now, your membership will be **good through December 2008!**

Members who plan to **RENEW for 2008**, just **enclose your check with the ballot** and mail to me. If any contact information has **changed**, please include an application to keep our records up to date.

Thank you,

Bobbie Nord, Chair
Nominating Committee

DEADLINE: Ballot must be postmarked no later than midnight DECEMBER 1, 2007

President:	_____	Earl Coggins
	_____	_____ (write-in)
Vice President:	_____	Carrie Renwick
	_____	_____ (write-in)
Secretary:	_____	June Applen
	_____	_____ (write-in)
Treasurer:	_____	Mark Renwick
	_____	_____ (write-in)

YOUR NAME (required for vote to be counted): _____

First Coast

FreeThinker



The Newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

November 2007

Volume 5, Issue 11

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Curtis Wolf

At the Atheist Alliance International conference in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 28, 2007, Sam Harris, darling of the atheist movement whether he wants to be or not, decided to stir up the pot a bit instead of playing it safe. (See http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/sam_harris/2007/10/the_prolem_with_atheism.html for an edited version of the speech.) In essence, he said that we should not identify ourselves as atheists anymore. Or freethinkers... or humanists... or

any other label that suggests a lack of faith in the supernatural.

If we did not provide the religious with a label at which to aim their arguments, I am sure that they would invent one and direct their fire at it—anything but deal with the facts!

Harris contends that instead, we should be content to question religion and promote rea-

son without identifying ourselves as members of any specific group.



At first glance, we would be tempted to tell Sam that what he said is just crazy talk. If anything, we should be proud to be atheists. We should be happy to pin the scarlet "A" to our clothes.

But not so fast. Sam actually makes some pretty good points in his speech. This month, I will examine Sam's points. Next

(Continued on page 3)

"We are faced with the monumental task of persuading a myth-infatuated world that love and curiosity are sufficient, and that we need not console or frighten ourselves or our children with Iron Age fairy tales."

—Speech by Sam Harris at the Atheist Alliance Int'l. conference in Washington, D.C., on 09/28/2007

November 2007 Meeting

Earl Coggins, Founder of the First Coast Freethought Society

"Atheism: Dispelling the Myths, Exposing the Taboos"

Monday, November 19, 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: Barnes & Noble, 9282 Atlantic Blvd., 721-2446, books are usually in stock. **PLEASE NOTE: THIS LOCATION CHANGE APPLIES TO NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER 2007!**



What: Books/magazines planned for discussion:

- November 18, 2007 - *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, by Bobby Henderson.
- December 16, 2007 - *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, by Carlo Levi

Christ Stopped at Eboli recalls Levi's stay in the tiny Italian village of Aliano. In 1935, the Turin-born doctor, painter, and writer had been banished to the remote South for anti-Fascist activities. The village was desperately poor—"almost all the houses appeared to teeter over the abyss, their walls cracked, with an air of general fragility about them." The "hopeless feeling of inferiority" of the villagers is reflected in the title, a local saying which means that Christ—and civilization—didn't quite make it to their town.

"Has been called in turn a diary, an album of sketches, a novelette, a sociological study, and a political essay. It has more than a trait of each genre; yet it remains as hard to classify as every beautiful book, or as the man who wrote this one." —*The New York Times Book Review* (\$14)

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.

Sam vs. Paul: Does the Atheist Label Hurt Our Cause?

(Continued from page 1)

month, I will examine the response to Sam's "heresy" by Center for Inquiry founder, Paul Kurtz. I will then argue that despite the fact that Sam is right in many ways, the labels that we assign ourselves may be inevitable if we want to be a force in our society.

Sam starts by saying that referring to ourselves as "atheists" is analogous to referring to people who oppose racism as "non-racists" or referring to those who find astrology silly as "non-astrologers." Atheism is not a world view, just as non-racism is not a world view. It is just the *negation* of a world view.

I agree that calling ourselves atheists does not say much. Yes, atheism is just a negation of the assertion that God exists. It says something about what we do not believe, but it says little about what we do believe.

However, is that necessarily a bad thing? Certainly, negation is a necessary part of science. The Michelson-Morley experiment negated the idea of the aether wind. This may not seem to be a breakthrough in and of itself, but Albert Einstein kept this negation in mind when he developed the Special Theory of Relativity. Sometimes, saying that something is not true opens the door to something that is true.

Sam's next point is better. He asserts that the atheist label sabotages our ability to get our arguments out against belief in the supernatural. Due to our atheist label, we are viewed as a "cranky sub-culture" whose arguments are quickly marginalized before they can be carefully considered by the public.

I agree that this is true, but I would not take it too far. Quite frankly, the assertion that God does not exist is likely to be quickly dismissed in our religious culture regardless of



Sam Harris

whether it comes from atheists or from the Pope (granted, that is not likely to happen, but wouldn't it be fun if it did!). We are swimming against the tide whenever we question the existence of God, and there is really no way to sugarcoat this message. Nor should we.

Sam's third argument is that atheism leads to an even-handed approach to all religion even when it is clear that some religions are worse than others. Specifically, he considers

Islam to be the most dangerous of all the religions.

I think that if atheists are even handed towards all religions, it is probably not due to atheism per se. It is probably due more to the politically correct multiculturalism that pervades certain segments of our society. It is considered to be xenophobic to criticize other cultures and religions.

The truth is that I would do anything to avoid living in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is not because the people of these countries are necessarily all bad, but the societies that they have created are insane. And yes, Islam has a lot to do with that. So while I agree with Sam that all religions are not equally bad, I do not think that the atheist label has as much to do with it as Sam believes.

His fourth argument is that religious people have a set of arguments specifically aimed at atheists that keeps coming up again and again. No matter how soundly defeated they are by atheists, these arguments have found their way into the arsenal of the Christian soldier for war against the heathens. We are on a merry-go-round that we cannot get off, and we have only ourselves to blame for using the atheist label that got us stuck on the merry-go-round in the first place.

Instead, Sam believes that we should talk about "reason" and "evidence." Few people want to seem irrational. Few

people want to be seen as basing their beliefs on bad evidence. Even Christians want to believe that their faith is not some fairy tale. That is why we have a cottage industry of apologists who try to convince the religious that science and history back up the existence of God. The strategy is that once we get them talking about reason-based evidence, then we start chipping around edges of their belief system with pick axes made out of inconvenient facts and thought-provoking arguments.

While I agree that atheism brings out a set of arguments that would not exist without the atheist label, and that the “reason and evidence” strategy is a good one (a strategy, I might add, that is already in use today by atheists), does Sam really believe that the religious are going to hear the words “evidence” and “reason” and immediately renounce previously deeply-held beliefs? The reason that so many religious people use these same fallacious arguments again and again, and avoid reason-based or evidence-based discussion, is that reason and evidence are on our side. If we did not pro-

vide the religious with a label at which to aim their arguments, I am sure they would invent another one and direct their fire at it—anything but deal with the facts!

Actually, the “reason and evidence” strategy *is* working, albeit slowly. We have come a long way since the days of superstition and irrational beliefs that permeated life before the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment.

Sam’s final argument is that atheism’s rejection of anything remotely resembling supernaturalism has biased atheists against certain practices that are usually associated with mysticism and spirituality. Specifically, he is talking about the contemplative life that goes beyond living from pleasure to pleasure. Sam claims that meditation leads one to have experiences that are transforming and mind expanding, despite its association with Buddhist monks and moksha-seeking yogis. He also doubts that mystery will be eliminated from our universe and feels we should not be afraid of this mystery.

If this sounds a bit “New Agey” to you, you may be right.

Personally, I have tried meditation and found it boring. I would rather read a book.

But I acknowledge the possibility that at some point in the future, we may bump into an impassable brick wall that science is unable to help us penetrate. I also acknowledge the possibility that we may one day expand our vision of reality beyond what can be added into the standard physics textbook. I believe that atheists should be willing to go to the edge of what is considered today to be the boundaries of reality and look down into the unknown abyss no matter whether it takes us into what has been traditionally considered spirituality and mysticism.

With that said, we always have to be careful about how we arrive at our conception of reality. I am not as concerned about the conclusions that we come to as I am about the methodology we use to arrive at these conclusions. The truth is that people base too much of what they believe on faulty evidence and sloppy thinking. Rather than promoting a set of beliefs, we should be promoting a methodology of finding the truth.



Dues Due in January. Join or Renew NOW for 2008!

You now have **THREE** join or renew options:
1) **Join or renew on line.** Pay with PayPal or a credit card. Visit the FCFS website, or click the

following link to the support page: <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/support.htm>.
2) **Mail a check** to the FCFS, P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591. Include an ap-

plication (found on website and in newsletter) if your contact info has changed. 3) **Mail** your 2008 dues (& application if necessary) **to Bobbie Nord with your BALLOT!**



Science Standards Available for Public Review

Curtis Wolf

After months of hard work by teachers, college professors, and other professionals, the new science standards have been made available by the Florida Department of Education for your comments. The science standards identify the important scientific ideas that every public school student should know before he or she graduates from high school. Once the standards are approved by the Florida

Board of Education, they will drive the revision of science curricula and FCAT science exams for years to come.

Anyone can comment on the standards at this website: <http://tools.fcit.usf.edu/ScienceReview/>. After a short registration, you will be given a user ID with which you can add comments and/or rate individual standards on a five-point scale. I strongly encourage everyone to take a look at the scientific concepts that your children, or grandchildren, will be learning in public

schools. Yes, the concepts will include evolution.

Public review will last until December 14th. In January 2008, the science standards will come up for a vote before the Florida Board of Education.

Anti-science groups will be out in force trying to strip evolution from the standards. We must be out in force, ourselves, defending the teaching of accurate science in Florida.



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.

Secular Sunday Morning in the Park (or Atheist Sunday Morning)

Freethinkers... let's get acquainted and enjoy intelligent conversation **every 4th Sunday of the month** (unless inclement weather prevails) at **10 a.m.** 'til ? at the pavilion at Losco Park, 10851 Hood Rd., S., Jacksonville 32257, between Shad and Losco Roads. Need directions? Call Beth Perry at 733-5489 or Google the address to get a map and directions. 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 a member is in order, or if a sympathy card, flowers, or some form of support is needed, please contact **Nita Pitts** at 904-996-0879 or e-mail her at pitrymnd@comcast.net. If you prefer, leave a notation on the sign-in sheet at the back table at one of our monthly meetings.

An Atheist's Journey, So Far

Fred W. Hill

Every sentient person has a story to tell about how they arrived at a particular point in their lives—even those of us who are not likely to be remembered much past our demise. As part of a projected series of profiles of members of the First Coast Freethought Society I herewith submit a rendering of my life's journey to the present.

I arrived on this sphere on Flag Day, 1962, the first of three sons of a sailor. My parents were both from poor families, broken by death and divorce. My mom's father, a Baptist minister for whom I was partly named, died when she was 11. My dad's father left my grandmother, six children, and a heavily mortgaged farm, after one too many arguments about his violent temper. Dad enlisted at age 17 to escape the farm and spent the next 27 years in the U.S. Navy. My existence is due to his chance encounter with my mother on a Greyhound Bus while he was on leave and his persistence in getting her to marry and make babies with him. And so I came to be.

My formal education began at a kindergarten in Japan and continued in various grade schools and colleges across the country, including a few years at San Jose State University majoring in Fine Arts, and Jones College, where I received a B.S. in

paralegal studies in 2002. In the meantime, I worked at a variety of nondescript jobs, spent seven and a half years in the Navy, and am currently employed as the Probate Department Operations Specialist in the Duval County Clerk of Courts.

My intellectual growth, however, really began in an elementary school library in Salt Lake City. I was the stereotypical bookworm—terrible at sports and very introverted—but I loved to read. Admittedly, I read much escapist fare, including

I became an atheist not because anyone directly influenced me, but because I realized while there are many emotional and social reasons to believe in God, there are no rational reasons.

comics, but I was also reading the various popular novels and magazines my parents brought home. And from that school library in the capital of Mormon society, I was picking out old classics by such authors as Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Jules Verne, as well as all the books about history, mythology, and animals I could find.

Which led my 9-year-old self to Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. I knew it was one of

the most significant science books ever written, but I was unaware, then, just how controversial it had remained for over a century since its first publication.



Looking back, I was fortunate in that despite having parents who were themselves raised to believe, in fear of eternal damnation, that the King James Bible was literal truth, they were fairly liberal in that they never attempted to impose any particular religious belief on me. Sure, they sent me to Sunday school for a year, but we attended churches only irregularly. They expressed belief in God, but also disdain for pious hypocrisy and cruelty, such as the bigotry and greed of one of my uncles, and a great aunt who told a grieving mother of a still-born infant that the baby was in Hell because it had not been baptized. My parents were turned off by such callousness by their oh-so-holier-than-thou kin and chose not to force faith upon their children. Hence, I was exposed to religion but not submersed in it.

I also read the annotated and illustrated King James Bible that my pious uncle gave my parents at their wedding and read it with fascination during the same year I also read *The Origin of Species* and *Bulfinch's Mythology*.

Darwin made no mention of

God and at the time I had yet to read anything directly stating that parts of the Bible might not be true. However, it was obvious to me from the first chapter that the Bible was more myth than truth. I loved reading fantasy, but I was also developing a rational, humane outlook on life, and I found much in the Bible that struck me as irrational and much in God's behavior that was viciously unjust. It didn't bother me then, however, because no one tried to convince me that it was all "absolute truth." That came years later, during my senior year in high school.

One night that year, three guys came to my house. One of them was a classmate I only knew in passing, another I didn't know at all and the third was an older guy I recognized as the boyfriend of a girl I'd had a crush on during my freshman year. They were there to invite me to church. That this particular guy asked me to go to church with him amused me, but I was also curious to check it out for myself, so off we went.

There was a large, multi-ethnic crowd at the little Baptist church, and everyone seemed cheerful, although a few were holding their hands up, shaking their bodies and shrieking babble. The sermon was all hellfire and brimstone, damning all doubters as the flock yelled "right on, brother!" "tell it like it is," "share the faith," and so on. Afterwards, Mike told me he could tell I'd enjoyed myself because I was grinning so much during the service. I declined to

tell him I was grinning because I found it all so ridiculous.

Back at my house, we had a deeper discussion. I confessed to my disbelief in much of the Bible. Alarmed, Mike warned me that if I doubted even one syllable of the Bible I would be damned to Hell for all time, but that Jesus loved me and died for me so that I could believe and be saved. I was not impressed. I replied that I could not believe in



Life is a journey.

and would not worship any god that would condemn anyone solely for what they thought. At about that moment, my mildly inebriated mother burst into the room and demanded that Mike and his friends leave the house. Thus ended my flirtation with the Baptists.

That episode, as well as my later experience with Scientology [See the April 2005 *FreeThinker*] led me to do more serious critical thinking about all religions and

the very existence of God. Upon first learning of the word "agnostic," I decided that fit my views because I could not truly know whether or not God existed. However ultimately, I came to the conclusion that there is no more reason to believe in the Christian God than there is to believe in the ancient Greek and Norse gods, or even in comic-book superheroes. I became an atheist not because anyone directly influenced me, but because I realized while there are many emotional and social reasons to believe in God, there are no rational reasons.

At that time (in the early 1990s), I didn't personally know anyone who I knew was an atheist, but of course since then, I have met many, initially through online chat rooms and subsequently through the First Coast Freethought Society which I first heard about through a notice in the *Folio Weekly* in December 1999. I attended the meeting that month and introduced myself and over the years have made several good friends through the group, served as the Parliamentarian in 2004, and have been writing articles for the newsletter every month since January 2005.

Upon which note I close this chronicle and, as the holidays approach, give thanks not to a god I know isn't there, but to what reason exists amidst so much insanity and to the kindness and compassion of all who live by humanitarian ideals, whatever else they believe or disbelieve.



First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 550591
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(904) 288-6291
<http://firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org>

Statement of Purpose

The First Coast Freethought Society, Inc. is an educational, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization dedicated to supporting nonreligious persons in the Northeast Florida area and promoting a nontheistic approach to everyday life.

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. Meeting time: 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Meetings are free and open to the public. Doors open at 6:00 p.m.

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November Social - All Welcome!

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

WHEN: TUESDAY, November 27, 2007. Gather in Lounge at 6:00 p.m., Dinner at 7:00 p.m.

RSVP: CarrieRen@att.net (or 268-8826) by November 26, if you plan to attend!

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

P.O. Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591 • (904) 288-6291

2008 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.

FCFS Wins the AAI 2007 Community Cooperation Award!

Carrie Renwick

The Atheist Alliance International grants a single award annually to a freethought group that fosters cooperation, ethical awareness, and a positive image of atheists and freethinkers

within the freethought community and the larger community in which the it based. We applied, citing last year's "Science Under Siege" panel discussion, which we co-sponsored with UNF Department of Biology, as our cooperative project. I am

delighted to announce that the First Coast Freethought Society is the proud recipient of the **AAI 2007 Community Cooperation Award!**



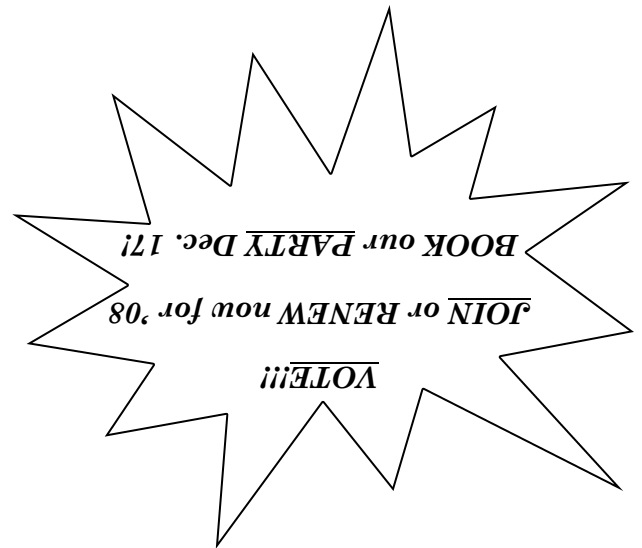
Next deadline for article submission: November 24, 2007

First Coast Freethought Society 2007/2008 Events

November	19 - Monthly meeting	18 - Book discussion group	27- Social at Steak and Ale
December	17 - Monthly meeting	16 - Book discussion group	26- Social at Steak and Ale
January	21 - Monthly meeting	20 - Book discussion group	22- 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



First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
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