

First Coast

FreeThinker



The Newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

September 2008

Volume 6, Issue 9

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September 2008 President's Message

Earl Coggins

For the next couple of months, I want to focus on some of the amendments to the Florida Constitution that might (depending on the outcome of current or future lawsuits) be appearing on the November ballot.

In the past, corrupt government leaders have used imprisonment and genocide to swiftly disenfranchise and strip away the civil rights of entire classes of people without any opportunity for redress. How do modern day neo-Nazis accomplish the same thing? They

change state and federal constitutions.

Torture, imprisonment, and murder can no longer be (legally) used by bigots as a means to hurt the people they hate, so their new credo has become "We won't kill you, but

If Amendment 2 passes, regardless of its ploy to play on gender roles, its root message is hate.

we will make you feel so bad that your life won't be worth living. We will do everything in our power to have laws passed that identify you as modern day lepers."

What on earth am I

referring to, and who are these so-called neo-Nazis, you might ask?



I am referring to Amendment 2, the proposed change to the Florida Constitution that would ban same-sex marriage in Florida. The neo-Nazis are anyone supporting such a ban.

The wording of the proposed amendment seems benign:

Inasmuch as marriage is the legal union of only one man and one woman as husband and

(Continued on page 3)

"Amendment 2 could take away existing benefits from all unmarried Floridians."

"Amendment 2 puts the government where it doesn't belong—regulating the personal relationships of Floridians."

—Reasons to say no to Amendment 2: See the <http://sayno2.com/> website

September 2008 Meeting

David Schwam-Baird, Ph.D., Dept. of Political Science & Public Admin., UNF

"Subverting Our Constitutions:

Amendment 2 on the November Ballot and Other Threats to Our Rights

Monday, September 15, 2008, 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:



- September 21, 2008 - *The Botany of Desire*, by Michael Pollan
- October 19, 2008 - *The Age of Unreason*, by Susan Jacoby

From *The New Yorker*: Identifying herself as a “cultural conservationist” (but by no means a cultural conservative), Jacoby laments the decline of middlebrow American culture and presents a cogent defense of intellectualism. America, she believes, faces a “crisis of memory and knowledge,” in which anti-intellectualism is not only tolerated but celebrated by those in politics and the media to whom we are all “just folks.” The Internet, for all its promise, is too often “a highway to the far-flung regions of junk thought.” Meanwhile, twenty-five per cent of high-school biology teachers believe that human beings and dinosaurs shared the earth, and more than a third of Americans can’t name a single First Amendment right. She offers little hope that the situation will improve, opining that, despite increasing levels of education, “Americans seem to know less and less.”

For more information, contact moderator Jewell Kross at JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org or call 904-996-1553. (NOTE: If you purchase books from Amazon, please go to our website [FIRST, firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org](http://FIRST.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org) and THEN click the link to Amazon.com. Thank you!)

First Coast FreeThinker

The *First Coast FreeThinker* is published for FCFS members, other freethinkers, and potential freethinkers. Nonmembers may receive three issues for free, after which they must join the FCFS to continue to receive hard copy.

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. The *FreeThinker* is intended to convey ideas to stimulate thought and discussion on a variety of subjects.

We welcome submissions. The deadline is the **FOURTH SATURDAY** of each month for the

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following month’s issue. Submit contributions to the newsletter by e-mail to Hugo (see above), or by U.S. mail to Hugo Borresen, 8831 Taurus Circle South, Jacksonville, FL 32222.

September 2008 President's Message

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wife, no other legal union that is treated as marriage or the substantial equivalent thereof shall be valid or recognized.

The most perplexing and troublesome aspect of this proposed amendment is the reason for it in the first place. Florida already has 4 laws banning same-sex marriage: Florida statutes 741.212(1); 741.212(2); 741.212(3); 741.04(1).

These four statutes not only define marriage as being the union of a man and a woman, but also do not recognize unions from other states unless they are—you guessed it—between a man and a woman. So what exactly will be changed by changing the Florida Constitution?

If we take a closer look at the wording, you see the words “substantial equivalent” as something that shall not be recognized. What does that mean and what are the ramifications?

Here is an excerpt from <http://sayno2.com/> on the consequences of this amendment:

Similar amendments in other states are being used to take

away benefits from public employees (Kentucky, for instance), and dissolve domestic partnership registries used to provide health care benefits and pensions (in Michigan).

Broward and Palm Beach Counties and the cities of Tampa, Gainesville and Miami Beach, among others, offer domestic partnership registries. Most Florida universities and



more than half of Fortune 500 companies offer domestic partnership benefits. These benefits would be placed at risk, if not outright abolished, if this amendment passes.

Every unmarried Floridian will be impacted by this amendment—especially divorced or

widowed seniors and public employees who, under existing programs, can share some benefits such as hospital visitation privileges, and health care coverage—without being married.

In his book, *Divided By God: America's Church-State Problem – And What We Should Do About It*, Noah Feldman writes:

Many Americans insist that marriage is “between one man and one woman” but say they have no objection to civil unions that give gay couples the same rights as married people. If there is no legal difference between civil union and marriage, why object to the word “marriage?” What’s in a name?

The religious right has obviously been studying memes and the framing of language. This amendment is bigotry—pure and simple—but as worded, it could fool a voter into thinking it's all about gender roles in marriage, when in fact it is not. Please urge everyone you know to read these amendments carefully. This particular amendment ostracizes anyone not in a traditional marriage. If Amendment 2 passes, regardless of its ploy to play on gender roles, its root message is hate.



Florida Supreme Court Tosses Amendments 7 & 9

Thanks to the efforts of the ACLU, the Florida Education Association, and other organizations concerned with separation of church and Florida public education, on September 3, the Florida Supreme Court unanimously barred amendments 7 and 9 from appearing on the November ballot! Amendment 2 remains. Threats to separation of church and state, to Florida public education, and to the Florida (and U.S. Constitutions) will surely continue. Let us be ever vigilant and never become complacent.

<http://jacksonville.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/stories/2008/09/01/daily15.html?jst=b ln hl>



Suppression of Science by Religion

Terry Loucks

Cultures that have suppressed science have suffered the price. The most recent example was in China, where the popular revolution, inspired by blind belief in the state, put scientists and doctors to death or into the rice paddies. The other modern examples are the Muslim countries where the Koran, not the scientist, is the source of ultimate truth.

An older but still relevant

example was the Catholic Church in Italy. Copernicus could have given them the lead in science, but as a priest, he refrained from publishing during

If science is repressed in America, it will flee to other countries where it can remain free...

his lifetime rather than face persecution from his own church. It took this church hundreds of years, and the trampling of

Bruno and Galileo, among others, to give up on their Biblical

“science” that put the Earth at the center of the universe.

Ironically, science merely fled to England and other Protestant countries where it flourishes to this day. Italy and, for that matter, all the Catholic



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Ongoing FCFS Activities

Dinners for Doubters

Sign up to attend or to host a dinner yourself. Sign-up sheets will be at the back table at the monthly meetings. For details on how this works, **see page 7 of the August 2008 FreeThinker** (available on website) or ask a greeter 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. until ? 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. We generally provide coffee. Bring breakfast snack and a **chair**. Mark your calendar. 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.

Suppression of Science by Religion

(Continued from page 4)

countries, are still decades behind England and America.

Suppression of science is new in America. When the country was founded, everyone, especially fundamentalist Christians, was fleeing the many Bishops, Popes, and Crowns. Our progress as a nation, including scientific research, can be directly attributed to the freedom we all

have enjoyed from religious and royal tyrannies.

The challenge we face today is not from the Church of England or the Church of Italy, but from our own fundamentalist Christians. They want us, once again, to go back to their interpretation of the Word of God. Two hundred years later, the very sects that fled persecution in Europe want to impose their beliefs on the rest of us.

What goes around comes

around. If science is repressed in America, it will flee to other countries where it can remain free, or the scientists will put up as good a fight as Galileo did in his time. Today, there are no satellites named for the Pope that censored Galileo. I think America's fundamentalist Christians are making the same mistake, and time will prove them wrong. Meanwhile, I plan to join the other scientists and fight Biblical "science" with my last breath.



How to End the Ban on Gay Marriage Forever

Curtis Wolf

In this month's President's Message and monthly meeting, we will be discussing Amendment 2 to the Florida Constitution, which is the so called Florida Marriage Amendment. This amendment makes marriage between "one man and one woman as husband and wife" the only valid marriage. This restriction has already been enshrined in Florida law, but apparently gays and lesbians have not been sent a clear enough message that their domestic bliss is not Florida's concern.

So how do we respond to this violation of the right of consenting adults to marry whomever they please? I have a radical solution. Let's take marriage out of Florida law completely.

I know. Marriage law has been a part of civil law as far back as anyone can remember.

But does it have to be? It is absurd that anyone has to get permission from the state to marry. Why not let two consenting adults go to a lawyer who would draw up a legal marriage contract between them? This private contract would define their marital relationship and would be enforceable in civil court like any other contract. It would de-

The problem with Florida marriage law is that it is subject to political influences.

fine marital and child rearing rights and responsibilities and even how to dissolve the marriage when it is over. The contents of the contract would not be defined beyond the requirements of contract law. Any disputes arising from the marriage contract could be submitted to private mediation.

No Christian church would

be required to hold a marriage ceremony for the same sex couple nor would it be asked to endorse gay marriage. This should not be a problem for gay and lesbian couples since Unitarian churches would be glad to marry two members of the same sex.



The problem with Florida marriage law is that it is subject to political influences. The religious right will fight against anything that is not traditional marriage until the end of time. The inclusion of marriage in the Florida statutes inevitably leads to continual meddling into our right to live our lives as we see fit by government officials pandering to religious traditionalists. There are certainly issues that should be decided by democratic majority rule. The right to marry should not be one of them.



Hell!

Fred W. Hill

I am damned. At least a few people, including friends, have assured me. My skepticism is such an affront to their excessively sensitive deity that there's no hope for me unless I reform my evil ways and accept their bible as absolute truth and recognize Jesus as my lord and savior. Since I regard all holy books as collections of fiction mixed with distorted history and outright lies, and since I wouldn't kneel to Jesus even if he was standing in front of me, it seems my chances of avoiding a dumping in the lake of fire are nil.

Naturally, I'd be somewhat worried if I actually believed in Hell, outside of a city in Norway and a few scattered villages. Still, on the remote chance that I do take up residence there, what should I expect, other than a hot time? Unsurprisingly, theists have held a variety of beliefs regarding the nature of Hell, much of which I glommed from Alice K. Turner's *The History of Hell* (1993), an excellent guide.

The word is derived from the Norse goddess of death and her realm, Hel, originally meaning "one who covers up or hides something." A dreary region, dispatch to Hel was not punishment but simply where the dead went if they lacked the gumption to have gotten themselves killed in battle like good warriors. Christian converts kept the name but applied revised standards of avoidance.

In the oldest known account

of life after death, the Epic of Gilgamesh, written approximately 4,000 years ago, the Sumerian king reacts with horror as his friend Enkidu, speaking through a hole in the underworld, describes being encased in dirt as vermin eat his body. As Turner relates, in these early stories, "There is no division yet into privileged or blessed souls versus sinners or common folk." (p. 11)

Zoroaster, a prophet believed to have lived in the 6th century BCE, is credited with dividing the afterlife between Ahura Mazda, the wise lord who rules in the sky with his angels, and

Hell, as Turner points out, was the great weapon of the clergy ... in their bid to retain power over society ...

Angra Mainyu, the Evil Spirit who rules underground with his demons. Each vie for mortal souls until a final apocalyptic battle in which the underworld is destroyed, evil souls are forgiven, and everyone lives ever after in an earthly paradise where "poverty, old age, disease, thirst, hunger, and death are halted." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrian_eschatology).

Once dominant in Iran and other regions of central Asia, Zoroastrianism was nearly squelched by Muslims who nevertheless incorporated variations of many of its tenets, following similar adaptations by their Jewish and Christian precursors.

In early Greco-Roman mythology, Hades was simply the abode of dead mortals, good and bad, although those who had offended the gods received appropriate eternal punishments. In his Socratic Dialogues written in the 4th century BCE, Plato advanced the idea that good souls would go the very pleasant Elysian Fields, while the worst miscreants would be hurled into Tartarus, a dank abyss beneath Hades, never to come out, another idea adopted by Christians.

Gnostics of the first few centuries CE, held that Earth itself was Hell, created by a Demiurge, or "lower god," and that salvation could only be found through knowledge, "gnosis," of the "higher god," acquired through direct participation with the divine. Apparently, agnostics would have to stay earthbound in a perpetual cycle until they found that knowledge or the world ended.

Paul, the first Christian theologian, made no mention of Hell, teaching that "the good would live and sinners would die" (ibid., p. 52). Matthew's gospel, however, promised "everlasting punishment" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" for sinners after the Last Judgment and end of the world, expected any day, as he wrote circa 81 CE. As the world conspicuously declined to end over the ensuing centuries, theologians



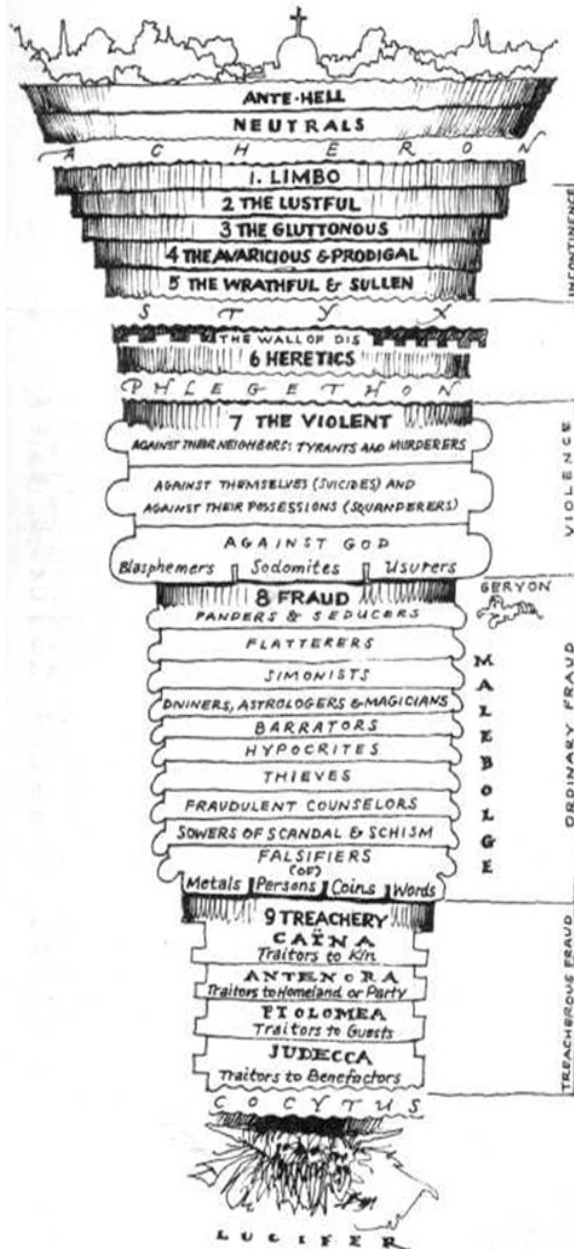
have regularly argued about where all those accumulating dead souls are supposed to be while awaiting final judgment.

Among the hunches made were that the souls are sleeping; dwelling in separate but unequal quarters, or in Limbo, unless particularly worthy of immediate ascension to Heaven; or rejoicing in Heaven or sweltering in Hell, as appropriate, having been judged immediately upon death. That last appears to be the most popularly accepted hunch among those laity not particularly concerned about textual inconsistencies or the finer points of biblical interpretation.

Other debates raged over whether or not damnation is eternal. Origen (c. 185 – 254) argued that all beings, even Satan, must eventually repent and be cleansed to rejoin their creator in eternal bliss, otherwise defeating God’s will. Augustine (354-430), however, reputedly “proved” that damnation is eternal, holding that the Original Sin of sex blighted all humanity, only those “delivered by mercy and undeserved grace” escaping punishment. Heretics and the unbaptized were doomed, although babies who died before baptism might be sent to Purgatory. The Catholic Church sainted Augustine for his propositions but repeatedly posthumously damned Origen.

Meanwhile, descriptions of Hell became ever more detailed,

as in the apocryphal Apocalypse of Paul, “found” in 388, envisioning “rivers of fire in addition to pits of fire, snow, and blood and ... worms, beasts, and avenging angels with instruments of tor-



ture... and a narrow, stinking, fiery pit reserved for unbelievers, and in it is ‘the worm that does not sleep’” (ibid. 86-87). Unbelievers were a favorite target for infernal punishment by Christian scribes, such as the

12th century Irish monk who wrote *The Vision of Tundal*, wherein they are chivied “by fiends with iron hooks and forks” (ibid. 98).

Hell, as Turner points out, was the great weapon of the clergy (p. 112) in their bid to retain power over society; but skepticism persisted all along about both the afterlife and Hell in particular. Dante’s detailed description of his journey into Hell in *The Divine Comedy* (1314) “made it possible to think of [Hell] in fictional or allegorical terms.” (p. 143). Even after the dominance of the Catholic Church in Europe was largely broken by the Protestant revolt initiated by Martin Luther in 1517, however, it remained dangerous to openly admit to disbelief in god or any part of the Bible, as the faithful would surely create Hell on Earth for any such foolhardy freethinkers.

But then the faithful regularly made life Hell for one another as well, century after century, even to the present, admittedly with political dogma and rabid tribalism adding to the toxic social brew. Fortunately, with the spread of the ideals of the 18th century enlightenment, religious authority has declined in much of the world, so at least in 21st century America, I don’t have to worry about my living body being burned by the state for my disbelief. My dead soul will just have to take its chances with those fiends and their iron hooks and forks and that sleepless worm in the fiery pit.



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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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September Social

Where: OLIVE GARDEN on Philips Highway, near the Avenues Mall.

When: Tuesday September 23, 2008 at 6:00 p.m. Proceed directly to our room. Drinks at 6:00. Dinner at 7:00. (Order from the menu.)

RSVP: CarrieRen@att.net (or 268-8826) by **Tues. a.m.**, if you plan to go!

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2009 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) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family (\$45/yr.) | | |

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 September 2008 Activities

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15 Public Meeting	16	17	18	19	20
21 Book Group	22	23 Olive Garden	24	25	26	27 Article Deadline
28 Secular Sunday	29	30				

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

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