

FIRST COAST FREETHOUGHT SOCIETY, INC.

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."

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The First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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April 2009

Volume 7, Issue 4

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Why should we continue to prohibit pastors from preaching politics from the pulpit?

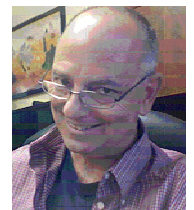
Ken Hurley

There are federal regulations that purport to prevent pastors from intervening or participating in political campaigns and endorsing political candidates.

Why shouldn't pastors and other clergy be afforded the same First Amendment rights as the rest of us? Why? Because they evoke claims of gods? Claims of Biblical truths? Should we use the weight and power of our government to deny the ability to speak politics from the

pulpit? Why is the "fire and brimstone" brand of political pabulum any different than your brand of political pabulum? Why are politically partisan messages delivered to congregants a flagrant violation of IRS rules? Who should decide who gets to

damn wall? There is a wall erected to keep the church and the state apart, right?



Religious organizations were free to preach about candidates from the inception of our country until 1954. So what happened in 1954? (I was born... But that is another matter.) 1954 is when an IRS rule known as the "Johnson Amendment" was enacted. Named after then Senator Lyndon Johnson whose

Let's stop pretending that the religious leaders do not preach their brand of politics from the pulpit. They do.

AND, what about the

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"Science has proof without any certainty. Creationists have certainty without any proof."

—Ashley Montague
Anthropologist

April 2009 Meeting

Ken Hurley, co-founder and director of Civication, Inc.

"Idiots, Activist Judges, Civics, and the U.S. Supreme Court"

Monday, April 20, 2009, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

(In the Sanctuary, upper parking lot level • Doors open at 6:00)

Unitarian Universalist Church • 7405 Arlington Expressway • Jacksonville, FL

HUMANIST BOOK DISCUSSION GROUP

- When:** 2:00 p.m., the first Sunday of each month.
- Where:** Borders Books, 8801 Southside Blvd., 519-6500, books are usually in stock.
- What:** Books/magazines planned for discussion:



- April 5, 2009 - Bring in an article on topics involving humanism, skepticism and issues on the separation of church and state from any magazine or other periodical of your choice.
- May 3, 2009 - *1434: The Year a Magnificent Chinese Fleet Sailed to Italy and Ignited the Renaissance*, by Gavin Menzies.

In Menzies's previous book, *1421: The Year China Discovered America*, the amateur historian advanced a highly controversial hypothesis, that the Chinese discovered America. In this followup, he credits the Renaissance not to classical Greek and Roman ideals (a "Eurocentric view of history") but again to the Chinese. His thesis in both works is based on the seven (historically undisputed) voyages undertaken by a large Chinese sailing fleet between 1405 and 1433. While it is known that they traveled as far as East Africa, Menzies believes that they landed in Italy and sent a delegation to the Council of Venice, held in Florence in 1439. There, according to Menzies, they provided the knowledge and technique introducing the painter Alberti, for instance, to the methods of perspective drawing that sparked the Renaissance. Whether you accept Menzies's thesis or not, his book is sure to inspire a lively discussion.

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, <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/index.html> 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 free of charge, 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 that stimulate thought and promote 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.

Pabulum, Politics, and the Pulpit

(Continued from page 1)

personal political ambitions caused him to seek the inclusion of the gag rule language on pastors in the pulpit in the IRS code in exchange for continued tax exemption status. Religious organizations want exemption from taxation under the principle that there is no surer way to destroy religion than to tax it.

Additionally, who wants to pay taxes if they don't have to?

Even the long-ago, late Chief Justice Marshall, in *McCulloch v. Maryland*, 17 U.S. 316 (1819), when writing the majority opinion, said, "the power to tax involves the power to destroy... Not necessarily and unavoidably destroy." But, according to the Chief, taxes can destroy.

The effect of the Johnson Amendment is that pastors are muzzled for fear of investigation by the IRS resulting in the loss of their tax exempt status. Hooray! Right? Or, maybe not so fast...

Another late Chief Justice, John Rehnquist, said, "The 'wall of separation between Church and State' is a metaphor based on bad history, ...a metaphor which has proved useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly and explicitly abandoned."

(Tear down this wall...echoes Ronald Reagan.)

Rehnquist could not find "separation of church and state" anywhere in the First Amendment. (He spent weeks looking too.) He believed the establishment clause was intended only to prevent the establishment of a national church

and to stop the federal government from asserting a preference for one religious denomination over others. His view, shared by many, would also mean that government could promote religion generally—though where Rehnquist would draw the line wasn't clear. He didn't include atheists, agnostics, agnostimists¹, nonbelievers, humanists, and the rest.

We know that the framers of our Constitution disagreed about what "no establishment" should mean. Jefferson and Madison wanted to prevent government entanglement

compassing than merely not establishing a national church.

The Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause are mutually exclusive opposites that have caused our courts to rule that government should remain neutral on matters of religion by not promoting one religion over another religion or religion over non-religion... Boring. Yawn. Quaint. Not reality.

It may be time for some real fun. Let the religious leaders spew their pulpit political pabulum as far as they can. Let others spew their anti-pulpit political pabulum as far

as they can. Let's engage in a big political pabulum pukefest and may the best ideas win the hearts and minds of the public and policy makers. What better way to expose folly and hope for a good idea to emerge. That's free speech—I confess, a bit messy, too.

Let's stop pretending that the religious leaders do not preach their brand of politics from the pulpit. They do. They're

not supposed to according to the IRS codes, and some religious organizations have lost their tax-exempt status for not complying.

One more thing... isn't it time to tax religion? It's big business. Tax it and maybe we'll see if Chief Justice Marshall was right.

¹agnostimist: one who can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God, BUT is hoping for the best.

—Ken Hurley is a founder and director of Civication, Inc. a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting civics education and civil responsibility.



with religion, while others wanted the federal government to keep out of state establishments already in place. There were some who would have offered hugs and kisses to get the words Jesus Christ somewhere in the Constitution.

The Constitution itself is a compromise that meant different things to different framers as it means different things to different people today. Want proof? Read the opinions of Justice Scalia and Justice Ginsburg.

As it is, the word "establishment" in the First Amendment is a noun referencing an already established religion and is far more en-



What is so holy about the Bible?

Sigrun Buckley

On the eve of Darwin’s 200th birthday, National Public Radio aired an interview with Darwin’s great-great-grandson, Matthew Chapman, on “Talk of the Nation.” (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100333722>). He is a writer and filmmaker who also covered the Dover monkey trial in Pennsylvania for *Harper’s Magazine* in 2006. The United Kingdom commemorates Darwin’s 200th birthday by including BBC documentaries on his discoveries, stamps, coins, even quilting groups, marking the occasion. Initial reluctance in theological and scientific quarters over Darwin’s discoveries was overcome pretty quickly, Chapman said, and Darwin’s theory has become part of the wallpaper of history. In the USA, however, four in ten Americans don’t “believe” in evolution, not only rejecting but even reviling its concept. Chapman is always amazed by what Americans believe, be that astrology or creationism. “How can people believe in things without evidence?” How indeed?

Which leads me to an unchallenged core belief of Christianity, the oh-so-holy Bible—a book believed to be the true word of God, even verbatim, by some faithful.

If you take obligatory history or exegesis classes as part of the theological curriculum at university, an inquisitive mind will stumble over authorship and authenticity and will be left with more questions than answers.

The four or canonical Gospels

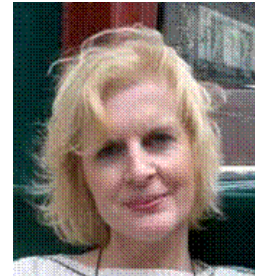
were presumably written between AD 65 and 100 by people unknown, after decades of oral tradition. They were quoted anonymously for the first half of the second century (i.e. 100-150). Then, the names by which they are currently known appear suddenly around the year 180; the Gospels have been attributed to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John to give their writings more authority and validity.

For about 300 years, there was no such thing as the Bible. The traditional, circulating stories about Jesus or Yahweh which eventually made it into the now existing form of the King James Bible and which were left out, suppressed, or banned, make for an interesting foray into the political and sociological field.

To an investigative mind, the Bible appears a random selection of books based on the opinion of one man at a time, who was not interested in accurate, historic, journalistic-like recordings of acts that happened.

The first attempt at compiling biblical stories was made by a wealthy shipping magnate of Pontus by the name of Marcian who became a catalyst among church leaders. A Roman Christian, heavily influenced by Gnosticism, Marcian was startled by many things about the God in the Hebrew bible. He didn’t believe that this God was the same as the one of Jesus’ teachings: Yahweh in the Old Testament was vengeful, wrathful; the God of the New Testament was merciful and loving. He considered only Luke’s gospel and Paul’s let-

ters worthy of inclusion. Since the new Christianity should have a bible of its own, he excluded the Old Testament from his compilation.



A variety of manuscripts and oral traditions circulated individually in different communities. Later, church fathers created their own lists and decided what was to be included and what was to be left out, e.g., the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Timothy and Paul were added over time. One hundred years later, there was still no canonized Bible.

That changed with Emperor Constantine. The story goes that he had a vision of Jesus on the cross that would let him conquer Rome in the name of Jesus. When he became the sole Emperor of Rome, defeating pagan civilizations, different Jewish and diverse Christian groups, he realized he needed unity and order in his newly established empire. No better way to achieve that than by a unifying religion. The Church became, on the one hand, a blending of pagan and Christian beliefs to unite these two opposing religions and, on the other hand, a complete reformation of existing Christian beliefs by declaring all those beliefs illegal.

On 28 Oct, 312, Constantine convened the First Council of Nicaea in present-day Turkey. The Council was historically significant as the first effort to attain consensus in the church through an assembly representing all of Christ-

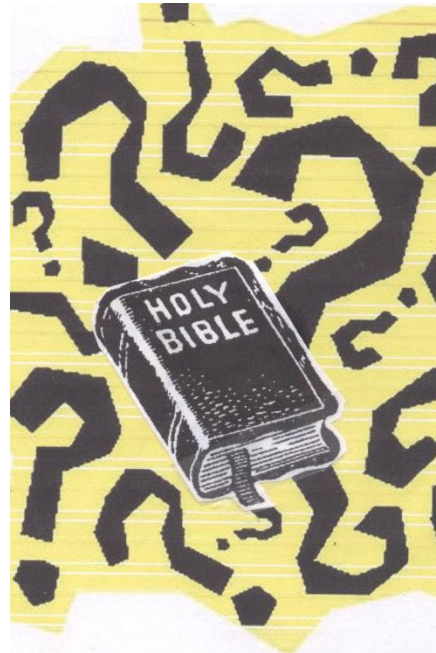
dom. One of the big controversies, however, was over the nature of Jesus and his relationship with God: Was Jesus the highest created human being (presented by Arias), or was Jesus both man and God (as claimed by Athanasius; both men were from Alexandria). Athanasius won the day, and the dogma was written into the Nicene Creed. A codex was put together, a canon of scripts that supported that creed and was acceptable to the whole church.

Six years later, Eusebius of Caesarea, c. 263 - c. 339, bishop of Caesarea Palestine, often referred to as the father of church history because of his work in recording the history of the early Christian church, was given the job by the emperor of compiling the Bible on parchment. Eusebius believed 18 books worthy of inclusion in the Bible, leaning on the list he had written in his church history. In contrast to Marcian's list, he includes all Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament.

Eusebius was aware that contemporary thought deemed the Apocalypse to be bordering on the heretical, that its vital imagery seemed to be at war with the savior's message: Do you really want damnation, hail and brimstone in the Bible? He disputed a number of other scrolls, i.e. Gospels of James, and Jude that were considered heretical. They were censured by the church and therefore not included.

Forty years later, a final list was canonized by the church. That's quick in comparison to the famous Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, written in Sanskrit, which took 800 years to compose and reinvent the storyline of Lord Rama and his battle over good and evil, and has been a canon in Hindu religion since.

The original Bible got lost as well as the list that it contained. Only two 4th century codices survive, Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus that is missing some pages. They contain the Christian Bible in Greek, including the oldest complete copy of the New Testament, again written in Greek. So



these are the canonical texts. This Bible, produced by Eusebius, is the same as that produced by King James (1611) with the exception of the New Testament Epistle of Barnabas and the book of Hermas which, though widely regarded as inspired, were purged before the 1611 translation.

The religion created by Constantine was formed by the "opinions" of Eusebius, a minor scholar, and there is no record of any reference to standards of historical research or textual criticism. His credentials as a historian have been questioned by the noted Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt. As a theologian, he directly affirmed his total disregard for honesty in his Evangelical Preparation by declaring, "How it may be lawful and fit-

ting to use falsehood as a medicine and for the benefit of those who want to be deceived," as well as, "it is necessary sometimes to use falsehood as a medicine for those who need such an approach," and "falsehood is something even more useful." He did not form his idea of what was accepted by using the books that existed as the foundation for that acceptance, but first created the religious beliefs and accepted only the books that matched those beliefs. Eusebius stated that the only standard he used in deciding which texts to call "recognized" is to accept only books that were recognized by orthodox authors that he knew. (*Merriam-Webster* defines "orthodox" as, "conforming to established doctrine especially in religion.") Eusebius determined the doctrine of the religion and therefore became the sole judge of what was "orthodox."

And then, there are the non-canonical Gospels and texts that date well back into and before the times of Jesus: a big number of manuscripts and scrolls that have been circulating around the Mediterranean, even into Ethiopia. In spite of enjoying huge popularity over centuries in wide parts of the Near East, they have been censured by the church and ruled out as apocryphal. Some interesting examples that have been ignored by the church and not canonized: The Gospel of Thomas gives the only account of Jesus' infancy—nowhere else mentioned but in the Koran. Another apocryphal script that deals with Mary's alleged perpetual virginity is the *Protoevangelion* of James. Interestingly enough, this story survives in the Koran, too, where Mary plays an important role. Muslims believe in the virgin birth of Jesus.

(Continued on page 13)

Variations in Marriage Provide a Guideline

Hugo Borresen

Gay marriage is the subject of enormous conflict today. Some people want to reserve marriage to one man and one woman. Others say that women should be able to marry women and men marry men. Votes, court decisions, and numerous print items are used to help people decide. Few take the trouble to look at past history and the choices other societies have made. Here, we take a brief look at history which may help the reader decide about gay marriage.

Some societies contend that the usual purpose of marriage is to provide for a long-term union between a man and a woman which follows customs and rules of society. It regulates sexuality, birth, and child rearing. It includes public announcements and rites, and it helps set the obligation of the spouses toward each other and toward the children. Children receive status and rights based on whether they are legitimate or illegitimate. It is felt that marriage should seek to provide a male father to ensure proper social and psychological development of children.

The most common forms of marriage are monogamy, meaning one female and one male; polygyny means one male and more than one female; polyandry is one woman and more than one man; and polygamy is two or more males and two or more females, often brothers and sisters.

Monogamy is most prevalent when the number of males and females is approximately the same. A study of 595 world societies showed polygyny preferred by three-fourths and monogamy for most of the rest. The latter often permits polygamy

by a series of marriages.

Polygamy requires wealth and is less common because each wife needs her own facilities and is usually more available to older men. American Indians carried off the wives of defeated tribes for themselves. The Blackfeet, for instance, needed women to prepare buffalo skins. Polygamy has been practiced by Muslims and Mormons, but Christianity has helped stamp it out, at least in the United States.

Polyandry is common among poor people who need brothers to support a family, as in Tibet. In Dahomey a woman can buy another woman to provide children with selected men and raise them. In India, some girls married at puberty, re-

The main purpose for marriage should be helping members of a family to care for each other.

turned to their female families, took lovers, and assigned paternity to the man who paid for delivery of the children.

The marriage partner must not be too close a relative. Opposition to incest is very common, except formerly for brothers and sisters of royalty or to preserve the wealth of a family group. Wife capture was common among some warlike peoples. This required help, so a remnant remains in our tradition of bridegroom and brides maids participating in weddings. The wedding ring is all that remains of the restraint placed on the wife so she would not escape.

Bride price is payment to the bride's family to compensate for the loss of her future children, sexuality,

and labor. It may be paid in three installments: initial agreement, when she enters husband's home, and when she has her first child. If she fails to have a child, the arrangement is cancelled. The custom of arranged marriages by parents still exists because the family is involved. But the new western concept involves romance and love, possible when the young people have the economic means.



Some rites are common. Rice is thrown as a symbol of fertility. Food and drink are consumed. The bridegroom breaks a glass. The groom places a ring on the ring finger of the bride. He carries the bride across the threshold.

Years ago, the Catholic Church made marriage sacred and indissoluble, requiring a priest and two witnesses. In Greek Orthodoxy, a crown is held over the head of the couple to show divine sanction. Protestants have similar actions and often use the Book of Common prayer.

In the United States, marriage is a civil service, and a wedding performed outside a church is acceptable. Participants must obtain a license from the civil authority, be free to marry (not a bigamist), of sound mind, free to consent, and 18 or older in most states, or have parental consent.

Some still feel the wife is obligated to live where husband chooses. The wife has to live with him, provide domestic services, including housekeeping, child care, and food preparation without pay. Each is entitled to exclusive sexual intercourse with the other. The rigid division of responsibilities has sof-

tened, but state laws are slow to change due to long tradition. Most states outlaw common-law marriages.

Marriage laws set some limits on emotional and sexual behavior in society. Old Hebrew laws made adultery, incest, and intercourse during menstruation punishable by death. Virginity was highly prized. The man divorced his wife with just a note. The new groom could avoid warfare for a year and had a year to enter a new business. Intermarriage with foreigners was discouraged. Rabbis counseled the couple before marriage, and divorce was restricted.

Teutonic (Germanic) law, like Roman law, outlawed polygamy, concubinage, incest, and marriage of freemen with slaves. The wife was bartered for, with the groom giving something of value to the parents of the bride after the abduction or elopement. Early Catholic law set high standards, continuing the requirement that the man be at least fourteen and the woman twelve. If not, or if either party was unsound mentally or physically, the marriage was terminated as if it never had taken place.

American law is influenced by England. The Catholic emphasis was dropped by Henry VIII. Secular courts determined valid and invalid law. Bigamy and incest remained objectionable because they discouraged people from marrying outside the family. Marriage is discouraged for people with epilepsy and tuberculosis or mental deficiencies, but



these are difficult to enforce. Marriage of blacks and whites (miscegenation) was made legal about forty years ago.

The anonymous author of this information in *Encyclopedia Americana* states Vermont made same-sex marriage legal in 2001, but this is very rarely mentioned in current news items. The writer ends with this statement: "Marriage law,

then, is a curious blend of modern social-policy judgments built on a foundation of historical practice. That they could be modernized and reformed to operate more efficiently and with less injustice to individuals and groups cannot be denied."

The main purpose for marriage should be helping members of a family to care for each other. The many variations and subtleties in past and current differences suggest that one form is not so much better than another, when local cultures and variety are considered. Furthermore, using the Bible as a guide is treacherous because it contains six hundred questionable instructions for people living two millennia ago. These include killing witches and owning slaves. As for children, they can be adopted, artificially inseminated, or provided from a woman under contract.

From this survey, we can conclude that many ancient customs, as well as archaic Biblical rules, still influence the "holy state of matrimony." Fortunately, however, social mores are changing, albeit slowly. Fewer and fewer people still condemn the homosexual lifestyle as "an abomination" as clearly stated in Leviticus 18:22.



CELEBRATE THE SEASONS

Paul Heck



For evening entertainment, our ancient ancestors watched the stars and the changing moon. They watched the sun rising from the eastern horizon. Primitive generations did not yet know that the earth was traveling around the sun, but they did recognize the varying lengths of days and nights. They knew that changing skies brought changing seasons.

The summer solstice was the longest day of the year. The winter solstice was the shortest day of the year. This year the winter solstice will occur on December 21. The vernal and autumnal equinoxes were the two times of the year when day and night were equal.

The moon changed from full moon to full moon twelve times a year, and particular stars clustered in the skies at different seasons. The configuration of stars was usually related to animals—twelve patterns of star groups, the zodiac. The zodiac means circle of animals and consists of twelve moons, half of longer days and half of longer nights.

Ancients made up stories to fit the zodiac displays. Mostly, the stories depicted the struggles of light and darkness, good and evil. Every biblical fable can be traced to the primitive account of the star-gazers. Fables, without historical evidence, were presented by religious leaders to their faithful supporters as facts.



Brief Bios by Borresen: Featuring Beth Perry

Beth Perry helped establish the First Coast Freethought Society. She met Earl Coggins at meeting of the American United for Separation of Church and State and discovered they both are atheist. Corresponding, she introduced him to the Freedom from Religion Foundation. Learning he was being transferred to Jacksonville from the Gainesville area, Earl wrote and asked Beth to help him start a freethought organization. He located names of freethinkers who live here with the help of a national freethought publication. Each one put up posters and flyers around town, and called a meeting and a surprising fifty people attended.

Beth is the wife of a retired Navy man which means she has

lived in Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, Memphis, North Kingston RI, Albuquerque, Oklahoma City twice, San Diego, San Francisco Bay area, Pensacola, and Jacksonville twice, 2nd time since 1958. She managed to earn two degrees in fine art and used that talent to pay her college expenses. She also raised three children and has three grandchildren. She was a Christian half her life, but eventually changed her thinking upon seeing the hypocrisy of religion.

As historian for the FCFS, she keeps a scrapbook of letters to the editor from our members, articles, and publicity.

Beth's worst experience was in 1949 while on her way with her two year old from Oklahoma to be with her husband returning from deploy-

ment. In northern Pennsylvania, her 1939 Studebaker broke down on the highway. With little money, she managed to get to a repair shop where the manager put the two of them up for three days while the car was repaired. An example of "the kindness of strangers." She says the nation's most pressing concerns are the poor economy, the environment, theocracy and terrorism. She hopes to be remembered for "a life well-lived, compassion for our environment and all living things, being an avowed Democrat, and a wicked sense of humor."



Beth Perry



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 a 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.

“Reasons to Believe” ...or Not by Gary J. Whittenberger

(This article reprinted from <http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/09-03-04.html> with the kind permission of Michael Shermer, Publisher)

On February 25, 2009, I attended a debate between Dr. Michael Shermer of Skeptic magazine and Dr. Hugh Ross and Dr. Fazale Rana of Reasons to Believe, a Christian apologetics organization that attempts to reconcile the findings of science and the tenets of faith. The event was held at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville.

Dr. Ross opened with a 25-minute explanation and defense of the RTB (Reasons To Believe) Testable Creation Model of the Universe and focused primarily on cosmology and physics. His talk was followed by a 25-minute presentation by Dr. Rana, who focused on the chemical and biological aspects of the model. Then for about 40 minutes, Shermer offered a general overview of skepticism and an incisive critique of the RTB model. This was followed by a Q&A session among the three panelists and then by a general audience Q&A session. Some levity was brought to the event during the Q&A by a drawing for door prizes by someone dressed in a gorilla costume. The gorilla gave away T-shirts, a skateboard, and even a flat-panel TV set, and fun was had by all!

Ross began by saying that scientists had finally and certainly determined that space, time, and matter-energy all began at the moment of the Big Bang. He didn't bother to mention that although this is a favored idea by many scientists, there are other respected cosmologists and physicists, such as Paul Steinhardt and Neil Turok, who contend that time had no beginning and is endless (see their 2007 book *Endless Universe*:



Left to right: Hugh Ross, Michael Shermer, and Fazale Rana

Beyond the Big Bang, Doubleday). Nevertheless, defending his own model of the universe, Ross asserted that God caused the beginning of time at the moment of the Big Bang. As other Creationists often do, Ross seems to ignore the fact that an act of a person causing something is itself an event in time, and so he

“...persons who wish to believe in God, especially physicists, will continue to pick out factors and constants whose values they assert could have been different, are very improbable, and must have been selected by an Intelligent Design or God for a noble purpose—the eventual creation of human beings. Now, there is a prediction you can take to the bank!”

backs himself into the corner of contradiction by implying there was time before the beginning of time. Of course this makes no sense, but Ross is unfazed; he simply imagines that there is a supernatural time and a natural time and supposes that this solves everything.

Ross and his RTB associates are fond of the hypothesis of the fine-

tuning of the universe, which is the modern-day resurrection of the design argument, which goes something like this:

1. If things had been different, then things would be different.
2. If the physical constants of the universe had been different at the Big Bang, then we wouldn't have life, especially human life, today.
3. The physical constants could have been different and all their exact values are, individually and taken together, extremely improbable.
4. Therefore, God exists because somebody was required to select those exact values of the constants for the purpose of getting humans later on.

The first two premises are reasonable, but the third is uncertain and the conclusion does not follow. I provided a more detailed discussion of this flawed fine-tuning argument in a 2007 issue of *Skeptic* (Whittenberger, Gary J. “The Dawkins v. Collins Debate: A Skeptical Analysis of the *Time Magazine* Debate Between Richard Dawkins

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and Francis Collins” Vol. 13, No. 2), but I want to point out what I think is another common flaw that I didn't mention there.

Ross and his cohorts first identify all the factors that had to be just right for life and/or humans to exist on Earth (he now says there are hundreds), they then calculate the low probability for each, and then they compute the extremely low probability of all these factors occurring at the same time or in succession. They perform this last step by the multiplication of probabilities. It's rather similar to calculating the probability of getting ten heads in a row from ten flips of a coin. In this instance you merely take the probability of getting a head on one flip (0.5), multiply ten of these together, and get approximately 0.000977 as the probability of getting ten heads in a row. In a similar manner, Ross takes the individual probabilities of different physical constants being favorable for the existence of humans, multiplies these hundreds of probabilities together, and gets an extremely low probability that all of these physical constants would all happen to be just right for life and intelligent human life. Obviously, an intelligent fine-tuner would be needed to cause this to happen, and sure enough, Ross finds him in the Bible.

But Ross and others are not justified in multiplying the probabilities because, unlike in our coin-flipping example where we correctly assume the independence of separate coin flips, they don't know that the individual physical constants of the universe are independent of one another. It could be that these constants, if they could be different from

what they are, are totally dependent on one another. Perhaps if one constant takes on one particular value, then the others must take on particular values through some natural law. At this point in our knowledge, we just don't know the relative degree of independence/dependence of these physical factors, and so Ross is not justified in thinking that he does know and that he can simply multiply the relevant probabilities together.



Raphael, Creation of the World, 1516

Ross and Rana proudly asserted that their RTB model makes predictions, like any good scientific model should. But some of the predictions that they presented at the debate were not very impressive. Ross claimed that he had used the model several years ago to accurately predict that science would discover more and more finely-tuned physical constants that could only have been produced by a majestic fine-tuner, and he claimed that this prediction will continue to be fulfilled. All this really means is that persons who wish to believe in God, especially physicists, will continue to pick out factors and constants whose values they assert could have been different, are very improbable, and must have been selected by an Intelligent

Design or God for a noble purpose—the eventual creation of human beings. Now, there is a prediction you can take to the bank!

In a clever maneuver via one of his slides, Shermer posed to his opponents a set of questions prepared for him by Sean M. Carroll, a well-regarded cosmologist and astrophysicist from Caltech (see his technical book, *Spacetime and Geometry: An Introduction to General Relativity*, published by Benjamin Cummings).

These were questions mainly about cosmology, astronomy, and physics to which science currently has no answers. Shermer asked Ross and Rana to make predictions from their RTB model about the answers to these questions; they provided none. I'm not going to hold my breath waiting, but if Ross finally provides the requested predictions, maybe we can actually calculate his rate of hits and misses over the next couple of decades. Here are Carroll's

questions for Ross to answer:

1. What is making the universe accelerate? Cosmological constant, quintessence, modified gravity?
2. What is the dark matter? Is there only one kind?
3. What is the mass of the Higgs? Is there only one Higgs?
4. Are there large extra dimensions of space?
5. Did inflation happen? At what energy? Will we see its imprint in gravitational waves on the microwave background?
6. Is supersymmetry right? Is string theory?

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First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
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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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April Social

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

When: **Tuesday April 28, 2009** 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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How did you hear about us? Comments? _____			

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freethought and secular humanism in this community
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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
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All inquiries are held in the strictest confidence.

What is so holy about the bible?

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The Gospel of Mary Magdalene was banned for its revolutionary ideas, i.e., the role of women and the relationship of Jesus with Mary Magdalene.

The Gospel of Nicodemus, who called Jesus an illegitimate child of Mary, lets Jesus descend into hell

by which he means a pit or darkness. Otherwise, there is no hell; according to Nicodemus, heaven and hell exist here and now. For further reading, visit: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New Testament apocrypha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Testament_apocrypha) will keep you busy all day.

To an investigative mind, the Bible appears a random selection of

books based on the opinion of one man at a time, who was not interested in accurate, historic, journalistic-like recordings of acts that happened. Proof of authenticity for me cannot be substituted by alleged divine inspiration.

It didn't take Divinity School to find these facts. The History Channel inspired me.



“An infinite God ought to be able to protect himself, without going in partnership with State Legislatures. Certainly he ought not so to act that laws become necessary to keep him from being laughed at. No one thinks of protecting Shakespeare from ridicule, by the threat of fine and imprisonment.”

—Robert Green Ingersoll, from [Some Mistakes of Moses](#)



FCFS April 2009 Activities

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

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

In the Adobe version, the links are **LIVE!** One click takes you there. If the two-line links do not work, copy and paste into your browser window.

“Reasons to Believe” ... or Not

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7. Explain something the Bible predicts that hasn't yet been found and will be completely surprising when it is.

Almost all arguments for the existence of God are based on analogies to human performance. For ancient humans the analogy was this: Humans move objects, objects in nature move, and so these objects must be moved by an invisible intelligence or designer. For the 19th century theologian William Paley, the analogy was this: Humans make watches which are complex, objects in nature are complex, and so objects in nature must have been made by an invisible intelligence or designer. For Ross the analogy is this: Humans fine-tune their machines for a purpose, values of the universe's physical constants are extremely improbable but consistent with the existence of human life, therefore the universe must have been finely-tuned by a hidden super intelligent agent for the purpose of producing humans.

During his presentation, Fuzale Rana continued this grand tradition of arguing for God through analogy by focusing on DNA. His analogy goes something like this: Humans create languages with orderly hierarchical structures, DNA has an orderly hierarchical structure, therefore DNA must have been created by an invisible designer. Rana said that a polypeptide is like a word, and thus somebody “out there” must have intended to produce that polypeptide just like humans on Earth intend to produce words to have certain meanings. However, apparently oblivious to the limits of the analogy, Rana fails to recognize that words symbolize (stand in the place of) concepts, whereas polypeptides do not symbolize anything; instead they produce chain reactions. Rana generalized

his language analogy by talking about information and codes.

During the debate Ross cited Bible verses to demonstrate how the model of the universe derived from God's Word exactly matches the model of the universe developed by scientists. Shermer pointed out that because he, Ross, knows the science, he is able to go back to the Bible and cherry-pick passages from it to fit the science. Of course, Ross denied this. When Ross is confronted with passages from the holy book that don't seem to fit the science, he reverts to the usual “not everything is literal” defense, or goes into a long-winded monologue on the etymology of Greek and Hebrew words.

As I listened to Ross and Rana, I was reminded of Shermer's investigations of mediums, palm and tarot card readers, and other psychics. They all seem to be playing the same game—the game of “Search for a Match Because You Really Want to Find It.” A medium will provide a vague piece of information, allegedly received from a dead loved one, to a subject who, wanting to believe that their dead loved one is living happily ever after and will be available for meet-ups later on, will search for a match of the information from the medium to anything in the known history of the loved one. And of course, the subject will almost always find a match, regardless of how tenuous or peripheral, because he/she really wants to find it.

Ross does the same thing, taking a piece of information from the Bible and searching for a match in science, and he inevitably finds one because he really wants to find it! At other times, he will take a piece of information from science and search for a match in the Bible, and of course, he nearly always finds one, even if he has to do some contortions with words. His own wishes and hopes (and probably prayers) that

the Bible and science are perfectly compatible, that God exists, and all is well with the world (at least for Christians) drives him to play the game.

One thing I noticed at the debate and at the Skeptics' conference on Origins last October, is that Ross has really good slides. Shermer has good slides too, but not nearly as good as Ross's. Ross's slides are the best I have ever seen and they are likely to influence the naive, the uneducated, the wishful thinkers, and those unmotivated to dig below the surface. I guess it just goes to show that even a dead man will look good if you dress him up in a tuxedo and you don't look too closely. We need to dig below the surface, to go beyond the fancy slides, as Shermer did at the debate. Eventually somebody will need to read all of Ross's books and provide a comprehensive critique of his RTB model; this project itself will require an entire book. It seems to me that such a critique could proceed in two steps. The first step would be to show how the model fails on scientific and philosophical grounds, regardless of its origin, i.e. whether or not it came from the Bible. The second step would be to show how, in a comprehensive and not cherry-picking way, the model does not match up well with the Bible. The first step would seem to be the more important step, for if the model is fatally flawed scientifically and philosophically, which it seems to be, who would really care if it matched up well with the Bible or not?

—Gary Whittenberger is a freelance writer and psychologist, living in Tallahassee, Florida. He received his doctoral degree from Florida State University after which he worked for 23 years as a psychologist in prisons. He has published many articles on science, philosophy, psychology, and religion, and their intersection.

