

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."

Post Office Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591
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The First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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First Coast

FreeThinker



The Newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

July 2010

Volume 8, Issue 7

Inside this issue:

The Power of Fleas and the Plague	4
Some Free-thoughts from the Founding Fathers	6
NPR Corporate Sponsorship Fundraising is Going Great	10

“Gods are fragile things; they may be killed by a whiff of science or a dose of common sense.”
—Chapman Cohen

President’s Message - July 2010

Earl Coggins

In an article regarding opposition to a proposed mosque in Staten Island, New York (Friday, June 11 *New York Times*, page A24), the author, Paul Vitello, writes, “But the objections have focused overwhelmingly

on more intangible and volatile issues: fear of terrorism, distrust of Islam, and a linkage of the two in opponents’ minds.”

agree that every terrorist, past and present,



“We may not like what some people think or say, but we cannot deny people the right to free thinking and free speech.”

has come out of a mosque?” The meeting was convened on Staten Island to address representatives of a group wanting to convert an empty Roman Catholic convent into a mosque.

In the *Times* article, Vitello quotes a woman at a civic association meeting who asked, “Wouldn’t you

(Continued on page 3)

July 2010 Meeting

Justin DePlato, Ph.D., Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of North Florida

“Christian Roots of the U. S. Constitution—Real or Imagined?”

Monday, July 19, 2010, 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: BARNES & NOBLE, 11112 San Jose Blvd., Jax • 904-886-9904

What: Books planned for discussion:

- August 1, 2010 - *Rigging the Game* by Michael Schwalbe
- September 5, 2010 - *Hot, Flat and Crowded* by Thomas L. Friedman



Books may be found in the library, may be purchased from local book stores, or purchased online. The First Coast Freethought Society will receive a small remuneration from your purchase (at no additional cost to you) if you first go to <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/> and then click the link to Amazon.com for your purchase.

In *Rigging the Game: How Inequality Is Reproduced in Everyday Life*, a brief, accessible introduction to the study of inequality in American society, Michael Schwalbe investigates how inequality is both created and reproduced. Guided by the questions *How did the situation get this way?* and *How does it stay this way?*, Schwalbe tracks inequality from its roots to its regulation. In the final chapter, "Escaping the Inequality Trap," he also shows how inequality can be overcome. Throughout, Schwalbe's engaging writing style draws students into the material, providing instructors with a solid foundation for discussing this challenging and provocative subject. (From the description by Oxford University Press)

More info, contact Jewell Kross at JKross@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org or call 904-996-1553.

First Coast FreeThinker

The *First Coast FreeThinker* is published for all freethinkers and potential freethinkers. Nonmembers may receive the e-mail version indefinitely. Nonmembers may receive three hard-copy 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 following month's issue. Submit contributions by e-mail or by U.S. mail to Hugo Borresen, 8831 Taurus

Circle South, Jacksonville, FL 32222.

ADVERTISING RATES: *Eighth-page (business card size) \$25.00, quarter-page \$50.00, half-page \$75.00, and whole page \$100.*

To advertise, contact Patrice Bennett, 904-352-7005, or PBennett@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

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*(President's Message—July 2010
Continued from page 1)*

Following this line of reasoning, am I to assume that Timothy McVay, Eric Rudolph, Laurence John Layton, and Ted Kaczynski were regular attendees at a local mosque? Perhaps not.

This is a great illustration of how thorny and complex the world of tolerance can be.

Tolerance is difficult, hence the title of T.M. Scanlon's book, *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy*. Scanlon repeatedly mentions that tolerance involves costs and dangers. I agree. A society deemed tolerant has done some extremely hard work.

Intolerance, on the other hand, is easy. You don't have to listen to the other side. You don't have to have any skills at empathy, sympathy, or love of freedom of expression. You don't have to think about anything other than the mantra for intolerance: might makes right. Intolerance in my view is synonymous with mob rule mentality and the tyranny of the majority.

Last month I mentioned my intent to explore the many

facets of tolerance. I hope everyone will tolerate this foray into the depths of what it means to be tolerant.

My first thoughts regarding tolerance are simple questions. Who? What? When? Why? How? In other words, why should we tolerate things which we find intolerable?



Anti-immigrant rally led by KKK in Gwinnett County, Georgia, February, 2010

How do we differentiate between tolerable and intolerable? Who gets tolerated? Who doesn't? What gets tolerated? What doesn't? Most importantly, who makes these decisions? Is there ever a time when you would tolerate something today, but not tomorrow?

The who, what, when, why, and how of toleration is a good point for analyzing the complications of the topic. Other

things to consider when contemplating the essence of tolerance are words like skepticism and open-mindedness. Skepticism of course, as opposed to dogmatism—and an open mind, as opposed to a closed mind.

Of course, we all want to claim to be non-dogmatic and open-minded, but are we?

Bertrand Russell is quoted often as saying that we see ourselves and our opinions as resolute and tenacious. People with differing views are stubborn and pigheaded. Russell is alerting us to be open-minded about our open-mindedness—which prompts me to be open-minded and skeptical about everything, even being

skeptical about my skepticism.

I will probably have more questions than answers as I begin this summer journey into tolerance. For instance, does tolerance mean accepting as equals those who are different, either physically, politically, or economically? Should society take a "live and let live" attitude towards everything? Should we tolerate the

(Continued on page 7)

The Power of Fleas and the Plague

Fred W. Hill

The flea, to paraphrase Bulwer-Lytton's adage, is mightier than the sword. Or, more precisely, a rat flea infected with *Yersinia pestis*, the bacteria responsible for the bubonic and other forms of plague, could easily kill an armored knight with one bite, but the knight would have been hard-pressed to smite the flea. Not that the knights of yore would have bothered trying, having perceived fleas as mere irritants derived from human sweat. In medieval fantasies, knights slew humongous dragons that endangered fair maidens or hoarded fabulous treasures, as in the mythic tales of St. George and Beowulf, but fleas were too tiny to merit much attention. Yet plague-carrying fleas would change the course of history several times, proving themselves far more dangerous than any dragons.

The damage wrought by flea bites that transmitted *Y. pestis* into human blood streams was clearly visible: enlarged and inflamed lymph glands, known as buboes, for which one of the most prevalent forms of the plague was named; black spotted skin; vomiting and urinating of blood; decaying flesh of victims who had not yet died; and

the people dying in agony by the millions. Yes, our ancestors who lived through the plagues that from the 6th through 19th centuries repeatedly ravaged large swaths of Eurasia and Africa, killing an estimated 200 million people, could see all that. Yet they did not know that the disease was spread by all those tiny fleas hopping about from rats to humans. They did not know that all that misery was caused by even tinier creatures, not only *Y. pestis*, but other bacteria too, such as *Bacillus anthracis*,

6th century, Emperor Justinian I was struck by the plague and although he recovered, his dreams of reconquering the western half of the old Roman Empire, lost to barbarian invasions, came to naught as the plague crippled his armies and reduced the population of his capitol, Constantinople, by an estimated 40 percent.



“Scientific research and applications significantly reduced the incidents of plague around the world after centuries of appeals to God and slaughtering scapegoats failed to accomplish anything beneficial.”

A larger percentage of the survivors died, unsurprisingly, as they lived and worked amid greater squalor and hence in closer proximity to more rats and fleas. Thus, there were labor shortages, such as in England during

the late 1300s, enabling the survivors to demand greater pay, fewer working hours and the freedom to seek the best opportunities for themselves. This didn't sit very well with elitists who attempted to force the poor back into place with head taxes and statutes setting maximum wages at pre-plague levels, requiring labor of all able-bodied lower-class men and women, and limiting their mobility. This, in turn, contributed to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, which

responsible for anthrax, another leading contributor to the Black Death, the pandemic that wiped out at least a third of Europe's population during the 1300s. All their swords, medieval remedies, and prayers were useless against those deadly microorganisms, too small for them to see with the naked eye and far beyond what their imaginations could conjure.

The recurring disasters did not discriminate between nobility or commoners, priests or laity, wealthy or poor. During the

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4) while eventually stamped down, “came close to bringing down the government and establishing a Christian socialist regime,” as described by Norman T. Cantor in his history of the epidemics and the social changes they incurred, *In the Wake of the Plague* (p. 24). Ultimately, the pestilence would change the old order, helping to bring an end to serfdom in most of Europe, and undermining the authority of the ruling classes who were revealed as helpless and incapable of directing divine interference to halt the onslaught as anyone else.

The true source of the plague being unknown, a variety of suspects were charged. Bad air was one, and doctors wore comical-looking masks, some with large beak-like protrusions, in efforts to avoid the disease while vainly attempting to treat patients. Intensely devout Christians assured anyone who would listen that the plagues were sent by a wrathful god as punishment for the sins of humanity (despite also believing that this same god previously sent His own son, who is also Himself, to be executed to assuage His anger at the free-willing ways of His creations; they were devout, not rational or

consistent). Cats were also blamed and slaughtered in great numbers which actually made the plague even worse as the dispatching of their primary predators in the villages and cities of Europe enabled the flea-ridden rats to spread the plague ever more widely. Jews were also blamed, igniting yet another medieval precursor to the Holocaust.

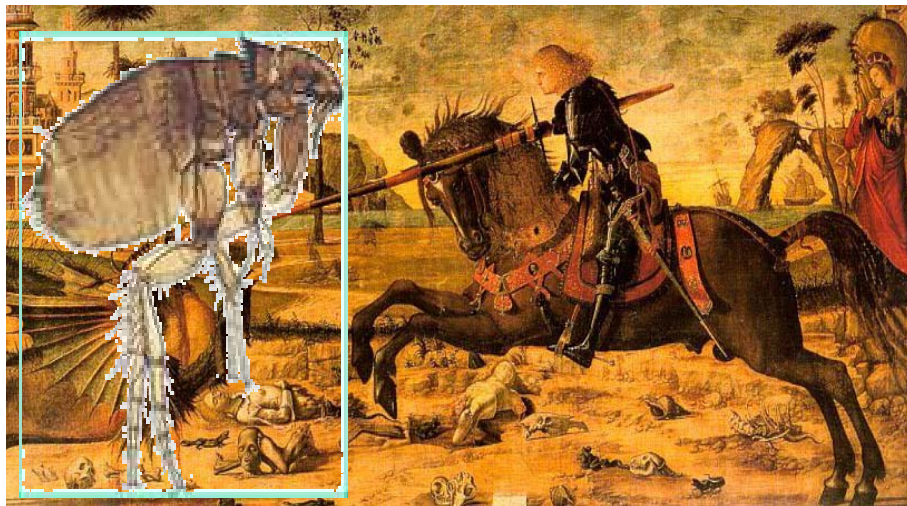
to avoid losing usually reliable sources of quick revenue, via loans made at interest or protectionist blackmail, from Jewish communities that thrived in banking and other occupations shunned by most Christians out of fear of committing the sin of charging interest on loans. Not that there weren't plenty of other secular and religious leaders all too eager to follow the

mobs in blaming Jews for the plague, sometimes as a means of eliminating Jewish creditors they were loath to repay. Jews were held suspect in part because relatively fewer of them were killed by the plague.

Laws passed by Christian

rulers barred Jews from jobs that involved mass production and transport of food, thus limiting their presence near farms, granaries, and wharfs favored by hungry, flea-infested rats. Further, by choice or force, Jews tended to live in communities separate from Christians, and the practice of rabbinical laws kept their homes rather tidier than typical gentile homes, further reducing their contact with rats and fleas. The ignorance of the Christian mobs regarding the plague was not bliss for either them or the Jews they unjustly blamed and persecuted.

(Continued on page 6)



A giant flea interrupts St. George's joust with a dragon

Rumors and false confessions drawn out by torture during the mid-1300s alleged that Jews were spreading the plague by poisoning wells. Christian mobs rampaged against their Jewish neighbors, murdering thousands throughout Europe, ignoring the efforts of rulers such as Pope Clement VI, Queen Joan of Naples, and King Peter of Aragon to protect them. These and other high-ranking Christians attempted to stem the violence, in some instances out of genuine humanitarian regard and respect for the wisdom of highly-educated Jews. More often, however, their motives were

(Continued from page 5)

Scientific advancements finally revealed the true cause of the plague. The first reported observation of any bacteria was made by Antonie Von Leeuwenhoek in 1676 using a single-lens microscope. Further studies over the next 200 years led to the advancement of the “germ theory of disease,” first proposed by Nicholas Andry in 1700 and given further credence by the research of Louis Pasteur in the 1800s. In 1894, Alexandre Yersin, a Swiss-French physician and bacteriologist employed by the Pasteur Institute, and Kitasato Shibasaburo, a Japanese physician, discovered the pathogen that causes the plague while conducting studies of an ongoing

Asian pandemic. Knowing the genuine cause of the plague and the means by which it was spread proved highly useful in finding means to treat the disease through antibiotics and preventing the disease by more effectively reducing the chances of humans coming into contact with rats and fleas, whether by exterminating the pests or enforcing greater cleanliness and more secure methods of food storage. Scientific research and applications significantly reduced the incidents of plague around the world, after centuries of appeals to God and slaughtered scapegoats failed to accomplish anything beneficial. Natural selection may have also played a role, as many of our an-

cestors who survived epidemics often did so due to a genetic resistance to the disease which they passed on to succeeding generations. Meaning we have evolved to increase our chances of surviving plagues. Of course, *Y. pestis* and other bacteria continue to evolve too, to overcome our antibiotics and genetic defenses. Fleas evolve too, of course, to survive our pesticides, requiring continuous research to find new means of eradicating the pesky and sometimes deadly insects. That is how the real world operates, whether we are aware of it or acknowledge it or not. A can of anti-flea fogger is still better than a sword or a prayer in killing those damned bugs!



Some Freethoughts from the Founding Fathers

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: “Without freedom of thought there can be no such thing as wisdom; and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech.”

THOMAS JEFFERSON: “Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blind-folded fear... Do not be frightened from this inquiry from any fear of its consequences. If it ends in the belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise...”



JOHN ADAMS: “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

JAMES MADISON: “During almost fifteen centuries the legal establishment of Christianity has been upon trial. What has been its fruits? More or less, in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry, and persecution.

THOMAS PAINE: I have always strenuously supported the right of every man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies another this right makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it.”



(Continued from page 3)

intolerable?

I think the last question is fairly easy. Yes, we have to tolerate some things we deem intolerable. Granted, we are not going to tolerate cruel and/or malicious behavior, but there are many things we will find objectionable that will get a nod to toleration.

Take for instance the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK stands for and advocates what I personally call disturbing behavior and I think a lot of people would agree, even perhaps with stronger descriptive language. There are many people

who don't want to tolerate the KKK, especially in a public forum. The KKK has applied for and been denied requests around the country for participation in Adopt-A-Road projects. Their permit applications have also been denied by various municipalities and governments to hold public rallies and marches. Is this an example of intolerance? What if a group of freethinkers wanted to do the same things?

A group of people loathed by more than a few members of the KKK thought these application denials were acts of unacceptable intolerance. That group of people turned

out to be the American Civil Liberties Union, more commonly known as the ACLU. Although hated by many in the Klan, the ACLU felt strongly that these were violations of basic civil rights, and I believe it is a great case for toleration. We may not like what some people think or say, but we cannot deny people the right to free thinking and free speech.

Voltaire is said to have said, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." I agree with him.



Ongoing FCFS Activities

Dinners for Doubters

Sign up to attend or to host a dinner yourself. If a dinner is scheduled, sign-up sheets will be found at the back table at the monthly meetings. For details on how this works, see page 7 of the July 2008 *FreeThinker*, available on the 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 904-733-5489 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 Carrie Renwick at 904-268-8826, or e-mail at CRenwick@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

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 Judy Hankins at 904-724-8188, or e-mail her at JHankins@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org, or leave a notation on a meeting sign-in sheet.

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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.

For other activities besides monthly meetings, please see the website, brochure, or newsletter!

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July Social

Where: OLIVE GARDEN on Philips Highway, near the Avenues Mall.
When: Tuesday July 27, 2010 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!

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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

2010 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? Comments? _____			

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.) | | |

Do you object to your name appearing on our membership list, distributed to other members? Yes No

I'm interesting in getting involved in the FCFS as a(n):

- General member Committee member Officer Financial supporter

- Annual dues cover the period of **January 1 through December 31**.
- The initial dues for new members joining in **July through September** are half the regular rates shown above. Membership extends to the end of the current calendar year.
- The initial dues for new members joining in **October through December** are the full, regular rates. Membership extends to the end of the following calendar year.

***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.

Upcoming Freethought Events of Interest on the First Coast

Monday	July 12	JAM Meetup at European St. Café, Jacksonville - 6:30 p.m.
Tuesday	July 13	ACFH Social at Gypsy Cab Co., St. Augustine Beach - 7:00 p.m.
Monday	July 19	FCFS Monthly Meeting - Justin DePlato, Ph.D. - 6:30 p.m.
Saturday	July 24	FCFS Deadline to submit articles for August 2010 <i>FreeThinker</i>
Sunday	July 25	FCFS Secular Sunday in the Park, Jacksonville - 10:00 a.m.
Tuesday	July 27	FCFS Monthly Social at Olive Garden, Jacksonville - 6:00 p.m.
Sunday	Aug. 1	FCFS Humanist Book Discussion Group, Jacksonville - 2:00 p.m.
Monday	Aug 16	FCFS Monthly Meeting - 6:30 p.m.

Ancient City Freethinkers and Humanists (ACFH) • <http://www.meetup.com/A-C-F-H/>

First Coast Freethought Society (FCFS) • <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>

Jacksonville Atheist, Agnostic, Secular Meetup Group (JAM) • <http://www.jaxatheists.com/>

Northeast Florida Coalition of Reason (NeFCoR) • <http://NorthEastFloridaCoR.org/>

The FCFS is a proud member of the Humanists of Florida Association
and the Northeast Florida Coalition of Reason

2010 NPR CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP FUNDRAISING DRIVE IS GOING GREAT

But we are not QUITE there yet! We need only \$655 more to reach our goal. We can do this! If you have not yet gotten around to contributing to the 2010 NPR Corporate Sponsorship Fund and you plan to do so, now is the time! Yes, our freethought message broadcast on National Public Radio (NPR) member station WJCT 89.9 FM, covering the Northeast Florida and Southeast Georgia area, will continue.

The Annual NPR Corporate Sponsorship Fundraising Drive has brought in \$3440 thus far. Subtracting that from our goal of \$4,095 gives a balance of only \$655! We are confident that you will rise to the occasion once again and insure that we keep our Voice of Reason alive on Florida's First Coast.

To donate via the FCFS website, click on this link. <http://firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org> or visit the website directly. If you prefer to send a check, please mail it to the FCFS, Post Office Box 550591, Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591. Thank you!

NPR-o-Meter

