

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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The Newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

August 2010

Volume 8, Issue 8

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President's Message - August 2010

Earl Coggins

I've been exploring tolerance this summer and as promised, I'm going to stay on course. This month I'd like to discuss open-mindedness, which I feel to be an essential component of tolerance.

are open-minded. It sounds worthy of praise, but what exactly does it mean to be open-minded?

Open-mindedness goes right to the heart of the scientific method,

istics of the scientific method is falsifiability, or in other

words, could your idea be wrong?

Open-mindedness embraces falsifiability. The essential characteristic of an open-minded person is his or her

ability to know always that any perception or

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“The essential characteristic of an open-minded person is his or her ability to always know that any perception or assumption might be incorrect.”

“Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.”

—Douglas Adams

I don't claim to speak for them, but I'd be willing to wager that most freethinkers believe they

another concept I think most freethinkers want to promote. One of the foundational character-

August 2010 Meeting

**Richard T. Hull, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Dept. of Philosophy
SUNY Buffalo; Author, Editor, Bioethicist, Humanist**

**“Marriage = 1 Man + 1 Woman
—or DOES It?”**

Monday, August 16, 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:

- September 5, 2010 - *Hot, Flat and Crowded* by Thomas Friedman
- October 2, 2010 - *Good Without God* by Greg Epstein



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.

The September book selection is “Hot, Flat, and Crowded” by Thomas Friedman. Friedman focuses on “two of the biggest challenges we face today: America’s surprising loss of focus and national purpose since 9/11, and the global environmental crisis which is affecting everything from food to fuel to forests.”

A location change: For September only, the Book Discussion Group will meet at the home of Jane Flesher. Jane says, “Join us for a “green” lunch of organic and farmers’ market fare.” Lunch and conversation will begin at 1:00. To RSVP for lunch and get directions, write 24peace@bellsouth.net.

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 Fred Hill, 1817 Egner St.,

Jacksonville, FL 32206.

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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Continued from page 1)*

assumption might be incorrect. Without that characteristic, I don't see how a person could claim to be open-minded.

In their book, *What Darwin Got Wrong*, Jerry Fodor and Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini open with what to me is a perception that not all people who claim to be open-minded can really lay claim to that moniker. Here is their opening paragraph:

"This is not a book about God; nor about intelligent design; nor about creationism. Neither of us is into any of those. We thought we'd best make that clear from the outset, because our main contention in what follows will be that there is something wrong—quite possibly fatally wrong—with the theory of natural selection; and we are aware that, even among those who are not quite sure what it is, allegiance to Darwinism has become a litmus for deciding who does, and who does not, hold a 'properly scientific' world view. 'You must choose between faith in God and faith in Darwin; and if you want to be a secular humanist, you'd better choose the latter'. So we're told."

This opening, although an introduction to their book, is more of a shot across the bow of academic and intellectual elitism than anything else. It also speaks to my inquiry into open-mindedness. In order to be truly open-minded, we must be willing to give everything away, even our most sacred ideas and perceptions. Is that counter-intuitive, to give up at a mo-

ment's notice a core belief? If so, then how can any person truly say he or she is open-minded?

In issue 47 of the magazine *Philosophy Now*, William Hare has come up with 10 questions and 10 (why is it always 10?) corresponding principles to help us determine our level of open-mindedness:



1. What do we really know about the matter in question? An open-minded person is guided by the evidence.

2. How reliable are those whose views we are willing to trust? An open-minded person seeks out reliable experts.

3. Have we tried to take into account our own biases and prejudices? An open-minded person tries to set aside any factor that might distort the outcome of reflection.

4. Is a desire for something to be true (or false) overriding our judgment? An open-minded person tries to recognize when belief is driven by desire.

5. Can we accept the possibility that many views that seem sound and secure today may yet prove to be false? An open-minded person sees knowledge claims as revisable.

6. What efforts are we making to determine whether or not previous conclusions remain tenable? An open-minded person takes steps to monitor his or her beliefs.

7. Do we see our views as open to criticism? Do we admit the possibility that those who disagree with us might be right? An open-minded person listens to opposing points of view.

8. Do we shut down in the face of the counter-intuitive? An open-minded person recognizes that truth can be stranger than fiction.

9. Are we ready to reject palpable nonsense? An open-minded person is not receptive to every idea.

10. Is our belief in the possibility of genuine inquiry alive and well? An open-minded person remains committed to the ideal.

My favorite is number 8. I think it's challenging us to be cautious about our instincts, which can often be very primal. Being open-minded is then about self-discipline — about avoiding the autopilot inside of us all. This of course reminds me of a bumper sticker quote, "Minds are like parachutes—they function only when open."



Southern Hospitality—Unless You’re One of Those Damn Atheists!

Curtis Wolf

One of the downsides of using public parking lots is the flyers that are inserted under your windshield wipers. Your car is a tempting target for low cost advertising of new restaurants, lawn services, and political candidates. So what was somebody trying to sell me when I pulled the unwelcome sales pitch from underneath my windshield wiper? Southern hospitality, of course. Well, as long as you are a good Christian!

Actually, it was more than a flyer. It was a newspaper published by the League of the South. It was titled, *The Free Magnolia* with a subtitle of *The Voice of Southern Life and Culture*. Having been born and raised in the South, I would ordinarily enjoy a publication like this. The first sign that my enjoyment may be short-lived was seeing on the front page articles titled “What is a Christian Nation?” and “Thou Shalt Have No Other God Before Us.” Don’t look now, but the door of Southern hospitality just got slammed in my face!

First, let’s take a look at the League of the South. Perusing its website (<http://dixienet.org/>), I determined that the League of the South is a Southern secessionist organization headquartered in Killen, Alabama. It believes that

Southerners are a distinct people culturally, politically, economically, and just about in every other way. The rest of the country has become a corrupt and immoral tyranny that has abandoned the principles of the Founding Fathers, and it is time for the South to fly solo. As interesting as is everything else discussed on its website, it is their attitude towards religion and society that I want to discuss in more detail in this article.

Their basic premise concerning the relationship between religion and society is summarized in the statement, “God deter-

based “evils” of homosexuality and gambling. Instead, our laws allow all sorts of debauchery that will surely lead to God’s revocation of the United States’ favored status among nations.



It seems to be the favorite strategy for Christian fundamentalists to argue that secular humanism is a religion like Christianity. Therefore, it is simply a choice between which religion runs the country. Sure, they are imposing Christian morality on

everyone, but so are the secular humanists who are imposing their own morality.

The problem is that this is a false choice, and it was not the choice envisioned by our Founding Fathers.

What they had in mind is expressed in this excerpt from the Declaration of Independence:

All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

“... once you open the door to freedom even a little bit, people have a way of charting courses with that new freedom that you never intended. That is the central problem for anyone contemplating a Christian nation.”

mines law and imposes that law on society” which is found in the article titled, “What is a Christian Nation?” This article laments the “fact” that the law being imposed on Southerners now is the law of the god of secularism instead of the law of the Christian god. The job of the government as defined in the Bible should be to restrain fallen man from all of his evil deeds. This includes the universally accepted evils like murder and theft but also the religiously

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Basically, the purpose of government is protect your right to pursue your own happiness. We are not talking about happiness as defined by others, but your own personal version of happiness. If that happiness is found in a relationship with someone of the same sex or watching a porn video, it is your happiness to define as you wish.

None of this suggests that our Founding Fathers would approve of everything that we encounter in our modern American culture. If they were alive today, they might very well be horrified at the prevalence of Internet porn or the drug culture in America. But they opened the door to liberty by freeing our minds and our persons from despotic kings and oppressive priests. As former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev discovered after introducing perestroika and glasnost to the Russian people, once you open the door to freedom even a little bit, people have a way of charting courses with that new freedom that you never intended. That is the central problem for anyone contemplating a Christian nation.

Here is a question to ask your Christian friends. In the book of Revelation, there is a period of tribulation followed by a thousand year reign of Christ. After that, the new heaven and earth replace the old heaven and earth as God and man live in a new holy city aptly named the

New Jerusalem. OK, so then what? Does everybody live happily ever after, or does the whole thing start to unravel when someone sins again and again and again? At some point, God could find himself very busy putting out fires as one person's sin leads to another person's sin and before he knows it, he has an out-of-control mutiny on his hands. So how does God get



“It says, We invite you to enjoy our famous Southern hospitality by joining us for fried chicken, cornbread, plenty of fixings and Christian worship, unless you happen to be a godless heathen, in which case you better get out of town before we lynch you and send you to Hell where you belong. Have a blessed day!”

around that? Does he turn us all into Stepford wife automatons who always say and do what we are programmed to do, without a hint of free will? I never got a good answer to that question, and it was one of the reasons why I began to doubt the Bible as a source of truth.

Christian nation enthusiasts would face the same dilemma in a free society like our own. It is nice for the League of the South to talk about free will and argue that it is not talking about a

Christian theocracy which is intolerant and oppressive, as it does in various articles in the *Free Magnolia*. But at some point, when people fail to toe the Christian line, you are going to have to bring the heavy hand of government down on them or risk even more flagrant violations of the laws of God. Sure, you may have some success applying informal social pressure in small towns, but in a large city like Jacksonville, where you do not have one culture but many subcultures, social pressure becomes fragmented as the subculture's values and mores become more important to the individual than to the broader cultural milieu. The consequence of this is that while the League of the South would certainly consider itself to be anti-Marxist, it will have no choice but to impose a social control regime that is no different from the regimented communist society in

North Korea.

Let's make no mistake about this. If you want to impose a Christian nation on the pluralistic society that exists in the United States today, you will have to stamp out freedom of conscience in a way that would destroy our successful experiment in liberty and self determination that the Founding Fathers set in motion over two hundred years ago. That is something that we must never allow to happen.



God Has Plans for Us

Fred W. Hill

A prominent belief of many theists is that everything happens for a reason—that God has a plan, and every event plays some role in it. A scientific view holds that while there is a natural explanation for everything that happens, nothing is pre-ordained. Natural events, whether a hurricane or childbirth, do not occur at random but are the result of a series of previous natural events, all without purpose beyond whatever sentient participants may provide.

I can plan to get up in the morning to go to work or meet with friends for dinner. My genes, however, did not plan for me to do anything, or to even exist, although without them, and without all my ancestors, human and non-human, there would be no me. Likewise, humans are not the ultimate purpose of evolution. Evolution has no purpose. We are the product of one of billions of possible paths evolution has taken since life took hold on this planet. Our presence has had a significant impact on many other life-forms, yet we are no more the pinnacle of life than is a bed bug.

Theists taught to believe that we are the special creations of God are unsurprisingly loathe to accept that they are not players in a divine scheme. Many feel highly insulted to be told that they are closely related to chim-

panzees and are even cousins, however far more distantly, to worms. Whether a homeless person begging for handouts, a multi-millionaire televangelist beseeching his flock for donations, or anywhere else along the socioeconomic spectrum, scientific reality doesn't suit their conceptions of self or the world. Most theists have accepted that they do not inhabit the center of the universe, but many cannot let go of other religious conceits. They insist that without some higher power, referring to whatever supernatural entity they were brought up to believe in, our lives cannot have any meaning.

"...[H]umans are not the ultimate purpose of evolution. Evolution has no purpose. We are the product of one of billions of possible paths evolution has taken since life took hold on this planet."

To listen to some, we are little more than meat puppets, our every actions controlled by God. While jogging past a church recently, I heard part of a sermon, broadcast over a loudspeaker, wherein the pastor insisted that God has planned every aspect of our lives: If you want to build a shed, God planned for you to build that shed and that's what you're going to do because that's part of God's plan." As a matter of fact, I did build a shed in my backyard in 2008, but I'd rather believe it was because I wanted a place in which to keep my lawnmower secure outside of my

house than that some ridiculously petty deity pulled my strings as part of a cosmic plan that defies all sense.



This theological determinist outlook, however, must be very reassuring to those who want to believe that *someone* is in charge, watching over everything all at once. This brand of determinism also logically undermines the notions we have free will and bear responsibility for what we do.

After all, if I made a bomb and destroyed that church, how could I reasonably be blamed if God controls my every action? And if I decline to believe in God on the basis that there is no credible evidence for His existence, then how can He justly condemn me to Hell when

He purportedly planned for me not to believe in Him? In this absurd scenario, our lives have no purpose except as God's playthings, programmed to believe that we are acting and thinking all on our own, yet doing what He wishes—only to be punished when He makes us do things that He doesn't like.

Many theists would regard the above set up as absurd as I do, but religious beliefs are so wide-ranging that theists could seek and find one more to their liking. They could even found

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their own religion with nothing more than imagination and charisma. They don't need evidence that can pass scientific scrutiny and objective analysis. Claims about the existence of God and posthumous rewards and punishments cannot be tested for veracity, and the survival of any particular religion depends only on the ability of its adherents to attract new followers.

Scientific ideas, in contrast, must continuously withstand rigorous testing in order to survive. New evidence and ideas, once tested themselves, may invalidate or modify old ideas. Darwin's ideas of natural selection invalidated the Creationist model which itself could not be tested and had survived for so many centuries only because it was an ingrained part of culture, but for



centuries it was a capital offense to openly express ideas that were contrary to biblical teachings. Unlike religious belief, science thrives not through dogma but by the continual testing of ideas, a willingness to accept new ideas that can be validated, and to toss out those proven faulty.

Events played out over billions of years, resulting in my existence as a person capable of rational thought. As far as I can tell, none of those previous events took place with the specific intent of me being here—or anywhere.

As with so many other religious claims, I can't prove that there isn't a supernatural entity plotting out my every move. Belief in such a creature, however, hardly adds meaning to life. We may be the only species that has ever contemplated meaning at all, and life has done fairly well for itself on this planet for billions of years before any humans came along. If I am a puppet, I suppose the divine puppeteer must get some jollies having me bite the hand that pulls my strings.



In Memoriam
Long-time member and friend of the FCFS
Johnny L. Cole
March 1943 • August 2010
To live in the hearts we leave behind is not to die.

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 or two. Note, if it's too hot under the pavilion, we take our chairs to some trees with a nice breeze. Mark your calendar. We hope to see you there!

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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August Social

Where: OLIVE GARDEN on Philips Highway, near the Avenues Mall.
When: Tuesday August 24, 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. 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.

2010 Freethought Events of Interest on the First Coast

Monday	August 9	JAM Meetup at European St. Café, Jacksonville - 6:30 p.m.
Tuesday	August 10	ACFH Social at Gypsy Cab Co., St. Augustine Beach - 7:00 p.m.
Monday	August 16	FCFS Monthly Meeting - Richard T. Hull, Ph.D. - 6:30 p.m.
Sunday	August 22	FCFS Secular Sunday in the Park, Jacksonville - 10:00 a.m.
Tuesday	August 24	FCFS Monthly Social at Olive Garden, Jacksonville - 6:00 p.m.
Saturday	August 28	FCFS Deadline to submit articles for August 2010 <i>FreeThinker</i>
Sunday	Sept. 5	FCFS Humanist Book Discussion Group, Jacksonville - 2:00 p.m.
Monday	Sept. 20	FCFS Monthly Meeting - 6:30 p.m.

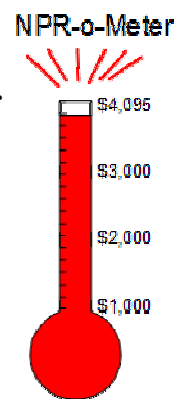
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First Coast Freethought Society (FCFS) • <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>
Jacksonville Atheist, Agnostic, Secular Meetup Group (JAM) • <http://www.jaxatheists.com/>
Northeast Florida Coalition of Reason (NeFCoR) • <http://NorthEastFloridaCoR.org/>

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

2010 NPR CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP FUND DRIVE IS DECLARED A SUCCESS!

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! Our Annual Fund Drive has been declared a success and officially has been closed. There will be no more calls or e-mails this year. However, the “NPR-o-Meter” is accurate. We did not QUITE reach our goal of \$4095 this year. We have received a total of \$3,780, leaving a balance of \$315.

Needless to say, if you planned to contribute this year but never got around to it, please know it is not too late. Also, you might consider using the Support Card included in each newsletter, where you can designate that your donation go to NPR. I am sure that we will reach our goal before the end of the year. In fact, given the current state of our economy, I would say that we did outstanding job this year, and I would like to thank every contributor very, very much!



—Earl Coggins, President and Carrie Renwick, Fundraising Chair