

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
Website: <http://FirstCoastFreethoughtSociety.org>

Telephone: 904-288-6291
E-mail: CarrieRen@att.net



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The First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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August 2011

Volume 10, Issue 8

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President's Message - August 2011

Earl Coggins

America is a Christian nation because it was founded on Christian principles. We've heard this repeatedly throughout most of our lives despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. We're all growing weary of its exaggerated and oversensationalized high-pitched hum—more of a thud, in my modest opinion.

be careful. Do your homework. The truth is indeed stranger than fiction. I often hear people, members of our side of the proverbial fence, declaring proudly their belief that the framers

fair-minded, and above all else, seekers of truth and justice.



Well, good luck defending that position. They were not all deists. They did indeed seek truth and justice, albeit a narrowly defined version of

those concepts.

It is equally interesting to hear the other

(Continued on page 3)

"The notion that faith in Christ is to be rewarded by an eternity of bliss, while a dependence upon reason, observation, and experience merits everlasting pain, is too absurd for refutation, and can be relieved only by that unhappy mixture of insanity and ignorance called 'faith'."

—Robert G. Ingersoll

"No worldview or religion could or should receive credit for shaping this country and its Constitution."

When addressing this issue, you'd better

of our precious U.S. Constitution were mostly deists, and more importantly, all claiming to be pluralistic,

August 2011 Meeting

"The Neurophysiology of Religious Experience"

**Elaine Hull, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience
Florida State University, Tallahassee**

Monday, August 15, 2011, 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: Books a Million, 9400 Atlantic Boulevard, Jacksonville
What: Books planned for discussion:

- September 4, 2011 - *The Good Book: A Humanist Bible*, by A. C. Grayling
- October 2, 2011 - To Be Announced

Books may be found in the library, 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://firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org> and then click the link to Amazon.com for your purchase.

Few, if any, thinkers and writers today would have the imagination, the breadth of knowledge, the literary skill, and yes—the audacity, to conceive of a powerful, secular alternative to the Bible. But that is exactly what A. C. Grayling has done by creating a nonreligious Bible, drawn from the wealth of secular literature and philosophy in both Western and Eastern traditions, using the same techniques of editing, redaction, and adaptation that produced the holy books of the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic religions. *The Good Book* consciously takes its design and presentation from the Bible, in its beauty of language and arrangement into short chapters and verses for ease of reading and quotability, offering to the nonreligious seeker all the wisdom, insight, solace, inspiration, and perspective of secular humanist traditions that are older, far richer and more various than Christianity. Organized in 12 main sections—Genesis, Histories, Wisdom, The Sages, Parables, Consolations, Lamentations, Proverbs, Songs, Epistles, Acts, and the Good—*The Good Book* opens with meditations on the origin and progress of the world and human life in it, then devotes attention to the question of how life should be lived, how we relate to one another, and how vicissitudes are to be faced and joys appreciated. (From the product description.)

For more info, contact Herb Gerson at 904-363-6446, or herbge@bellsouth.net

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: Freethinkers, let's get acquainted and enjoy intelligent conversation **every 4th Sunday of the month** (unless inclement weather prevails) at 10 a.m. until ? under 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 info@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org, or leave a notation on a meeting sign-in sheet.

*(President's Message
Continued from page 1)*

side proclaim how this nation was founded on Christian principles, as if to say that the framers of the Constitution—our Founding Fathers—were all members of the various flavors of Christianity available during the 18th century. That position is also equally troubling.

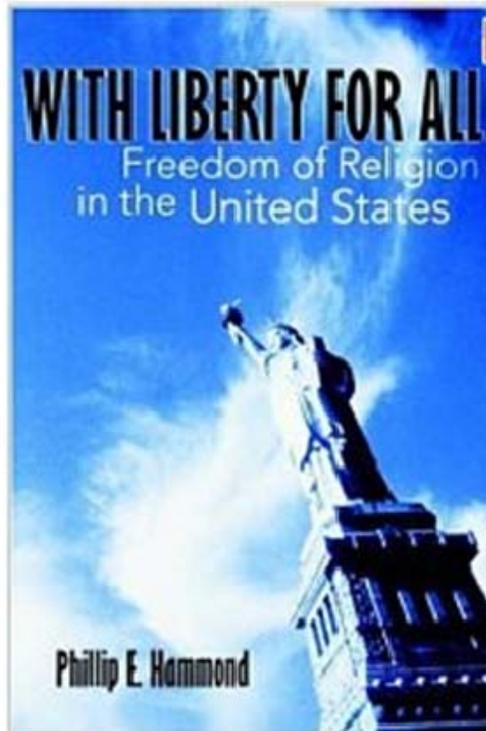
I have three responses to the claim that America is a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles. Number one is that it doesn't matter. The Constitution is the defining essence of what we call "founding" principles of the United States of America. If the framers of the Constitution were all members of the Christian religion, which all were not, it wouldn't matter. We have an overtly secular Declaration of Independence and a radically secular U.S. Constitution from the men referred to as the Founding Fathers, or as some of us prefer to say, the Framers of our Constitution. Where are the references to Christianity? There are none.

Some of these men, and they were all men, adamantly espoused the need for and justification of slavery, while simultaneously denying women the right to vote. Only well-heeled men were allowed to vote. The voting restriction placed on non-land-owning voters amounted to limited or unfair representation in Congress.

Despite their transgressions, they worked together with the goal of creating a new kind of government. Not all agreed on everything, but, as Benjamin

Franklin pointed out very poignantly, there was a need to hang together to avoid being hanged separately. And hang together they indeed did. Catholic, Protestant, Deist, Pantheist, atheist and many more all hung together and gave us a new nation, our Constitution, and a Bill of Rights.

When I hear an argument declaring America to be a Christian nation, my next two points



come to mind. I'm immediately wondering what the heck is meant by the phrase Christian nation, and more importantly, what does one mean when referring to Christian principles.

What exactly is a Christian principle? I always hope for an answer yielding an original idea. Perhaps that is merely wishful thinking. Are slavery and the suppression of women Christian principles? And prohibiting citi-

zens their right to vote based on land ownership—where does that fit into Christian principles? What principles are being referenced when someone refers to Christian principles? The Ten Commandments? It really doesn't matter whether the Founding Fathers used the Hammurabi Code, the Justinian Code, the Ten Commandments, Plato's *Dialogues* or, for that matter, Confucianism as an inspiration for the creation of our country. Their world views are worth studying and knowing, but irrelevant and a moot point when ascertaining the nature of the founding principles brought forth in the U.S. Constitution. Those principles are balance of power, negotiation, critical thinking, debate, consensus, and compromise—terms adopted by very few creeds and even fewer religions.

No worldview or religion could or should receive credit for shaping this country and its Constitution.

In his book, and I highly recommend that everyone go out, purchase and read it, *With Liberty For All: Freedom of Religion in the United States*, Phillip E. Hammond states, "Those persons who conceived of the United States and designed our Constitution to be its foundational document were, on the subject of religion, of one mind about two things: They did not want the federal government to sponsor any church, and they wanted citizens to enjoy maximum free choice in how, and even whether, to practice religion."

Enough said.



Dead Fish and Dodos

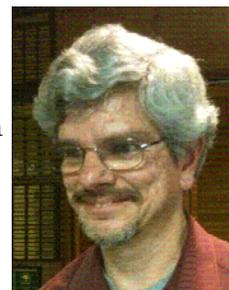
Fred W. Hill

According to biblical fable as related in John 6:5-15, Jesus fed at least 5,000 people with “five barley loaves and two small fishes,” filling them up with his magical capacity to make sufficient quantities of bread and fish appear out of nowhere to feed the multitudes, or else hypnotically fooling them into feeling satisfied with microscopic fragments of food. In the real world, however, while bread remains plentiful enough to be obtained without magic, numerous species of fish (and other fauna) are becoming increasingly scarce. The culprit behind their falling numbers, moreover, is not any supernatural agency, but one we might see anytime we look into a reflective pool of water—ourselves.

Religious doctrine once taught that no species could ever go extinct—after all, they were all created by God out of nothing and He, being such a good deity, would never allow any part of His creation to die out. Dodos, driven to extinction circa 1780 by human activity, might beg to differ if they could. So would numerous other species wiped out directly or indirectly by people, through overharvesting or hunting, destruction of habitat, or even simply by introducing various other animals, such as dogs, cats, pigs, and rats into regions where the native fauna had never encountered such threats and were ill-suited to deal with them. Passenger

pigeons once filled the skies over North America like clouds and their population is estimated to have been several billion in the early 1800s. However, passenger pigeons had evolved to become so gregarious that they only courted and bred in massive flocks, which would become their downfall when Americans began clearing the vast forests the pigeons depended on and overharvesting the birds for cheap food for slaves and the poor, as well as for fertilizer, slaughtering hundreds of thousands of them at a time. They were regarded as an endless resource and even as it was noticed that their numbers were declining, it was con-

are falling prey to overharvesting as well as by other human activities that have significantly changed the habitats they all need to thrive. These include the building of dams that prevent migratory species such as salmon from reaching their spawning grounds, industrial and agricultural pollutants that poison the lakes and rivers where they live and are creating ever larger dead zones along coastlines around the globe. Dead zones are created by an increase of



“Ultimately, every species will go extinct, even that subgroup of Homo sapiens with Jesus fish decals on their cars.”

sidered an affront to common sensibilities to think that there should be any limits on killing them. Until, of course, the last known one died at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914. God apparently didn’t see fit to ensure that that the passenger pigeon would continue to cheaply feed the poor.

Fish have likewise been regarded as a relatively cheap source of easily obtained protein, at least for those who live near rivers, lakes, and oceanic coasts. Numerous species of fish and other aquatic animals, however,

plant biomass in a body of water inundated with chemical nutrients from sewage and fertilizer runoff, resulting in an excessive growth of short-lived algae. The decaying algae, in turn, reduce the oxygen level in the water to the extent that fish cannot survive

and are often toxic enough to kill air-breathing sea turtles, manatees, whales, and dolphins, as in 2004 when a recurring algal bloom along the Gulf of Mexico called the red tide killed over 100 dolphins near the Florida panhandle.

Modern means of overharvesting, however, have been the greatest cause of the decline of fish. When Europeans began settling in northeastern North America, cod was bountiful enough off of the Atlantic shores to spawn fortunes in the fishing industry. Whales were also seen

in abundance—as Nathaniel Philbrick describes in *Mayflower* (pp. 56-57), the Pilgrims who founded Plymouth Colony were “astounded” by the regular sighting of numerous Atlantic right whales swimming playfully near the coast, frustrating the settlers who did not have the implements to capture and kill the enormous mammals which represented another means of wealth and would nearly be hunted to extinction within the next few centuries. The cod would prove somewhat more resilient, at least until new means were found to better track schools of the fish and to net far greater numbers of them, such as the use of environmentally destructive bottom trawlers which picked up hundreds of thousands of metric tons of cod and other aquatic species until they managed to put themselves out of business by the 1990s as the Atlantic cod fisheries collapsed.

Cod are hardly the only fishes whose number have gone in steep decline over the last century. Sharks are far less likely to take a bite out of any humans in their realm than to be slaughtered themselves merely for their fins, considered a delicacy among many wealthy Asian connoisseurs, while bluefin tuna are being sliced into sushi at such a rate to exceed any good taste, with a population decline of approximately 97% since 1960 (click [here](http://www.bigmarinefish.com/bluefin.html) or visit “<http://www.bigmarinefish.com/bluefin.html>”).

Many freshwater fish have also been in great decline as reported by *Discovery News* in 2009 (click [here](http://news.discovery.com/animals/freshwater-fish-population-decline.html) or visit “<http://news.discovery.com/animals/freshwater-fish-population-decline.html>”), noting, “In the 1700s, travelers described huge stocks of pike, walleye, catfish, and other fish in the Ohio River.” Presently, except for the most remote waterways, not only are the number of fishes significantly less but the size of individual fishes caught is smaller.



Given a chance, the numbers of fish may increase again, although while the human population continues to explode, it seems unlikely we'll be able to contain our massive appetites for long, despite any regulations enacted. Still, we managed to stop ourselves from wiping out the American bison, bald eagles, sea otters, and many other species endangered by human greed and environmental recklessness.

Ultimately, every species will go extinct, even that subgroup of *Homo sapiens* with Jesus fish decals on their cars. At least five mass extinctions occurred long before any humans

were on the scene, and more will occur long after we're gone. The most famous mass extinction was caused by an asteroid crashing into Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, creating a nuclear winter that killed off roughly 75 percent of all living things, including the dinosaurs, 65 million years ago, when our ancestors weren't much larger than shrews and were among the lucky few to survive despite being unaware of Jesus.

Having grown quite a bit since then, and with the help of much bigger brains and highly adept hands, our kind, according to a report published in the science journal *Nature*, has been recognized as the cause of a current mass extinction (click [here](http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/worlds-sixth-mass-extinction-may-be-underway--study-2234388.html) or visit “[http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/worlds-sixth-](http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/worlds-sixth-mass-extinction-may-be-underway--study-2234388.html)

[mass-extinction-may-be-underway--study-2234388.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/worlds-sixth-mass-extinction-may-be-underway--study-2234388.html)”). We have become not only the smartest animals who have ever existed but also the most destructive. That we can learn from our past mistakes may be a source of hope that our collective wisdom might restrain our baser instincts. Even so, despite the billions of humans that now inhabit this planet, we may well yet go the way of the passenger pigeons, done in by our own excesses and hence, the real dodos. Maybe Jesus might yet come back before then to perform another bread and fish trick.



In a Better Place?

Todd C. Bettis

Yesterday evening, I got home from work and thought to myself, “Ah, to relax and watch the news...” and turned on HLN. I shouldn’t have been surprised to see Jane Velez-Mitchell, broadcasting live in Orlando in front of the prison where Casey Anthony was being held until her Sunday, July 17th release. The caring, non-exploitative Ms. Velez-Mitchell was showing crowds of people with signs, chanting, “Justice for Caylee! Justice for Caylee!” over and over. As I sat there on the couch, any chances of relaxing disappeared quickly, as I realized that these same people angrily shouting for justice for Caylee Anthony would, if asked, surely espouse the

idea that they were sure she was in a better place, and God had a really good reason to allow what happened to happen. I’m always amazed at Christians who act in this way.

mouth duct-taped, and her body carelessly dumped, or, if you believe the defense, would drown in the



“As a former Christian, I find it more palatable and comforting to know that the universe is a random, chaotic place, and no god has planned my days.”

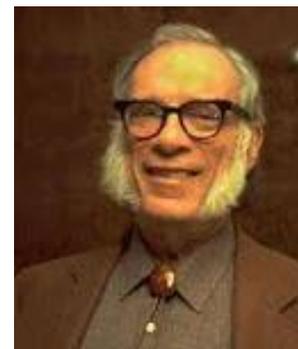
According to Psalm 139:16, David wrote, under the influence of the holy spirit, “...Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed...” (New Living Translation). So, god *knew* Caylee would be chloroformed, her

family pool. It was all part of god’s wonderful plan for her life! So, those people were upset that Caylee’s mom got away with murder and/or not reporting her daughter’s death, but were perfectly fine with god (assuming he/she/it exists), who could’ve done something about it (assuming god is omnipotent), allowing and/or planning the whole horrid death of that precious little girl.

I believe that we, as free thinkers, have a responsibility

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“I don’t believe in an afterlife, so I don’t have to spend my whole life fearing hell, or fearing heaven even more. For whatever the tortures of hell, I think the boredom of heaven would be even worse.” —Isaac Asimov (1920 - 1992)



(Continued from page 6)
ity in situations like this, a responsibility to speak out against such inane ideals. I remember talking to a Christian about Somer Thompson's death a few months ago. We discussed that god allowed her to be murdered and dumped in the trash, later to be found in a Georgia landfill, and I asked her how she could worship something that she believes allowed that, but could've stopped it. Her incredulous reply was that Somer might have been brutally beaten and gang-raped as a teen, and god had a better plan, who knows? !?!?!? It's no wonder that Epicurus quipped, "Is god willing to



Caylee Anthony

prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent." How

can people reconcile such an obvious contradiction in their minds?

As a former Christian, I find it more palatable and comforting to know that the universe is a random, chaotic place, and no god has planned my days. Instead of believing in something so fateful, I believe that I have a choice and can, in most ways, influence and direct my own life. It's much more empowering and helps make sense of sad tragedies such as Caylee Anthony's death. Perhaps by being a voice of reason, we can help people to come to know this, and to learn to think for themselves.



"There is not any thing, which has contributed so much to delude mankind in religious matters, as mistaken apprehensions concerning supernatural inspiration or revelation; not considering that all true religion originates from reason, and can not otherwise be understood, but by the exercise and improvement of it."



—**Ethan Allen (1738 - 1789)**

August Social

- Where:** OLIVE GARDEN on Philips Highway, near the Avenues Mall.
- When:** Tuesday August 23, 2011 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
904-419-8826
<http://firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org>

Statement of Purpose

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

Meetings

The FCFS meets the THIRD Monday of each month at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Jacksonville, upstairs in the sanctuary, 7405 Arlington Expressway, Jacksonville, Florida 32211, (904) 725-8133. Meeting time: 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Meetings are free and open to the public. Doors open at 6:00 p.m.

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

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Vice President	Carrie Renwick	268-8826
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At-Large	Fred Hill	358-3610
At-Large	Richard Keene	386-1121
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E-mail Secretary	Carrie Renwick	268-8826

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Website	Mark Renwick	616-2896

All FCFS personnel may be reached via e-mail at info@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

**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, 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.

Information for Contributors

We welcome submissions. Articles for consideration should be submitted via e-mail to the e-mail address shown below. Contributors who cannot submit manuscripts electronically may send them to Fred

Hill, 1817 Egner St., Jacksonville, FL 32206. The deadline for time-sensitive material is the FOURTH SATURDAY of each month for the following month's issue.

We prefer articles no longer than 1,000 words. Longer articles will be evaluated in terms of whether their importance and degree of interest to our readers warrant publication.

All accepted manuscripts are subject to editorial modification. Our style guide is *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Manuscript submissions cannot be returned. Authors are responsible for the accuracy of all quotations and for supplying complete references where applicable.

E-mail Address for Submissions
Editor@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

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2011 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
904-419-8826 • 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	August 15	FCFS Monthly Meeting - 6:30 p.m.
Tuesday	August 23	FCFS Monthly Social at Olive Garden, Jacksonville - 6:00 p.m.
Saturday	August 27	FCFS Deadline to submit articles for July 2011 <i>FreeThinker</i>
Sunday	August 28	FCFS Secular Sunday in the Park, Jacksonville - 10:00 a.m.
Sunday	September 4	FCFS Humanist Book Discussion Group, Jacksonville - 2:00 p.m.
Monday	September 12	JAM Meetup at European Street Café in San Marco - 6:30 p.m.
Monday	September 19	FCFS Monthly Meeting, Jacksonville - 6:30 p.m.

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**

Meet Our August Speaker: Dr. Elaine Hull

Carrie Renwick

Dr. Elaine Hull will be speaking at our August meeting, and her talk is titled, "The Neurophysiology of Religious Experience." Dr. Hull received her B.A. in Psychology from Austin College in Sherman, Texas, and her Ph.D. in Psychology from Indiana University in Bloomington. She is currently serves on the Neuroscience Faculty of Florida State University, as Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience. Dr. Hull is very involved with how brain chemistry affects behavior. To quote briefly from her FSU website, "Our research program investigates the neuroendocrine control of male rat sexual behavior. We have shown that dopamine is released in the medial preoptic area as soon as a male rat encounters a receptive female..." Included on Dr. Hull's extensive list of talks and address is a public lecture sponsored by the Center for Inquiry titled, "The Devil Made Me Do It: What Light Can Neuroscience Shed on the Question of Free Will?" (Maybe next year?)



Although many religious folks, especially fundamentalists, abhor and reject this concept, human behavior (and that of all DNA-based life forms as we know them) is the product of biochemical reactions (amino acids and other organic compounds, enzymes, hormones, neurotransmitters, etc.). It therefore comes as no surprise to me that the basis of religious experiences and experiencing "supernatural phenomena" is chemical. Join us on August 15 to discover the neurophysiology of religious experience.

