

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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October 2011

Volume 10, Issue 10

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President's Message - October 2011

Earl Coggins

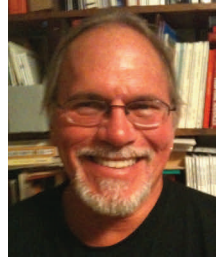
I recently met someone who interpreted my freethinking worldview with the following comments:

"I consider myself a free thinker in the sense that it was through much thought and serious consideration that I have come to believe that the universe has a creator and that creator is the God described in the Bible.....Would I be fair in saying that really, the only things that matter ultimately from your view are: Get all the pleasure you can, avoid all the pain you

can, live as long as you can (unless you want to end it all), and the only reason that you do anything good or bad is because it is best for you? Also, since there are no ultimate absolutes by which to measure good or bad, evil or righteous, then everything is subjective, and those with the most power and the ability to use that power make all the rules for everyone else."

This person in a nutshell wants to know where nonreligious people get their ethics. His narrative is full of a lot of things, but it is pri-

marily the perception that the ethical foundation of nonreligious people is rooted in a mixture of moral relativism, a narrow view of utilitarianism, hedonism, and narcissism—all with a pejorative slant—the central theme being moral relativism. This viewpoint isn't new. Nonreligious people have been labeled by their critics as hedonistic, narcissistic, utilitarian moral relativists



"The most ridiculous concept ever perpetrated by H. sapiens is that the Lord God of Creation, Shaper and Ruler of the Universes, wants the saccharine adoration of his creations, that he can be persuaded by their prayers, and becomes petulant if he does not receive this flattery."

—Robert Heinlein

(Continued on page 3)

October 2011 Meeting

"Reflections on the Arab Spring: What Do We Need to Ask?"

David Schwam-Baird, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of North Florida

Monday, October 17, 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, FL 32225

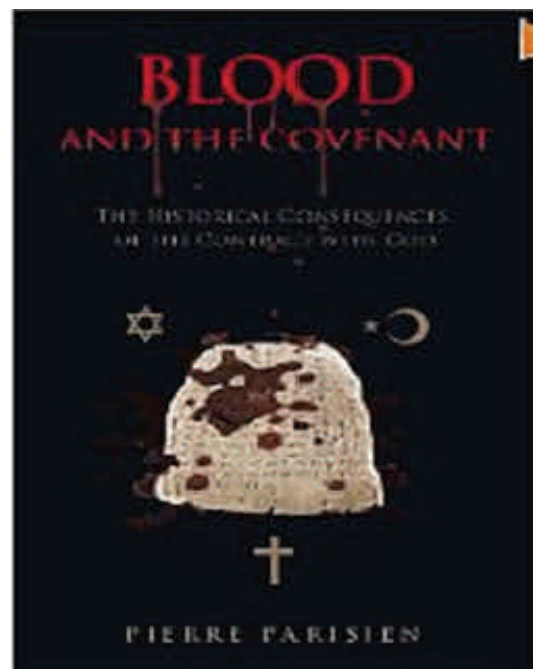
What: Books planned for discussion:

- November 6, 2011 - *Blood and the Covenant: The Historical Consequences of the Contract with God*, by Pierre Parisien
- December 4, 2011 - "2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal," an article by Lev Grossman in the February 21, 2011 issue of *TIME Magazine* (cover story). Link: <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20110221,00.html>

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.

Our October selection, *Blood and the Covenant*, tells the story of a mindset—the conception of a personal covenant between God and man—and the insidious consequences of this mindset. Author Pierre Parisien examines the history of covenantal belief and looks critically at two of its most troubling aspects: appropriation (the Promised Land) and moral dispensation (the belief that if you are doing it for God, then it is not a sin but a virtuous act).

Parisien traces the historical consequences of the contract with God, from the campaigns of Joshua in Canaan to the present manifestations of ideological Zionism. He argues that the course of history has been, in great part, a consequence of the original Covenant, and he charts the regrettable lineage of atrocities committed under the auspices of covenant fulfillment—including the conquest of Canaan to the hegemony of Rome, the rape of Northern India by the Muslim Sultans, the Crusades, European colonialism (which considered the entire planet as the Promised Land), Manifest Destiny, and ideological Zionism.



Wars, crimes against humanity, and genocide have too often been the aftermath of the Covenant. Will this woeful progression ever come to an end? (From the product description.)

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

October Social

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

When: Tuesday October 25, 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!

*(President's Message,
continued from page 1)*

all the way back to pre-Socratic times.

If you purchase the big box, there are a lot of colors to choose from in a box of crayons. When I think of moral relativism those crayons keep popping up in my mind. A lot of choices.

The term "moral relativism" is perceived in a variety of ways. In its simplest form it is merely the belief that there are widespread moral disagreements scattered throughout the globe. In other words, moral and ethical concerns vary from culture to culture, state to state, country to country, continent to continent, and once we get this space travel thing down, I feel strongly we will encounter an interesting ethical perspective from the little green people lurking about in other galaxies.

Another example of moral relativism is tolerance. We (humans) should extend a minimum level of tolerance towards people with whom we have moral or ethical disagreements. In other words, live and let live, give peace a chance, and all those similar catchy feel-good slogans from the counter-culture of the late '60s anti-war movement.

And last but certainly not

least, moral relativism proposes that the truth or justification of moral judgments is not absolute, but relative to any group of persons, whether it be a small group of friends or relatives, a large group of people from a particular culture or country, or anything in between. This viewpoint certainly does not negate ethical absolutes. It merely contends that when people band together to form a social or governmental group, they will almost always construct a personalized ethical

It gets interesting when you stop talking and start listening to the theories people have about ethics.

system of sorts, with rules (some absolute) regarding just about anything under the sun, i.e., when is killing okay, when is it not, etc., etc., etc. They might even decide that there are no absolutes, which for those of you who have adopted such an ethical viewpoint, I have a news-flash: It's an absolute.

The negative perception of moral relativism is the notion that it (moral relativism) equates to an absence of morals. This idea has many of its own catchy feel-good slogans, the most popular being "anything

goes" which essentially means that a person under the influence of such an ethic will throw care, concern, caution, empathy, sympathy, love, and friendship to the wind and do whatever he or she wants, with no respect for the laws of the land and certainly no respect for you or me. I haven't met too many people like this, religious or nonreligious. I certainly would not want to propose that the root cause for a person with no morals or ethics can be traced directly to one particular cultural background, or one particular state or nation. That would be absurd, would it not?

It gets interesting when you stop talking and start listening to the theories people have about ethics. Some say without a belief in a god it is impossible to have a high moral character. Of course, they usually mean the god of one particular religion — their own.

Most of us have heard the catchy, feel good slogan, "If it quacks like a duck, it must be a duck." Well, if you open up the "crayon box" of religion, you will find about 2500 gods crammed into that box, along with 2500 moral absolutes. Sounds (and quacks) like moral relativism to me.

Our world is very similar to a box of crayons. It's a very colorful place.



CALL FOR NOMINATIONS FOR 2012 BOARD!

If you wish to participate in leadership of the FCFS, contact the Nominating Committee Chair, **Bobbie Nord** (bobbienord@gmail.com or call 904-591-7636) to discuss running for a board position.

Perry Prays, Texas Burns, and God Is Mute

Fred W. Hill

During a family reunion hosted by one of my uncles who lives in a farming community in northeast Texas, he talked about the drought that had been causing hardships for him and other farmers and ranchers in the region. He had a herd of a few dozen cattle, but he would have to sell most of them because the dry conditions were significantly increasing the cost of hay he used to feed his cattle. That was in 2005. Conditions have not improved over the next six years. The U.S. Drought Monitor index for September 27, 2011, shows 86 percent of Texas, much of New Mexico and Oklahoma, and parts of other nearby states are under exceptional intensity drought, the highest level, based on several key and supplemental indicators. Possible impacts are “widespread crop/pasture losses; shortages of water in reservoirs, streams, and wells creating water emergencies.” (<http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/classify.htm>) One consequence is that wildfires have been rampant throughout Texas. In a press release dated September 6, 2011, Mark Hanna of the Insurance Council of Texas described fire losses thus far “already the worst on record for Texas.” (<http://www.insurancecouncil.org/news/2011/Sept062011.pdf>)

Whether the drought is part of a recurring natural cycle or

due to global climate change caused by human activity is still a hotly contested issue, even within the scientific community. Yet the drought itself is real enough that even climate change skeptic and presidential contender Texas Governor Rick Perry has responded to the crisis. Mainly, on April 21, 2011, he issued an official proclamation of three days of prayer “to humbly seek an end to this devastating drought and these dangerous wildfires,” urging “Texans of all faiths and traditions to offer prayers on those days for the healing of our land, the rebuilding of our communities and the restoration of our normal way of life.” (<http://governor.state.tx.us/news/proclamation/16038/>)

“[Prayer] is not and has never been a solution to genuine social and environmental problems, no more useful than a sugar pill is against cancer.”

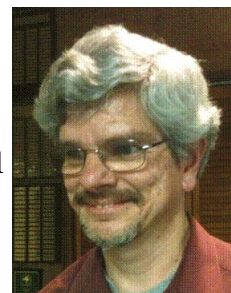
As the drought continues and the wildfires still wreak havoc over five months later, it appears God hasn’t been in a particular hurry to respond. Perhaps calling on Underdog will be more fruitful.

Naturally, theistic apologists have all sorts of excuses for why God has not answered what were likely millions of prayers for rain in Texas and other drought afflicted states where politicians and priests are likewise humbly attempting to impose their will upon their allegedly almighty,

omniscient and benevolent deity. The most straightforward explanation is that God did answer, apparently in an inaudibly whispered “no,” or, as more cynical observers of the increased intensity of the drought *after* Perry’s proclamation would interpret it, a shouted, “hell, no!” Since this clearly leaves millions of people, as well as much wildlife, suffering, this answer tends to undermine God’s reputation as a benevolent creator, as if all the previous natural and manmade disasters that have afflicted people of all religions as well as the irreligious haven’t already brought that notion into dispute.

Fundamentalists might insist the problem is that either enough people didn’t actually pray to God or God is just royally ticked off that all American children

aren’t required to pray to him in class every school day and that the United States is just too darned secular for his tastes, even though this is his specially favored nation. Pious Americans are being punished by God for tolerating secularists dominating the country, as Florida’s Lt. Governor Jennifer Carroll believes if taken at her words before a Faith and Freedom Coalition rally held before a Republican debate last month. “Christianity is in a fight and it is one of the greatest trials



we have seen in modern times. Without a doubt, America and her people are in grave need of prayer, divine guidance, protection, to have good solid Christians to step up and lead this country on a proper moral path. I firmly believe that if we magnify God, our problems will be minimized.”

(<http://www.rightwingwatch.org/category/individuals/jennifer-carroll>). I suppose her education skipped the part where the Black Plague devastated much of Europe when it was overwhelmingly Christian and publicly expressing any doubt about God or Jesus was suicidal behavior. Then there was the devastation visited upon Lisbon, reputedly one of the most staunchly devout Catholic cities, by an earthquake, followed by massive waves and fires that destroyed over 85 percent of the Portuguese capitol, killing at least 40,000 people on All Saints Day, November 1, 1755.

The calamities inflicted on devoted theists in old European Christendom and modern America may be due to yet another possibility, that God is testing their faith just as he once tested Job. As readers of that particular myth may recall, God and his buddy Satan wagered whether

Job, a deeply devout, very prosperous, healthy, happily married husband and devoted father, would still be so devout if he lost his health and prosperity, even suffering the loss of his children. Job endures much, seeing many loved ones die, losing his assets, assailed by a terrible skin dis-

right. Except, of course, God didn't bring back any of Job's dead servants and family – they just had the misfortune of being collateral damage to God's little game with Satan. Well, Panglossian believers insist, they all went to a “better place,” to be with God. Unless they didn't have faith, in which case they're burning in Hell where they belong.

Thus they might have wound up in 21st century Texas (all apologies to my brother, uncles and many other relatives in the Lone Star State). Prayer, admittedly, is a balm for many faithful in difficult times. However, it is not and has never been a solution to genuine social and environmental problems, no more useful than a sugar pill is against cancer. Believing that faith and prayer is the cure for

all ailments may even hamper efforts at finding and implementing real solutions. There may be nothing anyone can do to end droughts and global warming. Yet it's also possible that human activity is having a significant detrimental impact on climate around the world, and we may still change our behavior to reduce its severity. That won't happen if we do naught but wait for God to answer prayers. Even for Governor Perry, the hotline appears to have been disconnected.



ease before finally expressing outrage at the unjustness of God's behavior. His highly peeved Almightyness personally reproaches Job, perhaps from behind a bush, demanding to know by what right a mere simpering human dares question his vainglorious maker. A happy ending may have been added to the original story, as ultimately, at least as some Christians put it, after submitting to God's will, Job gets everything he lost back and more. So the moral is you just got to have faith that God will eventually set everything



Objectively: Ken Ham's Not Ashamed Sham

Sidney Monteiro

While looking at the Florida Times Union for show times for Sid the Science Kid, I stumbled on an interesting advertisement.

The ad for the event actually read, "Ken Ham & Dr. Gary Parker present 'Not Ashamed,' Defending the Christian Faith Biblically and Scientifically, From Evolution to Creation, One Race, One Blood, Reaching Today's Culture with the Gospel, Dinosaurs for Kids, at The First Baptist Church."

If you do not recognize the name Ken Ham, let me jog your memory: Creation Museum.

That was quite a bait tag line: this was a chance to see and hear unedited and live, the abysmal views from this man that I only read online, saw online, viewed on broadcast, and in the movie *Religulous*. This is as close to the creationist's Elvis as I can muster! It turns out that those topics were spread over several days for maximum impact on every possible age group. No child or adult was

spared!

I arrived in a timely fashion for the 6 p.m. event. I found myself at the tail end of a line of faithful attendees buying the DVD of the show that they were about to see.

I took a seat less than five rows from the podium in the main auditorium. The first floor was full by the time the baptisms were completed. The audience was comprised mostly of school age girls and about 20% parental units as

"The current states of culture of the races... is a direct consequence of whether the ancestors of any race worshipped the living God or deliberately rejected Him."

—Ken Ham, Answers in Genesis website

far as I could see. They were all instructed to reach for paper and pens to take notes of what was about to begin.

I listened politely to this very loving and caring gentleman spout his One Race One Blood concept underpinning one of the many books from his answersingenesis.com venture. The gist being that everyone was born from Adam and Eve and that God does not want Christians marrying non-Christians, plus the supreme gem to roll out of his mouth: "You shouldn't have

voted for Obama because he is black as we are all the same."

There were many collections of books and DVDs to be shamelessly plugged throughout the event. I give him and his editing team credit for good graphics and for having read the first two pages of any high school



genetics lesson, mentioning the 23 chromosomes, and then it went downhill fast.

I brought with me a digital camera that records both audio and

video, but video sales being the main course, I kept it hidden and only captured audio. (The video is actually a crotch shot!)

I take full responsibility: I did NOT connect the dots that present/presentation does not have room for Q&A at all.

After hearing the third heinous butchering of genetics, I made a move reminiscent of Tom Hanks' performance in the movie *BIG*: I raised my hand, and I did not

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

lower it as he avoided eye contact for minutes. Who could miss this hand extending six and a half feet in the air immediately in front of him, from a fat fellow's white Superman t-shirt?

Ken continued to dispense his fears as edicts from the deity. The first breath he finally took registered my echoing voice: I have a question!

The timestamp in the camera records the under 3 second response from the security staffer that surrounded me, squatted next to me, and

opened his suit as if in a cone of silence to muffle the conversation. The conversation is clear: "This is a presentation.

the "texting and video generation," plugging yet another essential set of dinosaur answers for kids, Ken introduced

Gary as an ex-atheist scientist that has seen the ways of the Bible.

Gary's delivery of disconnected stories about his redemption from the "don't have a clue scientists" while teaching solely at Christian colleges was as interesting as paint drying.

My bladder was full, it was time to leave.



Ken Ham and the Damn Dirty Ape who is immensely pleased to not be his ancestor

There will be no questions."

After a long winded presentation leading to a fast paced video meant to engage

I learned my lesson: no more road trips to the land of the lost!



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.

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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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

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 info@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.

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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 October 17 FCFS Monthly Meeting - 6:30 p.m.
Sunday October 23 FCFS Secular Sunday in the Park, Jacksonville - 10:00 a.m.
Tuesday October 25 FCFS Monthly Social at Olive Garden, Jacksonville - 6:00 p.m.
Saturday October 30 FCFS Deadline to submit articles for November 2011 *FreeThinker*
Sunday November 6 FCFS Humanist Book Discussion Group, Jacksonville - 2:00 p.m.
Monday November 14 JAM Meetup at European Street Café in San Marco - 6:30 p.m.
Monday November 21 FCFS Monthly Meeting, Jax - 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 the October Speaker - Dr. David Schwam-Baird

Carrie Renwick

This month's speaker, Dr. David Schwam-Baird needs practically no introduction. Dr. Schwam-Baird has served as Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of North Florida since 2005. He received his B.A. in Philosophy at the University of New Orleans, his Masters in Public Administration at the School of Urban and Regional Studies, University of New Orleans, and his Ph.D. in Political Science from Tulane University



You may be aware that Dr. Schwam-Baird is known in Jacksonville as a gifted and well-loved political science professor. Additionally, he is an author and is a highly sought-after expert on Middle East politics. He has taught courses in Latin American politics, Middle East Politics, Political Philosophy, and Globalization. He has lectured extensively and is multilingual. He loves cappuccino, traveling, and walking in the rain.

But did you know David he is also one of the founding members of the First Coast Freethought Society and has served as both vice president and president in the past?

At the October meeting, he will be discussing the Arab Spring and its implications.

