

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: 904-419-8826
E-mail: CarrieRen@att.net



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The First Coast

FreeThinker



Newsletter of the First Coast Freethought Society

December 2011

Volume 10, Issue 12

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President's Message December 2011

Earl Coggins

Humans seek explanations—for everything. Evidence for this is readily available by merely telling a child that X exists and has attributes that differ from those of other entities. The child's

dren go from questioning everything to adopting the worldview of their parents or, in the case below, the worldview of an uncle.

In a personal letter written August 10, 1787, Thomas Jefferson counseled his nephew

approve of the homage of reason than that of blind-folded fear." Hopefully Jefferson also advised his nephew to take care that only



trusted friends know about any doubts he might harbor regarding the existence of a god or gods. Doubters have had a tough journey navi-

gating the highways of humanity. Jefferson's advice was good, but

(Continued on page 3)

"[D]oubters...have been an unwanted reminder that the reasons presented throughout human history for why we are here and how the universe operates have yet to be adequately explained."

reaction will almost always be: Why? In other words, humans start their lives as Socratic life forms. But then something happens. Not all of us hold onto the Socratic Method, i.e. questioning practically everything. Many chil-

Peter Carr to "question with boldness even the existence of God; if there be one, he must more

"I am a doubter, a questioner, a skeptic. When it can be proved to me that there is immortality, that there is resurrection beyond the gates of death, then I will believe. Until then, no."

—Luther Burbank (1849-1926)

December 2011 Meeting - Party - No Lecture

Eighth Annual Human Light Celebration

Bring a dish to share • Bring a beverage of choice

Monday, December 19, from 6:00 to 9:30 p.m.

Social Hour at 6 p.m. • Dine at 7 p.m. • Ceremonies at 8 p.m.

Unitarian Universalist Church • 7405 Arlington Expressway • Jacksonville, FL

(Downstairs in the Social Hall - Doors open at 6:00)



Humanist Book Discussion Group



When: 2:00 p.m., the first Sunday of each month

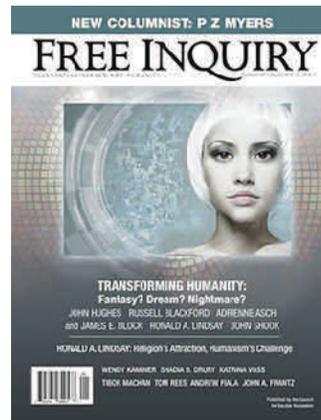
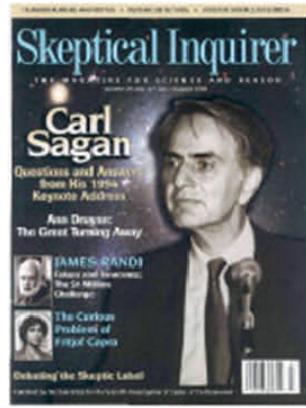
Where: Books-A-Million, 9400 Atlantic Boulevard, Jacksonville, FL 32225

What: Books planned for discussion:

- January 8, 2012 - Magazine or website article of your choice to bring for discussion
- February 5, 2012 - *The Limits of Power*, by Andrew J. Bacevich

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.

Bring a magazine or newspaper article of your choosing on topics related to humanism, skepticism, science and issues on the separation of church and state. A few popular magazines recently published are pictured here, but of course you can bring something from any publication or other source that you want to discuss.



Please note that as the first Sunday in January 2012 is News Years Day, the Humanist Book Discussion Group will meet on the **SECOND SUNDAY OF JANUARY**, and we will resume our regular schedule on the first Sunday in February.

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

December Social

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

When: **Tuesday December 27, 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)*

dangerous in the 18th century.

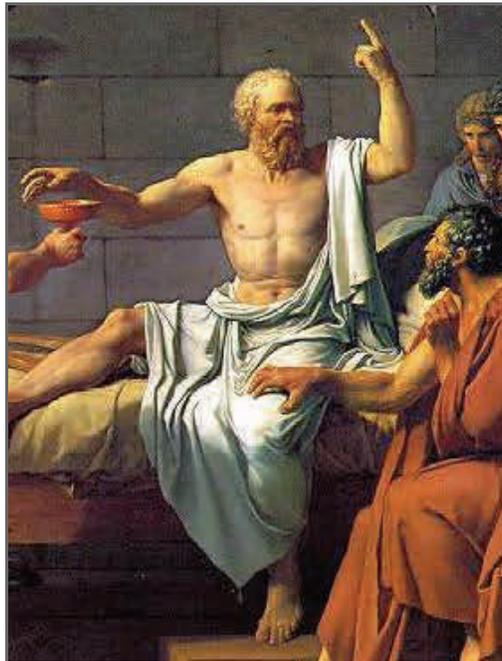
How long have people doubted the existence of a god or gods? Depending on whom you ask, the answers are strikingly diverse. The truth, of course, is that humans have doubted the existence of a god or gods throughout recorded history and probably even longer. Unfortunately, running parallel with a long history of doubt is an equally long history of intolerance towards doubt.

Why the intolerance? After all, doubting is nothing more than a personal belief, albeit a belief that another belief has serious flaws. We've all pondered the reason(s) for intolerance. Some experts have concluded (we've all heard it) that humans are pack (herd) animals and therefore set up early in their development a system of groups they like (will tolerate) and groups they don't like (will not tolerate). This is most often referred to as "in group, out group" behavior. The experts contend that most people do, it and I have to admit that I am guilty of it.

Am I a bad person if I don't take giant steps towards purging this "in group, out group" behavioral phenomenon from my psyche? Maybe. Maybe not. Quite frankly, it's extremely possible that it might be impossible. It's probably a survival mechanism, i.e. congregate with people who are less likely to harm you and stay away from those that might—although we are less likely to be

harmed today for doubt and skepticism compared with the doubters and skeptics from the past.

In his new book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Steven Pinker posits: "Believe it or not—and I know that most people do not—violence has declined over long stretches of time, and today we may be living in the most peaceable era of our species' existence." Good news for those without a belief in a god or gods.



Socrates: "Questioning is hard work! Now, will you pardon me while I take one last drink?"

In an era of diminished violence, our "in group, out group" behavior might perhaps have evolved away from a purely survival tactic to more of a social apparatus, but there still exists in many cultures an aversion for plurality.

My "in groups" tend to be

freethinker types, i.e. people who are fair and open-minded, respectful of the environment, music and art fans, prolific readers, students for life, and truth seekers. I am very cautious around people who proclaim that they have the whole universe figured out down to the last electron.

Why do you suppose doubters and skeptics, and especially the subset of doubters and skeptics who question belief in a god or gods, have frequently been the recipients of discrimination, ridicule, and even murder for most of recorded history? Is it merely hatred, or perhaps something much simpler? I don't think it was pure hatred. I believe doubters and skeptics from every generation of human existence have been an unwanted reminder that the reasons presented throughout human history for why we are here and how the universe operates have yet to be adequately explained. We are the ones who keep asking why. We are the ones who keep the Socratic Method alive with more questions than answers.

Freethinkers and their peers have been prodding humanity to question all motives and conclusions since the beginning of recorded history and perhaps even earlier. Give yourself a pat on the back. You and your like-minded ancestors have been a guiding force in shaping human history. Without doubters, skeptics, and freethinkers, how many millions of questions would never have been asked?



Saturnalian Greetings

Fred W. Hill

And so, the holiday season is upon us again, time to shop, shop, shop until we drop, or our credit runs out, do our patriotic duty to resuscitate the national economy in honor of baby Jesus, or in remembrance of the rededication of an ancient temple, or just because, well, it's a tradition! Admittedly, I'm conflicted about the whole thing. As an atheist, I reject the religious reasons for celebrating this season, and I'll risk culture warrior Bill O'Reilly's wrath by wishing everyone happy holidays rather than a merry Christmas. Not being entirely misanthropic, I do enjoy the socializing aspects of the season, get together, and feasts with friends and family, including those I may not see regularly during the rest of the year. I don't particularly enjoy shopping, however, and have no desire to partake of the consumer madness of after-Thanksgiving Black Friday sales. Several years ago, a few co-workers at my job took part in "Secret Santa" gift exchanges, but that degraded into everyone

giving each other gift cards, prompting the thought, "why not just trade \$20 bills and be done with it?"

Although most Christians regard this seasonal gift-giving as following the example of the gospel tale of the Magi who brought gifts of gold, myrrh, and frankincense for the newborn demi-god, the tradition goes back centuries prior to the alleged arrival of the infant king of kings. Two millennia ago, Romans, as

"[J]ust as many modern romantics yearn to get back to a mythic Garden of Eden, ancient Romans longed for a fanciful Golden Age, so much so that they made a simulation of it an annual event for many centuries."

part of the annual Saturnalia festival, gave small figurines called *sigilla* as gifts for young children and wax candles (*cerei*) for adults, perhaps in recognition of the lengthening daylight hours following the winter solstice. The Saturnalia itself honored the old Titan named Saturn, god of the harvest and agriculture, as well as father of Jupiter, king of the gods. In Roman mythol-

ogy, subsequent to being overthrown as lord of the universe by his Jovial progeny, Saturn settled in Rome at the reduced rank of king of Latium, initiating a Golden Age of peace and harmony. There was abundant food and drink, and all men lived as equals—no masters or slaves, and no private property. In the mixed bag of



Greco-Roman myths as recounted by such poets as Hesiod, Virgil, and Ovid spanning the 8th to 1st centuries BCE, the Golden Age came to an end in the distant past after the Titan Prometheus provided fire to mortals, arousing the ire of Jupiter, aka Zeus, who retaliated by

having Prometheus chained to a rock and tortured by an eagle that would daily rip into his abdomen to consume his perpetually re-growing liver. To punish mankind, Jupiter and his immortal cohorts fashioned the first woman, Pandora, purposely designed to be curious and so open the jar where all the malevolent forces of the world had been

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contained. Yep, those ancient Greek and Roman fabulists blamed a woman for all of humanity's troubles, just as the Hebrew authors of the Book of Genesis pinned it on Eve for biting a fruit. And just as at least a few modern romantics yearn to get back to a mythic Garden of Eden, ancient Romans longed for a fanciful Golden Age, so much so that they made a simulation of it an annual event for many centuries.

The first officially sanctioned Saturnalia was reputedly held on December 17, 217 BCE, as a means to boost civic morale after the Roman legions suffered terrible losses against the Carthaginian forces led by Hannibal on the Italian peninsula, barely succeeding in keeping the invaders away from Rome itself. The holiday proved so popular that it gradually expanded to a full week, to December 23, during which the norms of social behavior were suspended, class roles re-

versed, and even the civic courts were closed. As described by anthropologist Sir James G. Fraser, "the distinction between the free and the servile classes was temporarily abolished. The slave might rail at his master, intoxicate himself like his betters, sit down at table with them, and not even a word of reproof

letting their servants genuinely be in charge.

Still, the populace made merry, feasting, drinking, gambling, and going from house to house singing songs while naked, a ribald precursor to modern Christmas caroling. Augustus Caesar and other emperors attempted to rein in the revelry, by means

such as reducing it to three days, but the masses resisted and the empire gave in, allowing them their annual release from life's mundane burdens.

Narratives from antiquity hold that during the reign of Diocletian, from 284 to 305 CE, Roman soldiers stationed in



would be administered to him for conduct which at any other season might have been punished with stripes, imprisonment, or death." (*The Golden Bough*, p. 676) For a week, the slaves could act as kings and order their masters to serve them, but not entirely out of bounds—the ruling class, after all, was not so clueless as to risk revolution by

lower Moesia along the Danube went to the extreme of selecting amongst themselves someone to take the role of a King of Misrule, dressed to resemble King Saturn, and for the next thirty days was expected, even required to indulge himself in every imaginable debauchery of food, wine and sex. At the end of his

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reign, however, the mock king was obligated to cut his own throat on an altar to Saturn. As related by Fraser (p. 676-677), in 303 a Christian soldier named Dasius refused this temporary promotion and consequently lost his head, thereby becoming a martyr to the growing cult which, within another century, would supplant nearly every other religion within the Roman empire.

Part of that usurpation by the Christians involved replacing celebrations honoring Saturn and his rule in a nebulous past with a celebration in honor of the birth of Jesus and his anticipated rule in an equally nebulous future. Of course, Saturn wasn't the only old god

sent out to pasture, and Jesus' unknown birthday was set on December 25 to coincide with that of the Persian god Mithra, who had also become very popular with Roman soldiers.



Yet, although the official reason for the celebrations changed, the Saturnalias continued into the modern era, perhaps less raucous than in days of yore but still involving

drunken revelry and boisterous singing. Mr. O'Reilly may be surprised to learn that the Pilgrim and Puritan settlers of New England actually outlawed the celebration of Christmas precisely because they were aware of its pagan roots.

This secularist, on the other hand, feels that it is good to rejoice, whatever your particular reason, even if it's simply being alive to thrill to the axial tilt of the Earth, which is good enough for me. Eat, drink, and be merry to your heart's delight, but also be safe and kind.

And if a religious nut berates you for not saying "Merry Christmas," give him a holiday seal but don't tell him what he ought to do with it.



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. **Also note, that as this December the 4th Sunday happens to fall on Christmas, we'll hold the gathering on the 3rd Sunday, December 18th, instead.** 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.

Without God

Joe Varon

Words have amazing power over us. More than one person I know accepts as true many of the things the members of the First Coast Freethought Society believe in. But these people can't bring themselves to use that controversial and decisive word "atheist."

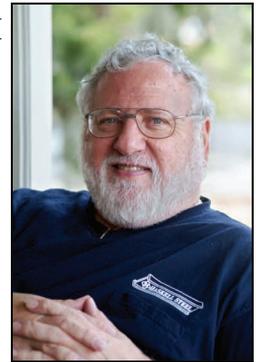
They explain that their concept of god is an abstraction, the sum total of the forces in the universe that allow the planets and stars to circle endlessly, that allow life to flourish and procreate, that give us order and predictability. To most of them, these forces have no personal interaction with individual people, animals, or plants. They don't have a master plan for tomorrow or a millennium from now and are indifferent to the chaos and troubles in the world.

But, somehow, these forces they choose to call "God" give them stability and hope. They sense comfort in their abstraction, be it ever so close to the very uncomfortable concept and word that they avoid (and which we

atheists have adopted).

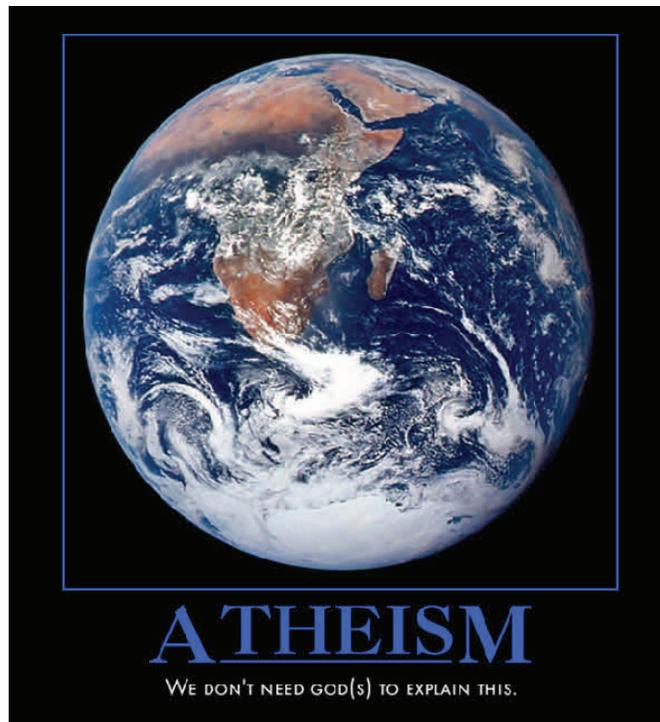
Some of them will say that the Bible is a series of metaphorical stories, not to be taken literally—just lessons for life. And they find comfort in studying those metaphors that promote honesty, virtue, and generosity; they avoid the metaphors that speak to exclusivity and violence. Probably even the most

In a way, I understand that, for those who question traditional, restrictive theistic teachings but still maintain a more distant and theoretical deity, their belief



system gives them a slender connectivity to an absolute. And that's OK. But I wish more people would disavow all the negativity surrounding the word "atheist." It literally means "without god." We atheists believe the forces of gravity, magnetism, and thermal energy are part of nature and can be studied, understood, employed, and enjoyed "without God." We believe the mysteries of life, which have not yet been discovered, are awesome, but exist in humans (and carrots)

"without God." And we believe people of different origins and beliefs will be able to develop ways to interact with each other and get along peacefully "even better, without God." And that's OK, too.



liberal "theists" believe that their metaphorical Bible is the basic source of virtuous ideals; and because they come from that source, those ideals have more credibility and authority.



Annual Planning Meeting - Sunday, January 15, 2012

Attention FCFS Members! The Annual Planning Meeting is being held at 10:00 a.m. on Sunday, Jan. 15, at the home of Mark and Carrie Renwick in Mandarin. Here is your chance to give the Board your ideas on monthly meeting programs you'd like, fundraising ideas, and ideas for special projects, and any other thoughts you may have. Please RSVP to Carrie for address and directions.

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!

FCFS 2011 Board Members

President	Earl Coggins	521-5039
Vice President	Carrie Renwick	268-8826
Secretary	Patrice Bennett	352-7005
Treasurer	Stephen Peek	742-5390
At-Large	Fred Hill	358-3610
At-Large	Richard Keene	386-1121
At Large	Alex Mabee	864-6198

Other Appointments

Parliamentarian	Mark Renwick	616-2896
E-mail Secretary	Carrie Renwick	268-8826

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Editorial	Fred Hill	358-3610
Membership	Judy Hankins	724-8188
Finance	Stephen Peek	742-5390
Publicity	Carrie Renwick	268-8826
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

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

- Sunday December 18 FCFS Secular Sunday in the Park, Jacksonville - 10:00 a.m.
Monday December 19 Annual Human Light Celebration - 6:00 p.m. See page 1.
Tuesday December 20 Winter Solstice JAM Session at a private residence* - 6:30 p.m.
Saturday December 24 FCFS Deadline to submit articles for January 2012 *FreeThinker*
Tuesday December 27 FCFS Monthly Social at Olive Garden, Jacksonville - 6:00 p.m.
Sunday January 8 FCFS Humanist Book Discussion Group, Jacksonville - 2:00 p.m.
Monday January 9 JAM Meetup at European Street Café in San Marco - 6:30 p.m.
Sunday January 15 FCFS Annual Planning Meeting, Jacksonville - 10:00 a.m.
Monday January 16 FCFS Monthly Meeting, Jax - 6:30 p.m.

* See <http://www.jaxatheists.com/events> for more details

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**

Human Light - A Holiday for Humanists

The “Human Light Celebration” was conceived as an alternative seasonal celebration which nonreligious persons could enjoy. It allows humanists and nonreligious persons of all varieties to celebrate this holiday season and express their good wishes to others in a spirit of hope, love, and understanding, unencumbered by religious dogma.



Human Light was created by leaders of the New Jersey Humanist Network in the period of 2000-2001. The first celebration was held in 2001, and word has been spreading around since then. In 2010, there were at least 30 cities in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. where public celebrations were held, but it is likely there were more. In addition, many families and individuals celebrate privately at home. The First Coast Freethought Society has been holding an “Annual Human Light Celebration” since 2003.

Human Light is designed to celebrate and express the positive, secular human values of reason, compassion, humanity and hope. Human Light illuminates a positive, secular vision of a happy, just, and peaceful future for our world, a future which humanity can build by working together, drawing on the best of our capacities. For more information, see the Human Light website at www.humanlight.org.

