

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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I still say, a church steeple with a lightning rod on top shows a lack of conviction.

—Doug McLeod

Volume 7, Issue 9

September 2009 President's Message

Earl Coggins

Labels are descriptive terms. We need them to communicate. When my doctor asks me to describe a pain in my neck, I can help her diagnose my illness with descriptive terms, such as a sharp, dull, constant, sporadic, mild, or severe pain. That's one reason why labels are important.

When it comes to describing world views, that's when the pain in

my neck becomes chronic. How many times have you heard someone say, "My definition is a little different than your definition?" Why can't we stick to one definition? Do we need 500 ways to define a freethinker, skeptic, or humanist? Add to it the

"I don't believe there is no god, but at the same time, I have no belief in a god. From a scientific perspective, I cannot say I believe in anything unless I have proof..."

phenomenon that definitions evolve over time due to changes in usage—sprinkle in some

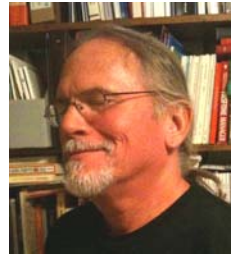
ambiguous sentence structure, and you have a semantic mess.

Literally pages of words in our dictionaries have had their defini-

tions changed due to the public's misuse of them over decades, even centuries, of time.

It's acceptable for some words to be rede-

(Continued on page 3)



September 2009 Meeting

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

"To Separate or Not to Separate: How Other Countries Deal with Questions of Church and State"

Monday, September 21, 2009, 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: Borders Books, 8801 Southside Blvd. • 519-6500

What: Books/magazines planned for discussion.

- September 6, 2009 - *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas*, by Matt Miller
- October 2, 2009 - *Christianity: 5000 Years of History and Development*, by Gary Stilwell



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.

This is an accessible book on the subject of the history of Christianity. It was obviously designed with the nonspecialist in mind since it avoids excessive academic jargon and presents the material in an easy to read format. The numerous charts, timelines and maps lay out the evolution of the Christian religion from the early Mesopotamian period through several layers of succeeding civilizations, showing the accretion of ideas that would develop into the faith preached by St. Paul. They then take the reader on the subsequent development of the religion about Jesus through the tortuous progression that would bring us to the multiple Christianities we find today.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT! Author Gary Stilwell is the **GUEST SPEAKER for the FCFS October 19, 2009 meeting!** Mr. Stilwell explains that the material in his talk is NOT in his book, *Christianity: 5000 Years*, and reading the book will likely make his talk clearer and more enjoyable. He recommends particularly pages 25-29, 208-215, 222-229, 169-178, and 251-265, in that order.

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

First Coast FreeThinker

The *First Coast FreeThinker* is published for FCFS members, other freethinkers, and potential freethinkers. Nonmembers may receive three 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

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following month's issue. Submit contributions to the newsletter by e-mail to Hugo (see above), or by U.S. mail to Hugo Borresen, 8831 Taurus Circle South, Jacksonville, FL 32222.

June 2009 President's Message
(Continued from page 1)

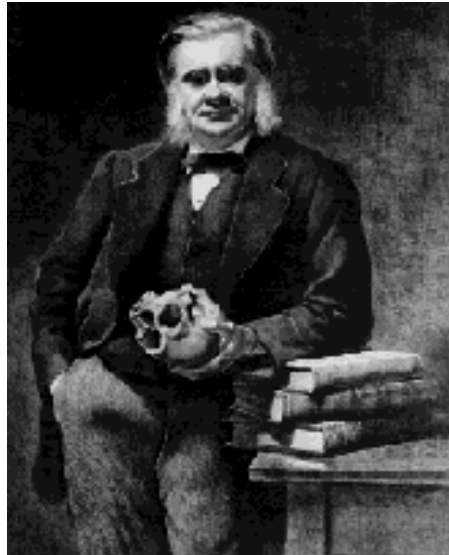
fined, but not all of them. Take the case for the words atheism and agnosticism. The dictionary says an atheist believes there is no god, yet you are reading an article written by an atheist who has no such belief. I don't believe there is no god, but at the same time, I have no belief in a god. From a scientific perspective, I cannot say I believe in anything unless I have proof of it, therefore, I cannot say I believe there is no god unless I have proof that there is in fact no god or gods existing today or yesterday.

So when I hear an atheist say she believes there is no god or gods, I immediately point out the need for evidence in order to back up such an assertion. The fact that there is no evidence to emphatically state god does not exist shouldn't scare a nontheist (another label). The theists have no evidence either. I think most atheists who assert that there are no gods are referring to the gods of contemporary religions, all of which can be traced back to man-made origins. I'll save further musing on whether or not god exists and how we can or cannot know, for another article.

Epistemology is the study of the nature and theory of knowledge. Epistemologists want to know how we know what we think we know. Epistemology was one of the things on Thomas Henry Huxley's mind in 1869, the year he coined the term "agnostic;" the other was politics.

Huxley had just become President of both the Geological

Society and the Ethnological Society of London. He was becoming the Carl Sagan of his generation, promoting science to the masses and converting more and more academics to his world view. His peers and he created a first-of-its-kind journal. They called it *Nature*.



Thomas Henry Huxley

Is it coincidence that Huxley and his science-promoting associates chose that label for their new journal—instead of *Creation*, *Design*, or something more theistic? No. The pursuit of scientific knowledge had led them away from theism. They weren't rejecting theism out of anger or any other emotional reason—their rejection came from logic and the scientific method.

During that same year, he was invited to a meeting of the Metaphysical Society of London, about which Adrian Desmond, author of *Huxley: From Devil's Disciple to Evolution's High Priest*, states, "Nowhere but in liberal London could Anglicans and Catholics, positivists and pantheists, Unitarians, and un-

believers sit down in a grand gesture to debate God's existence."

Huxley didn't want to be associated with a single label because he knew it was political suicide to do so. A leader had to appeal to all constituents, not just one group, so Huxley immediately rejected calling himself an atheist or a positivist—the "labels du jour" for the scientific elite of that day. He felt that the existence of God could not be proven one way or another, so he wanted to keep his distance from the atheist label. It seemed to Huxley that many of the men invited to the meeting of the Metaphysical Society were proclaiming a confident and assured "gnosis" similar to that of the second-century Gnostics who professed to have divine knowledge—an assertion Huxley wanted to avoid at all costs.

The night before the meeting, Huxley felt he was without this "gnosis," and it was that epiphany which gave birth to the term "agnostic," combining the negative prefix "a" meaning without, to the word "gnostic" meaning spiritual or intellectual knowledge. Huxley did not want to be portrayed as a leader or member of a rival creed. He described agnosticism as a method of inquiry, not a world view. Here we are, 140 years later, and most people (I used to be one of them) think agnosticism is a safe haven (and world view) existing between theism and atheism when in fact it is just another label for: All we know is that we don't know—something few people are willing to admit.



Why Do People Suffer?

Sigrun Buckley

Where is the presence of God during times of wars, famine, diseases, misery, murder, rape, disasters like the 2004 tsunami or hurricane Katrina—at any given time, really?

Theodicy is the theological and philosophical term that tries to explain how suffering in the world can be reconciled with the existence of a benevolent God.

The term was coined by the German philosopher and scholar of the Enlightenment, Gottfried Leibnitz (1646-1716).

Almost two and a half thousand years ago in ancient Greece, the philosopher Epicurus was troubled by the same question:

“Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. If he is able but not willing, then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?”

In times of crisis and suffering people turn to the Bible for comfort. The Christian religion wants us to believe that God is all powerful and all loving. But there is evil. How can these three be true at once?

The Bible, however, doesn't give an all encompassing answer to this question. On the contrary, there are contradictory answers in the different books of

the Bible.

The first and oldest explanation from the Hebrew Bible (Pentateuch) clearly states that suffering is a result of and punishment for sinning. Whole cities were wiped out for sinning, e.g., not worshipping God properly. There are plenty of chapters in Prophets and Amos warning the Israelites to renounce their wickedness lest they be punished. Punishment brings about atonement.

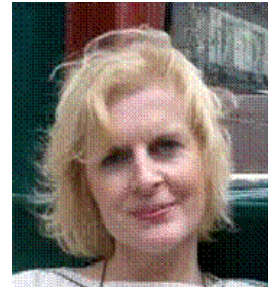
“The idea that most suffering is positive is preposterous. Pain mars lives and tragedy traumatizes. I reject the notion that suffering makes the sufferer or a watching bystander better people.”

Leviticus gives many examples how the Israelites were to appease the wrath of the angry God for their sins by making sacrifices. God preferred animal sacrifices over grain ones (see the Cain & Able story). Next level up was the sacrifice of Abraham's son, with the ultimate sacrifice, the works, coming in the New Testament.

This idea of sacrifice transformed into the writings of the Gospels in the belief that the crucifixion of Jesus brought about the redemption of mankind and salvation from eternal condemnation. Jesus allegedly took the punishment upon himself, atoning for our sins (Mark). Suffering was required

(according to 2 Isaiah) for the messiah to come back and save Israel.

On the other hand, Yahweh sometimes intervened by relinquishing the punishment if the Israelites turned back to him. He saved his chosen people on occasion when they repented, e.g., when he freed them from Babylonian slavery. The Book of



Wisdom answers “Why do people go hungry?” by saying, “because they angered God.” It is full of guidelines of how to live in order to achieve a happy and prosperous life. Although Israel repented, God did not

always keep his part of the covenant, they were still punished. At times it made no difference.

Then there is the advanced reasoning that suffering is not brought about by the wrath of God but by the sins of others who cause punishment on you. Amos, e.g., in the 8th century had a keen sense of social justice in his prophetic writings. He promises that in the end, justice will prevail and all will be punished by God. According to Jeremiah, God will get the last word in the end, but in the meantime the hungry will go hungry. And the mills of God are turning slowly, as those who are waiting to see justice in their lifetimes know.

(Continued from page 4)

If the explanation for suffering is the direct punishment for bad deeds, the question is: Whose bad deeds and when? As Genesis wants us to believe, it haunts us to the umpteenth generation as a result of Adam and Eve sinning against God's explicit order.

Another classic answer in the Old Testament to the question "why do people suffer" is that God is testing us and our faith (Jeremiah or Book of Job who is the epitome of suffering). At the same time, another part of Job, due to a different author and narrative, rejects the mere question: Who is Job—human beings—to question God and his reasoning? God chose not to reveal his reasoning.

In the New Testament along comes Jesus and restores the relationship with God. His death wasn't merely the result of an unjust Roman state, but it was also the will of God. Something good had to derive out of his death, and according to the Gospel writer, that was the salvation of the world.

Paul in his writings in the New Testament stresses the benefits of suffering. Afflictions that are thrown upon us cause endurance, and that builds character. Paul, who escaped death by stoning and other harsh forms of persecution, was on a mission to convert the Jews first. They, however, found the notion ridiculous that the messiah was crucified. Hence he turned to the gentiles, the Romans and Greeks. In his Epistles, he develops the thought: The more you suffer the closer

you are to Christ as if it was a distinguishing feature. "Perhaps it is those who God loves the most...he punishes the most severely." So if suffering per se cannot be explained, at least it makes you one of the chosen ones by God. Suffering equips us to console others and it induces humility. Paul reveled in his suffering. Friedrich Nietzsche maintained "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." When will humans have suffered enough and will be deemed strong enough? The idea that most suffering is positive is preposterous. Pain mars lives and tragedy traumatizes. I reject the notion that suffering makes the sufferer or a watching bystander a better person (Proverbs; New Testament). Millions suffer while others enjoy their lives?

Another standard explanation given by theologians is that God gave his people free will. Suffering ensues when people execute that free will badly. How does this Free Will Theory apply to someone lucky enough to lead a good life and suddenly be faced with a painful or fatal disease? How does the Free Will Theory apply to horrible political situations like Nazi Germany or a more current example like Darfur? Does it apply when a minority has the free will to exert their atrocious power over millions who, as a result, suffer from this "free will?" Neither does the Free Will Theory explain nature's disasters. It is unconvincing.

Ecclesiastes (usually ascribed to Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived) seems to have the only honest answer to

the question: Life is often meaningless, and in the end, all of us—wise and foolish, righteous and wicked, rich and poor—will die. And that's the end of the story. God's reasoning is beyond the ken of mortals. There is no mention of an afterlife.

The gospel writers expected the Kingdom of God to be very near (Mark). In his teachings, Jesus promised pain and suffering to end and evil doers to be punished. Mark writes that this would happen "before this generation passes away" (13:33-37). When it did not happen and their generation died, the idea of salvation was transformed into the future—after our deaths (Revelations of John).

For those who still pray: "You came into darkness and made a difference. Come into the darkness again." (Modern Anglican Church prayer) If that is so, why doesn't Jesus Christ enter into the darkness again? His reappearance would be called for these in days of war, hunger and near extinction of humankind. He either can't or he doesn't want to, it seems.

The Bible is the bestselling book of all times and lies at the root of our Judeo-Christian culture and civilization. It has deeply inspired thinking and behavior as well as offered comfort in times of need. Yet as hard as I tried, it provides no real answer to the question of theodicy. Maybe there is no God?

—Inspired by Bart D. Ehrman's book, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*



Did Jesus Exist?

Shane Christian

The motto of The First Coast Freethought Society is, "To question is the answer." Since some questions can be offensive to others, are we to keep silent and not critically analyze religious origins?

Luckily we live in a country where asking such questions is not punishable by death or imprisonment. Over the past twenty years, within the nonreligious societies, there has been a debate about the existence of an actual historical Jesus.

In the 1990s I was introduced to an Internet web site called the Piso Page. The following are some excerpts from that web site:

"The main focus is to present the postulate that:

- (1) the Roman Piso family were the actual authors of the New Testament;
- (2) the Piso family had invented "Jesus Christ."

Today, among the nonbelievers that I come in contact with, there seems to be about half who that believe there was a real historical person named Jesus, and half that believe the person known as Jesus is a fabrication, the product of many centuries of borrowed earlier religious mythologies. Keep in mind that we all agree that there is no magic or resurrection after death.

In a recent *Skeptic Magazine* cover story, Tim Callahan cri-

tiques "Zeitgeist," a documentary film about various ancient and modern conspiracies, including the origin of Christianity (Vol. 15, No. 1, 2009, "The Greatest Story Ever Garbled"). "Perhaps the worst aspect of 'The Greatest Story Ever Told,' Part I of Peter Joseph's Internet film, *Zeitgeist*" Callahan writes, "is that some of what it asserts is true." Callahan highlights many scholarly errors made in the film and puts forth evidence for the existence of a real historic person known as Jesus.

"Many biblical scholars have deduced that ...Jesus was attempting to self fulfill the Jewish bible prophecies, or perhaps the writings of the Jewish Essenes known as the Dead Sea Scrolls."

Callahan admits that the evidence is very meager. He quotes the writings of Josephus and Tacitus and applying what he calls, "the criteria of embarrassment and difficulty," which holds that people do not make up embarrassing details about someone they wish to revere. So if they say such things about a person, they are probably true." One of his examples is this; "In like manner, people do not go out of their way to invent difficulties for a character they have invented. It is clear from the Nativity narratives of the gospels of Matthew and Luke that they needed to explain why Jesus grew up in Galilee if he was born in Bethlehem. Both gospels invented rather convoluted means to have Jesus born in

Bethlehem. Had they been making Jesus up out of the whole cloth, they would simply have said he came from Bethlehem: end of story, no complications. So the evidence for Jesus as a real, historical personage, though meager, is solid." You can learn more about the writings of Tim Callahan by going to his web site <http://www.timcallahan.info/>.



I take the side of Tim Callahan. I agree that the evidence within the New Testament suggests that the writers are talking about

a real person. Many biblical scholars have deduced that the person who would become known as Jesus was attempting to self fulfill the Jewish bible prophecies or perhaps the writings of the Jewish Essenes known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

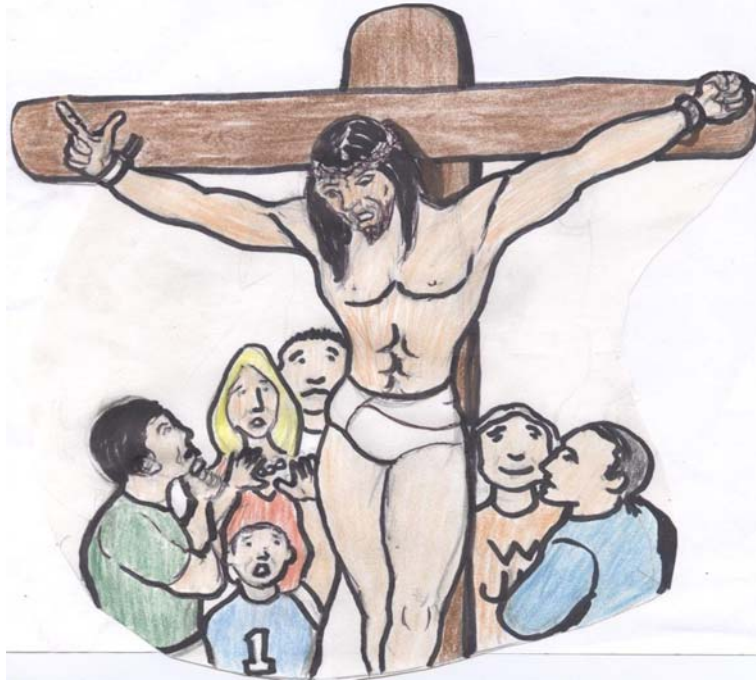
In *The Prophet of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Chapter 3, "The Incarnated Teacher," Upton Clary Ewing analyzes the New Testament, presenting evidence which suggests that Jesus was conscientiously doing the things necessary to fulfill the Essene prophecies regarding the Teacher of Righteousness. Ewing wrote,

"When Jesus himself assumed the role of the incarnated teacher, or better to say, when He 'realized' himself to be the one

whose spiritual fortitude and whose coming the scriptures of the Brotherhood so intimately describe and foretell, He conscientiously endeavored to abide by all the terms of his chosen mission. Only thereby could he feel secure in achieving the promised goal. This realization prompted the carrying out of a carefully planned course of action, much of which must necessarily remain obscure in process until the final climax had fully revealed and identified him as the incarnated Teacher. ... Our evidence shows that Jesus did of His own free will and choice, arrange for the several events which in due time were to be climaxed by His crucifixion. This He himself confirmed when, according to Jo.

13:18, He said: 'I know whom I have chosen, but that the scriptures may be fulfilled.' Obviously, the scriptures here referred to were those of The Sect of the Scrolls which Jesus, through a carefully laid plan of

action, was endeavoring to fulfill. Again, the same night in Gethsemane, according to Mark (14:49,50) He repeats once more "but the scriptures must be fulfilled."



"Jesus loved y'all so much he died on a cross just like this for you, so you better believe in Him or His daddy will send you to Hell!"

ously, the scriptures here referred to were those of The Sect of the Scrolls which Jesus, through a carefully laid plan of

I would think that if the Jesus character was a total fabrication, that the writers would not have the main character going around saying to his followers, "Look at me. I am fulfilling the prophecies. Therefore I must be the messiah." And why would a person commit suicide? Delusions of grandeur? Each week, we read about suicide bombers, giving their all for "their" greater good. In their minds, they are going to be rewarded. What better reward is there than becoming the messiah, "Christ?" Well, maybe 72 virgins is a close second?



To say that liberty is a sublime possession is no more than a truism. It is absolutely necessary to the proper development alike of nations and individuals. Bonds, whether they be material or mental, tend to deformity. The cramped foot of the Chinese woman may be thought beautiful in China. The cramped mentality of the priest may be thought beautiful at the Vatican in Rome, or at Lambeth Palace in London. To the Rationalist both are equally ugly."



—Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner (1858—1943) from *Christianity and Conduct*, 1919

The Voice of Secularism Is Louder in Washington

Hugo Borresen

Secular Coalition for America (SCA) reaches out to legislators and tracks legislation in progress. The first nontheistic organization, now with a new staff, is a lobbyist. Nonbelievers, who total about 16% of the population, are more numerous than other minority, being surpassed only by Protestants and Catholics. The dozen billboards posted around the nation have also increased attention to nonbelievers.

SCA met with officials in the White House to oppose proselytizing of the military, faith-based initiatives, and employment discrimination. It contacted senators to oppose public funding of vouchers for religious education in Washington, DC, schools. It was mentioned on CBS news, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *National Journal*, and other media. It hailed President Obama for telling the Turks that we are not a Christian nation but “we consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values.”

The SCA mission is to increase visibility and respect for nontheistic viewpoints and to strengthen secular government to guarantee freedom for all. It invites other organizations which share its views to join. Membership is by organization rather than by individuals.

Committed to promoting reason and science to improve the human condition, SCA encour-

ages the pursuit of knowledge. Recognizing the importance of secular government as the best means to allow both religious freedom and religious dissent, SCA advocates, through political action and public relations, responsible ethical codes with reference to the supernatural and the separation of church and state.

SCA's website, <http://www.secular.org/>, has much valuable information for freethinkers, including the organization's personnel, and a statement on freedom of conscience and religious tolerance. A new addition is a scorecard of Congress's votes on legislation pertaining to freethought interests. Only seven members of the House of Representatives voted as desired on ten key issues; thirty-eight percent (163 members) did not cast a single desired vote. Eighteen members of the Senate cast ten correct votes. Individual votes are displayed for the years 2006-08, and each legislator is graded from A to F. Percentages of desired votes of all members of the 109th Congress (2006-07) are presented. CSA does not endorse any legislation but encourages members to make their own judgments. Florida makes a poor showing and needs more input from freethinkers. Members can register to receive action alerts on opportunities to influence legislation on areas as listed above.

The web site lists titles of articles relevant to secularism from 2005 to the present. Topics of concern include separation of church and state, government support of church education,

teaching science in public schools, Boy Scout discrimination, religion influencing medicine, false allegation about atheists, conscience prohibiting services, military proselytizing, abstinence-only sex education, display of Ten Commandments, opposition to religious discrimination, earmarks in appropriations, U.S. not a Christian nation, stem cell research, and grading of Congress



The following freethought organizations constitute the coalition: American Atheists, American Ethical Union, American Humanist Association, Atheist Alliance International, Camp Quest, Freedom from Religion Foundation, Institute for Humanist Studies, Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, Secular Student Alliance, and Society for Humanistic Judaism.

The staff numbers nine, many with good training and experience: Sean Faircloth is the new Executive Director; Ron Millar is Associate Director; Sasha Bartolf is Legislative Director, responsible for lobbying, grassroots advocacy, and research; Mary Bellamy is Counsel and Director of Special Programs and recipient of our newsletter. The Advisory Board includes these familiar names: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Wendy Kaminer, Michael Newdow, Salman Rushdie, and Julia Sweeney.



Poverty Is a Capital Crime in the U.S.

Michael Fitzgerald

It's a crime to be poor in the U.S. Sounds ridiculous?

This society appears to operate on a philosophy that is a combination of Calvinism, Malthusianism, and social Darwinism: poor people are *ipso facto* of inferior stock and should be removed from the gene pool. These people obviously warrant very little if any consideration. We got a glimpse of this when Katrina hit New Orleans.

The prevailing paradigm was basically “who cares?” Who indeed?

It cannot be a coincidence that poor people in this country suffer the highest rates of infant mortality. This is directly related to lack of healthcare. More than 18,000 Americans per year die for lack of healthcare, including a large number of children. Over 50 years, we're talking a veritable holocaust.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that these people simply cannot afford healthcare—and therefore, apparently, have no right to exist. They are seen as unproductive and a drain on our fiscal resources. The easiest way to get rid of them is to let them die of disease, malnutrition, depression, and lack of neonatal care.

I am not saying this is deliberate—but it might as well be. Our society tends to blame the victims of poverty using a tautology that goes like this: they are poor because they do not have jobs; they do not have jobs be-

cause they are lazy and uneducated; they are uneducated because they just don't care; therefore, they deserve whatever they get.

Education or lack of it is the crux of the issue. The fact is poor people are uneducated primarily because we (voters) have given them the crummiest schools. Their lack of education guarantees their subsequent unemployment or underemployment.

Laziness has little to do with it; there are millions of hard-working poor people (or those who are marginally employed but do not have health benefits) who are in the same boat. Moreover,

“More than 18,000 Americans per year die for lack of healthcare.”

the manufacturing jobs that used to be available to uneducated people have been eliminated by the millions—shipped overseas.

Such self-fulfilling prophecies conveniently mesh with our society's Calvinist foundations. Although Calvin himself never stated that the poor were undeserving of Christian compassion, his main message—or at least the way his followers read it—was that being rich is a sign that God loves you. The implication is that if you are born into a good family (or, as Bill Moyers says, if you “choose your parents wisely”), you must be doing something right or somehow deserve to be blessed.

If this is acceptable reasoning—and of course it is delu-

sional—the opposite must also be true: if a person is poor, he or she is genetically or spiritually defective and deserves whatever fate is in store.



Combine this with social Darwinism—the idea that it is natural and desirable that “defective” individuals be removed from the gene pool by not surviving long enough to reproduce, and it becomes apparent, according to this line of reasoning, that the poor *should* die. And indeed, this is reflected in the infant-

mortality statistics. Add a dose of Thomas Malthus—the assumption that there is not enough food to go around—and we have a dangerous social Darwinism that extols the virtues of “thinning the herd” for the good of the species. The fallacy in this metaphor is that we are not animals in the wild.

Of course, in a society that professes to be democratic and classless, few would admit to this, so all this must go unspoken—a tacit social contract among people who lack compassion. The proof lies not in the rhetoric but in the proverbial pudding.

What we have in this country is an undeclared war of attrition against the poor. Yes, the desperately poor can turn dangerous and criminal (therefore we need more prisons, the reasoning goes). But we made them that way.



Heroes and Gods

Fred W. Hill

Upon his death this past August, Senator Edward Kennedy was remembered, depending on political persuasion, as either a great but flawed hero or a demagogic, drunken fiend who got away with murder. Of course, prominent politicians tend to arouse strong partisan feelings. Whether in a conflict of words or arms, one rarely becomes a hero to one side without also becoming a villain to the other.

During a 1936 speech, President Franklin D. Roosevelt famously welcomed the hatred of his enemies, whom he characterized as “forces of selfishness and of lust for power.” Those enemies, heroes to their own partisans, hated FDR with such passion that some took his very name as a vulgarity not to be spoken in polite company. An objective analysis of any actual person, as opposed to an imaginary character, will usually find aspects to both laud and criticize. Naturally, there are extreme cases, such as Adolf Hitler, whose extensive crimes against humanity vastly outweigh whatever good he may have done, even if former presidential contender and social commentator Patrick Buchanan thinks he wasn’t all that bad (see <http://www.realchange.org/buchanan.htm#hitler>). On the other hand, figures like Martin

Luther King, Jr., are regarded as such avatars of justice and the best in humanity that it seems churlish to shed light on their all-too-human flaws. Yet, idolizing or demonizing anyone leads us to forget that they are in fact human, neither purely good nor entirely evil.

Even many of our most popular fictional heroes and villains, whether from ancient myths or modern comics and films, aren’t written as all good or all bad, as such characters tend to be rather

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predictable and boring. We want our heroes to be perfect but can relate better to them if they have feet of clay, some defect indicating that the hero is not infallible.

Even Jesus, dying on the cross, expressed doubt, crying in the Book of Mark, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” I am agnostic as to whether he was a historical person, as I find the evidence for it unconvincing and the stories about him follow many common traits of ancient mythic heroes, nearly all of whom were described in Greek mythology as demi-gods, mortal offspring of unions between gods and humans. Like Jesus, they had exceptional powers and were defenders of ordinary people, al-

though rather than speaking parables and overturning moneylenders’ tables in temples, the



Greek heroes, such as Herakles, slew terrible beasts, went on great adventures, engaged in epic battles, and occasionally even cleaned out some very filthy stables. Similarly to Jesus’ death and resurrection, Herakles died, slain by a poisoned coat his wife was

tricked into giving him, and he ascended to the abode of his father, Zeus, king of the gods, to become part of the Olympian pantheon. As described by classical scholar, Friedrich Solmson, Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey* may have originally had Odysseus catch a glimpse of Herakles, long dead by his time in the 11th century BCE, in Hades’ realm. However, a corrective phrase: “*His ghost I mean: the man himself delights in the grand feasts of the deathless gods on high...*” was inserted in the transcribed text much later as Herakles had since become revered as a god and thus couldn’t possibly be roaming around in the gloom of Hades. This interpolation was echoed centuries later by the insertion of a laudatory description of Jesus in Josephus’ work, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, long after the historian’s death. Creative editing was required in both cases to boost their heroic

(Continued on page 11)

stature. Of course, Herakles' worshippers have long since dwindled to zero while Jesus' faction has grown considerably which, however, is no evidence for the veracity of Jesus' story over Herakles'. Under his Roman name, Hercules, the old god remains a popular fictional character in modern stories, while Jesus has become the ultimate hero to his adherents, despite the conclusion of skeptics like myself that, if he ever did live, he is certainly dead now and won't ever be coming back.

Personally, I enjoy occasionally catching up on the exploits of fictional heroes, and there are plenty of people who have done things I admire. Yet, no one, whether a pop star, sports hero, President,

priest, or even a supposed god and his son who, along with a ghost, are all one and the same, deserves abject adulation. Senator Kennedy was much faulted for his behavior following an accident in which a young woman drowned, but many of his detractors worship a god who they believe drowned all life in the world, save one family and a pair of each animal on an ark. Against all rationality, they believe that a god who would commit such an atrocity is good and deserves their worship. As a practicing Catholic, Kennedy worshipped that same god and found comfort in the belief that he would be reunited with his tragically slain siblings and other deceased members of his large family upon his own death. Most

people, including nearly all of our political leaders, find solace in similar beliefs, and many regard Jesus as their greatest hero. As an atheist, I don't share their beliefs, although I can respect and even admire people like Kennedy and his brothers, Franklin Roosevelt, and Dr. King, while acknowledging they were not perfect people. But, of course, imperfect people are all we have to even try to accomplish anything heroic that helps people in need without causing unjust harm to others. They may fail, or not live up to elevated expectations, but sincere efforts for a good cause deserve support. And whatever our limitations, as David Bowie once sang, "we can be heroes" too.



Ongoing FCFS Activities

Dinners for Doubters

Sign up to attend or to host a dinner yourself. Sign-up sheets will be at the back table at the monthly meetings. For details on how this works, see **page 7 of the August 2008 *FreeThinker*** (available on 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 733-5489 or Google the address to get a map and directions. We generally provide coffee. Bring a breakfast snack and a **chair**. Mark your calendar. We hope to see you there!

No Atheist Left Behind (or Are You Going My Way?)

If you are seeking a ride to an FCFS event, contact **Hugo Borresen** at HBorresen@firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org or call 904-779-6883.

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 **Nita Pitts** at 904-996-0879 or e-mail her at pitrymnd@comcast.net. If you prefer, leave a notation on the sign-in sheet at the back table at one of our monthly meetings.

First Coast Freethought Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 550591
Jacksonville, FL 32255-0591
(904) 288-6291
<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.

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September Social

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

When: Tuesday September 22, 2009 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

2009 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.

FCFS September 2009 Activities

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6 Book Group	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21 Monthly Meeting	22 Olive Garden	23	24	25	26 Newsletter Deadline
27 Secular Sunday	28	29	30			

Visit our website at <http://www.firstcoastfreethoughtsociety.org/>.

In the Adobe version, the links are **LIVE!** One click takes you there. If the two-line links do not work, copy and paste into your browser window.

PROPOSED BYLAWS AMENDMENT PASSES OVERWHELMINGLY

Be advised, the bylaws amendment proposed last month lifting FCFS officer term limits has passed. The sentence now reads, "All officers shall serve a term of one year, after which they may be reelected." Thank you all for voting. Let's hear it for democracy in action!



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