

SKIRMISHES

An apology

• After repeating the tired and untrue observation “There are no atheists in foxholes” in his weekly commentary for CBS News, the network’s chief Washington correspondent, Bob Schieffer, got an earful from scores of atheists, including two, according to Schieffer, who are currently stationed in Baghdad.

Unlike some of his colleagues in the broadcast news media who have ignored complaints from nonbelievers over similar remarks, Schieffer issued an apology, saying, “to all of you who took offense, I can only say that none was intended and I regret a poor choice of words.”

Those who would like to read Schieffer’s apology in its entirety will find it at:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/08/25/opinion/schieffer/main570003.shtml>

An execution

• Christian fundamentalist terrorist Paul Hill was executed by the state of Florida on Sept. 3. Hill, who was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1994 murder of Dr. John Britton and his driver outside a Pensacola abortion clinic, had told reporters he expected to be rewarded upon his arrival in “Heaven” in an interview given the day before his execution.

Although most mainstream anti-abortion groups have distanced themselves from Hill and condemned his actions, the former Presbyterian minister said he would be made a martyr by his execution. Others in the pro-life movement said Hill is

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Moving the rock

Workers move a controversial piece of granite from the rotunda of the Alabama Judicial building on August 27. The 2.5-ton “10 Commandments” monument had been placed there by Roy Moore, the combative - and now suspended - chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. The monument is now housed in a part of the building that is not open to the public. Moore vows to continue the fight. Stay tuned.

Freethought group promotes church-state separation

By George Ricker

The Space Coast Freethought Association, according to founder Dianna Narciso, is “a society of individuals committed to reason, tolerance, compassion, and the determination to stand for the strict separation of church and state.”

Concerned about attacks on the “Wall of Separation,” Narciso wanted to form a group that brings freethinkers from Brevard County and surrounding areas together “for purposes of social interaction, activism and community outreach.

Now holding monthly gatherings in Wickham Park, the group invites freethinkers to take part. They can be contacted on the web at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SpaceCoastFreethought/> or interested parties can contact Narciso directly by email at catspah@cfl.rr.com or by telephone at (321) 952-1231.

As the organization grows, its founder hopes it will become an active voice in the community through various forms of activism including letter-writing campaigns and various community outreach programs as well as social gatherings.

The SCFA’s next monthly meeting will be on Sept. 14th from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. in Wickham Park. The group usually meets at the far end of the first parking lot on the right (near the first covered pavilion). Those attending should bring chairs, something to drink and sun screen for protection.

HAPPENINGS

The Space Coast Freethought Association will hold its monthly gathering in the park from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. on September 14th at Wickham Park.

One subject for discussion will be the recent removal of Judge Moore’s block of granite with the “10 Commandments” inscribed thereon. Might this be a pyrrhic victory for the forces of church-state separation because of the potential backlash?

Come one, come all to SCFA’s meeting. We look forward to seeing you there. Look for the SCFA sign on the back of a vehicle in the parking lot to get a fix on our location.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation will hold its annual meeting in Washington D.C. on October. 10-12 at the Washington Court Hotel-Capitol Hill.

Scheduled speakers include attorney Alan Dershowitz, the “dean” of the White House press corps, reporter Helen Thomas, tv correspondent and author Betty Rollin, NY Times science writer Natalie Angier and “Pledge of Allegiance” litigant Michael Newdow.

For more information about the FFRF convention, go to their website at: <http://www.ffrf.org/convention/>

In search of the “10 Commandments” display at the U.S. Supreme Court

By George Ricker

Among the many claims made by Christian apologists who aim to keep the “10 Commandments” on display in as many government buildings as possible is the argument that the U.S. Supreme Court has representations of the commandments on the walls of its building and therefore such displays shouldn’t be a problem for other state-run government buildings.

However, like so many of the arguments that get offered by religionists in this debate, the claim fails to pass muster when examined with a critical eye.

This much can be stated flatly at the outset.

There is no place in the U.S. Supreme Court building where the “Ten Commandments” are displayed so that they can be seen and read in their entirety. Nor is there any location where there exists a display like the one that caused such controversy in the Alabama Judicial Building (see photo on page 1).

What this claim relies on is sketchy knowledge and context-dropping.

On the south wall of the courtroom in the Supreme Court building begins a frieze depicting the great lawgivers. Included among these figures is a representation of Moses clutching two stone tablets. On one of those tablets portions of commandments six through ten, written in Hebrew, are visible.

However, it’s important to note that the frieze includes a number of figures including one of the prophet Mohammed

holding a copy of the Qur’an. Also included are figures of Solon, Lycurgus, King John, Napoleon and so on.

Moses is given no position of special importance and the representation is no more an endorsement of the “10 Commandments” than it is an endorsement of the holy book of Islam or the Code of Hammurabi.

Moses also is pictured with Solon and Confucius on the eastern pediment of the building. In this tableau, he is seated and is flanked by the other two figure who stand on either side of him. He is holding two blank tablets. The other two figures each hold one. There is nothing written on any of the tablets. Again, no “10 Commandments” are visible.

On the inside of the oak door separating the courtroom from the great hall, there is a depiction of two tablets with the Roman numerals one through ten written on them. Again the depiction is out of the way - actually toward the bottom of the door - and there is nothing to indicate the artist intended to give this symbolic “Ten Commandments” a special prominence or to suggest it had any particular importance.

The bottom line on all of this is that there is nothing in the architecture or decoration of the U.S. Supreme Courts that suggests the “Ten Commandments” is the foundation of U.S. law or that gives them preeminence over all other influences on American jurisprudence.

To use these meager representations of the “Ten Commandments” as arguments to buttress the case for such blatant violations of the wall of separation as occur whenever the “Ten Commandments” are placed on display in a manner that suggests they are especially important to our law and to our courts betrays an ignorance not only of our laws but of the commandments themselves. They are sectarian in nature, and are not, therefore, fit to serve as the foundation of a secular government.

It’s one thing to recognize that the “Ten Commandments” are influences in the development of the culture of Western civilization in general. It’s quite another to claim they are of paramount importance in the emergence of that culture.

What is presented in the architecture of the Supreme Court places the “Ten Commandments” in an appropriate context and gives them the proper weight. It’s just too bad so many religionists cannot do the same.

CONNECTIONS:

some web addresses that may be of interest to freethinkers

<http://www.atheists.org/>

This is the web address of American Atheists, the organization founded by Madalyn Murray O’Hair. American Atheists publishes a newsletter and a quarterly magazine, *The American Atheist*. Under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson, American Atheists continues to be a consistent advocate for the rights of nonbelievers and the complete separation of church and state.

<http://www.ffrf.org/>

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is a national organization concerned with promoting freethought and protecting the wall of separation between church and state. The FFRF conducts a number of activities throughout the year, including its annual convention which is coming up next month, and publishes a monthly newspaper, *Freethought Today*.

<http://www.infidels.org/index.shtml>

The Secular Web is an oasis for freethinkers of every stripe. Sponsored and maintained by the Internet Infidels, the site contains a wealth of information about nonbelief and its ramifications, including a library of past and present books and articles discussing various aspects of a wide variety of subjects related to religion and the lack of it. The Secular Web may be among the “most used” bookmarks of nonbelievers on the web.

<http://www.talkorigins.org/>

The Talk.Origins Archive is a website devoted to exploring the Creationism/Evolution controversy and providing mainstream scientific evidence to rebut the claims of creationists. Unabashedly pro-evolution, it contains a huge amount of material covering all aspects of the controversy, as well as links to a number of sites representing all sides. The Talk.Origins Archive is linked to the usenet newsgroup Talk.origins

<http://skepticsannotatedbible.com/>

The Skeptic’s Annotated Bible: The King James Version is a website that contains the complete King James version of the Bible with commentary and annotation of a decidedly skeptical nature. The site combines solid research about the “wholly babble” with humorous jibes at much of the nonsense contained therein.

Freely Speaking is the newsletter of the Space Coast Freethought Association. It is published in the first week of the month and distributed free as a pdf file via email and/or by regular mail. Print copies may be available on request.

Freely Speaking is published and edited in Palm Bay, Fla., by George Ricker on behalf of the SCFA. All contents © 2003 by the Space Coast Freethought Association unless otherwise indicated. Copyright of any reprinted material remains with the original publisher.

Freely Speaking invites the submission of articles which promote freethought and church-state separation or may otherwise be of interest to our membership and announcements relating to groups and activities which do the same. Articles should be a maximum of 1,000 words and announcements a maximum of 100. All submissions are subject to editing and may be cut to conserve space. Email submissions to gricker@cfl.rr.com with the subject heading “newsletter submissions.”

Military Atheists protest decision to continue prayer ritual at U.S. Naval Academy, call for investigation

Atheist civil rights group charges decision ignores federal court rulings and violates naval trainees' civil rights

Officials at the Naval Academy have decided chaplain-led prayers before lunch will continue, despite federal court rulings that have struck down similar practices at other military academies. Attendance by all 4,000 midshipmen at the weekday lunches and prayer rituals is mandatory and the Naval Academy is now the only U.S. service academy that coerces prayers before meals.

Military Atheists were vocal in their condemnation of this practice. Kathleen Johnson, American Atheists' Director of Military Affairs and Founder of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, stated "it's shameful that future sailors in training to defend our country and the Constitution apparently

have no civil rights themselves".

"This practice violates Department of Defense Directive (DODD) 1350.2 in that it gives preferential treatment to midshipmen with monotheistic religious beliefs." said Johnson. "DODD 1350.2 strictly requires the chain of command to intervene immediately."

Bart Meltzer, the Director of State and Regional Operations for American Atheists, and a retired US Navy veteran stated: "It's sad that theocrats in the Navy have not been kept in check by the command." Meltzer added: "Violating the rights of Atheists to be free from theistic beliefs is common place in the Navy. The practice of forcing theistic beliefs on everyone

clearly displays disregard for Navy core values, a lack of leadership, and lack of accountability by the chain of command."

Meltzer also stated: "This practice violates Office of the Chief of Naval Operations Instruction (OPNAVINST) 5354.1E. OPNAVINST 5354.1E, Paragraph 6.d states that any violation of this instruction is punishable by the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ)."

Johnson and Meltzer are calling for an investigation as to why this divisive practice has not been stopped.

American Atheists called on the Naval Academy to reestablish all midshipmen's civil rights by following the lead of the other U.S. service academies and immediately stop this divisive practice that negatively impacts troop morale and fleet readiness.

AMERICAN ATHEISTS is a nationwide movement that defends civil rights for nonbelievers, works for the total separation of church and state, and addresses issues of First Amendment public policy.

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SKIRMISHES (from page 1)

not a martyr, just a murderer.

He is the first person in the United States to be executed for murdering a doctor who performed abortions.

Hill had maintained consistently that his actions were dictated by his conscience and his religious faith and called on others who shared his views to follow his lead.

An alliance

• What do Pope John Paul II, anti-abortion crusader Randall Terry, and President George W. Bush have in common? They all oppose efforts to legitimize same-sex relationships.

Apparently spurred on by the recent Supreme Court decision overturning a Texas ban on sodomy, the Vatican has increased its attack on homosexuality, and Terry, never one to pass up a new fund-raising opportunity, has launched a campaign opposing 'homosexual marriages.' and attacking the U.S. Supreme Court.

Bush, meanwhile, says he believes in the "sanctity" of marriage and thinks it should be codified as a relationship between heterosexual couples exclusively.

All of which makes us wonder. What do fundies fear most - gays or freethinkers?

Fellowship of Reason active in Atlanta

Fellowship of Reason (FOR) is a rational moral community based in Atlanta, Georgia. Members share a belief in *eudaimonism* (pronounced yoo-DIE-mon-ism), which embraces Reason as the best method for determining moral principles and achieving personal happiness.

FOR focuses on individual development and social interaction. The organization offers educational opportunities, including a teacher-guided philosophy class and a less formal audiotape-based discussion group.

Other activities include a monthly meeting, potluck dinners, movie nights, pub nights, nature hikes, an annual rafting trip, and an annual participatory art show. For information visit www.fellowshipofreason.com.

Got an announcement to make?

This space available:

The Space Coast Freethought Association welcomes announcements from other groups and organizations who are interested in promoting reason, freethought and the separation of church and state.

Please submit announcements of your group's meetings and activities no later than the last Friday of the month. All announcements should be emailed to: gricker@cfl.rr.com. Please do not send them as attachments but in the body of the email message. Please head all such messages "newsletter submission."

Announcements should not exceed a length of 100 words. All announcements will be subject to editing and may be shortened to meet space requirements.

Speaking out:

FLORIDA TODAY August 11, 2003

Democratic state must be secular

By Dianna Narciso
Palm Bay

Why is it that people like a recent letter writer have such trouble understanding the importance of separating government and religion? What is it that is blocking their compassion and empathy?

How can atheists, Buddhists, pagans, Wiccans and others be assured they are fairly treated and represented by a government that promotes the Judeo-Christian religion in its buildings, national parks, and schools?

The writer only mentioned the two of the Ten Commandments that coincide with our country's laws, conveniently omitting the Scripture that demands we all worship the writer's God and no other. How can a Christian government fairly represent non-Christians?

Christians often claim they are persecuted because of their religion, and yet they are so willing to deny freedom to others. NonChristians don't want to keep Christians from worshipping their God. But we do demand fair representation in our government.

Only a secular government, free of the controversies and complications of the various religious beliefs, can truly be fair to all.

St. PETERSBURG TIMES August 30, 2003
(Re: "Atheism is a religion too")

If atheism were a religion

Atheism has no dogma, no gods, no supernatural mumbo jumbo. Atheism is nothing more than lack of belief in a deity. Secularists aren't trying to force atheism on our government. But let's go with the letter writer's idea for a moment. Suppose atheists did want the pledge to say "... under no gods." And suppose we wanted our money to be inscribed with the phrase "In No Gods We Trust." And suppose we came up with some kind of atheist manifesto and insisted it be displayed in courtrooms across the country: "Ye shall have no gods . . . period." That would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? And it would horrify Christians.

Now you can imagine how people of other faiths, and no faith, feel whenever we come across Christianity's constant presence in our government. This is not a Christian nation. Christ is nowhere mentioned in our Constitution. We are a religiously diverse population and it's time Christians came to terms with that fact. One day, they may find themselves in the minority and then you can bet we'd hear cries for secularism like never before.

Dianna Narciso,
Palm Bay

PENSACOLA NEWS JOURNAL
August 17, 2003

Persecuted majority?

I'd like to thank Thomas Suhr for his letter ("Majority rules," Aug. 3) stating that, as an atheist, I don't have to pray, say "under God" during the Pledge, or believe in God. What a relief. All this time I thought government- endorsed God-belief on our money and in our Pledge, Christian displays on government buildings, tax-paid chaplains, and representatives' prayers during work hours was all about forcing me to practice religion. Now I see it's about Christians being in the majority. Be careful what you wish for.

When in the majority Christians cry "majority rules" and when they're not they cry persecution. Hold on -- they claim both at the same time! Funny Christians.

Perhaps Suhr would allow the little manger scenes at Christmas to be joined by symbols of all the religions of our country, along with the rationalists' statement of reason. What a beautiful mess that would be!

Or Suhr could learn what a constitutional republic is, and exercise some of that Christian compassion while meditating on the importance of a secular government that fairly represents all Americans. Separation of state and church might prove valuable to his children's children. -

Dianna Narciso,
Palm Bay

TAMPA TRIBUNE August 26, 2003.

I would like to help recent letter writer Arthur Whalley understand separation of church and state. True, the phrase does not appear in the First Amendment. It is also true that the words Christ, Christian, Jesus and God do not appear in our Constitution. It comes down to one thing: you either support a theocratic government, entangling itself in religion, or you support a secular government that steers clear of the issue in order to represent a diverse population.

As an atheist, I am appalled that any government representative would so callously disregard me and, as a public official, show favoritism to the majority religious view. Government must remain secular if it is to represent all citizens. Practice your religion on your time, on your property, or in your church and in your heart. But leave it out of my government. And remember, today's majority could be tomorrow's minority."

Dianna Narciso,
Palm Bay

In "Speaking out" the Space Coast Freethought Association reprints letters from its membership that have been published in the media. If you have a published letter that has appeared in a newspaper, magazine or other media, please send a copy to gricker@cfl.rr.com with the heading "newsletter submission." Your email should include the date the letter was published and the name of the publication and/or website where it appeared.

Dianna Narciso contributed all the letters this month.