

FREELY SPEAKING

FREE MINDS
FREE PEOPLE

Vol. 1, No. 9

May 2004

Four pages

SKIRMISHES

An embarrassment?

• When he led the U.S. House of Representatives in the Pledge of Allegiance on April 27, Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Washington) omitted the words "under God" - reciting the pledge as it was written before the Congress changed it in 1954.

Texas Republican Pete Sessions accused McDermott of "embarrassing the House." *

Later in the week, McDermott embarrassed himself by apologizing for the omission.

*Editor's note: I will readily concede that "embarrassing the House" is one subject on which many Republican congress critters can speak with authority.

A refusal

• The U.S. Supreme Court has refused to hear an appeal to reinstate mealtime prayers at a state-funded military college.

The decision lets stand a lower court ruling that declared the prayers at Virginia Military Institute (VMI) violated the U.S. Constitution.

Justice Antonin Scalia blasted his colleagues for refusing to hear the case, stating it raised important church-state issues and other questions and it was unfair to VMI to leave those issues unresolved.

Wait a minute. Hasn't the issue actually been resolved?

Methinks the justice doth protest too much.

A clash

• According to the AP, two days of religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia's Maluku Islands have

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Viewing the front-line in the culture war

By Dianna Narciso

The April 28 edition of the comic strip *Shoe*, published in Florida Today exemplifies the problems we face in this uphill battle for understanding and separation of state and church. In the strip, the big bird and the little bird compare report cards. Back in the old guy's day, he claims, he didn't get bad grades. The little guy pretty much says that's because back then they could pray in school. Whatever the meaning intended, the statement is so ludicrous it angered me. But it's just that opinion that fuels the Christian right in their attempts to force theocracy upon us.

How many times do we have to shout it? No one took away anyone's right to pray in school. Why can't Christians see any difference between an individual's right to belief and prayer and an authority's right to lead a religiously diverse classroom or school in prayer?

At Orlando Sentinel's website (among others) the ad banner is eye catching. Against the backdrop of the American flag, a man bows his head in prayer. Beside him flash the words: The freedom to gather, the freedom to worship, the freedom to pray. And finally, the patriotic fervor reaches its peak with: Let freedom ring. This ad promotes the National Day of Prayer, planned for May 6. If you go to the National Day of Prayer website, you'll see that the praying man is actually kneeling in front of the Supreme Court building.

While I have no problem with a National Day of Prayer organized and promoted by citizens, there's something unsettling about the President of the United States urging citizens to pray and repent. Worse is the endorsement and official participation by scores of other representative bodies throughout the country. But if I were to voice my concerns, I'd be attacked for suppressing Christians' right to pray.

The editorial pages often reveal the dysfunctional logic of those who deny separation. "What do you mean the County School Board can't say the Lord's Prayer before meetings? Next they'll be telling me I can't pray in my car!" It appears that freedom of conscience to some people is only extended to themselves and those who believe what they do. "It's my conscience and you darn well better let me impose it on you!"

In a recent poll done by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, Americans said atheists are the greatest threat to the American way of life. I wasn't surprised at the news. Atheists are misunderstood, feared and despised. If only there weren't any atheists, see, everyone would at least believe in god, with the

"Why can't Christians see any difference between an individual's right to belief and prayer and an authority's right to lead a religiously diverse classroom or school in prayer?"

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HAPPENINGS

The Space Coast Freethought Association will hold its next meeting from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. on May 9th at the Melbourne Public Library, located at 540 E. Fee Avenue in Melbourne.

The room we meet in is near the reference desk and holds about 15 people. As you enter the library walk past the circulation desk and look to your left.

Dianna will have copies of her new book (see announcement below) available for purchase and will also sign copies for those who already have purchased the book and bring it to the meeting with them.

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Dianna Narciso's new book *Like Rolling Uphill: Realizing the Honesty of Atheism* is now available from Llumina Press. It can be ordered online at: <http://www.llumina.com/store/likerollinguphill.htm>

To learn more about the book go to Llumina's website, listed above, or to Dianna's Atheist View website at: <http://www.geocities.com/atheistview>

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The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) will hold a mini-convention in the Pacific Northwest on July 9-10th. The convention will be held at the Red Lion Hotel on Fifth Avenue in downtown Seattle, Washington.

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WAR (from page 1)

little “g,” and the Christians would feel a lot more comfortable. The argument is easier, I guess, between “my god” and “your god” than it is between “god” and “no god.” As long as everyone is buying into the hallucination all is right with the world.

HAPPENINGS

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Although intended for members in Washington, Oregon and Idaho, FFRF members from other parts of the country are invited to include the convention in their vacation plans. The gathering will open on Friday night, July 9th, and continues through Saturday, July 10th.

Actress/comedian (and freethinker) Julia Sweeney will appear. A former Saturday Night Live cast member, Ms. Sweeney is currently working on her third one-woman show, “Letting Go of God.”

Also appearing will be musician Dan Barker of the FFRF staff and Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Steve Benson with their “Tunes ‘n Toons” - a satiric look at religion in the news.

For more details about the convention and to find an online registration form go to: <http://ffrf.org/events/>

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. Print copies may be available on request.

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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.”

At times, it seems as if there is no hope—all is lost. We are suffocating in the midst of the fearful begging us to just leave them alone and let them get on with their delusion. But one thing I try to keep in mind is that one of the biggest problems with Christianity (and other salvation religions) is that it lends itself to a completely whacked out extreme—your neighborhood radical fundamentalists.

They seem to have taken a stronghold in government of late and they’re reveling, somewhat, in the headiness of power. I can’t help but imagine that they are already nearing that line in the sand.

The pendulum swings; and the farther you take it up the arc, the faster and harder it’ll fly back. The more power they get, the more frenzied they become, the more they salivate, the more they lose control.

I have to believe there is an undercurrent of toleration of differing beliefs in this country. I have to believe that there is a silent majority that can be pushed only so far before they stand up and fight back.

I may be wrong.

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"I am an atheist because there is no evidence for the existence of God. That should be all that needs to be said about it: no evidence, no belief."

Dan Barker,
Losing Faith in Faith:
From Preacher to Atheist

Space Coast Freethought Association

Founded by Dianna Narciso, the SCFA seeks to bring freethinkers of Brevard and surrounding areas together for social interaction, activism and community outreach.

To join the group go to: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SpaceCoastFreethought/>

For more information, contact Dianna Narciso by email at catspah@cfl.rr.com or by telephone at (321) 952-1231.

CONNECTIONS:

some web addresses that may be of interest to freethinkers

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

AlterNet.org is a project of the Independent Media Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening and supporting independent and alternative journalism.

First launched in 1998, AlterNet's online magazine provides a mix of news, opinion and investigative journalism on subjects ranging from the environment, the drug war, technology and cultural trends to policy debate, sexual politics and health issues. The AlterNet article database includes more than 7,000 stories from over 200 sources.

As the name suggests, AlterNet.org is intended as an alternative news source. You'll find stories reported here that you may not see in the dominant media.

<http://www.vote-smart.org/index.htm>

Thousands of candidates and elected officials. Who works for you? Who is seeking your vote? Project Vote Smart, a citizen's organization, has developed a Voter's Self-Defense system to provide you with the necessary tools to self-govern effectively: abundant, accurate, unbiased and relevant information.

As a national library of factual information, Project Vote Smart covers candidates and elected officials in five basic categories: biographical information, issue positions, voting records, campaign finances and interest group ratings. What would you like to know?

With elections rolling around, this is a site you may want to bookmark for future use

<http://www.theonion.com/>

The Onion bills itself as "America's Finest News Source." It is definitely one of the funniest. Fans of Jon Stewart and the "Daily Show" on Comedy Central will probably enjoy this faux news source as well. Seldom politically correct and always irreverent, The Onion is a hoot.

If you enjoy a satirical touch, you'll love The Onion. If not, you probably won't. Give it a look and find out.

Notes of a godless man: on faith

By George A. Ricker

Since I have been talking and writing about atheism and nonbelief, I've noticed one of the most common tactics used by the religious to attack those of us who aren't seems to be to equate atheism and theism with the assertion that atheists must have "faith" in their beliefs just as theists do.

Some have noted, quite rightly, that atheism denotes an absence of belief rather than a belief, therefore no "faith" is required. In other words, if I don't believe in the existence of gods, I'm not articulating any belief about gods, just declaring the absence of one, and I need no "faith" to support a nonbelief.

Needless to say, that answer never seems to satisfy the faithful, and the discussion often degenerates, after that point has been made, into something like "Do too!" "Do not!" "Yes, you do!" "No, I don't!" followed by various comments on ancestral lineage and the like.

Since much of this flack seems to come from fundamentalists and others of that witless ilk who apparently have nothing better to do than harass people who don't share their point of view (all this in the name of saving our non-existent souls so that we will make it to their non-existent heaven), I thought I would try to offer a few thoughts for those

SKIRMISHES (from page 1)

have left 22 people dead. Police rushed reinforcements to the provincial capital of Ambon in an attempt to stem the fighting, which escalated on April 26 and 27.

It is the bloodiest outbreak of violence in the Maluku since a peace deal in 2002 ended two years of religious violence that killed 9,000 people.

The latest clash occurred after a small, mostly Christian, separatist movement held a rally in Ambon.

Yet another example of religion's civilizing influence.

A call for denial

• A top cardinal at the Vatican has called upon priests to deny Communion to Catholic politicians who support abortion rights.

Cardinal Francis Arinze spoke at a news conference to introduce a new Vatican directive intended to clamp down on liturgical abuses in the Mass. The directive also bars lay people from giving sermons, non-Catholics from taking Communion and rites of other religions from being introduced in the service.

Arinze stopped short of saying whether John Kerry—the presumptive Democratic nominee for president and a Catholic—should be denied Communion by clergy in this country.

"The norm of the church is clear," he said. "The Catholic Church exists in the United States and there are bishops there. Let them interpret it."

Kerry's campaign said that religion should not be an issue in American politics.

David Wade, a spokesman for Kerry, stated, "The decisions he will make as president will be guided by his obligation to all the people of our country and to the Constitution of the United States."

Kerry has previously said that, while he personally opposes abortion, he supports the right of women to have one.

And we should note that, the Cardinal's statements notwithstanding, Kerry did receive Communion on Sunday.

Stay tuned.

of you who may encounter such comments and feel a need to respond to them.

Faith, in the context of the Christian religion at least, is "the evidence of things not seen." Most dictionaries describe "faith" as the firm belief in that which cannot be proven. It's important to understand this. Faith is not belief that is based on evidence. Faith *is* the evidence. Faith becomes a substitute for evidence.

Evidence can be examined and weighed. It can be analyzed. It can be shown to be true or false.

Faith suffers none of those deficiencies. The True Believer cannot be challenged on points of faith because they are based on no evidentiary foundation. And in any argument or discussion with a True Believer, what is presented always will come down to a matter of faith. Many religionists will tell you that you cannot comprehend the reality of their deity or their religion until you have faith. Once you have it, of course, everything will be made clear and your doubts will disappear. And how do you get it? Well ... you have to ask the deity for it. In other words, if you believe, belief becomes possible - or something like that.

Obviously, those of us, like myself, who thought we were Christians at one time in our lives really weren't. Our faith wasn't strong enough else we never would have left. I've used that line of thought in sermons myself, back when I was in that business.

And the purpose for insisting that atheists must have faith too (because they don't have certain knowledge about anything either) is to reduce the entire discussion to a debate about points of view. "I choose to believe this. You choose to believe that."

Of course, the religious really don't believe that the god-no god question is just a matter of point-of-view. But once they get us to concede that "yes, everybody has faith in something," they're in a much stronger debating position. Besides it's a convenient way to escape those inconvenient questions about evidence and contradictions and the like.

Needless to say, none of us claims absolute certainty about much, if anything at all—at least, not if we're rational. But most of us act as though we are reasonably certain about quite a few things.

That's because most of us provisionally accept the axiom that "reality exists." We observe that we interact with the world around us. It appears, according to our perceptions, to be there. We can have impact on it, and it can have impact on us. We can test our observations of "reality" by comparing them to the observations of other people to see whether those observations conform or deviate from one another and how much.

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Free Minds - Free People

FAITH (from page 3)

While the idea that reality exists may require faith - if you want to call it that - it is an axiom that is constantly being verified every moment we are alive and always can be revised if the evidence changes.

Beyond that axiom, however, no faith is required.

If I board an airplane to fly from my home in Florida to Chicago or New York, it's not an act of faith at all. I will choose an airline that has a good safety record. I will assume that the plane has been serviced properly and that a competent crew is in charge of the flight. I may be mistaken in those assumptions, but making them is not an act of faith, because they are based on the evidence that this airline has made similar flights in the past without mishap. Therefore the assumptions seem reasonable. If I demand absolute certainty that the airplane will not crash, I will never make the flight. No such proof is possible.

Did you know?

— By George

The word "Jehovah" was created by biblical translators. It does not appear in manuscripts prior to the 16th century CE and is a construct based on a misunderstanding of what was written.

According to the Oxford Companion to the Bible (Oxford University Press, Inc. 1993, ISBN 0-19-504645-5, Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, editors): "Jehovah. An artificially constructed name for Israel's God first attested in sixteenth-century CE Christian texts. The new construction was the result of changing attitudes toward the use of God's name. The Hebrew name 'Yahweh' was not normally pronounced after about the third century BCE out of respect for its holiness. In its place, readers of the Hebrew used 'adonay,' 'Lord.' When vowels were added to the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible (ca. 1000 CE), the consonants of Yahweh were preserved but the vowels of 'adonay' were used as a reminder to readers. Renaissance Christian tradition erroneously combined the consonants of Yahweh and the vowels of 'adonay' to produce 'Jehovah,' which is used occasionally in the King James Version and regularly in some revisions of it. More recent English translations use 'Lord' rather than 'Jehovah.'" (pp. 343)

This is well documented. I first learned of the error when studying Hebrew in seminary back in the 1960s - obviously that was before I came to my senses.

If you decide you absolutely must share this information with a Jehovah's Witness, I suggest either you wear body armor or be prepared to exit the premises rapidly

**"THERE WAS A TIME WHEN
RELIGION RULED THE
WORLD. IT IS KNOWN AS THE
DARK AGES."**

**Ruth Hurmence Green,
author of the *Born Again
Skeptics Guide to the Bible*, 1980**

All of us make such decisions every day of our lives. Again, if we demanded absolute proof that those decisions would yield the intended results, living would be impossible. However, such decisions are not dependent upon faith. They are based, rather, on such evidence as is available to us and are the result of our assessment of that evidence and our decision to act on it.

If, on the other hand, I allowed my favorite guru, Baba Wan Swami, to convince me that, through his telekinetic powers, he would be able to support me in midair if I jumped off the edge into the gorge of the Grand Canyon, it clearly would be an act of faith. I would be accepting the guru at his word, asking for no evidence, and basing my decision on no rational foundation. It would be, quite literally, "a leap of faith"—probably my last.

I doubt many nonbelievers would take the swami at his word. But theists do something similar every day of their lives.

In my view, all gods and all religions are human inventions. I find plenty of evidence in support of that idea and see no reason to think otherwise. "The evidence of things not seen" does nothing to alter that view. Nor is any "faith" required to sustain it.

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SPEAKING OUT: SCFA members in print

Pensacola News Journal; April 15, 2004

Bad editorial

The News Journal editorial "Nothing wrong with God in pledge" was shallow and condescending to those of us who embrace our greatest freedom: freedom of conscience. The pledge was secular for over 60 years. "Under God" wasn't inserted until 1954, about the same time our appropriate motto, "E Pluribus Unum," was set aside for the divisive "In God We Trust."

It's fine for members of the majority to strut and guffaw at the minority and cavalierly instruct us to "sit it out" if we're bothered. The editorial fails to deeply consider government's role with regard to the conscience of its citizens.

The Declaration of Independence is not our governing document. Its mention of Nature's God is irrelevant. The editorial disingenuously shies from the lack of mention of God in our secular Constitution. "In God We Trust" should not be on our money; courts should not invoke deity. There is a meaningful difference between individual freedoms and government endorsement. Only a secular government, silent on the question of deities, can fairly represent all Americans.

But instead of recognizing that secularism embraces freedom of conscience, the editorial joins the Christians who seek to use our government to support and promote their own faith. -

Dianna Narciso, Palm Bay

**"No gods, no masters."
Margaret Sanger**