

FREELY SPEAKING

FREE MINDS
FREE PEOPLE

Vol. 1, No. 11

July 2004

Four pages

SKIRMISHES

A difference

• While the U.S. Supreme Court was deciding not to decide whether or not “Under God” was a constitutional addition to the Pledge of Allegiance (They said Mr. Newdow had no standing), the European Union was deciding to leave mentions of “God” and religion out of its new constitution. Of course, the new EU constitution still has to be ratified, but it appears the final result will be godless. In that sense, it bears a striking resemblance to another constitution we could mention.

A favorite son

• When Ron Reagan spoke at the burial service for his father, former President Ronald Reagan, he said, “Dad was also a deeply unabashedly religious man, but he never made the fatal mistake of so many politicians, wearing his faith on his sleeve to gain political advantage.” Some Republican pundits took umbrage at the remarks, claiming they were intended as a slap at President George W. Bush. Reagan’s son, who is an atheist, said the only person he was thinking of when he spoke was his father.

Think some presidential shoes are beginning to pinch?

A scam

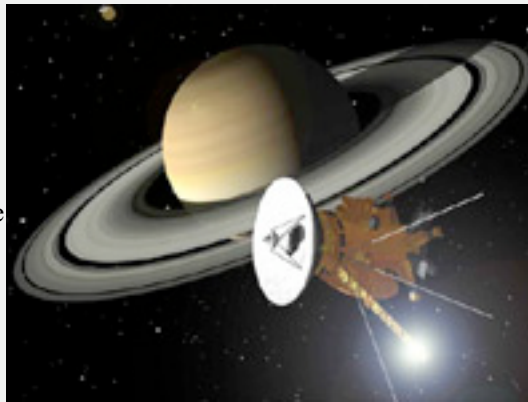
• The AP reports that seven people who accepted state voucher money to operate the Faith Christian Academy in Bartow now face charges ranging from grand theft to racketeering. Is this called “stealing for Jesus?”

See SKIRMISHES on page 3

No wings ... no prayers

The Cassini-Hygens mission to Saturn was launched from Cape Canaveral on Oct. 15, 1997. After a journey of approximately 2.2 billion miles, it arrived at Saturn on July 1 where it begins a four-year mission to study the gas giants rings, moons and magnetosphere. On Jan. 14, 2005, a probe will descend to the surface of Titan, Saturn’s largest moon. Cassini is the first spacecraft to orbit Saturn.

After almost seven years and more than 2 billion miles, a spacecraft has arrived where it needed to be when it was supposed to be there, thanks to the reasoning power of human beings. Hmmm...



Cassini spacecraft orbits Saturn (graphic courtesy of NASA)

A ‘Christian basher’ confesses

By Dianna Narciso

I’ve had another epiphany. Fireworks are lighting up in my brain. These jolts of understanding hit me a lot more often since I realized atheism than they did before that time. I wouldn’t say it necessarily has anything to do with atheism; instead, it has to do with the regular practice of thinking, something I can honestly admit I avoided in the past and the very thing that led to finding myself among the heathen.

I suppose I ought to qualify myself—my epiphanies might better be described as “duh” moments because it always turns out my brilliant insight was staring me in the face asking to be noticed, or worse, remembered all along. This time it arrived after a brittle confrontation with a Christian. I was accused, indirectly, of Christian bashing—of ripping people to shreds for their beliefs. I was properly aghast at the charge. Sure, I can be a solid foe once you poke me, but I don’t attack people outright with no provocation. And while I try to be honest about my thoughts and feelings regarding religion, especially Christianity as I know more about that one, I’ve never ripped a person to shreds physically or emotionally.

Long ago in that horrid institution known as high school, I learned my lesson. Before this particular incident I remember a few others in which I said or did something on purpose that hurt another person. This time, I was older and wiser and frankly should have known better. I’d like to say it was the fault of the culture, but nah, it was just me being jealous and acting out. I

See BASHER on page 2

HAPPENINGS

The Space Coast Freethought Association will hold its next meeting from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. on July 11 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.

Come and join the conversation about church-state separation and the importance of freedom FROM religion.

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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/athcistview>

“Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.”

Thomas Jefferson in a letter to his nephew, Peter Carr

BASHER (from page 1)

told another girl that my mother disapproved of her as a friend and that I could no longer be hers. My mother had said no such thing. I'd joined a bandwagon of girls unloading on this one, took my turn and for that, cried all the way home.

I called her as soon as I arrived there and apologized. I don't know why I said it and the look on her face when I did told me I'd hurt her. I can't recall ever doing such a thing again. I don't like hurting people. I don't like confronting people. I don't like having people angry at me. I don't even like it when people don't like me. I'm basically a relationship wimp. Part of the reason realizing atheism was hard for me was the subsequent realization that a lot of people don't like atheists very much, to say the least.

So, why would someone think of me as an antagonistic, hurtful person now? A Christian basher? Why would someone imagine me thinking to myself, "Why don't I insult my Christian friend today?" The idea is silly. One would think a person would need a reason to automatically assign injurious motives to another person's behavior. As far as I can tell, I'm not generally known as a basher in the company I keep; so why did this person assume I meant to hurt her?

I've heard of this plague of Christian bashing before. I've been told that we live in an anti-Christian society. That's a rather bizarre claim, as there are churches everywhere with their billboards advertising their moral and intellectual superiority with cutesy sayings. They've got their God in our Pledge and on our money and in our oaths. Could an atheist get elected president in this anti-Christian climate? Are you out of your mind? According to one poll I read recently, a convicted felon is a better choice for voters than an atheist.

Why do some Christians think they're being bashed all the time? Well, I figured it out. The truth is they aren't being bashed. Duh. Bashing would be harsh, threatening, or belittling criticism, especially involving personal insult. Bashing Christians would be calling them "stupid" or "idiotic." It might involve large groups of people agreeing in public that Christianity is ridiculous and ought to be wiped out. Certainly telling Christians they should leave the country if they don't like the way we do things here would qualify. But that's not what's been going on.

The truth is that those who claim that Christian bashing is a common occurrence are either so sure they're right about everything or so scared they're wrong, that

questioning or disagreeing with their beliefs is tantamount to a vicious attack. Any sort of humor aimed at their religion is blasphemous vitriol. Their beliefs, and therefore they themselves, are venerable and beyond reproach.

They can attack you, mind you, and they do so with gusto and quite a bit of self-righteous snobbery. But do not dare stand up for yourself, or worse, demand respect by going against what they've stated as fact. That's Christian bashing! And if you're an atheist you don't have to say or do anything to bash a Christian—apparently just being you will do the trick.

Granted, I've gone so far as to not only declare my atheism (Effrontery!), but write a book about it (Slamming!), run a website about it (Knocking!), and regularly write letters to editors concerning separation of state and church (Bullying!). This is all, apparently, purposeful Christian bashing. When Christians do these things it's out of love and concern for our nation and their fellow man. When I do it, it's ripping people to shreds for their beliefs.

Knowing what I am and what I do, a Christian can take virtually anything I say, especially as regards religion, as bashing.

Me: What's up with the Pope, eh?

Christian: How dare you impose your non-values on me!

Me: The Christian Right has taken over the Republican party.

Christian: Stop ripping me to shreds because of my beliefs!

I don't like upsetting people. I wish I could stop all this bashing. But, I fear the only other option is to agree with everything Christians say. I've never been a good candidate for Stepford so I guess I'll have to learn to embrace this new label. I'm doing well so far, I think, as this entire essay has been one long example of Christian bashing. Hey, when you find something you're good at, you ought to stick with it.

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://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/>

Part of the Library of Congress site, "A Century of Lawmaking For a New Nation" is a treasure trove of information for those interested in law and the making of law in the early history of the United States of America. Here you'll find loads of original source material, from drafts of legislation to reports and petitions sent to both houses of the U.S. Congress.

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/jefferson/>

The "Thomas Jefferson Digital Archive" is maintained by the University of Virginia and contains a wealth of information about the author of the Declaration of Independence and third president of the United States. One of the most accomplished men of his generation, Jefferson left a written record that is fascinating in its breadth and depth. Anyone interested in Early Americana will find this a rewarding place to visit.

<http://www.thomaspaine.org/contents.html>

Those interested in the writings of that other Thomas, Thomas Paine, will find online editions of all of them available on this site, which is run by the Thomas Paine National Historical Association. One of the first American freethinkers, Paine's writings provided the spark that ignited the American Revolution. After writing his *Age of Reason*, a classic attack on organized religion and specifically Christianity, Paine was vilified in the pulpits throughout America. He was called an atheist even though he was actually a Deist.

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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."

The “True Believer” in the White House

By John C. Miller

Many Americans have gone into the modern spiritual movement as evidenced by large charismatic churches springing up in every community. Many are affiliated with such denominations as the Assemblies of God or Pentecostal but all are led by driven preachers with grand plans to reach the community. These parallel the fundamentalist groups that claim they take the Bible as the “Word of God,” totally and literally true.

Understand that it is common for church bodies to adopt a statement of faith that says, “We hold the Bible to be the rule for faith and practice.” Fundamentalists go a step farther and declare that the Word of God is absolutely infallible as originally written. They work out the inconsistencies using methods that support their claims. Billy Graham is famous for saying, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.”

Conversion to fundamentalist Christianity (called being “saved” or “born again”) involves a voluntary brain cleansing wherein the subject pledges to accept Christ as his/her Lord, meaning the words of Jesus become the highest authority in life. This conversion involves willful rejection of secular methods of finding guidance in important decisions. Thus Fundamentalism is a really big step in personal philosophy if one attempts to follow Jesus their way. Thousands of theologians and Christian authors have become involved in solving the questions that scriptural teachings force upon the reader. The fundamentalist must not think outside the “box” because he is pledged to make everything fit into biblical principles.

On the other hand the Pentecostal-type convert solves the riddles of scripture by claiming modern special revelation from Jesus (through “gifts”), so while claiming that scripture is inerrant, a substitution of leading from the spirit is adapted with the scripture held as a guide. This sort of methodology irritates the strict fundamentalist because the modern Pentecostal is found without training to be engaged in evangelism and Christian ministries simply by recognizing his own experience as miraculous. Pentecostal Holiness churches and fundamental Baptists have more in common than the home-meeting, freewheeling Pentecostal who may come out with some far-fetched declaration after supposedly hearing God or Jesus speak.

What might come out of the imagination of a person who is committed to the current Christian viewpoint?

It was a typical home-church Christian meeting in which George W. Bush was converted and stopped drinking with the help of his friends in Austin, Texas. This type of conversion and a “miraculous” deliverance from alcoholism has become a rallying point for politically active preachers and church members. The son of former President Bush also made his declaration that he was called to become president in a home prayer meeting. Jesus is not found calling people to become president among literal fundamentalist groups, but they are unclear on just how God leads a person other than by the scriptures. Because the fundamentalists and Pentecostals are allied in political agendas they have downplayed their differences over scriptural usage and have united around the popular end-time books and teachings about Armageddon in the Revelation of John. Transport the Bush conversion experience to Washington.

We appear to have a very mixed-up man in the Oval office. Here is a man who may have held onto his problems of depression and addiction but quit drinking. Reliable reports indicate that the President and Cabinet often pray together and

that officials and aids in the White House are seen carrying their Bibles to meetings. Although this sounds tame and very nice it is the thrust behind new faith-based programs that have been given federal grants. It is common knowledge that the Christian community looked to Bush to restore the presidency after the sexual “uncleanness” of Bill Clinton and then advance to a form of theocracy. Bush chose to put together a staff of “true Americans,” based on Christian faith. Then while they were pursuing their Christian agenda the planes driven by Al Qaeda pilots slammed into the World Trade Center and the President’s popularity soared as he sent America’s might into the mountains of Afghanistan.

The Bush cadre of select believers combines the freewheeling Pentecostal with the End Time influences of fundamentalists who have been given access to the president’s ear. Bush has been told that events in Israel mark time leading up to the return of Jesus, the Messiah. End time believers have concocted a prediction that Israel must rebuild a temple like David the King’s temple and Israel is to gain all of the land promised to Moses including the entire West Bank. Orthodox Jews have been clamoring for these points ever since Israel took over Palestine. Such pressures would influence a convert like George W. Bush who now depends on religion like he once depended on alcohol.

The literal return of Jesus is expected to occur in conjunction with a great war over Israel. Out of the very unclear garble of the Bible several prominent preachers have made up the End Time prophecies that have resulted in best seller novels about how it will be as history unveils the events of Revelation and biblical forecasts for the end of the ages. Americans have been taught this for so long that they have overlooked any other possible interpretation of biblical prophecy, such as; it was written to enhance the fear factor in evangelist’s sermons during the early church era. Mark my words, Jesus never came back as the disciples promised the early church.

Lately a check on prominent Evangelicals verifies that they have swayed Bush to uphold Israel to settle the West Bank in spite of Arab threats of more terrorism. This commits American money and military support to grubbing Palestinians off their land. More recently aids are leaking stories of a frustrated president who suspects everyone has betrayed him because of news about Iraq. One day he curses people and the next day he quotes the Bible. His frustration and mood swings may indicate that his internal problems were never straightened out when he was “converted.”

Further reports indicated the most powerful man on earth calling the shots for invasion and head of state decapitation according to the way he felt led by “God.” During the move to assassinate Saddam, Bush’s counselors in house were none other than the Reverend Billy Graham and his crusading son Franklin. I wonder why the effort failed?

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John C. Miller is a former Fundamental New Testament Church activist and close associate to Senator Jesse Helms during the Reagan and first Bush Administrations. John was a corporate pilot until retiring in 2003 and now resides in Lehigh Acres, Fla. He is an active atheist and is a member of American Atheists. Permission to use parts of this essay is granted with proper attribution, however care must be taken to keep the context of all statements intact. Sources of subject matter are available on request.)

SPEAKING OUT: SCFA members in print

Tampa Tribune — June 22, 2004

Proves Newdow Right

Regarding "Where Does It End?" (Letters, June 21):

Mitch Baus' letter was full of misconceptions. First, the words "under God" needn't be "declared" unconstitutional; they are. The First Amendment reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." The idea that this country is under a god, of any sort, is a religious idea and, therefore, can't be promoted by government.

Second, if atheism is a religion, baldness is a hair color. Michael Newdow and millions of other Americans have no religion.

Baus claims that Newdow's argument would be akin to declaring "taking the Lord's name in vain in public unconstitutional" because it offends him. In doing this, he has shown that Newdow is right. Just as government has no business declaring blasphemy illegal, it has no right to tell us there is a god and most definitely no right to force patriotic Americans to acknowledge such when affirming loyalty.

Finally, Baus insults the very idea of freedom of conscience by claiming all atheists need do is remain silent while the Christian majority continues to trample the rights of not only ourselves, but also all religious minorities. Not a chance.

DIANNA NARCISO Palm Bay

SKIRMISHES (from page 1) ——— A rerun

• A councilman in Oceanside, California, says he will once again ask the council to hand a 2-foot-tall eagle-shaped engraving, bearing the motto "In God We Trust" behind the dais in the Oceanside City Council chambers. After initially approving the plaque, the council had changed its mind and rejected it in late 2002. Some issues just never die.

A judgment

• The AP reports a North Carolina district court judge has been ordered to restore the phrase "so help you God" to the oath administered in his courtroom. The State Supreme Court also ordered Judge James M. Honeycutt to allow bailiffs to open court with the customary "God save the state and this honorable court." Judge Honeycutt had told court officials in March that he planned to begin using a religiously neutral oath in his courtrooms because of the increasing number of non-Christians served by the court system. The North Carolina Supreme Court said the judge must conduct business in his courtroom in accordance with state law. (Note: Said law does allow for a simple affirmation instead of the oath when the person being sworn has "conscientious scruples" against taking the oath.)

Jacoby recounts freethought history

By George A. Ricker

Susan Jacoby's *Freethinkers: a history of American secularism* is a recounting of some American history that has been ignored and forgotten in the current wave of public religiosity and pious posturing by politicians of every stripe. Yet it's history that is essential for anyone who wants to have a true understanding of the critical role freethinkers have played in the creation of the society we live in today.

Whether she is rediscovering Tom Paine or writing about the controversy over Sunday mail delivery in the early part of the 19th century, Jacoby's narrative is lively and insightful. Her book is a celebration of two hundred years of secular activism and a reminder that the greatest legacy of the American Revolution was the creation of a government that was founded not on the authority of gods or religions but on the rational consent of human beings.

Jacoby's book was just published this year, so she brings the story of American freethought up to the present and notes the conflict between a society that is, in many ways, more secular than ever and the strident religious sectarianism that threatens to undermine the separation of church and state and the right of all Americans to freedom "from" religion.

The story of freethought in America is filled with heroes and heroines. Some of the names—Paine, Jefferson, Madison, Ingersoll, Sanger—will be familiar. Others, like Ernestine L. Rose, Lucretia Mott, William Lloyd Garrison, and Vashti McCollum, may not be. One of the points Jacoby makes in her survey is that freethinkers' contributions to American life have been edited out of most history texts.

Speaking of Lucretia Mott, Jacoby writes, "The neglect and misrepresentation of Mott is one more example of the fragmented historical record of Enlightenment-rooted American dissent."

She goes on to note that the secularists who have been most marginalized are those who were unabashedly antireligious. In the pages of this book, Jacoby tells the story of a culture war that has raged—at some times more stridently than others—since the inception of the American experiment in constitutional democracy. From the outset there has been a constant and ongoing effort by various Christian sects to gain recognition, advantages and privileges for their beliefs and their institutions.

Jacoby sees that process intensifying today. With President George W. Bush in the White House, the efforts of the Religious Right have gained a strong ally.

"It is time to revive the evocative and honorable *freethinker*, with its insistence that Americans think for themselves instead of relying on received opinion," she writes. "The combination of *free* and *thought* embodies every ideal that secularists still hold out to a nation founded not on dreams of justice in heaven but on the best human hopes for a more just earth."

This is a good read. I highly recommend it.

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

Karl Marx — February, 1844
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE CRITIQUE OF HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT (Introduction)