

FREELY SPEAKING

FREE MINDS
FREE PEOPLE

Vol. 1, No. 12

August 2004

Four pages

SKIRMISHES

A ranking

• The American Mosaic Project, a study of attitudes toward diversity in the United States, finds that respondents have the most negative attitude toward atheists when asked which of various groups is "most likely to share their vision of society."

Only 54 percent of those participating in the study thought atheists shared their vision of America. Not surprisingly, atheists got their lowest scores from social conservatives.

The study is being conducted by the University of Wisconsin and funded by the Edelstein Family Foundation of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

A watcher

• According to the most recent issue of *Free Inquiry*, published by the Council for Secular Humanism, Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, a conservative cleric considered to be the leading candidate to succeed Pope John Paul II, says the Antichrist, a seven-headed beast described in the book of Revelations, is already among us.

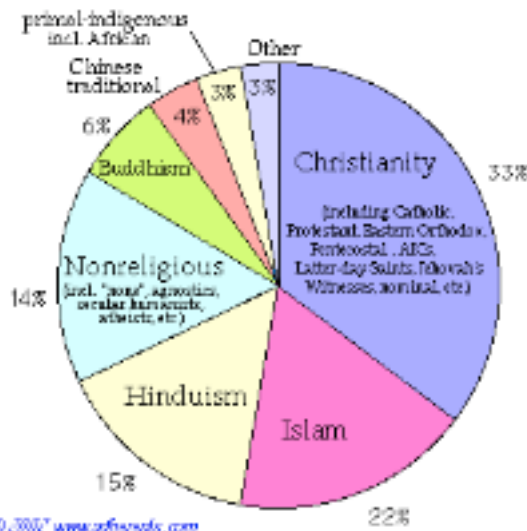
Biffi warns that the "Beast" is probably disguised as a philanthropist advocating for animal rights, vegetarianism or pacifism. It may even work to promote dialogue among various Christian sects, but its real purpose, according to Biffi, is to undermine Catholicism.

Hmmm... I always knew there was something I liked about vegetarians.

World religion — a numbers game

Estimates place the world population at more than 6.25 billion people. This pie chart represents the breakdown of believers and nonbelievers by percentages. However, such numbers can be hard to verify. Mostly they rely on membership counts by the groups or on estimates.

Christian sects form the largest group, but should that group be counted as one religion when some sects insist other sects are not "real" Christians? The chart indicates more than 4 billion non-Christians.



Splitting hairs for reason

By Dianna Narciso

"Why do you believe god doesn't exist?"

That is the question. It riles and baffles and, if not approached properly, parsed and exorcised of its demon, will in all likelihood lead you into the position of defending the almost-but-not-quite, depending on the definition, indefensible. Why bother with attempting to prove the nonexistence of a god? Better to nip the whole thing in the bud at the outset.

There is a difference between the two statements, "I believe no gods exist" and "I don't believe gods exist." Only the finicky among us may see it; certainly only the hair-splitters really care. But I ask you to care. I request that atheists stop saying they "believe" things to be true and most importantly that they "believe in" things.

I understand that our language is riddled with "belief." Someone may ask me if the library is open today. "I believe so," I reply. But is that really what I mean? Really, really? Don't I actually mean that I "think" it's open, but I'm too uncertain to say for sure? My husband asks me, "What's on the agenda for today?" I say, "I believe I'll lay around and watch television." Is that true? Do I "believe" I'll do that...or is that just what I'd like to do?

Don't get the relevance? The word "belief," like "faith," has more than one meaning. When we say we "believe in" Santa Claus, we're not saying we think he's real. We're saying that, despite evidence to the contrary, we have deluded ourselves into

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HAPPENINGS

The Space Coast Freethought Association will hold its next meeting from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. on August 8 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.

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>

"... it does not follow that the theology of a few should be allowed to forestall the health and well-being of the many."

— Ron Reagan, speech on stem cell research, Democratic National Convention, July 27, 2004

REASON (from page 1)

believing he is. When we say we “believe” that aliens abduct people and perform experiments on them, again, we’re saying that no matter what the facts are and no matter how absurd it sounds, we stand by that idea. When we say we “believe in” gods...now you understand.

Saying “believe” in those statements is far removed from using the word in place of “think,” “trust,” “accept” or “suppose.” Religious belief is a different animal altogether because it is the acceptance of something despite lack of or contradictory evidence. That’s why people “believe in” God. They have no factual evidence to back up the idea...they have to just “believe” it.

Don’t get caught saying you “believe” gods don’t exist. Before you know it, you’ll hear that your belief is no different from a Christian’s belief that God does exist. You share the burden of proof. The Christian has the Bible and thousands of years of shared belief by millions of people to show for his assertion...what do you have to prove god doesn’t exist? Not much beyond some circumstantial evidence and definition problems. But...even if you could handle your burden in debate...do you really want to say you “believe” something? If it’s factual, do you have to believe in it?

I’m sometimes asked if it could be proven to me beyond a shadow of doubt that God exists, would I then believe in him? To which I always reply, “I wouldn’t have to” and quickly turn the tables back to the Christian on whose shoulders the burden of proof (even a bit of evidence would be wonderful) rests. If God’s existence was factual, something that could be proven, no one would have to believe in him. It would be as apparent as gravity, repeatable, testable, factual. Everyone would “know” it. In one puff of confirmed data atheism would be eliminated and we could get on with fighting over who God likes best.

Faith, as a word, is rotten to the core. As a nonreligious person, I strive to eradicate the word from all conversation. Inevitably, a Christian apologist will demand I acknowledge that I practice faith just as he does. We are no different, you see. And if I would just look into the matter, once I’ve admitted I’m faithful, I’d see that my faith is based on nothing, while his is based on the real McCoy: God.

Indeed, he will say, atheists have faith every morning expecting the sun will rise. Every time they cross the street they exercise faith that they won’t be hit by a

car. Each time they look into their spouse’s eyes and trust they are loyal, they practice faith. This is no different from the faith the Christian has that his god is real. Creepy, isn’t it?

There is a big difference between trust and confidence on the one hand, and “belief without or despite evidence” on the other. And that’s what religious faith is. Having confidence in something based on experience and knowledge in no way compares to having faith in the existence of a divine being.

That is what you do when you wake up with the sun, cross the street, or trust your spouse. You have reasons to do so. And if those reasons ever deteriorate...you (hopefully) learn from your mistakes. With religion, on the other hand, when science and reason prick your balloon, you just patch it up and keep going. And when those pesky atheists try to split hairs over the definitions of faith and belief, you just keep shutting them out and insist they believe and have faith too, just like you. Because, let’s face it, you desperately need them to have your faults in order to make yourself comfortable with faith and belief.

I encourage all atheists to split hairs and play semantics with apologists. Don’t let them twist your words to suit their argument by being precise with “belief” and “faith” and calling on them to support their own definitions. It’s a lot like flicking holy water on demons...as the movies portray it anyway: terrible tantrums, lots of shrieking, until finally, they slink away defeated.

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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.factcheck.org/>

FactCheck.org claims to check out the reality behind political ads run by both parties. The site is sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

It states: "We are a nonpartisan, nonprofit, "consumer advocate" for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. We monitor the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases. Our goal is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship, and to increase public knowledge and understanding."

Though it's always wise to be skeptical of all claims of journalistic objectivity, this site may be a helpful source of information in the current political season. Let the reader beware.

Here are the websites for our U.S. senators and representatives for Brevard County, in case you want to get in touch

<http://graham.senate.gov/>

The web address of Florida Senator Bob Graham

<http://billnelson.senate.gov/>

Florida Senator Bill Nelson's web home

<http://www.house.gov/feeney/>

Congressman Tom Feeney represents the 24th District

<http://www.house.gov/weldon/>

Congressman Dave Weldon represents the 15th District.

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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."

Atheism and color-blindness

By George A. Ricker

A theist once asked me, "Isn't atheism like being color-blind? Just because you can't see the colors, that doesn't mean they aren't real."

I've seen this analogy used before. There are several reasons why it doesn't work in any argument for the existence of a deity.

First of all, it assumes that atheists lack the ability to "believe" in a god and therefore can't experience its reality in their own lives. Apart from the rather obvious question begging, this assumption seems incompatible with most versions of the god hypothesis. If a just deity created human beings who lacked the ability to perceive it, then how could it hold them accountable for failing to perceive it? How could there be any penalties associated with nonbelief? Would that not mean that, by failing to accept the reality of a deity, atheists were simply acting in accordance with "God's" will?

Beyond that, in my own life—and the same is true in the lives of many others I could name—I was a theist before I became an atheist. At one point in time, I did "believe" in the reality of "God." I was a Methodist, a Christian, and a very active participant in my church. Consequently, the notion that everyone who is now an atheist lacks some ability to perceive a deity fails at the outset, because many of us, at some point in our lives, apparently had that ability and stopped believing in gods anyway.

So the analogy fails at the outset because of the assumptions on which it is based. However, it also fails because of the nature of color-blindness.

In a sense, the problem of color-blindness can be appreciated by everyone. The portion of the spectrum that accounts for the colors that are visible to human beings is a small part of the total spectrum. We cannot see in either the ultraviolet or the infrared range except with the aid of powerful instruments.

But even though we cannot "see" colors in the infrared part of the spectrum, we have no reason to doubt they represent real phenomena. We have been presented with sufficient evidence for the existence of those parts of the spectrum.

By the same token, the person who is color-blind can verify that there is such a thing as "color" even though he or she may be unable to experience it directly. The existence of the phenomenon called "color" is an objectively verifiable fact that is supported by solid, scientific evidence.

The same cannot be said for "God." To begin with, the word "God" means many things to many people, and for those who have no belief in a god, the word conveys no intelligible meaning at all—beyond possibly a vague definition of some sort of cosmic super critter that had something to do with the creation of the universe. Moreover, we have been presented with *no* objective, verifiable evidence that the proposition "God exists" (however one defines "God") has any validity.

All ideas deserve a fair hearing but not all ideas will survive one. The chief difficulty with the "God" idea lies in the absolute inability of its advocates to offer either a description of what they mean by the word that is comprehensive, consistent and non-contradictory or any credible evidence in support of the existence of the entity so described.

These are some of the difficulties with the equation of color-blindness to the lack of belief in a deity. There are others.

If there's a comparison to be made between color-blindness and atheism, I would suggest it is quite the opposite of that being offered by theists. Religion and god-belief are shrouds that obscure one's vision. Whole sight is achieved by removing them.

SPEAKING OUT:

SCFA members in print (more on page 4)

Orlando Sentinel—July 6, 2004

Governing document

In his July 1 op-ed diatribe against the rights of others ("Pride on Parade" -- I was horrified by column"), Anthony Nardella Jr. asked a very interesting question: "Where do homosexuals get their authority for saying that Jesus, Moses, Muhammad and nearly every other major religious voice in history is wrong?" The answer? Easy: from the Constitution of the United States of America, Amendment One, which reads in part: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion"

Our governing document says that Jesus, Moses, Muhammad or any other religious leader has no say in our laws beyond his vote. While I appreciate that Nardella is personally offended by what he imagines homosexuals do that he doesn't, I am equally outraged at his bigotry against people who have done him no wrong. His self-proclaimed superior morality is disgusting to me and every other tolerant American.

As the zealously religious are always champing at the bit to denigrate someone or deny someone else equal rights, I'd say that strict separation of state and church is of utmost importance.
Dianna Narciso, Palm Bay

Lakeland Ledger; July 10, 2004

Forced Religion

Ben Johnson's letter ["Church-State Separation," June 30] claimed that the Constitution doesn't provide for "freedom from religion" and then went on to interpret the First Amendment as providing freedom to "practice (or not practice) religion." Excuse me for being confused, but the freedom to not practice religion is freedom from religion.

Forcing any person to declare we are "one nation, under God" is forcing that person to practice religion. Living in a country in which state-created coins are inscribed with, and whose appropriate motto "E Pluribus Unum" has been discarded and replaced by "In God We Trust" is forcing citizens to practice religion.

Any forced acknowledgment of a god, especially a particular god, the Christian God, is forcing a person to practice religion. Believers may claim otherwise, but they are hardly the unbiased people who can make that decision for nonbelievers.

While I could argue Johnson's attempt to claim Jefferson and our founders had no intention of a wall of separation, the truth is that it doesn't matter.

We are a religiously diverse population and only a government that completely separates itself from the divisive issue of religion can fairly represent all its citizens. Anyone who argues against strict separation of state and church is really arguing against freedom of conscience.

Unfortunately, many vocal Christians don't want freedom of religion for all, only for themselves to use our government to promote their faith.

DIANNA NARCISO

SPEAKING OUT: SCFA members in print (more on page 3)

Pensacola News Journal—July 5, 2004
Standards needed for the Pledge

In his June 27 letter ('Violating my rights') Mike Dunne states "Removing the words 'under God' from the Pledge would violate the First Amendment -- it would prohibit me from freely exercising my religious beliefs."

I guess everyone's rights were violated before the Pledge was modified by Congress in 1954. Before then, people who could not use evidence, reason and persuasion to promote their religion were unable to use the power of government to inflict their religion on the rest of us.

Religious ideas should meet the same standards of evidence and proof as other ideas whether scientific, economic or political. None should be adopted by government until they have been validated empirically by testing in a controlled environment against objective criteria.

Dunne should design a scientifically valid experiment to demonstrate that this is indeed "one nation under God" if he wants it to remain incorporated in our law. Until then, it is simply one unsupported assertion among many.

-- Larry Mundinger, St. Augustine

Pensacola News Journal—July 5, 2004

Not in Constitution

Mike Dunne ("Violating my rights," Letters, June 27) claims "this country was founded on a strong belief in God" and that removing the words "under God" from the Pledge would violate the First Amendment -- and prohibit him from freely exercising his religious beliefs.

Our country was not founded on Christian principles. Thomas Jefferson and many of his fellow Founding Fathers were Deists, not Christians. The words "Creator" and "Nature's God" from the Declaration of Independence are often construed by Christians to support our Founding Fathers' supposed belief in the Judeo-Christian God of the Bible. However, Jefferson wrote he did not believe in the divinity of Jesus or the Bible.

Also it is our Constitution, not the Declaration, that our great country is based upon. There is no mention of Christianity, the Bible, Jesus or God in our Constitution. This was done for a reason!

"All" Americans should have the right to pledge their allegiance without having to submit to the Christian God! Millions of Americans do not believe in the Christian God and millions more do not believe in any god.

No one is taking Christians' rights away from them! Christians are free to exercise their beliefs in their homes and churches.

-- Charles Eugene, Titusville

The Christian Science Monitor—July 6, 2004
Atheism doesn't negate morality

I found Arnold E. Resnicoff's June 28 opinion piece "On becoming our own worst enemy" disturbing. He quotes the untrue maxim, "There are no atheists in foxholes," and then makes the true statement that "foxholes can breed atheists." However, he goes on to equate atheism with loss of "all faith in dreams" and the values of fighting fire with fire and "dog eat dog." Put with the rest of his essay, this paragraph implies that atheism is the evil about which he writes.

Atheism is no more than lack of belief in deity. As an atheist, I simply don't believe the stories of gods are true. Atheism in no way negates one's faith in dreams, care and concern for others, morality, or a sense of justice.

Diane Narcisco - Palm Bay, Fla.

Bradenton Herald—July 19, 2004
Not Christian nation

Gene Gallo ("Heading wrong way," letters, July 12) attempted to prove we are a Christian country by quoting colonists and Founders. Thomas Jefferson's quote, "I am a real Christian" is misconstrued, as he despised the Christian religion. In an Oct. 31, 1819, letter to William Short, Jefferson listed things about Christianity he didn't believe: "The immaculate conception of Jesus, his deification, the creation of the world by him, his miraculous powers, his resurrection and visible ascension, his corporeal presence in the Eucharist, the Trinity, original sin, atonement, regeneration, election, etc." (Norman Cousins, "In God We Trust," p. 148-149). Jefferson was no Christian.

Gallo also claimed there are restrictions on public prayer. There is a difference between individual rights and government endorsement. Pray as an individual anytime, anywhere, but do not use government institutions to promote your faith.

Only two things matter in this debate. First, the Constitution is our governing document, and it is secular. Second, we are a religiously diverse population; Christianity itself covers assorted religious views. Only a secular government can fairly represent every citizen. No one asks Mr. Gallo to give up his faith; we demand our right to remain free of it.

Dianna Narcisco, Palm Bay

"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