

FREELY SPEAKING

FREE MINDS
FREE PEOPLE

Vol. 2, No. 1

September - October 2004

Four pages

SKIRMISHES

An affiliation

• A poll of American Jews by the American Jewish Committee shows that 51 percent report membership in a synagogue but only 14 percent consider "religious observance" the most important factor in their Jewish identity. Most of them considered social justice and simply being part of the Jewish people most important.

According to the survey, 31 percent of respondents identified with Judaism's Conservative branch, 29 percent with Reform, 7 percent with Orthodoxy, 2 percent with Reconstruction and 30 percent as "just Jewish."

The phone poll of 1,000 Jews, conducted Aug. 18 to Sept. 1, had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

A confrontation

• Greek Orthodox and Franciscan priests got into a fist fight last week at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (in Jerusalem), Christianity's holiest shrine, after arguing over whether a door in the basilica should be closed during a procession.

Dozens of people, including several Israeli police officers, were slightly hurt in the brawl at the shrine, built over the spot where tradition says Jesus was crucified and buried. Custody of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is shared by several denominations.

The fight broke out during a procession of hundreds of Greek

See SKIRMISHES on 2

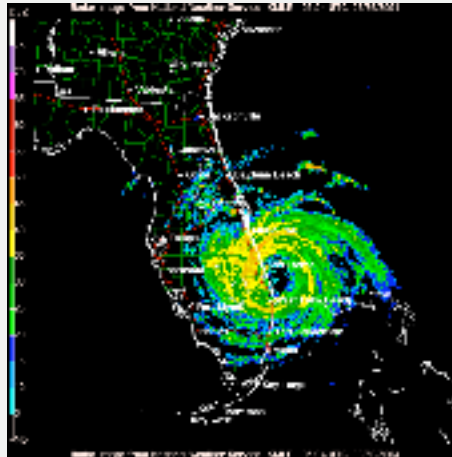
God fingers freethinkers

By Mike Archangelo

"I never thought God would let this happen," cried one woman after the second hurricane in three weeks ravaged Florida's East Coast.

Many of the faithful—while quick to offer the caveat that they were sure there was a reason for everything—seemed to wonder what possible rationale there could be for all these hurricanes.

See FINGER on 4



Acting up?

This radar image of Hurricane Jeanne making landfall on the East Coast of Florida near Stuart in the early morning of Sept. 26 doesn't represent an act of any god. However, the category three storm was yet another reminder (as if we needed more) of the power of undirected natural forces.

Storm thoughts

By Dianna Narciso

Life is full of mysteries. One of the more fascinating to me is that humans can speak without having any real understanding of what they've said. Another would be the human ability to believe two opposite things at the same time.

Natural disasters will bring these silly habits to the forefront as the religious scramble to beg their God not to kill them while at the same time accepting that his will is paramount. While this year's hurricane season has tested our patience and survival skills, it has also rewarded those of us who think with the funny side of religion displayed almost daily.

Houses are boarded up. Most say "Go away [insert hurricane name here]!" I saw one that put it rather bluntly: "I hate you, Jeanne!" But one of my neighbor's boards said, "In God we Trust." One has to wonder...if they trust in God, why did they board up their windows? Although, it's true, God isn't very precise when he wreaks his vengeance or lessons or whatever it is God does with his deadly acts. The good seem to perish along with the bad. So...how can they trust him? He hasn't shown himself to be an expert marksman in the past. Is there an answer? Can it ever make sense?

See STORM on page 2

HAPPENINGS

George Oertel of the Humanist Club at Barefoot Bay will be the featured speaker when the **Space Coast Freethought Association** holds its next meeting from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. on October 10 at the Melbourne Public Library, located at 540 E. Fee Avenue in Melbourne.

Oertel's talk is titled "Where are they?" (referring to freethinkers, atheists, humanists, etc.)

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.

oooooooooooo

The **Freedom From Religion Foundation** will hold its next annual convention in Madison, Wis., on the weekend of Oct. 29-31.

A Friday afternoon reception at Freethought Hall will open the conference. The convention will move to the nearby Concourse Hotel on Friday night, and continues all day Saturday. The annual meetings of the membership and Board of Directors take place Sunday morning, ending by noon.

To learn more about the FFRF convention go to <http://www.ffrf.org/convention>

See HAPPENINGS on 2

STORM (from page 1)

People prayed. They must have been tired of praying by late September. I'm wondering how the praying went. Did the people of Tampa Bay pray successfully, thus compelling God to bring Charley farther south into poor unrighteous Punta Gorda? Did Punta Gorda suddenly become righteous and pray Ivan right into Pensacola? Are the people on the east coast of Central Florida just lousy at praying? And what in Heaven's name did those poor people of Stuart do? Is Stuart a din of iniquity on the scale of Saddam and Gomorra? What have we been missing, I wonder.

HAPPENINGS (from page 1)

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/likeroilli nguphill.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>

SKIRMISHES (from page 1)

Orthodox worshipers commemorating the 4th-century pilgrimage by Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, to Jerusalem.

The procession passed a Roman Catholic chapel, and priests from both sides started arguing over whether the chapel door should be open or closed.

A criticism

The latest U.S. State Department annual report on religious freedom worldwide cites Saudi Arabia, along with six other countries, for engaging in or tolerative "gross infringements on religious freedom."

According to the State Department report, "Freedom of religion does not exist." Basic religious practice is denied to all but those who adhere to the state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam.

Former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Robert W. Jordan says the Saudis are likely to be privately stung by the criticism. He said there are moderate Saudi clerics and other leaders who may work for change when conditions are favorable.

"God is our refuge and our strength" so the church billboards say. If he's your refuge, why is your steeple tottering like that? Why is the front wall of one church blown away? Why evacuate or huddle in the hallway? If you can hide in God, do you have to hide anywhere else?

It's all just a little mind game. "If God takes me, it was my time to go." Well, I can handle that. It's no different from me sitting in the family room thinking, if I die tonight, I die. But that didn't keep me from being ready to dart to safety at any second. Didn't the religious do the same? Didn't they sleep in their closets or drive over to the other coast or barricade themselves in the bathroom? Seems to me, if the Almighty God of the Universe says it's your time to go, there is no refuge. And certainly no point in packing your underwear and medications.

When we all come out of it at the other end, they thank God for sparing them, they thank God when the line for water and ice is short, they thank God when the power is restored. They thank God for comforting them in the storm.

Well, I thank my husband and our neighbors for boarding up the windows. I thank my husband for sitting up with me all night. I thank my friends and family for their support. I thank Publix, volunteers, FPL and the guys who pick up the trash. I thank the real people, here now, visibly doing all they can to help. And I thank the wacky religious for a touch of humor to an otherwise stressful situation.

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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

In this political season, here are some sites that may be of interest to the political junkies among you. Caution ... I take no responsibility for the accuracy of any information contained therein.

<http://www.spinsanity.org/>
"Spinsanity" claims to be devoted to countering political rhetoric with reason. While the creators of the site concede they have been politically active in the Democratic Party and progressive causes, they also insist their effort is nonpartisan and dedicated to debunking spin from "both sides of the aisle."

<http://www.pollingreport.com/>
PollingReport.com is an "independent, nonpartisan resource on trends in American public opinion." If you want to know what the latest polling data says about the upcoming election, this is a good site to check.

<http://www.electoral-vote.com/>
This site tracks the current calculations for electoral votes, based on individual state polls conducted by major polling organizations. It is updated daily and can be volatile, so it's not advisable to get too excited or too down in the dumps about how the map looks on any given day.

<http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/index.shtml?>
This site has absolutely nothing to do with politics. This is the National Hurricane Center's Tropical Prediction Center. It's the place to go for the latest information from the National Hurricane Center on any tropical systems (tropical depressions, tropical storms and hurricanes). The site gives access to lots of data about tropical storms in general and specific storms in particular. It's also linked to all sorts of satellite images and so on.

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.

Freely Speaking is published and edited in Palm Bay, Fla., by George Ricker on behalf of the SCFA. All contents © 2004 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."

A dialogue with a creationist

By George A. Ricker

What follows is part of an online discussion I had with a creationist a while back. The hand-waving and evasion is typical of the breed.

Creationist: The idea that creationism is not a scientific theory and therefore not science seems to be a bit deceptive.

Atheist: OK .. then what is the scientific theory of creationism? Other than claiming "Goddidit" I have yet to hear one.

Creationist: This idea rests on the principle that a theory must be falsifiable and since God did it is not falsifiable statement it cannot be scientific. Of course by falsifiable this assumes that it can be tested in some way. I propose that creationism can be falsified and is testable by the following means.

Atheist: None of what follows is a test whereby "creationism" can be falsified. You can't falsify a scientific theory that does not exist. As far as I know there is no scientific theory of creationism. If there is one - beyond the simple statement that "God" did it, which is an assertion and bears no resemblance to anything remotely approaching a scientific theory - then what is it?

Creationist: 1. The atheist physicist simply has to show us a mechanism where something composed of matter can be created from a literal ontological nothingness.

Atheist: Suppose the physicist simply thinks matter/energy always has existed in some form or another and the current "universe" is simply the most recent configuration of that matter/energy? Would he still have to show that "something composed of matter can be created from a literal ontological nothingness?"

Actually, it is the creationist who must demonstrate that "something" can emerge from "nothing." If a "God" created everything from nothing, how was that done? And more importantly, if it is impossible for something to emerge from nothing, then where did "God" come from?

Creationist: 2. The atheist evolutionist simply has to show us a mechanism where life has been created from non life. (with no presupposing evolution a priori.)

Atheist: The biological theories collected under the "theory of evolution" label do not attempt to explain the origins of life. They account for the emergence of change in living organisms by attempting to identify and explain the mechanisms which cause those changes. It is those changes, according to evolutionary biology, that have led to the diversity of living organisms on this planet (and, hypothetically, on any other where life has emerged).

The scientific theory which attempts to account for the origins of life is abiogenesis. Although there are several promising lines of inquiry, I don't think there is a clear front-runner yet (I could be wrong about that, but that's my understanding of the current state of knowledge in that area).

Creationist: 3. The atheist information theorist simply has to show us a mechanism where intelligence arises from non-intelligence. (Again without presupposing evolution a priori.)

Atheist: How do you define "intelligence"? Is it simply problem-solving behavior or does it have to do with the ability to create and manipulate symbols? What makes you think the process whereby intelligence emerges only involves one "mechanism"? What sort of "mechanism" do you have in mind?

Can plants be intelligent? Is intelligence strictly confined to living organisms? Can machines be intelligent? What does it mean to say that "intelligence arises from non-intelligence. (Again without presupposing evolution a priori)"?

Are you here using the word "evolution" simply as a synonym for "change?" If you are, then how can one describe the emergence of anything from anything without assuming "change?" If that's not what you mean, then what do you mean?

Is a human embryo "intelligent" at the moment of conception? Is a human infant "intelligent" at birth? Is a human adult more or less "intelligent" than in either of those other states?

Creationist: 4. The atheist humanist simply has to show us how an absolute moral principle such as " all men have value" can come to be without there being an absolute basis for the principle.

Atheist: Why would an atheist humanist have to show you how an "absolute moral principle" exists at all?

Do you think there are "absolute moral" principles? Suppose that your "atheist" humanist thinks that human morality has developed as human societies have emerged and has its origins in our nature as biological organisms?

I've tried to point out some of the flaws in your "valid tests." The bottom line is that none of them "tests" the validity of creationism, as you claimed they did. I think you need to go back to the drawing board.

Even if modern science is dead wrong about everything, that state of affairs proves neither the existence of a cosmic super critter of any description, whether it's called "God" or goes by some other name, or the validity of any of the many religions associated with one of its iterations.

You need to do better than that. Otherwise, all you are left with is the assertion that since science can't explain everything, "God" must exist. That's not a very convincing argument ... except for those who already are persuaded.

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FINGER (from page 1)

In an exclusive interview with “God”—a.k.a. Jehovah, Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, the Lord of All Creation and other aliases too numerous to count—this reporter has learned the nature of that reason.

Blame the freethinkers.

“I’ve been watching this group in Brevard County,” said God. “Wasn’t too concerned when it was just an email list, but then they started having meetings and such. Then the meetings started attracting more people.”

God paused to catch a Divine breath, “Well, when a dozen or more nonbelievers start gathering that can spell trouble. I’ve learned my lesson after letting several other groups get out of hand and grow until they have become national organizations with thousands of members.

“So my policy for the new millennium is to get their attention early. Given the location of the Space Coast Freethought Association, sending back to back hurricanes seemed a reasonable approach. I even threw in Ivan, just to let them know how serious I was.”

Asked what would happen if the freethinkers didn’t get the message, God made his intentions clear.

“Well, that would be pretty silly,” He intoned, “First, I sent Charley, which was a category one storm when it hit northern Brevard County. Then, I sent Frances, a category two storm, followed by Jeanne, a category three storm. I’ve been holding back—after all, I am a merciful God. But I’m also a temperamental cuss.

“If these people think it’s been bad so far, wait until they get a load of Hurricane Zenobia!”

“But wait a minute,” I asked, “isn’t this awfully extreme? You’ve killed thousands of people, most in the Caribbean, caused billions of dollars of property damage and disrupted the lives of millions of people, all to get the attention of a relative handful of people who have no belief in you. How can you justify that?”

Following a period of intense thunder and lightning, which this reporter survived only by immediately prostrating himself and groveling profusely, God thundered a rebuke.

“I don’t owe you explanations, little man. And I certainly don’t have to justify anything to you or anyone else on that miserable planet. Read Job!

“Besides whatever I do is the right thing to do by definition. I’m God.”

With that the Supreme Ruler of the Universe terminated the interview and went stalking off.

This reporter went in search of a change of underwear. I had read about God being diagnosed with bipolar disorder—The Onion broke that story a while back—but this was my first direct experience with it.

So there you have it folks.

If you want to know what’s responsible for all this destruction, don’t blame nature, don’t blame Global Warming, and don’t blame God.

Blame the freethinkers.

(Note to the humor impaired. This is a bit of satire, a parody of the attitude that everything that happens is part of “God’s Plan.” It’s not intended to be taken seriously. Whether you find it funny will be a matter of taste.)

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SPEAKING OUT: SCFA members in print

Florida Today—Aug. 5, 2004

Columnist would impose his brand of religion

Joseph Perkins' recent column headlined "Religion in the public square" in the July 27 FLORIDA TODAY was outrageous. I am amazed at the presumption and ignorance of Christians who claim that a secular government infringes on their freedom of religion.

To claim, as Perkins did, that taking coercive prayer out of public schools "gave the godless minority in this country legal tyranny over the God-fearing majority" is one of the most ridiculous and infuriating statements I've ever read.

What Perkins advocates is Christian tyranny over non-Christians. Instead of ridding the government of references to gods and religion so that all Americans can enjoy complete freedom of conscience, he would impose his brand of religious belief on the entire country.

Yet he has the audacity to complain that atheists are subjugating him. How? Are we asking that the Pledge of Allegiance say "under no gods?"

Are we demanding all students be led in denunciations of gods each school day? Of course not.

Dianna Narciso
Palm Bay

"The atheist is not obligated to answer arbitrary assertions, unproven assumptions and sloppy generalizations concerning the nature and consequences of the atheistic position. Atheism is the absence of a belief in a god, nothing more. If the theist wishes to draw monumental implications from this lack of belief, he must argue for his claims."

"ATHEISM: The Case Against God," 1989
George H. Smith