

FREELY SPEAKING

FREE MINDS
FREE PEOPLE

Vol. 2, No. 5

April 2005

Six pages

SKIRMISHES

A mistake in identity?

• Tampa Bay's Channel 10 reported on March 29 that a man was arrested when he attempted to take a plastic cup of water into the Pinellas Park hospice where Terry Schiavo is dying.

When he was stopped at the gate, the man shouted at the officers who stopped him, "You don't know God from Godzilla."

Hmmm ... you think the Japanese are on to something?

A spanking?

• Pop diva Madonna and her husband, Jeff Ritchie, have incurred the wrath of conservative Catholics for dressing up as a nun and pope respectively for a bash celebrating the Jewish holiday of Purim.

E! Online reports that William Donahue, head of the Catholic League, condemned the pair for appearing at London's Kabbalah Center Purim Party drinking and dancing in clerical garb. It was especially offensive, Donahue complained, coming on Holy Thursday, a three days before Easter Sunday.

Donahue opined, "She needs to be beaten with a ruler by a real-life nun and he needs to be paddled on his behind by a real-life priest. That would please the Catholic League."

From some things we've read, it also might please Madonna.

Our sign

"What's your sign" may be the most recognized and most overused pickup lines on the singles scene.

Well, here's our sign. It's a sign that the SCFA is about more than sitting around carping about the latest outrage from the Religious Right.

It's a sign we are committed to doing what we can to make a positive contribution to our community. Join us for the next Adopt A Road cleanup on April 10 from 10 a.m. to noon. We meet in front of the Atlanta Bread Company restaurant on Palm Bay Road at Stack Boulevard.



Getting comfortable in 'The Zone'

By Dianna Narciso



"You're traveling through another dimension...a journey into a wondrous land of imagination...it is an area which we call...the *Twilight Zone*."

There is a feeling you get when reality goes weird—I've grown accustomed to it these days. You think you may be dreaming, but things aren't exactly bizarre enough for that. Still, eeriness surrounds you...you figure things must be normal but you've just gone wrong somewhere in your thinking. Soon, you reason, it will all come out and you'll see where the error occurred and everything will settle down to normal again. But for the time being, you're trapped in a warped moment of timelessness where you think all the world's gone mad. I'm reminded of the scene in *Mars Attacks* when the Martians are chasing the humans and obliterating them with their ray guns as they call out, "Don't run, we are your friends!"

Sad to say, instead of that wonderful reality settling in, the frequent outcome lately is my acceptance that, yes, indeed, we are living in the *Twilight Zone*. Americans have gone mad.

Christians gather on the beach at sunrise to sing praises of welcome to the Son, just as the pagans they ruthlessly censored or slaughtered did before them to welcome back the Sun.

Protesters outside Terri Schiavo's hospice rant about the injustice of removing the poor woman's feeding tube, claiming her life should be left in God's hands.

See **ZONE** on page 2

HAPPENINGS

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

The May meeting will be held in the conference room located just ahead of the reference desk, on your left as you enter the library.

Our program will be about the "National Day of Reason" to be celebrated on May 5 this year.

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

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The next **Melbourne Atheist Meetup** will be on April 19 at 7 p.m. at House of Joe 1220 W. New Haven Ave Suite 150, Melbourne, FL

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The next **Freedom From Religion Foundation** convention will take place on Nov. 11-13 at Rosen Plaza Hotel in Orlando, Fla. Details will be forthcoming at a later date. Check the website at: <http://www.ffrf.org/events> for more information.

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ZONE (from page 1)

President Bush said, of Shiavo's case, we should "err on the side of life," but mocked the pleas of Carla Faye Tucker before his state of Texas executed her. He signed the Advance Directives Act into law in that state in 1999 permitting hospitals to end life-support on patients whose chances of recovery were nil or whose family could not pay for care. Let's not even go to Iraq.

Those of us who gathered at Melbourne City Hall on Inauguration Day to protest the erosion of our rights were videotaped by the police. They got close-ups of all of us and put the organizers on a "persons of interest" list. Did I mention we were protesting the loss of our rights?

Is it any wonder I snapped unnecessarily at the poor parent volunteer who recently claimed our family owed money for marching uniform rental, cleaning of said uniform, and transportation of my son to and from football games last fall? Hello! My son's not in the marching band. I just figured it was another *Twilight Zone* moment and let him have it. Poor man. In that case, blissful reality did finally set in when the

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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."

Inquiries about **Freely Speaking** should be directed to George Ricker either by email or telephone at (321) 727-8386.

mistake was finally dug out of our squabbling. But the unfortunate truth is that, in the big, wide world where it matters, reality *is* the Zone.

The Constitution Restoration Act is meant to rewrite us into a theocracy.

Protesting in silence is the American way.

Lying and name-calling is now reasoned commentary; doing same regarding a lack of journalistic integrity among your peers gets you extra brownie points.

The party of small government involves itself in any area of our lives where they think they'll get the votes of the "religious right" minority.

The party of the little guy finds integrity in fashioning itself more like the party in power.

We've gone off the deep end. We're completely lost. It's time to admit that the wacky religious have been right all along. There really is another realm that we can neither study nor fathom. It's the *Twilight Zone* and I can feel it sucking us all in. When they finally get taken up and their clothes are *Left Behind*, maybe then it'll all make sense.

© 2005 by Dianna Narciso

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.

or visit our website at:

<http://www.geocities.com/spacecoastfreethought/index.html>

CONNECTIONS:

some web addresses that may be of interest to freethinkers

<http://www.china.org.cn/english/index.htm>

China's official gateway to news and information about the nation that is home to about one-sixth of the world's population. This site contains a wealth of information about what is happening in China today and includes topics as diverse as science and technology and learning to cook Chinese dishes. There is even a language lesson for anyone who wants to learn Chinese.

If you are interested in learning about the nation many economists think will dominate the world's economy for a good part of this century, this is a good place to start.

<http://www.arabamericannews.com/index.php?Language=0>

The Arab American News web site offers a view of what's happening in the Middle East that may not make it to the network news broadcasts.

According to the site, "Headquartered in Dearborn, Michigan, The Arab American News has a twenty-year history of award winning journalism. Private ownership and advertising revenue have allowed the newspaper to maintain an unwavering level of independence. This independent stance, along with our expert local, national and international political analyses, bilingual content and widespread complimentary distribution, account for our increasing success and popularity."

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/>

The Information Clearing House claims to present "news you won't find on CNN or Foxnews." The site contains a lot of information from a variety of sources. In addition to sources from print media, there also are audio and video reports available.

The site operates exclusively from donations and is apparently the work of one person who chooses to remain anonymous.

In addition to offering a number of news reports, etc., the site also has a quite a few links to other sites that may be of interest to you.

Befriending the faithful: why non-theists must befriend likeminded, minority religious groups

By Jeff Nall

What would it be like to live in a country ruled by religion, with government that uses tax-dollars for faith based programs, a president that makes weighty foreign policy decisions after communing with God, a Supreme Court that preserves discriminatory references to God in the nation's patriotic oath, and a congress that proposes an amendment putting the word God in the Constitution, and nullifying the Separation of Church and State?

Sadly, we are learning what such a world is like all too quickly. Tax-dollars pay for faith-based drug rehab. Our president implements a faith-based foreign policy. The Supreme Court preserves "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, and three justices have all agreed that the Pledge as recited by schoolchildren does not violate the Constitution ("Supreme Court Preserves 'God' in Pledge," *Associated Press*, June 14, 2004). Vying for Christian voters, Democrats are preparing to increase their public acknowledgment of God.

If ever there were a time for non-theists to circle the secular wagons, draw the line, and protect the Constitution, now is the time. However, there are not enough irreligious Americans to do the job alone. Now is the time to forge alliances, especially with the faithful.

When we set aside our desire to embolden people across the globe to forswear faith in mysteries in favor of reason and science, we want one thing above all else — freedom to not believe. Essentially the freedom to not believe is protected by the Constitution and its wall separating church and state, which we loyally seek to fortify at every moment. But of course the Constitution also upholds each American's right to believe and participate in the religion of his or her choosing. Therefore, as we struggle to secure the dichotomy between matters of the spirit and those regarding earthly governance, we are simultaneously heralding the rights of Americans to practice the faith of their choosing.

Since we live in a nation where more than 70 percent of the population considers itself Christian, tending to vehemently disagree on deep issues ranging from the origin of mankind, gay marriage, women's rights and roles, and concepts about what a family is and should be, it is not

surprising that many of us are repulsed by faith as we know it: worship of the patriarchal "father" in the sky; literal interpretation of Biblical scriptures; belief that mankind is inherently sinful — especially women-kind; and the belief that whatever inhabits the Earth is good for nothing but the subsistence of man.

The problem is we rarely distinguish one religion from another, or acknowledge the less subversive spiritual movements in our country. For the freethought movement to gain ground, both politically and culturally, nonbelievers must forsake apathetic generalizations in favor of recognizing potential allies, even if they are religious.

While optimistic atheists turn to various religious polls that point to an increasing population of atheists/agnostics, we must realize that these numbers do not represent an adequate body capable of rapidly fighting the de-secularization of our country. Though there are approximately 15 million agnostic/atheists in the U.S., according to The Barna Research Group's 2002 report, there are nearly just as many non-Christian persons of some other faith — seven percent. Certainly this is a group that is as threatened by encroachments on secular government by Christian fundamentalism as nonbelievers are.

Polarizing ourselves from freethinking religious persons is a grave error. In doing so we are fashioning pie-in-the-sky idealism rather than the pragmatism we should aim to purport. If we are to continue to fortify the division between god and government, we must be reasonable and practical; we must ally ourselves with those whose freedom of religion also depends on this bulwark — those whose backs, like ours, are firmly pressed to the wall as if they would willingly sacrifice their lives for the first amendment.

Many freethinkers point to religious surveys like that of the American Religious Identification Survey, 2001, which pointed to nearly 30 million Americans that identified themselves as having "no religion." But the reality is that out of those 30 million, less than three million identified themselves as being atheist, agnostic, humanist, or secular. Many of the remaining 27 million

are simply in spiritual limbo, and have little at stake in matters of separating church and state. Those most concerned with the safekeeping of the Constitution and our nation's legacy of tolerance — "Other Religion Groups" — amount to nearly eight million Americans (3.7 percent of the population according to the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey).

Having spoken to Al Rapaport, director at the Open Mind Zen Center, in Brevard County, Florida, as well as Roger Coleman of the Wiccan, Church of Iron Oak, also in Brevard, it is quite clear that we all have one obsession in common: the separation of church and state.

"Obviously, the constitutional right to choose a religious or philosophical path is very important to anyone not following the majority way, which in our culture is Christianity," said Rapaport.

In 1994 Coleman was singled out by the city of Palm Bay for holding "[r]eligious celebrations in the back yard of their Palm Bay home." Eventually the city agreed that the celebration, no different than a Christmas gathering at one's home, did not violate city code because, according to board member Diane White, the home "is primarily a residence" and not a church (*Florida Today* 22 November 1994).

The idyllic hope of many, that freethought, like a vaccine, will miraculously spread across the globe, saving humanity from the pestilence of religion has all the characteristics of a wild fantasy. Religion will likely flourish through the world until the end of civilization, but that doesn't mean we can't prevent religion from ruling the world.

Ours is a battle of secularists versus fundamentalists, not simply atheists versus Christians — there are secular Christians after all. For the freethinking movement to expand and continue to be a viable force against dangerous fanatics, it is best we rescind our declaration of war on religion as a whole, honing in on notions of "true religion," textual literalism (religion, myth etc.), and blatant dogmatism. If we do not, I fear we may very well lose the separation of church and state we hold so dear. Quite simply, the greatest threat to freethinking is not faith itself, but the rule of faith in society.

© 2004 by Jeff Nall

Remembrance and ritual serve needs of living

By George A. Ricker

I said goodbye to a dear friend recently.

As boys and men, George Hart and I had known each other for almost 53 years. When we first met, I was eleven and he was nine. Over the years, through all the twists and turns and changes in my life, his friendship was the one constant.

His passing came as something of a shock. He had endured two quadruple bypass operations over the years and had a heart transplant on May 31 of last year. My wife, Judy, and I had gone to see him last August. I talked to him on the phone for one or two hours almost every week. Our last conversation had taken place just two days before he died, and he had said he was feeling well. Certainly, he sounded that way.

But some sort of respiratory infection flared up the next morning, a Saturday, and he was rushed to the hospital. He died on Sunday, March 20. Judy and I attended the memorial service for him on Friday, March 25.

“So why tell me” you ask?

Like me, Bing (that was his nickname) was an atheist. Also like me — at that time anyway, he said little about it. In fact, I only discovered his atheism by accident. He and I had grown up attending the same Methodist church, had taken communion kneeling side by side at the same railing. We hadn’t talked about gods and religions in years.

So one evening, years later, I asked, in the course of a wide-ranging conversation, which could describe almost any of our discussions, “Do you still believe in God?”

“Of course not,” he answered.

We would return to the subject of religion from time to time. It was not a primary topic. We really didn’t talk much about gods at all. Having established that neither of us had any belief in any sort of cosmic super critter, there really wasn’t much left to say.

Bing didn’t entirely agree with my activism on the issue of separation between government and religion. He believed in the First Amendment and would have opposed any sort of theocracy but saw no harm in a considerable amount of accommodation, as long as it fell short of that.

Consequently, he had left the planning of any funeral service to others.

He was bemused by my declaration that I have left strict instructions with my spouse, my children and anyone else likely to be involved that I want my remains cremated, and I want there to be no funeral service of any kind. Nothing that can even remotely be regarded as a religious ceremony.

His attitude seemed to be, “I’ll be dead, regardless, so what difference does it make?”

I could see his point. Such services, after all, are for the living not the dead.

So Judy and I attended his memorial service on Good Friday last. It began well, with a slide show of still photos, images of the life we were gathered to celebrate.

Then the organ sounded and things got more serious.

I sat as a preacher told me and the rest of those assembled that we were there for three reasons: first, to pay our respects to the dear departed; second, to give our support to the family and loved ones left behind; and finally to acknowledge “Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.”

“Oh well, two out of three ain’t bad,” I thought to myself.

I marvelled at the arrogance of the assumption on which the preacher’s statement was based and wondered if he and the other

believers in the room, knew that Bing was a nonbeliever and that, if the tenets of their religion are true, he is now suffering eternal damnation for his nonbelief. Neither he nor I believed in such things.

At the appropriate time, early in the service, those who had known Bing were invited to share remembrances of him. I had prepared some remarks but when the time came, was unable to deliver them. Got about three words out and that was it.

Shortly after that, I quietly left the sanctuary. Judy followed moments later.

I considered going back in but, once the remembrances were over, the rest of the service really had nothing to do with my old friend. Judy and I went in after it had ended and talked to his wife, his children and grandchildren, his sister and the other people there. His wife knew Bing was an atheist. I’m not sure about his kids. The service had been cathartic for them.

And what’s the message? I think there are two.

First, if you want to be sure things are handled the way you want them handled upon your demise, leave very clear instructions to those who will be making the arrangements.

Second, don’t be offended when others turn to conventional rites and rituals to assuage their grief. The churchification of Bing’s memorial didn’t harm him in any way. It seems to have helped his family to get through a difficult time. That’s the purpose of such rites and rituals.

What bothered me most was that it seemed a betrayal of the spirit of the man I had known. However, my memories of my old friend can’t be damaged by the unctuous pleadings of any preacher. So if the service provided comfort to some in their hour of need, why should I or anyone else take issue with them for seeking that comfort wherever they could find it?

Remembrance and ritual are for the living, not the dead. They are a balm for the wounds left by sorrow and can ease the pain of a last goodbye.

last words

*I want no monuments of stone,
no rites to mark my passing,*

*just the whispered sigh of summer rain
that gently laves the window pane,
soft murmurings of loss and gain,
remembered joy, forgotten pain,*

all bitterness surpassing.

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SPEAKING OUT: *SCFA members in print (more on p.6)*

Orlando Sentinel — Feb. 27, 2005

No connection

I am in agreement with letter writer Stephen Wade regarding socialism ("Utter nonsense," Wednesday), though I wonder why he chose to associate Michael Harrington's socialism with his atheism. What does atheism have to do with it?

Atheism is nothing more than lack of belief in deity. We atheists run the gamut from socialists and Democrats, to Republicans and Libertarians, etc. Atheists aren't all humanists. Some are objectivists. Many choose not to subscribe to any pre-packaged philosophy of life, but merely live by the motto: Do no harm. We are a varied group of people who share only one thing in common: We don't believe in gods.

There really is not much difference between an atheist and a Christian. Atheists lack belief in all gods, while Christians lack belief in all gods save one. You can't know an atheist's political leanings by the gods he doesn't believe in any more than you can a Christian's.

Dianna Narciso
Palm Bay

Sun-Sentinel — March 12, 2005

Keep government out of religion

Dianna Narciso
Palm Bay
Posted March 12 2005

I respectfully disagree with the author of Monday's letter, "Learning morals made U.S. great," who said "there is certainly no danger in saying that we are a nation under God, because that is what we are." While I agree that there is nothing at all wrong with an individual stating an opinion such as that, there is something inherently wrong with the government promoting an opinion on religion.

There is at least one Christian sect that would agree with me in my opinion that we are not a nation under any god. It is my right to raise my children with skepticism and wrong for the government to teach my children to espouse a religious opinion as fact in order to pledge loyalty.

Atheists are just as loyal to this country as Christians. I think the difference is that we have been forced into a better understanding of religious freedom than those in the majority. A secular government that remains neutral with respect to religion infringes on no one's right to worship his God. But a government that tells me there is a God, that we trust in it, and that supports and endorses its commandments directly infringes on my freedom of conscience.

Florida Times Union — March 1, 2005

RELIGION

Secular government is vital

Why do so many Christians misunderstand what religious liberty is all about?

How can anyone think that displaying the Ten Commandments in courtrooms, inserting the Christian God in the Pledge of Allegiance or allowing government representatives to pray before proceedings is religious liberty in action?

A letter writer claims that displaying the Ten Commandments in courtrooms, civic buildings and parks is part of American history. I agree.

It is part of the history of religious people who have, from the beginning, derided our godless Constitution and our guarantee of religious liberty for all Americans.

The letter writer even admitted that these displays are a government acknowledgment of faith. The government has no business acknowledging, endorsing or supporting faith.

We are a religiously diverse population, made up not just of Christians, but millions of non-Christians and millions of atheists. Only a secular government can fairly represent us all.

Using the buildings and property owned by all Americans to promote the Christian faith directly infringes upon the freedom of conscience of non-Christians because it puts the government on the side of belief over non-belief.

Christians are free to pray, attend church and believe what they will.

But, they must stop using our government to promote their faith.

DIANNA NARCISO, Palm Bay

"I'm a nonbeliever. I don't believe in the existence of a God. I don't believe in the Christian dogma. I find it horrifyingly silly. The intolerance that flows from organized religion is the most dangerous thing on the planet."

Jane Rule, quoted in *Brave Souls: Writers and Artists Wrestle with God, Love, Death and the Things that Matter* by Douglas Todd (1996)

SPEAKING OUT: SCFA members in print (more on p.5)

Daytona Beach News Journal — March 13, 2005

Religionists are rewriting history

I thank The News-Journal for its editorial "Inviting trouble over God: The Constitution's forgotten church-state commandment," March 7:

As an atheist, I have been battered by the constant refrains of theocracy to the point of tears. Religionists (all Christian) claim that by not allowing the government to acknowledge their god and support their brand of faith, they are being denied their religious freedom.

They cry, out of one side of their faces, that the Ten Commandments do not promote a particular religion and then bow down to a monument and pray, out of the other side, to the god of the Christian Bible. They are rewriting the history of our founding and shouting down any attempts at reason. They ignore anything our founders said or wrote that would refute their claims, in much the same way they pick and choose which parts of the Bible to preach and which to ignore.

The editorial was like a breath of fresh air in a polluted sea of theocratic propaganda.

DIANNA NARCISO, Palm Bay

Palm Beach Post — March 20, 2005

Only Christians might mind if Eostre bunny multiplies

Frank Cerabino's column Wednesday, "It'll take a lot of rabbits to please every mall shopper," was hilarious. He highlights with humor the problem with government endorsement of religion. If you want your Christianity put on public property, allow room for a symbol of my atheism, too. But, of course, malls are not public property; they're privately owned, and their owners can do whatever they want. I really enjoyed the idea of all those silly bunnies, and I wasn't even insulted by the friendly jab at atheism with the Randy bunny handing out empty eggs.

The only problem with the column is that Easter isn't a Christian holiday at all. Eostre was a pagan goddess, and the rituals involving eggs, bunnies and baskets all are in celebration of the spring equinox. The people who may be offended by the Easter bunny would be Christians. We atheists and pagans just love him.

DIANNA NARCISO
Palm Bay

**Congratulations! You've found a
Non-prophet Zone**

St. Petersburg Times — March 13, 2005

A Religiously diverse nation needs a secular government

Re: U.S. a Christian nation? Not exactly.

In his March 6 column, Philip Gailey asked, "Would someone tell me exactly what religion is established by the Ten Commandments?" The answer is very simple. While any of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim religions could consider themselves established by the display, it is the Christians who have clamored for government recognition and endorsement from Day 1 of our founding.

Yes, Mr. Gailey, secularists want the line drawn where it ought to be drawn. Only a secular government can fairly represent a religiously diverse population. The Christian God should be out of our pledge, off our money, and out of our motto. As our nation was founded on the idea that government is granted its power by those governed, legislators ought to go about the business of governing, not praying to the majority deity for guidance.

Secularists are not anti-God. We seem to understand religious freedom much better than the majority. Freedom doesn't mean getting the government to espouse your faith to all Americans. It's having a government that says nothing about religion, so that we may all worship, or not, as we personally choose without any coercion, no matter how subtle.

-- Dianna Narciso, Palm Bay

Bradenton Herald — March 14

Source refuted

Faith Barnebey's March 7 commentary, "Religion is part of our history," was a poor testament to believers. She quotes and agrees with legislators of 1854 who claimed that "Laws will not have permanence or power without . . . a firm belief that there is a Power above us that will reward our virtues and punish our vices."

Are religious people only moral, law-abiding citizens because they fear punishment from a deity after death? Are they only good for the reward? If that's the case, the only truly moral individual is the atheist who does good because he knows it is the right thing to do by his fellow man and not for reward.

The very first commandment tells Americans that there is only one god, he is the Judeo-Christian God of the Bible, and no other gods may be worshiped. How can we allow such displays in our public buildings and still consider ourselves a free people?

Dianna Narciso, Palm Bay