

FREELY SPEAKING

FREE MINDS
FREE PEOPLE

Vol. 3, No. 11

July 2006

Four pages

SKIRMISHES

A marker

• Sgt. Patrick Stewart was a member of the Nevada National Guard who was killed in Afghanistan last September. Posthumously awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart, Stewart was also a Wiccan. His wife, Roberta, wants to honor his memory by having a pentacle—the five-pointed star that symbolizes the Wiccan faith—on a memorial plaque on the Northern Nevada Veterans Wall. So far the Department of Veterans Affairs has been stalling the widow—saying the pentacle is not one of the 38 “emblems of belief” already approved for such displays by the VA. Even atheists have an approved symbol, but Wiccans do not. Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center writes, “In a nation where people are completely free to choose in matters of faith, the government should stop trying to figure out which symbols are “acceptable” and instead allow each family member to choose whatever symbol best represents their convictions.

Inside ...

| | |
|------------------------|------------|
| Humor in Religion | ... page 2 |
| Members | ... page 3 |
| Disagreeable agreement | ... page 3 |
| Did you know? | ... page 4 |

Harriet: a tortoise's tale

Harriet, a 176-year-old tortoise who had become a fixture at an Australian zoo, died of a heart ailment on June 22. The tortoise may have been one of the world's oldest living animals.



Harriet gets a kiss from a fan on her 175th birthday.

At one time it was thought Harriet was one of three tortoises that had been brought back from the Galapagos Islands by British naturalist Charles Darwin. Recent DNA testing, however, had cast doubt on that claim—the tortoise came from an island Darwin had never visited—while confirming her age.

“Crocodile Hunter” Steve Irwin, who owns the Queensland zoo where she died, said of Harriet, “She is possibly one of the oldest living creatures on the planet and her passing today is not only a great loss for the world but a very sad day for my family. She was a grand old lady.”

‘God’ — losing its religions?

By Dianna Narciso

On June 22, the state of Florida made “In God We Trust” its official motto after 138 years. Finally! After all, the phrase has been on our official seal since 1868. It makes sense we’d eventually want to make it legal. And thanks to some fourth graders, without any input from their parents no doubt, the gaffe has been rectified...or sanctified, however you want to look at it.

See **GOD?** on page 2

HAPPENINGS

The **Space Coast Freethought Association** holds its June meeting from 1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. on July 2 at Melbourne Public Library, 540 E. Fee Ave., Melbourne. This meeting will be in the large conference room - on the right as you enter the library. George Ricker will talk about his new book, *Godless in America: conversations with an atheist*. He will sign copies for those who have them, but none will be offered for sale at the meeting. Our meetings are free and open to the public. Come and join the conversation about the need for a wall of separation between government and religion and the importance of freedom FROM religion.

Our next **Adopt-A-Road** cleanup will begin at 9 a.m. on July 9. We meet in the parking lot of the Atlanta Bread Company Restaurant, located on the northwest corner of the intersection of Palm Bay Road and Stack Boulevard.

The **Space Coast Freethought Association** continues its Saturday Socials with a bowling night on July 15th. For more information contact Dianna by email at catspah@cfl.rr.com.

See **HAPPENINGS** on page 3

GOD? (from page 1)

Now, before you start thinking we should do, or should have done, something about this obvious establishment of religion, forget it. It's already been pretty much settled that the phrase "In God We Trust" is not religious. It's being called a secular, patriotic utterance not at all out of line in this country that so prizes freedom of religion—freedom for the religious, anyway.

So, forget about removing the words "...under God" from the Pledge of allegiance. No doubt that isn't religious either. And we've already been told, pretty much, that the Ten Commandments aren't religious either, but all about history and the law.

God, it seems, is a very slippery fellow. When the religious want the Judeo-Christian God in our government, when they want to make every American acknowledge him, at the very least subconsciously by using our money or living in a state that proclaims trust in him, he isn't about religion at all. He's just a word. Just a word that means we love our country.

Space Coast Freethought Association, Inc.

The Space Coast Freethought Association is a Florida nonprofit corporation, based in Brevard County. To join the online discussion group go to:
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SpaceCoastFreethought/>

Our mailing address is:
Space Coast Freethought Association, Inc.
PO Box 60448
Palm Bay, FL 32906-0448

For more information, contact President Dianna Narciso by email at catspah@cfl.rr.com. or visit our website at:
<http://www.spacecoastfreethought.org/>

But in all other respects, this God word is totally about the one, true deity upon which this country was founded, in which all our founders believed devoutly.

In fact, just try to stand up for complete separation of religion and government (the only moral position to stand for in a free country) and the religious will have the gall to point to our Pledge and our money and our state and national motto as proof positive that this is a Christian country. Otherwise, why would we have so much of their God in our government?

Those wily Christians. You really have to hand it to them. They take us further and further toward theocracy, little bit, by little bit, all the while swearing they're really just furthering religious freedom; except when even that explanation doesn't wash, then they just redefine the word "religious."

We should all write to our legislators and the governor and let them know how pleased we are they have stripped the Christian God of all its meaning in order to remind us that we have religious freedom, while at the same time pushing secularists further to the fringe.

Every time I start to feel the sun on my face, I am reminded that we are powerless.

© 2006 by Dianna Narciso

"In India, as elsewhere in our darkening world, religion is the poison in the blood. Where religion intervenes, mere innocence is no excuse. Yet we go on skating around this issue, speaking of religion in the fashionable language of 'respect.' What is there to respect in any of this, or in any of the crimes now being committed almost daily around the world in religion's dreaded name?"

-- Salman Rushdie, "Slaughter in the Name of God," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2002

Humor in Religion

Pick and choose

The children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples.

A nun made a note, and posted on the apple tray. The note said, "Take only ONE. God is watching."

Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies.

A child had written a note and placed it on the plate with the cookies.

That note said, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples."

Freely Speaking is the newsletter of the **Space Coast Freethought Association, Inc.** It is published monthly and distributed free as a pdf file. Print copies are available to members on request.

Freely Speaking is published and edited in Palm Bay, Fla., by George A. Ricker on behalf of the SCFA. All contents © 2006 by the **Space Coast Freethought Association, Inc.** unless otherwise indicated. Copyright of any reprinted material remains with the original publisher.

Freely Speaking invites articles which promote freethought and church-state separation and announcements relating to groups and activities which do the same. Email submissions to gricker@cfl.rr.com with the subject heading "newsletter submissions." Inquiries about ***Freely Speaking*** should be directed to George Ricker by email or by mail to: SCFA, PO Box 60448, Palm Bay, FL 32906-0448 - att: newsletter.

**SPACE COAST FREETHOUGHT
ASSOCIATION**
A non-prophet organization

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

A disagreeable agreement

By George A. Ricker

I made an old friend angry the other day. Actually, I didn't do it personally. It was my book, *Godless in America*, that upset her. She said she had to put it down because I didn't show the proper respect for her beliefs.

My friend is a Christian, as she has reminded me on several occasions. I think she is of the more liberal variety. She says she agrees with me completely about the necessity for separation between religion and government and is concerned about the turn our country has taken in that regard. I get the impression she is not any sort of fundamentalist.

Partly, her anger was due to a misunderstanding. At one point in the first chapter of the book, I invite theists to take out a few sheets of paper and write out a definition/description of the god they worship that is as complete as they can make it. I state in the text that this exercise is chiefly intended to help them clarify their own thoughts on the matter. It is for them alone. Whether they choose to share it with anyone else is up to them.

Well, she took this to mean I was challenging her to prove her "God" to me. That reading cannot be supported by the text, but it was her interpretation nonetheless. After going back and rereading the offending material myself to be certain I was remembering it correctly, I suggested she might want to give it another look because it really didn't say what she thought it did.

But, according to her email, the thing that really caused her to put the book down was my reference to "God" as a critter. She thought that was hitting below the belt and was highly offended by it. I have no right to criticize her religious beliefs, she said, and even less right to poke fun at them.

Responding, I explained that the phrase "cosmic super critter," which I use on numerous occasions in the book, was intended to refer to the generic god concept and not to the deity of any particular believer. I also conceded it was, at least partly, my way of poking a bit of gentle fun at the vagueness of the concept.

While I regretted my choice of words had offended her, I stated clearly that I could not accept the notion

See *DISAGREEABLE* on page 4

Godless in America by George A. Ricker is now available at most book retailers. To learn more go to <http://www.godlessinamerica.com>

Join us!!!

Become a dues-paying member of the Space Coast Freethought Association.

Annual memberships are \$15 for individuals, \$25 for couples and \$10 for seniors (65+) and students.

Applications are available at our meetings, online and by mail on request.

Join the fight against religious extremism and for separation between government and religion.

If you would like to comment on an item in our newsletter or on the activities of the Space Coast Freethought Association, write a letter to the editor and email it to George Ricker at griker@cfl.rr.com. Please use the subject heading "Letter to the editor." Letters should be no more than 200 words long and will be subject to editing. They must be signed.

If you prefer to mail your letter, send it to *Freely Speaking*, Letters to the Editor, PO Box 60448, Palm Bay, FL 32906-0448.

SCFA store open at CafePress

How would you like to buy a tee-shirt or a button with the Space Coast Freethought Association's logo on it?

Check out the new "Space Coast Freethought Association" store at cafepress.com. You'll find the site at: <http://www.cafepress.com/scfreethought>

SCFA Board of Directors (officers)

Dianna Narciso (President) ...George Ricker (Vice Pres.)
Cameo Cramer (Secretary) ...Toni Sweeney (Treasurer)
Doug Cramer ...Mike Sweeney...Charles Trantham

HAPPENINGS (from page 1)

The Humanist Club at Barefoot Bay holds its next meeting from 2 to 4 p.m. on July 8th at the South Mainland Library, 7921 Ron Beatty Boulevard, Barefoot Bay. Contact George Oertel at 772-664-0170 for more information.

DISAGREEABLE (from page 3)

that religious ideas were off limits to criticism or jibes or anything else. My respect for her right to her beliefs does not translate, I told her, into automatic respect for the beliefs themselves.

Her emailed response was a terse, “We’ll have to agree to disagree about this.”

Now I use that expression myself on occasion—usually when it is obvious the conversation is going nowhere or when the disagreement is over some trivial matter that isn’t worth the effort it would take to resolve it. However, I try not to use it on matters of substance.

By uttering those words, my old friend had effectively eliminated the possibility of us reaching any sort of understanding. And I had to think the reasons went much deeper than her reaction to the word “critter.”

Atheists are often accused of claiming to know everything. No doubt some do, but I know quite a few atheists personally and have read books and articles by many more and have not found such an attitude to be shared by most of them. Most of the nonbelievers I am familiar with are very careful not to claim more knowledge than they actually possess, and they usually stand ready to amend their views when the available evidence suggests such an adjustment is necessary.

On the other hand, most theists seem unwilling to make that effort. It is really the theist who claims to have all the answers or, more properly, to have *the answer*. It is the theist who seems unwilling to reconsider his or her beliefs, even when there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

By insisting we must “agree to disagree” my old friend terminated a discussion that might have led to better understanding between the two of us. The impasse won’t end our friendship—at least, I hope it won’t—but will impose a burden on it, one that a friendship shouldn’t have to bear.

I have always thought a true friend was someone to whom you could say anything that popped into your head and be assured of, at least, a fair hearing. That doesn’t mean friends always agree. Far from it. In fact, some of the most profound disagreements I have had in my life have been with my best friends. We did not “agree to disagree.” We thrashed things out until each of us knew where the other stood. Sometimes, along the way, we reached agreement. At other times, we didn’t. But in every case, our friendship was strengthened by the exercise. As was our mutual respect for one another.

This particular friend, the one who has declared we must “agree to disagree,” is someone I knew years ago. We went to high school together, knew many of the same people. Over the years, we had lost track of one another, but a couple of years ago we got back in touch—thanks to a mutual friend and email. So our

friendship was interrupted for years. Maybe if it had gone through all the changes the two of us have gone through, we would not now find it necessary to “agree to disagree.”

It’s really too bad though. Now I must edit myself when I communicate with her. Stay off the subject of religion and my book and so on. I can do that. But it means she and I will never be the friends we could have been because, in agreeing to disagree, we have agreed to be less candid, less open with one another.

And I find that very disagreeable.

© 2006 by George A. Ricker

Did you know?

According to the World Christian Encyclopedia (Oxford University Press, 2001) by David B. Barrett, there are 10,000 distinct religions around the world, and 150 of those have at least 1 million or more followers.

Within Christianity there are 33,830 different denominations.

The largest Christian denomination is the Roman Catholic Church with some 1 billion adherents. The second largest grouping is classified as “independents,” a collection of indigenous Christian denominations that have emerged mostly in developing countries and numbers 386 million, according to Barrett’s study.

Protestant denominations are third with 342 million and are followed by Orthodox (Greek and Russian Orthodox to name two) denominations with 215 million and Anglicans with 80 million members worldwide.

All of which begs the question: What Christian religion?

Actually, it appears there is no such thing as a Christian religion. There are only Christian religions. And some of those Christian religions regard other Christian religions as unChristian religions.

For example, it is still an article of faith in Roman Catholic dogma—though the belief is not widely advertised and certainly is not shared by all Catholics—that the Catholic Church is the one true church.