

The Freethought Society News

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November/December 2010 Newsletter, Volume 1, Number 6

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(Articles in *The Freethought Society News* do not necessarily represent the views of FS.)

FS President Questions Chester County Commissioners

by Margaret Downey

In preparation of the 2010 Holiday season and Winter Display opportunities at the Chester County Courthouse, Freethought Society (FS) board members **Carol Everhart Roper** and **Andrew Barrett** sent emails to the Chester County Commissioners office in early September of this year. After three weeks, their inquiries for display details were still unanswered.

On September 29, 2010, I also sent an email to the Commissioners' office. Three weeks later, I too, had not received a response. It was then that I noticed that the Commissioners' office holds a monthly "Sunshine Meeting" at the Courthouse and an opportunity for public comments is made available. I attended that meeting with FS Vice-President **Sally Flynn** on Tuesday, October 19, 2010. Following is what I said at that meeting:

Good morning Commissioners and fellow citizens of Chester County.

I am attending the Sunshine Meeting today to voice my concern about the lack of information available on the Chester County Commissioners' office website. What I say in public is included in this letter and a copy of my September 29, 2010 email message is attached.

As chair of the "Tree of Knowledge Committee" (a committee of the Freethought Society), I am advising you of our intent to apply for the use of a designated zone during the 2010-2011 Winter Holiday.

The Tree of Knowledge Committee has been visiting the Chester County Commissioners' website regularly awaiting details regarding current regulations. The only link at the site refers to a set of 2009 regulations. Are the same regulations of 2009 in effect for 2010?

The only application form we have been able to locate is found at the Chester County Commissioners' website referring to the 2009 season. Is this the application that will be used for 2010-2011 displays? If so, what is the due date? If not, where can we find a current application form?

The Tree of Knowledge Committee also requests answers to the following questions:

1. What is the latest date that an application for a 2010 designated zone will be accepted?

2. Midway into the 2009 holiday season, the crèche was moved from a designated zone on Market Street to an undesignated zone located next to the High Street entrance of the Chester County Courthouse. Is that "new" zone now a part of the display zone? If so, what is the process by which that zone will be assigned? Since the "new" zone is a prime location with many opportunities for visitors to the Courthouse to easily view, we suggest that the zone be available or assigned on a rotating basis.

3. Since the zone that the crèche occupied halfway through the 2009 season was abandoned, does this indicate that more than four displays will be allowed in 2010?

4. In 2009, the crèche was on display for four days, without the required signage in violation of the regulation that states, "This Display has been placed and is owned by (name of the individual or organization, clearly displaying the name of the sponsor." What are the penalties for an organization that violates the regulations, and what policies are in place to reduce the chances that similar violations occur this year?

In addition, in order to ensure that the Tree of Knowledge Committee, as well as other participants are all being treated fairly and without prejudice, we hereby request that past Winter Holiday Display Regulations compliance records be made available to the public.

The Tree of Knowledge Committee looks forward to a peaceful 2010-2011 Winter Holiday season.

Immediately after I spoke, Chester County Solicitor **Thomas Whiteman** took the podium and answered some of my questions. He said that the last date applications would be received was November 15, 2010, but he did not provide a start date for applications. He indicated that the application process has not been changed. He also stated that the regulations, in his opinion were "Constitutionally sound" and that "fair representation" would be given to all applicants.

In regards to my questions about past violations and comparison treatment, Whiteman said that FS has a "right to know" and that I should contact him for more information. I sent an email to his office and will report what is discovered in the next issue of *The Freethought Society News*. □

Roy Zimmerman's Visit to West Chester, Pennsylvania



The Freethought Society (FS) hosted Folk singer extraordinaire, **Roy Zimmerman** on Wednesday, October 20, 2010 at Doc Magrogan's Oyster House in West Chester, Pennsylvania. It was the second Zimmerman appearance sponsored by FS. Zimmerman delivered another wonderful concert with new songs and fresh comedy. Photos from the evening are as follows:

1. Zimmerman sits on the couch located in the loft of the restaurant. He is captured looking out the window to the parking lot below. The cozy room was perfect for the intimate concert.
2. Concert attendees enjoyed a "Wednesday — All You Can Eat Crab Legs" special at the restaurant. Pictured in the foreground are (left to right) **Michael Newdow**, **Tom Schottmiller** and **Greg White**.
3. FS volunteers and board members **Andrew Barrett** and **Carol Everhart Roper** handled ticket and CD sales. Some Zimmerman CD covers are pictured above photo #3.

A special "thank you" to **Carol Blanchard** who designed and printed Zimmerman concert flyers. Blanchard also provided the concert sound system.

If you missed this concert, catch Zimmerman on YouTube. His excellent music can be purchased through the following website:

<http://www.royzimmerman.com/store.php>

Michael Newdow's Visit to West Chester, Pennsylvania



The Freethought Society (FS) and Contemporary Issues Club (a West Chester University student group) hosted **Dr. Michael Newdow** on October 21, 2010.

FS president **Margaret Downey** was pleased to host Newdow and folk singer **Roy Zimmerman** as houseguests at the same time, making it possible for the two talented and passionate freethinkers to meet, compare notes (both legal and musical) and share ideas.

Photo #1 was taken after the October 20th Zimmerman concert, the day before Dr. Newdow spoke at West Chester University.

The Dr. Newdow event took place in the Philips Autograph Library on the West Chester University campus. He spoke about his legal cases and the importance of religion and government separation.

In photo #2, Dr. Newdow is pictured with FS board member **Carol Everhart Roper** (left) and FS vice-president **Sally Flynn** (right).

In photo #3, Downey (fourth from the left) surprised Dr. Newdow with a special introduction portraying Justice **Ruth Bader Ginsburg**. Picture left to right are **Jake Babb**, **Colleen McHugh**, **Rich DiGiambattista**, Dr. Newdow, **Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg** (impersonator), **Andrew Barrett** and **Annie Koempel**.



My “Bye Bull” Story

by Margaret Downey

Originally printed in *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists*. Reprinted with permission from Australian publisher.

I distinctly recall the day I first read Matthew 19:26. I closed the Bible with an audible, “Sheeez. ‘With God all things are possible.’ What a joke!”

Only five years earlier, I had witnessed my mother and her siblings praying for work, food, and clothes. They were first-generation immigrants and did not speak English well. Jobs were hard to find and we were very poor. I concluded at a very young age that God does not make things possible — hard work and determination do. Working was better than praying and at age 10 I started sewing to earn money. I never wasted time on my knees praying to a god. I used my talents and time to earn income and contributed what I could to improve the plight of our family.

My mother’s family was not only religious; they were also highly superstitious. I had a lot of fun as a teenager poking fun at their superstitions. My mother loved to host weekly séances at our house and would ask the dead for favours and “signs.” Not wanting my family to be disappointed, I would retreat to the basement to stand next to the fuse box. At the proper time, I would pull out a selection of fuses related to the rooms above. I had the house electrical system down to a science.

Hearing the screams upstairs only made me laugh, and I created different séance tricks each week. Sometimes I threw pebbles at the window. On other occasions I would go to the basement to pound the floor of the living-room with a broom handle. I guess you could say I delighted in having “spirit.”

Reading Matthew 19:26 on that particular Sunday caused me to remember why I found belief in God so ridiculous. When I slammed the Bible shut, I was sitting in a church pew with my high school friend Hopie. Her stepfather, **Dr. Leath**, was the Pastor of Truett Baptist Church in Long Beach, California.

Pastor Leath heard my Bible slam shut and stared down at me from the pulpit. I stared back. It was a stand off of wills. With our eyes locked he publicly admonished me for being disrespectful and noisy. I was not intimidated, nor was I apologetic.

Even as a youngster, I could not extend un-questioning respect to figures of authority. My acquaintances and teachers had to earn my respect. I questioned why Pastor Leath had so much power over the people at Truett.

Pastor Leath allowed Hopie to stay at my house on Saturday nights with the agreement that she and I would be ready at 9.00 a.m. sharp on Sunday mornings to attend his sermons.

Even though I knew at age 13 that I was an atheist, the church attendance agreement was forged because of my friendship with Hopie. She was desperate to attend Saturday night dances at Kennedy High School. She was pretty and popular. She was also embarrassed that her Baptist beliefs dictated that dancing is a sin. Hopie and I developed the

scheme because I wanted to help her to be free of the silly religious dancing restraint. I loved to dance and could not fathom anyone saying that expressive movement of the body is immoral and *gasp!* dangerous pre-sexual behaviour. Hopie was a good dancer too and she was so deserving of exercising her freedom of expression.

Attending Truett Baptist Church also helped me fulfill my desire to learn more about religious beliefs. As an adolescent, I sought answers to unanswerable questions. I wanted to understand the world and begged my mother for a set of encyclopedias. Fulfilling that request was not easy for her. She was a single woman working as a waitress rearing three children without any child support.

The two-year encyclopedia payment plan was the greatest investment my mother ever made. She knew that those books were needed to improve our education. She was right. The day the *World Book Encyclopedia* volumes arrived, I made a vow to read them from A to Z.

That was when I discovered the difference between mythology and reality. The many gods that had been created by man became evident as I learned about Apollo, Poseidon, Uranus, and Zeus. It was only logical for me to question the modern God belief as I moved toward the end of reading the “Z” volume of the *World Book Encyclopedia*.

One Sunday, Hopie and I stayed for a “youth group” discussion. Shortly after the beginning of the session, a man came into the church. He was bold and determined to make a statement as he interrupted the youth leader’s story about Jesus. This unknown man said that he was there to tell everyone that religion is false and that the story of Jesus is just a myth. “There is no God,” he proclaimed.

“You are all being fooled,” he shouted as he pointed his finger at us.

The shock of his words hit all of the youths hard — except for me. I smiled and leaned toward him trying to absorb his essence. Wow, finally someone was saying the same things I thought as I forced myself to read Bible passage after Bible passage. Here was someone echoing the very same conclusions I had reached.

When this young man asked if there was anyone who would like to break the chains of religion and follow him out of the church to learn more about atheism, I jumped to my feet.

Hopie pulled me down as hard as she could. I reluctantly sat back down. She whispered in my ear, “My dad asked him to come here to test our faith!”

Damn!

Just to make sure I would stay seated, Hopie held on to my arm as if to keep me restrained from venturing further into rationalism. I was embarrassed — not because I had stood up — but because I was allowing myself to stay seated in the church pew. In actuality, one more minute of religious

nonsense was going to make me scream!

Needless to say, the ruse only disappointed me. All the other people in the youth group stood up and “testified” their faith. I passed. What I really wanted to do was find the basement and play tricks on them. Religion, after all, is based on superstitious nonsense and people sitting in church pews praying to a god are no different from people sitting in a circle conducting a séance. It would have been fun to show them a few “signs.”

I realized, after that experience, that I could never pretend to be a “believer” again. Even though I remained seated next to Hopie that Sunday, I knew that the search for a belief system was over for me — once and for all.

I had many questions about the natural world and philosophy. Fortunately, my adopted Uncle Floyd was there to help me find my way. Uncle Floyd married my mother’s best friend when I was 10 years old. He was Japanese and taught me a lot about his culture. When I asked him questions about the world, he would say: “I will bring you a book about that and you can find the answer yourself.”

Uncle Floyd’s motto was “look it up and report your findings to me for more discussions.”

I loved our discussions. He was the first person to tell me that my thoughts and doubts about religion indicated that I was an “atheist.” He admitted, at that time, that he also identified himself as an atheist. I felt I was in good company.

Uncle Floyd died in his sleep when I was 16. We never had the chance to discuss one very important book he had given me, **Bertrand Russell’s** *Why I Am Not a Christian*. Each page of that book expressed all my thoughts. It was as if Russell had extracted words out of my brain, organized them, and placed them on a page. Russell’s eloquent way of saying exactly what I had concluded reinforced in me the determination to be proud of my atheist philosophy.

So far, the declared fellow atheists I had been exposed to were admirable and intelligent. I wanted to surround myself with more like-minded people, but two decades would pass before I actually found an atheist organization to join.

In 1987, as I was unpacking boxes from a recent move to Bloomington, Illinois, I turned on the television for company and watched *The Phil Donahue Show*. I stopped all unpacking when I heard Donahue introduce his next guest.

“Please welcome the most hated woman in America, atheist **Madalyn Murray O’Hair**,” he said matter-of-factly. She came out to a mix of boos and applause.

O’Hair was brash and sarcastic. She was brave and outspoken. I was mesmerized.

O’Hair was not anything like Uncle Floyd, but her atheist words resonated with me. I found the American Atheist organization shortly thereafter and joined immediately.

A few years later, Donahue hosted an evangelical preacher turned atheist **Dan Barker** as a guest. Coincidentally, Barker looked just like the young man who’d entered Truett Baptist Church to test the faith of the youth group. This time I got out of my chair — all the way — to find a pen and paper. I wrote down all the information Barker disclosed about the Freedom From Religion Foundation. I joined that group shortly

thereafter and attended my first atheist conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

It was wonderful to be around people who thought like me. I was proud to learn that the nontheist community included people such as **Carl Sagan, Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Kurt Vonnegut Junior, Charlie Chaplin, and Katherine Hepburn**. I no longer felt strange and alone in my atheist thinking. The pride I felt mixed with the desire never to be hypocritical propelled my career as an atheist activist from that time forth.

I’ve since worked closely with all national nontheist organizations, including the Center for Inquiry. I served a pleasurable four-year term as a board member of the American Humanist Association between 1994 and 1998. I also proudly served on the Board of Governors of the Humanist Institute for two years. In 1992, I founded the Freethought Society (FS), a local nontheist group. FS is still thriving today.

I have had the honor of serving as president of the Atheist Alliance International, and in that role I’ve represented atheism in many venues. I know that my lectures and media appearances have helped other young adults seek more information about atheism. They were inspired to find the same freedoms as I have found. Freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom of choice are just a few examples of what happens when a person throws away the dictates of ancient dogma. The “thank you” letters I continue to receive, however, indicate that it takes a lot of courage for most to ask difficult philosophical questions. Just like my Uncle Floyd, I encourage people to seek evidential answers and to read as much as possible. The Internet is the modern day *World Book Encyclopedia*. Everyone should have access to the Internet in their home, school, or public library.

If you want to know how the universe came to be, don’t consult the Bible. Read about geology, evolution, physics, chemistry, and biology. If you want to know more about morals and ethics, don’t consult the Bible. Read about sociology, psychology, law, and history. If you want a hero to model your life after, don’t consult the Bible. Read biographies of great freethinking people who influenced the world, such as **Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Graham Bell, Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei** and all those who dared to seek answers and changes to better the world. Don’t spend your money on the purchase of a Bible. You will be buying “bull.” Spend your money on science books and spend your time trying hard to understand them.

Do you want something to believe in? Look around you. The world is a beautiful and fascinating place. There is no need to imagine a heaven. Your heaven can be made in the here and the now with good life choices.

Do you want life after death? Create a legacy worth remembering. When people speak of you, you will live again.

Need someone or something to worship? Look in the mirror and decide to live every moment as if it were your last. With pride in yourself and acknowledgment of the fact that you only have one life, your home is your heaven and you are

a god. As your own god, you are in complete control of your life with the ability to answer your own prayers through conscientious actions and self-determination. There is no need for an imaginary friend when you befriend yourself.

We may never have a definitive answer about how the universe came into existence, but making up a story about the existence of a god only inhibits further scientific inquiry. In my community of reason, questions are encouraged. There is no need to make up a story just to have an answer to a puzzling question. Unanswered questions bring about great scientific research, study, and much more interesting, believable results.

The scientists and atheists I have come to know are in agreement with me when I say that with knowledge all things are possible.



Pictured above are **Hopie Campbell** (left) and **Margaret Downey** (right). The photo was taken at their 40th high school reunion where they recalled the dance/church arrangement. Campbell gave Downey permission to use real names in the essay and sent the following comments after reading it:

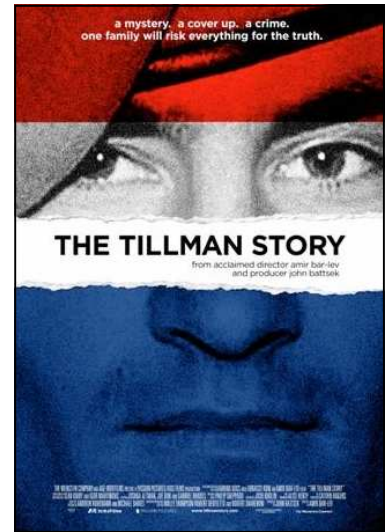
“Your essay is really interesting to me. I’ve so many different thoughts and ideas to share, but I don’t know when nor how I will ever get them ‘down’ in an eloquent fashion as your essay! I can tell you that I know there are many hypocrites in the Christian world. No one is perfect. We can be very bad examples to others sometimes, and I really feel it is via God’s love for me, His grace and what Jesus did on the cross that I am forgiven for my wrong doing and my ability to forgive others as well. I do not believe I could on my own. We definitely have opposite views and inner beliefs, Margaret. But, I am certainly willing to hear and read others’ thoughts and about their views.”

Movie Review

The Pat Tillman Story

by Dennis Middlebrooks

I saw the new documentary *The Pat Tillman Story* in September 2010, at the Loews Sunshine Theatre in Manhattan. This documentary is a moving story about the National Football League star **Pat Tillman**. Tillman gave up his lucrative football career to join the military and was killed by “friendly fire” in Afghanistan. The death was surrounded by very strange circumstances that have never been clarified. The United States Army did its best to cover up the nature of Tillman’s death. The Army falsely claimed Tillman died in combat with the Taliban. Many shocking and disturbing details emerge as Tillman’s courageous parents and brothers refuse to accept the lie and persist in their quest for the truth.



The best part of the film, however, is that there is a lot of focus on Tillman himself. In addition to being a great athlete and brave soldier admired by fans, teammates and comrades alike, Tillman is depicted as an atheist who enjoyed reading **Noam Chomsky** and **Ralph Waldo Emerson**.

Tillman’s family are also shown to be atheists. Unfortunately, Tillman’s family was criticized for their nontheist philosophy by an Army officer who was irritated by the family’s unrelenting quest for the truth.

In one telling segment, a Mormon soldier who was with Tillman as they were being sprayed with machine gun fire from their own comrades said he began to pray out loud but stopped when Tillman told him “Shut up. God can’t help you. We have to get out of this ourselves.”

The Mormon soldier further stated that Tillman was right. They needed to be alert, not praying. On reflection of the incident, the Mormon soldier admitted that Tillman’s advice saved his life.

So much for “no Atheists in foxholes”!

The film contains a telling segment on Fox News’ *Hannity and Colmes*. Guest **Ann Coulter** adamantly refuses to accept **Alan Colmes** claim that Tillman was opposed to the war in Iraq and was an atheist to boot. Apparently the notion of a war hero having dissenting views on Iraq and lacking a belief in a “higher power” was inconceivable to her. Sadly, this assumption, is the type of bigoted attitude most likely shared by millions of Americans.

This is a must-see film for atheists, agnostics, humanists, and freethinkers. □

Requests, Opportunities, and a Special Offer

by Glen H. Loev

No sugar-coating, no beating around the bush: In order for the Freethought Society (FS) to continue as a vibrant, thriving organization, FS needs some of your money, and could really use some of your time.

Yes, yours!

Here's a candid quote from a recent e-mail I received from the founder and current President of FS, **Margaret Downey**:

I'm overloaded with FS responsibilities. It's overwhelming. I'm redesigning the website, trying to distribute the newsletter through email and snail mail, trying to fund raise, prepare to install the Tree of Knowledge for 2010/2011 — the list is endless. I really need an assistant, but we have no funds. Without an assistant, I can't find more funding. The catch 22 is glaring.

Friends in freethought, there is so much that the FS is doing, but with help it can do more! Below is a partial list of projects and services offered through FS:

- Anti-Discrimination Support Network
- Billboards/Bus Signs
- Diversity Outreach
- Educational meetings
- Establishment of Meet-Up Groups
- Free Speech Zone Displays
- Helping Hands/Community Service Programs
- Media Training
- Mentoring Connection
- Newsletter
- Protests/Demonstrations
- Speaker's Bureau
- Street Fair Participation
- Student Outreach

But without the participation of membership – not much can happen. What can you do? Its simple!

Make sure you are current in your financial sponsorship, and volunteer! Just let us know which projects spark your interest, then please send FS a tax deductible earmarked donation. As a FS board member I ask you to think “outside the box” about what can you do to help.

OK, now that I have your attention, let me tell you about a very special offer to help FS. My partner and I have a vacation rental property on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica on a mountainside overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

The house was used by **Daniel Dennett** to finish his book *Breaking the Spell*. Dr. Dennett raved about the serenity of the location and the lovely setting it provided to inspire the completion of his writing.



Pictured above preparing a Costa Rican dinner are Dr. Dennett and his daughter. The fully-equipped kitchen is a chef's delight.

We are offering a 1-week stay for up to 6 guests at Villa Mango to any FS member, their family and friends, at a **rental discounted by \$1,000!**

When someone takes advantage of this special deal, **we will donate \$1000 to FS!**

Sounds good doesn't it? Grab this win-win opportunity while it lasts, and treat yourself to the vacation of a lifetime! Check out the property at this website:

www.ParadiseCostaRica.com

We are very proud of this home. It has a California King size bed in the master bedroom and Queen size beds in all other bedrooms. Each bed can be separated and made up as two single beds. Each room has Swiss orthopedic beds with “Luxury” quality linens.

There are wonderful panoramic ocean and rainforest views from every room and the house has a 45 foot (13.5 m.) lap swimming pool which is “chlorine free.” A gas barbeque grill is located on the wrap-around balcony.

For added comfort and convenience the house has a clothes washer and dryer, a 27” TV/DVD player, and wide selection of movies. Housekeeping service included

It is a quick drive to local beaches and many area activities. There is no need to leave the house to keep in touch. The house is equipped with free local telephone calling and there is no surcharge for long distance communication. We even provide a telephone answering machine for guests' use!

Guests who bring a laptop can enjoy free wireless high speed Internet (24/7).

Contact me for additional details about renting this property using the \$1,000 discount and initiating a much needed \$1,000 donation to FS. Write to:

Info@ParadiseCostaRica.com



Why I am...

by William A. Wisdom

...a fundamentalist

With respect to the Christian scriptures, I am a Fundamentalist in the sense that I think the *Bible* should be read literally, that it should be taken to mean just what it plainly says — that it should not be read (as it is by so many "modern" Christians) as metaphorical, symbolizing something other than what it says.

When I talk with other Fundamentalists, I understand what they mean. When they say that a great flood covered the entire earth in the days of **Noah**, that's exactly what they mean. When progressive Catholics say that there was a great flood in the days of Noah (if they say it at all), there's no telling what they mean. When Fundamentalists say that **Jesus** was born of a virgin, that's easy to understand. When liberal Episcopalians say that Jesus was born of a virgin (if they say it at all), there's no telling what they mean.

For a Christian who is not a Fundamentalist in my sense, there's not a single doctrine that can be counted on to be straightforwardly true. Of course it may be taken to be true in some sense, but not necessarily in the plain, ordinary sense. Any specific doctrine may be regarded as true in the literal sense; but it may not.

I'm not making this up. A very influential Christian theologian understands the accounts of Jesus' miracles in some such way as this:

Jesus' followers were very impressed by what a remarkable person he was, and what a life-changing influence He'd had on their lives. Unsatisfied with simply saying this, they fabricated the tales of His changing water into wine, walking on water, healing the sick, and raising the dead.

Who is to say what any particular Christian really believes? Answer: Christians are the ones who must say, "I'll pick the doctrines that are easy (fun, interesting, possible, ...) to believe, and call the rest of them metaphors, or myths, or symbols, or anachronisms, or whatever." But that's worse than conventional Protestantism — each denomination for itself! It's chaos — all individuals for themselves! The only stance that can avoid doctrinal chaos and its immediate consequence: the meaninglessness of the word "Christianity." That is the Fundamentalism that I share with many believers. Let us all resolve not only to mean what we say, but to take scripture to mean what it says.

Perhaps incidentally (maybe not), I'm no Johnny-come-lately to Fundamentalism. Around the age of eight or ten I started going to Sunday School at the Protestant church closest to my home. It happened to be Lutheran, but that was largely accidental. It was the shortest walk from home. My parents, vaguely Protestant themselves, were largely indifferent though not hostile to religious belief. They never pressured me to go to Sunday School or church, or, later, to

Confirmation Class. This was something that I enjoyed, and pursued on my own.

But the single most important part of my religious training came from the youth group in the church. Although there was a national Luther League for youngsters, our church was affiliated not with it but with Christian Endeavor, a much more conservative interdenominational group, whose summer camps were real camp meetings — a whole week of Bible reading, private devotions, instruction, prayer, soul-saving, and public testimonials. This is no doubt where my Fundamentalism was born and encouraged.

...not a Christian

Although throughout high school I claimed to be a Bible-believing Christian, I never thought much about what I was committing myself to. It was only when I got to college that I took up the challenge to examine the nature and grounds of my beliefs. A bit of reflection revealed that much of Christian doctrine was preposterous. Let me document this in just a couple of cases.

It is Jesus' plain teaching, documented repeatedly in the gospels, that God gives believers everything they ask for in Jesus' name. [Matt. 18:19, 21:22; Mark 11:24; John 14:13-14, 15:7, 15:16, 16:23]. Nothing could be more plainly false. Of course Jesus might not have said anything like what is attributed to Him; or, if He did, He might not have meant it. But, as I explained, I'm a Fundamentalist.

Both the gospels and epistles plainly teach that the sick will be cured by the ministrations of believers. [Mark 16:17-18; James 5:14-15]. Nothing could be more clearly false. Again, you may not think that scripture here means what it plainly says. But I'm a Fundamentalist.

Of course I could be a Christian—a modern, progressive Christian — if I felt free to interpret the texts and traditions of Christianity in any way I chose. Then I could take: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" to mean: "The presence of chlorophyll is a necessary condition for photosynthesis." There's a Christianity that I could subscribe to!

...not an agnostic

An agnostic, for the present purposes, is one who neither believes nor denies that there is a God. To say that someone is not an agnostic is not to say that that person knows whether or not there is a God. To say that one is not an agnostic is just to say that that person has a positive or negative belief — normally, a fairly strong belief—on the matter. So two sorts of people don't qualify as agnostics: theists ("believers"), and atheists ("disbelievers").

But, roughly, someone might qualify as an agnostic in one of two different ways:

(1) Some people might have no belief with respect to the existence of God because they have not thought about the matter. I consider the existence or non-existence of God as an important matter; so I think of this first form of non-belief as lazy agnosticism. Anyone who can't or won't — or, for whatever reason, simply doesn't—think about God would

qualify as a lazy agnostic.

(2) A responsible agnostic, on the other hand, is one who has thought seriously about the matter, has considered the arguments for and against the existence of God, and finds about equally good reasons to believe and to disbelieve. (So far as I know, I've never met an agnostic of this sort. But there could be such a person.)

I've thought carefully about many different arguments for the existence of God, and many variants of each. None has any merit. I'm not going to analyze each and every one of them. That's not necessary, since there's a short-cut. If God is to be an adequate object of characteristically religious devotion, of absolutely unqualified commitment, He has got to be something that exists of necessity — not merely contingently, the way people and rocks and chairs and galaxies exist — and the reasons for believing that He exists must guarantee His existence, and not merely make it very likely that He exists.

Those two considerations immediately disqualify almost all the traditional arguments — the “Cosmological Arguments” and the “Teleological Arguments” and the “Moral Arguments” and all the other arguments that appeal to matters of observable fact as evidence for the existence of God. No appeal to observable facts can guarantee the existence of a necessary being.

Only some sort of “Ontological Argument” for the existence of God — deducing His existence, of logical necessity, from some unavoidable concept of deity — could do the job. I don't think that an Ontological Argument can be as easily refuted as most commentators do. I think that there is a deductively valid inference to the conclusion “God exists” from unassailable premises. But that argument does not establish the existence of God...nor, in the last analysis, do I think that any Ontological Argument can do so.

That leaves us with no good reason for believing that there is a God. One might want to survey the field to see whether there are any good reasons for denying the existence of God. I do think that there are such reasons. But the absence of good reasons for believing in God is a sufficiently good reason for denying that there is a God.

...therefore, an atheist

It has sometimes been said that the proponent of any claim bears the burden of support. That surely isn't quite right. What is right is that the proponent of an outrageous claim that is incompatible with many of our well attested beliefs bears the burden of support, in the absence of which, rejection or disbelief is the appropriate stance — this because (by definition) the claim is opposed by a great weight of counter-evidence, and hence is appropriately rejected as false without any further investigation.

Although I can't document it, I somewhere picked up a relevant (and quite possibly false) story about **Freud**. Believers in the occult would often write to him in the hope that he would endorse their preposterous claims. After ignoring these for some time, he finally decided to write on the general matter. Among other things (so the story goes), he

wrote something to this effect: “If people tell me that deep below the surface of the earth there are large pools of soda water, I might at least hear them out, to determine what evidence there might be for this remarkable claim. After all, dilute carbonic acid might be a product of natural processes. But if someone tells me that deep below the surface of the earth there are large pools of strawberry jam, I will reject the claim out of hand, with not the slightest temptation to hear anything that might be offered as evidence. The claim violates so many well-established principles of nature that it is patently false, and investigation would be an obvious waste of time.”

In our story, Freud is following something like the principle I enunciated above: the proponent of an outrageous claim that is incompatible with many of our well-attested beliefs bears the burden of support, in the absence of which, rejection, disbelief, is the appropriate stance (not the agnostic's suspension of belief), this because by definition the claim is opposed by a great weight of counter-evidence, and hence is appropriately rejected as false without any further investigation.

The belief that, in addition to all the objects of the natural world and their properties, relations and activities, there is an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, benevolent, invisible spirit of whose necessary existence I can be certain, is strawberry jam.

There is not a shred of credible evidence supporting such a belief, and lots opposing it; so the intellectually responsible thing to do is to reject it. That is why I am an atheist.

In Conclusion

I was exposed to BIG IDEAS in a church: in Sunday school and sermons and summer camp. I now think that as a child I was attracted to speculation about the beginning and end of the universe, about the history of religious and hence philosophical thought, about human origins and destiny, and about the meaning of life, and that I found in the religious context what satisfaction was to be had at my age. It was only when I was exposed to critical thinking in college that I realized that these were philosophical questions to which philosophers for 2,500 years had been offering carefully reasoned responses. That was the real thing, and not intellectual fakery.

The second conspicuous feature of religious ideas was that, on the religious account, you could be sure that they were true. That kind of certainty in the midst of a constantly changing world of objects and thoughts was very appealing to me. Eternal verities!

What a comfort to know that there were certain important (religious) matters of which one could be absolutely certain. Of course, as I pointed out above, 'tain't so. But I discovered in my studies of the formal side of philosophy that there are some truths of which we can be absolutely certain — the truths of logic and mathematics. I think that my attraction to the study of them was, at least in part, my way of trying to fill what Sartre called the "God-shaped hole" in my consciousness. □

Helping Hands Committee

The Freethought Society's (FS) "Helping Hands Committee" (HHC) was established in the year 2000. It was created to help address the needs and concerns of the aging population. The aging of America will affect all areas of society and the baby boomer generation of approximately 78 million began turning 50 at the rate of 300,000 a month in 2010. Life expectancy in the early 1900s was approximately 46 years. Today the expectancy is approximately 75 years. By 2030, the number of citizens over age 85 will double. These facts reveal that soon we will see many nontheist elderly dependent on the kindness of others.

FS's Anti-Discrimination Support Network (ADSN) has recorded incidents of prejudice at retirement and assistant care facilities. There is justified fear of bigotry and lack of trust when senior citizens reveal themselves as nontheists to health care providers. The evidence is in the ADSN database. We must work to end this fear through educational programs, literature and diversity training endeavors. The acceptance of nontheists as equal citizens will take many years, perhaps decades, but we must try to change the hearts and minds of people who hold unreasonable negative opinions of the nontheist community. In the meantime, HHC can provide much needed services guaranteed to be free of prejudices.

This page and the next are intended to draw interest to the efforts of HHC. Please complete the applications below if you have the desire to join HHC or have a need for assistance.

Margaret Downey, FS President and HHC Chair
Email: Margaret@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Application

Helping Hands Committee volunteers will be matched to offer assistance to recipients, if they reside in an area that is conveniently located.

Please read over the volunteer duties and match them with your personal skills and areas of interest. For insurance purposes, volunteers will be subject to background checks.

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City and State: _____

Zip: _____

Home Phone: _____

Cell Phone: _____

Work Phone: _____

Email address: _____

Recipient Application

Helping Hands Committee recipients will be accepted on a volunteer availability basis. If volunteers are available, applications will be accepted.

Services are provided when Helping Hands Committee volunteers are available in the area. Completion of an application does not guarantee that services will be provided.

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City and State: _____

Zip: _____

Home Phone: _____

Cell Phone: _____

Work Phone: _____

Email address: _____

Which of the following services could you provide (volunteer) or are in need of (recipient):

Grocery Shopping

Change and wash bed sheets

Clothes washing

Cleaning (dusting, washing dishes, sweeping, etc.)

Transportation to grooming and medical appointments

Accommodation of special requests, such as picking up and returning rented entertainment items (books, videos, DVDs, magazines, music, etc.)

Visiting and talking with the recipient and offering friendship

Prepare food and/or meal deliveries

Please return form to: FS Helping Hands Committee, P. O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366. Fax to: (610) 793-2569.



Helping Hands Committee Volunteer Guidelines



Helping Hands Committee (HHC) volunteers will not be asked to extend financial assistance to the efforts of this committee. If a purchase is made by a volunteer, the receipt must be sent to the Freethought Society (FS) for reimbursement. Alternatively, financial assistance can be presented to FS for a tax-deductible receipt instead of reimbursement.

Volunteers may be needed to offer assistance to recipients with the following tasks only:

1. Grocery Shopping (only necessary trips and limited to one or two stores per visit)
2. Changing bed sheets (once a week)
3. Washing dirty sheets and clothing and returning them to recipient's home
4. Cleaning (dusting, washing dishes, sweeping, mopping, etc., etc.)

5. Providing transportation to doctor appointments, hair salon, hospital, bank, post office and other miscellaneous grooming/medical appointments.

6. Taking special requests and attempting to fulfill the needs of the recipient. For instance, a volunteer may be asked to pick up and drop off video rentals and bring items of entertainment to recipient (puzzles, books, etc.).

7. Spending time visiting and communicating with the recipient and offering friendship. Most "shut-ins" are lonely and need human connections. This can be achieved in person or over the phone. Recipients also enjoy getting cards, letters, and postcards from volunteers.

8. Some HHC recipients own pets. If a volunteer is not allergic to the animal, tasks such as grooming, feeding and walking could be provided by a volunteer. Trips to a veterinarian may be needed on occasion.



Helping Hands Committee Recipient Guidelines



HHC recipients are asked to limit their expectations of volunteers to the items listed on the "Helping Hands Volunteer Guidelines." Please do not ask volunteers to provide financial assistance in any way.

If possible, recipients must have a grocery list and errand list ready for upcoming visits from volunteers. Only necessary items should be purchased as to avoid too many trips to stores and waste of the volunteers time and gasoline.

Recipient is responsible for scheduling doctor appointments and grooming appointments, making sure that a volunteer on the rotation schedule is available and willing to assist with transportation needs.

If bill paying assistance is needed, the recipient is expected to organize and track due dates. If FS writes checks to pay bills for the recipient, the amount must be covered by designated funds. There will be no loans or grants provided by FS.

A pleasant attitude is appreciated by volunteers and a sincere "thank you" is always helpful to keep volunteers interested in staying involved with HHC.

Please Note:

FS will not ask the religion of a person in need of assistance. HHC members/volunteers will treat all recipients without prejudice or bigotry. The religious beliefs of an applicant will not be a consideration for providing needed assistance.

Recipients will be accepted on a volunteer availability basis. If volunteers are available, applications will be accepted. Applicants will be advised that services are available only if a core volunteer group can be established.

For more HHC information, please visit the FS website at:

www.FtSociety.org

Margaret Downey, the chair of HHC can be reached at:

FS/HHC
P.O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19366
Phone: (610) 793-2737
Fax: (610) 793-2569
Email: Margaret@FtSociety.org

The formation of FS's HHC was inspired by the words of
Robert Green Ingersoll:
"The hands that help are better far than lips that pray."



Enough of This Papal Bull!

by Nicholas Stark

“Good people! Don't fret about the lot of atheists. They don't in the least envy your enjoyments. They have their own that are more real and pure.” ~ Sylvain Maréchal

What if you had the choice between having someone who says they agree with you but in truth is deceiving you or someone who openly disagrees with you but is completely sincere? Apparently the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, representative of the “bastion of morality” known as the Roman Catholic Church, prefers the former dishonest choice.

In August 2010, I sent a “Letter of Defection” to Cardinal **Justin Frances Rigali**, Archbishop of Philadelphia, requesting that the Catholic Church remove my name from their records. I was entered into their records by being baptized as an infant — without my consent. I requested that the Church send me explicit written confirmation once my name was removed.

My request letter was published in the September/October 2010 issue of *The Freethought Society News* (see article entitled, “Declaration of Defection From The Roman Catholic Church”).

It took them a full two months to reply at all to my letter. The letter I received was dated October 26, 2010. Rigali himself did not have the good graces to send me the reply, nor did he even sign off on the reply, but rather it came from the Chancellor, **Gerard Mesure**.

Of particular interest, Chancellor Mesure expressed disappointment that I did not believe in his deity. That was of more concern than my decision to leave the Church. It seems he would rather have an atheist in his Church rather than having me follow the dictates of my conscience and act on my principles.

This attitude shows where the Church's priorities lay. The Church desires to perpetuate its own power and image even by the most dishonest means. Its actions drive scores of people away, whether by erroneously denouncing the efficiency of using condoms to prevent AIDS where it is pandemic or by grouping atheists in with Nazis.

Amusingly, yet disturbingly, Chancellor Mesure failed to comply with my request — a request enshrined in the Church's own guidelines and policy. My request was nothing new or unorthodox, but instead of complying, he requested that I reconsider, from which I can only infer that he has so far refused my request.

I sent another letter. This time the letter was addressed directly to Chancellor Mesure rather than Cardinal Rigali. I stated the following:

Dear Chancellor Mesure,

Thank you for your response of 26 October 2010, however delayed it may have been. I thank you for your interest in my personal affairs, but my mind is quite made up.

My decision to leave the Catholic Church was

neither hasty nor ill thought through. There is one thing I must apologize for, and that is I think I may have given the wrong Baptismal date in my original actus formalis defectionis ab Ecclesia catholica. To clarify, my baptism at Maternity B.V.M. Parish was on 4 November 1990.

With this correction made and my position absolutely clarified, I ask that the Archdiocese comply with my wishes and with the Church's process outlined for the formal defection process and send me, as per my original request, a direct statement saying that I have been stricken from the Church's records. I trust that you will follow through with policy and do as I ask.

Take care, and I await your express confirmation of this matter.

Salut et fraternite, Nicholas Stark

If again the reply I receive dances around the issue, I will go to the Archdiocese in person and kindly inform them that the “request” is a nicety, and that my perfectly reasonable desire must be followed unless Philadelphia has decided to go schismatic.

When the Church thinks its internal problems are the result of the betrayal or the ignorance of its members, it is sadly mistaken. The problem is the Church's own policies, which I condemned at length in my original defection letter, the depth of which should have demonstrated that this was not some spur of the moment decision and none of which was repudiated or disputed by the Chancellor.

Hopefully my second letter will be the final episode of the saga of my unfortunate association with the Catholic Church. It is beyond the scope of my principles or tolerance to remain associated with the crutch of fascism, the bane of the oppressed, the idol of sexism, the enemy of reason, the denier of reality, the distorter of morality, and the saboteur of politics.

The Church and its pope need to stop grasping (perhaps groping would better suit the little man) after me and let me leave them to their own devices. As **Jacques Hébert** once wrote of the Church, “The hell with them; we won't let ourselves be fooled by those sons-of-bitches of priests. Their confessions, their purgatory, their absolutions, their indulgences are nothing but feed for the foolish. The so-called keys of St. Peter ... now seem to us to be nothing but skeleton keys that the Latin pontiff wants to use to pry open our houses and our coffers so as to take what we own.”

Now I will bolt the final lock against the pope's prying key and keep him from wrongfully claiming me as one of his own because nothing could be further from the truth. □

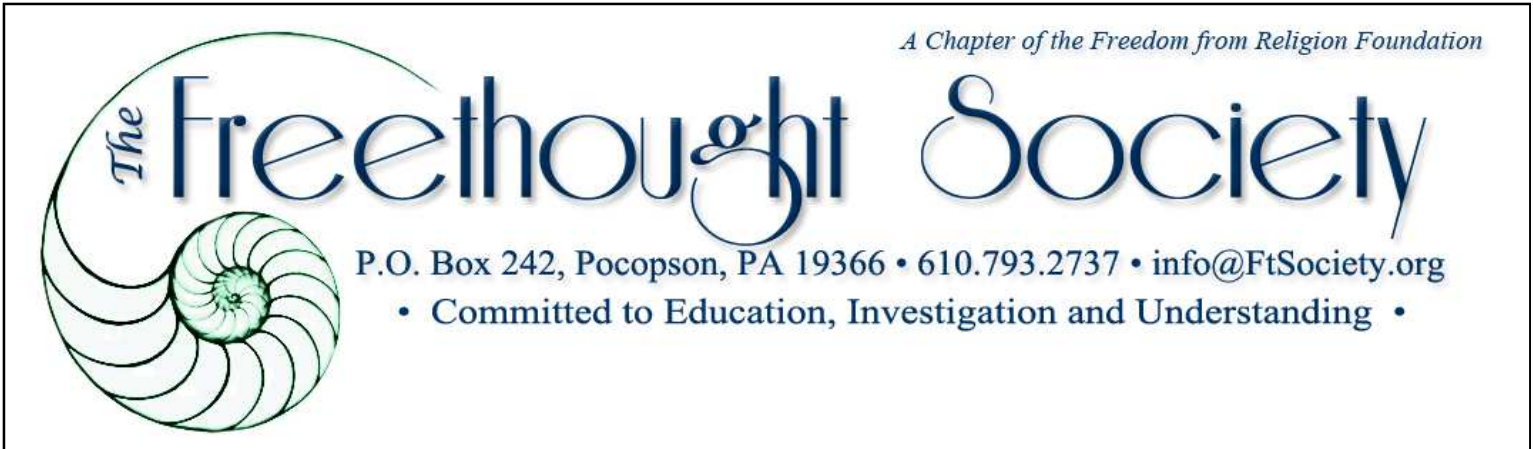
Freethought Society Logo Contest

In January 2010, a logo and website banner contest was announced. The Freethought Society (FS) took nine months to collect entries. The Logo/Banner contest prize is a lifetime membership to FS (valued at \$1,000).

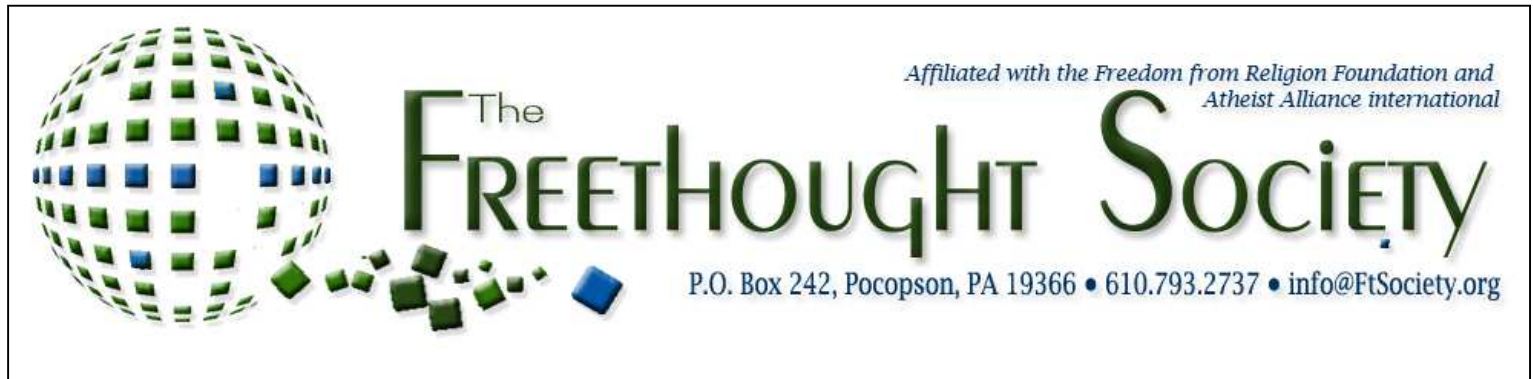
Many submissions were received and the first round of elimination was conducted through the FS Board of Directors. The FS Board of Directors recommend the logos and banners below for consideration. Please vote on your favorite logo/banner keeping in mind that there is still time to make suggestions to perfect the designs pictured below. Please send your first and second choice to the following email address as soon as possible (deadline is December 31, 2010):

vote@FtSociety.org

Logo # 1 (below)



Logo # 2 (below)

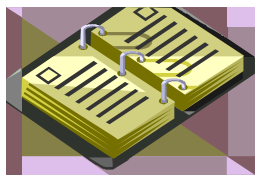


Logo # 3 (below)



Logo # 4 (below)





The Freethought Society's (FS) 2010-2011 Four-Month Activities Calendar

November 15

On **Monday, November 15, 2010**, FS was scheduled to host **Richard Fallstich**, who is a triple organ transplant recipient. Fallstich cancelled his presentation due to medical difficulties, but he will be rescheduled as soon as his condition improves.



FS president **Margaret Downey** is the replacement speaker. Downey's presentation "The Story Behind the Story" will highlight her journey from being baptized Catholic to becoming an outspoken leader of the nontheist community. The presentation is a continuation of the essay "My 'Bye Bull' Story" (reprinted on page 4-6 in this newsletter) which was originally published in *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists*.

Downey's presentation will include a powerpoint slide-show and literature for essay creation. Attendees are invited to share their (brief) journey stories during the last 15 minutes of this meeting. The presentation will start promptly at **7:00 PM** at the **Norristown Public Library**. The address of the library is **1001 Powell Street, Norristown, Pennsylvania**. For information about public transportation see the following website: septa.org/stations/rail/norristown.html

December 4

Please attend the lighting ceremony for unveiling of the 2010/2011 Tree of Knowledge on **Saturday, December 4, 2010** at the **Chester County Courthouse** lawn located at **2 North High Street, West Chester, Pennsylvania**. The ceremony will begin at **5:00 PM** or **dusk**. Apple cider will be served and freethought music will be played as volunteers decorate and secure the tree to the ground.

Socialize with supporters of FS and celebrate freedom of expression. Participants will be provided an opportunity to speak about the importance of the First Amendment and the value of separation of religion and government. Bring two color copies of your favorite freethought book to be made into an ornament for the Tree of Knowledge.

As of the printing date of this newsletter, the FS display application has not been approved. If the application is denied, this event will be restructured as a protest rally. There is no good reason why FS would be denied the opportunity to participate in the 2010/2011 Courthouse Winter Display. On December 4th the Chester County Commissioners and the press will get an earful regarding the violation of the First Amendment should FS be denied equal access. Please be prepared for either event.

At **6:00 PM**, interested people will dine at **Kildare's Irish Pub (18 West Gay Street, West Chester, Pennsylvania, 19380)**. Ask to sit with the "Freethought Society Party."

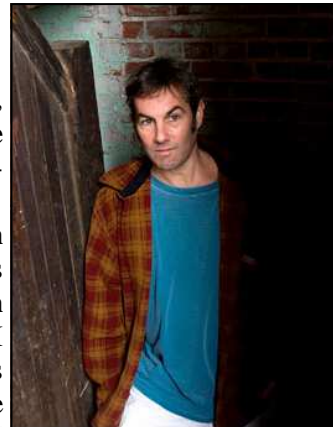
December 9

On Thursday, December 9, 2010, FS is pleased to host **George Kalman** of "I Choose Hell Productions."

Kalman is a filmmaker in Pennsylvania. In 2007, Kalman's request to register his production company under the name "I Choose Hell Productions" was turned down because of a state law that forbids blasphemy and profanity in company names.

In February 2009, Kalman sued the state for the decision, seeking the right to use the name. When notified of the state's rejection, Kalman contacted the ACLU and began a challenge to the state law. Kalman's story is fascinating.

The Kalman presentation will start promptly at **7:00 PM** at the **Norristown Public Library**. The address of the library is **1001 Powell Street, Norristown, Pennsylvania**. For information about public transportation see the following website: septa.org/stations/rail/norristown.html



January 25

FS proudly presents **Dr. Arthur Caplan** as the Tuesday, **January 25, 2011** speaker at the **Free Library of Philadelphia**. The meeting will begin promptly at **7:00 PM** in the **Skyline Room**. The address of the library is **1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**.

Dr. Caplan's presentation entitled, "Life, God, and Synthetic Biology — Ethics at the Frontiers of the Genomic Biology" will examine both the genomic revolution in medicine and the impact of developments in synthetic biology.

The "genomic revolution" carries many promises — personalized medicine, risk detection for diseases and screening embryos for different conditions and traits. Perhaps the biggest change in our lives is going to come from synthetic biology which is the genetic manipulation of bacteria and viruses. We may even see the creation of novel life forms! What ethical questions do these developments raise? What does synthetic biology tell us about religious explanations of life?

These are all great questions that only a bio-ethicist can answer. Don't miss this encore FS appearance of Dr. Caplan.



Supporters Added and Renewed

Robert Glickman
Kirk Hornbeck

Glenside, Pennsylvania
Bethesda, Maryland

Donations

Youval Balistra	\$50
Robert Glickman	\$10
Glen Loev	\$100
Marshall Martin	\$25
Alan Palmer	\$50

Going once, twice, gone!

As announced in the September/October 2010 newsletter, the donated time share week in St. Croix was auctioned at the Freedom From Religion Foundation's (FFRF) conference on Sunday, October 31, 2010. The opening bid was \$800. Two audience members participated in a mini-bidding war. In the end attorney **Patrick Devitt** won the week long stay with a bid of \$950. FFRF will receive a portion of the bid.

Several people expressed interest in bidding on the property next year and their contact information was secured for a future transaction. The property donation may indeed benefit the Freethought Society (FS) even though the maintenance fees are quite substantial. The current homeowner's association fee is being negotiated by time-share owners and it is possible that a reduced rate will be the result of these tough negotiations.

Devitt will send photographs and a description of his adventure in St. Croix. Hopefully, Devitt's experience will generate even more interest from FS supporters. The use of this cottage will be offered every year.



Tree of Knowledge Donations Needed

The FS Tree of Knowledge is a costly venture, but it certainly brings great pride to the group. When FS participates equally with religious members of the community, it conveys to passersby that the United States of America is not simply an exclusively Judeo-Christian country. There exists in America a strong united minority of Freethinkers, Atheists, Secular Humanists, Agnostics, Skeptics, Rationalists, Humanists and Ethical Culturalists.

Every Sunday millions of people open their wallets to place money into the church offering dishes and millions give the Mormon Church 10% of their salary to ensure the success of that religion.

FS is asking for its supporters to back the Tree of Knowledge project with a monthly donation. It is also clear that without the needed funds FS must abandon the idea of declaring a rightful spot at the Chester County Courthouse Free Speech Zone. It would be a shame to let this positive image of secularism die due to a lack of funding. If every FS member donated just \$2 a week, an annual Tree of Knowledge project would be paid for by the middle of December each year. Please complete the form below for your larger donations.



Tree of Knowledge Winter Display

Yes, I want to show my support of FS's winter display project. Please use the enclosed donation to fund the project. Please send a tax-deductible receipt to:

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

- Please acknowledge my donation in the FS newsletter.
- Please keep my donation anonymous.

Mail this form to:

FS Winter Display
P.O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19366

The Freethought Society (FS) is a chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and is a member of the Atheist Alliance International (AAI). FS members are committed to the advancement of Freethought and issues of religion and government separation. FS activities and services are supported by donations. A list of activities and services can be found at the FS website (www.FtSociety.org). Please help finance FS's endeavors to promote freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of choice and freedom from religious intrusions by donating via the website.

Yes, I want to:

- become a supporter of FS (includes PDF newsletter): **\$30** basic, **\$35** family supporter, **\$20** student and email newsletter recipient. Please make checks payable to the **Freethought Society**.
- join FFRF: **\$45** individual membership or **\$50** family membership. Please make checks payable to the **Freedom From Religion Foundation**.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Check here if you want your sponsorship to be anonymous.

Check here if you want to receive the newsletter as a **PDF** email (make sure to provide your email address below).

Please provide your email address to enable FS to send you a newsletter and keep in touch:

Our policy is to give interested readers a free newsletter to decide whether or not FS is for them. Please provide email address information to us regarding people who might be interested.

Name _____

Email Address _____

Clip and mail to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366-0242

Freethought Society

P. O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19366-0242

Please consider donating to the Freethought Society. Supporters are needed and appreciated. Every dollar counts!

Special Quote

"While Atheism may not entirely rescue us, it is our last best hope in the struggle to emerge from the religious and spiritual infancy that has plagued humanity ever since the dawn of our existence."

Eddie Tabash was born on December 20, 1950. He is a constitutional lawyer in the Los Angeles area. Tabash chairs the First Amendment Task Force for the Council for Secular Humanism and is a prominent debater representing the Atheistic point of view in "Does God Exist?" debates. Tabash is a Life Member of the Freethought Society.

Print and Place First-Class Postage Here
