

## Atheists of Florida CHAPTER EVENTS

**PALM BEACH:** Meetings are held the **third Sunday** of each month at **2:30pm** in Jupiter. Members are notified by postcard. For driving directions or more information, call Charles Schisler (561) 627-6340 or 624-9359.

**MIAMI:** On **3-21-99** from **2-4pm** the Dade/Broward Chapter will hold their March meeting combined with an Equinox Luncheon on-the-green at the **CADDYSHACK Restaurant** 315 South 62nd Ave., Hollywood. For directions call the owners, Rich and Mary: 954/985-5655, or our Dade and Broward hotlines: 954/929-0441 or 305/940-0442. And a Happy Vernal Equinox to all from A of F!

### Secure your place in history

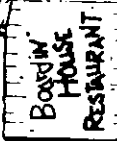
How often do we ordinary mortals have a chance to ensure that our names live on as long as the human species survives? Each one of us now has that chance—and not once but twice!

The Atheist Alliance member societies are holding a contest to find the one perfect, universal, symbol that will represent all atheists throughout the world forever after. It will never—unlike the American Atheists' atom orbital—be trademarked or restricted in any way.

The winner of the contest will receive a cash prize of \$100 and have a star named after him or her by the International Star Registry, thereby assuring that his or her name will live on, both in human history and in the universe.

When it is chosen, the winning symbol will be publicized by all AAI member societies to their local media, so our new atheist symbol will get nationwide attention. The

**TAMPA:** Saturday March 27, (last Saturday of each month), 12:00 - 1:30 p.m. at the Clearwater East Public Library, 2251 Drew St.



**Monthly Dinner — Tuesday, March 23rd, at 6:00 pm** Boardin' House Restaurant, 6821 W. Hillsborough, Tampa, just west of the Veteran's Expressway.

If you have any questions or need directions, please contact: Ed Golly—813/839-7567 or Jerry Moore—727/526-4225

**NORTHEAST FLORIDA:** Meetings notified by postcard  
FMI: C.W. Mitchell at 904/808-1884.

winner's name will also be publicized, with his or her permission.

Some tips: The winning symbol will be easy to draw and easy to recognize and will lend itself to being made into jewelry, bookends, etc.

Rules: Draw your symbol on a sheet of paper no larger than 8½ x 11, using a separate sheet for each symbol you submit. You can draw it by hand or on a computer, but it must be drawn, however roughly, not just described verbally. Write a statement on the page about why you think the design is appropriate and why it should be chosen. Also write your name, address, telephone number and e-mail address on the same page, or staple that information to the drawing. Send all entries to Marie Castle, President, AAI / 5146 Newton Ave. N / Minneapolis, MN 55430.

Deadline: All entries must be received by May 1, 1999. The Atheist Alliance board (made up of representatives of all Alliance member societies) will vote to select several top-ranking symbols. These will be voted on by all members of all AAI member societies. Votes will be tallied by June 30 and the winner will be announced in member societies' newsletters.

8 February/March 1999



P.O. Box 130753  
Tampa, FL 33681-0753

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# Atheists of Florida

*Dedicated to the absolute separation of State and Church*

Volume VIII  
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February/March  
1999



Atheists of  
Florida

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### Scholarship Fund

The Mark Twain Scholarship Fund Annual Report has just been completed. We ended 1998 with \$1,566 cash and have awarded \$800 in our essay contest (see page 4).

On Feb. 23, 1999, Ed Golly and Christos Tzanetakos appeared at the Florida State Employee Campaign 1998 Steering Committee to explain the Fund. Tzanetakos had previously submitted the application to that agency which had been accepted. The FSECC ended 1998 with \$12,114 in undesignated funds. Two days later we received notification that we were awarded \$800 from that pool. In addition, we received \$2,000 from the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay.

Our raffle of the 14K gold ladies ring with matching earrings has generated 128 tickets each for a \$5.00 donation. However, we need to get about 100 more tickets in the pool.

It's not too late to get in. Send your donations to:

Twain Scholarship Fund  
P.O. Box 3893  
Ft. Pierce, FL 34948  
This is the only fund-raising drive for our scholarship. Please be as generous as you can.

### Chapel

In mid-February, Barry Lynn, Executive Director of Americans United, was in the Tampa Bay area to engage in a school voucher debate. During dinner that evening, A of F President Ed Golly discussed the Tampa International Airport Chapel with Lynn. Familiar with the Florida State con-

stitution because of his debate over the voucher issue, he felt certain that even though the chapel does not represent a particular religion, courts had established that the expenditure of public funds for any religious purposes had been found unconstitutional. The chapel should be no exception. Lynn agreed to have the AU legal department review the case and advise our attorney, John MacKay, of their conclusions. MacKay has agreed that if they can find legal precedence to bring a case against the Aviation Authority, he will do so.

### Board meeting

The 1999 Board of Director's meeting is scheduled for March 28 in Ft. Pierce. Among agenda items will be the TIA Chapel case, the Miami Bookfair International, Camp Quest camper sponsorship, and election of officers for the 1999-2000 term.

This year the terms of all board members will expire. We will be electing 18 members who will serve for three years. Board membership is open to all members of Atheists of Florida. The election will follow the board meeting.

We encourage all members to consider applying for the board. The newsletter will provide details. Basically, applicants should submit a curriculum vitae and photo if possible. All candidates' dossiers will be printed for distribution to all active members for voting. Board members attend the annual directors meeting which we try to hold in a location central to all board members, and the officers are elected from the board. If a board member misses two consecutive meetings, that member is dropped from the board.

### Intolerant official

In Ft. Pierce, A of F founder Christos Tzanetakos discovered a blatant First Amendment violation when the city erected a menorah scene. Tzanetakos' complaints to the mayor were met with this response: "My philosophy is, if you don't like it, don't look... We anticipate legal action against them forthcoming."

## Why do I do it?

**M**AYBE I'M ADDICTED. That's all I can come up with. Why else does a self-employed commercial illustrator with a workload that's always at least one more job than can comfortably fit on the schedule add atheist activism to the mix? Fascination. I'm utterly fascinated that as we ap-

## Message from the President

—Ed Golly



proach the twenty-first century, the insane superstition we call religion still dominates the minds and lifestyles of so many people. What are they thinking? Or maybe the question is really, "Why aren't they thinking?"

This intrigue has plagued me for 30 years now. Consider our place in the cosmos, sitting on this tiny, insignificant planet on the remote edge of a rather common galaxy consisting of some 400-billion other suns and one of 100-billion other galaxies situated in an infinite universe. Why do we consider our species so significant?

Published eight times a year by Atheists of Florida, Inc., a non-profit, educational organization designed to heighten public awareness about atheism and to provide intellectually stimulating contacts for the membership.

Membership dues and general correspondence should be sent to:

Atheists of Florida  
P.O. Box 3853  
Ft. Pierce, FL 34948-3893  
Phone: (305) 936-0210  
athafld@ajol.com

Membership dues:

Life Member	\$ 500.00
Sustaining	50.00 Yr
Couple	40.00 Yr
Individual	30.00 Yr
Student (under 25 yrs.)	10.00 Yr

Send newsletter correspondence to:

Tampa Bay Chapter  
P.O. Box 130753  
Tampa, FL 33661  
Phone: (813) 835-1500  
athafld@ajol.com

The A of F newsletter is provided free to our members as a medium of exchange. Letters from our members are published on a space-available basis. Articles may be edited for clarity or length. Atheists of Florida, Inc. is affiliated with the national Atheist Alliance for purposes of information exchange.

Officers

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Newsletter Editor

saturated with it than our contemporaries, but then again, it's all about money. *If* we have it. Lots of it. And the church still gets it tax-free. Gobs and gobs of it. Which they use to blow their own horn so they can take in still more.

And here we sit, a non-profit group without a single paid employee, allying with other organizations with similar concerns about state/church separation. And now I'm the president. What are my ambitions for this group and how do I hope to achieve them?

To me, the most important aspect of Atheists of Florida is simply to exist. The presence of such an outspoken organization in any community tells others that we no longer are ashamed of simply *not* being superstitious. That is the only divisive criteria. Why on earth would anyone be ashamed of that?

In the Tampa Bay area, now that we have a telephone line installed and a permanent advertisement in *The Weekly Planet*, we receive an average of three calls per week from other atheists who are seeking others like us. Where else would they go to find the camaraderie of other non-superstitious people in a society saturated with religion?

But our highest hurdle is this: they each come seeking something more than camaraderie, and each seeks something different. So often, when they don't find what they anticipate, we never hear from them again. We need to work at retaining the interest which first caused anyone to contact us.

The other most important thing we can do is fight the state/church separation battle. A single person bringing a complaint about a violation can change the outcome of a violation. But it's always easier done with an entire organization backing that person up.

Our Mark Twain Scholarship Fund can only serve to improve our image while demonstrating that one need not reach his/her 70's to become a critical thinker.

We have now grown sufficiently in size to take a serious stand against the arrogant violations of religionist politicians, school boards, and other public figures. By networking with other state/church separation organizations, we can become part of an even larger body of force.

We are sufficiently networked to even assist individuals who have encountered religious discrimination if that violation is a constitutional issue. Beyond that, Atheists of Florida is not yet to the point where we can do much more. We all have jobs and lives which come first. But our president for the first five years, Christos Tzanetakos, has laid an excellent foundation on which we can expand. That's my highest priority.

We atheists need to collectively get involved in this organization. A little time from each of us can accomplish lots. Proselytizing and Biblical debate are a waste of time. One can't reason with an irrational mind. Or as Dan Quayle said, "A mind is a terrible thing to lose, or, it's a terrible waste to lose one's mind." He ought to know.

## Moral instinct: the brightest gem of human character

*So often we overhear that our society simply could not exist without biblical guidance. A of F member Sid Goetz responded to such a letter with this submission printed in the Tampa Tribune December 13, '98*



Miguel Serrano is so wrapped up in his Christianity that he cannot conceive of a decent civilization without the Ten Commandments

Yet, with 90 percent of our population professing to be "Christians," Serrano is forced to acknowledge that "today's society breaks every commandment. We have not only forgotten the Ten Commandments, we now reject them."

We might also remember that the vast majority of prison inmates in our country strongly profess their Christianity. One would have to search very hard to find an atheist among them.

Back in 1814, Thomas Jefferson, our Founding Father and president of the United States, wrote that human virtue and morality need not depend upon belief in God. In a letter to Thomas Law, Jefferson offered the following observation:

"If we did a good act merely from the love of God and a belief that it is pleasing to him, hence arises the morality of the Atheist? It is idle to say, as some do, that no such being exists."

"We have the same evidence of the fact as most of those we act on, to wit, their own affirmations and their reasonings in support of them. I have observed, indeed, generally that while in Protestant countries the deceptions from the platonic Christianity of the priests is to Deism, in Catholic countries they are to atheism."

"Didrot, D'Alenbert, D'Holbach, Condorcet, are known to have been among the most virtuous of men. Their virtue, then, must have had some other foundation than the love of God... Good acts give us pleasure, but how happens it that they give us pleasure? Because nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses.... I sincerely, then believe with you in the general existence of a moral instinct. I think it is the brightest gem with which the human character is studied, and the want of it as more degrading than the most hideous of the bodily deformities."

As for Serrano's final comment that our government and Constitution were established "with faith and belief in God," I challenge him to show one iota of proof. He appears to be totally ignorant of the fact that the U.S. Constitution contains not a single reference to God, Jesus Christ, to Christianity, or to the Ten Commandments

—Sidney M. Goetz  
Gulfport, FL

## Miami Book Fair

From the internet: zardoz@icconnect.net (Zardoz)  
To: athafld@aol.com  
To all unbelievers,

I just want to thank the Atheists of Florida for participating at the Miami Book Fair. I purchased Bertrand Russell's book, *If It's Not a Tyrant* there, and I am reading it now.

Regards,  
Jim Falker  
Free thinkers: <http://members.icconnect.net/~zardoz>

## Voucher sham

We proudly proclaim that the U.S. is a nation of laws, not men, and the laws we live by are the Constitution with its Bill of Rights.

Oh, Really?  
I am amazed and appalled how quickly legislators who swear an oath to preserve and defend the Constitution, both state and federal, work to destroy it from within upon taking office.

Case in point is the current voucher proposal of taking public tax money that pays for our public education system and giving it to private schools, mostly religious, under the guise of calling it "opportunity scholarships."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The cost of this travesty of law-making is beyond money. The damage to the institution of a free quality education for all children, will be felt by students, teachers, parents, in fact, every facet of our community. The first students who opt to leave the public schools will be the first victims of this reckless deconstruction of our public schools.

Coming from so-called failing schools they will be immediately identified as "failures." They will have no friends, and no kind of support system. Their parents will have false expectations of their improvement and will be bitterly disappointed on them. Do you really think they have the ability to cope with what they don't understand? Do you understand?

This is just the tip of the iceberg of misery to come. To the parents of children who want the best for their children... Remember, there is no such thing as a free lunch. Demand your legislators improve the public schools and stop fooling themselves and the public. Tell them you know the money is available and to use it for education, not for tax cuts that will benefit the rich, not the poor or the middle class.

To the legislators, while there is still time, step back and think. Study ways and means of bettering our schools, which incidentally, don't exist in a vacuum. Study how the family can be strengthened to help the schools help the children. Most of all, play by the rules... the Bill of Rights. Do your job as it was intended or resign. You are there for all of us, not for special interests.

—Florence Morganoich  
St. Petersburg

## Promise Keepers coming again

The Tampa Bay Area will again suffer the humiliation of a P K conference confirmed for October 8-9 in St Petersburg.

This will be the fourth major conference in this area since 1995. St. Pete is the only Florida location out of the 15 events planned for 1999.

Founded in 1990 by former University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney, Promise Keepers has drawn nearly 3 million men to dozens of stadium conferences across the country. But last year the organization ran out of money and was prepared to lay off the entire staff.

Within a few weeks, PK got a financial resurrection when \$4.7 million in donations poured in. The layoff order was rescinded.

Today, the operation employs fewer than 200 people. It ended 1998 with more than \$40 million in revenue.

*August Berkshire of Minnesota Atheists sent us this update on the Promise Keepers from the (Minneapolis) Star Tribune, Sept. 5, '98, p. B7:*

Peak annual budget: \$117 million

1998 annual budget: \$48 million (with further cuts expected)

People employed nationwide as of Jan. 1998: 341

People employed nationwide as of Oct. 31, 1998: 160

People previously employed at Minnesota Promise Keepers: 6

People currently employed at Minnesota Promise Keepers: 1

Registration fees (which used to account for 70% of the budget) are no longer charged at rallies, though donations are solicited. Money is also raised through the sale of books, T-shirts, videos, and other concessions at rallies.

Number of men who registered for the July 1998 rally in Minneapolis: 23,000

Number who actually showed up: 15,000

Group seeks after-school Bible clubs

"You get sued either way..."

That's the assessment of Largo School Board Attorney John Bowen whether the Missouri-based Child Evangelism Fellowship is granted or denied access to public school facilities.

Latest target: the Pinellas County elementary schools.

The local chapter is requesting the school board approve after-school "Good News Clubs" at Pinellas elementary and secondary schools, but plans to target grade school children.

The clubs operate by posting volunteers outside elementary school classrooms where the club would meet, with a sign announcing the meeting, and have students hand out Good News Club fliers in class. Then, fellow-ship-trained instructors would teach children Bible songs, verses and lessons, and a story about missionaries. The children would say a pledge to the U.S. flag and the Bible.

In order for the child to attend, a permission slip would need to be signed by a parent.

Bowen is concerned that allowing the clubs to operate at schools would violate the First Amendment.

In an article in the *Tampa Tribune*, he was quoted as saying, "If we get excessively entangled in the Good News Clubs, allowing them that kind of access, particularly at the elementary level, the children will not be able to discern that we're not sponsoring this religious club."

There are nearly 4,000 Good News Clubs nationwide, although the organization doesn't keep records of how many are in public schools. Fellowship officials said there are no Good News Clubs in Hillsborough public schools.

The nondenominational fellowship was founded in 1937 by the Rev. Jesse Overholzer to evangelize "unreached children" and channel them into churches.

Good News Clubs have sued in New York state to gain access to a public school that operated under a state law that school facilities could not be used for religious purposes. A federal judge agreed with the school. But school districts lost cases over access in Oregon and Missouri.

## Churchgoers not showing up

In a nation in which many like to pretend we are so Christian, the flock is fooling with the polls.

They might be showing up on Xmas eve or for the millennium, but the stock weekly appearances at the altar just aren't happening. Some experts claim people inflate how often they attend church.

Since the late 1930's, the Gallup Poll has asked Americans about church attendance. When asked if they have attended church or synagogue in the past seven days, about 40% said yes.

But recent research found about 20% attendance. Separate studies discovered that not only is attendance declining, but people are not honest with pollsters. Some poll respondents even counted attendance at a wedding or a funeral, or even mowing a church lawn, as church attendance.

"That doesn't surprise me," a *Tampa Tribune* article quoted the Rev. Randy White of Without Walls International Church in Tampa. "If we continue having church as usual, we will die off in the 21st century."

You can be sure religion will find and adopt any method to keep the flock. Internet services will likely be the next gimmick to keep the coffers full and to keep a new generation otherwise disinterested showing up. **A**

## Engel v. Vitale Separation of Church and State

—by Carol Haas

AS AN ATTORNEY, Carol Haas knows how best to ensure us with the accuracy of the facts presented in her books. But as an attorney she also knows how to



## Eggdancing with the Justices

Book review by —Patrick Benz

conceal facts as a means to make a victim look guilty.

Once more we find on the shelves of our public library a children's book addressing the Separation of State and Church. Once more this booklet glorifies prayer in its choice of photographs: a praying student, a praying House of Reps, a congressman who wants prayers back in public schools...

The adamant advocates of superstition and make-believe will exploit every trick to push their clever lies onto public bookshelves. Here again is a book which leads young readers through all the landmark Supreme Court cases regarding religion over the last half century. Each case is briefly and pseudo-objectively explained.

But then the author employs comments uttered by presidents like Hoover, Eisenhower, Kennedy and the neutrality wanes.

She quotes JFK as saying that instead of praying in our schools, people should pray more at home and attend their churches with "more fidelity..."

Shouldn't Haas have remarked that JFK had better cautioned young Americans that prayer, whether in school, at home or in church is an act of temporary insanity and that more time, physical and monetary effort must be granted to education and cultural after-school programs?

Atheists have closely followed all the important cases and dropped their chin at the irrational decisions of the

Honorable Justices during the last decade. Knowing this too well, Haas chooses not to challenge their lack of trust in reason.

Leading the devout eggdance, the Supreme Court has ruled out common sense in honoring the Jeffersonian Wall. Haas tiptoes along and refuses to communicate this to her readers, thus annihilating their right to be justly informed.

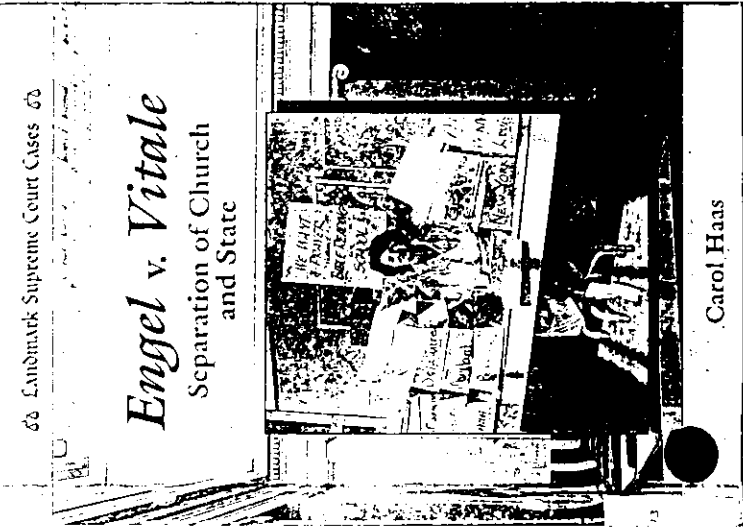
When Atheists win court cases Haas is quick to point out how this win can be turned into a loss. When the Religious Reich wins, she hails that outcome as the will of the people. The pendulum decisions by the highest court of the land make a joke of the judicial system.

The salute to the flag is one matter where we find the same parasites in the courts as in the churches. Haas could have exposed this to her student readers, many of them here from foreign countries, whose allegiance to the Stars and Stripes is as incomprehensible as Flag Day is alien. Patriotism, creationism and altruism are political ploys employed forever by power-mongers to wind up the emotions of a single citizen or an entire nation until enough start to march and drum in step like pink rabbits going and going, multiplying and multiplying and never asking why. The Gordon Riots in England started when one man shouted, "No Popery!" Crystal Night took place after one man shouted "Jews out!" Do we wait until the next man shouts "Atheists out!" while it's silently written in between the lines of America's schoolbooks?

What this booklet tries to do is throw thorns at Atheist kids who pick it off the shelf, thinking it's an objective study. No atheists were interviewed for their opinions, versus those of Billy Graham, Cassius Clay, Frank Borman, Cardinal Spellman and others. Non-believers whose names have become familiar nationwide are mentioned and their case described, but their arguments kept mute, whereas believers are quoted bounteously.

The eggdance of the nine Justices is in full swing and most absurd in reference to "one nation under geedee" because the Pledge is repeated over and over again, the phrase has become a traditional ceremony rather than words with a significant religious meaning. The same can be said about U.S. coins: if we leave off the in geedee we trust" slogan the coin may have an unfamiliar ring when tossed on the grocer's counter, therefore the motto has to remain...

The fittest will survive, however, and throughout the long list of cases and its impact on religion (from bigamy, the role of women, to gruesome sacrifices) the author may have proven beyond reasonable doubt, that creationism too is subject to evolution. The good news in all these "factual" booklets is that when these biased authors choose to refer to opinion polls conducted by CNN and Reader's Digest, one fifth of the population opposes religious intrusion in public life. Yes, one fifth! And this percentage number is slowly, steadily, significantly growing, to this Atheist's pride! **A**



Landmark Supreme Court Cases

## Engel v. Vitale Separation of Church and State

Carol Haas

**Sandra Loomis was awarded the \$500 first prize for the 1998-99 Mark Twain essay contest which is applied toward her tuition. She is studying Physical Therapy at State University of New York at New Paltz.**

**Mark Twain Scholarship Fund**

## *Imagine a World Without National Armies*

—Sandra M. Loomis

May 7, 2079

**For all the peace and equality that has been created, this world is lacking.**

FATE HAS CHOSEN you to read these words for fate's own reason. You opened an old paper book in an antique store, or perhaps found this among aging paper photographs of persons unknown. Know that I chose my destiny, and leave only these insignificant ramblings as my epitaph.

I never understood why, because of my advancing years, that I, and others of my ilk, were revered simply due to our age. Perhaps, because there were so very few left after the change occurred. Speaking solely on my own behalf, I was not so wise and knowing as my long history in the world would have anyone believe. During my years, there was little significance in my life personally. I married, raised children, buried a spouse, parents and some of my children. Few of my children weathered the change. For those that survived, I pray that you will find them, wherever they are, and pass this along to them. This personal insight may help them comprehend the reasons for my choice.

Well into my second century of life, I am in excellent health and fitness, thanks in no small part to the miracles of science. DNA exchanges and genetic engineering have extinguished all health problems in the last twenty years or so. Everyone changed or born is intelligent and altruistic, except for the few elders among us. I will never understand why we were left to this knowing lot.

The change restructured the world economy and now we are all economically equal. Nations no longer exist

there was music long ago—something in the words referred to . . . we are the world. I've often wondered how that writer could have been so prophetic, or if they ever envisioned what those words could actually mean.

I had always hoped that the world would someday eliminate hatred and violence. It seemed the ideal solution to an imperfect, and scary, world. The last confrontation among nations ended the world as we knew it. The land, oceans, and air were scarred, some thought, beyond repair. I really didn't expect to survive—but I did. And then came the change. A few hearty souls decided to repair creation based on their own ideology. This planet was rebuilt as a haven for intellect and altruism. All persons with the "diseases" of bigotry, individuality, or sexual aggressiveness, were offered the change. Banishment or imprisonment was believed too harsh. Death was the only alternative to the change. Genetic imprinting with satellite homing allowed no one, exempting the elderly, an escape.

For all the peace and equality that has been created, this world is lacking. It lacks the heart that I remember. I taught my kids that whatever they did, good or bad, would come back to them. I suppose that lack of balance is the problem for me. As much as it grieved me to witness the hatred and violence of the past, I always knew that these offenses were necessary, in order to have the other end of the spectrum—the givers and the dreamers. There are no longer those wonderful differences between humans.

Back then, people of conscience did what was right—not because they were genetically engineered to feel that way, but because they saw what was harmful and chose to be helpful. We had disabilities and differences and accommodated each other. We had artists and eccentrics. We had poverty and wealth and gained ambition and competition. Many had faith in a Supreme Being, or, like myself, in ourselves and one another. Religious factions disagreed—and there was understanding and acceptance. Nations and nationalities disagreed—and there was compromise.

War brought the world to this point. It was widely believed that before the final war, the mere threat of deadly conflict would force nations to compromise. Every now and then it worked. There were, however, those insane zealots who would not bow to the pressure of threats or even minor warring. Pride would not allow nations to back down from the conflict to come. Strangely, science provided the wrong people with the ultimate answer and only blind luck provided the inherent ability for some to survive the worldwide biological holocaust.

All peoples of the world are now equal and at peace. I can only reminisce about the freedoms once inherent in humanity—interdependence of thought, joy, passion, inventiveness, and eccentricity—the very things that made my life worthwhile. Today, on my birthday, I will exert, for one last time, a once abundant entity—free will—and choose death.

Against a backdrop of loud music, and intertwining conversations, a little-known fortress of free thought holds its own on the campus of the University of South Florida. Tucked in among the food and clothing vendors and the various religious booths—Christians,

## **Atheists of Florida: Ending**

### **Addiction; One Day at a Time**

—by Carmen Creed

Scientists, and Muslims—the Free thinkers of Florida, as they call themselves, have stood their ground in the USF flea market ever. Wednesday possible since 1994. Ed Corl and Britt Girard are the two amiable mainstays of the Atheist "outreach booth," as they call it. Their booth, a wide table topped by a big shady canopy, offers free literature, a variety of buttons,

gun, who came over and kicked the booth.

The ambiance, like the weather this spring day, was mild, breezy, but the atheists have had a few hair-raising encounters. A Muslim student stopped by to tell them if they were in a Muslim country, they'd be shot. Then there were the skinheads who told Girard they wanted to burn (the atheists) in an oven. Girard said he has videotape of a man shouting, "I don't need no intellect. I got Jesus!"

On this March afternoon, a young woman accompanied by a male friend, dropped by and joined the group. A regular visitor, she said she's the "pagan contingent." The conversation turned to the drug plague sweeping the nation. In that long ago decade of the 70's, the writer recalled, drug treatment was available on demand, and heroin addicts routinely received methadone, counseling, and other services paid for by the government. Things have changed a lot since the Reagan years, and the question was raised, why are most addicts today, "treated" only after they're urged to give their drug habit to a "higher power?"

Corl recalled a friend who was in AA, who asked him to attend meetings with her. He told her, "I don't want to go to your meetings because it's religion." And she said, "No, it's not." "You have a higher power," Corl argued. "Well, your higher power can be a duck," she told him.

Replied Corl, "Then the duck is a god." The young pagan commented that when people are addicted to drugs, the state gives them something else to be addicted to. "Hook 'em on religion," said Corl, adding, "Instead of solving your co-dependency problem, you trade your chemical addiction to a fantasy."

"It's self-delusion," said Girard. "What's the benefit of keeping people dependent on something, whether it's drugs or religion?" "It gives the government power over them," said the pagan girl.

"It's the cheapest way out," said Corl. Keeping people hooked on religion is cheaper and easier than solving a person's problems, as with a shrink, for instance.

Strangely enough, the Atheists of Florida have a "patron saint." He is an Arkansas-based trucker named Robert Higgins who travels with a poodle named Bridget. Britt met Robert when they were both picketing in front of George Bush's church in Texas. According to Girard, Bush has said atheists are not to be considered good Americans, and shouldn't be allowed to hold office. "If you've ever seen Episcopalians wade through a picket line of atheists, it is a sight to behold," recalled Girard. Robert supplies the outreach booth with all its books, visits a couple times a semester, and spends his vacations here. By the way, Corl says, to anyone who's interested in starting their own outreach booth, we'll supply all the basic pamphlets, 5 cent bumper stickers, and T-shirts at cost.



**George Giannakoulas at the Elm Street Flea Market**

bumper stickers, and T-shirts flapping in the spring breeze. A pink tee with gray letters reads, "Ask the Native People about Christian love"; another reads, "Religion is just another socially accepted addiction." Girard said they offer a place for non-believers to come and discuss things. A student group called Free Thinkers of USF recently started.

Corl estimated sixty to eighty percent of the people interested in what is going on (at the booth) are young women. "Women," he says, "actually look at religion as being a lot more oppressive than men do." In fact, on several recent visits to the Atheists booth, many, though not all of the students hanging out, are female students. Corl said they also get visitors who are less than sympathetic to the cause. He told of the ROTC

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