

Chapter Meetings

MIAMI: Sunday, May 24, and Sunday, June 28, 2 p.m. in the 8th floor Room A and B of the Broward County Main Library, 100 S. Andrews Ave., Ft. Lauderdale. FMI and speakers: (305) 665-8171.

TAMPA: Saturday, April 25, and Saturday, May 30, (last Saturday of each month) 12:30 - 2:00 p.m. in meeting room B of the Clearwater East Public Library, 2251 Drew Street, Clearwater. FMI: Ed Golly (813) 839-7567.

PALM BEACH: Sunday, April 19, and Sunday, May 17, (third Sunday of each month) 2:30 p.m. at the Herb Watt Rec. Building, just north of the North Palm Beach Library. FMI: Charles Schisler (561) 627-6340.

ST. AUGUSTINE: The Northeast Florida Chapter of the Atheists of Florida is about to become a reality. We have a Post Office box and a telephone number. Ads have been placed in local newspapers and we already are receiving responses.

Our next meeting is at 1:15 PM on Sunday, May 3, at the St. Johns County Public Library System in St. Augustine. The topic will be the "Public Prayer Issue." The library is located on San Carlos between A1A and US1, about 2 miles north of the Bridge of Lions. Ed Golly, the secretary of the Atheists Of Florida will be at this meeting discussing the problems that he has faced in trying to keep a chapel out of the public airport in Tampa. We need your input and support. FMI: C. W. Mitchell (404) 824-6281.

Godless *from page 5*

of the FreeThought Hall. Cleveland says he's glad it's a concrete building, but won't even waste a shrug to show he's unworried.

Actually, the 'Clevelands' disrepute never troubles them; they seem to like the sting of it. Besides, they do their share of good works. Pat has been running herself ragged lately taking care of a stroke-victim aunt. The A.F.A. donates almost extra vaguely to the town soup kitchen at Christmas (or rather: winter solstice). It hardly matters. In 'Tadadega, the atheists' most innocuous gestures are painted as diabolical acts. Two years ago, when Roger Cleveland roped off a square of land to refurbish his barn, rumor spread that the A.F.A. was making human sacrifices.

Roger, deeply involved in another cigarette laughs off this piece of gossip. "Maybe that's the one advantage we have over religious folks down here," he says, smoke pouring out with his words. "They think we have the power of the Devil - and they're afraid. Sometimes I'm not sure if we should talk them out of it or not." **A**

Imagine *from page 3*

in stone or decreed by a deity. Meaning is made in the mind of each individual.

AS SOON AS people realize that they have the power to make their lives mean whatever they want it to mean, they will have no need of religion. As soon as people abandon their beliefs in deities and begin to believe in themselves and their power to overcome their problems, the world will no longer need religion. If we, as a society, are to move forward; we must abandon blind faith for the light of reason. If we want to avoid another dark age when religion reigns supreme over a serfdom of human suffering, then we must guard well the lessons of logic.

The world without religion will be the world of the future, or else it will not be much of a future for humanity. **A**

8 April 1998

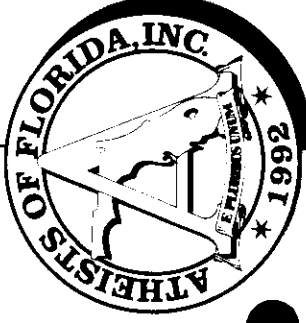


P.O. Box 130753
Tampa, FL 33681-0753

ADDRESS CORRECTION
REQUESTED

Atheists of Florida

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Tampa, Florida
PERMIT No. 2020



Volume VII Number 3

April, 1998

Dedicated to the absolute separation of State and church

Atheists of Florida

RFA exchange A of F member George Hunt exchanged this correspondence with his representative regarding the Religious Freedom Amendment

March 2, 1998

Rep. Mark Foley
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Sir:

I am concerned about the interest the so-called "Religious Freedom Amendment" has generated. I know I have prayed in school; my children and grandchildren were not and have not been barred from doing the same (at test time; at lunch time; at game time, etc.).

H.J.Res. 78 seems to be more of an agenda for tyranny than of freedom. Separation of church and state has served us well for over 200 years ("--if it's not broken...etc."). Let's please keep the First Amendment. Bringing religion and prayer into the public forum will only create more ideological barriers than we now have.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion; or prohibiting free exercise thereof...."

PLEASE VOTE NO!

George Hunt
Lake Worth, FL

On March 11, Congressman Foley sent this response:

Dear Mr. Hunt:

Thank you for contacting me in opposition to H.J.Res. 78, the Istook Religious Freedom Amendment. I appreciate hearing your views on this matter.

Our country was founded upon religious principles, the most important of which is that everyone has the right to practice the religion of his or her choice and I believe in protecting that freedom. For that reason, I have long supported allowing students a voluntary moment of silence for prayers in school, but I am opposed to the government forcing religious beliefs upon its citizens.

Congressman Ernest Istook introduced the Religious Freedom Amendment to affirm the rights of Americans to acknowledge their religion in the public arena. H.J.Res. 78 states that nothing in the Constitution shall prohibit acknowledgment of the religious heritage, beliefs, or traditions or prohibit student-sponsored prayer in public schools. The Amendment also declares that neither the federal government nor state governments shall compose any official prayer, compel joining in prayer, or discriminate against religious expression or belief.

As of this date, no action has been taken on this amendment in committee—largely because there are concerns that, despite its stated purpose, it could lead to forced religious observance. Please be assured that I will keep your views in mind as this issue is debated and will monitor the measure closely to ensure that those concerns are addressed.

In the meantime, thank you again for taking the time to contact me. *(see RFA, pg 7)*

I'm John Mackay.

I'm a 15 year trial lawyer and a lifetime (44 year) atheist. I hope to use this column to present news and views on legal and other issues that concern our battles. This is not a space for me to ramble or pontificate; it is instead a place for you and me to share stories (good and bad), to swap information, to air grievances, and to organize. This will only work if you participate by commenting, by criticizing, and by contributing. Let's make this work!

John W. Mackay

News from the front

John W. Mackay is a Board Certified Civil Trial Lawyer in Tampa, Florida. Please address your comments, criticisms, and contributions to Mr. Mackay in care of this newsletter or via e-mail to: info@mackaylaw.com.



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 3893
Ft. Pierce, FL 34948-3893
E-mail: AthAI.FL.C@aol.com
Contact Phone: (305) 936-0210

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 33681
E-mail: AthAI.FL.E@aol.com

The A of F newsletter is provided free to our members as a medium of exchange. Letters from 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

Chairman: John Xanthopoulos, Ph.D.
President: Christos Tzanetakos
Vice President: Charles Schisler
Secretary: Ed Golly
Treasurer: Charles A. Ross

State Board of Directors

Alan Altman
Rebecca Porto
Lon Katz
Steven Miles
Jan Eisler
Florence Morgenroth
Edward McDougall, Sr.

Newsletter Editor: Ed Golly

WHY ME? I have been

a First Amendment lawyer for many years. I

presently represent Atheists of Florida, Inc. Last year I met Ed Golly when he came into my office to talk about an airport chapel (more on that issue in a future column). A less logical reporter would contend that god sent Ed to the office, because I happened to be looking for plaintiffs to sue Hillsborough County's Aviation Authority over that very issue. We became friends and Ed put me in touch with an organization that was sitting on a great "hostile religious work environment" case. All they needed was a lawyer to do the work.

SO LET'S GET STARTED. A hostile religious work environment is one in which workers are subjected to religion and coerced into participation in religious practices. I contend that the term includes any work environment infused with a particular religion to the point that the workplace has become objectively hostile and degrading to those workers who do not share that religion. Such a workplace can be run by persons who compel prayer; who pray or bless, while disparaging those who do not; who leave religious icons and tracts on desks, or place them on boards; who have hiring, firing, and resource allocation on behalf; and who endlessly recruit.

Almost everyone reading this column knows or has known a workplace horror story. Send me your stories and I will report the best (my decision) in a future column. I'll tell you one of mine in the next issue to start the ball rolling.

See you then.

SECULAR

NATION

Prose and poetry of substance reflecting positive atheism.

A national magazine written by and for atheists

Published by the
ATHEIST ALLIANCE,
a democratic organization of autonomous atheist member societies.

Secular Nation is published quarterly by the Atheist Alliance, an international, democratic, nonprofit educational organization that connects autonomous atheist member societies. *Secular Nation* provides a wide variety of articles, poetry, book reviews and other material of substance reflecting a positive atheism that looks forward with hope to a tolerant, humanistic society free of divisive dogma.

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

Only \$15 a year

YES, I want to subscribe. My check for \$15 is enclosed, payable to Atheist Alliance.

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

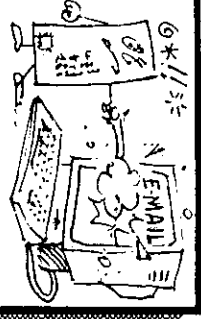
Phone _____

Mail to: Atheist Alliance,
Shirley Moll, Treasurer
P.O. Box 6261,
Minneapolis, MN 55406

Perdono questioned

I just read Mike Perdono's contribution to the A of F newsletter (Feb/March issue, pg. 3). In it he claims one of the three common errors religious people make is to link God with religion. Really? With what would he possibly link God?

Letters



He then states he will explain - but I didn't even find this explanation attempted. Since I have never heard or imagined such as he claims, I am still left wondering if anyone, including Perdono, thinks it can be supported.

I assume by *world* he means *the totality of existence or Universe*. If so, there is at least one other obvious hypothesis which he does not mention at all, and of which many atheists are uniquely aware. Rather than a god, or nature itself, bringing off a "creation," the most likely case is that All-of-existence is eternal—without an ultimate beginning at all!

The Universe is experienced by all, but only to those of integrity does it occur that it may exist eternally. Conversely, it does not occur to others that a god, for which there is no evidence, might not have ever existed. Nothing is *external* to the Totality of all that exists—

and nothing can create itself. To *arbitrarily insert* a god into the Totality and then claim that it created everything is absurd. If an entity cannot create itself, most certainly an invented part can not create the Whole of existence!

Rationally,
Charles Schisler
North Palm Beach
schisler@earthlink.net

Who's leading the police?

Dear Editor:
You may have noticed lately in the news that an Officer Homer of a nearby police department was killed in the line of duty.

Of course this was sad, but I noticed on television that at the funeral a uniformed police officer went ahead of the priest in the procession and carried a large gold cross. The symbolism struck me immediately as very threatening. Of course we must allow for certain segments of society, like the church and the army, etc., to indulge in ceremony and symbolism, but this went too far.

What if we allowed the police to parade around in uniforms with crosses on them like Cardinal Richelieu's men? What if the American police became like the religious police in Islamic countries? This is always possible and we must be vigilant even if we must choose our heads over our hearts.

Sincerely,
David Barrera
Gulfport

RFA

from page 1

Sincerely,
Mark Foley
Member of Congress
Hunt sent this follow-up to Foley's letter on March 17:

MARK ANDREW TROP
Attorney at Law

Shoreview Building / Suite 201
9999 N.E. 2nd Avenue
Miami Shores, FL 33138

(305) 759-5727

Dear Hon. Mark Foley,
It was a pleasure and an honor to hear your response to my original letter regarding H.J. Res. 78.
Realizing I am not as intelligent as you are, I tried looking up the basis for your statement where it said, "our country was founded on religious principles" (quoted from your letter).
Since I am unable to find your quote, I would be very pleased if you can point it out for me in the Preamble, Constitution, or Bill of Rights.
Thank you,
George Hunt

Hunt is awaiting a reply.

By the tone of his letter, Foley appears to have decided to vote in favor of the amendment. If you are in his district, please let him know your opinion. His address is: Rep. Mark Foley 113 Cannon Building Washington, CD 20515. Phone: (202) 225-5792. Fax: (202) 225-3132. E-mail: mark.foley@mail.house.gov.
And all the rest of us should follow suit by contacting our own congressional representatives. Their address is: House of Representatives / Washington, DC 20515, or find the local office in your telephone directory. Most of them probably have an e-mail address similar to Foley's. Let us hear of any interesting responses you may receive.

Volusia School Board invocation

DELTONA — On March 17, three Volusia School Board members resurrected the idea of opening their meetings with prayer.

The move to insert an invocation into the meetings came last November at the request of board member Earl McCrary, when he was chosen as vice chairman in a special session. However, two board members oppose the idea, citing the constitutional need to separate church and state.

Board members Deborah Denys and Susan Whittaker voted with McCrary to put the prayer decision on an agenda within the next two months.

McCrary's proposal went nowhere after School Board Attorney Dick Graham advised it might open the board to an expensive legal challenge. Then in February, an organization called the Liberty Counsel, an Orlando-based so-called religious civil liberties education and legal defense group, came forward to offer free legal help.

"We would urge the School Board to recognize that the board (is) within its rights to open meetings with an invocation if it so desires," Liberty Counsel director Nicole Kerr wrote to Volusia School Board Chairwoman Judy Conte.

Conte and Board member Dr. Jeff Timko object to the prayers, stating, "This school district has been through some difficult times...I don't think we need anything more to disagree about." She and Timko said they feared some people might be offended by prayers offered at board meetings.

Denys said a primary purpose of the school district is to encourage students to pursue truth. "By acknowledging the creator of that School Board meeting," she said.

This issue will be on the agenda of the Atheists of Florida board meeting scheduled May 10. Thanks to A of F members Glen Law and Jim Strayer for keeping the newsletter informed.

Hemlock Society of Florida, Inc.

P.O. Box 39561
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33399-9561
800/849-9949
954/563-7386

MARY BENNETT HUDSON

Court Turns Back Prayer Challenge

WASHINGTON—The Supreme Court last October rejected a challenge to Indiana University's custom of having a clergy member offer two prayers at the school's graduation ceremony each May.

The court, without comment, turned away arguments that the state school's custom violates the constitutionally required separation of religion and government.

For 35 years, the nation's highest court has banned officially sponsored worship in public schools. In 1992, the court ruled that clergy members cannot lead invocations and benedictions at public grade school or high school graduation ceremonies.

But that decision emphasized that the same rule might not apply to officially sponsored prayers at a public university or a city council meeting.

The 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, in upholding Indiana University's practice last January, drew a distinction between college graduates and younger students.

The appeals court added: "The university's practice...has prevailed for 155 years and is widespread throughout the nation. Rather than being in violation of the (Constitution) it is simply a tolerable acknowledgment of beliefs widely held among the people of this country."

The graduation prayers had been challenged by James Tanford, a law professor at the university, and Joseph Urbanski, a student.

Tanford, a Roman Catholic, objects to non-denominational public prayer because he believes they trivialize and desanctify communion with God. Urbanski, who expects to graduate in May 1999, is an atheist.

They sued in an attempt to ban prayers from the university's 1995 graduation ceremony. A federal trial judge and the 7th Circuit court ruled against them.

In the appeal, Tanford and Urbanski argued that "prayer has rarely been found to have a secular purpose because it is so quintessentially a religious activity. Such prayers should not be justified on the ground that they are voluntary, nonsectarian, traditional or merely used to solemnize a secular occasion."

Lawyers for the university urged the justices to reject the appeal.

"Under any realistic view, (Tanford and Urbanski) are not coerced to participate in a religious exercise," they said. "There is no evidence, and it is not credibly to be believed, that Indiana University's 'real' purpose or intent is to promote religion."

The case is Tanford vs. Brand, 96-1894. **A**

An T. Nguyen Le of the University of Florida wrote this second place winning essay in the 1997-98 Mark Twain Scholarship Fund essay contest. He was awarded the second place prize of \$300 toward his tuition.

Mark Twain Scholarship Fund Imagine a World Without Religion

↑ HERE ARE

a few tragedies darker than a dream deferred. It

is the cry of a

hungry child. It is the tears of a broken father.

It is the heart that ceases the thoughts of the man that did dream. Such pain pierces the heart of humanity. It creates a need for justice, for answers to the question of our misery.

Religion, across the borders and throughout time, has sought to give a name to our pain and answer what needed to be answered. It has failed. In times considered sacred; in chants, songs, and mantras to deities or deity; there is nothing but vagueness and mythology. People still cry and suffer and die.

What religion has given us is intolerance. In holy wars to eliminate those that did not share their beliefs, religious fanatics committed some of the worst atrocities known to mankind. The inquisition and the holocaust were designed specifically to eliminate those of another faith. In some cases as the witch-hunts of the nineteenth century, the victims did not even have to be of another faith. They only had to resemble the description of evil invented by religious mythology.

Religion is generally credited with providing mankind with morality. This assumes that the mind of man is incapable of determining between what is beneficial and what is detrimental without a deity to show them the distinction between the two. If humanity cannot determine for itself what actions create human suffering, then the state of the world is a sad one indeed. It is more likely that morality comes about by individuals learning to live together in a society. Theft and murder are immoral not because of some commandment but because any society that permitted them would decline into chaos.

THE ABSOLUTE MORALITY of religion has little use in a changing society with unique situations. Commandments millennia old are not going to provide the answers to the problems that plague society today. Dusty, religious texts say nothing about cloning, about intellectual property in an age of information.

or about individual freedom in the face of increasing government eavesdropping. Religion has not solved the problem of our educational systems, of the congestion of highways, or of the increasing gap between rich and poor. Accepting things on faith does not seem to be a good way to run a society. If we are to find solutions to the problems of our society, we will have to reason out all of the consequences of our actions.

A WORLD WITHOUT RELIGION is a world where the people are free of blind faith. It is a world where people still interpret life from different unique perspectives; but reason becomes the basis of belief and ideas are accepted because of their utility not because of some arbitrary appeal of familiarity. It is a world that does not fear and fight change but instead prepares for it.

In this world uniqueness is valued through the understanding that our diversity is our strength. Debate becomes the medium through which we settle or voice our differences of opinion, and no one fears putting forth their unique thoughts because there are no sacred thoughts, nothing that cannot be questioned. It is a world of tolerance because there is no fear of what is foreign, because there is no fear of change.

A world without religion is not a world run by a cold, robotic logic. It is a world run by a humane logic where the needs and happiness of humans are a primary consideration. Policy and goals are created to serve human ends and their effects on others are scrutinized. No longer will people act and accept on faith that their actions will bring no harm to others because a benevolent deity would not permit that to happen. In a world without religion people would have to take responsibility for their actions and be consistently aware that what they do has an effect on others.

The solutions to the problems that plague society can only be found in reason, not faith. Through the applications of science, societies once based on agriculture have turned to technology and more people are being fed in the process. Through tested methods of observation, experimentation, and logic; modern medicine has discovered cures for diseases that once decimated populations. People are living longer and have greater access to travel, to communication, and to information than ever before. All this was done without religion and if we evolve further as a society, it will be without the aid of religions that have not changed in thousands of years.

Religion has given some people meaning to their existence. This is something reason, logic, and science has not done. Meaning is not set (see **Imagine**, back page)

Religion fanaticism is like a virulent, malignant fungus that tries to crawl over everything - a monster that must be fed.

This article appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* December 7, 1997

In the midst of a religion boom, atheists have to fight for their right to disbelieve — especially in the heart of the Bible Belt.

Godless and Proud of it

— by
Marshall Sella
edited for length

Talladega, Ala., a town of 19,000 about 40 miles east of Birmingham, is the kind of little world Southern Baptists dream about. Churches, it seems, are on every street corner; their flick-knife spires jut through the humid air, a warning to transgressors. Just about any building can be cajoled into being a church. One house of worship is dearly a converted gas station; traces of pump stands are still visible on the concrete out front.

But even in what's called the buckle of the Bible Belt, devout atheists gather for their monthly Sunday social on the shores of Lake Hypatia, just outside of town. So people — happy pagans from as far as Cedartown, GA — are sitting around in sport shirts and sun hats, as the Alabama Freethought Association enjoys a traditional Southern lunch of cold beef and fried okra. The tables are wobbling with atheistic small talk. A raspy-voiced woman complains that her daughter was accused of being a Satanist merely because the girl was carrying a Stephen King book; a ginger-haired man recalls how seeing Joseph Campbell on TV shattered his faith in God.

Roger Cleveland, 52, a former paper-mill worker and the association's founder, takes a last useless pull on his cigarette. "Right about now," he says languidly, "the folks in town are sitting in church, waving a book that makes no sense and that most of them haven't even read."

A few years ago, *The Birmingham News* published a county-by-county breakdown of born-again Christians, tallying how many Alabamians "will be damned to hell if they don't have a born-again experience." In Alabama, religion is a force in everyday life. There is Yes and there is No, and the people who gather at Lake Hypatia have chosen the narrow road. They're an odd assortment of clear thinkers and contrarians and social misfits in search of comfort and brave souls. For whatever reason that they renounce the God of their commu-

nity, each of them feels solitary and exposed. "We get a lot of letters from people who believe as we do," says Pat Cleveland, the association's director and Roger Cleveland's wife. "But they're scared to come out into the open."

Roger started up the Alabama Freethought Association in 1989 to combat what he saw as the incursion of religion into state government. It has since become what Pat fondly calls "a kind of big old family."

ATHEISM IN AMERICA is a paradigm of miscellany.

Atheists are not joiners. The prime assertion of their philosophy estranges them. Still, most godlessness is invisible. Lack of faith, in most places in this secular age, is a mere topic of conversation, not a wedge that destroys families and careers. What is decried as heresy in Alabama is genteel intellectual debate in New York — when the subject comes up at all. Accordingly, it's hard to gauge the number of atheists in this country. A recent Gallup poll indicated that 3% of Americans do not believe in "God or a universal spirit." But survey results vary wildly sometimes pushing into double digits. Polls using the word atheist routinely get low readings; that word is shorthand for "amoral" and "crackpot." (One member of a leading antireligion group calls himself an atheist, in hopes of dodging the stigma). Regardless of the polls, there's a sharp distinction between the masses of those who quietly lack faith and the clarion, scarlet-A atheists who will not or cannot hide the fires of their unbelief.

Those committed atheists who poke their heads above the surface are not always without political agendas. Though groups like the AFA will deny this, in part to preserve their nonprofit tax status, organized atheists often wield their unbelief against what they perceive as egregious violations of the Founding Fathers' intentions.

Constitutionally, of course, America is secular soil for atheism. Even a quick stroll through the Lake Hypatia Freethought Hall suggests the length and breadth of faithlessness in U.S. history. Quotes from Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, crusaders for the ascendancy of individual reason, are everywhere you turn. Other portraits are offered as hopeful signs that shunning God is a sound and noble life decision: Mark Twain, Ulysses S. Grant and Clarence Darrow; each one accompanied by a pithy remark that makes religionists out to be fools or oppressors or both.

In a library off the main room, there's a bust of Robert G. Ingersoll, the 19th-century orator known as the Great Agnostic (and in the interest of full disclosure, one of my own

wicked distant uncles). Ingersoll's standing as our history's most renowned infidel was finally eclipsed in June 1963, by a noisy atheist named Madalyn Murray O'Hair. As a litigant in the U.S. Supreme Court case that forced prayer out of public schools, O'Hair gained instant notoriety and was dubbed "the most hated woman in America" by *Life* magazine. Into the 1990's, O'Hair would boast (on scant evidence) that her foundation, the Texas-based American Atheists, was 50,000 members strong. None of them were merely agnostics — those who doubt, rather than deny the existence of God. O'Hair regarded agnostics as cowards, jackpots of the middle ground.

O'Hair's legacy, for now, has been ruined by scandal. In August 1995, besieged by the I.R.S. and purportedly having funneled more than \$650,000 into secret accounts in New Zealand, she and two family members vanished.

At Lake Hypatia alone, you meet retired doctors, feminists, advocates for the legalization of hemp, college activists and truck drivers. It's the house joke: getting atheists together is like herding cats.

Most overt atheists, however, share one striking characteristic. They reject God with the same passion and intensity that others use to embrace Him. Their lack of faith cannot be confused with indifference. Unbelievers believe one thing — that they've found the only vacuum in all the universe that Nature does not abhor. Nothing can sway them. When Baptist pastors in Talladega unthinkingly substitute the word Satanist for "atheist," the members of the Alabama Freethought Association who gather at Lake Hypatia are not enraged. They are comforted by the ignorance of their foes, freshly confirmed in the notion that they alone are "freethinkers."

ATHEIST TECHNIQUE, of course, varies according to group. For its part, the AFA often adopts the fire-and-brimstone metaphor its members learned from the pulpit in childhood. "Anyone who believes in any religion," declares Jesse Bailey, a retired banker, "is in fact mentally ill and should be institutionalized!"

Happily, a benevolent eye watches over the infidels of Alabama. For the AFA is a local chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a nonprofit group founded in 1978 and based in Madison, Wis.*

Dan Barker, 48, a spokesman for the foundation, calls himself a "positive atheist," but it was not always so. He was an evangelist for 19 years, 8 of which he spent hauling the word of God across the country in a sunshine-yellow Chevy Nova.

Barker, like many atheists, did not lose faith as a result of personal trauma. If asked about his transformation, he likes to dismiss the five-year process with a quick and somewhat loaded remark: that he simply "grew up."

It's typical of atheism that the godless of Madison and Alabama flourish within the same group. Around Lake Hypatia, the air is not buzzing with ontology or Bertrand Russell. Most everyone there claims to have read Thomas Paine — but specifics, much like God, don't often reveal themselves. Paine and Jefferson become code words, secret handshakes of the initiated. Dan Barker, meanwhile, can argue ontology in all its shadings; he can explain why the Christian God is impossible, with assertions that "omniscience and omnipotence could not exist in the same being." In short, he can pitch atheism six ways to Sunday. "There's another possibility," he adds. "The only all-powerful God would have to be evil. Just walking into any children's hospital will show you that."

*Several chapters of FFRF are members of the Atheist Alliance

WHAT KEEPS the thinkers of Madison and the soldiers of Lake Hypatia under the same tent is more political than stylistic. They are obsessed with the constitutional separation of church and state, and keep a wary eye on both, like chaperones on a bad date. The Lake Hypatia group spent the past year engaged in a high-profile battle with Roy S. Moore, a state judge who displays the Ten Commandments in his courtroom. In August, the FFRF backed the ACLU in a battle over Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson's attempt to spend public money on vouchers for parochial schools. Unsurprisingly, not all the causes the foundation champions end in triumph. A lawsuit to remove the phrase "In God We Trust" from U.S. currency has utterly failed. Boy Scouts still have to sign an oath that they worship a deity.

In Barker's world, there is no FFRF chapter more inspiring than the atheists of Lake Hypatia. He loves knowing that one Sunday a month, a bunch of red-toothed heathens down in the Bible Belt meet in a hall maintained by the foundation. That spices up the whole operation, gives it a sort of flinty credibility. "When Roger Cleveland first told me he wanted to start a chapter," he recalls, "I thought he was naive. Just holding a meeting down there is gutsy; Madison is a much easier place to be an unbeliever than the Bible Belt. In our neighborhood, parents are delighted to see their kids playing with ours."

Alabamians react a bit differently. Roger Cleveland's children, in their own school days, were routinely heckled and stoned.

Back in Alabama, the streets of Talladega are sweltering, but at Lake Hypatia the air is neither hot nor cold. Freethinkers are eating peanuts and discussing the latest outrage. "That Roy Moore should be impeached," says Carol Faulkenberry, who is obsessed with the Baptist judge. "Maybe even arrested!"

But politics, as a topic of conversation, burns down fast. In the shadow play of Southern faithlessness, the star players are reason and nature. Reason, most AFA members agree, invalidates the Bible in its first few pages. "The Book of Genesis was obviously written by someone who didn't know what caused rain or even that the Earth is round," says James Howard, a ruddy-faced welder. "How am I going to trust something like that?" Nature is another matter entirely. Nature is sovereign; it gives and takes according to its own baffling design.

STILL, THE GREATEST potential menaces to the AFA are hardly the forces of nature. Local Klansmen have been overheard muttering about coming on down and "taking care"

(see **Godless**, back page)