

# The Secular Gazette

Supporting Science, Reason and the Separation of Church and State

Issue #37

September 19, 2012

## From the Editor



We had a great time at our outreach program last weekend on September 15. We talked with many people, both believers and non-believers. Several Backyard Skeptic members commented on our Meetup page that we were not serving the cause of atheism because we would never change the minds of believers. But our goal is not to change the minds of people who are locked in to their theology, but rather to plant the seed of doubt in those who are willing to have a polite discourse on what is

demonstrably true. Our second purpose is to let other atheists and agnostics know that there are many groups which revel in the opportunity to talk with others about being good without a god. It was exciting to see people, after seeing our “We Don’t Believe In God” sign, come up and eagerly ask “Where do I sign up?” At one point a couple with three kids, three, five and seven were enthusiastic about finding a group with no religious dogma.

The most rewarding feeling while out in a public place was one of empowerment. To discuss important issues with complete strangers with respect and openness moves us forward as individuals and as a community. We are making a difference in how people see us as non-theists – and it is a positive message:



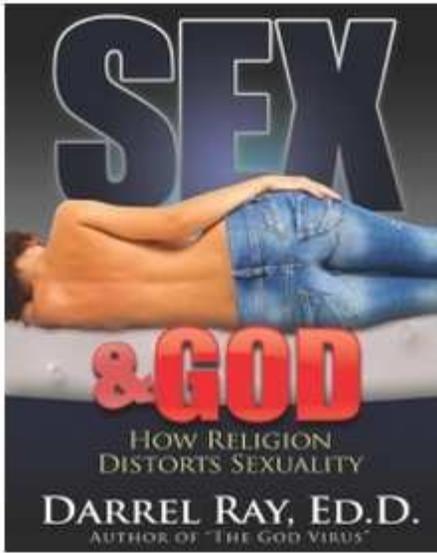
As with the gay pride movement, the idea of knowing someone unlike yourself increases the respect and tolerance one has toward a group of ‘outsiders’. That is why atheists must follow the gay agenda closely, as we might be the last group which discrimination might keep its ugly hands on. And this is why it’s important to come out as rational non-believers, either on a one-on-one basis or in a public setting. As my wife affectionately says, my husband is not out of the closet – he’s out of the house!

Bruce Gleason, editor

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Our newest [DVD lectures](#) are now available at [Backyard Skeptics.com](#)



Darrel Ray, author of [Sex & God: How Religion Distorts Sexuality](#), gave a talk on Sex and Secularism at the Center for Inquiry in Los Angeles, CA during the monthly meeting of Atheists United.

The talk is based on Dr. Ray's groundbreaking survey in 2011 where Dr Ray explores what the data tells us about people who rejected religion and how that affected their sex lives and sexual attitudes. Over 10,000 people answered 69 questions about the sexuality after leaving religion. [\\$12 plus shipping](#)

About the book:

Why are all the major religions consumed with sex?

What makes sex so important, whether Buddhism or Islam, Christianity or Mormonism?

What is the impact of religion on human sexuality?

This book explores this and more. It ventures into territory that has never been examined. You will be surprised at how much religion has influenced your sexuality, who you marry, the pleasure you get or don't

get from sex, and what you can do about it.



## [Black Holes, Dark Matter and the Mysteries of the Universe.](#)

James S. Bullock, professor of astronomy and astrophysics at UC Irvine, was captivated by astronomy at age 8 by Carl Sagan's TV series Cosmos. Today he explores such fundamental questions of cosmology as: Why there is so much invisible dark matter compared to the amount of ordinary matter in galaxies? What is this "missing mass"?

Director of the multicampus UC Southern California Center for Galaxy Evolution, he represents the UC Irvine on the UC-HiPACC council. Outside the office, he teaches astrophysics and observing techniques to talented high school students as part of the California State Summer School for Math and Science (COSMOS), runs a blog "Cosmo for the People," and appeared in the National Geographic Channel special "Inside the Milky Way." Taped at the June meeting at Backyard skeptics in Villa Park, CA [\\$12 plus shipping](#)

Enjoy viewing our other secular DVD selections:

[The Christian Reich, Fetal Idolatry & Female Reproductive Enslavement](#)

[Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Survey of the Supernatural World - Adrian Novotny, Ph.D.](#)

[Craig A. James, author of The Religion Virus \\$12](#)

[Thomas Quinn "God Needs Therapy" \(a comedy\) \\$12](#)[Dr. Richard Carrier "How Christianity Began Is Proof Enough It's Bunk" \\$12](#)

[Dr. Sarah Dunn - Atheists in Prison: How the law, culture, psychology shape prison populations \\$12](#)

[Ingemar Hulthage - Is the 'mystery of being' a challenge to the atheist worldview \\$12](#)

[Joe Nickell - Relics of the Christ](#)

[Dave Richards - Exploring logical fallacies and how to identify them \\$12](#)

### Sam Harris

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One of the most common objections to my position on free will is that accepting it could have terrible consequences, psychologically or socially. This is a strange rejoinder, analogous to what many religious people allege against atheism: Without a belief in God, human beings will cease to be good to one another. Both responses abandon any pretense of caring about what is true and merely change the subject. But that does not mean we should never worry about the practical effects of holding specific beliefs.



I can well imagine that some people might use the nonexistence of free will as a pretext for doing whatever they want, assuming that it's pointless to resist temptation or that there's no difference between good and evil. This is a misunderstanding of the situation, but, I admit, a possible one. There is also the question of how we should raise children in light of what science tells us about the nature of the human mind. It seems doubtful that a lecture on the illusoriness of free will should be part of an elementary school curriculum.

In my view, the reality of good and evil does not depend upon the existence of free will, because with

or without free will, we can distinguish between suffering and happiness. With or without free will, a psychopath who enjoys killing children is different from a pediatric surgeon who enjoys saving them. Whatever the truth about free will, these distinctions are unmistakable and well worth caring about.

Might free will somehow be required for goodness to be manifest? How, for instance, does one become a pediatric surgeon? Well, you must first be born, with an intact nervous system, and then provided with a proper education. No freedom there, I'm afraid. You must also have the physical talent for the job and avoid smashing your hands at rugby. Needless to say, it won't do to be someone who faints at the sight of blood. Chalk these achievements up to good luck as well. At some point you must decide to become a surgeon—a result, presumably, of first wanting to become one. Will you be the conscious source of this wanting? Will you be responsible for its prevailing over all the other things you want but that are incompatible with a career in medicine? No. If you succeed at becoming a surgeon, you will simply find yourself standing one day, scalpel in hand, at the confluence of all the genetic and environmental causes that led you to develop along this line. None of these events requires that you, the conscious subject, be the ultimate cause of your aspirations, abilities, and resulting behavior. And, needless to say, you can take no credit for the fact that you weren't born a psychopath.

Of course, I'm not saying that you can become a surgeon *by accident*—you must do many things, deliberately and well, and in the appropriate sequence, year after year. Becoming a surgeon requires effort. But can you take credit for your disposition to make that effort? To turn the matter around, am I *responsible* for the fact that it has never once occurred to me that I might like to be a surgeon? Who gets the blame for my lack of inspiration?

More here: <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/life-without-free-will>



### Uncertainty not so certain after all

Physicists may need to tweak what they think they know about Werner Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle.

Measuring light particles doesn't push them as far into the realm of quantum fuzziness as once thought, new research suggests. The work doesn't invalidate the principle underlying all of modern quantum theory, but may have implications for supersecure cryptography and other quantum applications.



"The real Heisenberg uncertainty principle is alive and well," says Lee Rozema, a graduate student at the University of Toronto whose team reports the finding in the Sept. 7 *Physical Review Letters*. "It's really just this [one aspect] that needs to be updated."

In its most famous articulation, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle states that it's possible at a given moment to know either the position or momentum of a particle, but not both. This relationship can be written out mathematically. But Heisenberg first came up with the idea in a slightly different fashion using slightly different mathematics. That version says the more you disturb a particle, the less precisely

you can measure a particular property of it, and vice versa.

As an example, Heisenberg imagined shining particles of light on an electron and, by watching how the light bounced off it, deducing the position of the electron. But each time the light particles impart a little of their momentum to the electron, thus blurring how well scientists can measure the system. "This is how Heisenberg thought, but it wasn't what was rigorously proven later," says Rozema. "Physicists quite often confuse the two."

Heisenberg's original version still works for the light/electron example, Rozema says, but not in more general cases — as most scientists have assumed.

More: [http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/345081/title/Uncertainty\\_not\\_so\\_certain\\_after\\_all](http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/345081/title/Uncertainty_not_so_certain_after_all)

### How to walk on water

Secrets of cornstarch fluid unveiled (video in the link)

By [Devin Powell](#)

Dump enough cornstarch into a swimming pool, and you can walk across the water's surface. Scientists have now revealed the secret of this YouTube party trick.

When struck by a foot, the particles suspended in the water jam together like snow piling up in front of a snowplow. The compaction forms a hard patch that can push back with the same amount of bone-crushing pressure concentrated at the tip of a high heel, researchers report in the July 12 *Nature*.

"If you were to punch the suspension, you might break your wrist," says Scott Waitukaitis, a physicist at the University of Chicago who was inspired to study the goop after watching videos of people running on top of it.

Water added to equal or larger quantities of cornstarch has long been a staple of science fair demos, thanks to the mixture's Jekyll-and-Hyde personality. A non-Newtonian fluid, it doesn't behave like regular liquids. A hand eased into it slides in gently, without much resistance. But smack the surface hard, and it smacks back.

To understand the forces at work, the researchers struck the mix soundly with a metal rod and monitored the repercussions. Previous experiments had rubbed the material between two plates instead — a common technique for testing the properties of liquids, but one that shears the fluid sideways instead of producing a direct impact.

X-rays of the opaque muck revealed how the stuff moved beneath the surface. Simulations based on the data suggested that the initial impact squeezed water out of the spaces between the particles. Friction between the particles then took over. They stuck together in an expanding front that behaved like a solid, pushing back against the rod.

"I was not extremely surprised by the results," says Daniel Bonn, a physicist at the University of Amsterdam who suspected a similar mechanism after shooting bullets into cornstarch suspensions. "But the experiment was interesting because they're able to look inside the cornstarch as it thickens."

Both Bonn and Waitukaitis hope

[http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/342314/title/How\\_to\\_walk\\_on\\_water#video](http://www.sciencenews.org/view/generic/id/342314/title/How_to_walk_on_water#video)



More science articles at <http://backyardskeptics.com/wordpress/science-news/>

## [Church-State News](#)

### [Football Coach Toes Religious Line](#)

A Walker County high school football coach is coming under fire for allegedly violating the separation of church and state.

The Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation said in a letter to Walker County Schools that Ridgeland High School coach Mark Mariakis is violating the First Amendment.



The foundation cited an unnamed local source claiming the coach pressures players to attend a Christian football camp and takes the team to local churches for pre-game meals. The complaint also said the coach leads pre- or post-game prayers.

Emory University law professor Michael Broyde said if the allegations in the letter are true, the activities are likely unconstitutional.

“Coaches are the same as any other teacher, and they’re not allowed to endorse any religion and they’re not allowed to encourage students to be religious or not be religious, or to be religious in a specific faith or any faith,” Broyde said.

More: <http://www.gpb.org/news/2012/08/31/football-coach-toes-religious-line>

### [Americans United urges appeals court to uphold access to birth control at Washington state pharmacies](#)

**Americans United for Separation of Church and State** has asked a federal appeals court to find that pharmacies do not have the right to opt out of filling certain prescriptions on religious or moral grounds.

In a **friend-of-the-court** brief filed in a Washington state case, Americans United urged the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to allow state officials to enforce a rule that requires pharmacies to stock when locally demanded – and fill prescriptions for – the so-called “morning-after” pill, also known as Plan B.

“Religious freedom is for people, not corporations,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. “Pharmacies are businesses, and they should not have the right to impose religion on anyone.”

The Stormans family owns Olympia-based Ralph’s Thriftway and has been arguing with the state Pharmacy Board since 2007 over enforcement of rules requiring medicines in demand locally to be dispensed. The Pharmacy Board had been investigating Ralph’s Thriftway for refusing to stock Plan B, but that investigation halted when the store owners filed a lawsuit.

Americans United cited several reasons in its brief why a district court decision in favor of the pharmacy should be reversed. The brief noted that the state regulations at issue strike a balance between the religious freedom of pharmacists and that of their patients because individual pharmacists may opt out of filling prescriptions, but pharmacies may not.

More: <http://www.goddiscussion.com/100863/americans-united-urges-appeals-court-to-uphold-access-to-birth-control-at-washington-state-pharmacies/>

### [Update: American Atheists File Objection to Motion to Dismiss World Trade Center Cross Case](#)

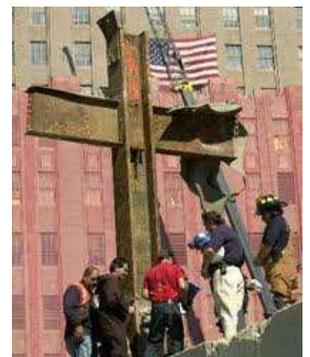
American Atheists filed a response objecting to the motion to dismiss the World Trade Center Cross case, Wednesday, September 12, 2012. American Atheists’ response stated, “Plaintiffs do not seek to disrespect the honorable victims and rescuers...they demand that all Americans feel welcome in honoring them, including the non-Christians.”

David Silverman, President of American Atheists said, “Conviction can tremble in the wake of attacks, but if this nation has hope for healing and peace, it will not come through preferential treatment and minority alienation.”

American Atheists recognizes that its position in this case is not popular; however, battling for minority rights has never been about being popular.

Edwin Kagin, Legal Counsel of American Atheists said, “It is the upholding of these rights in our most trying hours that preserves this country’s greatness.”

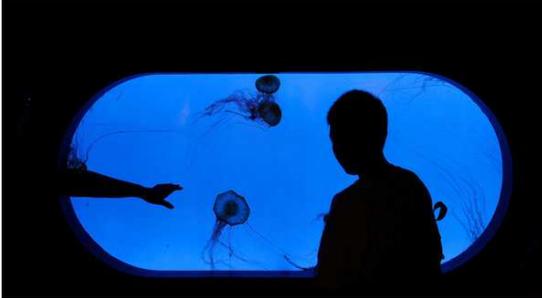
<http://www.atheists.org/update-american-atheists-file-objection-motion-dismiss-world-trade-center-cross-case>



# Climate Change News



## Intriguing Habitats, and Careful Discussions of Climate Change



With many zoos and aquariums now working with conservation organizations and financed by individuals who feel strongly about threatened habitats and species, managers have been wrestling with how aggressive to be in educating visitors on the perils of climate change.

Surveys show that American zoos and aquariums enjoy a high level of public trust and are ideally positioned to teach.

Yet many managers are fearful of alienating visitors — and denting ticket sales — with tours or wall labels that dwell bleakly on damaged coral reefs, melting ice caps or dying trees.

You don't want them walking away saying, 'I paid to get in, I bought my kid a hot dog, I just want to show my kid a fish — and you are making me feel bad about climate change,' ” said Paul Boyle, the senior vice president for conservation and education at the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Some zoos and aquariums have therefore held back, relegating the theme to, say, a sign about Arctic melting in the polar bear exhibit. But many have headed in the other direction, putting climate change front and center in a way that they hope will inspire a young generation of zoogoers.

Working with cognitive scientists and experts in linguistics and anthropology, a coalition of aquariums set out in 2008 to develop a pattern that would intrigue rather than daunt or depress the average visitor. After the group was pleased with the script, it secured a grant of about \$1 million last year from the National Science Foundation to train staffs across the nation. This month, the foundation awarded the group an additional \$5.5 million for a five-year education effort.

More: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/27/science/earth/zoos-and-aquariums-struggle-with-ways-to-discuss-climate-change.html?\\_r=2&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1346423502-/zcp/2ZE+bOHkGhFZxfnWA&#h\[\]](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/27/science/earth/zoos-and-aquariums-struggle-with-ways-to-discuss-climate-change.html?_r=2&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1346423502-/zcp/2ZE+bOHkGhFZxfnWA&#h[])

## How Will Climate Change Affect Food Production?

Food is one of society's key sensitivities to climate. A year of not enough or too much rainfall, a hot spell or cold snap at the wrong time, or extremes, like flooding and storms, can have a significant effect on local crop yields and livestock production. While modern farming technologies and techniques have helped to reduce this vulnerability and boost production, the impact of recent droughts in the USA, China and Russia on global cereal production highlight a glaring potential future vulnerability.



There is some evidence that climate change is already having a measurable affect on the quality and quantity of food produced globally. But this is small when compared with the significant increase in global food production that has been achieved over the past few decades. Isolating the influence of climatic change from all the other trends is difficult, but one recent Stanford University study found that increases in global production of maize and wheat since 1980 would have been about 5% higher were it not for climate change.

All else being equal, rising carbon dioxide concentrations – the main driver of climate change – could increase production of some crops, such as rice, soybean and wheat. However, the changing climate would affect the length and quality of the growing season and farmers could experience increasing damage to their crops, caused by a rising intensity of droughts, flooding or fires.

## Political News



### Atheists' road signs attack faiths of Romney, Obama ahead of Democratic convention

(ed: American Atheists consider themselves as the 'bad boys' of atheism)

Just as the city of Charlotte, N.C., geared up to host the Democratic National Convention, an atheist group is mounting a billboard campaign attacking the religious faiths of President Obama and GOP challenger Mitt Romney.

The signs, paid for by American Atheists Incorporated (AAI) and appearing along keylocal highways, include messages such as:

"Christianity: Sadistic God, Useless Savior" and "Mormonism: Magic Underwear, Baptizes Dead People, Big Money, Big Bigotry." AAI President David Silverman told FoxNews.com the signs are aimed at keeping religion and politics separate as the convention gets under way Sept. 3.

"It's never appropriate to insult another person, it's never appropriate to disrespect another person."

- Christian Life Center Pastor Mark Matthews

Other faiths, including Judaism and Islam, were spared because the billboards are designed to attack GOP nominee Mitt Romney, a Mormon, and President Obama, a Christian, according to AAI. They will remain up for a month, and cost Silverman's group \$15,000.

"We chose Christianity and Mormonism for these billboards because those are the religious faiths of the two presumed candidates for president," said Amanda Knief, managing director for American Atheists "The president of the United States is in a position to make life-changing decisions for all Americans. We believe it is perfectly reasonable to ask whether each candidate will choose to follow his religious faith or the U.S. Constitution when making those decisions."

More: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/08/22/signs-attack-religion-ahead-democratic-convention/#ixzz26vzFEs2J>

### Atheists bummed by Democrats' God flip

God has returned to the Democratic Party platform, a move some atheists say is a step backward in tolerance for nonbelievers.

"We're disappointed," Teresa MacBain, spokeswoman for American Atheists, told POLITICO. "What appeared to be a bold move by the Democrats to be inclusive has been pulled away. It sends a mixed message. Many, many people who are nonbelievers fall in the lines of the Democrats."

The party was **criticized** for removing "God" and "Jerusalem" from its platform. It reversed the decision earlier Wednesday to reflect President Barack Obama's views.

Republicans, not to mention some Democrats, had criticized the party for removing the language. GOP vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan told Fox News on Wednesday morning that Democrats had "purged" the language from the platform.

"It's not in keeping with our founding documents, our founding vision," Ryan said. "I'd guess you'd have to ask the Obama administration why they purged all this language from their platform."

But Lauren Anderson Youngblood, spokeswoman for the Secular Coalition for America, told POLITICO that America's founding fathers wanted separation of church and state.

"This is one of our core founding principles — the idea of separating religion and government," she said.

Other atheists were equally critical of the reversal.

"Belief in God is a personal choice and there's no reason to include reference to one faith or one system of belief in a platform designed to represent a large, far-from-monolithic party," Hemant Mehta, aka Friendly Atheist, wrote on his Patheos blog. "What a mess."

Read more: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0912/80797.html#ixzz26w0lKNrv>

## **Religious Right Watch**

<http://www.religiousrightwatch.com/>



### **A Swag Bag Preview of the Values Voters Summit | PRA 2012 Values Voter Summit Blog**

This year's Values Voters Summit (VVS) will be a shock to all who have claimed that the Christian Right is dead or about to breathe its last. Several thousand registrants are jamming into the Omni Shoreham hotel in Washington, D.C. this weekend for the annual political conference of the Christian Right hosted by, among others, the Family Research Council (FRC) Action, American Family Association (AFA) Action, and the Heritage Foundation. As the movement emerges from a

period of transition following the passing, retirement, or semi-retirement of the founding generation of the Christian Right, I see a movement that is increasingly focused, vibrant and angry.

After registering yesterday evening before this morning's official opening, I combed through the swag bag issued to conference participants, where I found several magazines brimming with the stuff of which theocratic movements are made. If you were up late last night and following me on Twitter, you would have noticed metweeting some of the highlights as a conference "preview." I think that even the most casual reader — maybe especially the most casual reader who is less accustomed to such rhetoric — would be startled and concerned about the surprising sense of urgency expressed and the aggressive political vision of the writers.

Here is some of what I found: [pravaluesvoters.wordpress.com](http://pravaluesvoters.wordpress.com)



### **David Barton Publisher Pulls Book**



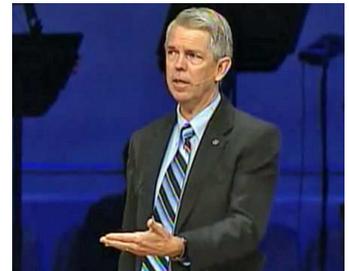
Yes, David Barton had entitled his book *The Jefferson Lies* with absolutely no sense of irony whatsoever. Remarkable.

Casey Francis Harrell, the director of corporate communications at the publishing firm, said that, due to a spate of recent complaints, Thomas Nelson had "lost confidence in the book's details." *The Jefferson Lies*, a New York Times bestseller, has been pulled from Thomas Nelson's website, and the company has asked online retailers to cease offering the work to the public. The cessation came only two days

after NPR's "All Things Considered" ran a stinging commentary of Barton's work.

Barton told Thomas Kidd of *World Magazine* that the publisher's decision was a "strange scenario," and that he'd only been notified of the move by email.

The book, which purports to illuminate Jefferson's Christian leanings and the biblical influence on the Constitution's creation, has been the subject of critique from much of academia since its release earlier this year, such that the History News Network deemed the book the "least credible book in print." However, unlike many of Barton's previous offerings, the averse reaction to *The Jefferson Lies* has crossed the political and religious spectrum. More: <http://www.religiousrightwatch.com/>



## [Evolution/Creationism](#)

### [On the road again with NESCent](#)

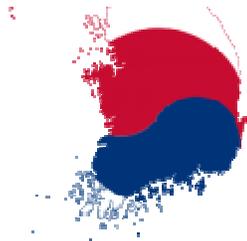


The [Darwin Day Roadshow](#) is returning! The Roadshow is a project of the National Evolutionary Synthesis Center, in which NESCent staff shares their enthusiasm for evolutionary science with students, teachers, and the general public on the occasion of Charles Darwin's birthday, February 12. According to NESCent, "Our teams talk to students, teachers and the general public about their research in evolutionary science, describe what it takes to become an evolutionary biologist (and what some of the rewards and challenges are), and convey why evolutionary science is relevant to everyone."

And the results are delightful: as NESCent's Craig McClain [wrote](#) at Pacific Standard (May 15, 2011), "for all of us the Darwin Day Road Show was a gratifying adventure that no one will forget. From the landscapes with their silos, combines, center pivot crop circles, high school gymnasiums, to the indelible interactions we had along the way, we absorbed it all." Applications from schools interested in hosting the Roadshow, especially those who would not be likely to have access to Darwin Day activities otherwise, are now being [accepted](#). Act soon, though; the application deadline is November 9, 2012.

<http://ncse.com/news/2012/09/road-again-with-nescent-0014579>

### **Progress in South Korea?**



A panel overseeing revisions to science textbooks in South Korea "reaffirmed that the theory of evolution is an essential part of modern science that all students must learn in school," [according](#) to a report in *Nature* (September 6, 2012). The panel was convened after it was revealed that, owing to pressure from a creationist organization, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology instructed publishers to exclude discussions of the evolution of the horse and of *Archaeopteryx* — favorite targets of creationists, including the "intelligent design" movement — without consulting any biologists for their advice.

Nature reported that on September 5, 2012, the panel concluded that *Archaeopteryx* should still be included but conceded that "the textbooks' explanation of the evolution of the horse was too simplistic and should be revised or replaced with a different example, such as the evolution of whales." Duckhwan Lee, the leader of the panel, told Nature that he hopes that the panel's work will improve the public's understanding of evolution, adding, "We welcome any petition in the future ... if it is regarding flaws in the evolution parts of science textbooks. But we do not want to waste our time if it has any religious implication." <http://ncse.com/news/2012/09/progress-south-korea-0014567>

## God is Imaginary

### Proof #15 Examine Jesus' resurrection

Jesus' resurrection after his death is the ultimate and defining proof of Jesus' divinity. Just about everyone knows the story, which is summarized in the Apostles' Creed. Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

There is only one way for Jesus to prove that he rose from the dead. He had to appear to people. Therefore, several different places in the Bible describe Jesus' appearances after his death:

- Matthew chapter 28
- Mark chapter 16
- Luke chapter 24
- John Chapter 20 and 21

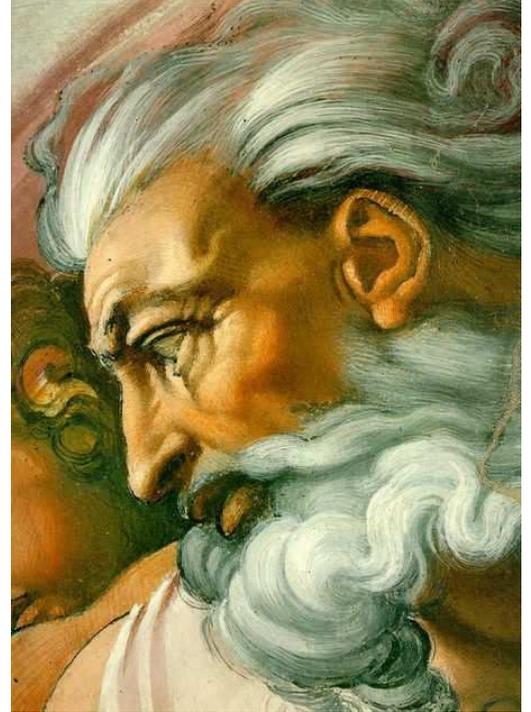
1 Corinthians 15:3-6 provides a nice summary of those passages, as written by Paul:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

As you can see in this passage, Jesus appeared to hundreds of people a number of different times.

#### Being like Paul

When we look at these Bible passages, there is a question that comes to mind -- why did Jesus stop making these



appearances? Why isn't Jesus appearing today?

It really is odd. Obviously Paul benefitted from a personal meeting with the resurrected Christ. Because of the personal visit, Paul could see for himself the truth of the resurrection, and he could ask Jesus questions.

So... Why doesn't Jesus appear to everyone and prove that he is resurrected, just like he appeared to Paul? There is nothing to stop Jesus from materializing in your kitchen tonight to have a personal chat with you. And if you think about it, Jesus really does need to appear to each of us. If Paul needed a personal visit from Jesus to know that Jesus was resurrected, then why wouldn't you?<http://godisimaginary.com/i15.htm>

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## Raiding the Ark of the Covenant

The true history of the most famous holy relic from Biblical times.

Today we're going to travel back to Biblical times, and cast our skeptical eye upon one of the most enduring legends in all of Christianity: the Ark of the Covenant, the holy box in which the smashed stone tablets of the original Ten Commandments were said to have been stored by Moses himself. It's a particularly interesting story, because unlike its fellow icon the Holy Grail — which existed only as a literary device in Arthurian legend and has no historical basis — the Ark of the Covenant may have been (and in fact probably was) a real physical object.

In appearance, the Ark was very much like the version depicted in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, just a bit smaller: 2.5 cubits long, and 1.5 cubits high and wide. It was made of acacia wood, completely gilded with gold leaf, and had two golden cherubs atop its lid. It was carried only by two gold-plated acacia staves, and was not to be touched itself.

There are many replicas of the Ark, even surviving today; and we'll talk about some of those in a moment. But what are they copies of? Following the threads of the various Ark legends backwards through history, they soon fade into stories known only from the Bible, plus some corroborating mentions in other ancient texts such as the Quran and the Books of the Maccabees. The original Ark is said to have been constructed upon instructions from Moses during the Exodus, and this is problematic, as we now know from numerous lines of evidence that the Exodus was a Bible story and not a historical event.

Moving forward through history from there, the chronicle of the Ark becomes increasingly less fuzzy. There are all kinds of Bible stories about where the Ark went and which army had possession of it, but because there is no archaeological evidence of any of these stories, they can't be verified. It is said to have eventually come down to King Solomon sometime in the 10th century BCE, but even King Solomon's very existence has no compelling evidence outside of scripture, despite many efforts by Biblical literalists to interpret various pieces of archaeological and anthropological evidence. Most famously, Solomon built Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon's Temple is not proven to have existed either. It's said to have been destroyed in 586 BCE. Some archaeologists believe they've uncovered evidence of its structure; others find insufficient reason to support that identification.

Inside Solomon's temple was a special room called the Holy of Holies, in which the Ark of the Covenant was kept. Since we can't verify that the temple existed, we certainly can't say that the Holy of Holies did, and we can't say that there was an Ark inside of it. However, there is a wealth of non-empirical evidence supporting the idea that Solomon, his temple, and the Ark within probably did exist. Historians going back through ancient Rome, such as Josephus, and ancient Greece, such as Herodotus, have all provided accounts that are generally consistent with the Biblical history of Solomon's temple. I believe it's fair to say that the existence of Solomon's temple, and a gilt wooden ark hidden inside of it, are the null hypothesis. We've no compelling reason to doubt it.

The pivotal moment in the Ark's history is the sacking of Jerusalem by the Neo-Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE. This is a factual historical event, and it's the best point at which the Bible-based history of the Ark ends and its evidence-based history begins. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple of Solomon. Anything in it fell into the hands of the Neo-Babylonians. Whether this booty included the Ark of the Covenant is unknown. One further Bible verse states that the haul was taken to Babylon, including "the Ark of God", but of what became of it thereafter there is no mention. In all likelihood, if the raiders had found a large gold-plated box, they would have opened it, found nothing of value inside, and set fire to it along with the rest of the temple. Assuming an original Ark of the Covenant ever did exist, this was probably its ultimate fate.

But as a holy object, the Ark inevitably became the subject of rumor and passion. The Jewish tradition holds that the Ark was secreted to an underground chamber on the Temple Mount (where Solomon's Temple is believed to have been) during Nebuchadnezzar's attack where it remains safe to this day, but the political situation has prevented any archaeology from validating this story. Another story from the second Book of Maccabees holds that the prophet Jeremiah rescued the Ark, took it out of Jerusalem, and hid it in an unknown cave which he then sealed, where it has remained ever since. There's never been any way to evaluate this tale either. And over the ensuing years, a whole raft of scholars and authors have proposed alternate versions: That the Knights Templar took it somewhere, that's it's hidden at the Vatican, that it burned in another basilica in Rome, that it's buried in Ireland, and even a story from Zimbabwe that resulted in the find of a replica ark carbon dated to 1350.

But the best known modern-day claim about the Ark of the Covenant is that it lies in a small Ethiopian temple belonging to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This story exists because the church has long publicly proclaimed it. In fact, you can visit any one of the church's temples throughout Ethiopia and actually view the Ark for yourself. But, contain your excitement: all of the Arks that the church displays are replicas. More: <http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4327>

# Backyard Skeptics visits the Harvest Crusade at Anaheim Stadium – August 26, 2012

## Harvesting Rational Thought: An Analysis of the Harvest Crusade

Jeffrey I. Chang

B.A. Psychology, California State University, Fullerton

The Harvest Crusade event takes place in Angels Stadium in the city of Anaheim, California. There are approximately 30,000 participants of differing ages, genders, sexes, and ethnicities. Seating for the participants is mixed. Located in the middle of the baseball field is a large, technologically sophisticated stage draped in red, white, blue, stars, stripes and the messages of Christian faith tradition.

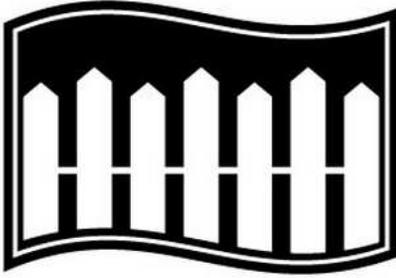
**Musing:** *I found the stage ostentatious for several reasons. First, I object to the mixture of patriotism and religion. I feel that it sends the message that to be good American one must be religious, specifically Christian. My second objection is this display provokes a sense of emotion, while eliciting emotion is not objectionable; it is used to strengthen faith and weaken logic in this instance. A third objection is the pageantry that is used for this event. While it is understandable that a stadium would be a rational choice; does one need a state of the art lighting system and special effects? If Mr. Laurie church is doing "God's work" are they so insecure that they need to rely on glitz and glamour? Do they doubt in the ability of "God" to work through their words alone? Closing my thoughts, could not the money for the effect have been better used helping the poor?*



In addition to the patriotic nature of the stage, there are several religious symbols and a message. The most prominent is a sign that reads, "Jesus said: I am the way, the truth and the life."

**Musing:** *While I do not disagree that the Bible does indeed mention this statement in John 14:6; several questions are raised to the authenticity of this statement. A problem challenging the authenticity of the statement is that the author of the Book of John is highly disputed. One would think that who the book was named after would be the author. However, it is surprising that many scholars reject that the apostle John wrote these works (Harris 355). Another challenge to the authenticity of the quote concerns the elapsed time between the death of Jesus\* and the completion of the "Book of John". Utilizing internet resources, I found a Christian apologetic site that reviewed various scholarly materials to determine when the "Book of John" could have been written. The earliest date is 60 C.E. with the death of Jesus\* occurring between 30 – 36 C.E. At minimum there is a 14 year gap between the death of a possible religious icon and a book that contains a statement he could have said. Taking a holistic approach, an average of 86.5 years elapsed between Jesus and the "Book of John" being written (Butner). An examination of secular sources seems to verify this estimate putting the writing of the "Book of John" near the turn of the century (Bruce 7). If authorship and the time elapsed were not problems, than the reliability of eyewitness testimony would present a challenge if the historical figure of Jesus\* existed. Studies in the field of legal psychology may provide clues to how accurate eyewitness testimony is. What research into this area shows, strikes at the reliability of eyewitness testimony (Wells, and Olson 277-295). When eyewitness testimony is coupled with temporal variables, namely longer lengths of time, the accuracy of eyewitness testimony deteriorates drastically (Gerrie, Brewer, and Williams). Furthermore, the accuracy of the "Book of John" is brought into question by its relation to the other Biblical texts and Gospels. When an examination is done of events in the non- Johannine Biblical texts and Gospels and compared with the Book of John significant differences become apparent (Throckmorton), (Funk), (Nicholason) and (Edwards).*

More here: <http://backyardskeptics.com/Events/HarvestingRationalThought-harvestcrusadeaug2012.docx>



## [Backyard Skeptics](#)

is part of the Freethought Alliance, a 501C3 grass-roots organization based in Villa Park, CA which sponsors monthly meetings with interesting secular speakers, dinner-and-a-movie nights, science-oriented field trips, outreach programs for letting others know about our secular community and atheist advocacy programs. If you are local to Orange County you are welcome to join our meetup group to receive announcements of upcoming events. <http://www.backyardskeptics.com>



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## [Backyard Skeptics Events](#)

<http://backyardskeptics.com/wordpress/events2/>

BYS has many fun and education events such as field trips and lectures, movie & dinner nights and psychic parties. Join us!

Sept 28 – Beer, Not God

Sept 30 – Book of Mormon play in Los Angeles

Nov 10 - Private viewing on the 60" telescope at the Mt Wilson Observatory \$55

Future events:

Go-Kart 'SPEED' night with dinner

Blackstar Canyon visit with the OC Astronomers Club

Habitat for Humanity volunteer day

Music Appreciation night – rock, classical and jazz

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Both of these sites have one of the largest selections of secular DVDs available anywhere. Most DVDs are only \$10. Make a contribution to your secular organizations by ordering one of our entertaining and educational DVDs

[The 2012 Orange County Freethought Alliance Conference 3-DVD set. 18 wonderful speakers. Enlightening, Educational and inspiring. \\$45](#)

Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Survey of the Supernatural World with Adrian Novotny, Ph.D. \$10 special

Thomas Quinn - "God Needs Therapy" (a comedy) \$12

[Dr. Richard Carrier: How Christianity Began Is Proof Enough It's Bunk \\$12](#)

[San Diego Secular Humanist Conference 2011 - Entertaining speakers, engaging insights and thought-provoking lectures. 2 DVDs \\$45](#)

[Ali Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a spokesperson for human rights and a proponent against female mutilation in Muslim countries. Her riveting personal story is told with the help a local journalist, Jill Stewart. \\$10](#)

[Sean McDowell vs. BYS - Commonalities of Christians and Atheists](#)  
[Sean visits Backyard Skeptics, then Bruce Gleason and Mark Smith visit Sean's church in San Juan Capistrano A 2-DVD set. \\$15](#)

[Sarah Dunn - Atheists in Prison: How the law, culture, psychology shape prison Populations \\$10](#)

[Dave Richards - Exploring logical fallacies and how to identify them \\$10](#)

[Eugenie Scott - Creationism, evolution, education, and politics, Taped at Chapman University, Orange CA \\$10](#)

[Orange County 2010 Freethought Alliance Conference 2- DVD set](#)  
[Enjoy 12 full-length seminars and an evening discussion panel for only \\$30](#)

[Does God of the Bible Exist? A 6-Person Panel Debate, December 2009 \\$20](#)

["The God Question" - Debate between Shermer & De'Souza \\$10](#)

[Bruce Gleason - "Why Am I Am Atheist" speech at Calvary Church, Costa Mesa, CA \\$10](#)

[Dan Barker 2 DVD set - Jesus Myth or Fiction? and Why I Became An Atheist \\$20](#)

[Chris Mooney - The War on Science: What Have We Learned? CFI lecture \\$10](#)

[John Shook - The God Theory is Dead CFI lecture \\$10](#)

[Edward Tabash - America at the Crossroads \\$10](#)

[Sean Carroll - The Origin of the Universe and the Arrow of Time CFI lecture \\$10](#)

[Ross Blocher - Swaddling Cloth out of Whole Cloth: Problems with the Nativity Story CFI lecture \\$10](#)

## National Secular Links

Here are several secular links to other organizations supporting secularism, science and skepticism around the world:

Americans United for Church and State Separation, National au.org

American Humanist Assoc. americanhumanist.org

Atheist Alliance International atheistalliance.org

American Atheists atheists.org

Military Assoc. of Atheists and Freethinkers

ACLU.org

BERTRAND RUSSELL SOCIETY

www.users.drew.edu/~jlenz/brs.html

CFI centerforinquiry.net

camp-quest.org

Freedom From Religion Foundation ffrf.org

jennymccarthybodycount.com

Meetup.com (search for humanist, agnostic, atheists or church and state in your area)

National Center for Science Education ncse.com

People for the American Way pfaw.org

Richarddawkinsfoundation.org

James Randi Educational Foundation randi.org/site

Southern California Secular Humanist Conference.org

(in San Diego)

Whatstheharm.net

Saturdays a month. Dates vary. Contact Steve 310-670-7131

BackyardSkeptics.com – meets once a month in Villa Park (Orange County) also see [meetup.com/backyard-skeptics](http://meetup.com/backyard-skeptics)

Center for Inquiry -Lectures 1st and 3rd Sundays, 11a.m. 4773 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles.

Free for members of CFI, \$6 for non-members

<http://centerforinquiry.net/la>

San Diego Coalition of Reason

FreethoughtAlliance.org – sponsors debates and events in southern California

Free Thinkers for Liberty.org Freethinkers for Liberty is an organization of humanists and others who reject all superstition, in favor of rationality and critical thinking, who also respect the freedoms our forefathers described in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Freethinkers Toastmasters: Want to improve your speaking abilities in a fun and supportive group? Join FTTM on 2nd & 4th Saturdays at 2 p.m. at the Center for Inquiry West.

More information: David: 310-479-6318.

<http://www.freethinkersclub.org>

GALAH: Gay and Lesbian Atheists and Humanists- 2nd Sundays, 1 p.m.,

Center for Inquiry West, 4773 Hollywood Blvd.

Contact Ken Wolverton 818-554-9858 or

[galahla@aol.com](mailto:galahla@aol.com)

[Generation Atheist](#): A meeting group for atheists in their 20s and 30s, 3rd Sundays, location changes monthly. <http://atheists.meetup.com/724/Hollywood/>

East LA: 2nd Tuesdays, 7 p.m. at Atwater Village in Glendale .Contact Steven Gibson 562-900-2834.

<http://atheists.meetup.com/212/>

[Humanist Association of Orange County](#) Meets the third Sunday of the month at 1:30pm at the [Irvine Ranch Water District](#) 15600 Sand Canyon Ave. Irvine, CA 92618 <http://www.meetup.com/OCHumanists>

Humanist Association of Los Angeles: 2nd Sunday, 11:00 a.m.,

Colorado Center Community Room (same as Yahoo Center),

2500 Broadway, Santa Monica (near corner of 26th Avenue and Broadway); Contact: Larry Taylor 310-479-2236,

[larry-a-taylor@att.net](mailto:larry-a-taylor@att.net)

## Local Southern California groups and links

Ateos Unidos: The group for Spanish speakers! 3rd Saturdays at 11 a.m. at the Center for Inquiry West, 4773 Hollywood Blvd. Contact Liliana at 323-466-4223.

Americans United Meets the third Sunday of the month at 1:30pm at the [Irvine Ranch Water District](#) 15600 Sand Canyon Ave. Irvine, CA 92618 <http://www.au-oc.org/>

AU General Meeting: 4th Sundays, 11:00 a.m. at Center for Inquiry West, 4773 Hollywood Blvd. Presentation followed by lunch and afternoon activity.

Board meets briefly at 10:30 a.m. for members' concerns. Childcare is available.

<http://atheists.meetup.com/705/>

Adopt-a-Highway: Help us keep our roads clean in the name of atheism!

AU hosts the southbound strip of the Glendale Freeway, Hwy 2, south of the 210.

Keeping the road clean allows us to keep our signage there. Good exercise, and fun company! Two

Inland Empire: 1st Wednesday, 7 p.m., Riverside  
Unitarian Church 3657 Lemon St., Riverside Contact  
JanGoings@aol.com  
<http://atheists.meetup.com/499/>

Lancaster "Antelope Valley Freethinkers" 4th Thurs.,  
7pm, Camille's Garden Cafe, Lancaster  
<http://atheists.meetup.com/615/>

Long Beach: 3rd Fridays, 7 p.m., at Hometown Buffet,  
290 E. 4th St.  
Meal cost is \$16. Contact Rodney 562-437-4370 or  
Hank Schultz,  
whschultz@mac.com.  
<http://atheists.meetup.com/487/>

Orange County Atheists, meets one a month at the  
IHOP across from OC Airport  
<http://www.ocatheists.com/>

Orange County Atheist United Chapter: 2nd Sundays,  
10:30 a.m.,  
Tee Room, 3100 Irvine Ave Newport Beach  
Contact Norman 310-408-8653 (cell).

Atheists United San Fernando Valley: 3rd Thursday,  
6:30 p.m., Kountry Folks Restaurant,  
on Sepulveda Blvd. and Chase St.  
Contact Henry at 818-988-2806, after 5:00 p.m.  
<http://atheists.meetup.com/614/>

[San Diego New Atheists and Agnostics  
http://www.meetup.com/atheists-518/](http://www.meetup.com/atheists-518/)

Atheists United Santa Clarita: 2nd Sundays, 11 a.m.,  
at Greenhouse Café, 26586 Bouquet Cyn. Rd., Santa  
Clarita <http://atheists.meetup.com/670/>

[Atheists United South Bay/Torrance: 3rd Sundays,  
7p.m., At Marie Callender's, 2979 Artesia Blvd,  
Redondo Beach http://atheists.meetup.com/729/](http://atheists.meetup.com/729/)

[Atheists United Ventura: 4th Mondays, 7pm,  
E.P. Foster Library, 651 E Main Street, Ventura.  
Contact Brian Parra for info: 805-794-4714,  
venturaatheists@yahoo.com  
http://atheists.meetup.com/494/](http://atheists.meetup.com/494/)

[Ventura "Freethought Parents Network":  
Kids playgroup meets every Tuesday at 11am,  
Locations subject to change  
http://www.meetup.com/freethoughtparents/](http://www.meetup.com/freethoughtparents/)

[WestValley Secular Humanists: Last Sundays, 2 p.m.,  
Daphne's Greek Café, 5780 Canoga Ave. Unit B,  
Woodland Hills  
http://secularhumanism.meetup.com/17/](http://secularhumanism.meetup.com/17/)

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