

9 IN '09

Americans United for Separation of Church and State has prepared and presented a list of nine religious liberty issues for consideration by our new President.

This campaign is called "9 in '09" and it seeks to repair the damage that occurred to the wall of separation between church and state during the Bush administration.

1. Restrict Faith-Based Funding
2. Ban Faith-Based Job Bias
3. Select Good Judges
4. Reform Justice Department
5. Stop School Vouchers
6. Protect Military Personnel
7. Defend Sound Science
8. Resist Church Politicking
9. Oppose Sectarian Symbolism

For more information on the AU's 9 in '09 campaign, see their website at <http://www.au.org>

<http://www.redriverfreethinkers.org>

Articles in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the ideas or opinions of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

The mission of the Red River Freethinkers is to advocate for a skeptical view of the role of religion in society and to promote critical examination of religious authority and dogma.

Items for this newsletter may be sent to 4330 47th Street S Unit K, Fargo, ND 58104.

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WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Recently there was a small article in the Fargo Forum entitled "Freethinkers can shut up too". There was some spirited conversation on the online forum page in response to the article.

One online responder pointed out that members of the RRF are known for lashing out at any Christian content in the Fargo Forum.

Another responder noted that the RRF is pushing its own form of religion.

This last observation prompted me to post a comment opining that our groups won't be able to constructively debate if we can't even agree on the meaning of the word religion.

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RED RIVER FREETHINKERS

THE RED RIVER RATIONALIST

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SENATE REJECTS TAXPAYER FUNDING OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

On Thursday February 5, the U.S. Senate voted to reject tax funding for religious facilities in the economic recovery package.

The 54-43 vote came after Religious Right groups began complaining that the proposed economic recovery bill was hostile towards religion. The legislation states that tax funds used for school construction and rehabilitation may not be diverted to religious institutions.

"The Senate has voted to reaffirm an important American principle that religious groups should pay their own way and not expect funding from the taxpayer," said the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

OBAMA ACKNOWLEDGES NON-BELIEVERS IN INAUGURAL SPEECH

"We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus — and non-believers."

Those words spoken by President Barack Obama during his inaugural address stuck out immediately for me.

Knowing how carefully the words of that speech are chosen, Obama's pointed reference to non-believers was a breath of fresh air from our last president. President

"[This] vote is a reminder that the Religious Right has no plans of giving up trying to use the federal government, and our tax dollars, to promote their religious beliefs," said Ron Millar, acting director of the Secular Coalition for America.

Although the Supreme Court has ruled in the past that the Constitution bars the use of public funds for religious facilities, U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), attempted to remove language in the bill that bans tax funding of religious facilities. DeMint's amendment would have allowed taxpayer funds to be used for religious facilities at private religious institutions, including divinity schools.

Obama clearly professes to be a believer, but apparently his faith doesn't blind him from the fact that there are many of us out there. A small mention but I, for one, appreciated it.

In a speech on the campaign trail Obama said, "If you get a federal grant, you can't use that grant money to proselytize to

In a letter to all 100 senators, Legislative Director of Americans United Aaron Schuham wrote, "The best and most important way our Founding Fathers sought to protect and promote religion was to ensure that government does not interfere with it. This language is just one more way that our laws reflect this constitutional requirement and important national tradition."

"Religion has traditionally paid for its own buildings and projects in America, and we've been better off for that," Lynn said. "I'm thankful that the Senate has rejected this misguided and reckless gambit to sneak government-funded religion in through the back door."

the people you help and you can't discriminate against them -- or against the people you hire -- on the basis of their religion." Obama has not decided to eliminate the faith-based initiatives project begun by Bush, but this statement definitely represents a new mindset in the Oval Office.

Nathan Schoenack
Moorhead, MN

POINTS OF INTEREST

- *The February RRF meeting will be held from 1-3pm on Sunday February 15th at Atomic Coffee on Broadway in Fargo, ND. This month's meeting will include a discussion around ideas for RRF projects beyond the 10C monument.*
- *The Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar has resumed for the spring semester. Meetings are being held in various meeting rooms at 12pm on Tuesdays in the Memorial Union at NDSU. If you have not been irritated by SRSL, you have not attended enough meetings.*

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MOST AND LEAST RELIGIOUS STATES

A study of more than 350,000 interviews conducted in 2008 by Gallup reveals that Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana are the country's most religious states. The least religious states are Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine.

Top 10 Most Religious States

"Is religion an important part of your daily life?"

State	% Yes
Mississippi	85
Alabama	82
South Carolina	80
Tennessee	79
Louisiana	78
Arkansas	78
Georgia	76
North Carolina	76
Oklahoma	75
Kentucky (tie)	74
Texas (tie)	74

Top 10 Least Religious States

"Is religion an important part of your daily life?"

State	% Yes
Vermont	42
New Hampshire	46
Maine	48
Massachusetts	48
Alaska	51
Washington	52
Oregon	53
Rhode Island	53
Nevada	54
Connecticut	55

WILL YOU BE(HEAD) MY VALENTINE

Since Valentine's Day is the only February holiday (other than Groundhog's Day) I decided to do a little research on this Hallmark holiday. It turns out that, like so many other popular holidays, Valentine's Day has its roots in Christian mythology.

Valentine's Day is Catholically named for Saint Valentine. There were actually several Christian martyrs named Valentine to whom the title St Valentine is attributed, but there are three stand-outs. One is described as a priest in Rome, another as a bishop in Italy, and a third is described as having been martyred in Africa.

As with much of Catholic mythology, the details of St. Valentine's life are as numerous as the inconsistencies are. But all versions of Valentine's story seem to have the same Empire Strikes Back theme to them; the good guy (a Christian played by Valentine) tries to resist the forces of evil, but the bad guy (a Roman played by emperor Claudius II) ultimately wins this one in the end. In one version of the martyrology, Valentine is persecuted as a Christian and interrogated by Claudius. Claudius then tries to convert Valentine to the dark side (Roman paganism). Valentine refuses and counters by trying to convert Claudius to Christianity. Then Claudius counters by beheading Valentine. Another version has Valentine as a priest who refuses to support a law that Claudius has in place ordering all young men to remain single. Supposedly the sith lord Claudius put this law in place to grow his imperial army, believing that married men did not make for good soldiers. Valentine, however, secretly performs marriage ceremonies for young men. When Claudius finds out about Valentine's resistance, he has Valentine captured, thrown in jail, and later beheaded. Waa waaa.

The "feast of St. Valentine" was instituted by Pope Gelasius I, who included Valentine among those "whose names are justly revered among men, but whose acts are known only to God", which we know is code for, "we have no idea who these martyrs actually were or what they really did".

Up until 1969, the Catholic Church formally recognized eleven different Valentine's days, other than the one on February 14; January 7, May 2, July 16, August 31, September 2, October 25, November 1 and November 3, November 11, November 13, and Dec 16.

Valentine's Day didn't become associated with romantic love until Geoffrey Chaucer's (c.1343-1400) time, when he wrote his Parliament of Foules (1382), in which he draws correlations between the day and romance.

So what is the lesson to be gleaned from the Catholic stories of St Valentine? I'm not sure, but maybe it could be, "when debating opposing viewpoints with the emperor, don't lose your head."

Jason Schoenack
Fargo, ND

CAN'T WE JUST AGREE TO DISAGREE?

Freethinkers use science and reason to make sense of the world. Religious people use faith to make sense of the world, usually the faith that they were raised with. If these two incompatible modes of understanding reality are irreconcilable, then why bother arguing and debating and getting all worked up? Can't we non-believers just agree to disagree?

I don't think we can. Many Christian groups in this country feel compelled to fervently spread the good news and influence government in order to impose specifically-Christian ideals, values, and truths on all U.S. citizens. If Christian pressure groups are left unchecked, if we just agree to disagree, then the United States of America will definitely become a Christian country.

Christian groups have been executing on their agenda of influencing politics in Washington for a long time. Only recently have non-believing groups and others started fighting back, pushing for equality, insisting that real science be taught in our classrooms, demanding

that the First Amendment of the Constitution be upheld.

Many Christians believe that the United States is a Christian nation and that non-believers are encroaching on their territory. Non-believers think that we had a secular Constitution for a reason and that it is the Christians who are inappropriately breeching a deliberately established wall between the U.S. government and religions. Christians want to bring all people closer to God and Jesus. Freethinkers want to keep it real, even if the truth is not as comforting as faith.

So what's so wrong with the country becoming a Christian nation, why would that be such a terrible thing? Well, the blunt answer is that some U.S. citizens just don't agree with a lot of Christian doctrine and they don't think that Christianity should be institutionalized and made to be the standard by which American governmental policies and decisions are made. Policies like those governing stem cell

research. Decisions like whether or not a female U.S. citizen should be allowed to get an abortion if she wants to. Policies like allowing creationism to be taught as science in the classroom. If the U.S. government were to favor Christianity as its preferred religion, then the believers of other religions and non-believers would certainly not experience equality in the public sphere.

If Christian and other religious groups could just adopt a policy of non-government entanglement, then agreeing to disagree would be an option. However it doesn't appear that a policy like that will be adopted by religious groups any time in the near future. So non-believers and proponents of the separation of state and church must remain vigilant and continue to press for maintenance of the First Amendment, otherwise the Christian agenda could become a reality and the United States of America would become a very different country.

Jason Schoenack
Fargo, ND

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION POSTS DARWIN BILLBOARDS

To celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of English naturalist Charles Darwin on February 12 and the 150th anniversary of the release of his work "On the Origin of Species", the Freedom From Religion Foundation has put up billboards in Dayton, Tennessee and Dover, Pennsylvania.

The billboards read "Praise Darwin: Evolve Beyond Belief". The FFRF is a state/church watchdog and the nation's largest association of atheists and agnostics, with more than 13,000 members.

"It's an intellectual blot on our country that more than 50% of Americans reject evolution," says Freedom From Religion co-president Annie Laurie Gaylor. "The Darwin bicentennial is a chance to celebrate reality, to move our nation forward, to 'evolve beyond belief' and out of the Stone Age thinking and return to the Enlightenment."

