

Rationalists of East Tennessee Newsletter
June 2011 – edited by Ralph Isler

Announcement 1: Rob Boston's presentation at the RET annual public lecture on May 15 was received very enthusiastically. Several people offered the opinion that it was the best speaker we have had for that event.

Announcement 2: A few people have responded to my request for volunteers willing to give presentations or lead discussions for our Sunday meetings. Suggestions for speakers and possible topics for putting together a program for the rest of the year are always welcome.

Quote of the month: Seen on a church sign in Oak Ridge: "GOOD without GOD becomes O". Any interpretations?

Question of the month: No one seems to have merited rapture on May 21. Does that mean we'll still be stuck with all the religious fundamentalists in the afterlife following October 21?

Cartoon of the month:

<http://news.yahoo.com/comics/ed-stein>

RET June 2011 calendar:

Freethought Forum

Every Tuesday 5:00 pm – 6:00 pm

Community Channel of Knoxville – Comcast Channel 12

The free streaming live broadcast can be seen at <http://ctvknox.org/> for those who do not live in Knoxville. These discussions feature "Faithless" Forest Erickson, Larry Rhodes, and Joe Barnhart. They can usually be found on YOUTUBE within a day or so.

Sunday, June 5 – Open Roundtable

Time/location: 10:30 - 12:30, Pellissippi State, Goins Bldg., Cafeteria Annex

Members can present any items which they wish to discuss. Possible topics may include Rob Boston's presentation of challenges and opportunities in the conflict between separation of church and state, recent proposed Tennessee legislation concerning discussions of creationism and homosexuality in the classroom, the decline of civility in the public dialectic, Bill Behr's alternative to the word "atheist" (see below), or anything else that people would like to bring up in a free-wheeling, free-thought forum.

Sunday, June 12 - Skeptic Book Club

Book: "Twelve by Twelve: A One-Room Cabin Off the Grid and Beyond the American Dream" by William Powers.

Time and location: 4:00 to 6:00pm, Barnes and Noble Booksellers, 8029 Kingston Pike.

Sunday, June 19 - DVD presentation

Topic: "How Religion Hijacks Evolved Adaptations"

Speaker: Dr. Andy Thomson

Time/location: 10:30 am – 12:30 pm, Pellissippi State, Goins Bldg., Auditorium

A psychiatrist discusses the evolutionary basis for morals vis a vis Francis Collin's view that morals must come from a god.

Sunday, June 26 – Reflections Group (potluck lunch)

Topic: To be announced

Location: To be announced

Time: 1:00 pm – 3:30 pm

Non-RET Events:

Friday July 1-Sunday July 3

Lake Hypatia Advance, Lake Hypatia, Alabama. A freethought meeting sponsored by the Alabama Freethought Association, a chapter of the Freedom from Religion Foundation. For details see <http://ffrf.org/outreach/lake-hypatia/>

An Acceptable Alternative to the Word Atheism

By Bill Behr

Many people have expressed dissatisfaction with the term **atheism**, feeling it is too negative in tone and conveys an unfavorable and perhaps even threatening connotation, especially to some with religious convictions and others who may associate it with anarchism or communism. I suggest adopting a neutral term free of unintended inferences to denote belief in a spontaneous, natural origin of "life, the universe and everything" analogous to the generic terms employed to characterize other belief systems. A term is indeed neutral only if it has had no previous usage from which it may have acquired undesirable associations. I believe I have found a truly novel, unique term to serve as a neutral alternative.

The belief that the universe in general, and the earth in particular, was created by one or more supernatural beings who control the forces of nature and often intervene in human affairs is called **theism** from the Greek term for god. The belief that the universe was contrived by a supernatural entity that established the physical laws governing natural events but assumes no active role in their continuing operation is called **deism** from the Latin term for god. The belief that the entire universe and everything in it, including life on earth, came into being spontaneously through the autonomous operation of purely natural processes, without reliance on any supernatural influence, I propose to call **geism** from the Greek term for earth to stress the premise that "we are of this place": that life on earth arose from the earth, developed with the earth and is specific to the earth. We are not the creation of a beneficent deity, just a part of the whole living earth. There is no other life for us but this life, no other place for us but this one place.

Adherents to this doctrine I prefer to call **geists**. In their worldview, the orthodox theological rationale for appropriate behavior is supplanted by the ecological imperative: the realization that we must be good to others, not just other people but every other living thing, not for fear of divine retribution but to safeguard our own continued existence. The earth and the chaotic profusion of life it supports comprise a tightly coupled organic unity in which each part interacts with all the others in an intricate harmony we only vaguely comprehend. If we do not play our part in a responsible, conscientious manner we risk unraveling the entire tapestry with unforeseeable consequences. Life is adaptable and will surely persist in some form but the human species quite possibly will not. Extinction has been the fate of most species when conditions necessary for survival have been compromised. By our stubborn, reckless, shortsighted refusal to restrain our excesses we may unwittingly be writing the last chapter in our fossil record.