



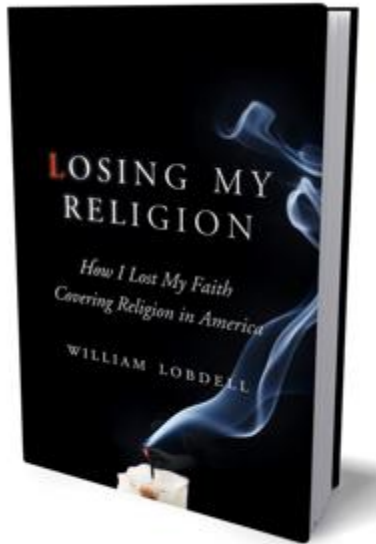
San Francisco Atheists | March 2009 Newsletter

## March Program Meeting: William Lobdell



**William Lobdell** became a born-again Christian in his late 20s when personal problems -- including a failed marriage -- drove him to his knees in prayer. As a newly minted evangelical, Lobdell -- a veteran journalist -- noticed that religion wasn't covered well in the mainstream media, and he prayed for the Lord to put him on the religion beat at a major newspaper. In 1998, his prayers were answered when the Los Angeles Times asked him to write about faith.

Yet what happened over the next eight years was a roller-coaster of inspiration, confusion, doubt, and soul-searching as his investigative reporting and experiences slowly chipped away at his faith. As this evidence piled up, he started to fear that God didn't exist. He explored every doubt, every question -- until, finally, his faith collapsed. After the paper agreed to reassign him, he wrote a personal essay in the summer of 2007 that became an international sensation for its honest exploration of doubt. And though he was perhaps the world's most reluctant atheist, his post-God life brought him something unexpected: peace.



Lobdell, 48, is the author of the new critically acclaimed memoir, “Losing My Religion: How I Lost My Faith Reporting on Religion in America — and Found Unexpected Peace” published by HarperCollins.

The book has garnered glowing reviews and endorsements from such disparate people as atheist Christopher Hitchens and Skeptics Society founder Michael Shermer, and a variety of well-known Pentecostal and evangelical pastors and Christian talk radio hosts.

Lobdell started on the religion beat at the Los Angeles Times in 1998 as an evangelical Christian and left it, eight years later, a reluctant atheist. He earned several national awards for his work before leaving the beat in 2006. Lobdell also has been a visiting faculty member for 12 years at the University of California, Irvine.

**6:00 pm Saturday, March 28, 2009**

[Schroeder's Restaurant](#), rear dining room, 240 Front Street. SF Financial District, 2 blocks north of Market, between California and Sacramento Streets. Use California Street cable car, or BART/MUNI Embarcadero stop. Parking on street or at nearby garage. Restaurant and bar remain open after meeting.

*San Francisco Atheists is an affiliate of American Atheists. You can help American Atheists fight for your rights by joining for \$35 per year. As a subscriber of this newsletter, you can also request a free 6 month trial membership. Join at [www.atheists.org](http://www.atheists.org) or call 908-276-7300.*

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**Camp Quest West Needs Your Help On  
March 14th**



Chris Lindstrom, Director of [Camp Quest West](#), the summer camp for the children who don't want to go to church camp, is looking for a few volunteers to help table for a few hours this Saturday at a summer resources fair in San Francisco. "This is absolutely hands down the best way to get the word out about Camp Quest and reach secular families who aren't even aware of our programs. It's actually super fun and easy - we've got the Big Wheel of Science and a really fabulous display this year."

Here's the info:

WHEN: March 14, Saturday

WHERE: Concourse Exhibition Center, Eighth & Brannan Streets, San Francisco

Interested folks should feel free to contact Chris by phone or by email. Thanks for your encouragement and help getting the word out!

Chris Lindstrom

[chris@camp-quest.org](mailto:chris@camp-quest.org)

cell: (650) 305-1248

*Camp Quest West? What's that?*

Camp Quest West is affiliated with National Camp Quest (Ohio), the first secular summer camp for youth in the history of the United States. Camp Quest was specifically designed for children of agnostics, atheists, freethinkers, humanists, and others who hold a naturalistic worldview. This year, we've got kids camp for kids 8-17 and family camp for families with younger kids. See <http://west.camp-quest.org/> for more info!

Kids Camp: Sunday July 12 - Saturday July 18

Family Camp: Thursday July 17 - Sunday July 19

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**East Bay Atheists Meeting**



This month [East Bay Atheists](#) watches a video of a talk by **Dr. Richard Dawkins** at the 2007 Atheists Alliance International Convention.

Dawkins responds to criticism of the “New Atheism” in this speech, and especially focuses on the criticisms of his book, *The God Delusion*.

One of the most outrageous criticisms is that the “New Atheism,” and especially Dawkins, are too shrill and extreme in their take on religion. Dawkins masterfully slays this position, and in the process points out that after decades of being very nice, Atheists are finally having an affect on the consciousness of England and the United States.

To charges of not respecting religious people, Dawkins provides a humorous example of what makes it so difficult sometimes. When confronted with a charge of focusing on fundamentalists and ignoring moderate Christians, Dawkins points out that moderation is not mainstream, and that many supposed moderates are only moderate when confronting us, but fundamentalist when teaching their flock.

Dawkins then goes on to stress the necessity of raising consciousness, similar to the way in which the feminist movement has done. That can only happen when Atheists and other nonbelievers come out of the closet and express their views on religion. He is especially concerned with the indoctrination of children in religious dogma long before they can make intelligent evaluations of the ideas. How can people talk about a Christian or Muslim child? Is that any different than talking about a post-modernist or socialist child?

The bottom line is that Atheism is about teaching people critical thinking. We don’t want to teach children to think as Atheists; we merely want teach them to think critically. We are confident that Atheism will be the conclusion of that thought process for most people.

A number of other critical issues are examined by Dawkins in his succinct and brilliant style. Don’t miss this one!

Meeting is **Sunday, March 15**, 1:30 - 3:30 PM in the Berkeley Main Library, 3rd Floor Meeting Room. 2090 Kittredge Street, One Block From Downtown Berkeley BART.

BART Access: From the downtown Berkeley BART Station, walk 1.5 blocks south on Shattuck Avenue, then turn right on Kittredge. The library is a half block down the street on the left.

Parking: The city parking lot at Allston & Harold Way, a short block from the library, is \$5 for the entire day on Sunday. If you don’t mind walking, take University to MLK, turn right and then instead of proceeding left on Allston to the parking lot, turn right. In several blocks you will see parking on the side streets.

## **Non-Religious On The Rise, Says Landmark Survey**

Secularity continues to grow in strength in all regions of the country, according to the latest ARIS (American Religious Identification Survey). Conducted last year, ARIS 2008 is the third in a landmark series of large, nationally representative surveys of 54,461 U.S. adults in the 48 contiguous states. With a margin of error of less than 0.5 percent, it provides the only complete portrait of how contemporary Americans identify themselves religiously, and how that self-identification has changed over the past generation.

ARIS 2008 found the percentage of Americans claiming no religion, which jumped from 8.2 in 1990 to 14.2 in 2001, has now increased to 15 percent. Given the estimated growth of the American adult population since the last census from 207 million to 228 million, that reflects an additional 4.7 million "Nones." Northern New England has now taken over from the Pacific Northwest as the least religious section of the country, with Vermont, at 34 percent "Nones," leading all other states by a full 9 points. "Many people thought our 2001 finding was an anomaly," researchers said. "We now know it wasn't. The 'Nones' are the only group to have grown in every state of the Union."

Only 1.6 percent of Americans call themselves atheist or agnostic. But based on stated beliefs, 12 percent are atheist (no God) or agnostic (unsure), while 12 percent more are deistic (believe in a higher power but not a personal God). The number of outright atheists has nearly doubled since 2001, from 900 thousand to 1.6 million. Twenty-seven percent of Americans do not expect a religious funeral at their death. Asian Americans are substantially more likely to indicate no religious identity than other racial or ethnic groups.

The percentage of Christians in America, which declined in the 1990s from 86.2 percent to 76.7 percent, has now edged down to 76 percent. Ninety percent of the decline comes largely from mainline protestant denominations, including Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians/Anglicans, and the United Church of Christ. These groups shrank from 18.7 percent in 1990 to 17.2 percent in 2001, experienced sharp numerical declines this decade and now constitute just 12.9 percent of the population.

"It looks like the two-party system of American Protestantism--mainline versus evangelical--is collapsing," said Mark Silk, director of the Public Values Program. "A generic form of evangelicalism is emerging as the normative form of non-Catholic Christianity in the United States."

Other key findings:

- Baptists, the largest Protestant denomination, have increased their numbers, but continue to decline as a proportion of the population.
- Mormons hold steady at 1.4 percent of the population.
- Muslims continue to grow; now at .6 percent.
- Eastern Religions have declined slightly.
- Religious Jews continue to decline numerically, now at 1.2 percent of the population. But by ethnicity alone, the American Jewish population has remained stable over the past two decades.
- Adherents of New Religious movements, including Wiccans and self-described pagans, have grown faster this decade than in the 1990s.

See the complete report at <http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org>

-Dave Fitzgerald

## Why I Actively Oppose Religion



*In case you are wondering how our new American Atheist president Ed Buckner feels about theism, here's a classic essay he wrote around 1995 as head of the Atlanta Freethought Society. It is not just a terrific defense of the atheist position; it is a manifesto with heart, a challenge to theism issued with reason and compassion, every bit as relevant now as it was when first published.*

By Ed Buckner

My friends and colleagues, especially those among them who are religious, often ask me why people like the members of the Atlanta Freethought Society are so eager to actively oppose religion (or why we're "against God"). Typically these folks, most of whom pride themselves on being "live-and-let-live" sorts, don't understand why we are not content to leave religious people to their own practices and ideas, unmolested. It is, they say or imply, a free country where our rights are protected and no one is stopping us from being atheists if we choose, so why all the fuss? In the last year or so, some of our former allies have joined this chorus, urging us to be more "positive," to focus on building our social community, to cease debates or "recreational Bible-bashing" and other forms of activism that in one way or another might sting the feelings of religious people. Some of these critics apparently believe that humanism/freethought has won all the most essential battles and that a more relaxed and "mature" approach is now more

appropriate. The term “freethought” itself has been derided as being offensive to religious people, implying that we are arrogant to believe that only our thoughts are free.

We’ve also been accused of being rabble-rousers (i.e., more interested in publicity and taking sophomoric pleasure in “stirring the pot” than in educating or in developing our own vision or philosophy), extremists so blindly committed to our own point of view that we cannot see the good in those who disagree with us, and hyper-sensitive to the point of taking offense at any display of religion or defense of religious ideas. This is my reply to these critics and should not be construed as necessarily representing the opinion of the membership of the Atlanta Freethought Society.

If all the religious people in the world were Unitarians or even liberal Christians of the consistently tolerant and open-minded variety, religion should *still* be actively opposed (thought it might not be necessary to be angry or so vigorous about it). If all the religious people were as quiet and thoughtful about their religion as a friend of mine at work, I’d have no anger, but I’d still support broad educational efforts that I hope will eventually wipe out religion. James Madison, “Father of the Constitution,” explained it succinctly in a letter he wrote to a friend\* in 1774: “Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect.”

The harm that religions – all of them, even the best of them – do to individuals and cultures outweighs the good they do. Of course much good is done in the name of God or religion, and at least some churches do provide worthwhile physical, fiscal and emotional support for members. A sense of community is important to humans and we should all be eager to find ways to nourish it, as indeed we seek to do so within the AFS – but communities built in the name of religion are founded on ideas purportedly derived from God and therefore usually suggest that human needs must take second place to needs or plans supposedly in “God’s” best interests. Religions, at least as practiced by the adherents of most religions, are inherently divisive, destructive, anti-human movements, often providing an excuse for persecution of those different from the believers, including abuse based on race, ethnicity, sexual preference, and, especially, based on simply not being among the true believers. And, worse, such ideas cannot be rationally disputed or tested, for who can argue with “God”?

Religion undermines an individual’s natural sense of responsibility for his own behavior and concern for his fellow humans, even as a sense of guilt, of hopelessness, of corruption and worthlessness, is instilled. These are not minor difficulties; eliminating them is crucial to the progress of humanity. Given the overwhelming extent to which mankind has religious ideas ingrained in the collective psyche, even in the midst of great leaps forward in knowledge and technology, change will not come automatically and easily. If we believe ourselves to be enlightened, our thoughts to be free while others are still in bondage in important ways, we must be bold enough to declare that we are enlightened and thinking freely, that we have learned a better way – those who do not see things our way are entitled to hear us defend our ideas in free and open exchanges. Nor should we tremble at the possibility of offending others we seek to enlighten. While giving offense intentionally, gratuitously, is rude and useless and should be avoided, risking offense in the pursuit of education well worthwhile. If we are reasonably confident that we are right, much is to be gained, for others as well as ourselves, by the education

we pursue. If we harbor great fear that we are wrong, then of course we should think, read, and reflect some more before we decide whether to speak out.

If we believe that there is not sufficient evidence for any God, and that it is unwise and unhealthy to believe in any God, we cannot reasonably said to be “against God.” We are opposing instead those who claim to explain God to the rest of us. And if we conclude that religion is inherently destructive, honestly compels us to speak plainly about our conclusions. This does not mean we are compelled to pretend to have a unified nonreligious philosophy when we do not. The members of AFS are united by what we do *not* believe – even the few Deists and Pagans and Buddhists among us do not conclude that there is a personal God out there giving clear enough directions on how we should live that we can impose ideas on anyone else. We do not, as a group, offer a single “philosophy of life,” a “positive vision of the one best way to live.” Individually, most of us have such philosophies available to us all. Dogma, even nontheistic, humanistic dogma, destroys human intellectual freedom, and we reject the idea that any ideas, even our own most cherished ones, are beyond questioning or discussion.

The charge that we enjoy debating about these matters is well-founded. Part of that may indeed be that we like being the center of attention – I know I do – but a bigger part is that we think we’ve learned something important, that what say deserves to be heard. It is also fair, in a narrow sense, to accuse us of being “negative,” because we see a particular type of human institution that we believe humanity would do well to abandon, and we’re willing to say so and explain our views. We’re far from negative, however, in many other respects. Avoiding living a lie or cringing before some imaginary power is, most of us will testify, a source of great joy and strength and well worth affirming to others as being of great value. Most of us are essentially happy people, people who like life and like our fellow humans, and are proud of having given up fairy tales, Santa Claus, and religion. We’re proud to be able, often with the help of friends, to tackle the problems that come our way, to live ethical lives with integrity, to create meaning in life for ourselves and others, and to face the inevitable, insoluble problems that eventually befall us all – and to do it all without crutches based on false legends and myths./p>

We are right to be proselytizers for our ideas, though within limits. Everyone, whether religious or nonreligious, is entitled to some privacy and quiet enjoyment of ideas that he does not want to argue about. We have no right to press our ideas on people who are unwilling to consider them – so long as they are not pressing ideas on us. Advocates for ideas – atheists or Christians – have a right to make their case; opponents can rightly dispute the content of the messages, rude or unethical techniques, and any attempts to use government improperly to support causes. The Christian Coalition is *lying* when they imply their views represent those of all “people of faith” or that their positions are the only “pro-family” positions or that people without “faith” cannot contribute equally to the public good – their tactics are sleazy. Most if not all Unitarians are, by contrast, honorable and diffident in arguing their views and are therefore more reasonable and far easier to tolerate – but religious Unitarians are still wrong. Whether Unitarians or any other religious participants light candles, sing, have traditions, or meditate is irrelevant to whether they should be opposed. Their ideas of “spirituality,” of forces beyond our power to understand, or of supernatural control of the affairs of men, are not irrelevant and deserve to be understood, considered, debated, and accepted or rejected on their merits. We should make common cause with “liberal” religionists in supporting the separation of state and church and in combating



unethical advocates like those in the Christian Coalition, but we and they must be honest about our very real and very important differences.

Those who believe the battle is won should have been at a recent meeting of the Douglas County (Georgia) Board of Commissioners. Despite being in a county where fewer than half of the people are church members, the commissioners and all but one brave citizen present made it clear that they believe the imposition of mandatory Christian (Protestant? Baptist?) prayer and Bible reading in the public schools is necessary and desirable. They apparently sincerely believe that their religion is without question the *only* key to happiness, progress, morality and decency. And if the point is conceded to them without debate, out of fear of offending them, that “God” is on their side and behind their actions, on what basis could they be opposed? If they are right, all of us should rush to the nearest Baptist church and get dunked. But if they are wrong, all of us should have the courage to say so.

Fred Brown, a friend at work, is a good guy, a good teacher, a compassionate, intelligent, decent, friendly man. I admire and respect him in many ways. He is a Bible-believing Christian, a fundamentalist to the core. (When asked if he considers himself a fundamentalist, he says “Well, if a fundamentalist is somebody who swallows it all hook, line, and sinker, I must be the one, because I swallow the hook, the line, the pole, the fishing boat, and, especially, the Fisherman. The Bible is THE Word of God and Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”) Fred likes me, cares about me, and does not want to grieve, should I die before him, about my soul being eternally lost. He argues with me endlessly, though always with humor and good-naturedly and with respect for my right, because he cares. I like Fred, care about him, and do not want to continue to grieve that my friend wasting the only life he has, that he is being given a false sense of security, that he is not realizing his full power as a thinking human. I argue with him endlessly, though always with humor and good-naturedly and with respect for his rights, because I care. Fred thinks every soul is worth saving, even that of a man who doesn’t think he has one. I think every mind should be free, even that of a man who doesn’t admit that he isn’t. Fred is not a symbol or a metaphorical creature of this essay – he’s my friend, and I may yet persuade him to come to an AFS meeting and see what freethinkers are really like. Fred Brown and millions like him are why I actively oppose religion.

\* *“Letter to William Bradford” April 1, 1774 -editor*

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## A Brief History of the Trinity



Is the Christian religion completely in agreement and at peace with what the Trinity is? That is, what is the nature of God -- of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost? Is it “one in

three” or “three in one”? What part of the trinity produced what other parts? Are they all equal in power, and in age? These are important questions. How so? Because endless wars have been fought over them; thousands, perhaps millions of lives have been lost over these questions. Therefore, let’s take a quick look back for some of the answers and that have been hammered out over the years.

- 325 CE - Emperor Constantine calls to order the Council of Nice. It is decided that Christ is consubstantial (of the same nature) with the Father.
- 3381 CE- Emperor Theodosius calls to order the First Council of Constantinople. There it is decided that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.
- 388 CE – Emperor Theodosius threatens punishment to all who refute the trinity.
- 451 CE – Emperor Marcian calls the Council of Chalcedon to order. There it is decided that Christ has both human and divine natures.
- 680 CA – Emperor Constantine Pogonatus holds the Third Council of Constantinople. There it is decreed that Christ has two wills.
- 1274 CE – At the Second Council of Lyons, it is finally decided that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Now, I do hope that clarifies things for you. Do you have any further questions?

*Contributed by Don Havis*

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## **Jerry "Geronimo" Alvarado: In Memoriam**



After several months battle with cancer, our friend Jerry Alvarado died on the night on February 12th. He was a regular at our picnics and Darwin Day celebrations. At the Laguna Honda Hospice, he was an inspiration. He was proud to be an atheist to the very end, facing death with good-humor and dignity, and we were proud of him, during those last hard weeks. Jerry had a steady parade of visitors, both friends and family. He attracted a truly impressive number of friends with his gentleness and loving heart, his ornery, good-natured humor and his passion for social justice. He was a tireless campaign worker for Obama who got to see his candidate not just get elected, but become the first President to publicly acknowledge nonbelievers in his inaugural address.

Jerry's son John Alvarado asked to pass his condolences to those that knew Jerry and especially to those that made his final weeks bearable with supportive visits. "Knowing he had so many friends stopping by to see him made my limited visits a little easier to handle."

John thanked everyone for their expressions of sympathy and hoped the article Jerry wrote helps SFA members and others stick to what they hold true in their hearts just as his father was able to do. "I was actually paying close attention to this as his time grew closer to the end. He never wavered, as far as I know."

Other friends of Jerry had this to say:

"Jerry loved square dancing; there were many times we drove to the East Bay to attend a hoedown and we would whoop it up. And every year, without fail, Jerry would call to wish us all happy birthday. I will really miss that."

- Caroline Cory

"I was always happy to see him in CCSF's computer lab doing his work with his bright smile and cheerful personality. We'll always miss the days we would send jokes to each other, laughing about them. My thoughts go out to this family today and always."

- Sandra Ng

"Tall and always ready with a smile. A brilliant sense of humor. Easy to talk to. Free spirited. I will miss him. Aloha no wau ia oe Jerry!"

-Nay

"Jerry was a good man and an excellent friend. We met when we both started to work at a hotel downtown. His name tag was 'Geronimo'. It was a long time before I found out he was also known as Jerry. I miss him, as I know you do."

--Seán O'Connor

In accordance with his wishes there were no services. His body was donated to the UCSF willed body program. There is a "Celebrate Jerry" website (<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/celebratejerry>) for anyone that knew Jerry to share a memory or kind word.

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**San Francisco Atheists now on  
Facebook**



If you are one of the 175 million and growing members of social networking website **Facebook**, join our new "Group" on the site. [Click here to see the San Francisco Atheists Facebook group](#) and show your support by joining the group!

[American Atheists also has a Facebook Group page.](#)

Our new site is growing and it's a handy place to join a discussion, post items and comments, see upcoming events, and to network with other Bay Area Atheists.

Facebook is free, but you do need to become a Facebook member before joining a Facebook Group. Signing up is quick and easy.

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# Joke Of The Month

**FINALLY, SOMETHING BOTH JEWS AND MUSLIMS CAN AGREE ABOUT**



## Quote Of The Month



*"Religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich."*

-- Napoleon (1769-1821)

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