

## Rick Wingrove

*When Wingrove was 14, he heard someone in*

*his Southern Baptist church in West Texas joke*

*about the Bible, saying, "Man created God*

*in his own image." That sen-*

*tence caught Wingrove's*

*attention, illuminating*

*his already growing*

*doubts. He left the*

*church, got a job that*

*required him to work Sun-*

*days, and never returned.*

*Now the Leesburg resi-*

*dent and freelance web designer is the*

*Virginia state director for American*

*Atheists, the oldest atheist organization*

*in the world, as well as chief executive*

*officer of Beltway Atheists and an orga-*

*nizer for Northern Virginia Atheists. He*

*spoke to The Washington Examiner*

*about his faith — in science — and the*

*follies of religion.*



GRACIE JENNINGS/EXAMINER

### Do you consider yourself to be of a specific faith?

I'm not a member of any faith, in the traditional definition of faith. Faith is such a loaded word that I don't like to use it. I like to say I've got confidence in science. I'm a lifelong atheist, even though I spent some time in church as a kid.

### Why are you so vocal and active about your atheism?

It may seem almost trite, but when I was growing up I was taught in school all about rights, the Constitution and the separation of church and state. But I also learned about the Inquisition and the abuses of the church in Europe, and those things clearly indicated the importance of the separation of church and state. And what I see now is so much adamant religiosity in the U.S.; it's just taken over the right. It's so bad on the right it's almost a race to the bottom to say the meanest or dumbest thing. And it's always a danger, not to say I'm apocalyptic, but it would be a terrible fate for our republic for religion to rise to dominance again.

### When did you first realize you were an atheist?

It probably happened when I figured out that Santa Claus was mythical, which happened very young. What that showed me was some of the things people were telling me weren't true. Even when I was going to church, I was collecting fossils, and I understood what they meant and their age, and this directly conflicted with the teachings of the Baptist church. If you understand science at all, you understand that science is about discovering and validating all knowledge. Religion seems intent on destroying the teaching of evolution, supplanting it with the ridiculous creation myth fable, calling that science. It's just crazy.

**Some would object to your esteem of science, saying that science answers the "how" questions, and religion answers the "why" questions, such as, "Why does the universe exist?" What is your response?**

There is no why. The universe exists. Why implies that there was intelligent thought that went behind it. And we disagree with that. The universe is just a manifestation of matter.

### How has atheism changed over the years?

For 2,000 years people heard that atheists were the worst kind of people. We were essentially hunted for bounty. But in the U.S., once we wrote the First Amendment, prohibiting official favoritism for religion, it was easier for people to lose their religion. ... With the advent of the Internet, we were able not only to find each other but to begin to form a community. Now you see hundreds of atheist organizations in the U.S., some of them with over 1,000 members. When people realize there is safety in numbers, they come out. The population is mushrooming.

**You've talked about WER — your acronym for "the worst elements in religion." What do you think those elements are?**

There are many of them. If you watch TV you'll see the televangelists are getting away with pure flimflam. They sell books and other things and couch it in terms of "Send us your seed offering, and we'll send you this lovely gift."

And there's the faith healing, which is preying on the most needy people in society. Sick, damaged, hurting people are being told, "We can fix you.

Write us a check." And then there's the people using elected office to advance a fundamentalist religious agenda.

### At your core, what is one of your defining beliefs?

I believe in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I believe the Constitution is a firewall against theocracy. I believe in the basic goodness of humanity and in the value of quality education. I believe in science and in separation of church and state. And I believe that America is a stronger, smarter, happier place with those things than without them.