

FACT
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A Matter of *FACT* & *The Voice*

March 2008

FACT

is an association of atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, secular humanists, rationalists, skeptics, and other non-theists serving the purpose of preserving the separation of church and state and promoting Freethought through education.

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March General Meeting

This month, FACT turns to the local gay and lesbian community to share with us the ways in which they have gained recognition and respect. They seem to be quite a distance ahead of freethinkers and atheist in this respect. Our guest speakers will be Roberto Flores and Daniel Graney, who have been partners for 34 years. Roberto was a Catholic priest and Daniel an ordained Lutheran minister, when they were told to abandon their pastorates due to their sexual preferences. Dan became an attorney and Roberto a psychotherapist. Both are now retired, but they keep busy in their roles as leaders in the Stonewall Democrats of San Antonio, Soulforce (an organization that seeks freedom for LGBT people), and Equality Texas. Come prepared with good questions for these exceptional thinkers and activists.

General Meeting, Saturday, March 15th @ 1pm
Community Unitarian Universalist Church
4818 E. Beverly Mae

TFN at AU Meeting

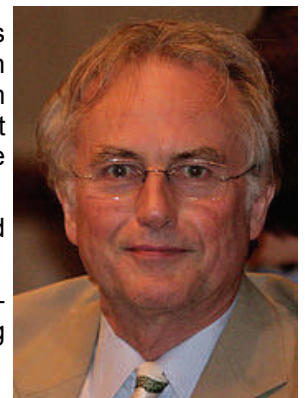
The San Antonio Chapter of Americans United have announced that the guest speaker for their General Meeting on March 19th will be Kathie Miller, President of the Texas Freedom Network. She will talk about "The Religious Right in Texas". The AU meeting will be held at the Community Unitarian Universalist Church, 4818 Beverly Mae East (off Babcock) beginning at 7 p.m. Parking is limited, so better get there early.

Dawkins Scheduled to Speak in Austin

Richard Dawkins is scheduled to give a lecture on his book "The God Delusion" at the University of Texas in Austin. The lecture will be at Hogg Memorial Auditorium on March 19 at 7:00 p.m. The event is hosted by Atheist Longhorns and the Secular Longhorn Alliance. Tickets are first-come, first-serve at the event.

Also appearing will be Secular Student Alliance Board member Becky Robinson.

See <http://www.campusfreethought.org/> for more information and <http://www.utpac.org/venue/directions.php#hogg> for directions.



February Meeting Review

Elected Positions:

President, Nick Lee
 Vice President, Jane Tuck
 Secretary, Jim Evans
 Treasurer, Cathy Howard
 Publicity, OPEN

Appointed Positions:

Newsletter

Publisher/Editor, Marc Janssens
 Webmaster, Jim Evans
 Discussion Group Host, OPEN
 Librarian, Jimmie Barnes

Texas Hill Country Freethinkers

(No Officers)

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FACT MEMBERS:

FACT wants your participation in communicating through our newsletter. Please contribute letters, articles, book reviews, highlights and comments on church/state separation, quotes, drawings, cartoons, etc. Please send contributions to FACT.newsletter@FreethinkersACT.org.

All submissions are subject to editorial revisions at the discretion of the publisher.

In celebration of the 199th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, FACT invited Trinity University professor C. Mackenzie Brown to be the guest speaker at our monthly General Meeting on February 16th. Professor Brown explained the course he has been teaching, "Science and Religion" which illustrates the differences between evolution, intelligent design and creationism. He used very professional power points to show the views of his students in relation to these three concepts.

Professor Brown did his undergraduate work at Stanford and received his doctorate from the Harvard School of Divinity. His interests include the Hindu religion, its beliefs and practices. He has spent time in India doing research.

His speech engendered a lively and thoughtful question and answer period. One of the strong points he made is that debate between atheists and believers should always be done in a respectful manner. FACT members were delighted to host such a knowledgeable Darwinian scholar.

Submitted by Jane Tuck

Speak Freely!

The monthly Discussion Brunch has been enlivened by the addition of guest speakers to kick off the discussion. In February, Amanda Haas, who is a staff member of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, spoke on the new San Antonio City ordinance governing parades and marches.

The organizers of the International Women's' Day March and the Free Speech Coalition joined forces to litigate against this ordinance, which puts limitations of our First Amendment rights. Judge Xavier Rodriquez has recently handed down a temporary injunction which will stop the enforcement of the ordinance until it can be decided in Federal court.

Amanda urged individual FACT members to sign on to the Free Speech Coalition and to attend the International Women's' Day March in San Antonio on March 8th.

Join us in March at Denny's on Fredericksburg for another lively Discussion Brunch.

Submitted by Jane Tuck

Check Your Checkbook

Have you paid your membership dues for 2008? The membership period runs from January to December of each year. See the note on the back page for the rates. Those who have not paid by March 30 will not receive future Newsletters, or invitations to member-only events.

Every Monday at 12:30 and 8:30 PM

Time Warner Digital Cable Channel 20

FREETHOUGHT FORUM

Hosted by Hugh Henry

ISSR Adds Its Voice for Evolution

The International Society for Science and Religion recently adopted a statement on the concept of "intelligent design," describing it as "neither sound science nor good theology." The statement continues, "Although the boundaries of science are open to change, allowing supernatural explanations to count as science undercuts the very purpose of science, which is to explain the workings of nature without recourse to religious language. Attributing complexity to the interruption of natural law by a divine designer is, as some critics have claimed, a science stopper. Besides, ID has not yet opened up a new research program. In the opinion of the overwhelming majority of research biologists, it has not provided examples of 'irreducible complexity' in biological evolution that could not be explained as well by normal scientifically understood processes."

The authors of the statement -- Denis Alexander, Munawar Anees, Martinez Hewlett, Ronald Numbers (chairing the committee), Holmes Rolston III, National Center for Science Education (NCSE) Supporter Michael Ruse, and Jeffrey Schloss -- constitute a group set up for the purpose by the Executive Committee of the International Society for Science and Religion. Through a process involving consultation with all members of the society, the statement has now been accepted by the Executive Committee for publication as a statement made on behalf of the society. Founded in 2001, the International Society for Science and Religion seeks to facilitate scholarly dialogue between science and religion, which it describes as "one of the most important current areas of debate in terms of understanding the nature of humanity." Membership in ISSR is by invitation only; its small but distinguished membership includes NCSE's Faith Project Director Peter M. J. Hess.

The British religious thinktank Ekklesia welcomed the ISSR's statement. In a February 7, 2008, press release, Ekklesia's co-director Simon Barrow described it as "a very important development," adding that "intelligent design" "brings the proper engagement of religion and science into disrepute, and benefits those who wish to pursue dubious ideological agendas at the expense of a common search for truth and wisdom." Accompanying the press release was Barrow's essay "Theology, science and the problem of ID," which discussed the religious, philosophical, and political context of the ISSR's statement, suggesting, "That one of the world's foremost scholarly organizations devoted to the dialogue between science and religion should come out with such a statement at this time is a very important and encouraging development."

Source: <http://www.ncseweb.org/>

Christians Honor Darwin

by Nick Lee

As in previous years, hundreds of US churches and many thousands of religious believers marked the birthday of Charles Darwin in 2008, with sermons and seminars on the consonance of spiritual and scientific exploration. Pastors, theological educators, scientists and lay people also joined together to mark the 199th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth on 12 February. Darwin, a number of whose specific ideas have been superseded, but whose influence remains vital, is regarded as the founding father of the modern biological sciences.

Educators and clergy have been working together to combat the influence of creationism and its cousin 'intelligent design', which base their rejection of all or part of evolutionary science on discredited biblical interpretation and a god-of-the-gaps idea that the divine is to be sought in the 'holes' or limits of the natural sciences. By contrast, mainstream scholars argue that the creativity of God is to be understood in and through the natural, not in conflict with it, though they give different pictures and accounts of the relation between God and the world.

More than 800 congregations took part in Evolution Weekend this year, engaging in the science-religion dialogue. Many of them offered sermons exploring how both the contingency and complexity of evolved life can be understood as reflections of divine creativity and the whole world process as gift. Thus, they assert, there is no inherent conflict between science and religion.

Atheist Debate Points

A list of common debate points that atheists are likely to meet, either in a formal debate or casual setting, is posted on Richard Dawkins' web site <http://richarddawkins.net>. Readers are invited to write their rebuttal, rank comments and propose new debate points. The current list is as follows:

1. What are your qualifications to question religion anyway? Just who are you?
2. What is the role of free will to an atheist?
3. If you don't have religion, where do you find your sense of community?
4. People who've experienced God KNOW that God exists.
5. What does atheism say about the purpose (or the meaning) of life?
6. Hinduism and Buddhism offer much more sophisticated worldviews (or philosophies) and I see nothing wrong with these religions.
7. Atheists are just as dogmatic as theists, and the only reasonable person is an agnostic.
8. Atheists only promote divisiveness, as any other separatist movement.
9. All worldviews are merely paradigms, narratives having no more inherent value than any other narrative.
10. A universe that follows 'laws' implies a 'law giver'.
11. How can the Earth be so perfectly suited for life by coincidence?
12. Why do atheists care about what others believe when it doesn't affect atheists?
13. How do you explain the lack of transitional forms in nature, the gaps in the fossil record?
14. What's the evolutionary advantage of offering your place to an old woman on a bus?
15. Atheists don't believe in anything.
16. Most religious people are moderate, and don't hurt anybody.
17. Science owes its origins to Christianity or Religion.
18. The US is a Christian Nation.
19. Was religion beneficial to the development of society? Is it now?
20. The Transcendental Argument for God.
21. If you don't accept the supernatural, you obviously think life is depressing, meaningless and cold.
22. Science can answer how questions but only religion can answer why questions.
23. You can't prove that you love someone, so don't expect proof of God.
24. Arguments From Design, First Cause, Something Rather Than Nothing, Fundamental Constants.
25. Pascal's Wager.
26. A Rational Universe Implies a Creator, Science points towards Theism.
27. Arguments Against Evolution (gaps in fossil record, formation of the eye, bacteria with one protein taken out doesn't work, etc).
28. I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist.
29. Science and Religion BOTH make faith claims.
30. That's not MY God or Religion you're criticizing.
31. Atheism is a religion and you're as bad as the fundamentalists.
32. Religion is not incompatible with Science: 'Non-Overlapping Magisteria'.
33. You can't be moral without God!
34. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, etc. were atheists, and they were terrible! Answer that!

In the coming months we will publish some of the highest ranked rebuttals.

Published in San Antonio Express News, February 17, 2008.

Re. Keep dreaming

Mike Huckabee probably thinks the Earth is only 10,000 years old, there's no such thing as evolution, the Earth is flat and that he'll still beat John McCain for the GOP nomination.

The hard truth is that miracles really don't happen.

Frank Hernandez

Re. Appeal for support of the Secular Coalition of America

In just two years, the Secular Coalition has grown from an all-volunteer effort into a professionally run organization with a full-time lobbyist and small support staff in Washington, D.C. Since the fall of 2005 Lori Lipman Brown, your lobbyist and mine, has made hundreds of visits on Capitol Hill and met with scores of Secular Coalition partners to present the secular perspective on freedom of conscience, civil rights, and secular government. In fact, she is the first and only full-time Congressional lobbyist specifically representing your interests: religious discrimination in Head Start, religious restrictions on stem cell research, military proselytizing, abstinence-only sex education, religious school vouchers, and "faith-based" initiatives.

It's not just about legislation, though. We're also building public awareness of, and respect for, naturalistic worldviews. Earlier this year, when we held a contest to find the highest level openly nontheistic elected official, Rep. Pete Stark made history for all of us by stepping forward. We admire his courage and commitment, and we hope we can depend on yours, too.

Our site provides several easy ways to give: credit card, PayPal, monthly pledges, and more. We appreciate our donors all the more because gifts to the Secular Coalition are not tax-deductible. Our incorporation as a lobbying organization (rather than as an educational nonprofit) enables us to engage in political advocacy to an extent previously impossible in our community. We hope you agree that this new direction is a necessary measure worthy of the vigorous support of all brights.

On a personal note: As president of the Secular Coalition, I'm worlds apart theologically from Christian Coalition president Roberta Combs, even though we live a mere 20 miles from one another in South Carolina. And yet our fundraising capabilities may be even further apart than our beliefs. The religious right is not going away after 2008, even if the election doesn't go their way. They are well funded and organized. If we don't work to improve the public image of brights and to assert our viewpoint relentlessly, religious extremists will keep us marginalized. This is no time for complacency.

The Secular Coalition for America can't threaten anyone with eternal damnation for not giving. But with greater financial support, we can expand on our successes by hiring a media specialist, grassroots organizers, and more. We're doing our part to fight for the rights and interests of brights, and we hope we can count on your support.

<http://www.secular.org/support/>

Appreciatively,

Herb Silverman, President

Secular Coalition for America

<http://www.secular.org/>

P.S. If you have questions about the Secular Coalition, please e-mail me directly at president@secular.org.

I'll be happy to hear from you.

HEY, LETTER WRITERS!

We're looking for well-crafted letters having to do with the separation of church and state, atheism, or any other relevant topic. Members are encouraged to forward published letters, or ones which were rejected by the mainstream media, for publication.

Send them to: FACT.newsletter@FreethinkersACT.org or PO Box 160881, San Antonio, TX 78280

NAS News Release

Scientific Evidence for Evolution Continues to Grow

On January 3, 2008 the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released *SCIENCE, EVOLUTION, AND CREATIONISM*, a book designed to give the public a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the current scientific understanding of evolution and its importance in the science classroom. Recent advances in science and medicine, along with an abundance of observations and experiments over the past 150 years, have reinforced evolution's role as the central organizing principle of modern biology, said the committee that wrote the book.

"*SCIENCE, EVOLUTION, AND CREATIONISM* provides the public with coherent explanations and concrete examples of the science of evolution," said NAS President Ralph Cicerone. "The study of evolution remains one of the most active, robust, and useful fields in science."

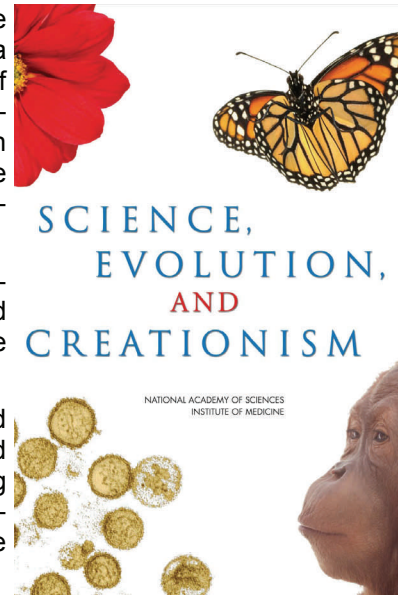
"Understanding evolution is essential to identifying and treating disease," said Harvey Fineberg, president of IOM. "For example, the SARS virus evolved from an ancestor virus that was discovered by DNA sequencing. Learning about SARS' genetic similarities and mutations has helped scientists understand how the virus evolved. This kind of knowledge can help us anticipate and contain infections that emerge in the future."

DNA sequencing and molecular biology have provided a wealth of information about evolutionary relationships among species. As existing infectious agents evolve into new and more dangerous forms, scientists track the changes so they can detect, treat, and vaccinate to prevent the spread of disease.

Biological evolution refers to changes in the traits of populations of organisms, usually over multiple generations. One recent example highlighted in the book is the 2004 fossil discovery in Canada of fish with "intermediate" features -- four finlike legs -- that allowed the creature to pull itself through shallow water onto land. Scientists around the world cite this evidence as an important discovery in identifying the transition from ocean-dwelling creatures to land animals. By understanding and employing the principles of evolution, the discoverers of this fossil focused their search on layers of the Earth that are approximately 375 million years old and in a region that would have been much warmer during that period. Evolution not only best explains the biodiversity on Earth, it also helps scientists predict what they are likely to discover in the future.

Over very long periods of time, the same processes that enable evolution to occur within species also can result in the appearance of new species. The formation of a new species generally takes place when one subgroup within a species mates for an extended period largely within that subgroup, often following geographical separation from other members of the species. If such reproductive isolation continues, members of the subgroup may no longer respond to courtship from members of the original population. Eventually, genetic changes become so substantial that members of different subgroups can no longer produce viable offspring. In this way, new species can continually "bud off" of existing species.

Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting evolution, opponents have repeatedly tried to introduce nonscientific views into public school science classes through the teaching of various forms of creationism or intelligent design. In 2005, a federal judge in Dover, Pennsylvania, concluded that the teaching of intelligent design is unconstitutional because it is based on religious conviction, not science (*Kitzmiller et al. v. Dover Area School District*). NAS and IOM strongly maintain that only scientifically based explanations and evidence for the diversity of life should be included in public school science courses. "Teaching creationist ideas in science class confuses students about what constitutes science and what does not," the committee stated.



NAS News Release (Continued)

Scientific Evidence for Evolution Continues to Grow

"As SCIENCE, EVOLUTION, AND CREATIONISM makes clear, the evidence for evolution can be fully compatible with religious faith. Science and religion are different ways of understanding the world. Needlessly placing them in opposition reduces the potential of each to contribute to a better future," the book says.

SCIENCE, EVOLUTION, AND CREATIONISM is the third edition of a publication first issued in 1984 and updated in 1999. The current book was published jointly by the National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine, and written by a committee chaired by Francisco Ayala, Donald Bren Professor of Biological Sciences, department of ecology and evolutionary biology, University of California, Irvine, and author of several books on science and religion.

The book was funded by the NAS, IOM, the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, the Biotechnology Institute, and the Coalition of Scientific Societies.

Copies of SCIENCE, EVOLUTION, AND CREATIONISM will be available from the National Academies Press; tel. 202-334-3313 or 1-800-624-6242, or on the Internet at www.nap.edu/sec, for \$12.95; a PDF version is FREE. Reporters may obtain a copy from the Office of News and Public Information (contact listed above). In addition, a podcast of the public briefing held to release this publication is available at <http://national-academies.org/podcast>. The NAS' evolution resources Web page, <http://national-academies.org/evolution>, allows easy access to books, position statements, and additional resources on evolution education and research.

The National Academy of Sciences is an independent society of scientists, elected by their peers for outstanding contributions to their field, with a mandate from Congress since 1863 to advise the federal government on issues of science and technology. The Institute of Medicine was created in 1970 by the NAS to provide science-based advice on matters of biomedical science, medicine, and health.

Texas Academy of Sciences Adds its Voice for Evolution

In a recent statement, the Texas Academy of Sciences expressed its support for teaching evolution - which it described as "the primary unifying cognitive framework in the biological sciences" - and its opposition to including creationism (including "intelligent design") in the state's scientific curricula. The Academy's statement emphasized in particular the economic importance of science education, noting, "Modern industry requires a scientifically educated workforce. In order for Texas to remain economically competitive, it is essential that all Texans, but especially our youth[,] obtain a solid foundation in the sciences."

References in the document to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and to personnel decisions at the Texas Education Agency suggest that the Academy was prompted to issue its statement by recent controversies involving evolution education in Texas, specifically the Institute for Creation Research's attempt to obtain certification in Texas for its graduate program in science education and the forced resignation of Chris Comer. Founded in 1892 and now boasting over 1000 members, the Texas Academy of Sciences seeks to promote scientific research among the colleges and universities of the State of Texas, to promote undergraduate research, and to enhance the professional development of its members.

Source: <http://www.ncseweb.org/>

READ A GOOD BOOK LATELY? TELL US ABOUT IT.

Send your book reviews, recommendations, critiques, or top 10 list to:

FACT.newsletter@FreethinkersACT.org

Or P.O. Box 160881, San Antonio, TX 78280

Atheist Floating to Heavens

As the number of publicly-declared atheists continues to rise in the US and Canada, a new-generation atheist author in his own words, "floated like an angel in heaven" on Sunday, December 9, 2007 to draw attention to his unholy cause. David Mills, author of the divisive yet briskly-selling book *Atheist Universe*, became history's first avowed atheist author to fly into zero gravity.

Mills, 48, flew from Kennedy Space Center aboard G-Force One, the same modified 727 space-plane that ferried renowned astrophysicist Stephen Hawking into weightlessness on April 26, 2007. Unlike Professor Hawking, who was rewarded for his stellar scientific achievements with a "free ride" aboard G-Force One, Mills did self-finance his own cosmic excursion. G-Force One was also previously employed by Producer Ron Howard and Tom Hanks to film weightless scenes for the movie *Apollo 13*.

When asked prior to his expensive voyage what he hoped to achieve, Mills replied, "Religious believers think they're going to float like an angel in heaven after they die. Atheists, by contrast, believe that the only life we're ever going to experience is right here and right now. So I'm floating like an angel on December 9th.

"There are still millions of atheists in our nation who feel alone and isolated. I also want to raise their awareness of the diversity of free-thought organizations that now exist for them: The Richard Dawkins Foundation, Secular Web, Rational Response Squad, Atheist Alliance, Freedom From Religion Foundation, and American Atheists to name just a few." He added, "I hope this flight boosts public visibility of the atheist movement for non-believers and believers alike and underscores that, together, we must work now on earth to resolve our conflicts, rather than storing our treasures in a nonexistent heaven."

According to Mills, who lives in Huntington, WV, "Many other atheists have certainly preceded me throughout the 45 years of manned-space flight. But I'll be proudly and openly representing the estimated 15 million atheists in the US, many of whom continue to feel underrepresented. Like it or not, there are plenty of us [atheists] out there. We're your next-door neighbors and coworkers."

Mills' book *Atheist Universe* ignited the explosion of atheist books in 2004-05, when it became Amazon.com's emergent and best-selling title on the subject, a sales ranking that it maintained for over two years. Since that time, however, other, better-known authors have followed with atheist volumes of their own, including Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith & Letter to a Christian Nation*), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*) and Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*). Dawkins quotes Mills extensively in *The God Delusion*, describing Mills' anti-Fundamentalist writings as "admirable work." Mills' book showcases a Foreword and endorsement by Dorion Sagan, son of the late astronomer Carl Sagan.

Not everyone supports Mills and his floating book tour. A Baptist pastor in nearby Charleston, WV, who asked to voice an observation without identifying himself, said, "This is yet another sorry illustration of Mills' juvenile behavior and immature intellect. He uses cheap stunts and theatrics as a substitute for intellectual substance in his writings. Even if he were the first man on Mars, it wouldn't prove that one word of his book was true. We already knew that Mills' brain was weightless, so now the rest of him will be weightless too. This proves only that he's a lightweight. But the Word of God will stand forever on a solid foundation."

Mills' flight aboard G-Force One took off steeply over the Atlantic Ocean after leaving the Kennedy Space Center. After achieving the necessary sub-orbital altitude, the G-Force craft executed a series of high-speed 45-degree nose-dives back toward Earth, creating the weightless condition NASA uses to train its corps of astronauts. Mills' flight entailed 15 such parabolic maneuvers, simulating Zero G (or weightlessness), Lunar (1/6th) gravity, and Martian (1/3rd) gravity for approximately 30 seconds during each earthward tumble.

There are 5 such gravity-escaping aircraft on the planet. Three are owned by the governments of Russia, France and the US. Two are owned by Zero Gravity Corporation of Las Vegas, NV, from whom Mills purchased, without sponsorship, his flight into weightlessness.

When asked about personal fear or trepidation about embarking on such a roller coaster flight—described even by hard-boiled NASA astronauts as the "Vomit Comet"—Mills jokingly replied: "To me, Zero G means zero gods. In the highly unlikely event that the aircraft disintegrates before landing safely back at Kennedy, I'll be at peace. I know in my heart where I'm going . . . to the bottom of the ocean to be pilfered by squid."

Source: www.davidmills.net



FACT T-Shirts for Sale (Grey w/Black Logo)

Small-XLarge.....\$12.00	3X.....\$15.00
2X.....\$14.00	Vests (Red).....\$17.00

To order or for further information, contact Catherine Howard

Atheists Don't Just Speak With One Voice

by Nica Lalli

I have a question for the Christians out there: If you could pick one living person to be the face of the entire Christian faith, who would that person be? Even if you could pick three, or even five people, it would still be a challenge. I imagine it would be hard to figure out whether you wanted to pick those Christians who think most like you, or if you would pick people who could better represent the many colors of Christianity, the subtle differences and big-picture similarities.

I am an atheist, a humanist, a secularist, a person of no religion. I am nothing. And I ask the question above because in recent months, the word "atheist" has become synonymous with one kind of non-believer: the kind that writes books about atheism and is not very nice about religion.

Many of these books have been written by atheists who are tired of being silent, who are sick of being reviled and who are no longer willing to play the religion games according to the rules of the devout. That means that they no longer consider religion off limits to criticism.

The authors of these books have chosen titles that re-set the stage, with new scenery, new production and new lyrics. *God is Not Great*, *The God Delusion*, *The End of Faith*. These titles tell the reader right away that religion is being looked at from a different, far less reverential, view.

But there is more than one kind of atheist. And even in the pool of (mostly male) writers who are called "atheist fundamentalists," there are many differences. Don't confuse your Sam Harris with your Daniel Dennett, and although Victor Stenger or Richard Dawkins may mostly agree with Christopher Hitchens, there are many disparities as well.

I take a different approach altogether. Although I do not believe in God, I have no interest in telling anyone else what he should or should not believe. I am more interested in dialogue, and I hope that conversation will get us to respect and understanding. I cannot see dialogue happening with someone who tells you that your core beliefs are wrong, so I refrain from telling anyone what to believe.

It isn't that I am not angry at some believers. These days, many atheists are angry. And we should be.

We are not liked by most people in our own country, and we couldn't win an election unless the other guy was a child molester. We are regarded as threatening, unethical and downright evil. We are rarely even invited to the table when discussions among different religions (or beliefs) are held. We have no representation, and we get very little respect.

Yet the believers want us to be nice; they want us to respect them and leave them to their religions, to their worship, and to their hope that we will see the light and become like them.

The road to understanding between those who follow a religion and those who do not is fraught with difficulty. The difficulty is compounded when the sides involved in the journey resort to name-calling, finger-pointing and the blame game.

It is true that we all need to learn to get along. It is true that the atheists need to be included and respected. But how to start? Where to begin?

It would help if everyone could stop fearing the differences. If people admitted that they don't know the answers to all the big questions and stop being frightened by the possibility that there is more than one answer (or no answer at all), then we might be able to start a discussion that would be worth having.

In the meanwhile, when people think about the atheists out there, it would be helpful if they at least acknowledge that there are numerous approaches to non-belief just as there are a wide variety of ways to believe. Because if you really want to understand Judaism, you have to talk to more than one Jew; you can't ask a Protestant what a Baptist does or doesn't do; and even one kind of Presbyterian is not the same as another kind. And so it follows that no single atheist, or one approach to atheism, represents all the atheists out there.

With that in mind, let's invite more of everyone to participate in the discussion. In fact, the discussion should not be held in some far off conference room with only those invited seated at the table. We should all be having the discussion, within our communities and neighborhoods. At the park, in the coffee shop, at the community center, even at each other's dinner tables.

Once we start, we might see that we have more in common than we all think. Once we all agree to disagree, once we set the rules that no side is trying to convince the other of its rightness or wrongness, once we clarify that we are simply trying to understand each other — and then move on to other topics of common interest — then the conversation about religion and its place in our society can really begin. "

Source: USA Today, October 8, 2007

Christian Right's Emerging Deadly Worldview

by Chris Hedges

Walid Shoebat, Kamal Saleem and Zachariah Anani are the three stooges of the Christian right. These self-described former Muslim terrorists are regularly trotted out - a few days ago they were at the Air Force Academy - to spew racist filth about Islam on behalf of groups such as Focus on the Family. It is a clever tactic. Curly, Larry and Mo, who all say they are born-again Christians, engage in hate speech and assure us it comes from personal experience. They tell their audiences that the only way to deal with one-fifth of the world's population is by converting or eradicating all Muslims. Their cant is broadcast regularly on Fox News, including the Bill O'Reilly and Neil Cavuto shows, as well as on numerous Christian radio and television programs. Shoebat, who has written a book called *Why We Want to Kill You*, promises in his lectures to explain the numerous similarities between radical Muslims and the Nazis, how "Muslim terrorists" invaded America 30 years ago and how "perseverance, recruitment and hate" have fueled attacks by Muslims.

These men are frauds, but this is not the point. They are part of a dark and frightening war by the Christian right against tolerance that, in the moment of another catastrophic terrorist attack on American soil, would make it acceptable to target and persecute all Muslims, including the some 6 million Muslims who live in the United States. These men stoke these irrational fears. They defend the perpetual war unleashed by the Bush administration and championed by Sen. John McCain. McCain frequently reminds listeners that "the greatest danger facing the world is Islamic terrorism," as does Mike Huckabee, who says that "Islamofascism" is "the greatest threat this country [has] ever faced." George W. Bush has, in the same vein, assured Americans that terrorists hate us for our freedoms, not, of course, for anything we have done. Bush described the "war on terror" as a war against totalitarian Islamofascism while the Israeli air force was dropping tens of thousands of pounds of iron fragmentation bombs up and down Lebanon, an air campaign that killed 1,300 Lebanese civilians.

The three men tell lurid tales of being recruited as children into Palestinian terrorist organizations, murdering hundreds of civilians and blowing up a bank in Israel. Saleem says that as a child he infiltrated Israel to plant bombs via a network of tunnels underneath the Golan Heights, although no incident of this type was ever reported in Israel. He claims he is descended from the "grand wazir" of Islam, a title and a position that do not exist in the Arab world. They assure audiences that the Palestinians are interested not in a peaceful two-state solution but rather the destruction of Israel, the murder of all Jews and the death of America. Shoebat claims he first came to the United States as part of an extremist "sleeper cell."

"These three jokers are as much former Islamic terrorists as 'Star Trek's' Capt. James T. Kirk was a real Starship captain," said Mikey Weinstein, the head of the watchdog group The Military Religious Freedom Foundation. The group has challenged Christian proselytizing in the military and denounced the visit by the men to the Air Force Academy.

The speakers include in their talks the superior virtues of Christianity. Saleem, for example, says his world "turned upside down when he was seriously injured in an automobile accident."

"A Christian man tended to Kamal at the accident scene, making sure he got the medical treatment he needed," his Web site says. "Kamal's orthopedic surgeon and physical therapist were also Christian men whom over a period of several months ministered the unconditional love of Jesus Christ to him as he recovered. The love and sacrificial giving of these men caused Kamal to cry out to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob acknowledging his need for the Savior. Kamal has since become a man on a new mission, as an ambassador for the one true and living God, the great I Am, Jehovah God of the Bible."

This creeping Christian chauvinism has infected our political and social discourse. It was behind the rumor that Barack Obama was a Muslim. Obama reassured followers that he was a Christian. It apparently did not occur to him, or his questioners, that the proper answer is that there is nothing wrong with being a Muslim, that persons of great moral probity and courage arise in all cultures and all religions, including Islam. Christians have no exclusive lock on virtue. But this kind of understanding often provokes indignant rage.

The public denigration of Islam, and by implication all religious belief systems outside Christianity, is part of the triumphalism that has distorted the country since the 9/11 attacks. It makes dialogue with those outside our "Christian" culture impossible. It implicitly condemns all who do not think as we think and believe as we believe as, at best, inferior and usually morally depraved. It blinds us to our own failings. It makes self-reflection and self-criticism a form of treason. It reduces the world to a cartoonish vision of us and them, good and evil. It turns us into children with bombs.

These three con artists are not the problem. There is enough scum out there to take their place. Rather, they offer a window into a worldview that is destroying the United States. It has corrupted the Republican Party. It has colored the news media. It has entered into the everyday clichés we use to explain ourselves to ourselves. It is ignorant and racist, but it is also deadly. It grossly perverts the Christian religion. It asks us to kill to purify the Earth. It leaves us threatened not only by the terrorists who may come from abroad but the ones who are rising from within our midst.

Source: <http://www.alternet.org/story/76686/>

March Events

March 4th - THCF First Tuesday Lunch

1:00 pm: Meet other Freethinkers at the Texas Hill Country Freethinkers' First Tuesday Lunch (held monthly)
 Discussion Topic: "Bible Study: Contradictions and Ghastly Stuff"

Ping's Restaurant (by HEB in Leon Springs)
24165 W IH 10 # 221

March 12th – THCF Lunch in Northwest

12:30 pm - Meet other Freethinkers at the Texas Hill Country Freethinkers' Lunch (held monthly)
 Host: Julie Fisher
 Discussion Topic: "Procrastination"

Sarovar Indian Restaurant
10227 Ironsides Drive (Near Wurzbach)

March 15th – The Lunch Bunch

11:30 am: Join the "Lunch Bunch" for good food and great conversation before the General Meeting

Sarika's Thai Restaurant
4319 Medical Dr, Near Fredericksburg Rd

March 15th – FACT General Meeting

1:00 pm: General meetings occur on the 3rd Saturday of every month (unless otherwise announced)

Speakers: Roberto Flores and Dan Graney
 Title of Presentation: "How Do Minorities Gain Public Acceptance"

After-Break Speaker: Nick Lee
 Topic: "Election of Officers"

Community Unitarian Universalist Church
4818 Beverly Mae East (off Babcock)

March 29th – FACT Discussion Brunch

9:30 am - Join us for a brunch and discussion the last Saturday of every month.
 Topic: TBD

DENNY'S Back Room
4510 Fredericksburg Road
New Location! Different Day!

April Events

April 1st — THCF First Tuesday Lunch

April 9th — THCF Lunch in the Northwest

April 19th — General Meeting

April 26th — FACT Discussion Brunch

March 2008						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
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April 2008						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
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27	28	29	30			

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ANNUAL DUES (Jan-Dec)

A.	Individual Paying Member	\$30
B.	Family (2 or more members)	\$42
C.	Active Duty Military/Full-time Student (non-voting)	\$18

- Membership dues are due in January.
- Dues are non-refundable.
- New members who join after the 1st month of the year will pay a prorated amount for the remainder of the year.
- Members who paid dues the previous year, but who are paying late, will be liable for the entire year.
- Donations in addition to dues are always welcome.