

FACT
P.O. Box
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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.

A Matter of FACT & The Voice

October 2008

Was Mary a Virgin?

A discussion of the Virgin Mary as originally envisioned by Jewish writers will be led by FACT Member Mary Beth Romeo at the General Meeting on October 18th. Romeo has been working on a thesis exploring the Old Testament roots of the story of Mary, and will be presenting her preliminary findings.

Mary Beth has studied the rituals and daily customs of the Jewish population in the first century BCE, and shows how later Christian authors distorted the stories of the genealogy and character of Jesus' mother. She takes an alternate view of the birth stories at the heart of Christians belief, and shows that these stories relate neither to myth or miracle, but are instead masterpieces produced by a marginalized Jewish minority. All are invited to join in this scholarly discussion.

After refreshments, we will be accepting nominations for the positions of Treasurer and Public Relations.

General Meeting, Saturday, October 18th @ 1pm
Community Unitarian Universalist Church
4818 E. Beverly Mae

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Do Not Miss the Texas Convention!

The Texas Freethought Convention will be held on Sunday, October 26th, at the Saengerrunde Hall, 1607 San Jacinto in Austin! This will be a rare gathering of groups from all over, including the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, Austin Center for Inquiry, Secular Family Network, North Texas Church of Freethought, Corpus Christi Atheists, Metroplex Atheists (Dallas), Houston Church of Freethought, several Atheist Meet-Up Groups, as well as student groups from University of Texas, UT Arlington, and UT San Antonio.

Activities will run between noon and 9 p.m. There will be live music and a performance by SA Actress Anna De Luna. You will be able to re-dedicate your life in an official "De-Baptism Ceremony", properly certified! Speakers will include representatives from the major groups, as well as Dallas attorney Geoff Henley, who will talk about his new book "Beyond Reasonable Doubt". A Bloodmobile will be available outside the convention

To add to the excitement, the Convention will be filmed by a group from Houston as part of their documentary on Atheists in America.

The full agenda is posted on the web site at www.texasfreethoughtconvention.com, and you are urged to pre-register on-line. There is only a modest registration fee of \$15 (\$10 for seniors), which can be paid at the web site. Registration will also be available at the door, but we would like to keep that to a minimum.

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)
 For Information contact
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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.

¡Holy Guacamole!

FACT members and friends were treated to a wonderful performance by actress Anna De Luna of her show “¿Chicana Atheist?” at the General Meeting on September 20th. This dramatic and poignant one-woman show is an exploration of her evolution as a non-believer against a background of her deeply religious Hispanic cultural roots.

Even as a child, Anna began avoiding going to Mass by feigning illness because of the boring and unbelievable homilies. Yet, she said, she lived in fear of the mystical powers of the ‘glow-in-the-dark’ rosary that her mother hung in her room, and the portrait of Jesus, whose eyes followed her everywhere she went. As she grew up, her skeptical feelings increased, until her reason told her that there was little truth to the stories and rituals the rest of her family adhered to, and she found it particularly difficult to reconcile her brother’s accidental death with a loving god. When she became open about her doubts, she lost a few friends who accused her of being a ‘devil worshipper.’

Anna said that she still struggles with the emotional ties to her Hispanic culture and her intellectual rejection of its religious integration. Her mother still has not seen her performance, which has appeared several times throughout San Antonio. The next performance of “¿Chicana Atheist?” will be at the Texas Freethought Convention in Austin on October 26th.

Nick Lee

Miracle Toast?

Excitement is growing in the Northern England town of Huddlesfield following news that a local man saw an image of the Big-Bang in a piece of toast. Atheist Donald Chapman, 36, told local newspaper, "The Huddlesfield Express" that he was sitting down to eat breakfast when an unusual toast pattern caught his eye.

"I was just about to spread the butter when I noticed a fairly typical small hole in the bread surrounded by a burnt black ring" said Chapman. "Then to my amazement I saw the direction and splatter patterns of the crumbs and the changing shades emanating outwards from the black hole. They were identical to the chaotic-dynamic non-linear patterns that one would expect following the Big-Bang". "It's the beginning of the world" he added excitedly.

Ever since news of the discovery made national headlines, local hoteliers have been overwhelmed by an influx of atheists from all over the country who have flocked to Huddlesfield to catch a glimpse of the scientific relic. "I have always been an Atheist and to see my life choices validated on a piece of toast is truly astounding" said one guest at the Huddlesfield Arms hotel.

To the surprise of many, the UK National Atheist Association has asked its members not to pay attention to the story despite its potential to inspire less faith. "Given what the religious believe already, this is an easy sell" said one disgruntled activist who said he was going to Huddlesfield anyway noting that "Seeing is not believing".

Source: <http://www.satireandcomment.com/>

Planned Parenthood Battle Lines

by Frank Hernandez

For the past two weekends, I have been volunteering as escort duty at one of the Planned Parenthood centers in town. The reason why is because the Christian community have mobilized to demonstrate the centers for 40 days and 40 nights. Here are some of the nutty stories of my encounters with these people, whom the majority of them are Catholics. Considering how rabid the Evangelists are about the subject, I have met ONE at the protest line. I guess they hate the Catholics too much to unite.

The makeup of these people are Anglos and Hispanics, well to do, not so well to do, sane and insane, educated and not so. They know nothing of Planned Parenthood, and have disinformation of its services. One girl asked me where the fetuses are taken after an abortion, as if I had that info! They mean well, but have no solutions, aside from adopting children, which for the first time I met one of them that did. They stand against sex education in schools, birth control, and gay marriages (?).

In birth control, they will teach their girls the rhythm method the Church approves of, which the protesters tell me is 100% affective, even though we have all heard the "myth" about large Catholic families. They don't realize the trap involved here. This method is not 100%, and therefore when a woman does become pregnant, you can't abort because of your faith and bang, there appears another new member of the Catholic Church! The rhythm method has an average failure rate of 13 to 20%. It is not recommended for women who have irregular cycles or who do not have menstrual cycles that are exactly the same number of days every month.

Sex education in schools is unacceptable because birth control will be taught as an option, and they don't want their kids to know, till the time is right. As far as Gay Marriages, I don't know how that got involved in all this, but they're against it also!

Evolution even raised its logical head, when a protester told me he believed in Adam and Eve. He went on to tell me also that modern day lizards are dinosaurs! I asked this individual not to talk to me anymore on the account of he was too ignorant to hold a conversation with me. During the first week, I went up to each of the 15 protestors present there and asked them to show me pictures of their adopted child...I was shown none. They tend to talk the talk, and fail on the walk.

I would like to see us organized a counter-protest, with signs supporting women's rights, nothing ugly, but supportive of what Parenthood is doing. If interested in this email me at infidel@ymail.com.

We can do this. One Saturday of your lives for 2-3 hours is all that's needed, and I'm sure the staff of Parenthood would be deeply appreciated it.

Every Monday at 12:30 and 8:30 PM

Time Warner Digital Cable Channel 20

FREETHOUGHT FORUM

Hosted by Hugh Henry



*Sunday, October 26, 2008 at Saengerrunde Halle next to Scholz's Garden
www.texasfreethoughtconvention.com*

Editorial Support for Science Standards in Texas

Texas's newspapers are beginning to express their editorial support of the draft set of science standards, released by the Texas Education Agency on September 22, 2008, and applauded for their treatment of evolution by the Texas Freedom Network, Texas Citizens for Science, and the newly formed 21st Century Science Coalition. Referring to the absence of the "strengths and weaknesses" language from the draft standards, the Waco Tribune (October 3, 2008) commented, "Explaining and investigating 'strengths and weaknesses' of any theory is inherent in scientific inquiry. But having such language in state standards, as has been the case for several years, is code for those who want religion to have a foot in the door when Darwin comes up," and added, "acknowledging the shortcomings of scientific theories, no matter what they are, is one of the essences of science. But when the objective is to inject matters spiritual, we are not talking about science. We are talking about religion that wants a seat at the table."

The Austin American-Statesman (October 6, 2008) urged the board of education to "defer to scientists and its own advisory committee when it comes to determining what should be taught in biology classes. The six-member advisory committee, which includes science teachers and curriculum experts, recommended eliminating ideas 'based upon purported forces outside of nature' from high school biology courses. In other words, get rid of creationism and intelligent design, which teach that the universe was created by God or some other higher power." Invoking the increasing economic importance of evolutionary biology, the editorial added, "McLeroy and other board members should be strengthening science standards to accommodate a big push to attract world-class biomedical researchers, companies and grants to Texas. Those are growth industries that have not looked favorably on communities that water down science studies with vague and unproven ideas."

Source: National Center for Science Education - <http://www.ncseweb.org/>

Bible is Literature and Other Scripture is Religion

Did you ever wonder why staunch defenders of teaching the Bible in public schools don't also encourage schools to teach about other examples of religious scripture? Surely that's not a sign of favoritism and a desire to implicitly promote Christianity over other religions, is it? Of course not, the strongest supporters of teaching the Bible in school are also the strongest supporters of church/state separation, didn't you know that? This is proven by Texas State Representative Warren Chisum, architect of his state's new law requiring all schools to provide elective courses about the Bible as "literature" and "history."

[Rep. Warren Chisum, R-Pampa, the author of the plan] said the legislature specifically addressed the Bible, not the Quran or any other religious writing, because "the Bible as a text ... has historical and literary value." "It can't go off into other religious philosophies because then it would be teaching religion, when the course is meant to teach literature," he said.

Source: World Net Daily (via Pharyngula)

So let me get this straight... the Bible can be taught as literature, but absolutely no other collections of religious scripture can be taught as literature? Is this because only the Bible has literature in it, or what? Notice that Warren Chisum admits quite openly that the courses teaching the Bible will be teaching religious philosophy — it's appropriate to teach the religious philosophy of the Bible, but it would be wrong to teach "other religious philosophies."

So when it comes to Christianity, it's acceptable to teach Christian religious philosophy because that's not really religion it's just history and literature. It's not acceptable to teach any other faith's religious philosophies because that would mean teaching religion, not history and literature. Public schools aren't permitted to teach religious philosophy. Unless it's Christian religious philosophy, based on the Bible. Which isn't actually religion, it's history and literature. Get it?

Source: Austin Cline - <http://atheism.about.com/>

From Letters to the Editors at Fort Worth Star-Telegram

Re. How racism works

What if John McCain were a former president of the Harvard Law Review? What if Barack Obama finished fifth from the bottom of his graduating class? What if McCain were still married to the first woman he said 'I do' to? What if Obama were the candidate who left his first wife after she no longer measured up to his standards?

What if Michelle Obama were a wife who not only became addicted to pain killers, but acquired them illegally through her charitable organization? What if Cindy McCain graduated from Harvard? What if Obama were a member of the 'Keating 5'? What if McCain was a charismatic, eloquent speaker?

If these questions reflected reality, do you really believe the election numbers would be as close as they are?

This is what racism does. It covers up, rationalizes and minimizes positive qualities in one candidate and emphasizes negative qualities in another when there is a color difference.

Kelvin LaFond, Fort Worth

E-mail to FACT President Nick Lee from Marie Alena Castle at Atheists for Human Rights, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Re. Bill Maher's movie "Religulous"

Ten of us went to see Religulous last night. One of our reasons for going was to let attendees know of our organization with signs and handouts. Unfortunately, the theater manager said we could not do that and, since it was private property, he could stop us. He succeeded for the most part, even sitting next to our group during the movie. However, due to one of our member's admirable determination and skill in grabbing an opportunity when he saw it, we did get our signs up and handed out a fair number of brochures for a short while after the movie ended. Out in the parking lot, one woman came running up to us to thank us for being there. She hadn't got a brochure and wanted one, which we gave her.

It was a great movie, very well done, and the fairly large audience was enthusiastic—just the kind of people we need to reach! There was a lot of applause at the end. One of the main points Bill Maher made was that the nonreligious should make our large numbers count and speak up against religious insanity. He criticized moderate religionists for not speaking up more. He said we need to get rid of religion if humanity is to survive. He proved it with an ending that was a shocking, jaw-dropping, wakeup call to what we could face if the bible-blinkered righteous right maintains political power. This is a movie everyone in the country should see!

We learned a lot from this experience:

1. If the theater area is all on private property, don't let anyone know your distribution plans. Don't bring signs, just handouts, and do the handing out as people are leaving the theater. This would get you a lot done before the manager arrives.
2. When the manager stops you, politely apologize, express sincere thanks for showing such a great movie, hand him/her one of your brochures to show you are the very people Maher is urging to speak up, and say you're sorry you couldn't do it there, but thanks so much for showing the movie.
3. Try to do this at a theater where the entrance is on the public sidewalk, so the theater manager can't stop you.

Our signs were made on computer using 8 1/2 x 14 bright yellow paper taped to cardboard with the following text:

Religulous
A Great Movie!
We're Atheists For Human Rights
and we approve this message
atheistsforhumanrights.org

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 with the date that they were submitted.

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

Palin and the Christian Right (Part I)

by Michelle Goldberg

Pat O'Hara, a journalist who served on the Wasilla school board for twelve years, remembers how the religious right made her feel like a stranger in her own community. The Mat-Su Valley, which includes the neighboring towns of Wasilla and Palmer, had once been a libertarian sort of place, full of blue-collar individualists who didn't fit in elsewhere. "I had the dog team in the woods, the cabin in the woods. My friends were teachers, farmers, construction workers," she said as she stood with about 1,500 demonstrators at a September 13 anti-Sarah Palin rally in Anchorage. "It was kind of a working, very much Democratic community. And then it changed."

The Valley, Alaska's fastest-growing region, is a spectacular area of lakes and birch and spruce forests, surrounded by granite-colored snowcapped mountains that poke through the clouds. Palmer has a community core, a walkable few blocks with a lively coffee shop, Vagabond Blues. Wasilla, though, has developed as a sprawl of strip malls containing a mix of pawnshops, gun shops and chain stores--and, incongruously, a decent sushi place, with a Korean chef from California. It is a little piece of the American South near the North Pole, rough-hewn but slowly upscaling.

It wasn't until the 1990s that local churches like the Wasilla Assembly of God, which Palin grew up attending, became aggressively political. A few years before Palin became mayor, a group of preachers confronted the school board with questions about social issues that had never before surfaced in local politics, according to O'Hara, who wrote first for the Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman and then for the Anchorage Daily News. "They started asking me, 'Would you allow a homosexual to teach in schools?' and 'Do you favor abortion?'" she said. "At the time, I didn't know what was coming. I said, 'This is not a school board issue. We have overcrowding. We have funding problems.'" The last time O'Hara ran, conservative pastors mounted an effort to defeat her, saying she favored hiring homosexuals, but they failed. Nevertheless, in 1996, feeling increasingly alienated in a place she'd lived for twenty-five years, she quit the school board and moved to more liberal Anchorage.

"The whole community changed," she said. "It became extremely rigid and intolerant, and you can see that in every election since." Palin, said O'Hara, "represents the worst of those values. She feels that because she's a member of the right church, she's chosen by God to inflict her values on everyone."

With her vice presidential nomination, Sarah Palin has become the ultimate religious-right success story. Ever since the Christian Coalition was formed using the infrastructure of Pat Robertson's 1988 presidential run, the movement has focused on building power from the ground up, turning conservative churches into little political machines. "I would rather have a thousand school board members than one president and no school board members," Christian Coalition head Ralph Reed said in 1996. Palin, who got her start in a local church-backed political struggle, is very much the product of Reed's strategy.

She has not always governed as a zealot; in fact, she's a bit of a cipher, with scant record of speeches or writings on social issues or foreign policy. Nevertheless, several people who've dealt with her say that those concerned about church-state separation should be chilled by the idea of a Palin presidency. "To understand Sarah Palin, you have to realize that she is a religious fundamentalist," said Howard Bess, a retired liberal Baptist minister living in Palmer. "The structure of her understanding of life is no different from a Muslim fundamentalist."

Palin's nomination, and the energy she has injected into the GOP, show that, once again, reports of the death of the Christian right have been greatly exaggerated. Not long ago, pundits and journalists were lining up to explain how the religious right, long the largest and best-organized faction in the Republican Party, was deteriorating. Last year the liberal evangelical Jim Wallis published a piece in Time headlined The Religious Right's Era Is Over. Several months later The New York Times Magazine followed with a cover story titled The Evangelical Crackup. Liberal columnist E.J. Dionne argued, in his book Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics After the Religious Right, that the movement was collapsing.

Obviously the religious right has endured many setbacks in recent years. Ted Haggard, former head of the National Association of Evangelicals, slunk away in disgrace following a scandal involving a gay prostitute and crystal meth. Ralph Reed was tainted by his association with the extravagantly corrupt lobbyist Jack Abramoff. Jerry Falwell died, as did the influential Florida televangelist D. James Kennedy. Tom DeLay, one of the movement's fiercest allies, left Congress after being indicted on charges of criminal conspiracy. Nonetheless, the Republican Party is actually more dependent on religious conservatives than ever. In the 2006 midterms, the most significant GOP defeats were among moderate Republicans from the Northeast, where the party lost almost a third of its House seats, and from the Midwest, where it lost 15 percent. As moderates and independents abandoned the party, its center of gravity moved rightward. In order to maintain the support of the party that reluctantly nominated him, John McCain had to choose a vice president who represented the base. Indeed, never before has someone with such deep roots in the movement been on a major party ticket.

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Palin and the Christian Right (Part II)

It's a familiar pattern: the Christian right often has its greatest triumphs just after it's been pronounced moribund. In 1999, just as the Christian right was about to achieve unprecedented power in the Bush administration, *The Economist* wrote, "The armies of righteousness, which once threatened to overwhelm the Republican Party, are downcast and despondent." One could have written the same thing last month. Now, as then, the movement has been resurrected. At the recent Values Voter Summit, a religious-right gathering in Washington, DC, sponsored by the Family Research Council, attendees were ebullient. "The surge of energy is unbelievable," said Emily Buchanan, executive director of the Susan B. Anthony List, a PAC that supports antiabortion candidates and aims to mobilize antiabortion women. "Sarah Palin is going to be our poster woman," she said. "She represents exactly what we've been trying to do since we were founded in 1992."

Palin--who opposes gay rights, believes abortion should be banned even in cases of rape and incest, and supports the teaching of creationism--wasn't known as a leader in Alaska's religious right, but she clearly had ties to it, and to some of the more extreme fundamentalists in the United States. As has been widely reported, her husband, Todd, was a member of the separatist Alaskan Independence Party. She reportedly attended the party's 1994 convention, and as governor she gave a video address to the group's gathering this year in Fairbanks. Less well-known are the Alaskan Independence Party's ties to the theocratic Constitution Party--a vice chair of the former is the state representative for the latter. According to its platform, the Constitution Party aims "to restore American jurisprudence to its Biblical foundations" and advocates criminalizing gay sex and abolishing Social Security.

When Palin ran for mayor in 1996, she leveraged the support of the religious conservatives. Wasilla mayoral races are nonpartisan and in the past had been focused on local issues like taxes and policing. In her challenge to Republican mayor John Stein, Palin changed that, touting her opposition to abortion, her religion and her support for gun rights. "She got a lot of help from the Christian groups," said Curt Menard, mayor of Mat-Su Borough (which includes Wasilla). "They came out and did telephone polling and things like that."

Menard and his wife, Republican State Senate candidate Linda Menard--the former director of the Miss Wasilla pageant--have known Palin since she was in third grade. She was a classmate and close friend of their late son, who, before he died in a 2001 plane crash, was the godfather of Palin's son Track. Their families attend the same church--Wasilla Bible Church, which Palin joined in 2002--and the Menards are caring for Palin's dog, Agia, named after Palin's proudest legislative accomplishment, the Alaska Gasoline Inducement Act, while she is on the campaign trail. They clearly adore Palin, and when Curt Menard describes her connections to the religious right, he doesn't intend to be critical.

Echoing Pat O'Hara's account, he recalled that the area had been solidly Democratic until the rise of politicized right-wing religion. "Pat Robertson, when he organized the Christian right...that's when this area really changed," said Menard. "To my knowledge, I would say [Palin] was supportive of the movement," he added, though he said she wasn't at the forefront of it.

Nevertheless, the movement was at the forefront of her mayoral campaign. According to Stein, a national anti-abortion organization sent out postcards to Wasilla voters on Palin's behalf. There was a whisper campaign that Stein, a Lutheran, was actually Jewish. Some Palin supporters suggested that Stein and his wife, Karen Marie, weren't really married because they didn't have the same last name. "We had to produce a marriage certificate just to demonstrate that," said Stein. "I believe that was Sarah's campaign committee who brought that up."

Much has been made of Palin's gestures toward book-banning as mayor. To understand what happened, it's useful to realize that the Mat-Su Valley was in the middle of a roiling controversy over a book by Bess, the retired minister, titled *Pastor, I Am Gay*. Bess, 80, is deeply respected by the Valley's small progressive community. Educated at Northwestern's Garrett Biblical Institute--now called the Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary--he comes from a Baptist tradition committed to church-state separation. In 1980 he left his church in Santa Barbara, California, to become pastor of Anchorage First American Baptist. Over the years Bess developed an intense concern about gay rights, and he went out of his way to welcome gay people into his Anchorage church. After he had served seven years at First Baptist, the board of the church asked him to lower his profile on the issue. Unwilling to do so, he resigned, took early retirement and ended up moving to Palmer to pastor a tiny liberal congregation, the Church of the Covenant, which he did without pay.

Bess published *Pastor, I Am Gay* in 1995. It recounts his experiences ministering to gay men and lesbians, calls for the church to take a stand against discrimination and even draws parallels between the experience of

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Palin and the Christian Right (Part III)

gay people and that of Jesus. "They are despised and rejected," he wrote. "They suffer and are acquainted with infirmity. They are rejected by a perversion of justice.... Is it possible that the will of the Lord will prosper through them?"

Local conservatives, including at Wasilla Assembly of God, mobilized against the book. Christian bookstores as well as secular retailers refused to sell it. Bess donated two copies to the Wasilla Public Library, but they vanished from the shelves, so he donated more. The atmosphere toward Bess was toxic; a 1997 cartoon in the *Frontiersman* showed a slobbering, doll-clutching pedophile approaching his church, whose sign said, Wasilla Church of the Covenant. Howard Bess, Pastor. All Sinners Welcome! Bible Interpretations to Suit Your "Lifestyle."

Most reports have said that, when asking about banning books, Palin never mentioned any specific titles, but the presence of Pastor, I Am Gay in the library was, at the time, a matter of fierce contention. "I'm as sure that that book was at issue with Sarah Palin as I am that I'm talking to you right now," said Bess.

When Palin ran for governor in 2006, Christian conservatives mobilized to help elect her--the Alaska Family Council, a group that formed that year and is loosely affiliated with Focus on the Family, distributed a voter guide showing Palin's alignment with its ideology. During her nineteen months as governor, it's important to note, she has mostly ignored divisive social issues, instead focusing on getting a gas pipeline built. If she hasn't governed as a fire-breather, though, her record nevertheless offers some evidence that in Washington she would likely continue George W. Bush's injection of religious dogmatism into government appointments and policy-making. Opposition to abortion is, for her, a litmus test. When Sarah Palin ran for mayor of Wasilla, Faye Palin, Todd's stepmother, supported her, but when Faye Palin ran for mayor in 2002, Sarah supported her opponent. The reason, said Menard, was that Faye Palin is prochoice. "To my knowledge, that was the big issue," he said.

Last year, when Vic Kohring, a Republican State Representative from Wasilla, left office after being indicted for bribery and extortion, Sarah Palin appointed Wes Keller, an elder in her church, to replace him. He introduced a bill to make the performance of intact dilation and extraction abortions--so-called "partial-birth abortions"--a felony, and according to a McClatchy Newspapers report, he plans to introduce legislation mandating the teaching of intelligent design in public schools.

Like McCain, Palin appears to believe that the United States is a Christian nation. As governor, she signed a resolution declaring October 21-27 Christian Heritage Week in Alaska, in order to remind Alaskans of "the role Christianity has played in our rich heritage." Written in the mode of some right-wing revisionist historians, it describes the nation's founders--including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson--as "Christians of caliber and integrity who did not hesitate to express their faith."

The conviction that America is a Christian nation could be especially worrisome when coupled with the kind of apocalyptic beliefs espoused by the Wasilla Assembly of God, since the combination suggests a profoundly messianic foreign policy. In a widely seen video taken just months before she received the vice presidential nomination, Palin stood onstage in her old church with pastor Ed Kalnins as he explained how, in the last days, Alaska would be a refuge for Christians fleeing the Lower 48. "Hundreds of thousands of people are going to come to this state to seek refuge, and the church has to be ready to minister to them." Palin's current religious home, Wasilla Bible Church, is rather more moderate and low-key, but it, too, subscribes to a theology that includes a literal belief in a biblical End Times scenario. In August, it hosted David Brickner, executive director of Jews for Jesus, who told the congregation, "But what we see in Israel, the conflict that is spilled out throughout the Middle East, really which is all about Jerusalem, is an ongoing reflection of the fact that there is judgment...there's a reality to the judgment of unbelief."

Brickner's beliefs, said Menard, are shared by many at Wasilla Bible Church, though he said he couldn't speak to the particulars of Palin's faith. Whatever her original convictions about the Middle East--or anything else--they have likely stayed intact throughout her tutorials by the McCain campaign team. "Once she makes her mind up on an issue, it takes a ninety-mile-an-hour Alaska north wind to move her off course," said Menard. Of course, he meant it as a compliment, not a warning.

Source: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20081013/goldberg>

Must-See Sermons by Ben Hubbard

This is excerpted from an article that appeared in the Washington Post on August 31, 2008.

Fistfights, crashing helicopters and gun-wielding guerrillas flashed across the screen. The auditorium filled with the sounds of the jungle as Senior Pastor Rob Seagears clomped onto the stage in camouflage and combat boots, toting a rifle, canteen and machete.

"Good morning, Mountaintop!" he growled to the congregation before launching into his Sunday sermon based on the R-rated, curse-filled Hollywood hit "Tropic Thunder."

The audience chuckled at his grizzly soldier act, and gave him some loud "Amen!"

Since June, Seagears, senior pastor at Christ Chapel Mountaintop in Prince William County, has based his sermons on the summer's blockbusters, managing to draw life lessons from the most unlikely subject matter. The Summer Cinema Series, which concludes today, seeks to attract those who don't ordinarily attend church while making the experience more fun for those who do. The four-year-old church averages about 20 visitors a week, in addition to members, which is significant considering that attendance usually lags during the summer, he said.

"We try to make church and God applicable to people's lives," said Seagears, 47.

Seagears bases each week's message on the highest-grossing movie the previous weekend. He sees the movie, then prays about how to extract a biblical message.

He has had to see movies with violence and language he would otherwise avoid. Last month he saw "Hellboy II: the Golden Army," in which an evil prince seeks to resurrect an indestructible army to take over the Earth by assembling pieces of a magical crown.

We, too, have invaluable crowns, Seagears preached, rewards God has prepared for those who love and serve him faithfully.

Although church members love the series, a few pastors have called the Potomac District of the Assemblies of God, to which Seagears' church belongs, saying his use of the movies is inappropriate, Seagears said.

Larry Hickey, superintendent of the district, which includes 315 churches across Maryland, Virginia, the District and Pennsylvania, said pastors have flexibility in how they relate to the culture of their location. He even attended a "biker church," he said, where the pastor wore flip-flops.

Although Seagears's use of movies does not bother Hickey, he said he understood how it might concern others. "Because if you're a pastor in a traditional mountain culture, you just won't get it," he said. "But your kids probably will."

Seagears responds that preaching through movies allows him to meet people where they are and is similar to Jesus's use of parables.

"It's all about engaging your audience," he said. "That's what Jesus did, telling stories."

Source: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/>



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School Bans Contraceptive Display

by Lindsay Kastner

Editor's note: Marcelle mentioned in this article is the daughter of FACT treasurer Cathy Howard.

Told to redo a school project because it was potentially controversial, Madison High senior Marcelle Howard went home Thursday to put together a new display without the offending packages of contraceptives attached. The only problem is that the display is to illustrate a presentation about a U.S. Supreme Court case involving the right of a married couple to use birth control. Marcelle's mother said she feels her daughter's freedom of expression is being squashed, ironically in a lesson on constitutional rights.

Marcelle — whose original display included a condom in its sealed wrapper and an empty package of Plan B emergency contraceptives — went to work on her own plan B for her presentation, due today.

In an interview, the school's principal said drawings of contraceptives would be allowed, but that “the actual packages could fall into the wrong hands.”



Marcelle, 17, took her completed visual aid into school early, in part because she was proud of the finished product. But teacher Trey Brown told her that after speaking with an academic dean at the North East Independent School District campus, he felt she would need to turn in something else.

Marcelle said she received little explanation from her teacher, but in an e-mail Thursday to Marcelle's mother, Brown wrote: “The decision was made that the display and presentation of actual contraceptive devices in the classroom may be offensive to some and/or create controversy.”

Patrick Filyk, president of the San Antonio Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and an attorney, said he was concerned by the preemptive nature of the teacher's decision. “When people say that it's going to cause problems, how do they know that?” Filyk asked. Filyk noted that if students in the college-level course read the text of the court case that they were assigned to research, they would be reading detailed information about contraceptives and reproduction and so he was puzzled at the assertion that viewing packages for birth control was somehow controversial or offensive.

Marcelle also said she didn't understand the problem with the display, noting a student who presented earlier in the week used Nazi symbols in the depiction of a case about the freedom of assembly. “I had thought that was a whole lot more offensive than seeing a condom, which you can see anywhere you go. You can see it at H-E-B, you can see it at a pharmacy, you can see it at a corner store, you can see it anywhere you go. I didn't understand why it was not OK to present.”

Filyk said he hoped the situation would spark a conversation not just on personal privacy rights — the premise of the *Griswold v. Connecticut* case Marcelle was studying — but also First Amendment rights.

Madison Principal Chris Thompson, a former government teacher, said he knows there are times when “mature topics” are addressed in the classroom. “But the classroom is not an open forum for anything that wants to be discussed,” he said. “It's our job to make sure that what's being discussed is appropriate.” He said the school tries to be consistent across all courses and, for instance, doesn't include demonstrations of actual contraceptives in the sex-education portions of its health courses.

Marcelle said Thursday afternoon that she wasn't sure how she would approach her second attempt at a visual aid. She spoke with a couple of other students who had been assigned the same case but had not yet presented their work and said one had attached an actual condom package to his display and another had drawn pictures of contraceptives.

“All of us have basically come up with same ideas,” she said. “I thought (the original display) was a fine representation of it and I was a little upset that I wasn't going to be able to do it because it was a lasting impression and people were going to be able to remember the case.”

Source: <http://www.mysanantonio.com/>

October Events

October 7th - THCF First Tuesday Lunch

1:00 pm: Meet other Freethinkers at the Texas Hill Country
Freethinkers' First Tuesday Lunch (held monthly)

Host: Julie Fisher

No Discussion: "The Bailout, Will it Work?"

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

October 15th – THCF Northwest Lunch

1:00 pm - Meet other Freethinkers at the Texas Hill
Country Freethinkers' Lunch (held monthly)

Host: Julie Fisher

Repeat Discussion Topic: "The Bailout"

Cha Cha's, 2026 Babcock Rd

October 18th – The Lunch Bunch

11:30 am: Join us for good food before the Meeting

Sarika's Thai Restaurant

4319 Medical Dr (Near Fredericksburg Rd)

October 18th – FACT General Meeting

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

Speaker: Mary Beth Romeo

Title of Presentation: "Was Mary a Virgin?"

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

October 25th – FACT Discussion Brunch

9:00 am - Join us for a brunch and discussion the last
Saturday of every month.

Host: Jane Tuck

Topic: TBD

DENNY'S Back Room
4510 Fredericksburg Rd
(South of Crossroads Mall)

October 26th – Noon to 9 PM

Texas Freethought Convention

Saengerrunde Hall (Scholz Garten)

1607 San Jacinto Street, Austin, TX 78701

November Events

November 4th—THCF First Tuesday Lunch

November 12th—THCF Lunch in the Northwest

November 15th—General Meeting

November 29th—FACT Discussion Brunch

October 2008						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
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26	27	28	29	30	31	

November 2008						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
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