

FACT
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ACT.org

A Matter of *FACT* & The Voice

September 2009

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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Professor Brown on Hinduism

Most of us are familiar with the reaction some (not all) Christians have to Charles Darwin's work on biological evolution. Those fundamentalists who believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible are four-square against it, (pun intended) because they cannot reconcile the ideas of genetic mutations and natural selection with the stories in Genesis. Since these opposing ideas are irreconcilable, these folks are led to fight to impose their world-view on others. On the other hand, most mainstream Christians have no difficulty reconciling their faith in a Supreme Being with the idea of theistic or guided evolution.

But what about other religions? Most of us know very little about the basic tenets of Eastern Religions. Trinity University's Professor Mackenzie Brown does! At the September 19th General Meeting of Freethinkers, Dr. Brown will give a presentation on "Hindu Responses to Darwinism." He teaches courses on Religion and Science and is currently completing a book on "Hindu Perspectives on Evolution: Darwin, Dharma, and Design." For more information on Dr. Brown, visit his home page at www.trinity.edu/mbrown, where you will find a list of his published articles on Religion and Science, with links to abstracts. Come and be enlightened!

General Meeting, Saturday, September 19th @ 1pm
Community Unitarian Universalist Church
4818 E. Beverly Mae

FACT Elections

In accordance with the FACT By-Laws, the office of President will be open for election this year. Normally, elections are held at the November General Meeting, but because the Texas Freethought Convention on November 14th will supplant our usual schedule, the elections will be held at the October meeting. That means that nominations for the office of President will be taken at this month's meeting on September 19th. That will allow the Secretary to prepare the formal ballots.

The President serves for a three-year term, and is responsible for the overall management of the Association, acts as the Chairperson of regularly scheduled General Membership Meetings as well as the meetings of the Executive Committee, and is the FACT spokesman vis-a-vis the public and with other groups.

Persons interested in serving in this capacity may nominate themselves, or members may nominate another member (with his/her concurrence). Nominations will be called for during the "after-break" period. Think about who you would like to lead you into the future.

Every Monday at 12:30 and 8:30 PM
Time Warner Digital Cable Channel 20
Grande Cable Channel 19
AT&T U-verse Channel 99

FREETHOUGHT FORUM
Hosted by Hugh Henry

Current Challenges to Separation

Elected Positions:

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

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
 Julie Fisher:
 zoezappa@gmail.com

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.

At the August General Meeting, the President of the San Antonio Chapter of Americans United spoke about the status of legislation and the challenges to the separation of church and state in Texas politics. Eric Lane reviewed the tectonic shift to the right with the election of George W. Bush as Governor in 1995, and leading up to the current Governor, who believes that public laws should be 'informed' by religion.

Despite the attention they garner and the political muscle they flex, the Religious Right appeals only to small numbers, and do not reflect mainstream voters in Texas, according to Eric. The membership of Americans United includes large numbers of religious folk who oppose the imposition of their belief systems on the rest of society.

The most egregious (and most dangerous) example of undue influence by the Religious Right is the ideological cant of the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE). The decisions by the SBOE about the public school curriculum and the text books to support that curriculum affect the education of 4.5 million children in Texas. The concern is that the teaching of science, sex education, and social studies can be skewed for ideological reasons.

Eric noted that a partial victory was won in the Spring, when the SBOE removed the requirement to discuss the "weaknesses of the theory of evolution" in high school science classes. However, the board also laid down a challenge to the idea of "common descent", which is fundamental to Darwin's theory.

The next step will be the consideration of textbooks that comply with the curriculum guidelines, and Eric asked that all interested citizens maintain vigilance on the proceedings of the SBOE and support the groups, such as Americans United and Texas Freedom Network, who are organized to protest any incursion on the separation of church and state.

Nick Lee

Donations Needed for Community Outreach

As part of our outreach to the community and in an attempt to improve the public image of non-believers, FACT has begun a program of collecting donations of items or identifying volunteer activities. We welcome suggestions from the membership as to recipients for these donations.

Our first effort was suggested by Clem and Debbie Wiechecki, based on their past contact with a program called "Dare To Care/Rainbow Room", a non-profit organization which provides free clothing and school supplies to children from broken homes or homeless. The stuffed animals and toys donated by FACT members at the July Pot-Luck were delivered to the center on July 31st. Thanks to Clem and Debbie for their assistance!

Following a suggestion from FACT member Len Wheeler, we have decided that our next recipient organization will be Bexar Home Comforts, which is a "Welcome Basket" project for the chronically mentally ill, providing them with basic household items for the kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom, as well as cleaning supplies. This will allow them to set up housekeeping and live independently.

We will be gathering donated items at the September and October General Meetings. We are looking for such items as:

- Kitchen: Cooking Utensils, Dishes, Flatware, Glasses, Towels, Pots and Pans
- Bathroom: Shower Curtains, Towels, Toilet Brush, Soap, Shampoo, Toilet Paper
- Bedroom: Sheets, Blankets, Pillows, Alarm Clock, Waste Baskets
- Cleaning: Brooms, Mops, Laundry Soap, Sponges, Dust Pan

Please bring a donation with you as you come to the meetings. They will be collected up and delivered the non-profit in November. Thank you!

Secular Camp Quest Texas Major Success

by Kacey Cornell

I got the pleasure of speaking with Zachary Moore, via Facebook, about the first Camp Quest held in Texas this past Sunday. Mr. Moore is the Executive Director of the North Texas Church of Freethought and was a volunteer at the camp. The NTCOF was the sponsoring organization for the event and provided many volunteers along with the DFW Coalition of Reason.

About the event Mr. Moore told me, "We had 40 kids registered this year... Kids were dropped off at 9 AM, and picked up at 5 PM. We had ages from 5 to 15. We started by telling all of the kids about some Native American fire-creation myths, and then split them up into three groups based on age (5-7, 8-11, 12-15). The groups rotated through the activities, which included science activities, games, animal demonstrations, and pottery. We had a central location for snacks and lunch breaks—many parents stayed in this area throughout the day and talked among themselves about being a secular parent in North Texas.

The science activities differed by age group, and included making habitats for earthworms, assembling dinosaur fossils, and staging a UFO sighting hoax. Games included water balloon toss/fights and sack races. Pottery was thrown on a potter's wheel, and will be fired and returned to the kids at the next NTCOF service. The scavenger hunt included a search for an invisible pink unicorn, which was reported to be just one of the many animals located on the farm, which also included llamas, goats, pigs, rabbits, chickens, ponies, cats, and kangaroos."

When I asked what plans they had for next year he said, "When we began planning, our hope was that we would be able to get half a dozen kids for this single-day event. No other Camp Quest has attempted a day camp before, and the national organization was very interested to see what we were able to do. Based on our success, we are planning for a week-long sleep-away camp for the summer of 2010. We're scouting locations and recruiting volunteers, and anyone who's interested can send an email to: campquest@churchoffreethought.org."

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

Atheists Offer Pet-Sitting Service

by Nick Lee

Whatever else can be said about atheists, they are compassionate people, even toward those who passionately against them. And when they see an opportunity to do good, they does it!

Evangelical Christians are convinced that when their Savior returns, the righteous will be swept up into Heaven to live an eternal life of love and good will. Left behind on earth after the Rapture will be all those heathens and followers of false Gods, who will suffer pain and misery and other bad vibes.

But, wait! What about dear little fluffy? What will happen to my beloved pet cat/dog/boa after I am swept up to live with the Lord?

Comes now an enterprising group of Atheists with a charitable solution. They will take care of your pets after the Rapture, for a modest fee. They certify that all potential pet-sitters are avowed atheists and blasphemers and heretics, and thus are assured of being left behind. They will be around to feed, water, walk, and otherwise take good care of your pet in a loving home for the rest of its natural life here on earth, while you are comfortably resting on a cloud pillow.

Concerned Christians may sign up on-line at eternal-earthbound-pets.com. Subscriptions to this post-apocalyptic service may be made through Pay-Pal.



DON'T MISS IT!

NOVEMBER 14, 2009
AL FAZAR TEMPLE
SAN ANTONIO, TX

Reading, Writing and Religion

Texas Matters is a locally produced news show on national public radio that spends half an hour each week looking at the issues, newsmakers and culture of Texas. The locally produced program features co-hosts David Martin Davies and Yvette Benavides. On August 21 Texas Matters aired an interview with Mark Chancey, associate professor in religious studies at Southern Methodist University on the new state law requiring that all public high schools teach about the Bible.

Benavides: As Texas high schools reopen for a new school year, they will have to contend with a new state law requiring all public schools to offer information relating to the Bible in their curriculum. The courses are elective, not mandatory, and are supposed to focus on how Christianity has influenced American history and society.

Chancey: Legislators passed the bill H.B. 1287 which inserted in the Texas Education Bill the requirement for all public schools to teach about the Bible at high school level, but it left open the means by which schools can do this. So, it is perfectly acceptable for schools to include some type of instruction about the Bible in their social studies classes or literature classes, which presumably many are already doing. It offers the possibility of elective Bible courses and some schools are going that route, although they are not required to.

Martin Davies: So what is the mandate? What do schools have to do?

Chancey: It is a very vaguely worded mandate. They have to incorporate some type of instruction about the Bible into their curriculum. Now, the education agency has said that a wide variety of means would satisfy this requirement and as I mentioned, just talking about the importance of the Bible for early Christianity and early Judaism in a social studies class would be sufficient. There is no requirement for the amount of time spent. There is very little guidance on the content that has to be discussed. It is a very general requirement.

Martin Davies: Do you know how most school districts are running with this?

Chancey: It is hard to say at this point. I think at least a couple of dozen, maybe more than that, will end up offering elective Bible courses. These would be one or two semester courses on the Bible. Others, I suspect, will not change a thing since presumably somewhere in a high school curriculum students are being exposed to basic information about world religions, including Judaism and Christianity, anyway. So, it may not have a big impact in some districts. Others will go so far as to create a course.

Martin Davies: Now teaching the Bible as a class in many [high schools across Texas] is not new.

Chancey: That is exactly right. Texas has been offering Bible courses for decades. The practice started back in the early twentieth century in something called “weekday religious education” and there are a few Bible courses that have been taught continuously for decades. Most Bible courses are fairly short in their duration. They are all offered for a few years and then fade away. But some are offered year after year after year.

Martin Davies: Are these classes being taught by theologians, pastors, by the football coach?

Chancey: All of the above. This is one of the more challenging aspects of this law. The law on the one hand requires some type of instruction about the Bible, but no funds were appropriated to offer teachers any training in the Bible. When I studied Texas Bible courses a few years ago I found that virtually none of the teachers offering Bible courses had ever had any academic background in Biblical studies or religious studies. So, what you often have are teachers who are extremely well qualified in their fields, who nonetheless don't have the specialized training necessary for this particular course, which obviously has its own distinctive challenges. Sometimes you do have area ministers who are asked to offer the course. This leads the school district into potentially troubling legal water. Sometimes you have coaches who are asked. Sometimes teachers have been required against their own desires to teach these courses. So, in this respect the situation is not ideal. We are not giving our teachers the tools and resources that they need to do the job that the state is asking them to do.

Martin Davies: Now when we say “the Bible” that is a really broad term because there are lots of Bibles.

Chancey: That is exactly right.

Martin Davies: So are we talking about the King James Bible or what?

Continued on the next page ...

Reading, Writing and Religion (Continued)

Chancey: Well it becomes even more complicated than that. The Jewish Bible is different from the Protestant Christian Bible which is different from the Roman Catholic Bible which is different from Eastern Orthodox Bibles. A good Bible course, one that is taught in a legal manner [and] does not promote or discourage any particular religious perspective will expose students to the differences between these Bibles as well as the functions of different translations and different religious traditions. Unfortunately, what studies of this have shown is that most courses reflect the Protestant bias. Students learn about the Protestant Bible, but not about the different Bibles of other traditions. Courses often emphasize translations favored among especially conservative Protestants like the King James Version or the New International Version and not other translations that are important for other religious traditions. So a lot of times these courses very much end up promoting ideas about the Bible that circulate in certain Protestant sectors at the expense of other religious perspectives and when they do so that is when, again, they enter into very troubling legal waters.

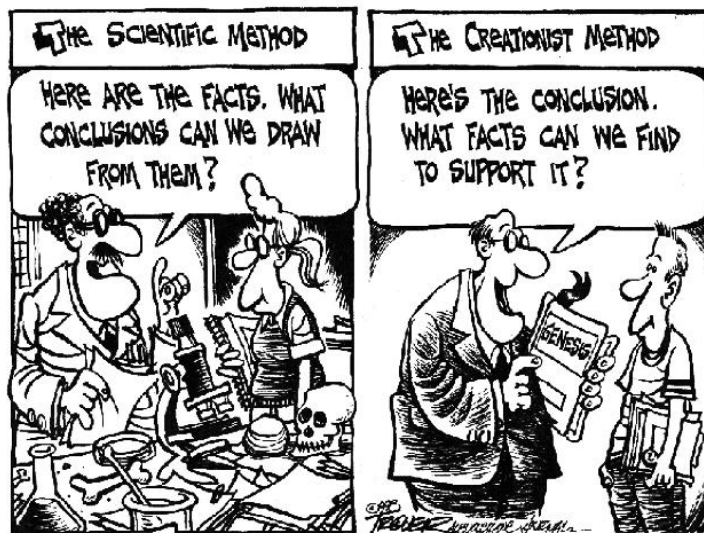
Martin Davies: Is this something that is masquerading as instruction but is actually indoctrination?

Chancey: In some cases no. There are a few schools in Texas that have done strong jobs of teaching these courses from a non-sectarian perspective. What I mean by that is that they neither promote nor disparage particular religious viewpoints and try to teach it in a religiously neutral way. Unfortunately most courses strongly promote particular religious views. I suspect most courses that have been offered in the past few years, if they were taken to court, would have a lot of trouble making the case that they were neutral in the way that they are supposed to be. In a few cases the courses are blatantly religious in nature and teachers have used these courses to promote Christianity. There have been cases where teachers showed students PowerPoint presentations explaining to them the plan of salvation, argued that Christianity is a better religion than Judaism, or taught students that the earth is six thousand years old and that dinosaurs and humans had walked the earth together. These are things that I have seen in Texas Bible courses. So you [have] the full range, there courses that are very strong and courses that are very problematic.

Martin Davies: But so far no legal problems, I would have thought that someone would have filed suit by now.

Chancey: There is nothing illegal about offering a Bible course in general if it is taught in a way that does not promote or disparage a particular religious viewpoint. That is kind of my recurring mantra. There will not be any challenges until a course steps over the line. Now, a few years ago there was a big controversy in Odessa, in Ector County ISD, over the Bible course there. This controversy arose before this law was passed and there the debate was over the choice of curricula. The school district was using a particular curriculum that was actually very problematic. Ultimately it decided to drop that curriculum and develop its own course rather than defend that curriculum in court. That was [the curricula of the] National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, a religious right organization that uses Bible courses to promote Christianity in public schools.

Source: <http://www.tpr.org/programs/texasmatters.html/>



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.

Outside Faith, a Rising Tide of 'Nones'

by Jay Tokasz

A few years ago, Tyler Manley would have considered himself a Presbyterian. If asked about his religion today, he will confess he doesn't have one. Nor does he believe in God. The United States remains one of the most religious countries in the world, but Manley is part of one of the steadiest trends in the national landscape of faith; the growing number of Americans who profess no religious affiliation.

Social scientists often call them the "nones", a broad category that includes atheists and agnostics, as well as those who believe in a higher power but don't cite a particular faith. Studies indicate they make up as much as 16 percent of the U.S. population, and researchers expect that the numbers will continue to grow. "You're just getting a lot of people drifting away," said Barry A. Kosmin, research professor in the Public Policy & Law Program at Trinity College in Hartford, CT.

For Manley, who studies philosophy at the University at Buffalo, the drifting was the result of understanding that human conscience comes before religion. "It's important that you critically examine your own beliefs," he said.

Kosmin's latest American Religious Identification Survey, published in March, estimated the population of U.S. "nones" at 34 million, roughly 15 percent of the total, up from 29 million in 2001 and 14 million in 1990. "It was quite amazing. It went up in every state," Kosmin said. Fourteen percent of New Yorkers did not associate with a religion, up from 7 percent in 1990.

A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that 16 percent of U.S. adults had no religious affiliation. Data from the General Social Surveys indicates that 16.4 percent of Americans are nonreligious, up from 5.1 percent in 1972.

Researchers once observed a familiar pattern of religious disaffiliation among young adults, who then would reaffiliate later on, said Darren E. Sherkat, a sociologist at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. But that pattern is breaking down, said Sherkat, who analyzes data from the General Social Surveys. "We're seeing greater stability of non-affiliation, and we're also seeing greater numbers of parents raising their children without affiliation, which was really quite rare in earlier generations," he said.

Even in the Buffalo Niagara region, which had the highest percentage of residents in the country adhering to a particular faith, according to a 2000 study by the Glenmary Research Center the slippage is evident in houses of worship, where empty pews have led to church closings and mergers.

Fred Mohr's faith journey once meandered through Billy Graham crusades, a liberal Protestant church and an evangelical Christian congregation. Now "none" applies to him, too. "If I'm honest, I mostly say I'm agnostic," the Town of Tonawanda resident said. Mohr, 66, described a slow movement toward his agnosticism and doesn't recall any particular moment when his skepticism of religion set in. "I still have a lot of respect for the church I belonged to," he said. And he doesn't think he's all that different from many faithful parishioners. "There's some people who go to church regularly, and they're basically skeptical, too," said Mohr, who occasionally attends functions at the Center for Inquiry, a national think tank based in Amherst promoting secular humanism.

For Lauren Pollow, who attended services in a Reform synagogue in Albany until a few years ago, the principles of science began to take precedence over the Bible and the Torah. "It's not that I didn't feel happy or content," said Pollow, who is studying psychology at UB. "Culturally, I do love Judaism. I think the stories in the Torah are beautiful, and I love them." But religiously, Judaism lost its sway with her. "I started to realize the value of critical thinking in my life," she said. "Science and secularism are very much hand in hand."

Continued on page 8



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To order or for further information, contact Sally Chizek
Sally.Chizek@FreethinkersACT.org or (210) 656-3796

“Escaping Domestic Abuse” by Jane Boucher

A Book Review by Sally Chizek

Jane Boucher says in her book that physical battery is the number one cause of injuries among women—more than automobile accidents, rapes, and muggings combined.

I recently heard from Jane Boucher, who was an acquaintance of the late Catherine Fahringer. She lives in Nevada and is coming to San Antonio in November. She is conducting a couple of speaking engagements, but would like to have a book signing at one of our Barnes & Nobles bookstores. Unfortunately, the book signing is tentatively scheduled to take place the same day as our Texas Freethought Convention.

Jane also says about her book, "In this revealing book, you will meet courageous women who broke away from abusive relationships to escape the agonizing pain and find lasting peace. You, too, will: recognize the signs of abuse, conquer timidity and helpless dependency, protect your children from experiencing abuse, destroy the controlling power of an abuser, develop the strength to start over, heal your emotional and physical scars, defeat the fear of being alone, enjoy healthy relationships.

The book is very easy reading, but there is nothing easy learning that so much harm is taking place for women and men in relationships that are meant to be loving. While it's true that this book is of more interest to women who are in abusive relationships and could benefit from learning how to escape such situations, other reasons make it relevant for you. It is an eye-opener and you may need it to help a relative or friend, or maybe even yourself.

It was interesting and sad to read what Karen Spruill, who works with victims of domestic violence shelter in Pennsylvania, said. "Among the participants who have suffered the most abuse are church pastor's wives. When women suffer abuse by men who claim to represent God, the emotional and physical damage can be even more intense, for these men often feel justified by God in doling out painful chastisement to their 'disobedient' wives who 'refuse to submit.'"

From the book:

About the author: She was a practicing obstetrician-gynecologist for over twelve (12) years. In that capacity she witnessed many women suffering from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Jane received her bachelor of science and master of arts degrees from The Ohio State University. She has done doctoral work at the University of South Florida and has been an adjunct professor at the University of Dayton, Wright State University, Sinclair Community College, and Antioch University McGregor. She also served as Associate Director of the Antioch University McGregor Organizational Institute.

She is the author of seven books, she uses both the podium and the pen to promote personal and professional excellence. Her bestseller, "How to Love the Job You Hate," has been endorsed by Dr. Kenneth Blanchard, author of the best seller "The One Minute Manager." She has been interviewed and profiled by Forbes and the New York Times. She is a nationally syndicated newspaper columnist and contributes to business journals across the country.

Jane is one of the most dynamic women on the speaking circuit today. The National Speakers Association awarded her the Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) designation, a distinction held by less than eight (8) percent of professional speakers. She can be reached with feedback or to discuss speaking engagements at jane@janeboucher.com.

"Escaping Domestic Abuse", by Jane Boucher. Whitaker House, 2009, ISBN: 978-1603740913, 192 pages, Paperback \$12.99.

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

Outside Faith, a Rising Tide of 'Nones' (Continued)

Raised Catholic, David R. Conners was educated by Franciscan friars and Jesuit priests. He still believes in God and occasionally attends worship services in various traditions. But he doesn't identify with a single religion, he said. "A lot of people just aren't finding the answers from institutions," said Conners, a retired banker from Amherst. "That doesn't mean they become godless."

There's plenty of debate about exactly who the "nones" are and what they believe or don't believe when it comes to faith. A 2008 study out of Baylor University found 11 percent of Americans saying they had no religion, and researchers there concluded that two-thirds of those people were not so much irreligious as they were unchurched. Yet an analysis of the General Social Surveys shows that the majority of those Americans who don't affiliate with a religion also don't believe in God, said Sherkat, who is writing a book about religious change in the U.S. "Not everyone believes, and it's a really large chunk, and it's a growing chunk," he said.

Kosmin plans to release more findings this fall about the "nones," who as a group are 60 percent male. Otherwise, "just like the religious groups, they're not homogenous," he said. "The only thing they agree on is when you ask them, 'What religion?' they say, 'None.'" Current data probably underestimates the extent to which Americans have drifted away from organized religion, because secularization happens on a continuum, with church attendance ceasing first, followed by belief, Kosmin said. It takes a while for people to acknowledge in surveys that they're no longer part of a religious tradition, he said. "The belonging," he said, "is the last thing to go."

In some parts of the country, small communities of secular humanist groups have been cropping up in recent years to fill a social need that churches often provide in society. These new communities are "religious only in a slight sense. They are confronting issues of morality and the purpose of human life, but they don't do it with God, and that's a critical difference," Sherkat said.

The Center for Inquiry now has 10 affiliate centers throughout North America and "faith-free" communities for skeptics and the nonreligious in a dozen other cities. "The centers we have provide a kind of alternative," said John R. Shook, vice president for education and research. "What it is essentially is people who have grown disenchanted with religion for whatever reason." The centers offer programs such as secular parenting groups and secular celebrations and rights of passage; the equivalents of what religious people would find in churches and synagogues.

Source: <http://www.buffalonews.com/home/story/783014.html>

Republicans, Religion and the Triumph of Unreason

In a recent article in the British newspaper "The Independent" on the U.S. health care reform debate, Johann Hari states that "[Ordinary Republicans] are being tricked into opposing their own interests through false fears and invented demons". He then goes on to make the following connection with religion:

How do they train themselves to be so impervious to reality? It begins, I suspect, with religion. They are taught from a young age that it is good to have "faith"—which is, by definition, a belief without any evidence to back it up. You don't have "faith" that Australia exists, or that fire burns: you have evidence. You only need "faith" to believe the untrue or unprovable. Indeed, they are taught that faith is the highest aspiration and most noble cause. Is it any surprise this then percolates into their political views? Faith-based thinking spreads and contaminates the rational.

Source: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/johann-hari/>

Interesting perspective!

Humanism and Religion—Part I

by Marilyn Westfall

For centuries, the idea of God has been the very heart of religion; it has been said, no god, no religion' — but humanism thinks of religion as something very different, and far deeper than any belief in god. To humanism, religion is not the attempt to establish right relations with a supernatural being, but rather the up-reaching and aspiring impulse in a human life. It is life striving for its completest fulfillment, and anything which contributes to this fulfillment is religious, whether it be associated with the idea of god, or not.

—Rev. John Dietrich, a founder of Unitarian Religious Humanism

Religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago: either that or it mutated into an admirable but nebulous humanism, as did, say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brave Lutheran pastor hanged by the Nazis for his refusal to collude with them. We shall have no more prophets or sages from the ancient quarter, which is why the devotions of today are only the echoing repetitions of yesterday, sometimes ratcheted up to screaming point so as to ward off the terrible emptiness.

—Christopher Hitchens, God Is Not Great

The first words I quoted were written by a founder of Unitarian Religious Humanism, the Rev. John Deitrich, enormously popular as a speaker and writer in the 1920s – 1930s. In fact, he drew so many people to his sermons in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that his congregation rented a theater, as the audience outgrew the church facilities. Deitrich never hesitated to state that the “completest fulfillment” of human aspiration was “religious” in nature. It is important to note, however, that his was a religion without God. The second quotation, on the other hand, is by the popular writer and debater Christopher Hitchens; his most famous (or infamous) statement may be that “religion poisons everything.”

Where can we find a middle ground between these two positions? Is it at all possible? Allow me at this point to introduce two other voices into this discussion. I'm a fan of singer-songwriters, and recall the song “Jesus of Rio,” by David Crosby and Graham Nash, which concerns religion and the country of Brazil. A very human Jesus is mentioned in the song, reaching out with holy palms to wipe tears away, perhaps those tears of the poor and disenfranchised. There are deep divisions in Brazil between the haves and have nots (more so than in the United States). High above both social classes stands a 130 foot statue of Jesus, built on a mountain peak over Rio de Janeiro. The statue is supposedly a symbol of “love in the land,” but according to the lyrics of Crosby's and Nash's song:

If everyone opened their eyes
They'd see that loving feeling
Is waiting within us,
And if everyone opened their hearts
They'd see that every human
Is holy to someone.

These lyrics, so resonant and humanistic, make me wonder, yet again, if religion is necessary for us to recognize another human's worth. Do we need religion to remind us to love others? Or to point out that everyone deserves a fair shake in life?

At one time, when I first became a Unitarian Universalist in 1994, I would comfortably have called myself a religious humanist—pretty much agreeing with John Deitrich that the highest human aspirations might be described as religious impulses. These days, given the dire effects of religious fundamentalism, I question if humanity's highest aspirations should have any ties to religion at all.

Just consider Mitt Romney's recent comments that only religious people in the United States can aspire to or understand freedom. Romney's statement disregards between 21 - 30 million nontheistic American citizens. Or consider the plight of a nineteen-year old female victim of gang-rape in Saudi Arabia, who was sentenced to being lashed 200 times for HER supposed transgression against Sharia law. Given these incidents and a long list of other recent events (proselytizing in the U.S. military to create a Christian army, promotion of Intelligent Design as Science, death threats made against cartoonists who depicted the prophet Mohammed, rape and murder in Darfur), religion can be justifiably viewed as an obscene anachronism. The Nobel Prize winning American physicist Steven Weinberg famously said: “With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”

Humanism and Religion—Part I (Continued)

To me, threading a needle serves as a metaphor for deciding what's best to say, or not to say, about religion. As a humanist, I do not want to defend in any way the superstitions promoted by religion; nor would I defend religion's violations against human rights and dignity. But yet, I want to understand why people are religious, and to assure that each person has the right to practice the religion of his/her choice. I want to be able to criticize religion, when it is necessary—but I want to give religious people an opportunity to moderate their most extreme and hurtful positions.

I think my attempt to “thread the needle” regarding religion is an outgrowth of my Humanism. I have read all three versions of the “Humanist Manifesto,” and find merit in each. The first was written in 1933, and many of the original signatories were Unitarian Religious Humanists, including John Deitrich, mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The third rewrite of the Manifesto (published in 2003) is certainly an expression of the values by which I wish the world could live; however, I do recognize that my utopia is likely someone else's dystopia. For example, here is the initial paragraph of Manifesto III:

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without superstition, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

Such a simple, elegant statement; who could argue with it—right? Well, let me tell you what happened when an entire congregation read an affirmation about Humanism, using the Manifesto's language, just this past summer, when I was invited to speak about the history of Humanism and Unitarianism at a UU church. During my visit, I was lucky enough to stay at the home of a dear friend whom I've known since we were both teenagers. She is more spiritual and religious than I am. She attended the service at which I spoke and, like everyone else, recited the affirmation for Humanism. However, she later told me that she almost refused to recite it. Why? Because Humanism outright rejected superstition and supernaturalism. She did not take kindly to this.

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

“The Family” by Jeff Sharlet

A Book Review by Julie Fisher

Put this book by Jeff Sharlet on your required reading list. You've read about powerful groups of Christians before, like Focus on the Family and The Family Research Council, but The Family, aka The Fellowship, puts them all to shame. This network of people, that you probably never heard about until the recent “house on ‘C’ Street” adultery scandals of Senator John Ensign, former Congressman Charles “Chip” Pickering, and South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford, comprises hugely influential people whose names you will recognize. What's more they have an inordinate amount of influence on even people like Hillary Clinton and our President Obama. Their influence is both domestic and international.

The Family has been in existence since the 1930s. Some members you may recognize are Senators Tom Coburn and James Inhofe and Chuck Grassley who have been much in the news recently.

The Family sponsors the National Prayer Breakfast. They are behind Chuck Colson's Prison Ministry and the Campus Crusade for Christ organizations.

The people in The Family call themselves followers of Christ and talk about love. They have a philosophy of Jesus + nothing. They push prayer and the personality of Jesus.

Beneath that is a belief that the powerful are chosen by God. The powerful do not need to be good people, only to use their power. Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot are idealized for their use of power. The Family is not about morals or ethics. The common people are to love Jesus by obeying the powerful.

Most Christians ignore the Bible verses in which Jesus says he comes bringing a sword and that his followers should leave their families. The Family emphasizes this aggressive, ruthless Jesus.

The Family pushes the myth of the United States being founded as a Christian nation and other false ideas of history.

“The Family,” by Jeff Sharlet. Harper Perennial, 2009, ISBN: 978-1603740913, 464 pages, Paperback \$15.99.

September Events

September 1st – THCF First Tuesday Lunch

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

Host: Julie Fisher

Discussion Topic: "Are we sicker than we used to be?"

Naples Italian Restaurant
215 W. Bandera Rd, Boerne
NEW LOCATION!

September 9th – THCF Lunch in the NW

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

Host: Julie Fisher

Discussion Topic: "US Government Atrocities"

Taste of China Super Buffet
3711 Colony Dr
(Off Wurzbach near I-10)

September 19th – The Lunch Bunch

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

Sarika's Thai Restaurant
4319 Medical Dr (Near Fredericksburg Rd)

September 19th – FACT General Meeting

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

Speaker: Prof. Mackenzie Brown

Title of Presentation: "Hindu Responses to Darwinism"

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

September 26th – FACT Discussion Brunch

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

Topic: Freewheeling Discussion

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

October Events

October 6th—THCF First Tuesday Lunch

October 14th—THCF Lunch in the Northwest

October 17th—General Meeting

October 31st—FACT Discussion Brunch

September 2009						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

October 2009						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

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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.