

THE FORT WORTH HUMANIST QUARTERLY

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Briefs

HoFW cleans Adopt-A-Street, attends Cowtown Great American Cleanup

Adam and his family led a team of 11 volunteers who met Saturday, March 28 to clean the segment of Granbury Road south of University Drive. HoFW has cleaned this street for a few years as part of the Adopt-A-Street program.

For the past 2 years at least, we have chosen the Spring cleaning date to coincide with the Cowtown Great American Cleanup. The city provides t-shirts, gloves, bags, and bottled water for the volunteers.

The weather could not have been better. Our volunteers spent about an hour and a half picking up trash and items for recycling.

After the cleanup, Adam and his family headed to the Earth Party on the Magnolia Green at 1201 Lipscomb. They provided a hot-dog lunch for all of the volunteers. More than 40 booths were on the green sharing earth-friendly products and services with people from various groups in the larger community. The event also featured live music and other activities for families. Adam said his children left the event with free bicycle helmets.

We all would like to thank Adam for leading the HoFW effort and all the volunteers for their tenacity and ongoing efforts to keep the program going. Spring is a great time to mingle and perform a service for the community.

"I would just like to say thank you to all of the volunteers who came out and worked," Adam said. "This is a fun way to contribute to our city and get to know each other better."

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Atheist organizations grow, blend, and cooperate across DFW borders

By Wanda Foster

(This is the second article in a series about the growth of atheist, agnostic, humanist, and other secular communities across Dallas and Fort Worth.)

The emergence and evolution of so many secular, atheist, and agnostic organizations across our area during the past three decades clearly shows that trends in Dallas and Fort Worth are in line with the national trends reported by the Pew Research Center.

As the first article in this series discussed, at least 20 secular or atheist groups have popped up and grown in this area since about 1985 or 1986. In the early 1990s, only 7 percent of the U.S. population identified themselves as unaffiliated with a religion. By 2002, the number doubled to 14 percent, and in 2013, Pew research stated that a full 20 percent of the U.S. population was unaffiliated. Of that number, one-third of those less than 30 years old reported no religious affiliation.

While some of these people are not atheists or agnostics, we know that many in our area are, as evidenced by our growing atheist, agnostic, and secular communities and their close association and cooperation.

The oldest local atheist organization, Metroplex Atheists (MA), stands at the nexus of these trends. Over the past three decades, the organization has transformed itself through various names and stages of development, but it started in the mid-1980s as an outgrowth of a national organization, American Atheists, originally formed by Madalyn Murray O'Hair about 1963. O'Hair originally gained fame and notoriety for fighting prayer and religious education in Baltimore, MD

public schools and participating in the landmark Supreme Court Case Abington School District v. Schempp decided on June 17, 1963, which for the first time stated that prayer and reading scriptures violated the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment. That clause states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Later, in the mid-1960s, O'Hair ended her 17-year career as a social worker in Baltimore and moved to Honolulu, HI, followed by Austin, TX about 1965. O'Hair held the American Atheist Convention in Austin in 1986, the same year she stepped down as American Atheists president and passed the mantle to her son, Jon. Both Jon and O'Hair's granddaughter, Robin, whom she adopted as her daughter, were avid supporters of the national organization throughout their lives.

During this time frame, Jay Campbell, initial founder of groups that eventually became MA, paid considerable attention to American Atheists activities and attended the organization's convention. That event piqued his interest in forming a local atheist organization.

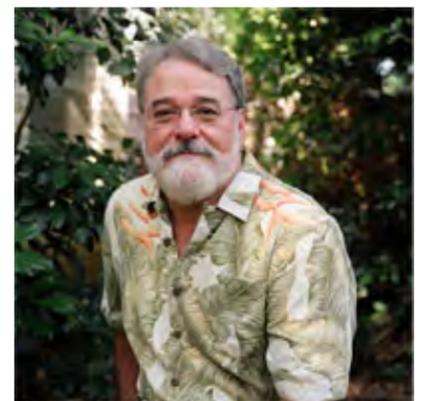
Campbell remembers events this way.

"At the American Atheist convention in April 1986, I promised Madalyn, Jon, and Robin that I would start a chapter of American Atheists in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, where I was relocating away from a really bad job in Killeen, TX. By September, I was firmly working in Dallas at a division of

Compaq Computers, and I started the chapter of American Atheists in my then-hometown of Carrollton, actually getting the meetings set up in the Library meeting room also used for city council meetings. Madalyn loved that. Also, I started a Dial-an-Atheist phone line (because social media didn't exist), which was in a friend's closet in her house."

The initial group operated for about 4 years, but floundered as other groups began forming in competition with his chapter. At one point, American Atheists disbanded all of the chapters, and in the late 1990s Campbell passed leadership on to others who wanted to keep the group going. Most of those people lived in or around Arlington, so they renamed it Tarrant County Atheists before it eventually morphed into the current organization, Metroplex Atheists, and began to grow. Early groups met at a local mall or at Dick Hogan's construction company.

Campbell attributes much of MA's growth to the work of Terry McDonald, who led MA for 5 years between 2007 and 2012. He still remains



Terry McDonald, MA Past President, Current Director and Treasurer

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Student questions reveal need for open dialog and understanding

Houston Christian School children ask HoFW questions

By Adam and by Morris Meador

Three high school students from The Woodlands Christian Academy in suburban Houston connected with Humanists of Fort Worth in January seeking answers to their questions about humanist beliefs.

The school's Web site states that it is "a Christ-centered, college preparatory school offering accredited education from Pre-K through 12th grade." As part of the students' Christian Apologetics class, they were assigned to contact a secular humanist and ask a few "big questions" related to the creation of the world and the meaning of life. Following are their questions and responses Adam provided by email. On page 6, Morris Meador also answers a question from another student. Two of the students responded with notes of thanks.

If only we could be a fly on the wall as

the students shared what they learned from their secular humanist neighbors.

1. What is the origin of the universe and man?

As far as I can tell, we don't know yet. Cosmologists are fairly certain that the universe began about 13.7 billion years ago with the big bang, resulting in a lot (a whole lot) of cosmic matter expanding outward. That matter settled into the galaxies we observe today. About 5 billion years ago, our solar system formed. Around 4.5 billion years ago, our earth formed.

Nearly immediately after the planet became habitable for life, just a few hundred million years later, microbial life formed on earth. Through the process of evolution guided by natural selection, humans came onto the scene within the last half million years or so. These facts have been confirmed by cosmologists and biologists and are

not in dispute among the vast majority of scientists. How did that first microbial life form? We don't know. But I bet one day we will. I also expect the answer to be closer to what scientists hypothesize than the creation myths in Genesis or any other religious text.

2. What is the purpose of mankind?

We have evolved as biological creatures to survive and reproduce. Beyond that, I don't know of any purpose we have.

3. What is satisfaction and how do I obtain it? (How can I be happy?)

Find something that you enjoy doing and do it, provided it doesn't harm any others.

4. What has gone wrong with the world? (Why is there evil in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people?)

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Opinion

HoFW Humanist Perspectives

by Elva Roy

YIKES! I'm an atheist! That eureka moment happened for me when I read Sam Harris' book, *The End of Faith* in 2009 when I was 64 years old.

For years I had been trying to clarify my own belief system. Despite having a Masters of Business Administration degree, I am sometimes lazy when it comes to critical thinking. I had never seriously questioned what it really meant to identify as a Christian.

After all, I had been taught all my life that good people go to church on Sundays and that, most especially, it is necessary to rear your children in the Christian faith. Otherwise, you, as a parent will have heartbreak from your children because they will not have learned about morality. Church is where people learn good morals. (Note: now I agree with Christopher Hitchens that morality precedes religion.)

But Harris' book really lit my fire and made me get down to brass tacks about what I believe at my core. I believe that humans are social beings with an innate desire to work for the common good, but painful life experiences can lead a person in the wrong direction. We, as a society, need to collaborate and work to help people overcome scars left by painful experiences, and I am not talking about suffering as the way to get to heaven.

Young Muslims are taught that the only way to reach paradise without standing before God in judgment is to die a martyr. Can you believe that?!

People have to help people. That is all there is. Nobody else is going to do it. I'm talking about very practical ways of people helping people—with jobs, care for dependents, leading healthy lives, people aging at home rather than in an institution, and teaching people "how to fish."

What can YOU do today to help your fellow (wo)man? My own special interests are helping elders, especially anyone with a form of dementia, including Alzheimers, with the objective of removing the stigma of aging and of dementia. There is no shame in either. My volunteer work is directed toward helping these two communities, spreading understanding and em-

pathy, and actively seeking solutions to address needs.

Life as a Presbyterian

Having been brought up in the Presbyterian Church, my three sisters, my three brothers, and I were taken to Sunday school every Sunday. We did not really mind going, but it was a pain in the shoe to get all gussied up every Sunday in time for seven children plus Mom and Dad to get to Sunday school by 9:30 a.m.

My experiences in the Presbyterian Church were good, and I have high regard for that denomination. My grandmother, Elva Meyer, was the first female elder in the Presbyterian Church. Presbyterians are big on works and education. We see their names on many hospitals, such as Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas and Plano, and on eldercare facilities, such as Presbyterian Village in Dallas.

Presbyterian churches I attended stressed love a lot more than original sin and all that jazz. Like most churches, they cherry-picked parts of the Bible and mostly ignored the horrible parts, except I do remember being taught in Sunday school some gory parts such as Genesis 22: 1-12 where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering to God.

We colored pictures about that and still I did not think much about it because we were taught how faithful Abraham was to God and how important it is to obey God.

My Sunday school teacher left out the part when the angel of God stopped Abraham from slashing the throat of his only son just in the nick of time. So Abraham caught a goat that had its horns stuck in a thicket, and Abraham slashed the goat's throat and burned the goat on the altar rather than Isaac. Geesh!

My first husband and I married in the Presbyterian Church. After three years of marriage, he was drafted into the Army and sent to Vietnam. When he came back, he was a changed man. He suffered from substance abuse, which he eventually kicked, I am happy to say, but we divorced in the meantime since that was never part of our lifestyle before he went to Vietnam.

Life as a Catholic

Five years later, I remarried, this time to a Catholic. Catholicism was extremely important to my second husband and his parents. He had attended Catholic schools all of his life in a regimented school led by Dominican nuns, one of the strictest orders. At his schools, the playground was divided into halves, one-half for boys and the other half for girls. Neither gender dared to encroach onto the wrong side of the playground. Nuns even assigned which boy would take which girl to the senior prom when they graduated from high school.

So I decided to convert to Catholicism because God is all the same, right? Also, I wanted our children to go to one church rather than spending half of the time in a Presbyterian church and half in a Catholic church.

To get married, we had to go priest shopping in Phoenix where we were living because, unless you made a large financial contribution to the Church to get a first marriage annulled, priests were forbidden to perform a marriage ceremony for a divorced person.

But we found a liberal priest who advised us to go to the courthouse and quietly get married there, and then we could have a wedding in the Catholic Church. Nobody, including my husband's family, could tell the difference, but what the priest actually did was bless our marriage rather than marrying us.

I never felt good about deceiving his family or ourselves by pretending to get married in the Catholic Church, and I was always confused about the true date of our wedding anniversary—the date of the civil ceremony or the date of the Catholic ceremony three days later. But I was in love and I went along.

I do not think we missed Mass three times in 10 years, because missing Mass was a mortal sin back then. If you died with a mortal sin on your soul before you confessed the sin to a priest, you would go straight to hell. Truthfully, I did not give such things much thought, but since good people go to church on Sundays, off we went. I was busy as a wife and working mother to three sons. Life was good.

From the Editor:

Most HoFW members favor science and rationalism over religion, magic, and dogma. Within that realm, we remain a very diverse group, however, with different thoughts, perspectives, and ways of arriving at our beliefs in a world often unfriendly to secular thought. This column presents our stories. Many of the names have been changed or limited to first names to protect the innocent.

But after attending Mass for 10 years or so, one Sunday in our small Catholic parish in Claremore, OK, as I was sitting, standing, kneeling (doing whatever the dingy bell told the congregation to do), when a little voice in the back of my head piped up "Do you really believe all this stuff you're proclaiming to believe in front of these people?"

"I don't know.

"Well, it's important. You'd better figure it out. And if you're not sure, then why are you standing here Sunday after Sunday saying that you DO believe it?"

"It's complicated. There's no way I can figure it out."

"Well, here you are, once again stating I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell, the third day He rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

"If I don't know if I believe it, why am I saying that I do?" I asked myself. The solution, for a while, was to stop saying the Apostle's Creed and the other responses.

I still went to Mass, sitting, standing, kneeling at the ding of the bell, but I just remained silent until finally I felt like such a hypocrite that I stopped going to Mass altogether. My husband (continued on page 3)

Letters to the Editor

All HoFW members and other readers who wish to write Letters to the Editor responding to articles that appear in this publication are invited to express their own views and provide feedback.

Our newsletter policy requires letters to reference a specific article that has appeared in one of the two most recent issues. We do not publish open letters or third-party letters.

Responders should limit their letters

to 150 or 175 words and provide the writer's email address. In addition, for those who require anonymity, please provide the name you would like published with the letter.

All letters should be exclusive to *The Fort Worth Humanist Quarterly* and should not be published in any other publication.

Anyone who would like to submit a letter can do so by e-

mailing the editor at the following address: vicechair@hofw.org.

Space is limited, so we make no guarantee that all letters will be published. Letters may be edited or shortened to fit the space.

We request that all content show a respectful tone, even when the viewpoints expressed differ from those of *The Fort Worth Humanist Quarterly* or any other party.

THE FORT WORTH HUMANIST QUARTERLY

Chair: Sam
Editor and Vice Chair: Wanda Foster
Assistant Editor: Adam
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Opinion

HoFW Humanist Perspectives

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stopped going too. It turns out that he was also having the same internal conversation, such as “why are you here on this Sunday? What are you getting out of it? Everyone wants to belong to a community, is that it? Or is it so you can mention at work the next day that you went to church on Sunday because all GOOD people go to church?”

Life as an Atheist Unitarian

So I started exploring other churches, such as the Unity Church (different than the Unitarian Church). I attended Unity Church in Arlington and then in Dallas for about 10 years. What I liked about Unity is that they did not pretend to have all the answers. They are very up-front in stating that what they say today could be different 5 or 10 years into the future because they are as Students of Truth who expect to keep growing and learning over time.

Eventually, though, I stopped attending because some rituals felt too phony and uncomfortable to me. Also, the senior minister at Unity no longer was around, and I was told he had run off with the church secretary without telling anyone where they were going. He left his wife, co-minister of the church, stranded without a retirement plan or a church.

This troubling situation just goes to show that ministers are not holier than other people. They do not have higher moral standards than others. They are just like us. So we should not put them on a pedestal and think they are always the authority we should follow. We need to use our critical thinking skills.

After 20 years of marriage, my second husband fell in love with someone who reported to him at work, and he asked for a divorce. I was 50 years old and devastated. The divorce happened, and now I believe that what I learned at a Unity Church is mostly correct; i.e., that “things always happen exactly the way they’re supposed to happen.”

We all have lessons to learn, and if we don’t learn them, we are given another opportunity, and then another, until we see the lesson to be learned and actually learn what we need to know.” Or at least that’s how I rationalize what happened in order to get over a broken heart. (Maybe I will get over it one day.)

After reading Sam Harris’ book mentioned previously, I realized that Christian doctrine simply did not fit me anymore.

So I went church shopping. My two very best friends are Unitarians. One belongs to Horizon UU in Carrollton, and the other belongs to First Unitarian in Dallas. For years, they had encouraged me to check out Unitarianism, and I finally did.

I attended Westside UU for some months when Minister Emeritus Russell Elleven was minister, and I have attended Pathways UU (Hurst) and am a member there. Both churches provide me with what I need: a community of humanists where I can be fully myself.

But I must admit that I do not enjoy church-like Sunday services. What I enjoy the most is the weekly luncheon with my humanist Pathways friends, the Humanists of Fort Worth Book Club, and the HoFW monthly meetings, when I can convince myself to drive over at night from Arlington since traffic on Interstate 20 is always a bear on the return trip. I am so grateful to have met many wonderful UUsers and humanists, which would not have been possible without the two UU churches.

I have struggled with a label to put on myself. I think either atheist or secular humanist is fine because I do not believe in the supernatural—AT ALL. And I definitely believe in separation of church and state. Obviously, science does not have all of the answers about how the universe(s) began, and many unexplainable happenings occur that are not miracles. One day science will be able to explain some or most of those things unexplainable today.

Scientists do not claim to have all of the answers. They are open and welcoming about challenges to scientific theories. If someone has a better answer with higher probabilities, which are supported with evidence, then science accepts the revised theory and moves forward. That is a major difference between science and religion or faith. With faith, we are asked to believe without any evidence. Interestingly, this is the only area of our lives in which we are asked to believe something without evidence. We are not asked to buy a new car and just have faith that it is the best car. Why is everything different when it comes to religion?

Not a shred of evidence exists for most of the sacred doctrines Christians profess to believe in—the Virgin Mary, the resurrection, the Trinity, the Holy Ghost, etc. Speaking of the Trinity, why would God send himself to Earth to be tortured and sacrificed to him to cleanse humans of original sin?

If God is omnipotent, couldn’t he just have told his prophets on Earth through divine revelation to write in the Bible “I forgive all humanity and do not hold them accountable for Adam and Eve’s disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit?” If you think about it, it is goofy. The Bible advocates wa-a-y-y-y too much bloody violence as a means of showing love for God.

Think of the world today without religion! We would have no Israeli/Palestinian conflict, no ISIS, no Sharia law in Sweden where Muslims

walk the streets to ensure girls are dressed modestly. We would have no Sunni versus Shia, no flogging of bloggers in Saudi Arabia for a blog post, no subway bombings or murders of journalists and cartoonists, no 9/11, no death penalty for gay people in Uganda, no hate speech from Westboro Baptist Church as they picket funerals of gay people or returning soldiers. We would have no right-wing Christians hoping for end-time prophecy, thereby urging war in the Middle East between Jews and Muslims resulting in these so-called Christians being swept up directly to heaven in a nuclear holocaust because theirs is the only true faith.

We would have no Uyghur (Chinese Muslim) problem in China, no Boko Haram putting bombs on little kidnapped Nigerian girls and sending them to market wearing remote detonators because the first little girl waived when she got to market and was instructed to detonate.

We would have no border dispute or threats of nuclear bombs between people in India (Hindus) and Pakistanis (Muslims). No televangelists scamming poor people out of money they should have spent on food or medicine or a doctor. No Benny Hinn. No Jimmy Swaggert. No Jim Bakker. And on and on and on. We would have a better world without religion.

Sometimes, I use the term atheist to describe myself because it is clear and unapologetic. I might even go a step further and call myself a strong atheist. And I have lost friends because of coming out as an atheist. One was a dear friend of 40 years who is a very devout Mormon, who now refuses to take my calls.

My younger sister who just found Jesus in the last year or so wrote me a letter to tell me that she has lost all respect for me after I told her that I am a nonbeliever. That hurt. She later apologized but I am glad she said what she thought she needed to say. We have agreed not to talk to each other about religion because she is not interested in hearing what her big sister has to say on the subject. I’m okay with that. You can’t be a guru in your hometown, as the saying goes.

Most people inwardly gasp when I say I am an atheist to a group where I might be in a conversation circle. Often this happens in a group of people working to solve a social problem, and they know me as a good, moral person. Maybe they have never met an atheist. And they do not know what to say when they have a first encounter with one.

I do not go around screeching “I’m an atheist!” But if someone mentions several times something like “God will handle it” or “it is in God’s hands” or some other such rubbish, I must then say something like “well, that doesn’t work for me because I am

an atheist. Humans are going to have to act to solve this.” And sometimes they think “Uh-oh. Danger here. My preacher has warned me not to associate with people like her.”

And it hurts to be reviled. Poll after poll has shown that atheists are the least trusted people in the U.S., just above child molesters. But I must express who I really am, without worrying about judgment from others. Otherwise I am a hypocrite and in my book, the hypocrite is to be reviled.

That is one of the wonderful things that comes with age. You can be who you really are at your core, you have time to figure that out, and you have learned enough toughness and resilience to accept whatever rejection comes your way because of your views. We older adults do not shy away from talking about things that matter instead of joining the Kardashians-celebrity chatter. We recognize that this is the only life we have and we had better make the most of it.

It is interesting to me how many times one or two people standing in that conversation circle do not say anything immediately when they hear me say I am an atheist, but they come to me later and whisper “me too.” It takes a certain amount of courage, especially in the geographic area where we are living, to come out as an atheist, but when we do that, it gives others the courage to say “me too.”

Therefore, I encourage all nonbelievers to speak up and speak out so others will feel free to say “ME TOO!” And when and if the opportunity arises, encourage atheist politicians to come out so we know who they are and can consider voting for them.

Atheism and Congress

Currently, zero members of Congress openly admit they do not believe in God. Yet two humanist organizations say they know of at least 24 members who have said privately that they are nonbelievers. I agree with the four well-known strong atheists—Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens—that it is not rude to ask some questions about a politician’s beliefs when every other word of his/her campaign rhetoric is about God and Christians to lock down the religious block of voters, yet it is considered rude to ask them if they believe the end times are near or if they believe in plural marriage or any number of religious beliefs. It is quite possible that (s)he will vote on U.S. policies in the Middle East and other policies where their beliefs will directly affect all of us.

Religion has been kept out of the realm of polite conversation. Why is that? It needs to be talked about a lot more! Yes, it is hard. Yes, in spite of that, it needs to happen. The world will become a much more peaceful place for all of us if more atheists speak up and speak out and religion bites the dust.

MA grows through friendliness, outreach efforts, and community participation



MA members carry flags and post signs as part of an Independence Day parade.

(continued from page 1)

active as a director and treasurer and has held many outreach events and projects through the years to help things grow.

McDonald describes himself as “not a formal kind of leader.” But he acknowledges making administrative changes that enabled the organization to increase funding, including instituting a pickle jar for donations and instituting dues at various levels. After people attended a few times, he would present them with a membership form.

When the Web site was first started, he thinks having his photograph on the site helped people know someone when they walked in, which he said made it easier for people to acclimate to a completely new group.

“At our Wednesday socials, I always sat looking toward where people came into the room so new visitors could see a face they were familiar with from the Web site. I can’t tell you the number of times I saw people’s faces brighten up when they saw a face they were looking for,” he said.

He also set up a program to give newcomers a welcome kit containing a folder with information about MA, a membership application, and the most recent newsletter. He also gave them a Metroplex Atheist pen to keep.

In the fall of 2008, McDonald said the group discussed putting up billboards in Dallas and Fort Worth. During that time he also organized the Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason (DFWCoR) as an outreach program, which actually predated the National Coalition of Reason. This outreach combined with billboard advertising helped publicize the MA’s name.

With a donation from the American Humanist Association, MA put up billboards in March of 2009, one on Interstate 35E in Dallas and another on Interstate 35W in Fort Worth. The billboards said “Don’t believe in God? ... You’re not alone.”

McDonald said the billboards created quite a stir and received news coverage from most local news outlets and introduced the organization to the entire Metroplex, increasing both interest and membership.

In December 2010, MA put signs on Fort Worth buses. The signs had an American flag motif in the background with pictures of many actual atheists and the words “Millions of Americans are good without God.”

“We got more publicity about this than we could have imagined. This event ended up being covered by media outlets all over the world.” Some of the news outlets who covered it are listed at the following Web link:

<http://dfwcor.org/media-coverage/good-without-godq-fort-worth-bus-campaign-2010.html>

He was interviewed on several television news stations, and he appeared on Fox News, Channel 4 and was interviewed in their newsroom for the evening news by one of the anchors. The publicity helped increase memberships in most, if not all, DFWCoR organizations. Metroplex Atheists reaped the greatest benefit because he was president at the time and received most of the television facetime.

So McDonald believes that the organization’s growth is directly attributable to “a combination of reasons, both external publicity to let people know we were around and an internal effort to welcome newcomers and make them feel accepted.”

He continues holding community outreach events. In one recent effort in 2014, he taught a religious philosophy class. Forty students attended, including Christians, Muslims, and atheists.

The current president is Randy Word, and the organization continues to draw new members under his leadership.

Despite the controversies surrounding



MA President Randy Word holds a flag at a parade attended by MA members.

O’Hair and American Atheists during the years of disbanding and later dur-

ing the dramatic disappearance and subsequent murder of the O’Hairs, Metroplex Atheists remains affiliated with American Atheists and with two other organizations, the Atheists Alliance of America (AAA) and the DFWCoR.

AAA was formed as part of the Atheist Alliance in 1991 and was subsequently renamed to reflect its U.S. membership, since the organization also has a related international component, Atheists Alliance International (AAI). AAA publishes a quarterly magazine, *Secular Nation*, produces educational podcasts, and conducts national conferences designed to “develop and provide educational, advocacy, and community-building programs for the atheist community.”

DFWCoR was established to help build the public profile of atheist and secular groups across Dallas and Tarrant Counties and to increase cooperation among these organizations. Alix Jules, who attended the March 11 Humanist of Fort Worth meeting, is a DFWCoR coordinator.

The Internet and the explosion of social media have contributed substantially to the growth, cooperation, and cohesion among local atheist organizations today. Web sites such as Facebook and Meetup provide organizations with platforms that draw other like-minded populations to events and increase public awareness.

Like most organizations, MA has Meetup and Facebook sites and their own Web site at <http://www.metroplexatheists.org>, which offers newsletters, updates about major events, and a calendar. The monthly MA business meeting often has been held at the Irving Garden & Arts Center, 901 Senter Road, Irving, TX 75060, although they sometimes meet in other nearby locations provided on their calendar. Wednesday night socials are held at J. Gilligan’s Bar & Grill in Arlington. Events are also held for children who attend the Winter Party and participate in laser tag at Laser Quest in North Richland Hills and in community service projects.

Today, the MA Meetup site shows 891 Meetup members, and the organization has become a nonprofit organization organized to provide education, maintain Constitutional separation of government and religion, protect atheists’ rights, and provide social meetings for people who share similar worldviews.

MA could still be considered one of the more activist atheist organizations in North Texas. President Randy Word recalls that MA’s “first real boots-on-the-ground activism started under Dick Hogan and Randy Gorman. We demanded equal time for a Winter Solstice sign at the Parker County Courthouse around 2000, and we kept that going for about 4 years. We also protested the Birdville school district’s back-to-school rally that was a thinly disguised religious rally.”

Besides supporting Adopt-A-Highway projects and most recently the

CureSearch Walk for Children’s Cancer held March 25th, MA members participate in or sponsor various freedom and human rights-related events, such as the 2013 Alan Ross Texas Freedom Parade, gay pride rallies and parades, and occasional protests.

In September 2014, the Tarrant County chapter joined the Rowlett MA chapter in organizing and conducting a protest against the City of Rowlett to draw attention to discrimination against nonbelievers. The protest was a reaction to the City’s rejection of MA’s request for a local atheist resident to give an invocation at a city council meeting. MA in Tarrant County teamed up with MA Rowlett to bring attention to discrimination against nonbelievers.

The close cooperation among Dallas and Fort Worth atheist communities is made clear simply by reviewing their Web sites and the links among people posted on their Meetup sights. MA is strategically positioned to help bridge the geographic divide between Dallas and Fort Worth organizations and has cross-over members and supporters from freethought communities located east and west of the Arlington divide.

Many of the people who participate in MA also participate in or support various other local and area organizations, and occasionally their members join HoFW events.

MA has many supporters from the freethought community, including the Fellowship of Freethought Dallas, which has more than 1,900 Meetup members; the Rowlett MA group, a satellite group; the North Texas Skeptics, who meet in Dallas and Addison and have some 188 Meetup members and support science and rational thinking; and the North Texas Church of Freethought, which has more than 450 Meetup members.

The first Sunday of each month, the North Texas Church of Freethought holds a Sunday morning atheist service conducted in various locations, including hotels in and around the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport followed by social events, such as a gathering for teens conducted at 1 p.m. or other social events. They also provide a Freethought Salon meeting on most other Sundays and host regular Friday night game nights.

The close cooperation among Dallas and Fort Worth atheist, agnostic, and humanist organizations is clear. We know that many members of MA and other organizations appear in the Meetup profiles of sister groups, such as HoFW and FreeThinkers of Fort Worth. Founded August 7, 2007, FreeThinkers of Fort Worth has 812 Meetup members. As with all organizations, the core membership typically is less than the Meetup membership, but Meetup serves as the opening to large, new populations that help keep organizations operating and vibrant.

Additional information about other local atheist organizations will be provided in the next issue.

The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought by Susan Jacoby



By Morris Meador

We chose *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* by Susan Jacoby for our February Humanist Book Club meeting. Bad winter weather forced cancellation of the meeting, so we rescheduled the discussion for our Saturday, March 28th meeting.

Several months ago, we read Susan Jacoby's book *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* and enjoyed it immensely, which is one reason we

selected another of her books for review.

Jacoby masterfully conveys the importance of individual freethinkers such as Ingersoll in a compelling, understandable way. The points she makes are backed up with relevant background material and meaningful quotes from this very quotable man. The book was a learning experience, which we hope will attract the interests of more humanists in the future.

Robert G. Ingersoll (1833 – 1899) was a larger than life person, who became one of the most popular orators during the Golden Age of Freethought (1875 – 1914). He drew crowds of thousands to his speeches and entertained even those who did not agree with his agnostic beliefs.

As a preacher's kid, Ingersoll had many humorous, satirical stories to tell of the contradictions and evils of organized religion. He was a powerful

champion of the secular government established in the United States Constitution. Jacoby points out that Ingersoll did many things to revive the appreciation of Thomas Paine as an original advocate of government free from religious influence.

Ingersoll was a lawyer and defender of numerous people against government and societal restrictions of free speech. He was a good friend and defender of the poet Walt Whitman and an ardent advocate for women's suffrage with enlightened views of women's rights over their own bodies, in the same way these ideas are supported in modern contemporary society.

He was a great popularizer of Darwin's *Origin of Species* at a time when Americans were just learning of this revolutionary understanding of our origins. Amazingly, Ingersoll was a Republican, but in a time before the party became what it is today.

In an "Afterword" Jacoby describes Ingersoll as "the missing link between the revolutionary generation and millions of late nineteenth-century Americans, whether born in the New World or the Old, who had forgotten or never knew that their nation was built on the premise of human, not civic, authority. . . Ingersoll was one of the grand doubters who labored to clear the environment of poisonous certitude for future generations."

He explained the true meaning and value of science as a system of inquiry. Jacoby also says that Ingersoll, like no one before him, made the connection between repressive religion and everyday burdens and injustices with the aim of restoring historical memory of a founding generation that had explicitly rejected theocracy as the basis of national government. Jacoby presents us with Robert Ingersoll, this vital link to the genius of our founding fathers.

Molecular biologist Zachary Moore speaks to HoFW about Darwinism, racism, and the evolution of science

by Wanda Foster

Zachary Moore, Ph.D., a molecular biologist and prominent member of the North Texas atheist community, used the backdrop of science from the 1700s to the present day to relate the depth and evolution of racism as part of the human condition, as he spoke to the HoFW audience at the regular, second Wednesday meeting held March 11.

While we celebrate Charles Darwin's life and his scientific theories of evolution,

Moore points out that Darwin did have racist attitudes, which were common among his mentors and in society as a whole at the time. Darwin did distinguish various human races as subspecies, and he believed that some races were superior to others.

As people and science have evolved, we find many of the early ideas about race deplorable, yet we have not fully eliminated these ideas from modern society. People often are unaware of their own racist attitudes and thoughts just as much as Darwin was for his

era. A sense of difference, which Moore described as "otherness," continues to pervade society and contribute to injustices.

Current events such as racial divides in Ferguson, MO, and racial profiling across the U.S. reemphasize the fact that racial prejudice and injustice continue to exist.

Many of the scientists and philosophers of the 16th and 17th centuries were products of a time when slaves were maintained throughout England. Although the English abolitionist movement began in the 1770s and 1780s, slavery continued in England until the British government passed the 1833 Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom Abolishing Slavery.

Darwin was born in 1809 and throughout his formative years lived with mentors with their own, preconceived racist attitudes common during the era. Yet many texts fail to recognize that Darwin grew up in a household in which both his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, and his father, Robert Darwin, both successful physicians, were freethinkers and Charles became an agnostic at the age of 40. All of them were staunch abolitionists in an era where many other people were not.

Darwin's opinions largely reflected the contradictory ideals of his time.

While he attended the University of Edinburgh between 1825 and 1827, he formed a close friendship with a neighbor, John Edmonstone, a black freed slave who taught him taxidermy, who Darwin purportedly described as a "very pleasant and intelligent man." However, even as an abolitionist later in life, he inferred through his own privilege as a white, educated, wealthy man, the assertion that people that looked like him represented an evolutionary superior race of human.

Moore pointed out in his discussion that we all are products of our time, our environment, and our mentors. Darwin was no different. He studied with prominent philosophers and scientists, who also classified humans according to racial hierarchies and subjective, cultural attributes based on their perceptions rather than on fact.

Moore emphasized that the science of the period was different than it is today and relied heavily on subjective observations, classification, and philosophy rather than on objective scientific methodologies, many of which had not yet matured during Darwin's lifetime.

The meeting ended with a lengthy question-and-answer session in which the group discussed the lack of evolution of modern racial attitudes and the need to monitor and overcome racial divides.



Zachary Moore, a prominent member of the atheist movement in North Texas, speaks to Humanists of Fort Worth about the evolution of science and racial attitudes since Charles Darwin's death in 1882. (Photo by Alix Jules, DFwCoR)

	April 2015	May 2015	June 2015
Key HoFW Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular Meeting, Wednesday, April 8, 7 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX, Keith Annis will briefly discuss Tarrant County water issues, and Wanda Foster will discuss the progress of Human Action Thursday, April 23 social to be announced at http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/#calendar HoFW Book Club, Saturday, April 25, 3 to 4:30 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular Meeting, Wednesday, May 13, 7 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX Thursday, May 28 social to be announced http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/#calendar HoFW Book Club, Saturday, May 23, 3 to 4:30 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular Meeting, Wednesday, June 10, 7 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth June 25 social to be announced at http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/#calendar HoFW Book Club, Saturday, June 27, 3 to 4:30 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX
Other Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CureSearch Walk for Children's Cancer, 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 PM, Saturday April 25, Texas Motor Speedway, 3545 Lone Star Circle, Fort Worth, TX with participants from MA and Freethinkers of Fort Worth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> American Humanist Association 74th Annual Conference, May 7 - 10, 2015, Grand Hyatt Hotel in Denver, CO http://www.cvent.com/events/74th-annual-aha-conference-registration/event-summary-e8dc8cd89eb34fc7be9260b93a102ef6.aspx 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Camp Quest, OK June 14th to June 20th, 2015, Chouteau, OK, secular camp providing a place for children to explore their developing worldviews, ask questions, and make friends in an environment that supports critical thinking and skepticism. (Camp Quest, TX will be in August.)

*Students of The Woodlands Christian School assigned to ask humanists questions about their beliefs***(continued from page 1)**

Why do you think the world has gone wrong? Crime rates are at historic lows. Life expectancies are at historic highs. People are healthier today than they used to be. Smallpox has been eradicated from the world. The Guinea worm disease is on the verge of eradication. A visitor from an earlier era would think we have it pretty good.

Why is there evil in the world? Is it evil when a cheetah kills a gazelle? The gazelle doesn't like it, but for the cheetah survival depends on it. Are natural disasters evil? When the tectonic plates shift and a damaging earthquake occurs, it is natural, not the malevolent deed of some being that wants to harm us. New Orleans doesn't get hit with hurricanes because there are too many homosexuals there. It gets hit with hurricanes because it is close to the coast in a hurricane-prone region.

Why do bad things happen to good people? They just do. Just like when good things happen to bad people.

5. What is the solution to the problems we face? (What happens when I fail and how do I make things right?)

There are problems of all sorts that we face. If you're struggling in school, you can increase your time studying or engage a tutor. If you're struggling with your marriage or another relationship, you can find a trusted person to counsel you.

If you've wronged someone, you can talk to that person and find out how you can make it right. I'm no expert in any of these, but ultimately it is up to the individual to accept responsibility and work to improve the situation.

6. What is right and wrong? (Is moral truth absolute or relative?)

(Answers to 6 and 7 combined.)

7. Is there a universal moral law? (Does everyone know the difference between right and wrong?)

These questions are more philosophical than the ones I usually ponder. I tend to search for practical truths. I think overall questions of morality, right and wrong, are answered collectively by society, and these things change. Issues like slavery and subjugation of women have been acceptable in past times (including in both the Old and New Testaments), but today we object to them. Some things are universally (or almost universally) accepted as wrong: the murder of cartoonists in France, and murder in general. I think this is because society has come to these conclusions, not because there is a universal moral law guiding us. After all, the near-murder by Abraham of Isaac was looked upon as virtuous in ancient times. Today we would imprison or institutionalize Abraham.

8. What happens at death? (Where to go when we die, how do we know, and what does it look like?)

I don't know, and I don't think anyone alive knows, either. I expect that we

just die. Our body stops working, including our brain, and our conscious thoughts cease. I don't think we go anywhere. I don't think our minds live on. I don't believe in the idea of a soul or a collective consciousness. I don't believe in these things because they seem highly improbable, and I don't know of any credible evidence saying that they exist.

9. What does your faith/worldview do with the person of Jesus?

I believe in the historical Jesus, but not in the miracles credited to him, or in teachings that he was divine. I don't rely upon the Gospels as historical documents. Much of what we have about Jesus was written long after the events by people who did not actually witness the events described. I consider most of the church's teachings about Jesus as mythological stories, no different in nature from what we learn about the Greek and Roman gods. Jesus taught some virtuous things, like loving your neighbor, but his teachings were not perfect. Take Matthew 15:27, for example. Jesus referred to the woman as a dog, only showing compassion for her when she noted that even dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table. Also, consider the idea of hell. Eternal torture and punishment for not believing in the correct god is about as repugnant as it gets. This is not an Old Testament belief that can be discarded. Jesus himself taught about it. So while he had many good things to say, he also said some things we should not follow.

I hope this helps. I wish each of you well.

Take care,

Adam

Elizabeth D and Blair wrote:

Mr. Meador,

Thank you so much for taking the time to reply back to me. I looked back at the website and found it very helpful, but I would like to know what your own personal opinion is on the matter of how you answer the person of Jesus. This is the only question that I would really like to have your own opinion on but if you could tell me also possibly how you decided to become a secular humanist I would love to hear about that as well. Thank you.

Morris Meador Wrote: Hi..

I am going to try to answer your question but it requires that I share my personal spiritual journey. I grew up in the South (North Carolina) as a Southern Baptist. I was very involved in church and had decided to go into some type of church work as I went to college. I went to a junior college in North Carolina and then to senior college in Oklahoma at Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU). Growing up I was presented with one view of religion, Jesus, etc. This was the Evangelical Christian view. I had doubts as early as in high school as I guess everyone does. There was an altar call at the end of every service at First Baptist Church, but I noticed that not too many people took the theology behind

this that seriously. I mean if the people in my church really believed that everyone was going to hell that did not make a profession of faith in Christ, it seemed to me that getting people "saved" would have been much more important than it actually was. Later in college I was introduced to other religions and even quite different Christian beliefs. I went as a summer missionary to North Dakota one summer where most people went to Catholic, Lutheran, or Greek Orthodox churches. It shook me up when one person referred to my church as a sect. Where I grew up everyone was either Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian. With minor differences, all had the same view of religion.

At OBU I majored in philosophy and took a lot of religion courses. Taking church history courses gave me a very different understanding of how Christianity developed. It was eye opening to study, especially early church history and the various councils that developed Christian doctrines. The process was very political. There were many competing views of Jesus and what his life meant. The ones that lost became heresies. Later at the Southern Baptist seminary in Kansas City, Midwestern, I really began to study the Bible and especially the New Testament in earnest. My professors taught the Bible from a historical, critical point of view. This means they drew on scholarship that tries to understand the events of the Bible in a historical rather than a theological context. Much of this scholarship has been around since 1800, but it was all new to me. On the one hand I felt really cheated that my church had never shared any of this with me before. On the other hand it was exhilarating to really begin to understand who Jesus was and what he taught. The picture was quite a bit different from the one presented to me in my church.

The scholarship I am referring to for example concerns the Synoptic Gospels. Since the 1800s most scholars have accepted what is called the Markan hypothesis that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke based their information of Jesus on the Gospel of Mark and added other information from different sources. The Gospel of John comes from a totally different tradition. All the Gospels were written a generation after Jesus' death, so no Gospel writer knew Jesus personally. In fact, some of Paul's letters actually were written earlier than the Synoptic Gospels. Each Gospel tells the story of Jesus from a different angle, and there are many conflicts in chronology.

You can read a summary of much of this just by Googling "Jesus" and reading the article in Wikipedia. The image of Jesus that comes from a historical, critical study is that of a Jewish rabbi who taught about what a person's inner personal life should be like. It involved loving the people around you and not condemning anyone on the basis of externals like race, religion, or gender.

I don't want to drag this out. On a per-

sonal level, all of this time I was dealing with questions like, what does my call to the ministry mean? How can I tell what is God's call? How about prayer? All of what I learned growing up in church did not seem to be working. I was really trying. Now what I have come to understand is that I was born in 1947, smack dab in the middle of the 20th century and my way of looking at everything reflects this. The world that Jesus lived in and when Christian doctrines were formulated at a time when scientific understanding was totally different. By the way, it is obvious, but not thought about too much, that Jesus was not even a Christian. The god, Christ, was created by the church long after he was dead!

Much of my understanding of the man Jesus, as opposed to the Christ of Christianity, came to be solidified with the AIDS crisis. I came out a gay man while in the seminary. I soon met and fell in love with another man, who had just had to leave the Lutheran ministry because of his sexual orientation. We have now been together in a committed, monogamous relationship for 36 years. We raised Keith's 3 children from a young age. They are now all in their 40s and have lives of their own. We were lucky. Many of our friends were not and died of AIDS. I think the Christian church should be blamed for much of the AIDS crisis. The church for the most part turned its back on gay people with condemnation rather than love and acceptance.

Many of my friends looked for love and acceptance in one-night stands and bar life after the church told them they were going to hell anyway and could not have meaningful relationships together. It was in this context that the AIDS virus spread so fast and killed so many people. The understanding I have of Jesus, and most scholars think his parables reflect his authentic teaching, is of a man who accepted and loved those around him and did not condemn people for external differences. My favorite parable is the story of the Good Samaritan.

It has taken me a bit to get here, but I think you can understand my view of Jesus. I think he was a man who if alive today would be called a humanist. His values certainly inspire my own and are identical to humanist's views of individual freedom, quality of life, and social justice.

As a person born in the 20th century and now living in the 21st century, I just have no information about any god. Growing up as a Christian studying the Bible, church history, theology, and philosophy, I now see all religion as being more of a problem than a help in the world today. Jesus' teaching and life is a great example of how we should live. Ultimately, however, humans are capable and have the responsibility to create our own values.

I am sending this email to the others in your group as well as the head of our Fort Worth Humanist group.

Sincerely yours,

Morris Meador