

THE COWTOWN HUMANIST

FEBRUARY 2006

DOUBLE-BILL ON TAP FOR FEBRUARY 8 HOFW MEETING

February, as most if not all of you know, is Black History Month. To celebrate the occasion we are privileged to have two speakers from the Afro-American community, Peter J. Johnson and Marc Veasey, to discuss the history of civil rights in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. They will discuss how the community of color views the history of the civil rights movement locally, and how they view the current situation. They want to discuss how social progressives who do not believe in a deity can link arms with the Black communities, where faith and organized religion are the underpinnings that hold those communities together. The idea is to promote better understanding and communication on both sides so that right-wing extremists are no longer able to divide and conquer. This should be a first step in the development of a fruitful relationship.

Reverend Peter J. Johnson, founder and CEO of the Peter Johnson Institute of Non-Violence, was born in Louisiana in 1945. Befriended in childhood by both Thurgood Marshall and Roy Wilkins, he joined the civil rights movement in 1958 after meeting Rosa Parks. He attended Southern University in Baton Rouge and subsequently joined the Freedom Ride. Later he joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and became the youngest member of Dr. Martin Luther King's original staff of the SCLC. While standing up for social justice, he was arrested more than 100 times, beaten 14 times and hospitalized six times. He continues his commitment to non-violence and civil rights with the Institute of Non-Violence in Dallas.

Marc Veasey was born and raised in Tarrant County and has lived in Fort Worth almost his entire life. He is a graduate of Arlington Heights High School and of Texas Wesleyan University where he studied Mass Communications. Representative Veasey was elected to represent Texas House District 95 in November 2004.

Increasing access to quality, affordable health care, as well as fighting for public schools and local economic development, have been the focuses of his political agenda. In addition to his duties as State Representative, Marc currently works as a health care consultant, providing outreach services to individuals who are HIV/AIDS positive, and as an account executive for a documents retrieval company.

Prior to holding elective office, Marc worked on the staff of Congressman Martin Frost where he served as one of the congressman's key aides in Tarrant County. He has also worked at Polytechnic High School, as a part-time sports writer for the *Star Telegram* and for Source Media's IT Network.

Representative Veasey is active in the Tarrant County Black Genealogical Society and the Volunteer Center of Tarrant County.

This program should be especially interesting to all local Humanists. We urge all who can to show their support for humanist values through their attendance.

THE TEXAS POLITICAL MAP

This is an election year for Texas. The big prize is the governor's office. Governor Rick Perry and two candidates running as independents, Carole Strayhorn and Kinky Friedman, have already thrown their hats in the ring. The Democrats will presumably choose between two announced candidates in the spring primary. Kinky Friedman's presence will suffice to keep the campaign lively. (Hopefully, everyone saw Morley Safer's interview of Kinky at the latter's hill country ranch on 60 Minutes January 22 and some perhaps stayed up late enough on January 25 to see him interviewed by Jay Leno on the Tonight Show. In the former, he told Safer that he was pro-choice, pro-education, pro-school prayer, anti-bigotry, okay with gay marriage and for protecting the border.) Reportedly, he has raised \$1.5 million for his campaign, twice as much as the two candidates vying for the Democratic nomination, but a drop in the bucket compared with the \$20 million raised by Perry and Strayhorn.)

One may surmise that the governor will wage as much of his campaign as he can from the pulpit where he can remind the Texas electorate of his successful shepherding of proposition 2 through the constitutional referendum on November 2005. With two new anti-abortion justices on the U.S. Supreme Court, he may be tempted to endorse new restrictions on women's reproductive freedom. The Religious Right is already savoring the possibility of reversing *Roe* in the not too distant future. That calls for new test cases.

Also, opponents of Darwinian evolution are putting pressure on Texas Attorney General Abbott for a favorable ruling regarding the power of local school boards to select their own textbooks—i.e., textbooks that favor intelligent design, not Darwinism. How Abbott may rule and how this will play out politically remain to be seen.

While Perry has to be rated a heavy favorite for re-election, he is not necessarily a shoo-in. He is vulnerable on several scores:

- Texas has the highest percentage of people (25.1 percent) without health insurance coverage of any state. Nearly 20 percent of Texas children lack coverage.

- Texas has the sixth-highest poverty rate, 16.4 percent, among the 50 states.

--Among adults 25 and older, Texas has a higher percentage who did not graduate from high school (24.3 percent) than have a bachelor's degree (23.2 percent).

--If the current drought persists through spring and summer, the state will have to start facing up to how to cope with a water shortage made even more serious by a rapidly increasing population. Texas also scores poorly environmentally in many respects, especially with regard to a large concentration of refineries on the Gulf Coast and high levels of air pollution on most days in parts of the Metroplex. The proposed construction of several coal-fired power plants could further exasperate air pollution in North Central Texas.

--Despite several special Lege sessions over the past two or three years, the state has still not found a solution to the school financing crisis. On November 22, the Texas Supreme Court declared that the current method for funding Texas schools amounts to a statewide property tax and therefore violates the state constitution. Justices gave the Legislature until June 1 to devise a new tax structure. Presumably the governor will convene another special session in the spring. Failure to produce legislation would be campaign fodder for opposition candidates.

(Sources: Texas Press Association, *The Texas Observer*, *KERA*, and Jack Z. Smith, columnist, *FWST*)

The other candidates have plenty of bones to pick with the governor's stewardship. The question remains whether they can rouse Texas voters from their apathy.

HoFW NEWS AND VIEWS

JANUARY MEETING: Fellow humanist Mary Hunter dazzled us with her presentation on the inconsistencies and errors of Intelligent Design proponents in their assault on Darwinian evolution. Suffice it to say that they have failed to even make a chink in the naturalistic case endorsed by almost all

biologists. Absent an appalling ignorance of science among the American public and the intimidation of fundamentalist clergy, Intelligent Design would scarcely constitute a ripple in the public forum.

Mary passed out a list of books and web-sites, both pro and con, for those wanting to dig deeper into the debate or who wish to be kept closely informed on new developments. We will be happy to make copies available to those who missed the meeting if you will so inform your editor.

We were gratified that 33 humanists were able to attend the meeting.

FEBRUARY MEETING: Our February 8, the Reverend Peter J. Johnson and Marc Veasey, State Representative for the 95th district will be our speakers. The Reverend Johnson is a long-time civil rights' advocate. Representative Veasey has enjoyed a high profile for several years in the local political community. We will be convening at 7:00 p.m. at our usual meeting place, Friends of the Fort Worth Library Bookstore located in the Wedgmont Shopping Center just off Wedgmont Circle North. From I-20 take Granbury Road South to Wedgmont Circle North. Turn left onto Wedgmont Circle North. You will notice a CITGO station on your left. Immediately thereafter turn left again into the Wedgworth Shopping Center. Going west on I-20, you can take the Trail Lake Road exit and approach the shopping center from the southeast.

MARCH MEETING: Ken Carlson will talk about the Dutch Jewish 17th century philosopher, Baruch de Spinoza, at our March 8 session. Spinoza has been hailed as the first secular humanist. He led a morally exemplary life, to the consternation of his religious foes. Interest in Spinoza's philosophy has, consequently, grown sharply in recent decades.

PRE-MEETING DINNER: Our pre-meeting dinner will be held at Joe's Italian Restaurant across the parking lot from our meeting place. Time: 5:30 p.m.

TREASURER'S REPORT: The Association had income from dues and donations of \$48 and expenditures of \$125 for the latest reporting period. Our balance stood at \$800.02 as of January 11.

REMINDERS: Dolores will be collecting canned food to be distributed by WestAid to the needy. Please remember to bring one or more cans.

Anyone interested in catching up on his or her dues can still do so. See Dolores.

Dolores is progressing very well from her recent knee surgery to the point that she should be graduating from a walker to a cane very soon. She deeply appreciates the calls, cards and dinners of which she has been the recipient from both HoFW and Westside UU members. We look forward to seeing her at our next meeting.

COMMENTS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NEWSLETTER ARE SOLICITED: If you think there's something missing about your Newsletter or if you would like to contribute a news item or book review, don't hesitate to submit it to the editor.

EXPRESSING APPRECIATION TO THE HOST: Friends of the Fort Worth Public Library Bookstore welcomes book contributions. If you have any books you don't expect to read again and if they are still marketable, consider making a contribution to our host.

YOUR OFFICERS AND HOW TO REACH THEM:

Chairman: Don Ruhs, 1036 Hill Top Pass, Benbrook, 76126-3848; 817-249-1829; ruhsd@sbcglobal.net

Vice Chair & Newsletter Editor: Jim Cheatham, 1582 CR 2730, Glen Rose, 76046; 254-797-0277; halfrey@hyperusa.com

Secretary: Reed Bilz, 6316 Walburn Ct., Fort Worth; 76133; 817-292-7974; rbilz@earthlink.net

Treasurer: Dolores Ruhs (Address same as Don Ruhs)

Immediate Past Chair & Webmaster: Russell Elleven, 6120 Comfort Dr., Fort Worth, 76132; 817-370-2171; info@hofw.org

Program Director: Jeff Rodriguez, 5612 Odom St., Fort Worth, 76114; 817-732-4235; schnooks61@netzero.com

SOME ISSUES OF INTEREST TO HUMANISTS

SENATE LIBERALS IN NEED OF MORE SPINE:

The Alito nomination has been discussed largely in the context of his opposition to abortion rights. If the hearing provided any serious insight at all into the nominee's intentions, it was that he has never changed his early conviction on that point. The judge, who long maintained that *Roe v. Wade* should be overturned—ignored all the efforts of the Senate Judicial Committee chairman, Allen Specter, to get him to provide some cover for pro-choice senators who wanted to support his nomination. ...portraying the Alito nomination as just another volley in the culture wars vastly underestimates its significance. The judge's record strongly suggests that he is an eager lieutenant in the ranks of conservative theorists who ignore our system of checks and balances, elevating the presidency over everything else. He has expressed little enthusiasm for restrictions on presidential power and has espoused the peculiar argument that a president's intent in signing a bill is just as important as the intent of Congress in writing it. ...Justice Alito's refusal to even pretend to sound like a moderate was telling because it would have cost him so little. Chief Justice John Roberts, Jr., who was far more skillful at appearing mainstream at the hearings, has already given indications [most notably in the Oregon assisted suicide case] that whatever he said about the limits of executive power when he was questioned by the Senate has little practical impact on how he will vote now that he has a lifetime appointment. (NYT editorial)

EVERYTHING EXCEPT WHAT WE WANTED TO KNOW

It is disheartening that a matter of such importance as confirming a Supreme Court Justice is a charade—about the nature of the job, about the character of the nominee and about a process that tells us everything except what we need to know. (Jeffrey Toobin, Legal Affairs Correspondent, *New Yorker*)

PARTIAL BIRTH ABORTION ACT RULED UNCONSTITUTIONAL BY TWO U.S. COURTS

Two federal appeals courts on January 31 upheld rulings that the Partial Birth Abortion passed by Congress in 2003 but barred by lower courts is unconstitutional because it does not include an exception when the health of a pregnant woman is at risk. The rulings by the appeals courts in San Francisco and New York were substantially based on a U.S. Supreme Court decision in a 2000 Nebraska case, in which the Supreme Court found that any abortion ban must include an exception allowing a procedure that involves a partly delivered fetus after the first trimester of pregnancy when alternative methods could endanger the woman's health. (NYT)

ACLU SUIT BACKING MUSLIM SCHOLAR CHALLENGES PATRIOT ACT

The ACLU filed a federal lawsuit January 6 seeking to strike down a clause of the USA Patriot Act that bans foreigners who endorse terrorist acts from traveling in this country. The suit was filed on behalf of the scholar Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss academic, and three national organizations of academics or writers who have invited him to speak to their members. Mr. Ramadan's visa was revoked in the summer of 2004 when he was to take up a position at Notre Dame University. Mr. Ramadan, though an outspoken critic of the Bush administration's Mideast policies, denies any connection to terrorists. (NYT)

ASSISTED-SUICIDE RULING MAY AFFECT PAINKILLER CASES

Doctors who specialize in pain management and their advocates are hoping the Supreme Court decision upholding Oregon's assisted-suicide law will boost their efforts to defend colleagues accused by the government of illegally prescribing narcotic painkillers to their patients. With dozens of doctors, pharmacists and patients now in jail or awaiting imprisonment after being convicted of drug trafficking, the specialists and their attorneys say the Oregon ruling supports their contention that prosecutors have reached improperly into the state-regulation of medicine. Whether the court will go so far remains in doubt since the court has allowed the federal government authority to override state laws prohibiting the use of medical marijuana. (WP)

Sixty minutes' Murray Safer had an interesting segment on the program Jan. 29 that featured a convicted "drug trafficker" sentenced to 25 years of prison. The convicted had suffered severe spinal injuries as the result of an accident and, to assure himself a plentiful supply of painkiller, had forged his doctor's prescription. Although the Florida authorities had no evidence that he had resold the drugs or had otherwise disposed of them, they obtained a conviction on the basis of evidence they found in his home indicating they were being consumed at a rate far beyond any conceivable need. A New York City pharmacologist consulted independently by CBS, however, affirmed that some people in his condition might in fact need such dosage to obtain relief. Overkill?

APPEALS COURT UPHOLDS FFRF'S RIGHT TO CHALLENGE FAITH-BASED OFFICE

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit, in a Jan. 13 decision, ruled in favor of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in its quest to challenge the creation of the White House Office of Faith-based Initiatives. A panel of the 7th Circuit voted 2-1 that taxpayers have a right under Art. III of the Constitution to sue over a violation of the First Amendment Establishment Clause, even though Congress had not specifically earmarked money for the challenged program or activity. "Taxpayers have standing to challenge an executive-branch program, alleged to promote religion, that is financed by a Congressional appropriation, even if the program was created entirely within the executive branch, as by presidential executive order. ...By forbidding Congress to establish a national church, the Establishment Clause places a specific limitation on Congressional appropriations, since the essence of an established religion is government financial support," wrote Judge Richard Posner, joined by Justice Wood. Judge Ripple dissented.

"Had we been denied standing, said Annie Laurie Gaylor, Foundation co-president, the court would be saying *no* citizen has the right to sue over executive branch-instigated activities that violate the separation of church and state. (*Freethought Today*)

GAY MARRIAGE POLITICS IN VIRGINIA AND MARYLAND

Populist champions of intolerance in Virginia and Maryland are pushing constitutional amendments that would outlaw not only gay marriage but also civil unions, domestic partnerships and any other arrangement between consenting adults who happen to be homosexual. Those amendments could have cruel and discriminatory effects, but that is of little moment to some of their advocates, who, confident that the wind of popular opinion is at their backs, assert a monopolistic claim on morality and God's law. ...Both houses of the [VA] General Assembly have voted to put the amendment on the November ballot. Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D), who is opposed to gay marriage, nonetheless is balking at the amendment as written. ...Republicans in Annapolis apparently see in the gay-marriage issue a chance to motivate their base voters and coax swing voters away from the Democrats ahead of this year's elections for governor and U.S. senator. (WP editorial)

The Maryland amendment was defeated in the State House on Feb. 2 but only after the Democrats tacked on an amendment unacceptable to many supporters.

IN 'DESIGN' VS. DARWINISM, DARWIN WINS POINT IN ROME

The official Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, published an article on January 17 labeling as "correct" the recent decision by Federal District Judge Jones that intelligent design should not be taught as a scientific alternative to evolution. "If the model proposed by Darwin is not considered sufficient, one should search for another," opined Fiorenzo Facchini, a professor of evolutionary biology at the University of Bologna. In the scientific world, biological evolution "represents the interpretative key of the history of life on Earth." He lamented that certain American "creationists" had brought the debate back to the "dogmatic" 1800s, and said their arguments weren't science but ideology. (AP)

STUDY TIES POLITICAL LEANINGS TO HIDDEN BIASES

Studies presented to the Society for Personality and Social Psychology in late January produce evidence that emotions and implicit assumptions often influence why people choose their political affiliations, and that partisans stubbornly discount any information that challenges their own preexisting beliefs. One study presented at the Palm Beach, CA, Conference explored the role between racial bias and political affiliations by analyzing self-reported beliefs, voting patterns and the results of psychological tests that measure implicit attitudes—subtle stereotypes people hold about various groups. That study found that supporters of President Bush and other conservatives had stronger self-admitted and implicit biases against blacks than liberals do. (WP) [So what else is new?]

OLE ANTHONY TAKES ON AN ASPIRING FUNDAMENTALIST, THE REVEREND PARSLEY

An Ohio preacher who is trying to make a name for himself in the Religious Right faces a new round of questions about his extravagant lifestyle and fund-raising practices. The Rev. Rod Parsley, pastor of World Harvest Church in Columbus and founder of a group called the Center for Moral Clarity, is an up-and-coming Religious Right figure working hard to make himself a national figure. At 48, Parsley is young enough to replace aging movement leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat (“Potty”) Robertson. Parsley also has a nationally broadcast television ministry.

Parsley is extremely active in Republican politics in Ohio. In November 2004, he worked to bring out voters to support a state constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriage in Ohio. Many of those voters, analysts believe, also backed President George W. Bush, perhaps providing him with a margin of victory in that key swing state.

Ole Anthony of the Dallas-based Trinity Foundation, a group that monitors televangelists, notes that Parsley lives in a sprawling \$1 million home. [Ole was our November 2004 speaker.] Anthony called Parsley a “power-hungry” man with “an extravagant lifestyle that has become the hallmark of televangelists these days.”

According to *American Prospect*, Parsley’s secrecy about his church’s finances has led Ministry Watch, a conservative Christian organization that monitors financial accountability practices, to give his and other well-known Word of Faith organizations an ‘F’ rating for transparency.

Anthony told *American Prospect* that Parsley enlisted the aid of a Georgia attorney named Dale Allison to help his church grow. The publication described Allison as “a brazen con man who helped pastors set up dictatorial churches, through which they enriched themselves by convincing followers that God required them to give their money to the pastor.” Allison was disbarred in 1997.

Perhaps better legal counsel would have kept him out of the legal scrapes Parsley has been a party to in recent years. A painting contractor sued Parsley and his father claiming that they assaulted him in a dispute over money. Another lawsuit accused Parsley’s father of sexual harassment. In yet another lawsuit Parsley was sued by a church employee for firing him after a complaint about Parsley’s failure to pay overtime hours. Parsley has also been criticized for injecting himself into the Republican governor’s primary on behalf of Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, the same official who miffed Democrats by his hasty certification of the results of the 2004 presidential election. (C&S)

WORKPLACE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT’S EFFECTS MAY NOT ALL BE SO INNOCENT

Legislation titled “The Workplace Religious Freedom Act” is expected to be reintroduced this year. The bill requires employers to make “reasonable accommodations” for employees’ religious needs unless they

cause a “significant difficulty or expense” to the employers. While intended primarily to cover things like requests for time off from work for religious observances, the act’s language could lead to anti-civil and personal rights abuses. Pharmacists refusing to fill certain prescriptions because doing so would violate their religious beliefs might cite this legislation in their defense. The measure might also be used by employees to trump state and local civil rights laws that protect people from discrimination on the basis of marital status or sexual orientation, as well as employers’ voluntary civil rights and anti-harassment policies. (C&S)

ABC PULLED “WELCOME TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD” TO APPEASE CHRISTIAN AUDIENCES?

The producer of ABC’s series “Welcome to the Neighborhood”, Bill Kennedy, thinks the series was cancelled so as not to interfere with a much bigger enterprise: the courting of evangelical Christian audiences for “The Chronicle of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.” A Southern Baptist official said that had the show been broadcast—particularly with an ending that showed Christians literally embracing their gay neighbors [publicans yes, gays no!]-it could have scuttled Southern Baptist support for “Narnia.” Another right-winger, a Focus on the Family official, said it would have been a huge misstep for Disney to aggressively do things that would disenfranchise the very people they wanted to see “Narnia.” ABC spokesmen dismissed any connection between the cancellation of “Neighborhood” and courting a Christian audience. (NYT)

DEMOCRATS STEAL A PAGE OUT OF A REPUBLICAN BOOK

Democrats in Georgia and Alabama, borrowing an idea usually advanced by conservative Republicans, are promoting Bible classes in the public schools. Their Republican opponents are in turn denouncing them as “Pharisees.” Democrats in both states have introduced bills authorizing school districts to teach courses modeled after a new textbook, “The Bible and Its Influence.” It was produced by the non-partisan Bible Literacy Project and provides an assessment of the Bible’s impact on history, literature and art that is academic and detached, if largely laudatory. The Democrats who introduced the bills said they hoped to compete with Republicans for conservative Christian voters. “Rather than sitting back on our heels and then being knocked in our face, we are going to respond in a thoughtful way,” said Kasim Reed, a Georgia state senator and one of the bill’s sponsors. “We are not going to give away the South anymore because we are unwilling to talk about our faith.”

Democrats in other states are moving in the same direction, jumping into a conversation about religion and values that some party leaders began after the 2004 election. (NYT)