

THE COWTOWN HUMANIST JAN 2005

HUMANISTS CELEBRATE WINTER SOLSTICE AT WESTSIDE

“HOW I BECAME A HUMANIST” TOPIC OF JANUARY MEETING

SUSAN JACOBY'S *FREETHINKERS* TO BE REVISED IN FEBRUARY

GOODBYE TO THE OLD AND GREETINGS TO THE NEW SOLAR YEAR

Twenty Humanists of Fort Worth gathered on December 8 at Westside to celebrate the winter solstice with wine, food, song and conversation. Dolores did a great job decorating; Jeff tinkled the ivories; and Don provided the lyrics. Our thanks go to everyone who chipped in to make this perhaps our most memorable dinner yet.

NEWS ON SOME FORMER SPEAKERS

Our November speaker, Ole Anthony, was featured in the December 6, 2004 issue of *the New Yorker* magazine. The eleven page long article entitled “God Doesn't Need Ole Anthony” by Reporter at Large Burkhard Bilger covers the ups and downs of a career worthy of representation in the flicks and, more importantly, Anthony's on-going campaign to put shady TV evangelicals out of business and to return the Church to its original mission of caring for the sick of mind and body. While Ole gets top billing, his chief investigator, Pete Evans, who accompanied Anthony to our meeting in November, gets almost equal space. In fact, reporter Bilger went along on one of Evans' searches for incriminating evidence, on this occasion to the trash bin of Dennis Brewer Sr., Tulsa attorney for several TV evangelists. Sad to say, it's hard to keep a “good” TV evangelist down: Robert Tilton is back in business in Florida; Benny Hinn recently held a crusade in India for almost five million people; Jimmy Swaggart broadcasts his show to more than fifty countries.

Our September speaker, Mark Greene, wrote the following letter (“Failing our Charge”) to the FWST on Jan. 4:

Thanks to Jack Z. Smith [one of our 2001 speakers] for voicing the question that none dare voice. (See Friday column, “Is more really better?”) Why are intelligent, educated Americans unwilling to recognize that we have completely fulfilled God's initial edict to “be fruitful and multiply and replenish the Earth”? We have enough people in Texas, in America, on the planet. When will we adopt a measure of progress that looks to quality of life and equality of opportunity as our moral guideline? When might we intelligently fulfill the balance of God's first directive to humanity: to have “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the Earth” We've been appointed the Earth's stewards, and every day that we unnecessarily foul our air and water, devastate the jungles and forests, tolerate the existence of poverty and pestilence and permit the persistence of war, we fail our charge.

Our May speaker, Jim Cornehl, wrote the following letter (“Ideological Attack”) to the FWST on Dec. 31:

The Star-Telegram does its readers and the public a disservice by helping spread the myth that Social Security needs to be overhauled. It does not. The existing system is strong and solvent for the next half-century and after that will require only minor tinkering to continue as America's tried-and-trusted old-age and survivors benefit program. It's the envy of the world. The Administration's scare tactics about huge

Social Security deficits and insolvency in the future are false. They're intended to open the door to the privatization of Social Security. The highly successful and popular social insurance program (until President Bush began a systematic campaign to discredit it) is a thorn in the side of conservatives because of its great success. Their goal ultimately is to dismantle Social Security and turn it over to the private brokerage industry. The news media need to step up and let their readers know what virtually every economist in the nation knows: Social Security is in good shape and is under attack for purely ideological reasons. [To which, we would add, the FWST could start to make amends by carrying the NYT's Paul Krugman's series of articles on financing Social Security and on the real threat to fiscal integrity: massive federal deficits and the looming (this one is for real) crisis in Medicare finances]

HoFW NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

JANUARY MEETING

At our January 12 meeting, all members and guests will be encouraged to share their stories about how they came to embrace the philosophy of Humanism. Some may have found their ways through science or the study of history or, perhaps, disenchantment with organized religion. Still others may have been brought up in a family of Humanists or Freethinkers. Whatever your story, come and share it with us.

PRE-MEETING DINNER: 5:30 p.m. at the Buffet King, 6809 South McCart Avenue (within walking distance of Westside UU Church)

REMINDER: Please remember to bring a can of food for the needy. Westside will arrange for its distribution. For those who haven't had a chance to renew dues, here's your chance.

BOARD MEETING: Immediately after the regularly scheduled meeting, the Board will hold its quarterly session.

FEBRUARY MEETING: We will be discussing Susan Jacoby's *Freethinkers* at our February 9 meeting. Having read the book beforehand will contribute to a livelier discussion. But, if you don't have the opportunity, come anyway. We think you will find our program informative and, hopefully, entertaining as well.

RAISE YOUR VOICES!

We welcome contributions to and comments about the Newsletter. Criticism makes the editing job easier, not harder, so don't be a shrinking violet with your suggestions. Thanks to Gino Kennedy and Don Ruhs for their contributions to this month's Newsletter.

YOUR OFFICERS AND HOW TO REACH THEM

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LEGAL FRONT

DON'T MIX JUSTICE AND POLITICS, SAYS REHNQUIST

In a statement released on New Year's Day, Chief Justice William Rehnquist said that judges must be protected from political threats, including those from conservative Republicans who maintain that "judicial activists" should be impeached and removed from office. The public, the media and politicians are free to criticize judges, Rehnquist said, but politicians cross the line when they try to punish or impeach judges for decisions they do not agree with. "The Constitution protects judicial independence not to benefit judges, but to promote the rule of law: Judges are expected to administer the law fairly, without regard to public reaction," the ailing chief justice said in his traditional year-end report on the federal courts. In his report, Rehnquist did not name names but spoke of his concern for the "mounting criticism of judges for engaging in what is often referred to as 'judicial activism.'" House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Sugar Land, has threatened to impeach liberal-leaning judges for their rulings, such as the ban on school-sponsored prayer. Last year, DeLay called for Congress to enact legislation that would remove issues such as the Pledge of Allegiance from the jurisdiction of federal courts. (LAT)

GAY MARRIAGE AMENDMENT NOT LIKELY SOON

Opponents of gay marriage concede that victory will not be swift in their attempt to amend the Constitution, even after prevailing in all 11 states where the issue was on the ballot on Nov. 2. Although the election increased the ranks of amendment supporters in both houses of Congress, the gains were relatively small. "We're going to have to see additional court cases come down" supporting gay marriage before congressional sentiment shifts dramatically, predicted Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who supports the amendment that failed in both houses of Congress last year. Critics say several cases have the potential to produce a sharp shift in congressional sentiment toward their viewpoint. They point to lawsuits in Florida, California, Nebraska and elsewhere. But Matt Coles of the ACLU's Lesbian and Gay Rights Project said that's unlikely. Many of the cases making their way through the courts were filed by individuals not affiliated with leading gay rights organizations, he said, and were not framed to make a targeted challenge to the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act. Front-line groups have held off, he said. "People think that neither the country nor the courts are ready for it and probably we'll lose. Nobody likes to take cases and lose." (LAT)

JUSTICE DEPARTMENT BACKTRACKS ON TORTURE

The Justice Department is issuing a rewritten legal memo on the meaning of torture, backing away from its own assertions before the Iraqi prison abuse scandal that torture had to involve "excruciating and agonizing pain." The 17-page document states flatly that torture violates U.S. and international law. It omits two of the most controversial assertions made in the now-disavowed 2002 Justice Department documents: that President Bush, as commander in chief in wartime, had authority superseding U.S. anti-torture laws and that U.S. personnel had several legal defenses against criminal liability in such cases. "Consideration of the bounds of any such authority would be inconsistent with the president's unequivocal directive that U.S. personnel not engage in torture," said chief of the Office of Legal Counsel to Deputy Attorney General James Comey. (AP)

BRITISH HIGH COURT RULES INDEFINITE DETENTIONS VIOLATE RIGHTS

Britain's highest court ruled December 12 that the British government could not indefinitely detain foreigners suspected of terrorism. (NYT)

FORMER HIGH-RANKING MILITARY OFFICERS OPPOSE GONZALES

Several former high-ranking military lawyers say they are discussing ways to oppose President Bush's nomination of Alberto Gonzales to be attorney general, asserting that Gonzales' supervision of legal memorandums that appeared to sanction harsh treatment of detainees showed unsound legal judgment. Several retired generals, including Clinton's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, some of them supporters of Sen. Kerry in the last election, have also expressed reservations about Gonzales' judgment. Although Gonzales is expected to be confirmed, objections from former military lawyers, generals and admirals would be a setback and an embarrassment for him and the White House. (NYT)

Damaging at least to his image as a policymaker are revelations that he allowed Cheney's legal counsel, David Addington, write some of the memos he put his name to. One unnamed administration source commented that Gonzales often acquiesced to others in policy-making. This might not be the best quality for an Attorney General to have. (WP)

Editorially, the Washington Post commented: ...the Senate should ask whether Mr. Gonzalez is capable of giving Mr. Bush dispassionate legal advice, rather than—as he seems to have done so often in the past—telling the president what he wants to hear. ...Positions he has advocated have damaged U.S. prestige, courted judicial rebuke and greatly complicated the long term goal of establishing legal regimes that will stand over the course of a long war. ...When Mr. Bush was governor of Texas, Mr. Gonzalez as his chief counsel gave him only the most cursory of briefing on upcoming executions, omitting important facts and mitigating circumstances, according to a 2003 article in the Atlantic Monthly. Perhaps this is what Mr. Bush wanted. But the Attorney General's job is not to give what the president wants.

[At the confirmation hearings on January 6, Democratic Senators were obviously reluctant to get tough with a Mexican immigrant's son who had come up from the bottom of the economic and social ladder. Questions on Gonzales' role in approving torture at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and elsewhere were pursued without enthusiasm and nothing at all, apparently, was asked about the lack of White House vetting of Bernard Kerik for Homeland Security.]

LUGAR CONDEMNS PLAN TO JAIL DETAINEES FOR LIFE

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Dick Lugar condemned on January 2 as a "bad idea" a reported U.S. plan to keep some suspected terrorists imprisoned for a lifetime even if the government lacks evidence to charge them. Influential senators denounced the idea as probably unconstitutional. Another proposal would transfer large members of Afghan, Saudi and Yemeni detainees from the Guantanamo Bay detentions center into new U.S.-built prisons in their home countries. (WP)

JUDICIAL EXECUTIONS AND DEATH SENTENCES DOWN

Only a few years ago, 1999, Americans saw 98 people put to death—a modern record following two decades of steady increases. Since then, however, there has been a precipitous decline in capital punishment. Two years after its peak, the number of executions had fallen to 66. After blipping marginally back up for a year, it fell again—from 71 executions in 2002 to 65 executions in 2003 and down to 59 executions this past year. This is a 40 percent drop from the 1999 figure. What's more, new death

sentences have fallen by more than 50 percent since the mid-1990s and death row is gradually shrinking. Public support for the death penalty has also declined. (WP)

STUDY CRITICIZES GROWING INTIMIDATION OF IMMIGRANTS

The report, *Securing our Borders: Post-9/11 Scapegoating of Immigrants*, says crackdowns against refugees and illegal immigrants intensified after the attacks, with thousands of illegal immigrants arrested and deported. “President Bush’s War on Terrorism has transgressed into a war on immigrants and asylum seekers fleeing terror, and nowhere has the impact been felt more acutely than in Florida,” the report says. Overall, post-9/11 dragnets—including the controversial practice of ordering mostly Middle Eastern and South Asian men to register at immigration offices—have largely failed to detect terrorists but have succeeded in frightening immigrants. The report was issued by the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center. (Knight Ridderr)

WILL THE GOP NUKE THE CONSTITUTION?

Right now, somewhere in the White House, administration strategists are hatching plans to go to war. Battle plans are being drawn. Timing and tactics are being finalized. A nuclear option is even being openly discussed. The designated target: Iran? Syria? North Korea? No, much closer to home: The United States Senate. Salivating at the chance to radically remake the Supreme Court, the president and his loyal lapdogs in the World’s Most Exclusive Club are plotting to obliterate over 200 years of Senate tradition by eliminating the use of filibusters against judicial nominees.

Invoking this parliamentary dirty trick would eliminate unlimited debate on judicial nominations and lower the number of votes needed before a nominee can be confirmed from the 60 necessary to break a filibuster to a simple majority of 51, and would drive a stake through the heart of the Senate’s longstanding commitment—indeed one of its founding purposes—to defending the rights of the minority. Over the course of his first term, 204 of Bush’s judicial nominees received Senate approval; just 10 were blocked. This is the highest number of lower-court confirmations any president has had in his first term since 1980—including President Reagan. But, apparently, the highest is not enough. This president wants total approval of his every wish.

“Courting Disaster 2004,” a study by People for the American Way Foundation, found that adding just one or two Scalia/Thomas [Bush’s favorite justices] clones to the Supreme Court would put at risk more than 100 precedents and the legal protections they safeguard. We’re talking about the Voting Rights Act, affirmative action, worker protections, access to contraceptives and legal abortions, laws protecting our clean air and drinking water, and on and on. —Arianna Huffington, columnist, Tribune Media Services

CHURCH & STATE

CHRISTIAN CONSERVATIVES PRESS ISSUES IN STATEHOUSES

Energized by electoral victories in November that they say reflect wide support for more traditional social values, conservative Christian advocates across the country are pushing ahead state and local initiatives on thorny issues, including same-sex marriage, public education and abortion. In Texas, conservative

Christians are backing an amendment to prevent human cloning, a measure that would also block the kind of cloning used in embryonic stem-cell research. In Georgia, advocacy groups hope to win approval this year of two measures limiting abortion, after redistricting helped Republicans take control of the state legislature. In Kansas, conservatives have won a majority on the State Board of Education, which is expected to introduce changes this spring to the high school science curriculum challenging the theory of evolution. In Missouri, a bill would remove the state’s requirement that all forms of contraception and their

potential health effects be taught in schools, leaving the focus on abstinence. Another would require publishers that sell biology textbooks to Missouri to include at least one chapter with alternative theories to evolution. And in Maryland, some black churches have joined with a white Republican state delegate to push for a ban on same-sex marriage. While the agenda varies from state to state and in some cases is still emerging, the initiatives generally have to do with abortion rights, same-sex marriage, embryonic stem-cell research, sex education and the teaching of evolution. (NYT)

DOBSON THREATENS DEMOCRATIC SENATORS UP FOR REELECTION

James C. Dobson, the nation's most influential evangelical leader, is threatening to put six potentially vulnerable Democratic senators "in the bull's-eye" if they block court appointees. Dobson promises "a battle of enormous proportions from sea to shining sea" if President Bush fails to appoint "strict constructionist" jurists or if Democrats filibuster to block conservative nominees.. (WP)

MORE FUNDS THAN 'FAITH'

An AP analysis of the \$1.17 billion given to "faith-based" groups last year and of nearly 150 interviews in 30 states with grant recipients found that 1) Many are well-established, large social-service providers that have received federal money for decades. More than 80 percent of recipients of grants administered by the HHS Department and 93 percent of recipients of grants administered by HUD had gotten federal money before; 2) Two programs account for half of the billion total: Section 202, a HUD program that builds housing for low-income people, and Head Start, a preschool program for poor children; 3) Many organizations say they not belong on a list of "faith-based organizations," even though they may have religious roots.

Meantime, the Bush administration is focusing attention on state governments. The goal is to persuade states to funnel more of the \$40 billion that they administer for social services to "faith-based organizations." States were initially slow to warm to the Bush initiative. However, within the past six months, more governors have appointed liaisons to the religious community and announced policies that make it clear that the state will consider their applications for funding. "There clearly is a wave of new faith-based offices coming to states around the country, and I think some of them are likely to deal with it responsibly and others to deal with it as irresponsibly as the administration does," said the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. (AP)

ANGRY OAKIES DEFEAT SCHOOL BOND ISSUES

Voters incensed over a superintendent's decision to remove a Nativity scene from an elementary school Christmas program took out their anger at the ballot box in Mustang, Oklahoma, helping to defeat bond measures worth nearly \$11 million. The school board's attorney had recommended that the Nativity scene be removed. Some parents were angry that Santa Claus, a Christmas tree and symbols of Hanukkah and Kwanzaa were left in the production. (AP)

RELIGION IN THE NEWS

[To demonstrate the travesty of Christian fundamentalism the author cites the use of selected passages from the Bible to validate their views on sexual morality. Appealing to Leviticus, for example] they impose on the Bible standards of their own which are not found there, and they accept as binding specific rules which happen to suit them, while completely ignoring many other biblical rules that they do not like. In other words, they pick and choose what they like, and what they provide is not biblical morality at all, but a combination of

social convention and prejudice, which they support by carefully selected and edited parts of the Bible.

--Keith Ward, What the Bible Really Teaches

DEATH OF A TELEVANGELIST DEMAGOGUE: BILLY JAMES HARGIS

The sinning televangelist has become such a staple of American life that it is hard to credit that, at one time, the role was new. Long before Jim and Tammy Bakker fell from grace (baby-faced Jim having been taken in adultery), long before Jimmy Swaggart ("Lift up the Name of Jesus!") had been snapped in a motel with a Louisiana hooker, there was Billy James Hargis. But whereas Jim and Tammy confessed their sins, to the ruin of Tammy's mascara, and Jimmy admitted his loathsomeness in floods of tears on national TV, Billy James was never exactly sorry. He was not sorry because the Devil was to blame; the Devil, and communists. Both were out to get him. They were, of course, in cahoots. The entire left-wing movement, as he often said, was of the Devil ...As televangelists do, he also set up courses and centers of learning: the National Anti-Communist Leadership School, the Christian Crusade Anti-Communist Youth University and, in Tulsa, the American Christian College. A naïve reporter once asked him what was taught there. Why, Hargis answered, "anti-communism, anti-socialism, anti-welfare state, anti-Russia, anti-China, a literal interpretation of the Bible and States' rights." ...After a while the authorities, stirred up by the Evil One, got interested in him. The Christian Crusade was a supposedly religious charity with tax-exempt status, yet Mr. Hargis's work seemed mostly political. Its purposes were allegedly altruistic; yet Mr. Hargis drew a salary of \$25,000 from it, besides his utility bills, his house, his clothes, his colour TV, his traveling expenses and his dry-cleaning bills. In 1964 the tax exemption was withdrawn by the IRS, and his reputation spoiled. ...In 1974 both male and female students at the American Christian College, and three male members of the college choir, the All-American Kids, claimed Mr. Hargis had deflowered them. One couple allegedly made the discovery, on their wedding night that Mr. Hargis had slept with them both. He strenuously denied wrongdoing, citing the biblical love of David for Jonathan, blaming "chromosomes and genes" (an unexpectedly scientific explanation) and threatening to blacklist his defamers. Later, when the scandal had caused the collapse of his college and his empire, he defended himself with a line that has since become a televangelical favourite: "I was guilty of sin, but not the sin I was accused of." (Economist magazine)

FORT WORTH BAPTIST PREACHER CHARGED WITH SEXUAL ABUSE

Westside Victory Baptist Church minister Larry Nuell Neathery has been charged with sexual misconduct with six underage boys, on several occasions inside the church. The first allegations against Neathery surfaced in April when a 13-year-old church member told his mother that Neathery had sexually abused him at least four times since late 2003 or early 2004. Neathery was arrested and released from jail on \$50,000 bail. Subsequent investigations turned up more accusers. One of those accusers is now an adult who said Neathery sexually assaulted him as a youth and tried to sexually assault him as an adult. (FWST)

ORANGE COUNTY DIOCESE PAYS \$100 MILLION TO SETTLE SUIT

The Orange County, California, diocese has agreed to pay \$100 million to settle sexual abuse cases brought by 25 former church members. Two-thirds of the amount will be paid by insurance companies. This is the largest settlement reached to date of suits brought against priests in the U.S. The former record--\$89 million-- was paid by the Boston diocese in early 2004. (De Telegraaf)

TOP OF THE NEWS

I believe, but cannot prove, that all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all “design” anywhere in the

universe, is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection. It follows that design comes late in the universe, after a period of Darwinian evolution. Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe.

--Richard Dawkins

EVER HIGHER SOCIETY, EVER HARDER TO ASCEND

A growing body of evidence suggests that the meritocratic ideal is in trouble in America. Income inequality is growing to levels not seen since the Gilded Age, around the 1880s. But social mobility is not increasing at anything like the same pace: would-be Horatio Alger are finding it no easier to climb from rags to riches, while children of the privileged have a greater chance of staying at the top of the social heap. The United States risks calcifying into a European-style class-based society. The Economic Policy Institute argues that between 1979 and 2000 the real income of households in the lowest fifth (the bottom 20% of earners) grew by 6.4%, while that of households in the top fifth grew by 70%. The family income of the top 1% grew by 184%--that of the top 0.1% grew even faster. Back in 1979 the average income of the top 1% was 133 times that of the bottom 20%; by 2000 the income of the top 1% had risen to 189 times that of the bottom fifth. Thirty years ago the average real annual compensation of the top 100 chief executives was \$2.3m: 39 times the pay of the average worker. Today it is \$37.5m: over 1,000 times the pay of the average worker. In 2001 the top 1% of households, earned 20% of all income and held 33.4% of all net worth. Not since pre-Depression days has the top 1% taken such a big whack. ...Everywhere you look in modern America—in the Hollywood Hills or the canyons of Wall Street, in the Nashville recording studios or the clapboard house of Cambridge, Massachusetts—you see elites mastering the art of perpetuating themselves. America is increasingly looking like imperial Britain, with dynastic ties proliferating, social circles interlocking, mechanisms of social exclusion strengthening and a gap widening between the people who make the decisions and shape the culture and the vast majority of ordinary working stiffs. ...Upward mobility is increasingly determined by education. The income of people with just a high-school diploma was flat in 1975-99, whereas that of people with a bachelor's degree rose substantially, and that of people with advanced degrees rocketed. The education system is increasingly stratified by social class, and poor children have a double disadvantage. They attend schools with fewer resources than those of their richer contemporaries. ...America's great universities are increasingly reinforcing rather than reducing these educational inequalities. Poorer students are at a huge disadvantage, both when they try to get in and, if they are successful, in their ability to make the most of what is on offer. This disadvantage is most marked in the elite colleges that hold the keys to the best jobs. Three-quarters of the students at the country's top 146 colleges come from the richest socio-economic fourth, compared with just 3% who come from the poorest fourth (the median family income at Harvard, for example, is \$150,000). This means that, at an elite university, you are 25 times as likely to run into a rich student as a poor one. ...In most Ivy League institutions, the eight supposedly most select universities of the northeast, “legacies” make up between 10% and 15% of every class. At Harvard they are over three times more likely to be admitted than others. The students in America's places of higher education are increasingly becoming an oligarchy tempered by racial preferences. This is sad in itself, but even sadder when you consider the extraordinary role that the same universities—particularly Conant's Harvard—played in promoting meritocracy in the first half of the 20th century. ...The Republicans by getting rid of inheritance tax, seem hell-bent on ignoring Teddy Roosevelt's warnings about the dangers of a hereditary aristocracy. The Democrats are more interested in preferment for minorities than building ladders of opportunity for all. ...So far Americans have been fairly tolerant of economic distinctions. But that tolerance may not last forever, if the current trend towards “excessive endurance” is not reversed. (Economist magazine)

HOW SECULARISM BECAME A DIRTY WORD

Today's secularists would do well to take a lesson from their freethinking 19th-century predecessors, who, with a combination of passion and rationalism, sought to change hearts as well as minds. In a speech (appropriately titled "A Lay Sermon") delivered before the American Secular Union in 1886, [Robert] Ingersoll quoted "the best prayer I have ever read"—Lear's soliloquy when, after raging on the heath, he stumbles upon a place of shelter.

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your unhoused heads and your unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? Oh, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! This physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayest shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

And show the heavens more just. This is the essence of the secularist and humanist faith here on earth, and it must be offered not as a defensive response to the religiously correct but as a robust and ardent creed worthy of the first secular government in the world.

--Susan Jacoby, addressing the national convention of the Freedom From Religion Foundation

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THE NEWS

JUST ONE LITTLE WORD ...

Many evangelicals stress an apocalyptic verse in the second epistle of Peter which ends: "the Earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." If it's all going to be consumed by fire, some evangelicals say, then why worry about pollution or climate change? But the oldest existing version of the New Testament, long preserved at St. Catherine's monastery on Mount Sinai and now (most of it) in the British Library, has a different Greek verb for the Earth's fate: euretesetai, not katakaesetai. Instead of being burned up, the Earth will be uncovered, its true nature exposed. That, too, is a difference worth studying, for both believers and everyone else. (Economist magazine)

RULES ARE RELAXED FOR LOGGING IN NATIONAL FORESTS

Managers of the nation's 155 national forests will have more discretion to approve logging and other commercial projects without lengthy environmental reviews under a new Bush administration initiative. Environmentalists say the administration is catering to the timber and paper industries and weakening standards for protecting endangered or threatened species. "The president's forest regulations are an early Christmas gift to the timber industry masquerading as a government streamlining measure," said Rodger Schlickeisen, President of Defenders of Wildlife. The plan eliminates analyses required under the National Environment Policy Act, scraps wildlife protections established under President Reagan and limits public input in forest management decisions. (WP)

NEWMONT MINING ADMITS TO EMITTING MERCURY IN INDONESIA

A U.S. mining company acknowledged December 22 that it released tons of mercury into the air and water over five years at one of its gold mines in Indonesia but denied causing harm to anyone's health. Indonesian police have accused Newmont's local affiliate of dumping heavy metals in Buyat Bay, causing residents to develop skin cancers and tumors. (WP)

BOOK CORNER

Natural Right and History, by Leo Strauss (1953)

...the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.

--John Maynard Keynes

Until fairly recently, the name Leo Strauss would have drawn a blank not only from fairly well-informed students of public affairs but even in academia, where Strauss spent all of his working life, except for political science departments. Since 9/11 and especially since the Bush administration made clear its determination to invade Iraq, the media, mostly the Washington and New York press, have made his name known to a larger public and a couple of books have been written about his influence not so much in academia as with various policymakers, most notably in the White House, the Vice President's office and the Department of Defense, with various conservative publications (Washington Times, Wall Street Journal, Weekly Standard, etc.) and with several conservative think-tanks. What virtually all of his followers have in common, it seems, is an advocacy of a more muscular foreign policy, particularly strong support for Israel, and less government intervention in the economy. An alliance with the Religious Right was a natural consequence. Although Strauss died more than 30 years ago, he left behind a devoted cadre of students and students of students to carry the flame onward. Whether it is the same one left by the Master, is a subject of debate.

Who was Leo Strauss? Born into a rural Jewish family near Marburg, Germany, in 1899, he spent his student and the first decade of his professional career at various German universities studying philosophy and analyzing the thoughts of many of the most prominent, especially Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Locke. In 1932, shortly before the Nazis took over, he received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to study in Paris and then a few years later in London. Failing to find a permanent position in England and then in Palestine (he was an atheist Zionist) he came to the U.S., first to Columbia, then to the New School of Social Research and finally to the University of Chicago. By all accounts, he was an outstanding teacher who, during his lifetime, was not identified with any political party or political movement

His best known publication is *Natural Law and History*, a book based on public lectures he gave at the University of Chicago in 1952. Indeed, he wrote nothing of any great significance during the last 20 years of his life. Apparently, most of the influence he was to have on his students came from contact in the lecture hall and in seminars rather than from the written word, a situation that makes it rather difficult to assess where he might have stood on current issues. *Natural Law and History* is a hard read and not to be dipped into lightly. Sometimes it is maddeningly dense. It's worth the effort, however, if you have some background in the history of political philosophy and the grit to take on a rather difficult book.

The third sentence of his Introduction is taken from the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." He asks whether or not the nation still cherishes "the faith in which it was conceived and raised?" Does it still hold those "truths to be self-evident" Virtually all Americans would respond affirmatively. Yet, if you think about it a bit, even if you are a believer, how can you reconcile original, unalienable rights with Darwin's Descent of Man? If there are any unalienable rights, they must have been acquired at some point in the historical process—an original political contract between the governing and the governed. But that too is a fiction. If I understand him right. Strauss is saying that a naïve faith in useful fictions is a lot better than a realistic appreciation, at least among the larger public, of the frangibility of constitutional foundations. He contrasts the fate of Germany, where faith in natural rights, at least among the elites, had been eroded by the nihilism of the philosophers and the social scientists (chief among them Nietzsche and Webber), to which he would presumably include "the higher criticism", with the happier fate of the U.S. where there is less philosophical speculation, hence more faith in tradition and revelation.

Can we reestablish natural rights on firm intellectual foundations? Strauss takes the reader on a visit of the great political philosophers from Socrates to Edmund Burke touching down heavily on Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Rousseau along the way. At the end of the trip, however, I looked to see if there might be a second volume. There's got to be something beyond Edmund Burke, or at least a summing up that will give the reader some idea of how the a firm foundation is to be given to natural rights. I looked in vain. In this respect, the book is a disappointment. Too much has to be inferred.

Obviously, there is meat here for conservatives in his criticisms of relativism and historicism. I would have preferred that he had made it a lot more explicit.

For those interested in pursuing Leo Strauss and the Straussians further, I commend two articles in the *New York Review of Books* (October 21 and November 4, 2004) by Mark Lilla, a University of Chicago political scientist professor and one of our most eminent commentators on political philosophy. Lilla dismisses as nonsense charges of fascism against Strauss. He emphasizes the considerable divide between perceptions of his adepts in the U.S. and of his following in Europe where students come to the study of philosophy much better prepared. Lilla implies that what is being written there about Strauss is of a much higher caliber, especially in Germany and France, than in this country.

That's it for this month's Cowtown Humanist!