



Volume Nine Number 12 - January 2008

Meeting at Westside Unitarian Universalist Building 901 Page Ave Ft Worth 7 PM, 2nd Wednesday of each month - Jan. gathering is on the 8th. Many of us dine at Luby's Cafeteria at 5:30 prior to the meeting (8th Ave South of Elizabeth Blvd) Join us if you'd like!

JANUARY 8th MEETING

Program: OPEN DISCUSSION

Discussions following all of our last four meetings and the dvd "Sicko" have been spirited and regrettably abbreviated. Many have commented they would like to have had more discussion. Well, the opportunity will be made available at our coming January meeting. The entire hour and one-half will be devoted to free expression of your interests and questions. Some topics mentioned to me are:

1. How to deal with theist relatives and friends
2. How to create more interest in HOFW and make it grow
3. What kind of programs create greatest interest
4. How strongly should Humanists represent themselves (see Sam Harris' position vs others)
5. Who are Robert Ingersoll, H. L. Mencken, David Hume and others

Other subjects of interest may be introduced as well. Everyone will have an equal opportunity to speak and contribute information. Please plan to come and help to make HOFW a vital and interesting organization.

Dick Trice, Chairman

The Humanist's Winter Solstice dinner was attended by 34 friends and members, including several Westside UU attendees. The entertainment was outstanding, featuring Matt Erickson and Jeff Rodriguez on piano along with the mellifluous voice of Caroline Nixon.

I received the following from Beverly McPhail after thanking her for the article you'll see on page 6—Ray

Thank you for your supportive email on my piece on atheism in the *Houston Chronicle* and for taking the time to write. It was nice to see an atheist perspective in print in a mainstream newspaper and I hoped it caused religious believers to pause and rethink their understanding of what it means for someone to be an atheist. Also, it felt good to claim a high moral ground. I received many emails of support and that is very gratifying, and, of course, several responses that tried to set me straight!

I agree with you that the number is probably higher, but as you note, it depends on how they ask the question and many are reluctant to identify as "atheist."

Thank you again and all the best. Beverly McPhail

Romney Speech Reflects Inaccurate Understanding Of Church-State Relations, Says Americans United for Separation of Church and State

Those Who Don't Follow Any Particular Religion Are Good Americans Too, Says AU's Barry Lynn

Today's speech by Mitt Romney on the role of religion in American politics reflects an inaccurate understanding of the constitutional relationship between church and state, according to Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

"I was disappointed in Romney's statement," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. "The founders of our Constitution meant for religion and government to be completely separate. Romney is wrong when he says we are in danger of taking separation too far or at risk of establishing a religion of secularism.

"I was particularly outraged that Romney thinks that the Constitution is somehow based on faith and that judges should rule accordingly," Lynn said. "That's a gross misunderstanding of the framework of our constitutional system.

"I think it is telling that Romney quoted John Adams instead of Thomas Jefferson or James Madison," Lynn continued. "Jefferson and Madison are the towering figures who gave us religious liberty and church-state separation.

"I was also disappointed that Romney doesn't seem to recognize that many Americans are non-believers," Lynn continued. "Polls repeatedly show that millions of people have chosen to follow no spiritual path at all. They're good Americans too, and Romney ought to have recognized that fact.

"I am an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, and I believe in my faith," Lynn added. "But I believe just as strongly that non-believers are good Americans too. I wish Romney had said that."

New Theory Uncovered in Commerce Secretary Gutierrez's waiting room: Darwin, not Saddam, behind 9/11 (From Harper's)

I'm not sure if Secretary of the Commerce Carlos Gutierrez is cheap or cuckoo, but it comes as something of a shock to learn that the controversial book *The Atlas of Creation* is prominently displayed in the waiting room to his office. Written by the Turkish writer Adnan Oktar (under the pen name of Harun Yahya), the Atlas offers an Islamic version of creationism and blames Charles Darwin for modern terrorism—including the 9/11 attacks. A recent visitor to the office tells me that the Atlas is impossible to miss, both because of its huge size—it weighs in at 12 pounds and has nearly 800 pages—and because it is prominently displayed on a stand at the entrance to the room.

The Atlas of Creation can be bought for \$99 (plus shipping and handling) through a link from Harun Yahya's website. A summary says:

This book provides the reader with not only such information as what fossils are and where and how they are found, but also a closer examination of a variety of fossil specimens, millions of years old, that are still able to declare, "We never underwent evolution; we were created." The fossils discussed and illustrated in this book are just a few examples of the hundreds of millions of specimens that prove the fact of Creation. And even these few are enough to prove that the theory of evolution is a major hoax and deception in the history of science.

Earlier this year, the Atlas created a controversy in France, where creationist belief is relatively rare, when hundreds of unsolicited copies turned up at high schools and universities. This summer, hundreds (and possibly thousands) of copies were mailed to university biology departments, science museums and government offices in the United States. No one ever determined who paid for the mailings, but the cost was clearly extensive. A July 26, 2007 story on University Wire said recipients marveled at the color illustrations, but said the contents "set scientists sputtering with indignation."

A caption from the book, below a photograph of one of the planes striking the World Trade Center, reports: "No matter what ideology they may espouse, those who perpetrate terror over the world are, in reality, Darwinists. Darwinism is the only philosophy that places a value on—and thus encourages—conflict."

Darwinism is also to blame for fascism and communism. As the Atlas explains, it "is the root of various ideologies of violence that have spelled disaster to mankind in the 20th century.

The New York Times reported over the summer that scientists in France had banded together to denounce the book:

So far, no similar response is emerging in the United States. "In our country we are used to nonsense like this," said Kevin Padian, an evolutionary biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, who, like colleagues there, found a copy in his mailbox. He said people who had received copies were "just astounded at its size and production values and equally astonished at what a load of crap it is.

I called Secretary Gutierrez's press office to ask if the copy on display in his waiting room had been bought, or mailed unsolicited to his office. (If I hear back, I'll update this story). But either way, it seems like a bizarre choice of literature to offer to people waiting to meet the secretary.

Ken Silverstein Dec 6, 2007

<http://harpers.org/archive/2007/12/hbc-90001865>

Germany Seeks to Ban Scientology

December 7, 2007 12:01 PM

BERLIN (AP) - Germany's top security officials said Friday they consider the goals of the U.S.-based Church of Scientology to be in conflict with the principles of the nation's constitution and will seek to ban the group.

The interior ministers of the nation's 16 states as well as federal Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaueble "consider Scientology to be an organization that is not compatible with the constitution," Berlin Interior Minister Erhart Koerting, who presided over the officials' two-day conference, told reporters.

The German government considers Scientology a commercial enterprise that takes advantage of vulnerable people. During the summer, it initially refused to allow the producers of a movie starring Scientology member Tom Cruise as Germany's most famous anti-Hitler plotter to film at the site where the hero was executed, although it did not expressly state Scientology as its reason.

The ministers plan to task the nation's domestic intelligence agency to begin preparing the necessary information to ban Scientology in Germany. The agency has had Scientology under observation for a decade on allegations that it "threatens the peaceful democratic order" of the country.

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Scientists have long battled to end the surveillance, saying it is an abuse of their right to freedom of religion. The U.S. State Department regularly criticizes Germany in its annual Human Rights Report for the monitoring practice.

From the *Guardian* see link below:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/latest/story/0,-7134704,00.html>

Sound like anyone we've heard of?

About 2000 B.C.E., Persians began worshipping the man-god Mithra, who was supposedly born from a god father and a human virgin mother.

Mithra's birth was said to have occurred in a cave or stable, and was witnessed by shepherds who brought him gifts. Later, his followers celebrated this event with a ceremony at midnight on the eve of the Winter Solstice.

Mithra was viewed as a Redeemer. He was believed to have performed miracles, such as raising the dead, healing the sick, making the blind see and the lame walk, and casting out devils.

According to legend, Mithra celebrated a Last Supper with his twelve disciples before he ascended to heaven. In memory of this, his worshippers partook of a sacramental meal of bread marked with a cross.

In subsequent years, a stone image symbolizing Mithra was buried in a tomb. It was then withdrawn and he was said to live again. Followers of Mithra believed a person had to be baptized in order to ascend into the heavens after death. Mithra is supposed to return at the end of time to judge the human race.

In 67 B.C.E., Mithraism was introduced into the Roman Republic. Later, Mithraism stood as a powerful rival to the newly emerging Christianity. In fact, by 307 C.E., Mithra was officially designated the "Protector of the Roman Empire." However, by 358 C.E., followers of Mithra began to be persecuted under Christianity.

In addition to being a man-god savior, Mithra was connected to the sun god. Later, Christians began referring to their own man-god savior, Jesus, as the "Light of the World" and the "Sun of Righteousness." moved their Christian Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday (sun-day).

More of the same!

There are many parallels between these and other pre-Christian savior man-gods and Jesus. Indeed, so much of Jesus' legend has been plagiarized that a few scholars doubt whether he ever actually existed! Others claim that if he existed, his life is obscured in myth and we know virtually nothing about him.

Most of the Roman persecution of Christianity occurred from 250 to 313 C.E. In 380, the Roman emperor Theodosius ordered all pagan temples to be destroyed and forced pagans to accept Christianity.

The Roman celebration of the sun god's rebirth was still held on December 25th. However, due to imperfections in the Julian calendar, the actual Winter Solstice had drifted to December 21st.

Pagan sun god celebrations proved too popular for early Christians to overcome. Therefore, they decided to superimpose their story of Jesus (which contained many pagan elements anyway) onto the sun god festivals of the Winter Solstice (Christmas) and the Spring Equinox (Easter).

In 354, Bishop Liberius of Rome decreed that the birth of Jesus should be celebrated on the same day as the birth of the sun gods - December 25th. Before this, the Christian church had no official observance of the birth of Jesus.

From 1652 to 1659, Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans in the English Parliament outlawed Christmas because it was not sanctioned in the Bible. Churches were ordered to be closed and shops were ordered to be open on this day. Clergymen were imprisoned for preaching on Christmas, and some parish officers were fined for decorating the church.

From 1659 to 1680, Puritans in the colony of Massachusetts prohibited the observance of Christmas, imposing a five shilling fine on anyone caught celebrating this pagan festival.

It wasn't until 1856 that Georgia became the first state to make Christmas a legal holiday. In 1894, Christmas was included in the first group of federal holidays. Previously, Congress had met, and mail was delivered, on Christmas Day.

The Winter Solstice is a great time to get together with family and friends, put up some decorations, exchange gifts, and share a meal. Perhaps someday humanity will set aside divisive religious beliefs and unite to celebrate the Winter Solstice as a truly universal, secular holiday. The Winter Solstice reminds us of our common ties to nature and to each other. It is a celebration of life!

**New York Times op-ed page By Roger Cohen
Published Dec 13, 2007**

ST. ANDREWS, Scotland

The cathedral here, on which work began in the 12th century, was once the largest in Scotland, until a mob of reformers bent on eradicating lavish manifestations of “Popery” ransacked the place in 1559, leaving gulls to swoop through the surviving facade.

Europe’s cathedrals are indeed “so inspired, so grand, so empty,” as Mitt Romney, a Mormon, put it last week in charting his vision of a faith-based presidency. Some do not survive at all. The Continent has paid a heavy price in blood for religious fervor and decided some time ago, as a French king put it, that “Paris is well worth a Mass.”

Romney, a Republican presidential candidate, was dismissive of European societies “too busy or too ‘enlightened’ to venture inside and kneel in prayer.” He thereby pointed to what has become the principal transatlantic cultural divide.

Europeans still take the Enlightenment seriously enough not to put it inside quote marks. They have long found an inspiring reflection of it in the first 16 words of the American Bill of Rights of 1791: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Thomas Jefferson saw those words as “building a wall of separation between church and state.” So, much later, did John F. Kennedy, who in a speech predating Romney’s by 47 years, declared: “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute.”

The absolute has proved porous. The U.S. culture wars have produced what David Campbell of Notre Dame University called: “the injection of religion into politics in a very overt way.”

Much too overt for Europeans, whose alarm at George W. Bush’s presidency has been fed by his allusions to divine guidance — “the hand of a just and faithful God” in shaping events, or his trust in “the ways of Providence.”

Such beliefs seem to remove decision-making from the realm of the rational at the very moment when the West’s enemy acts in the name of fanatical theocracy. At worst, they produce references to a “crusade” against those jihadist enemies. God-given knowledge is scarcely amenable to oversight.

But Bush is no transient phenomenon; he is the expression of a new American religiosity. Romney’s speech and the rapid emergence of the anti-Darwin Baptist minister Mike Huckabee as a rival suggest how estranged the American zeitgeist is from the European.

At a time when growing numbers of Americans identify themselves as born-again evangelicals, and creationism is no joke, Romney’s essentially pitted the faithful against the faithless while attempting to merge Mormonism in mainstream Christianity. Where Kennedy said he believed in a “president whose religious views are his own private affair,” Romney pledged not to “separate us from our religious heritage.”

“Religiosity now seems at least as important for public office as leadership qualities,” said Karl Kaiser, a German political scientist. “The entrance condition for the American presidential race is being religious. If you’re not, you have no chance, which troubles Europeans.”

Of course, the religious heritage of which Romney spoke is real. The Puritans’ vision of America as “a city upon a hill” was based on a covenant with God. As the Bill of Rights was formulated, George Washington alluded in his Thanksgiving Proclamation to “that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be.”

Religion informed America’s birth. But its distancing from politics was decisive to the republic’s success. Indeed, the devastating European experience of religious war influenced the founders’ thinking. That is why I find Romney’s speech and the society it reflects far more troubling than Europe’s vacant cathedrals.

Romney allows no place in the United States for atheists. He opines that, “Freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom.” Yet secular Sweden is free while religious Iran is not. Buddhism, among other great Oriental religions, is forgotten.

He shows a Wikipedia-level appreciation of other religions, admiring “the commitment to frequent prayer of the Muslims” and “the ancient traditions of the Jews.” These vapid nostrums suggest his innermost conviction of America’s true faith. A devout Christian vision emerges of a U.S. society that is in fact increasingly diverse.

Dallas school plans master's in science education, fueling debate over teaching evolution

By HOLLY K. HACKER / The Dallas Morning News
hhacker@dallasnews.com

Texas' debate over teaching evolution is going to college.

The nonprofit Institute for Creation Research in Dallas wants to train future science teachers in Texas and elsewhere using an online curriculum. A state advisory group gave its approval Friday; now the final say rests with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, which will consider the request next month.

<http://www.icr.edu/index.html>

The institute's proposal comes amid a fierce debate over how to teach evolution -- the theory that humans and other species evolved from lower forms of life -- in Texas public schools.

Some advocacy groups are attacking the creation institute's plan, saying it's an attempt to undermine the teaching of science in public schools.

"They teach distorted science," said Eugenie Scott, executive director of the California-based National Center for Science Education, which opposes teaching creationism in public schools. "Any student coming out from the ICR with a degree in science would not be competent to teach in Texas public schools."

The institute was created in 1970 by the late Henry M. Morris, a Dallas native known as the father of "creation science," the view that science -- not just religion -- indicates that a divine being created the Earth and all living things.

Patricia Nason, chairwoman of the institute's science education department, said that, despite the institute's name, students learn evolution along with creationism.

"Our students are given both sides," said Dr. Nason, who has a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from Texas A&M University. "They need to know both sides, and they can draw their own conclusion."

The institute, through its graduate school, wants to offer an online master's degree in science education.

According to the school's Web site, it offers typical education classes, teaching such fundamentals as how to use lab equipment, the Internet and PowerPoint in the classroom. But it also offers a class called "Advanced studies in creationism."

And the course Web page for "Curriculum design in science" gives this scenario: "The school board has asked you to serve on a committee that is examining grades 6-12 science goals. ... Both evolutionist and creationist teachers serve on the curriculum committee. How will you convince them to include creation science as well as evolution in the new scope and sequence?"

The school has offered science degrees in California for years. It offered its first graduate courses in 1981, and its first online courses about two years ago.

The institute began moving its headquarters from the San Diego area to Dallas last year, making it necessary to get approval from the state of Texas to offer degrees here.

The school now has more than 50 students taking online classes all over the world, school officials say.

Most graduates have gone on to teach in private schools, Dr. Nason said, though some may want to teach in public schools.

That's what scares people like Dan Quinn of the Texas Freedom Network, which also opposes teaching creationism in public schools.

"It just seems odd to license an organization to offer a degree in science when they're not teaching science," Mr. Quinn said.

"What we're seeing here is another example of how Texas is becoming the central state in efforts by creationists to undermine science education, especially the teaching of evolution."

A group of educators and officials from the state Coordinating Board visited the campus in November and met with faculty members. The group found that the institute offered a standard science education curriculum that would prepare them to take state licensure exams, said Glenda Barron, an associate commissioner of the board.

Dr. Barron said the program was held to the same standards that any other college would have to meet.

Suppose we elected an atheist president? Beverly McPhail Houston Chronicle

The presidential campaign is increasing the visibility of religion in public and political spaces. Candidates are scrambling to prove their religious bonafides, on the left as well as the right. Mitt Romney is trying to overcome the perception that Mormonism is a cult while Mike Huckabee, a Baptist minister, flashes the words "Christian leader" on his television advertisements and John McCain refers to America as a Christian Nation.

Hillary Clinton talks about her long-standing Christian faith, and Barack Obama speaks of reconnecting to Christian principles as an adult after being raised by a spiritual, but religiously skeptical mother, despite rumors that he is a closeted Muslim.

Although the Constitution strictly prohibits any religious test as a requirement to hold office, a de facto religious test is in effect today. Candidates must profess their faith in order to be elected.

The Constitution's promise of religious freedom and prohibition of religious tests will be fulfilled when an atheist can be elected president of the United States.

We atheists are a small and misunderstood minority. Only 3 percent to 9 percent of Americans report that they do not believe in God. Professor Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi's review of psychological studies reveals that atheists are less authoritarian and suggestible than religious believers, less dogmatic, less prejudiced, more tolerant of others, law-abiding, compassionate, conscientious, highly intelligent and well educated

Some religiously inclined mistakenly believe that atheists are amoral. However, we atheists tend to subscribe to the highest moral principles and do so without being motivated by fear of hell or hope of heaven.

One benefit of having a president who is atheist would be that policies would be adopted or rejected due to science and reason rather than a religious creed that may not represent the beliefs of all Americans. Issues such as stem cell research, evolution and gay marriage would be considered on their merits and in accordance with the Constitution rather than human interpretations of religious texts.

A disadvantage, however, is that journalists and voters would have to focus on substantive policy positions held by candidates rather than their professed beliefs.

No longer could a voter hold up a Christian Bible, as one questioner did at a recent Republican debate, and ask if candidates believed every word in the book. Perhaps candidates would have to pledge, instead, that they have read and believe every word in the Constitution.

Another benefit of having an atheist president is that bloodshed could be less likely. Some of the most brutal episodes in world history, including the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch burnings, genocides and bombings by Christian and Islamic fundamentalists, have been conducted in the name of God. Other countries might well be more trusting of our motives if religious subtexts were absent.

If religious tests were no longer required for public office and more atheists were elected, believers could focus more on their traditional realm of feeding the hungry and clothing the poor. The faithful could seek spiritual enlightenment rather than elected office.

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