

THE COWTOWN HUMANIST

MAY 2006

LYLETTE PHARR OF

TARRANT FOOD BANK TO SPEAK

MAY 10

Lyllette Pharr, Director of Agency Services and Community Outreach of the Tarrant County Area Food Bank will present our May program. Ms Pharr has a remarkable background in welfare services. She has served as administrator, legislative advocate, teacher and leader in various capacities during her 15 years as a social services professional. Prior to her current position, she worked for Catholic Charities of the Fort Worth Diocese. She holds a Master of Science degree in Social Work from the University of Texas, Arlington, a Master of Divinity degree from the Brite Divinity School of TCU, and a Bachelor of Arts degree from TCU. She also worked several years in banking.

We have been contributing for the past several years to West Aid with donations of canned goods and money. Don't miss this opportunity to learn more about where your contributions have been going, how the Food Bank coordinates its activities with those of other relief agencies and how Food Bank officials assure that aid goes to those most in need.

Following Ms Pharr's presentation will be the election of officers, approval of our revised by-laws and discussion of future programs. Here is your chance to make your views known about the direction of the association and how it may more effectively fulfill its mission. To help focus the discussion, a sheet listing areas of particular interest to humanists will be handed out. You will be able to rank your preferences and add others that may have been missed. Reminder: Only members have a vote and a say in the policies of the association. If you are not yet a member or if your membership has expired but you still wish to participate in this phase of the program, please see Dolores about membership renewal.

Our April 12 meeting drew 23 humanists and six visitors, our largest turnout of the year. Audience reaction suggested that everyone was well pleased with our program: A showing of the video "The God Who Wasn't There." How could anyone but a fundamentalist not have been pleased and, oftentimes, amused? We will look forward to director Brian Fleming's next documentary "The Beast" due to be released later this year.

HOFW NEWS AND VIEWS

MAY MEETING: After our speaker's presentation, we will elect officers, discuss and approve the revised by-laws and consider the direction and future programs of the association. Put on your thinking cap and come prepared to voice your interests and concerns. Without input from the membership, your board is largely operating in the dark.

PRE-MEETING DINNER: Our pre-meeting dinner will be held at Joe's Italian Restaurant located across the parking lot from Friends of the Fort Worth Public Library Book Store. Dinner at 5:30 p.m.

TREASURER'S REPORT: The Association had income from dues of \$200 and expenditures of \$25 for an honorarium during the month preceding April 12. Our balance as of that date was \$921.13.

TIME TO CATCH UP ON YOUR DUES: Please see Dolores for membership renewal or if you are interested in joining for the first time: \$18 for individual members receiving the newsletter by e-mail; \$24 for individuals receiving the newsletter by regular mail; \$30 for couples receiving the newsletter by e-mail; and \$36 for couples receiving the newsletter by regular mail.

DON'T FORGET OUR HOST: Are your bookshelves groaning under the weight of too many publications? If so, consider making a donation to our host. Friends of the Fort Worth Public Library bookstore will accept any and all marketable books.

REMINDER: Dolores will be collecting canned goods and/or money for West Aid, preferably the latter. A monetary contribution enables aid agencies to allocate resources more economically. Canned goods will nonetheless be welcomed.

HUMANISTS OF FORT WORTH

EXECUTIVE BOARD MEETING MINUTES

APRIL 25, 2006

The meeting was called to order by Chair, Don Ruhs, at the home of Reed Bilz.

Present: Dolores Ruhs, Reed Bilz, Jim Cheatham, Don Ruhs, Dick Trice, Jim Fogelman, Ann Sutherland, Ray Weil and Jeff Rodriguez.

Membership: Don distributed a current membership list. We currently have 42 paid members.

Don reported that a Campus and Community organizer, D.J. Grothe, with the Center for Free Inquiry, will be available to meet with us Friday May 19 or Sunday May 21. We have conflicts on both these dates, so Don will contact him and suggest he come another time.

By-laws: We reviewed the proposed changes to the by-laws and made suggestions for other changes. Dick will distribute the proposed by-laws in time to vote on them at our annual meeting, May 10, 2006. We will hold the meeting after the speaker has made her presentation.

Election of Officers: We will also hold elections for officers for next year at our May meeting. Following is the proposed slate, but we will have paper ballots available in case there are contested races:

Chair: Dick Trice; Vice Chair: Jim Cheatham; Secretary: Reed Bilz; Treasurer: Dolores Ruhs

The following have agreed to serve as Program Committee Chair: Jeff Rodriguez; Newsletter Editor: Ray Weil; Webmaster: Russell Elleven. As past Chair, Don Ruhs will continue to serve on the Board.

Meetings: We discussed future programs. Dick will distribute a survey at the next meeting to determine the wishes of the members. DVDs or videos seem particularly desirable if they are shortened to allow for discussion.

We will have a video for the June meeting. Jeff proposed changing the schedule of our regular meetings to the 4th Thursday of the month. We decided it would be too hot to hold a picnic this summer. The one two years ago was poorly attended.

We voted to contribute \$100 to the Friends of the Fort Worth Library in appreciation for use of the library store for our meetings.

Our next board meeting will be in July to comply with the requirements of the new by-laws. Board minutes will be published in the newsletter.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

Reed K. Bilz, Secretary.

YOUR OFFICERS AND HOW TO REACH THEM:

Chairman: Don Ruhs, 1036 Hill Top Pass, Benbrook, 76126; 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

Center for Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanist Hold Session in Irving

On Saturday May 20 starting at 8:30 a.m. and on the morning of May 21 at the Westin DFW Airport, 4545 W. John Carpenter Freeway, the above organizations will be holding a training session for defenders of civil liberties. Among the luminaries speaking at the session are Tom Flynn, editor of *Free Inquiry* and author of *The Trouble with Christmas*; David Koepsell, Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism; Norm R. Allen, Jr, Deputy Director of *Free inquiry*; Sherry Rook, Vice president for planning and development at the Center for Inquiry, D.J. Grothe, National Field Director of the Council for Secular Humanism; Sarah Jordan, field organizer with the Center for Inquiry; Nathan Bupp, Associate Director of the Center for Inquiry; and Thomas Donnelly, producer of CFI's radio show and podcast *Point of Inquiry*.

When you attend *Defending Reason in an Irrational World*, you'll receive an intensive day-and-a-half orientation. You'll learn the strategies the Center's activists are using to take back tomorrow. You'll learn how you can get involved at the grass roots level. And you'll learn how to make sure the Center for Inquiry has the resources it needs to press forward with your fight.

Price: \$49, which includes lunch on May 20. Invitations have been issued to members only. However, if you are interested in attending, you might be able to obtain membership and an invitation at the same time with a phone call to the Council for Secular Humanism at 800-458-1366 (have credit card handy). *Free Inquiry* is worthy of a place in every secular humanist's reading schedule.

In Leak Cases, New Pressures on Journalists

Earlier administrations have fired and prosecuted government officials who provided classified information to the press. They have also tried to force reporters to disclose their sources. But the Bush administration is exploring more radical measures to protect information it says is vital to national security: the criminal prosecution of reporters under the espionage laws. In the last year alone, a New York Times reporter was jailed for refusing to testify about a confidential source; her source [Scooter Libby] was prosecuted on charges he lied about contacts to reporters; a CIA analyst was dismissed for unauthorized contacts with reporters and a raft of subpoenas to reporters were largely upheld by the courts. Legal experts say that existing laws may well allow holding the press to criminal prosecution. Should the administration pursue the matter, these experts say, it could gain a tool that would thoroughly alter the balance of power between the government and the press. One example of this administration's new approach is the FBI's effort to reclaim classified documents in the files of the late columnist Jack Anderson. (NYT)

A Humane and Sensible Policy Slashes the Prison Population, but for How Long?

Proposition 36, passed by 61% of California's voters in November 2000 and in effect since July 2001, is saving the state a great deal of money by offering treatment instead of incarceration for non-violent adult drug offenders. One study shows that for every dollar invested in Proposition 36 programs California has saved \$2.50—a total of \$140.5 m. in the first year alone, and \$158.8 m. in the second. Money for the program, \$120 m. a year for five years, however, runs out at the end of June, and Gov., Arnold Schwarzenegger is proposing that it continue only if the legislature passes a bill to reform it, notably by allowing judges to impose brief jail terms for offenders who miss appointments or commit other lapses in their treatment. The Justice Policy Institute notes that before Proposition 36 was passed, California's Department of Corrections was predicting a prison population of more than 180,000 by June 2005; the reality, thanks mainly to a 20% fall in imprisonment for drug offences was 164,000. At the same time, California's violent crime rate declined and faster than the national average. Why not extend eligibility for Proposition 36 from simple drug possession to drug-involved property offences? That may be asking too much where the prison guards are big contributors to campaign coffers. Cynics note that while the governor talks of the need for rehabilitation rather than punishment in reforming California's colossal corrections system, his push for \$68 billion in taxpayers' bonds is designed, in part, to build two new prisons and provide 83,000 new jail beds. (Economist)

In Religion Studies, Universities Bend to Views of the Faithful

In 1993, the Mormon church excommunicated D. Michael Quinn, one of the world's foremost authorities on the faith, whose writings had frequently contradicted the church's traditional history. Now, he has become a pariah in some higher-education circles as well. Although Mormon studies is a fast-growing academic discipline, Mr. Quinn—a former professor at Mormon-run Brigham Young University and the author of six books on Mormon history—can't find a job. In 2004, he was the leading candidate for openings at two state universities. Both rejected him. At least three other secular schools plan new professorships in Mormon studies, but he appears to be a long shot for these posts, too—not because he lacks qualifications, but because almost all the funding for the jobs is coming from Mormon donors.

Mr. Quinn's struggles reflect the rising influence of religious groups over the teaching of their faiths at secular colleges, despite concerns about academic freedom. U.S. universities, in the past, usually hired religious-studies professors regardless of whether they practiced or admired the faiths they researched. But some universities are bending to the views of private donors and state legislators by hiring the faithful. Some professors at both state universities that rejected Mr. Quinn say fear of offending Mormons played a role. Deans at the universities deny that.

In the 1970s, some universities pioneered the idea of privately funded professorships in specific religions by establishing Judaic studies chairs. Now many universities have chairs for faiths ranging from Islam to Sikhism. They are usually underwritten by donors of the same religion, who generally expect that the scholar filling the chair will be sympathetic to the faith. Emory, Claremont and Harvard are among universities that have recently solicited the views of the faithful before hiring professors to teach about a specific religious tradition. [Will there be no place for critics in academia's religious departments?] (WSJ)

Georgia Plans to Teach the Good Book in Schools

Undeterred by the Dover decision dealing a decisive defeat to fundamentalists, Georgia marched back into the culture wars the last week of April when Governor Sonny Perdue signed a bill allowing Bible classes in public high schools. An estimated 8 percent of the nation's schools offer some form of Bible study. But the Georgia law is the first to set statewide guidelines and earmark public dollars for a Bible course. Five other states are considering similar measures. Georgia's school board has until February 2007 to decide how the courses should be taught, and forces on both sides of the issue are bracing for a messy

battle. Two groups now offer curricula for high school Bible courses: one endorsed by moderate Christian and Jewish groups, the other by conservative Christians and Pat Robertson. However, if Georgia opts for either program it will be the first time that a state has officially adopted a Bible curriculum. Whatever the Georgia state school board decides, observers predict a flurry of lawsuits. And Georgia teachers will once again find themselves in the cultural crossfire. [The Marietta school district is in federal court over the labeling of biology textbooks: "Evolution is a theory not a fact.]

(Newsweek)

Single-Faith Prison Program Questioned

The Justice Department plans to set aside cellblocks at up to half a dozen federal prisons for an ambitious pilot program to prepare inmates for release. But it has produced an outcry by saying that it wants a private group to counsel the prisoners according to a single faith. The plans do not specify what that faith must be, but they appear to rule out secular counseling or programs that offer inmates guidance in a variety of faiths. [Why confuse them?] Americans United has charged that bidding regulations have been tailored to fit one particular program: an immersion in evangelical Christianity offered by Charles W. Colson's Prison Fellowship Ministries. (WP)

Illinois Pledges \$1 Million to Rebuild Church

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is prepared to sue if Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich (Dem.) makes good on his pledge of \$1 million in state money to help restore Pilgrim Baptist Church. Blagojevich announced the pledge following a Jan. 6 fire. After church leaders announced plans to rebuild, Blagojevich, who is running for reelection, publicly awarded a state grant to rebuild what he termed "non-church" portions of the African-American church. But money is fungible. The state grant would free up money to rebuild the church. (Freethought Today)

FFRF Protests Student Fees for Catholicism

The Freedom From Religion Foundation formally has objected to a Feb. 15 vote by the University of Wisconsin-Madison student government to award \$147,000 in student fees to the UW Roman Catholic Foundation. Some of the funds would pay for "Lenten booklets." "This well-endowed Roman Catholic center, which serves about

10,000 Catholic students and describes itself as one of the oldest and largest student organizations on campus, should be asking for funding from Catholic students, their parents and the diocese, not from the diverse student body,” said Annie Laurie Gaylor, Foundation co-president. (Freethought Today)

The Gospel of Judas

The finding of the new Gospel, though obviously remarkable as a bit of textual history, no more challenges the basis of the Church’s faith than the discovery of a document from the nineteenth century written in Ohio and defending King George would be a challenge to the basis of American democracy. There are no new beliefs, no new arguments, and certainly no new evidence in the papyrus that would cause anyone to doubt who did not doubt before.

Yet the Judas Gospel is an eye-opener anyway. First, because it is useful to be reminded, in a time of renewed fundamentalism, that religions actually have no fundament: that the inerrant texts and unchallenged holies of any faith are the work of men and time. Any orthodoxy is the snapshot of a moment. That the Church has long had answers to gnosticism, in all its varieties, does not mean that gnosticism was always doomed to heresy. Bard D. Ehrman has recently written touchingly and convincingly, of his own migration away from a fundamentalist Christianity on the basis of an increasing understanding of how time contingent and man-made the foundational Gospels really are. As Borges once suggested, had Alexandria, where gnosticism flourished, triumphed rather than Rome, we could have had a Dante making poetry out the realm of Barbelo [the first emanation of God in the various Sethian Gnostic cosmogonies]. –Adam Gopnik, the New Yorker

Pope Prepared to Relax—Ever so Slightly—Ban on Condoms?

Church officials recently confirmed that Pope Benedict XVI has requested a report on whether

It might be acceptable for Catholics to use condoms in one narrow circumstance: to protect life inside a marriage where one partner is infected with the HIV virus or is sick with AIDS. Catholic officials and others agree that this is a remarkable development. It is also drawing criticism from Catholic conservatives who see any deviation from orthodoxy as a slippery slope. A change would address a relatively small part of the problem since most transmission of AIDS is not between married couples. Still, a small concession in this area, it is feared,

would help to break down inhibitions against condom use in places like the Philippines and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, both with high fertility rates and low economic growth, where Catholic officials and clerics wield great influence.
(NYT)

Recommended Reading: The May/June issue of *Skeptical Inquiry* features many articles of particular interest to secular humanists: among them, three on SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) and a review of several self-help books.