

# Humanist CommonSense

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A NEWSLETTER OF THE HUMANIST ASSOCIATION OF WEST CENTRAL FLORIDA Volume No. 13, Issue 4

April 2010

A CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION (AHA) AND AN AFFILIATE OF THE COUNCIL FOR SECULAR HUMANISM (CSH)

## America, Religion and Science—What More Could you Ask For?

**A Special Treat—Join us on Saturday, April 17 at 11 am: We have a New Time and Place**  
(see map and directions on p. 2)

WE HAVE A FOURFOLD TREAT FOR APRIL: The coveted return of Dr. Robert Tucker to our lectern, plus TWO lively discussion presentations, plus the opportunity to meet new (or perhaps old) humanist friends from the Tampa Bay area, at this joint HAWCF-CFI meeting.

First, AMERICA IS NOT A CHRISTIAN NATION: Dr. Tucker will survey some of the popular but mistaken belief that the United States was intentionally and legally founded as a



Christian nation. He will survey some recent and rather startling (and possibly unsettling) instances of this false belief in action.

WAYS OF KNOWING: SCIENCE VS. RELIGION—in the second half, Dr. Tucker will offer a 14-point analysis of the great differences between the epistemologies, goals and language of modern science and

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### APRIL MEETING

11 am Saturday, April 17  
Seffner-Mango Library  
410 N Kingsway Road  
conveniently located just off I-4  
in Seffner (813.273.3652) ...  
see driving directions on page 2.

## Dubious Alternatives

By James W. Williamson, M.D.

[Dr. Williamson, a member of our chapter and longtime Humanist advocate, is a retired cardiologist and currently lives in Orlando. Editor of a magazine for physicians, CENTRAL FLORIDA PHYSICIAN, he has contributed articles to various freethought publications and regularly submits letters to the ORLANDO SENTINEL. He served on the boards of Humanists of Florida and Atheists of Florida. E-mail: jwingw@aol.com]

IN ALL AGES, the public has clamored for magical cures, many of which are now recognized in retrospect as irrational or even comical. Many people are unaware, however, that even in this age of effective scientific medicine they are embracing pseudo-scientific therapy that in the future will be looked back on in the same way.

Quackery became big business after the Civil War fueled by the large scale manufacture of patent medicines and their distribution in frontier areas by "medicine men," who traveled in horse-drawn wagons covered with ads for patent medicines. This type of distribution eventually developed into full-blown medicine shows with acrobats, elephants, and magic acts to entertain a gullible audience.

Many of the patent medicines' claims were not encumbered by logic. The King of Pain was good for baldness or deafness, or whatever the

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## The Problem of Theodicy

By Robert P. Tucker, Ph.D.

[Dr. Tucker, a founding member of our chapter, received his Ph.D. in Theology from the University of Chicago. He was chair of the Dept. of Religion and Philosophy, Yankton College, Yankton, SD, and former professor of Philosophy and Bible at Florida Southern College, Lakeland.]

PICK UP ANY NEWSPAPER in any city on any day and read it. Somewhere in the world there has been an earthquake, a volcanic eruption, a tidal wave, a flood, a drought, a forest fire, a tornado, a hurricane, a blizzard, an avalanche, or some other "natural disaster" which has resulted in the suffering and deaths of untold numbers of animals and people.

Turn on any radio and there you can hear about the latest case of someone lying to someone else, of one person stealing from another, of this business defrauding its customers, of that corporation selling dangerous and defective merchandise, of some country devaluing its money, of another nation discriminating against large segments of its population.

Watch television or scan the Internet for a while and you can see the swollen bellies of starving children,

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## CALENDAR April–June 2010

April 12 .....	Humanist Dinner
April 17 .....	Humanist Meeting
<b>New Date and Location for this month—See Article on this very special meeting on Page 1 above, plus Map on p. 2</b>	
May 10 .....	Humanist Dinner
May 18 .....	Regular Meeting
June 14 .....	Humanist Dinner
June 22 .....	Regular Meeting

## Religious Fracas at Lakeland City Council

THERE IT WAS—RIGHT ON THE FRONT PAGE of the *Lakeland Ledger*: ATHEIST GROUP CHALLENGES LAKELAND COMMISSION OVER PRAYER! Cary McMullen,

the *Ledger's* Religion Editor, on March 12 reported on a major story in the city, to wit: "The Lakeland City Commission is being challenged on its policy of beginning its meetings with



**Beautiful Lakeland—let's keep its nature beautiful**

prayer, part of an effort by a state atheist organization that is targeting the practice at other city councils in the region. City leaders cannot recall being challenged on the practice before, and say they may be facing an on-going controversy with the atheists, including the possibility of legal action."

At the council meeting of March 1, 2010, EllenBeth Wachs (director

of the Lakeland chapter of Atheists of Florida) and Rob Curry (executive director of Atheists of Florida) objected to the standard practice of opening prayers recited by local clergypersons, stating that the practice amounts to "divisive (and) unfair" treatment for the non-

religious and for those having nontraditional beliefs.

The *Ledger* reporter pointed out that leaders from Lakeland's Jewish synagogue, Temple Emanuel,

are also exerting pressure on the city council ... recently they urged the county's public boards to be "completely nondenominational" when opening their meetings with prayer.

Read the full story online at <http://www.theledger.com/article/20100312/NEWS/3125036>.

Not covered by the *Ledger* was a follow-up story: Two weeks later, on

March 15, Wachs and Curry returned, accompanied by John Kieffer, president of Atheists of Florida. During this appearance, all three speakers encountered hostility and argumentativeness from some commissioners, and the Mayor appeared to be combative and dismissive, interrupting all three during their time for speaking.

CBS News affiliate 10CONNECTS interviewed EllenBeth Wachs and John Kieffer for a story that ran on the 11 o'clock news: ATHEISTS BLAST LAKELAND CITY COMMISSION. View the video at <http://wtsp.com/news/local/story.aspx?storyid=127598>.

As March ended, EllenBeth Wachs and Rob Curry just concluded individual meetings requested by Commissioner Justin Troller and Mayor Fields, scheduled for Monday, March 29, 2010. We'll follow up on further developments next month.

Do you have an opinion about these events going on in Lakeland? Should the humanists put forth an opinion on the matter? Let us hear from you about your ideas of freethought life in Lakeland, Florida.

## April Meeting

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traditional religion.

Robert P. Tucker received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Theology from the University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; his B.A. degree in Religion and Philosophy, magna cum laude, from Texas Christian University, Ft. Worth, Texas. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

Dr. Tucker's career combined teaching and ministry. He taught Religion, Philosophy, Ethics and Logic at Yankton College (Yankton, South Dakota) and at Florida Southern College (Lakeland, Florida). He has served congregations in Texas, Illinois, South Dakota, Nebraska, Virginia and Florida.

From 1995–2008, Dr. Tucker served as the Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, Florida. Now retired, he is Minister Emeritus of the Congregation.

Dr. Tucker has served as a member of the Boards of Florida District UUA, and the UU in the Pines. He is a Founding Board Member of Humanist Association of West Central Florida.

His wife, Roberta, is a professor of French Literature at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Their daughter, Erin, is a lawyer in New York City.

### Driving directions to the Seffner-Mango Library:

#### From Tampa: Take I-4 East ...

Take the middle lane in exit 10—Route

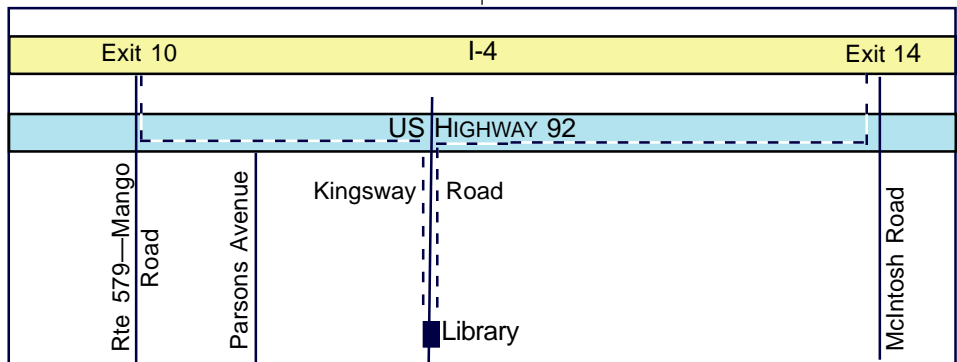
579 for Mango-Thonotosassa Roads, Turn right, but move to the left lane Turn left at the first traffic light, onto US-92 E/FL-600 E/E Hillsborough Ave for 1.5 mi

Turn right at N Kingsway Rd for 0.4 mi Library will be on the right

#### From Lakeland: Take I-4 West ...

Take exit 14 for McIntosh Rd Turn left at McIntosh Rd for 0.5 mi Turn right at US-92 W/FL-600 W/W Hillsborough Ave for 2.1 mi

Turn left at N Kingsway Rd for 0.4 mi Library will be on the right



## Does Government Foster Prayer Discrimination?

By Nan Owens

THIS ISSUE OF *COMMON SENSE* seems to be rife with corrections to the March 2010 issue (see, the *errata* on page 8). In my article last month, I mixed up the National Prayer Breakfast with the National Day of Prayer. The National Prayer Breakfast, held in Washington, D.C., each year on the first Thursday of February, originally was called the Presidential Prayer Breakfast. The National Day of Prayer is held on the first Thursday of every May. Outside of slightly differing names, sponsors and dates, there is little difference between the two events. Both are sponsored by aggressive far-right organizations unconstitutionally seeking to mix religion into the highest reaches of our American government and convert America into a theocracy.

The organizational information I referenced last month actually referred to the National Day of Prayer.

The National Prayer Breakfast is organized on behalf of the members of the United States Congress by The Fellowship Foundation, a conservative Christian organization more widely known as “The Family.” In keeping with the Family’s use of secretive influence, neither the Family nor the National Prayer Breakfast has a web site.

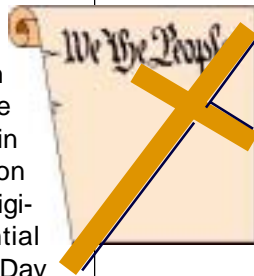
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## More Government and Religion Mischief

Once again, the battle over school prayer has come to the Florida Legislature—with predictable results. The House PreK-12 Policy Committee approved a measure last month that would allow public school students to initiate and lead prayers at school functions such as football games and the senior prom, and would allow teachers to pray with the students.

The bill prohibits teachers, administrators and school boards from “discouraging or inhibiting the delivery of an inspirational message,” which includes a “prayer or invocation.”

Though called a “breakfast”, the National Prayer Breakfast is more—it’s a series of events that take place the entire week of the breakfast. Members of Congress hold private meetings with American and international individuals and groups



to discuss issues of interest—there are regional breakfasts, luncheons and dinners, plus hospitality suites (e.g., a Florida suite, a Middle East suite, etc.) for people to meet and build relationships outside the official sphere.

Last month I reported on a *New York Times* article stating that a Washington ethics group had asked President Obama and Congressional leaders to abstain from this year’s Breakfast because religious and gay rights groups in protest had organized competing prayer events in 17 cities. In general this “breakfast” has been much criticized by organizations such as American Atheists and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, who describe it as violating separation of church and state.

But Obama chose to attend the prayer breakfast, which has been held in Washington for more than half a century and attended by every president since Dwight D. Eisenhower. Accordingly, Vice President Biden, congressional leaders, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham

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Despite objections from Democrats and civil liberties groups who called the effort “patently unconstitutional,” the House PreK-12 Education Committee approved the prayer bill (HB11) on a largely party line, 10-3 vote.

Rep. Greg Evers, R-Baker, a co-sponsor of the legislation, said: “This is not necessarily a prayer bill. This is a rights bill.”

Courtenay Strickland, a lobbyist for the Florida American Civil Liberties Union countered: “This is not about protecting free speech. It is about trampling on the free exercise of religion.”

Others complain that the bill creates the potential for minority students to be marginalized, arguing that government has no business institu-

Clinton and an array of religious leaders and foreign dignitaries attended the February 4 breakfast. Obama called on the attendees to step outside their comfort zone to bridge divisions and unite around common goals.

The National Day of Prayer is coming up next month on May 6. The 2010 chairperson is Shirley Dobson, well known to religious and seculars alike. And, yes—to volunteer at an event you must be a Bible-thumping evangelical Christian. Not only is this unconstitutional, it is meant to proselytize. For more information, visit [www.nationaldayofprayer.org/](http://www.nationaldayofprayer.org/).

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has filed a federal lawsuit broadly challenging the federal law that designates a National Day of Prayer and requires a National Day of Prayer Proclamation by the President. Public Law 100-307 sets the first Thursday in May as “National Day of Prayer.” The Foundation is seeking a declaration that the law violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, alleging that a Focus on the Family Task Force, chaired by Shirley Dobson, is “working hand-in-glove” with the government in organizing the National Day of Prayer.

Tell us what is going on in your city next month as we follow up on this travesty of religious coercion.

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tionalizing religious speech.

Rep. Kelli Stargel, R-Lakeland, argued the proposed law does not promote religious indoctrination. “If I don’t agree with a prayer that someone is saying, I sit there and think of something different. You are not forced to believe something just because you heard it.”

Religious speech and public schools are a polemic combination that has long drawn legal debate. In Florida, lawmakers regularly introduce school prayer bills with little success.

Rep. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami, said the proposed law could create new disciplinary problems if students use it to promote hateful or discriminatory speech.

## Dubious Alternatives

Continued from p. 1

patient had. Colder's Liquid Beef Tonic was sold as a cure for alcoholism, even though it contained over 26% alcohol. Simmons Liver Regulator was a remedy for everything, including "disgust for food and prostration of the system." One of the best patent medicine sellers of the nineteenth century was Dr. Miles Compound Extract of Tomato, guaranteed to reach a person's "weak" spot. Today it is known as ketchup.

Rather than being an amusing and interesting relic of history, the "medicine man" still operates in our midst. He is spiffed up and hardly recognizable any longer. He operates out of attractive shops, offices, hospitals, and medical education facilities. What he dispenses is backed up with impressive pseudo-scientific jargon and poorly designed studies. He spreads his message widely to a eager public with advertising dispensed by the best public relations firms. The harsh designation of "quack" is hardly ever associated with him. He is now practicing "complementary and alternative medicine" (CAM).

In our culture, "alternative medicine" is any healing practice that is used in place of conventional medicine. It includes measures that lack scientific proof or that have already been disproved, such as naturopathy, chiropractic, herbalism, traditional Chinese medicine, Unani, Ayurveda, yoga, biofeedback, hypnosis, homeopathy, acupuncture, and others. "Complementary medicine" refers to the same measures used in addition to conventional medicine. Note carefully that for the rest of this article the unwieldy phrase "complementary and alternative medicine" will be abbreviated as CAM.

More than one-third of adults and nearly 12% of children use CAM, according to a large federal survey released in 2008. Overall, the use of CAM appears to have stabilized compared to a study done five years earlier.

The problem with the designation "alternative medicine" is that "alternative" suggests an equal status with conventional medicine and implies

that "alternative medicine" would be a rational substitute.

David Eisenberg, director of the Harvard Medical School's division for research and education in complementary and integrative medical therapies stated that, "I think the news is complementary and alternative medicine use by the U.S. public is here to stay." He may be right, but many in the medical field are disturbed by the trend, since most CAM therapy has not been evaluated by well-designed investigations, and those that have been evaluated are overwhelmingly found to be ineffective.

Wallace Sampson, founding editor of the *Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine*, summed up the situation succinctly: "They are either unproven or disproved. Acupuncture is a placebo. Homeopathy is one step above fraud. It goes on and on. The fact that they are so widely used is evidence for how gullible large segments of our society are." He has also stated: "Most alternative medicine is quackery by another name."

The most frequently used form of CAM is the intake of dietary and herbal products. Currently, the only legal requirement for these products is that they cannot be promoted as preventing or treating disease, and the Federal Drug Administration can intervene only when a product is shown to be harmful. The reality is that these products often are promoted for the prevention and treatment of disease, in spite of the legal requirements.

In addition to a gross misdirection of our precious healthcare dollars toward largely placebo therapy, there are other problems with dietary and herbal products:

1) Lack of standardization. When the few herbs that have active ingredients are assayed, the amount is often lower or higher than stated on the label.

2) Contaminants. Sometimes the remedies contain pesticides, heavy metals, carcinogens, and bovine products (remote risk of "mad cow disease").

3) Occasional serious or even fatal side-effects. Ephedra products have been the most dangerous since they have produced adverse cardiac reactions,

including sudden death.

4) Adverse interactions with prescribed medications. Only about one third of patients tell their physicians about alternative products.

5) Using alternative therapy in place of proven medical treatments. This action can have serious or fatal results.

The government has played a large part in making CAM mainstream, and much of the government promotion has been by one individual, Democratic Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa. In 1992 he was a powerful member of the appropriations subcommittee in charge of the National Institute of Health (NIH) and slipped a line in the report accompanying the appropriations bill that created the NIH Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM) with one million dollars in seed money.

In 1999 President Clinton signed into law an appropriations bill that changed the name of the Office of Alternative Medicine to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM). The budget was pumped up to 50 million dollars a year, which enabled the organization to establish a national center at Bastyr University, a naturopathic college outside of Seattle.

Harkin is a great believer in alternative therapies. His conviction in these modalities was cemented when he concluded that his hay fever had been cured by bee pollen. There is no evidence in the scientific literature that bee pollen can cure anything, and it can cause life-threatening allergic reactions. And the Federal Trade Commission fined Harkin's bee pollen distributor 200,000 dollars for false claims.

His main motive in establishing the Office of Alternative Medicine appears to have been to promote the use by the public of alternative therapies, and little scientific investigation was done. Harkin criticized the "unbendable rules of randomized clinical trials" and, citing his use of bee pollen, to treat his allergies, stated: "It is not necessary for the scientific community to understand the process before the American public can benefit from

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## Dubious Alternatives

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these therapies.” Harkin’s office reportedly pressured the OAM to fund studies of specific “pet theories,” including bee pollen and antineoplastons.

When the OAM became the NCCAM, one of the main goals was to evaluate alternative therapies with rigorous scientific studies. After ten years of evaluating many herbal and other alternative health remedies and spending 2.5 billion dollars, the sad fact is that *not a single one* has been found effective. Popular herbal remedies such as St. John’s wort, echinacea, saw palmetto, and ginkgo biloba were no more effective than a placebo.

Despite these definitive scientific studies, NCCAM has never stated that these measures were ineffective. Dr. Stephen Barrett, a retired physician who runs Quackwatch, a web site on medical scams, states: “There’s been a deliberate policy of never saying something doesn’t work. It’s as though you can only speak in one direction and say a different version or dose might give different results.” And even if negative findings do reach practitioners of CAM and its enthusiasts in the public, there often is no effect on behavior since such conclusions are based on faith rather than evidence.

The biggest waste of taxpayer money by NCCAM is repeating tests on measures that have already been disproved by good scientific studies and studying measures that have no scientific rationale for working.

An example of repeating studies on measures that are already disproved is a study on chelation therapy underway on 2,300 patients, even though smaller controlled trials have been negative (and a scientific rationale is lacking and deaths have occurred). Examples of funding studies that violate the basic tenets of science are these: therapeutic touch for wrist fractures in postmenopausal women; use of Reiki for patients with advanced AIDS; distance healing in wound healing.

Clearly, by any objective standard, NCCAM has been a failure. Any

good studies that it has done could just as easily been done by other departments of the National Institute of Health with more scientific vigor and better public communication.

Despite its negative findings, NCCAM has continued to promote the proliferation of CAM by offering grants to money-starved medical education facilities. 60% of standard medical schools, 95% of osteopathic medical schools, and 85% of nursing schools teach some form of CAM. With a few exceptions, it is not taught as an objective scientific appraisal but from an advocacy viewpoint.

The significance of this spread of CAM to medical education facilities is appraised clearly by Dr. Wallace Sampson, the CAM expert who was mentioned earlier: “Teaching about alternative medicine implies acceptance of it and potentially creates more gullibility and less critical, objective thinking. This will be felt in many indirect ways, including judgment errors, misguiding people with severe diseases, and tax standards and laws.”

Instead of the “medicine man” of the nineteenth being relegated to his proper place as a historical relic, he still walks proudly among us enjoying great respect and adulation, sometimes even in the halls of our most prestigious medical educational institutions. Steven P. Novella, Assistant Professor of Neurology, Yale University School of Medicine is certainly right when he states we are in “the golden age of quackery and anti-science.”

What can be done to counteract this embrace of quackery and anti-science by many in the general public? I am under no illusions that any measures will eliminate quackery and anti-science entirely, but certain ones over time can be helpful. My suggestions are these:

First, eliminate NCCAM and do any research with a reasonable chance of a positive result under already established units of the National Institute of Health. For political reasons this will be difficult since true believers in CAM in congress strongly support the organization. Strong public pressure to accomplish this will be needed

and is lacking at present; Second, increase science education and scientific (critical) thinking in schools. These measures over time would probably be the most effective; Third, scientists themselves must be actively involved in educating members of the general public about science and scientific thinking. Fourth, the general public should screen candidates for Congress as to their scientific knowledge and their ability to use scientific thinking.

Sometimes I slip into a funk worrying about why some of my fellow human beings aren’t more rational. Perhaps a heavy dose of Dr. Miles Compound Extract of Tomato (ketchup) will reach my “weak spot” and lift my spirits.

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## Book Review: A Brief History of Death

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the secularization of attitudes about death reflect the secularization of society and relationships in society generally.

In the past, the body was kept whole in expectation of a physical resurrection; it took a lot of time and cultural changes before cremation became an accepted practice. In the past, funerals were highly religious and focused on the loved-one joining family in heaven; today, even priests have shifted the focus of many funeral orations to the person’s life and accomplishments. Burial near a church used to be standard practice; today it’s increasingly common for ashes to be scattered around some site with special personal significance.

### Bottom Line

This history of beliefs and practices surrounding death, dying, and grieving is too complex for one book, but Douglas Davies’ *A Brief History of Death* is a great introduction. Davies touches on so many different religious, artistic, philosophical, and secular matters that you’ll probably want to read more. Given the importance of these beliefs and practices, it’s certainly a subject worth learning more about.

## The Problem of Theodicy

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the shattered cars and wrecked lives which come from drunken driving, the battered faces of spouse abuse, the broken buildings and bloodied corpses of terrorism and war.

Evil! That's what these things are. I don't mean some supernatural, metaphysical, mythological mumbo-jumbo! I mean plain old ordinary, everyday down-to-earth evil: bad things happening to good people and animals!

That's what evil is, and it's everywhere!

No one is immune, not even people who believe they ought to be. One day newspapers carried this story with the headline, "Roof Collapse Kills 30 People in Church" [5]:

"A church roof collapsed over a packed congregation early Saturday, killing at least 30 people and injuring 538...

"About 1,300 people were at the church in Osasco [Brazil] when the roof came crashing down...

"We were praying and had our eyes closed. When we opened them, the building was falling," Maria Aparecida Costa, said... "I fainted, and when I woke up, I was buried."

Firefighters were not certain why the roof collapsed, but they said the building was more than 40 years old. The roof was supported by heavy wooden beams that may have rotted...

In a building large enough to seat 1,300 people, the ceilings would have been quite high. It would have taken a long moment for the roof to reach the floor. In that time, some of the people might have heard something—a snap, a ripping, a tearing—and some might have looked up and seen the ceiling coming down towards them. Imagine their utter astonishment at such a thing! What safer refuge could there be than the house of one's god?! What safer activity could one be doing than praying?! How could such evil happen if one's god were good and omnipotent?!

That is the question, and it has a name: "*theodicy*" (from Leibniz; *theos*/god, *dike*/justice). [1:601]

*Theodicy is the greatest prob-*

*lem there is for any monotheistic religion.* It is the one fatal disease that theologians must cure if they are to prevent the "death" of their "god."

Theologians most often express the problem of theodicy as this question: "How can there be evil when [their particular] god is good and omnipotent?"

*Theodicy is not a problem for atheists*, of course, since the existence of evil can be easily explained as the inevitable consequence of such natural processes as wind and water, fire and air; and as the result of the biological requirements evolution has instilled in all living creatures, and by the selfishness, ignorance and stupidity of all human beings. Nature, unlike divinity, is not expected to be good, and so the presence of evil does not constitute any self-contradiction in the natural scheme of things.

*Theodicy is also not a problem in polytheistic religions* where some of the gods are good, some of the gods are evil, but none of the gods is in charge of the universe! They may meddle in earthly affairs, but ultimately it is Fate which determines what happens: not only to men and women, but to the gods and goddesses themselves! Because they are impotent prisoners upon the Great Wheel of Becoming polytheistic deities can co-exist with evil, there being no contradiction between evil and their divine natures, and thus no problem of theodicy.

*The matter is altogether different in any monotheistic religion*, however. The book of *Job* offers a perfect example.

Most of us know *Job* fairly well. It has been called "the greatest monument of wisdom literature in the Old Testament." [1:588] Martin Luther said that it is "magnificent and sublime as no other book of scripture." [1:588f] Tennyson called it "the greatest poem of... [all] times," [1:589]

At first glance, the story of *Job* seems pretty simple. During a meeting of the Heavenly Council, one angel doubts the faithfulness of human beings. When Yahweh cites *Job* as an example of a righteous man, the

angel wagers that the loss of his health, prosperity and family will reveal *Job's* lack of faith. Yahweh permits the angel to "test" *Job*. Hurt and angry at the suffering he endures, *Job* bewails his predicament. "Friends" come to comfort him, but then they tell him he is at fault, that his sins are the cause of his suffering. *Job* denies this and turns directly to his god to protest his situation and to plead his innocence. Yahweh eventually responds, whereupon *Job* repents (!), has his good life restored, and lives happily ever. [1:589f]

While it may seem simple, the book of *Job* is really quite complex. More than that: it marks a pivotal turning point in Hebrew religion.

*Job* is complex, first of all, because it is a mythological folktale and not an historical chronicle. Nothing in the story can be taken literally, for every element is a symbol of something else. [1:588-601]

*Job* is complex, secondly, because it has had numerous authors and editors with differing points of view. Originally the story circulated in non-Hebrew lands [1:590] as an oral folktale in the second millennium, B.C.E. Then it was written down in a Hebrew version around the time of King David. [3:613] It was not until some 500 years later that it came to be re-written in the version we have.

Yet a third complexity arises from the fact that the version of *Job* we have is the unification of two separate editions. One was written as prose and appears as the prologue and epilogue of our book. The other was poetic, and it constitutes the bulk of our book of *Job*. The complexity here lies in there being different gods and different *Jobs* in each edition! The *Job* of the prose portion is patient and willingly suffers the slings and arrows of his outrageous fortune. The *Job* of the poetic section is boiling mad at his god, and vigorously protests what has happened to him. [1:589]

Most readers don't notice these two different *Jobs*. As one scholar has written, "This ignorance is

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## The Problem of Theodicy

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clearest among those who refer to the 'proverbial patience' of Job" and treat him as a model of piety. That portrait only applies to the prose beginning and ending of the book, and not to the much larger poetic section. [1:589]

A fourth complexity exists because later editors have heavily modified the text to tone down its heresy and make it seem more orthodox. [1:591] This element is directly related to Job's also being a pivotal turning point in the history of the Hebrew religion.

The radical change which occurs in Hebrew theology becomes visible when one understands that the background which Job is repudiating is the ancient "doctrine of divine retribution." [1:595f.] From the exodus until the Babylonian Exile, the Hebrews believed that their god, Yahweh, was an omnipotent deity, the creator and sustainer of the universe, a good and just god who balanced the scales of justice in this life (which was essential since pre-exilic Hebrews had no belief in life after death). Such divine retribution appears in every pre-exilic biblical writing (especially Deuteronomy and Proverbs). [1:581f, 595] That long period of naive and unsophisticated theology eventually came to an end, however, when finally, one catastrophic event, changed everything. That event was the Babylonian Exile.

In 597 B.C.E. Babylonia conquered Judah and began deporting the Hebrews into exile. Ten years later, Jerusalem fell and its Temple was destroyed. In the minds of the Hebrew faithful, evil pagan heathens had caused the suffering and deaths of the righteous, and all the while, Yahweh had apparently stood by doing nothing! It simply was no longer possible to pretend that Yahweh was the lord of history, for everyone could see that he was not rewarding the good and punishing the evil! After the Exile, there began to appear a new kind of Wisdom Literature, such books as Job and Ecclesiastes. These documents began to raise the

question of theodicy for the first time among the people who were now called "Jews," and the first to do so was the book of Job.

Like the pre-exilic Hebrews, Job knew he was a good and righteous man. He also knew he was suffering. The author of our version of Job used his friends as a literary device to symbolize the old, conservative, orthodox—and false—theology of divine retribution. [1:595] They claimed Job's suffering was due to his sins, but Job knew better! He abandoned their "windy words" [1:597] and sought out his god, only to find that Yahweh had gone into hiding! "Oh, that I knew where I might find him... Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; on the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see Him." [Job 23:3, 8-9]

It was bad enough that Job had fallen into the pit of the theodicy problem, but now there fell in on top of him another theological disaster whose formal name is "*deus absconditus*," the Vanished God!

In every religion an experience all too common is that when the going gets tough, sometimes the deity gets going...and disappears! Even Jesus on the Cross understood that: "My God, my God," he cried out "why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

Job eventually got his audience with Yahweh. He addressed theodicy head on. "The flaw, he cried, is not in himself but in God, who is responsible for his misery. Instead of caring for a mortal creature, God is like a capricious tyrant (Job 9:18-19), a savage beast (Job 16:7, 9), a treacherous assailant (Job 16:12-14)." [1:596f.] Job "set himself up as the judge of God.... Like Prometheus, Job is a titanic figure who doubts, rebels, and shouts defiance at God." [1:597]

The genius of the book of Job lies in the fact that, at long last, a Hebrew writer has become theologically sophisticated enough to ask the question of theodicy! It took over 1,000 years for that to happen, and its profundity cannot be under-

estimated. But, alas! With that shot, all of his ammunition was spent: the author of Job was not capable of answering his own question!

That is why when Yahweh finally speaks "one wonders if he has even heard Job." [1:599] As Jewish theologian, Martin Buber wrote: "What God says does not answer the charge; it does not even touch upon it." [*Ibid.*] Instead, Yahweh belittles Job and tells him that as a finite creature he is too stupid to understand the workings of an infinite deity. Then Yahweh rebukes Job for being so audacious as to ask questions in the first place. [1:600]

The book ends with Job completely capitulating. He "repents" at being angry over his unjust treatment. He ceases to question why his god has abused him. For such "acts of faith," he is "rewarded" and lives happily ever after.

The book of Job succeeds brilliantly in showing that the old, conservative, orthodox Hebrew doctrine of divine retribution is false: no deity balances the scales of justice in this life. Anyone with eyes can see that good people suffer, evil people prosper, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer!

*Theologians* admit that "the book of Job does not end with a resolution to the problem of suffering.... The mystery of suffering is left rationally unanswered, as it is finally unanswered in the Bible as a whole." [1:600-1]

That word, "*mystery*," is the theologians' way "out" of the problem of theodicy. When asked, "Why is there suffering?" Maimonides and Buber, Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin all reply: "It's a *divine mystery!*"

We are creatures, they say, infected with Original Sin, bereft of the supernatural grace that once guided our reason, left with only our fallen and fallible mentality, and so there are many things we cannot know, should not know, will not know. Such "divine mysteries" are beyond human understanding. That's what the theologians say.

*Philosophers*, however, say some-

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## The Problem of Theodicy

Continued from p.7

thing else!

Three hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the Greek philosopher *Epicurus* summarized the problem of theodicy in these words:

The gods can either take away evil from the world and will not, or being willing to do so cannot; or they neither can nor will, or lastly, they are both able and willing. If they have the will to remove evil and cannot, then they are not omnipotent. If they can, but will not, then they are not benevolent. If they are neither able nor willing, then they are neither omnipotent nor benevolent. Lastly, if they are both able and willing to annihilate evil, [then] how does it exist? [300 B.C.E.; 6:298]

Two thousand years later, the British empirical philosopher, *David Hume* surveyed the history of theology and concluded: "Epicurus' old questions are still unanswered." [1779; *ibid.*]

Philosophers recognize there are "pseudo-statements" and "pseudo-questions." That is, there are sentences which appear to make assertions or inquiries, but which turn out to be inherently meaningless gibberish because the combination of words used in them constitutes logically impossible self-contradictions called *oxymorons*.

An example of a pseudo-statement is this sentence: "An omnipotent god ought to be able to create a rock so heavy he could not lift it." That, of course, is absurd, for if an omnipotent god were unable to lift that rock, he would no longer be omnipotent!

The same problem occurs in the pseudo-question of theodicy: "How can there be evil, if God is good and omnipotent?" There can't be! The existence of evil and the existence of a good, omnipotent deity are mutual exclusive, self-contradictory things. There can be one or the other, but not both.

Given the fact that evil exists undeniably, whereas the existence of deity is merely a belief, philosophers invert the traditional question of

theodicy. They ask, "How can a good and omnipotent god exist, when there is evil?"

Unless we are willing to sacrifice our intellects and believe in Original Sin and divine mystery, we are left with only *three options*:

1. *We might conclude that a god does not exist*, that theism is mythology, and that so-called "experiences of God" are merely the epiphenomena of brain chemistry as psychologist Michael Persinger's research suggests [4]. Such atheism clearly avoids the problem of theodicy.

2. *We might conclude that a god exists and is omnipotent and could destroy evil but does not because s/he is not good*. No one likes this approach because, "if god is not good, then god is not god." An evil god is a demon whom no self-respecting person would worship! This option is useless.

3. *We might conclude that a god exists and is good and would destroy evil if s/he could, but s/he cannot because s/he is not omnipotent*. This is the option which most nonfundamentalist theists take and this is why they tend to accept the "Process Theology" which comes out of the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. [2:177ff.] Belief in a benevolent but less than omnipotent deity is compatible with recognition that evil exists and arises from the interplay of natural forces and from human freedom. But is such a weakened deity really attractive?

A good, omnipotent creator could have invented a universe in which organisms lived by eating dirt and drinking salt water. But that is not the world we have; and for living things to go on living in this world, they must kill and eat one another, which is surely evil.

Similarly, humans *could* be totally controlled by some deity, like puppets on a string, and then they could be forced to do only good deeds. But in such a world humans would have no free will. Freedom is only possible where there is evil. Not even omnipotence can change that.

If theology is only mythology, then

the question of theodicy is no more serious than asking "What size shoe does Santa Claus wear?"

But, if there is a god, then theodicy remains the ultimate and fatal challenge to any belief that such a deity is both good and omnipotent.

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- [5] "Roof Collapse Kills 30 People in Church." *The [Lakeland, Florida] Ledger*. 6 September 1998. A6.
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### A Correction from Dr. Tucker:

Our fellow Humanist, the much respected and beloved, Dr. David Reifsnyder, M.D., sent me a private email that I was historically inaccurate about penicillin in my March 2010 article on Immanuel Kant. I had paraphrased incorrect information from Lawrence M. Hinman's *Ethics* textbook. David cites the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 126:63-64, September 9, 1944. Below is the rewritten paragraph (the number 8 source being David's words in his email; 4 being Hinman):

In the 1930s, the U.S. Government began a project to determine the long-term effects of syphilis on men. At that time "mercury and arsenicals were used to treat syphilis and had a high side effect incidence." Also, "up to at least 25% of individuals with syphilis spontaneously cure themselves." [8] All this made a long-term study difficult since most patients were being treated and quickly cured. So, it was decided that a group of black men would be used as human lab rats. These men had already been diagnosed as having syphilis, but they had not yet been told that they had the disease. They never

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## BOOK REVIEW



### **A Brief History of Death by Douglas Davies**

By Austin Cline as posted on his blog, About.com. Reprinted with permission.

*Editor's comment: I have not read this book myself, but I found the book's subject and Austin Cline's review intriguing. Would appreciate any feedback on either this topic or the book itself. With the first week-end in April "celebrating" the supposed gruesome death of a savior, it seemed that something more realistic and possibly helpful was in order for our readers.*

The book: *A Brief History of Death* by Douglas Davies. Publisher: Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN: 1405101830

#### **Summary**

##### **PRO:**

- Compares and contrasts a wide variety of cultural beliefs & practices
- Even includes modern secular developments in treatment of death
- Covers religious, scientific, anthropological, philosophical, even artistic issues

##### **CON:**

- More on secular developments might have been nice
- Religious discussions rely too heavily on western Christianity

##### **DESCRIPTION:**

- History and analysis of how people have dealt with death over the millennia
- Traces cultural changes, especially in the West
- Deals with beliefs about the afterlife, grieving, burial, etc.

#### **Reviewing the Book**

Douglas Davies, a professor in the Study of Religion in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham, specializes in anthropological and religious questions about death, mortality, and grief. His book *A Brief History of Death* is part of Blackwell's Brief Histories of Religion series and provides a handy introduction to a wide variety of issues around death, dying, and burial. It doesn't just address

how religions have tried to explain and deal with death, but also how death is handled from philosophical, political, and even artistic perspectives.

Davies begins his exploration with the Epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest known work of literature—yet as old as it is, it still has the ability to speak to us directly because it addresses enduring human concerns: love and loss, death and grief, and immortality. It's no coincidence that this ancient text also deals directly with such issues.

#### **Self-Reflection & Hope**

Davies' basic thesis is that despite all the variations in how humans have thought about or approached death, they have all been driven to one degree or another by two basic features of human nature. First, we are a self-reflective species. No other animal seems to do what we do: ponder who or what exactly we are, why we are here, what we should do with our time here, where we are going, etc.:

The history of death is a history of self-reflection. Who are we? Whence do we come, and whither go after death? If there is an afterlife, what is it like and how might we prepare for it?

Second, our species is one "condemned" to hope: in the absence of proof, we hope for a future beyond death, we have hope that compels us to strive for higher and greater achievements, we have hope that encourages us to keep learning more and seek proof for what's happening, etc.

There is an optimism in hope that fosters human endeavor in a committed search for solutions to problems even when they may appear insoluble. Hope makes it more likely that individuals or societies will overcome adverse situations to survive today and be even more prepared to face adversity in the future.

There is survival value in hope.

#### **Hope & Faith**

Although hope isn't the same as faith, it is closely related and this is one reason why hope combines with self-reflection to create myths and stories about who we are, why we are here, and where we are going:

Hope underlies the human drive for meaning; it fuels the processes producing the sense of transcendence in life. The human being, self-conscious and aware of living in an uncertain world of risk and potential danger, has found it possible to face daily life and hardship because of this attitude of possibility and a sense that difficulty may be overcome.

Primary examples of this are of course religious myths about human origins and destiny, but these aspects of human nature also combine in secular ways, compelling us to learn more about humanity and to seek ways to extend human reach, human knowledge, and even human life spans.

#### **Transcending Life & Death**

Central in all this is the concept of transcendence: belief or hope in the ability to transcend death and thus transcend human life itself. Belief in souls and an afterlife is one obvious form, but even art, literature, and music can have this effect by causing a person to feel transported outside and beyond their bodies and daily existence.

Many rituals, religious or secular, create the sense that one transcends the limited self by merging with a larger human community, past and present. There is even a kind of secularized after-life: cryogenically freezing the dead in the hope of future resurrection once medical science progresses enough. Less literal forms include the desire to have one's ashes spread in water or beneath a tree in the hope of merging with the larger natural environment.

#### **Secularization of Death**

Most books about the history of death focus on religion of course, but Davies gives some attention to the secularization of attitudes and beliefs about death, too. The shift from religious to secular views about life and death can be seen most vividly in the shifting attitudes towards handling the dead body. What we think of and how we treat the body of a deceased loved-one says volumes about our relationship not only with the person, but with life and death itself. This means that

Continued on p. 5

## AHA Defines Humanism

[As published in *THE HUMANIST* magazine, a bi-monthly publication of the American Humanist Association (AHA), 1777 T Street NW, Washington, DC 20009.]

"Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice.

Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values—be they religious, ethical, social, or political—have their source in human nature, experience, and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny."

### Definitions of Humanism

[From the website of *Humanist Network News*—Ed.]

#### Humanism is:

"...seeking, without religion, the best in, and for, human beings." *Chambers Pocket Dictionary*

"...a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values; especially: a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason." *Merriam Webster Dictionary*

"...a non-religious philosophy, based on liberal human values." *Little Oxford Dictionary*

"...an appeal to reason in contrast to revelation or religious authority as a means of finding out about the natural world and destiny of man, and also giving a grounding for morality... Humanist ethics is also distinguished by placing the end of moral action in the welfare of humanity rather than in fulfilling the will of God." *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*

"The rejection of religion in favor of the advancement of humanity by its own efforts." *Collins Concise Dictionary*

"A system of thought that centers on humans and their values, capacities, and worth." *American Heritage Dictionary*

## What do Humanists believe?

**Humanists believe** that life is a naturally occurring process in the universe, that humans and human consciousness evolved on earth in the same way as all other life on the planet, and that humans will share with all other life the same ultimate fate.

**Humanists believe** that the application of human reason and the scientific method are the best means for discovery of truth about the universe and ourselves. Humanists reject the notion that the application of intellect to all areas of human concern is in any sense vain or arrogant, and require that all claims to truth be supported by credible, verifiable evidence.

**Humanists believe** humanity alone is responsible for its own destiny. All values—spiritual, ethical and social—have their source in human experience, are products of evolving culture, and are subject to human critique and amendment. Humanists believe in the common moral decencies, including altruism, integrity, honesty, tolerance, compassion, and equal justice for all.

**Humanists believe** in individual liberty and responsibility, freedom of conscience and speech, and in free inquiry. They support separation of church and state, and are opposed to censorship.

**Humanists believe** each person has but one life to lead, here and now on this earth; each of us must make the most of it in terms of creative work and happiness, and by respect for and cooperation with others we can make this a better world.

## HAWCF ... Vision & Mission Statements

The Following Vision and Mission Statements were approved by the membership on December 19, 2006:

**Vision:** *HAWCF membership to grow to more than 100 active members by 2010. Media sources in Lakeland are aware that HAWCF exists. Non-Humanists begin to see Humanism, science, and secularism as an ethical, nonthreatening alternative to sectarian supernaturalism. HAWCF has a committee structure of active members performing tasks related to our mission.*

#### Mission:

1) *Actively increase the public awareness of the Humanist, secular worldview as a rational alternative to views based upon supernaturalism.*

2) *Act as an informational, educational and social resource for members and others on all matters related to Humanistic, Rationalistic and Free-thought ideas.*

**Common Sense** is the newsletter for members and friends of the Humanist Association of West Central Florida (HAWCF). Its purpose is to report information and opinions of interest to members.

Its articles are the opinion of the respective authors only and not necessarily of HAWCF, AHA or CSH.

Permission to reprint articles in this newsletter is granted to all Humanist/Freethought groups provided proper acknowledgement is given. All others write for permission.

*Editor:* Nan Owens

*Associate Editor:* Abigail Ann Martin

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## What is HAWCF?

The Humanist Association of West Central Florida (HAWCF) is a chapter of the American Humanist Association dedicated to the promotion in our area of a rational worldview free from dependence upon supernatural belief systems.

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# Humanist Association of West Central Florida

A chartered Chapter of the American Humanist Association and an Affiliate of the Council for Secular Humanism

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I am interested in helping on the following activities

- Membership Recruit, welcome and orient new members to HAWCF
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- Programs Arrange/facilitate interesting programs for HAWCF meetings
- Hospitality Facilitate social, housekeeping and refreshment activities for HAWCF
- Education Develop/provide humanist educational & historical materials for HAWCF
- Newsletter Write for or edit HAWCF newsletter
- Publicity Publicize HAWCF and Humanist activities in the community

The Humanist Association of West Central Florida is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization. Contributions are tax deductible as provided by federal and state law.

## WHEN AND WHERE?

THE HUMANIST ASSOCIATION OF WEST CENTRAL FLORIDA usually meets on **the 3<sup>RD</sup> Tuesday of every month at 7 pm** (except July & August) at the UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF LAKE LAND (UUCL), 3140 Troy Avenue, Lakeland.

However, for our April 2010 Meeting:  
Meeting date is Saturday, April 17 at 11 am.  
The meeting place will be the Seffner-Mango Library.

This location is convenient to I-4, and is just about half-way between Lakeland and Tampa.

Center for Inquiry Tampa and HAWCF are jointly hosting a talk by our esteemed Dr. Robert P. Tucker.  
*See the address and map on page 2.*

**GUESTS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME!**

### Notable "Quotes"

God, as some cynic has said, is always on the side which has the best football coach.—Heywood Broun

## HUMANIST DINNER!!

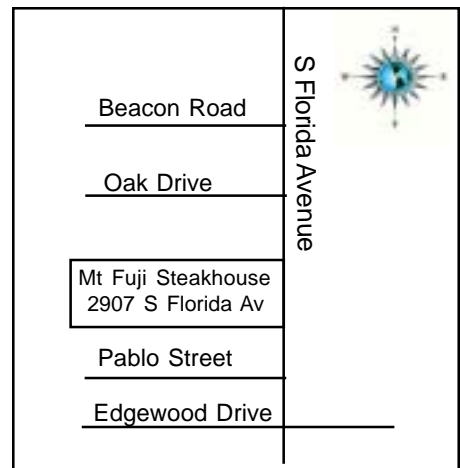
JUST A REMINDER: we usually hold an informal Humanist dinner gathering on the **2<sup>ND</sup> MONDAY OF EVERY MONTH at 6:15 pm.**



**NOTE THAT WE MEET AT:**

**Mt. Fuji Sushi Bar & Steakhouse**, 2607 S Florida Avenue in Lakeland (in the Southgate Shopping Center) between Pablo and Oak Streets. See Map below.

PLEASE JOIN US...BRING YOUR FRIENDS!



## Correction

Continued from p. 8

were told. Nor were they ever treated. Instead, they were "observed" until they died. The project continued until 1972! [4:229f.] What makes that date significant is that penicillin ("first used on a patient in February 1941") was "shown to be effective for syphilis and then came into common usage in the mid to late 40s" As David Reifsnnyder, M.D., has written, "The real travesty was when penicillin became available in the 1940s, the study wasn't terminated." [8]

A special thank you to careful and helpful readers such as David Reifsnnyder.—Robert P. Tucker, Ph.D.

## In Cyber Space:

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# Inquiring Minds Want To Know...

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See inside for exciting news.



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