

Humanist CommonSense

A NEWSLETTER OF THE HUMANIST ASSOCIATION OF WEST CENTRAL FLORIDA

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

Aren't Movies Fun? Especially When They Promote Freethought!

Bring the Popcorn—Come on out & join us on Tuesday, February 16, 7 pm at the Lakeland UUCI (see map pg. 9)

ANDREA STEELE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE FREETHOUGHT FILM FESTIVAL FOUNDATION [FFFF], will be our February speaker,



focusing on the world's first International Free-thought Film Festival, to be held right here in Florida. The Festival's purpose is to promote reason, critical thinking and life-long inquiry through the medium of film. At our meeting,

Andrea will present a collection of short films selected for their free-thought themes: just a teaser for the films that will be screened at the Festival. Scheduled to be held in Tampa, Florida, its November 2010 target date is well underway!

Andrea is known as a freethought live wire in the Tampa Bay area. Though she is the mother of three teenagers and married to her high school sweetheart for 19 years, she made the time to write and self-publish a well-received book titled *Your Preacher May Not Want You to Read This*, followed up by the founding of Families

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2010 DUES ARE DUE

HAWCF 2010 Membership dues (covering the full year Jan–Dec) are now being accepted. Please make check payable to HAWCF. Give to co-Treasurers Eskenazi or mail to HAWCF as shown on page 9.

Faith: Religion's Achilles Heel

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]

THE WORD "FAITH" IS SHORT and appears innocuous. But it has caused much human misery in history and continues to do so presently. A good first step in addressing this problem is to appreciate that "faith," like most words, has multiple meanings. The type of faith discussed in this essay will be confined to religious beliefs without supporting logic and evidence. The explanation of how faith developed will be about the Christian religion, but many of the concepts apply to religion in general.

The idea that any conclusion should be reached without evidence is a uniquely bizarre idea. A person who professes belief without evidence in other than a religious context is thought of as a fool. But in the case of religion, turning a fatal logical flaw into a concept that is revered and held in awe is a remarkable achievement.

Faith is the very lifeblood of religion. Faith gives people license to believe

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Oxygen, Fire and Light!

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.]

LET'S HAVE SOME FUN: I'm going to mention twelve names: you think for what each person is most famous: Susan B. Anthony (d. 1906), P.T. Barnum (d. 1871), Clara Barton (d. 1912), Alexander Graham Bell (d. 1922), Charles Darwin (d. 1882), R. Buckminster Fuller (d. 1983), Thomas Jefferson (d. 1826), Florence Nightingale (d. 1910), Beatrix Potter (d. 1943), James Reeb (d. 1965), Rod Serling (d. 1975), Frank Lloyd Wright (d. 1959).

All right—how did you do? Did you identify every single one? I'll bet you did. But if not, here's a list of their claims to fame in the same order: women's rights advocate, honored by a U.S. one-dollar coin; founded Barnum & Bailey Circus; "Angel of the Battlefield" during Civil War and founded American Red Cross; first to patent telephone; evolutionary biologist; U.S. engineer; U.S. president and author of the Declaration of Independence; founded nursing as trained profession, "The Lady With the Lamp";

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CALENDAR

Feb-Mar 2010

February 8 Humanist Dinner

New Location—Mt. Fuji Steakhouse: See Info & Map on p. 9

February 16 Regular Meeting

February 17 SOS—in Tampa

March 8 Humanist Dinner

March 16 Regular Meeting

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Faith: Religion's Achilles Heel

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in the imaginary world of the supernatural where the dead rise out of their graves and snakes talk, and it provides almost impregnable protection for religion against critical inquiry. Faith is the ultimate cop-out. Completely absurd and contradictory beliefs can be justified. If it weren't for faith, religion could not exist. Doctrine provides the foundation of religion but without faith the doctrine would be meaningless. Lacking faith, we would never have seen the many abuses associated with monotheistic religion throughout history.

But how did such a foolish idea as religious faith ever come to be regarded with such awe and respect? One of the major factors promoting it was the Bible. Faith was mentioned only twice in the Old Testament but several hundred times in the New Testament. Jesus reportedly said, "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible." And Paul states that faith is the only way a person can be "saved" when he said, "For by grace are ye saved through faith ... not of works, lest any man should boast." Nowhere in the Bible does it state that the truth would be revealed through logic and evidence. In fact, it consistently discourages the acquisition of knowledge by these means and instead touts the superiority of knowledge arrived at by faith. The story about Thomas the doubter is a dramatic example of the glorifying of faith. Alone among the disciples, he asked for proof of the extraordinary claim of resurrection, a request that most rational people would consider quite reasonable. Jesus accepted the challenge and provided proof that satisfied Thomas. But then in John 20:29 Christ demolishes the idea of religious skepticism and elevates faith to a profound virtue with this irrational statement: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." With this passage, Christians would regard anyone who exhibited skepticism about their religious claims as "a doubting Thomas." Religious

skepticism became a sin.

The virtue of faith was pushed to its ultimate by Tertullian (c.160-c.230), a Roman theologian and Christian. He was the son of a centurion and was well educated, especially in law. Tertullian is mainly famous for this quote: "It is certain because it is impossible," often incorrectly quoted as, "I believe it because it is impossible." In other words, he thought that if a religious belief seemed impossible, that seeming impossibility made it certain. He believed the more impossible a religious belief seemed, the more it would strengthen a person's faith.

Christian leaders through the centuries further fortified the idea of the power of faith by continued propaganda. As science in the last few centuries, however, began explaining the working of the Universe through natural means, and religion began losing every battle with science, faith began taking a beating.

To counteract this negative trend, conservative Christians staged a series of meetings called the "Niagra Conferences." The people attracted to the cause were generally poor, rural, and not well educated. Therefore, it was ironic that two rich, urban and well educated, oil tycoons, the Stewart brothers, Lyman and Milton, gave the movement its biggest boost. They financed a series of twelve booklets entitled *The Fundamentals* (1910-1915). In these booklets the five basic fundamentals necessary to be a "true" Christian were publicized, the ones that had been agreed on at the Niagra conferences. These fundamentals included: (1) The virgin birth of Jesus Christ. (2) The complete inerrancy of the Bible. (3) Christ's atonement for the sins of man on the cross. (4) The divine status of Christ. (5) The Resurrection and the Second Coming of Christ.

Now Christian Fundamentalists with their dogmatic claims were in a position to answer the conclusions reached by scientific (critical) thinking. Since the Fundamentalists' conclusions were based on an inerrant source, the direct word of God as revealed in the Bible, then henceforth their conclusions would trump any amount of those reached by logic

and evidence. And what was it that rendered this Fundamentalist doctrine valid? Faith, of course. Faith and only faith.

And this strategy from a numerical stand point has been successful. The Christian Fundamentalist denominations, energized by the renewed empowerment of faith, have been the most rapidly growing of all Christian denominations.

This renewed glorification of faith produces major problems for society. Religious claims based on faith cannot be resolved. The citing of an infallible source ends all rational discussion, and sets one group in society against another, or is even divisive within a religious group itself.

A few examples will emphasize the detrimental effects of faith-based decisions:

- (1) **Evolution.** Despite being one of the most thoroughly documented conclusions in all of science, Christian Fundamentalists return again and again with some version of Creationism. Incidentally, belief in Creationism is also behind their denial of the scientifically well documented "big bang theory." In effect, they are claiming that the Bible is a scientific textbook. The denial of the scientific evidence can lead to a type of child abuse since their children don't receive proper scientific educations and are launched into a scientifically oriented society with a major handicap.
- (2) **Homosexuality.** There is now much scientific evidence that sexual preference is inborn. But those holding faith-based conclusions don't want to hear any of the scientific information. They want to hear only what the Bible says. Again, they are using the Bible as a pseudo-scientific textbook.
- (3) **Abortion and Stem Cell Therapy.** Whatever one's conclusions are on these subjects, they should not be based on an embryo having a soul. There is no scientific evidence that a soul exists in an embryo or any other living organism.
- (4) **Women's Rights.** The Biblical view is the one that those relying on

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Oxygen, Fire and Light!

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British author of Peter Rabbit stories; Civil Rights activist and martyr; creator of The Twilight Zone; U.S. architect.

I mention all these people not only because they were historically important individuals, but also because, in their own diverse ways, they are heroes of mine and some are favorites of Humanists everywhere. To make this a “Baker’s Dozen,” let me add one more name: Joseph Priestley. What is the most famous thing you can remember about him? You’re right if you said: he is best known for having discovered oxygen, in 1774.

I must also admit to one further personal prejudice here: I am especially attracted to these thirteen personalities because they were all Unitarian Universalists—and, as most of you know, I am a U.U. minister as well as a card-carrying, atheistic Humanist.

But, it is not their UUism about which I write here. It is, instead, their characters as exemplars and pioneers—and especially as heroes—which is my current focus; and I bring your attention to Priestley at this time because it was on the sixth of this month (February) in 1804 that he died and I believe his life and times are worthy of our commemoration as Humanists who are, even today, facing many of the same kinds of difficulties from (bad) religion as he did so long ago.

What, then, makes someone a “hero”? For me, Priestley’s life holds the answer.

But before I introduce him, let me first give you a couple of terms to keep in mind. They are: “necessary condition” and “sufficient condition.”

Imagine, if you will, that I am now lighting a cigarette lighter.

This article is entitled, “Oxygen, Fire, and Light,” so it seems only appropriate for me, at least in your imaginations, to “flick my Bic!” There is, of course, a method to my madness. When I used to teach Logic to college students, I always impressed upon them the difference between “necessary” and “sufficient” conditions. In order for there

to be a fire, three conditions are absolutely necessary: oxygen is one of them. There’s plenty of that here: even though a few of you may have fallen asleep reading this, I don’t think anyone has stopped breathing! Fuel is another necessary condition for fire to exist and there is plenty of fuel in my lighter. The third necessary thing is heat and that is what the lighter’s spark supplies. So, I roll the flint’s wheel and, Voila! There is a flame.

Oxygen, fuel and heat—each of these is necessary for there to be a fire; but none of them alone is sufficient. Only when all three are properly combined do they—together—constitute a sufficient condition to start a fire.

Now, as I tell you about the life and career of Joseph Priestley, I want you to ask yourselves: What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for someone to become a pioneer, an exemplar, and a hero (whether it is, as in his case, within Unitarian Universalism; or, as in our own case, within Humanism)?

For someone who would eventually be recognized (along with Theophilus Lindsey and Thomas Belsham [3:343]) as one of the three founding fathers of British Unitarianism as well as a great scientist, Joseph Priestley began his life in anything but a Unitarian or scientific environment. Born in 1733 in a small English village, Priestley was the eldest child of a poor cloth-maker. His mother died when he was only six years old, leaving him to be brought up by his grandmother and an aunt, both of whom were strict Calvinist Christians. [3:294]

As a youngster, Priestley was quite precocious. He had an eager and inquisitive mind, found religion fascinating, read everything he could, and—having decided to enter the ministry—quickly conquered Latin, Greek and Hebrew, all at the ripe old age of 14! [3:294; 2:309f.]

His aunts wanted to send him to a Calvinistic academy, which would have required him to recite the ten articles of Calvinism every six months. Priestley rebelled, and went instead to a liberal academy! Even as a youth,

he had already come to have serious doubts about many traditional Christian beliefs, including those concerning Adam’s Fall and Original Sin. Theologically he was becoming an Arminian—a believer in human freedom rather than in divine predestination—even at the same time, ironically, that his scientific studies were causing him to begin to believe in a mechanistic universe and the determinism that goes with it. [3:294f.; 2:22; 4:680, 4:1056]

But that was not the half of it! Priestley was also becoming an Arian because he believed that while Jesus was more than human, he was definitely not a god, but was instead some kind of middle-level supernatural being between deity and humanity. Furthermore, Priestley denied the Church’s doctrine that Jesus’ horrible death was an act of atonement. He also rejected any notion of a divine inspiration for the Bible. [3:295]

Despite such heretical disbeliefs and the fact that he stammered during public speaking, Priestley entered the ministry and took a church. He supplemented his meager salary by serving as a tutor in a nearby academy. His subjects included: foreign languages, English grammar, literature, rhetoric, composition, logic, history, law, government, economics and a few other odds and ends! During his summers, Priestley went to London where he became a close friend of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, and Dr. Richard Price (who became the “Father of Life Insurance and Old Age Pensions”). [3:295f., 301]

By 1767 Priestley was married and serving a different church as its pastor. More importantly, his continuing theological research forced him to abandon Arianism and take up Socinianism—an anti-Trinitarian doctrine that saw Jesus as only human and not divine. [3:297]

Priestley also began to publish. He wrote over 6,000 religious tracts that had great influence. In addition, he wrote numerous scholarly books on theology, and began publication of a theological journal. [3:297f.]

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Oxygen, Fire and Light!

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In his spare time, for recreation, Priestley began to explore the realm of chemistry. Encouraged by Benjamin Franklin, in 1767 he wrote a book on the history and present state of electricity. It won him fame and membership in the Royal Society. [2:309f.] Indeed, his experiments on the nature of air turned out to be of such great value that the Royal Society conferred on him its highest honor, the Copley Medal. In 1774, Priestley discovered oxygen! Eventually, he discovered more new gases than all his predecessors combined. Even though he became most famous for his scientific pursuits, chemistry was never more than a hobby for Priestley. In his Memoirs he devoted less than two pages to his experiments, saying, "Though I have made discoveries in some branches of chemistry, I never gave much attention to the common routine of it, and know but little of the common processes." [3:299]

In 1780, Joseph Priestley moved his family to Birmingham, a major intellectual center, and took over what was then the most liberal pulpit in all of England. He quickly became infamous for preaching that Jesus had all the human moral and physical failings the rest of us have, and that Jesus was the son of Joseph and not of any supernatural virginal conception! [3:302]

Then, in 1782, Priestley published a book entitled, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity*. Its thesis was that primitive Christianity had been unitarian, and that the Trinity and many other similarly bizarre doctrines were nothing but corruptions of Jesus' original religion that had been distorted by theologians who had tried to interpret it using the categories of Greek philosophy! An enormous eight-year long controversy arose over Priestley's views. The orthodox clergy of the Church of England denounced him and Unitarianism from their pulpits, in newspapers and journals, and on the streets; Lutherans attacked him in Germany; and Dutch Calvinists had the hangman burn his

books in Holland! Priestley, however, enjoyed controversy and gave as good as he got in every dispute. [3:302-6]

Things were building to a crisis of major proportions, however, and matters were made worse by the political situation: On the one hand, Priestley and other liberal ministers were well known supporters of total religious toleration of all faiths. This frightened and disgusted the orthodox clergy and members of the Church of England who interpreted such toleration as seditious! On the other hand, Priestley and other liberal ministers were also well known as supporters of the French Revolution which had begun in 1789. Other British citizens feared that similar disruption might cross the waves and harm England. People like Priestley were accused of being enemies of both the state and the church. Common citizens were on the verge of panic. The stage was set for violence. [3:305-8]

According to historian Earl Morse Wilbur, "a feeling had evidently grown up and been carefully fostered that in view of the political dangers something ought to be done to check the influence of the Unitarians and to teach them a lesson." It was deemed time to use force, and all that was lacking was "a suitable occasion." [3:308] That occasion came on July 14, 1791 when supporters of the French Revolution held a dinner at the Royal Hotel to celebrate the anniversary of the Fall of the Bastille. Over 80 guests attended, including many members of the Church of England, but not including Priestley who was at home. The party went smoothly and ended around 5 p.m. "A plan," says Wilbur, "had been carefully laid" by the Church of England clergy "to employ mob force to silence" people like Priestley. "A list had been made" of the liberal leaders, their homes, and meeting houses, all of which were "marked for destruction." When this mob got to the hotel, the guests were gone. Someone shouted out the name of Priestley's church, so they went there, demolished it and set the ruins on fire. Next someone called

out, "To Dr. Priestley's," and down the road they went toward his house. A messenger got there before them and alerted the Priestley family who barely had time to escape. The mob ravaged the house, tore the laboratory apart, scattered Priestley's library, and set everything on fire. Later that night word reached Priestley that his life was in danger, and he fled to London, never to see Birmingham again. [3:308f.]

The Birmingham Riots lasted several days and involved over 2,000 people. Prisons were broken open and inmates released. Indiscriminate looting took place. The magistrates, who initially supported the mob, finally had to call in troops from London to quell the violence. More than twenty houses were destroyed, and several businesses and churches. No one was killed, but several rioters died when the houses they were demolishing collapsed upon them! Only twenty rioters were ever arrested, with only six of them being convicted, and four of them being executed. No government or religious official ever expressed sympathy for Priestley, but the nation of France honored him with its gift of French citizenship. [3:309-311]

Priestley spent the next three years in London. The Royal Society now shunned him, and so he resigned. When the Reign of Terror broke out in France in 1793, the British prepared for their own domestic disaster and all patience for toleration, freethinkers and freedom fighters evaporated. Along with Tom Paine, Priestley was frequently burnt in effigy. He received insulting and threatening letters. A reign of persecution began during which anyone even suspected of speaking or writing anything which might be construed as treasonable was in danger of criminal prosecution, a fate that had already befallen several of Priestley's friends. Priestley's three sons found jobs barred to them, and so they left for America, which greatly saddened Mrs. Priestley. Finally, he decided to follow his sons, and so in April of 1794, he and his wife set sail for the United States. [3:312f.]

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Priestley landed in New York City in June of 1794, warmly welcomed by the learned and scientific societies there, but no pulpit was open to him! An English visitor to the city wrote about this reception, saying: "They are really afraid of Dr. Priestley, and are preparing publications against Unitarianism." Indeed, despite his well-known contributions to British Unitarianism, "Priestley received no welcome from the Boston liberals when he came to America in 1794. But on principle they abstained from pulpit controversy" and did not directly attack him, though he was far less orthodox than they on many doctrinal issues. [3: 400] After two weeks, Priestley went to Philadelphia to be near his sons. After two years he helped to establish the "first permanent Unitarian church in America," there, in Philadelphia (1797). [3:396; 395-7]

Priestley preached, continued his theological writing and his scientific experiments for several years. He exerted significant influence over many prominent Americans. Thomas Jefferson, for example, called Priestley's theological works, "the basis of my own faith." [2:23] Finally, Joseph Priestley's illustrious life came to an end on February 6, 1804.

I won't take time to review any more of Priestley's theological beliefs. Suffice it to say that—liberal as

he was—he was also much more of a traditional Christian than any of us who are Humanists feel comfortable being. His particular brand of Christianity is not what really matters here.

What is important is his role as a pioneer, as a prophet of the kind of toleration and freedom (both of and from religion) which you and I all but take for granted today. In that regard, Joseph Priestley was certainly a hero!

That brings us back to my question: Just what are the necessary and sufficient conditions needed for someone to become a hero?

At least one of the necessary conditions is the presence of a crisis. Certainly there were crises galore in the life of Joseph Priestley. He was always too intelligent and too tolerant to be held down by the irrational beliefs and the unfounded prejudices so lovingly nurtured by his British and American contemporaries. He was always the odd man out, and in Birmingham this minor life-long crisis developed into a major life-threatening crisis.

Under similar conditions of rejection, condemnation and attack, most people knuckle under to pressure, conform to contemporary custom and capitulate to causes they don't truly support.

Priestley did none of these things. Instead, he persevered and stood—almost alone—not only as a priest but also as a prophet, the harassed

harbinger of greater (more secular and less mythological) things to come.

While crisis is one necessary condition for the emergence of a hero, it is not a sufficient condition.

The other necessary condition is personal character, the kind that comes from living one's life guided by principles are empirically grounded and rationally scrutinized—the kind of principles which Joseph Priestley had in abundance. Together these necessary conditions of crisis and character become the sufficient condition for the making of a true hero.

Oxygen is what made Joseph Priestley famous. But it was fire that proved his character; and it was his whole life lived as a beacon of hope, of integrity, and of intellectual freedom that today shines as a light for us all!

As we work to make Humanism all that it can be, I hope we will be inspired by the example of Joseph Priestley, a real hero who was willing to sacrifice everything to uphold his liberal principles!

SOURCES:

[1] Foss, Gwen. *A Who's Who of U.S.* Farmington, MI: Foss, 1998.

[2] Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.

[3] Wilbur, Earl Morse. *History of Unitarianism, Vol. II*. 3rd edition. Chicago: Meadville / Lombard Theological School, 1972.

[4] Woods, Ralph L. *The World Treasury of Religious Quotations*. New York: Garland Books, 1966.

Freethought Action in Tampa More Billboards

Late last month, the Tampa Coalition of Reason (Tampa CoR) with the help of the national United Coalition of Reason (United CoR) put up two billboards on either side of Tampa Bay: in Tampa near University of South Florida, and on a major highway. in Clearwater. The billboards will be up for 4 weeks.

They were paid for by United CoR as part of a national awareness campaign in 19 cities across the nation.

Rick O'Keefe, activities coordinator for Tampa CoR, estimates "there are about 400,000 freethinkers in the Tampa Bay area" based on census data and recent polls ... the ad cam-

paign is designed to let them "know there are groups in the Bay area that can meet their diverse needs."

Tampa Bay Coalition of Reason is a collaboration of freethought, atheist and humanist groups in the Tampa Bay area. It serves as a resource for the public and offers a way to combine the voices of those who hold that science and reason lead to more reliable knowledge than dogma and faith.

See billboard on the front page.

Clamor in the Council

The Tampa City Council, Bay area newspapers, and local TV channels were in an uproar. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, in late 2009 a Wisconsin-based nonprofit group de-

livered a letter to the Council warning it to stop pre-meeting prayers: "Government prayer is unnecessary, inappropriate and divisive," [said] Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

A *Tampa Tribune* editor chimed in "... we fervently pray that the Freedom from Religion Foundation will take its anti-faith zealotry elsewhere."

Three weeks later, again a letter was delivered to the Council, this time from Atheists of Florida, urging a moment of reflection rather than prayer. On January 21, several AofF members spoke to the Council meeting. The *St. Petersburg Times* quoted Frank

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February 2010

LETTERS



Our first letter reprinted this month was published on December 18, 2009 in the Lakeland Ledger. Something rather unusual this month: I am following up on our president Westerfield's letter with a response by a Christian. My point: Our relationship with believers is not always thorny!

Atheism, Humanism

REGARDING THE SPIRITED DIALOGUE about opposing billboards from Atheists of Florida and from Richard Geringwald ["Roadside Response," Dec. 5, page B1].

When the atheist billboard appeared on Memorial Drive, neighborhood reaction included a complaint that local children might see it. Then, several weeks ago, at a peaceful Atheists of Florida gathering in Veteran's Park, Lakeland, our banner attracted a man who challenged this meeting in a venue where children were present—a strong implication that atheism is something nasty from which children must be protected. Actually, many atheists and humanists regard the forced religious indoctrination of impressionable, very young kids as an egregious form of child abuse.

Our world has many secular people, and our numbers are growing. We live here, we obey the laws, we pay taxes and we vote. For too long those of us unable to accept mythology, dogma and superstition as "truth" have been cowed by the majority faith into shutting up about it.

I've been a humanist all my life but for the first two-thirds of it, I hardly ever said so. I hope the billboard flap will pull more of us former hypocrites out of the closet. We all have friends and colleagues of different persuasions—that's America.

If the majority faith weren't so insecure about its self-proclaimed superiority, maybe its followers could appreciate the richness of our national and local diversity without

trying to fight it.

My parked car bears identification as to its nonreligion. I often find little notes tucked under the wipers saying, in effect: "I agree with you, but that's as far as I dare go."

Bottom line: let's quit being afraid to identify ourselves, let's be proud of who we are. And unlike the "tyranny of the majority," let's treat others as we wish they would treat us—ideally with respect, at the very least with tolerance.

*Portia Westerfield, Mulberry
President, Humanist Association
of West Central Florida*

This response letter was published: in the Lakeland Ledger on December 27, 2009.

Churches and Humanism

I want to thank Portia Westerfield ("Atheism, Humanism" published Dec. 18) for acting like a mirror. Now, if only the churches would look in that mirror, maybe life for all of us would be better.

Portia talks about the fear that atheists and humanists feel in this area. I am a Christian, but I also feel that fear because I am a walkaway—I left the churches because of the abuse I've been put through for the last 30 years. There are a lot of us—people who have been so hurt by the preachers and churches that they're unwilling to set foot in one again. Unless you are a walkaway or have experienced these things yourself, you wouldn't believe the horrible (true) stories that people tell. Yet those churches think they're doing "God's Work."

We have good reason to feel fear. Some national leaders have advocated the death penalty for homosexuals, atheists, and walkaways. (They also advocate "Returning America to its Christian roots!")

Their actions remind us of the description of the Pharisees in the Bible—they don't remind us of Jesus at all. They're quick to "praise Jesus!" and slow to lift a sick or hurt neighbor out of the gutter (and when they do, it's usually to preach at them). The "terrible liberals" so hated by those churches on the other hand, are the people who listened and were far more Christ-like

in their behavior. For instance, they helped me find ways to function in spite of my disabilities. Think about it.

Robert D. Bowers, Lakeland

This letter, by one of our Illinois subscribers, was printed on December 29, 2009 in the Daily Herald (a publication with a large readership throughout suburban Chicago), and again a week later on January 6 in the Chicago Tribune. You'll undoubtedly recognize the writer's name, as he is a prolific letter writer and is often published.

Boy Scouts are about exclusion

THE DEC. 20 DAILY HERALD carried a full-page story on the Boy Scouts of America as the BSA reaches its 100th Anniversary next February. The story pointed out the BSA's discriminatory policy in excluding from its membership boys who may be gays or atheists. It is for those reasons that I am no longer supportive of the BSA, though back when I was boy I was a member, becoming a First Class scout.

It seems to me that the Boy Scouts teach our young boys to have an exclusionary attitude toward others who may not believe as they do, and I certainly did not want my own children to be raised as youngsters with such a discriminatory frame of mind. If a young boy is gay, it is because of his genetics, and it's not a matter of choice. And if a young boy is an atheist because he believes that he may be a good person even without a belief in a god, then I do not think he should be shut out of the Boy Scouts simply because of his beliefs.

Also, I believe that the Girl Scouts are just the opposite and do not teach young girls to be discriminatory toward their friends. My own philosophy on this subject is that I would prefer to teach our youngsters to be welcoming and inclusionary toward others, rather than exclusionary and unwelcoming, inasmuch as what we are taught as youngsters molds our morality and behavior as we grow into adulthood.

The *Daily Herald* correctly pointed

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religious faith use as a pattern for the treatment of women. They show little interest in the scientific studies about women.

- (5) **Science.** Although those using faith-based conclusions readily accept the benefits provided by science, they otherwise have an antipathy toward it since scientific conclusions are regularly in conflict with their faith-based ones. They tend to minimize scientific study for themselves and their children.
- (6) **Church-State Separation.** The true believers have faith in the infallibility of their beliefs and see no reason why they shouldn't impose them on everybody. They are just doing God's work.

(7) **Abstinence Only Programs for Teenagers.** The faith-based conclusion is that premarital sex is sinful and that abstinence only programs should be promoted using religious zealotry. Recent scientific studies show that these programs simply don't work.

Although Christian Fundamentalists rely on and glorify faith more than moderate Christian denominations, the latter also base their religious conclusions on faith, but usually with less dogmatism. Nevertheless, moderate Christians also help perpetuate the idea that faith is a valid way to arrive at truth about the material Universe. In doing so, they encourage the extreme views of the Christian Fundamentalists by seldom criticizing these views.

Most faith-based religious conclu-

sions that are detrimental to society involve the material Universe, not what many freethinkers would regard as an imaginary spiritual region. Science with its use of logic and evidence has earned the right to be the sole interpreter of how the material Universe works by always being right in its numerous fights with religion.

Imagine an ideal world where people realize that faith is a bogus way to reach any valid conclusion, even a religious one. Conflicts would only be resolved using logic and evidence. No longer would debates end when a person slammed a faith-based door in another person's face. This dream can be realized by explaining to the media and the public the reasons that conclusions based on faith are irrational and detrimental to society.

Letters

Continued from p. 6

out that the U.S. Supreme Court has held that the BSA is a private organization and therefore may have such policies as it wishes, and the BSA is free to be the discriminatory organization that it is. But the BSA will no longer have my support because I wish to teach our young people to have tolerance for all rather than to become discriminatory bigots.

Theodore M. Utchen, Wheaton [IL]

Our most recently published letter was printed in the St. Petersburg Times on December 31, 2009, regarding a story titled OT VIII. The title refers to a high level of leadership in scientology, from which some leaders have decamped recently.

Leaving for good reason

SCIENTOLOGY ATTORNEY Anthony Michael Glassman is quoted: "All major religions, be they Catholic, Mormon, Jewish, etc., suffer the defection, on a regular basis, of once orthodox members." Evidently this remark was meant to diminish the importance of the reasons why Scientology's members have been leaving the church.

Actually, it's the other way around. Yes, people have been leaving

their religious institutions (in fact, this trend is rapidly increasing), but most often for good reason. How better to understand the dogma and practices of a religion than by being an active, earnest member. It takes a great deal of thinking, research and "soul"-searching to make such a wrenching decision.

Thus, seldom is such a serious action taken on a frivolous or emotional whim. Since most religions are based on authority and faith, as our knowledge and understanding grow, the soundness—i.e., the truth—of these two bases is increasingly called into question. The authority, in most cases, is either a leader or a written source, based on a revelation to the leader or the writers of the books. Which is why faith is needed, since the adherents generally are discouraged from truly investigating the authenticity of these assertions and stories.

The true "good news" is that we can have good morals, positive emotions, and even a sense of awe and mystery at the wonders of our natural world, all without conjuring up a supernatural world order.

Hurrah for a new year of increased good works and a quest for reason and wisdom.

Nan Owens, Seffner

Freethought Film Festival

Continued from p. 1

in Reason. Honored by the Council for Secular Humanism in 2002, she became their Coordinator for the Secular Family Network. Her creative and vivacious work with Jan Eisler and Toni Van Pelt led to the opening of the Center for Inquiry-Florida (now CFI-Tampa).

More immediately, if you have been following the brouhaha over atheist billboards in Tampa and Clearwater (see page 5), Andrea has been the radio and TV spokesperson for the Tampa Bay Coalition of Reason, the sponsor of the billboards. And a fine job she is doing. Further, Andrea has been asked to be a member of the planning committee for an upcoming 2013 Unity Convention.

Andrea works voluntarily as director of FFFF, managing all details of executing the film festival.

Currently the Festival is calling for film submissions, with a deadline of April 30. See the website <http://free-thoughtfilmfest.org> for more information on the festival, and how to submit a film for consideration.

Our HAWCF February meeting promises to be a delightful treat, at the same time spurring serious information and discussion.

Don't miss this meeting!

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

Make check payable to HAWCF and mail to: P.O. Box 6675 • Lakeland, FL 33807-6675 • 863-644-0560

MEMBERSHIP

New Renewal

<input type="checkbox"/> Newsletter Only	\$15	<input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining Member	\$100
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<input type="checkbox"/> Family	\$35	<input type="checkbox"/> Cardinal	\$1000
<input type="checkbox"/> Patron	\$50	<input type="checkbox"/> Endowment	

Date: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: _____ e-mail: _____

I am interested in helping on the following activities

- Membership Recruit, welcome and orient new members to HAWCF
- Civic Action Promote Humanism within community and government
- Activities Develop and facilitate social activities for the membership.
- 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

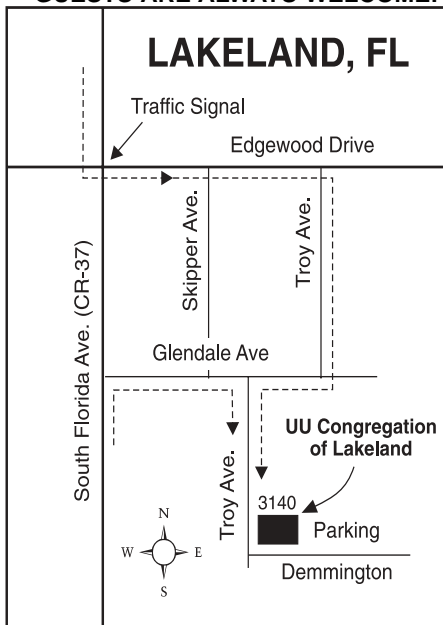
The Humanist Association of West Central Florida is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization. Contributions are tax deductible as provided by federal and state law.

WHEN AND WHERE?

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

See map below.

GUESTS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME!



HUMANIST DINNER!!

A REMINDER that we usually hold our informal Humanist dinner gathering on the **2ND MONDAY OF EVERY MONTH at 6:15 pm.**

OUR MEETING PLACE HAS CHANGED ... WE MEET AT Mt. Fuji



Steakhouse, 2607 S Florida Avenue in Lakeland (in Southgate Shopping Center) between Pablo and Oak Streets. See Map below.

Please join us ... bring your friends!!



Freethought in Tampa

Continued from p. 5

Prahl (also a HAWCF member): "I'm not sure you realize how repugnant ... your opening prayers are for those of us without superstition." The *Times* continued: "Jason Rodriguez said the council doesn't need prayers to perform its duties. 'They belong in churches, not government meetings,' he said, adding that the prayers violate separation of church and state principles and are a waste of time and taxpayer money."

Stay tuned for further developments!

In Cyber Space:

WEBSITE ADDRESS:

<http://hawcf.org>

BLOG ADDRESS:

www.humanistcommonsense.blogspot.com

Please visit each of these sites. Comments or suggestions on either site are earnestly desired and should be brought up at meetings or made directly to webmaster Ken Schmidt:

kschmidt@tampabay.rr.com

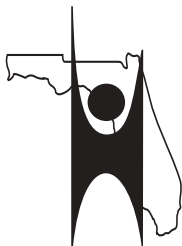
Note: this newsletter can be printed from our website with adobe acrobat reader.

See inside for exciting news.



Inquiring Minds Want To Know...

February 2010



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