

# Humanist CommonSense

A NEWSLETTER OF THE HUMANIST ASSOCIATION OF WEST CENTRAL FLORIDA

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## Happy New Year ... Your 2010 Dues Are Due!

### Humanistic Judaism: A Contradiction in Terms?

Join us: Tuesday, January 19  
7 pm at the UUCL (map page 11)

HUMANISTIC JUDAISM: A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS? You may be asking this same question. In fact, our speaker has asked his friends this over the years.



This presentation is largely an attempt to answer the question frequently asked of him by his daughter-in-law's mother: How can you be Jewish and not believe in God? And if you're really a non-believer, why join a congregation? Sound familiar?

A retired intellectual property attorney, Louis Altman shares his time between Sarasota and Chicago. Altman graduated from Cornell University and Harvard Law School. While he practiced law, he was also an adjunct professor at John Marshall Law School and later Loyola Law School, both in Chicago.

As president of the National Society for Humanistic Judaism, Altman also is involved with its local congregations both in Sarasota and Deerfield, Illinois. He was recently elected to the American Humanist Association board, and is on the boards of the Humanist Institute and Secular Coalition for America. Here in Sarasota, he has spoken about Humanism before various local groups.

He was one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit to break the tradition of the inauguration prayer prior to President-elect Obama's inauguration.

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### What's up with Those Placebos?

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](mailto:jwingw@aol.com)]

COMMON SENSE PUBLISHED MY ARTICLE ENTITLED "PLACEBOS APLENTY" in September, 2001. Since then considerable neuroscience research on the placebo response has been done. Consequently, I thought it would be timely to write an update.

Before modern neuroscience research began to accumulate, the placebo response was often regarded as "psychological" or "imaginary." Not only are these beliefs erroneous, in fact the precise areas of the brain involved have been mapped out and many of the chemicals released by the brain are now known.

Much of the new information has been provided by scans that not only

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### What a Difference a Day Makes!

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.]

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES!

I want to tell you a true story that is every bit as strange as anything you will ever see on the SCI FI Channel! [3]

On October 4, 582, people around the world went to sleep just as they had done every day since they were born. Nothing unexpected was expected to happen! Nevertheless, to their shock and horror and absolute astonishment, the next morning people in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Luxembourg woke up to discover that it was, all of a sudden, October 15! *Eleven whole days had just disappeared!*

That did not happen everywhere, of course ... not then, at least. But two years later, sweeping across the Continent like an invisible plague, the same time-warp did happen in most of the German Catholic states, in Belgium, in parts of Switzerland and in the Netherlands!

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### CALENDAR Jan-Mar 2010

January 11 .....	Humanist Dinner
<b><i>New Location—Mt. Fuji Steakhouse: See Info &amp; Map on p. 11</i></b>	
January 19 .....	Regular Meeting
February 8 .....	Humanist Dinner
February 16 .....	Regular Meeting
March 8 .....	Humanist Dinner
March 16 .....	Regular Meeting

## Intergalactic Missionary Work

*To start out the New Year and recover from December's festivities, I thought it prudent to offer a light-hearted adventure for one of our columns. This article comes to us from Mark W. Brandt, F.A.A.R.—Fellow American Academy of Accrophobic Roofers. Truthfully, Mark is an attorney and active Humanist in Tampa Bay. He is on the Tampa Center For Inquiry advisory council as its program chair, and is active with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Clearwater. He claims as his Personal Motto: If only the good die young, I'm gonna be as bad as I can be*

THE VATICAN OBSERVATORY recently issued a statement indicating that it was quite acceptable to look for intelligent life on other planets. Their position seems to be that since God created the universe, any life on other worlds would be his creation also. God will be referred to hereafter as "Sheit," an inclusive combination of the 3 pronouns, she, he and it. It's a more comprehensive view of the Creator of the Cosmos than the masculinization of this omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, omnibus and omni-SUV winner of the Cosmic High School's<sup>1</sup> #1 Best All Around

Senior Award. Since the "evidence" is that Jesus, if he existed, was male and it appears that the Holy Ghost is androgynous, suffusing male and female humans alike, then God must be the feminine emanation of the 3 in 1<sup>2</sup> Godhead. So Sheit at least, based upon the totally specious and vacuous logic just aforementioned, is a better term for the totem pole Godhead. The only downside to this more inclusive nomenclature for the deity is that if you're a southerner, you have to be very careful how you pronounce the deity's name, especially when in polite company.

This observation by the observatory, which I guess is a natural thing for them to do, raises a host of intriguing questions. Will the discovery of intelligent life on other planets tend to prove that there is a Sheit, or will it tend to

prove that Sheit doesn't exist? Let's consider a few questions and scenarios that might pop up when intelligent life is located on the planet 32F<sup>3</sup>, orbiting around a non-descript star in the Sagittarius Constellation.

Genesis Ch 1, verses 26 and 27 says that man was made in the image of Sheit. So if the inhabitants of 32F look very similar to us, bipedal, wearing Armani suits, driving Hummers, and continually causing each other untold misery then we're going to have to say "Holy Shit, Sheit, we secular humanists were wrong and we're really, really, REALLY, sorry." Chock one up for the Sheit.

But how closely do the Mabellians have to resemble us to be made in the image of Sheit. Maybe they're bipedal, but have wings with grasping hooks at the ends, coupled with an eagle-like proboscis/masticatory aperture located in the middle of their elongated and multifaceted head. Or maybe they look like a composite of Al Gore, Gore Vidal and Vidal Sassoon, but with 13 limbs that both propel them and allow them to pick pockets at the same time. Are such personifications manifestations of Sheit's creative image? Is every manifestation necessarily in the image of Sheit, since Sheit is all encompassing? Or will extraterrestrials need to look like us to have been made in Sheit's image?

Since it's doubtful that Sheit will manifest him, her, and itself to answer these questions, then it's up to us, for the umpteenth time, to decide what the mind of Sheit requires. And like every other issue where humans have decided how Sheit felt about a certain issue, there will be a difference of opinion.<sup>4</sup>

The strict interpretationalists will insist that dissimilar extraterrestrials do not qualify as (a) intelligent, (b) life forms, (c) made in the image of Sheit, or (d) all of the above. In fact the strict interpretationalists will probably just deny the extraterrestrials even exist unless they procreate asexually. In that case, they won't care what the extraterrestrials look like. Since they don't engage in sex, which is evil, wicked and

nasty,<sup>5</sup> they'll be welcome into the strict interpretationalists' neat little, but expanding ever so slightly, world. In the event that the extraterrestrials do engage in sex, and in fact use it, like bonobo apes, to settle all disputes, and are therefore peaceful, then the strict interpretationalists will insist that they be annihilated. They are clearly an abomination in Sheit's anthropomorphic eyes. Many times this type of individual tries to conform reality to their notion of it, even at the risk of appearing delusional. Sound Familiar?

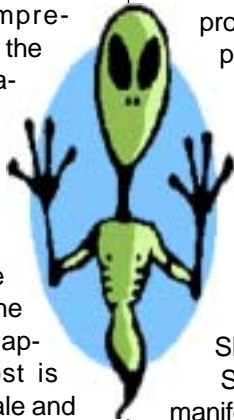
The liberal religious interpretationalists<sup>6</sup> on the other hand, will likely include any sentient, selfconscious life forms as Sheit's creation, even if they all look like Michael Moore. Just imagine for a moment, but not longer lest you be rendered catatonic at the thought, an entire planet of Michael Moores: men, women, children, even pets.

The skeptical among us will connect with skeptical Mabetlians to deny that Sheit exists. This logical and rational view will contravene the views of the declining majority of Mabellians who do worship a rich panoply of multiple and different deities. These Deities require a wide range of ritualistic practices. Prime examples of these practices include symbolic cannibalism of the deity, refusal to participate in the affairs of their society, never cutting their toe nails, and watching reruns of the Mabellians version of The Crystal Cathedral.

In spite of any clear sensory evidence to the contrary, you can plan on earth bound theists trying to expand their world to include the Mabellians, as Sheit's children. Otherwise, they might have to confront that really creepy idea that we have to take care of each other, instead of foisting it off on their good ole' imaginary, 3 in 1<sup>7</sup> buddy, Sheit.

Now what happens if the Mabelians, programmed through eons of evolution, are just as religious as Earthlings? Will they be sending missionaries here just as we will certainly be sending missionaries there? And then, because there can only be one true way, which has eluded both

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## A Humanist Set Loose at a World Religions Seminar

By Justin Trottier (on Facebook)

I GENERALLY CONSIDER MYSELF SKEPTICAL about the ultra-tolerance and political correctness run amok that characterizes ideological multiculturalism, especially in Canada where it's practically illegal to criticize another's beliefs. But I have to admit this past weekend [October 2009] I engaged in productive multicultural dialogue at two conferences where I was invited to participate.

The first was hosted by the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity whose leader Gretta Vosper is one of the most remarkable women I've met. A United Church minister and author of *With or Without God: Why The Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe*, she is attempting to re-interpret Christian mythology as stories and symbols rather than miracles and metaphysics. She's spoken for the Centre for Inquiry at a number of events. Returning the favour, she invited me to speak at her conference entitled "Explore the Elements".

At this conference, speaking on "Aren't You a Freethinker?" to a group of people that make up a spectrum between atheism and liberal Christianity, I made a central point by borrowing the concept of memetic equilibrium developed by my co-panelist—ethics and critical thinking Professor Chris DiCarlo—to explain how different ideas upset the established ecology of beliefs. I argued that while our society has established a rough tolerance for different religions, that tolerance is ultimately illusory. As new equilibriums generally establish themselves as close as possible

to the old one, in this analogy it's only natural that upsetting the Christian establishment would result in the development of the "theist club" in which membership is open to all so long as there is a belief in god.

I was pleased that one of the audience members asked the profound question at the end of our workshop, namely is there a new global mythology we can build that will upset the equilibrium enough so it does not require outsiders to exist and might include even non-believers. My answer was that whatever it is, it must start with the acceptance that no one has epistemic authority over anyone else. That is not to say that some people don't know more than others, but rather that we all have the same tools at our disposal to establish truth. Another questioner wondered if even atheists didn't believe in god in some form.

This leads nicely to the second conference this weekend: I was the secular humanist speaker at the Hamilton World Religions Conference, sponsored by the Ahmdayya Muslims, on the topic: "Role, Character and Actions of God." A bit awkward for me, but I reinterpreted the topic in creative ways:

1. What is the Role, Character and Actions of a person in the absence of god? which allowed me to answer with, and then explain, secular humanism
2. What is it about the Role, Character and actions of God that make him God ... That make him worthy of our worship, which led to an emphasis on the fact that everyone must make secular conscience-based ethical choices
3. The role and character of people's gods as projections of their mentality and values at any given

time in history and the ways in which the nature of god evolves in time with the changing secular society, which led to an evolution of religion history lesson, with reference to this video by anthropologist Jared Diamond,

4. And finally—and that which connected nicely to the first conference—"What kind of role could a new conception of god take on that even an atheist would believe in it?"

There's always a tendency at these events for believers to wish that atheists could embrace some new conception of god so as to join the family—perhaps a name they might use to refer to their secular values, to the complexity of the universe, or to the sense of awe and wonder that characterizes it, in much the way Einstein used the term.

And it was a reference to this universal feeling of curiosity and questioning, and a desire to obtain truth in the face of the mystery of the universe, that the Bahai moderator of the World Religions Conference used to bring all of us together and to close the conference. Its a neat and tidy picture. But while I admit to a productive multicultural weekend, I've never been one to choose what's pretty over what's true. I can't help thinking that scientific naturalists—not religious believers—dare to accept and deal with the true mystery of the cosmos, rather than hide it under a new name. In any case, what was enlightening about the experiences was that—much as I just described—I didn't need to compromise on the genuine differences between myself as a secular humanist and the other speakers at the conferences in order to engender dialogue and understanding between us.

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## Humanistic Judaism

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Last November he was a signer to the letter from the Rev. Chuck Currie (a United Church of Christ minister) to the members of Congress: Open Letter from Religious Leaders to Members of Congress Supporting Inclusion of Abortion Services in Health Care Reform.

He is listed by the Military Associa-

tion of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF) as New York Army National Guard Private Louis Altman (1959-1960), during which duty he was a court recorder for special court martials.

As a lifelong poet, in 2005 he read one of his poems for the closing of the Ariel Bookstore in New Paltz.

Following is one of Altman's poems, titled "Chicago" (my home town!).

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## Chicago

The hog butcher is gone.

In his place stands a woman  
dressed in colors by Renoir,  
tower-tall,  
highway-ribboned,  
light-jeweled till dawn,  
ready for the morning sun to spring  
out of the lake  
and spread his reflection at her feet.

Louis Altman

## What's up with Placebos?

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demonstrate the anatomy of the brain but also visualize it in action. Foremost among these scans are Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI).

The PET scan is a nuclear medicine imaging technique that produces a three-dimensional picture of functional processes in the body. When used to visualize processes in the brain, a chemical that is actively used by the brain (fluorodeoxyglucose) is combined with a short-acting radioactive substance. The radioactive material allows the path that the fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG) follows in the brain to be recorded on a scanner.

The fMRI scan is a specialized form of the MRI that measures change in blood flow in the brain or spinal cord. It is one of the most recently developed forms of neuroimaging that has come to dominate the brain mapping field since the early 1990s because of its relatively low invasiveness, absence of radiation exposure, and fairly wide availability.

The word "placebo" comes from the Latin and literally means, "I shall please." A placebo is any "treatment" that works only through a person's mind. The placebo response is the effect the placebo has on the body. The term placebo is most often applied to an inert pill, but a wide array of other factors can produce the placebo response: contact with any medical personnel or procedure (including surgery, cardiac catheterization, drawing of blood, acupuncture, chiropractic, and others), encounters with authority figures such as faith healers, and other stimuli.

There are many factors that increase the frequency of the placebo response: increased patient anxiety, a high level of expectancy of a positive result, a warm and confident attitude on the part of medical personnel, previous positive medical experiences (positive conditioning), a treatment that is expensive and appears impressive (such as surgery), injections more than pills.

When pills are involved, their appearance can influence the type of placebo response. Yellow pills tend to

promote expectations of elevated mood, red ones suggest potency, and green is equated with a decrease in anxiety. Pills stamped with a brand name or larger ones imply more potency.

In 1955, Beecher, one of the first investigators to strongly recommend double blind placebo controls in evaluating therapeutic measures, reviewed 15 such studies that included 1082 patients and found that an average of 35% benefited from placebo therapy. This average figure has been widely quoted as being the amount of people that will satisfactorily respond to a placebo, but actually the range he found was considerable (15% to 58%).

Subsequently, some studies have shown response rates higher than 58%, the highest reaching 100% in the treatment of angina pectoris. Therefore, an investigator can't presume a treatment is effective just because the average figure of 35% is exceeded, but treatment response must exceed that of the placebo in each study to be deemed effective.

Although scientists have rightly pointed out that the placebo effect is more widespread than many people think, its limitations should also be clearly understood. The placebo effect has never killed bacteria, cured cancer, set a broken bone, relieved blockage in arteries, or repaired a hernia. If the placebo effect were really effective in curing illness, we wouldn't need modern medicine. Prior to the twentieth century, nearly all the drugs such as mandrake root, powdered mummy, tartar emetic, fox lung, and many more depended on the placebo effect if they did anything at all. Oliver Wendell Holmes wisely observed in 1860 that if all the drugs of the day "could be sunk to the bottom of the sea, it would be all the better for mankind and all the worse for the fishes." Some procedures such as bleeding and purging, while probably producing a placebo effect, were detrimental overall.

Much of the neuroscience research on the placebo effect has been done since 1978. One of the leading investigators in placebo research in the world is Fabrizio Benedetti of the University of Turin Medical School,

who recently published a comprehensive book entitled *Placebo Effects*, which is the first ever book to explain placebo effects across the entire spectrum of medical conditions.

The neural mechanisms involved in the placebo effect are only partially understood. Most discoveries have been in the pain field, but preliminary findings in Parkinson's disease, immune and endocrine responses, and depression have been uncovered.

As to pain, there is general agreement that endogenous opioids play an important role in the placebo response. They are chemical substances with a morphine-like effect that are produced in the pituitary and the hypothalamus and then act on mu receptors in the cerebral cortex and the brainstem, the very same regions where swallowed or injected opioids act. The stronger positive feelings of expectation that a patient has about a placebo, the more opioids are released by the brain. Administration of naloxone, an opioid blocker, can blunt the placebo effect, further evidence that endogenous opioids are responsible for much placebo pain relief.

Neuroscience studies with Parkinson's disease have shown the release of dopamine from the striatum and the subthalamic nucleus of the brain in response to a placebo when patients are told that it is an anti-Parkinson's disease drug. Dopamine is the brain chemical that is in short supply in patients with Parkinson's disease.

Placebo responses mediated by pharmacological conditioning can be demonstrated in the immune and endocrine systems. After repeated administration of an active drug, when a placebo drug is substituted, responses in these systems can be seen that are similar to those previously evoked by the active drug. Conditioning, then, is another mechanism helping explain the placebo response.

Preliminary studies on depression by researchers have shown that placebos cause changes in brain activity similar to that induced by antidepressants. These changes are

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## What's up with Placebos?

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quite different from those caused by cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Since 1962, double blind testing with placebos has been the norm for approval of medications tested by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA). Further improvements in testing occurred in 1996 when a large group of clinical studies experts published detailed criteria on how to conduct clinical investigations that would be clear, accurate, and as free of bias as humanly possible (there are other ways bias can be introduced in addition to the placebo response). The name of this cooperative effort is the Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) and is the guideline that the best medical journals now require in publishing studies. These guidelines are regularly evaluated and improved. Consequently, the quality of clinical studies has considerably improved since 1996, and the gold standard is now a randomized placebo-



controlled double blind trial conducted by the CONSORT criteria.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the criteria in place since 1962, most of the therapies in use today have never been investigated using these criteria. Only 20% of medical treatments and 7% of surgical procedures have been scientifically proven.

Although coming up with a dummy pill that is indistinguishable from an active one is no big challenge, producing a placebo for medical and surgical procedures can be. A recent study in the Archives of Internal Medicine demonstrated, by using a clever placebo, that the positive effect of acupuncture is due solely to the placebo effect. 638 patients with chronic lower-back pain were assigned to different groups: needles in the standard positions, random placement of the needles, and simulated acupuncture in the standard positions (toothpicks in acupuncture-needle guide

tubes that mimic the feel of real acupuncture), or standard back-pain care (such as anti-inflammatory drugs and massage). Pain diminished significantly for 60% in all three acupuncture groups but just for 39% of the usual care patients. It's clear from this study that just the thought of getting needles, but nothing specific about acupuncture, was enough to trigger a strong placebo response. Two types of sham acupuncture (random placement of the needles and simulated acupuncture) produced the same results as real acupuncture.

Neuroscience studies in understanding placebo reactions are making great strides but, like all neuroscience studies, are still in their infancy. Eventually, however, this research should lead to improved and reliable medical treatment as well as understanding exactly how this remarkable three pound organ called the brain actually works. This understanding can lead to increased rationality, an attribute that sometimes seems in short supply nowadays.

## The War on Christmas—A 1-sided Battle Continues ... and on and on and on ...

A PRESS RELEASE FROM BOSS CREATIONS speaks for itself:

NASHVILLE, TN, December 08, 2009 /24-7PressRelease/—Boss Creations, a new holiday decor company, has introduced the new "CHRIST-mas" Tree, featuring the unique trait of a trunk in the shape of a wooden cross. Company owner Marsha Boggs says the tree was specifically designed to counter the "war on Christmas."

"When I became a Christian a few years ago," says Boggs, "I was appalled by the secularization of the Christmas holiday. When retail stores started substituting 'Happy Holidays' for 'Merry Christmas,' and schools began calling their Christmas programs 'Winter Plays,' it all seemed ridiculous to me. That's why we have created products that remind people what the Christmas season is really all about—the birth of Christ."

The "CHRIST-mas" Tree is size

adjustable up to 7.5 foot tall to accommodate various ceiling sizes. Additionally, the company offers ornaments, wreaths and gift items all with Christian-based themes.

Legal fights over Christmas symbolism continue to create headlines such as a recent ban on religious songs in a New Jersey school district where the federal appeal judges noted "such songs were once common in public schools, but times have changed." Lawsuits regarding Christmas trees being taken down from public buildings have sparked anger across the country. Boggs says Boss Creations' mission is to uphold the traditional meaning of the Christmas season, and from their sales, the company will be supporting two non-profits that work as advocates for religious freedom. A portion of the proceeds of all "CHRIST-mas" Tree sales will go to support the



American Center of Law & Justice, an organization recently hailed by *Business Week* as "the leading advocacy group for religious freedom," as well as to the Liberty Counsel, a nonprofit litigation, education and policy organization dedicated to advancing religious freedom, the sanctity of human life and the traditional family.

### Notable "Quotes"

IF I HAD THE POWER to produce exactly what I want for next Christmas, I would have all the kings and emperors resign and allow the people to govern themselves

.... I would like to see the whole world free—free from injustice—free from superstition.

This will do for next Christmas. The following Christmas, I may want more.

Excerpt from *Robert Green Ingersoll*, The Arena, Boston, December 1897.

## The difference a day makes!

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Time passed, and elsewhere things seemed to have remained normal. But then on the day between 1699 and 1700, it happened all over again, only this time in the German Protestant states.

Off and running once more, this galloping miracle of missing days took a while to cross the British Channel and the Atlantic Ocean. But finally, in 1752 it did: in both England and America people went peacefully to sleep on the night of September the 2, with no cause for alarm whatsoever, only to wake up the next morning and discover that it was suddenly September the 14<sup>th</sup>!

Now, if you find all of that rather bizarre, let me not fail to mention that *New Year's Day also disappeared!* Gone from its old familiar position, it turned up in a totally different, truly unusual place! No longer did people see the year change, say from 1799 to 1800, on the day that for so many centuries had felt right and proper, that day being, what else (?!), *March 25*. Now New Year's Day made its appearance on, of all dates, *January the 1<sup>st</sup>!*

These miracles of meandering moments kept spreading! They reached Sweden in 1753; Japan in 1873; Egypt in 1875; China in 1912; and Turkey in 1925.

In the Soviet Union the incarnation of that old phrase, *tempus fugit*, finally occurred in 1918 when our Communist comrades went to bed on January 31 and woke up on February 14!

Greece underwent the same temporal transformation in 1923.

When all the dust had finally settled from these various tick-tock tinkering, yet another miracle was observed: for the first time in human history, all the major cultures of the world had the same calendar!

Well, by now you have probably figured out that the story I have been telling is that of the world-wide adoption of the *Gregorian Calendar*. By 1582, scholars and farmers alike had become so exasperated by the inaccuracies of the Julian Calendar set up by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C.E., that they convinced Roman Catholic Pope Gregory XIII to mandate a change.

Despite having its own built-in errors which have to be periodically corrected by such devices as *leap years* and *centesimal years* (years ending in 00 which are not designated as Leap Years), the Gregorian scheme has proven so useful that, after 400 years it has become the primary calendar for the entire human race! [By the way, 2005 required the addition of a *Leap Second* on December 31.(8)]

Indeed, it is precisely because we are all now on the Gregorian calendar that we celebrate New Year's Day, on January the 1.

*And what a date it is, this January the 1<sup>st</sup>.* For things have happened

on this date which have altered forever the way we live our lives! On January 1, Lorenzo de'Medici was born in 1449. So were Paul Revere, in 1735; E. M. Forster, in 1879; J. Edgar Hoover, in 1895; J. D. Salinger, in 1919; and Madonna, in 1961.[5] Imagine how different the world would have been without those people!

It was also on January 1 that some very significant people died: Maurice Chevalier, in 1972; Groucho Marx, in 1977; and that noted author of science fiction and founder of the religion called "Scientology," L. Ron Hubbard, in 1986. Surely, the world is a different place because of them![5]

By any standard of measure, January the 1<sup>st</sup> has been a most eventful date. On this day in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation; in 1901 the Commonwealth of Australia was formed[5]; in 1942, 26 nations signed the United Nations Declaration[7:III, 5]; in 1958 the European Community came into existence; in 1959 Fidel Castro seized power in Cuba; in 1993 Czechoslovakia split into two separate states; and, in 1994 the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect.[5]

What a difference a day makes!

Throughout human history, all religions have taken note of the importance of certain special days. Frequently these are symbolic of the birthdays or the death days of their founders, such as Christmas and Good Friday in Christianity. Sometimes these are days which commemorate special events

crucial to the religion's own history, such as Hanukkah in Judaism. *But, in almost every religion, one day which is almost always set aside for particular observance is New Year's Day.*

In his book, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade explained the meaning and importance of sacred time in human culture, and much of his discussion focused on New Year's celebrations.[2:68-115]

According to Eliade, for all traditionally religious people, time occurs in either one or two varieties:

(1) Normal or everyday time he called "*profane time*." It is perceived as having had a *beginning*, and is expected to have an *end*. Filled with *power* and *glory* at its creation by the gods, this type of time is felt to *wear out*, to become tarnished and polluted by history, and to become ever *weaker* and more *evil* under the impact of immoral human behavior. The problems which arise during the passage of this profane time are considered to be cumulative in their effects such that, with each added moment, solutions become more and more difficult.

(2) In contrast, traditional religious people also believe in the existence and availability of "*sacred time*." Unlike ever-changing profane time which is *linear* and unrolls with one different moment after another from its beginning to its end, sacred time is understood to be always *identical* to itself, never changing, having no beginning or end. It is an *eternal present* which *can be experienced repeatedly* ad infinitum. Its believers experience it as irrupting into and temporarily displacing profane time. What makes it "sacred" is the "presence" of the "holy" within it. Such sacred time is also *primordial* time, which can mean either of two things. [1] On the one hand, it can refer to the "*golden historical age*" of a religion's founder: [a] This is the professed experience of Jews during their Passover Seder meal when, metaphorically, they claim to be brought into the same present moment with Moses and the Israelites as all of them, ancients and moderns, together re-experience the Exodus event; and

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## The difference a day makes!

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[b] it is the professed experience of Christians during the Lord's Supper when, metaphysically, they claim to be brought into the same present moment with Jesus and his disciples as all of them, ancients and moderns, together share the Last Supper, again.[2] On the other hand, sacred time can refer to *the moment of primordial creation* when supernatural powers were busy bringing the universe into existence. [a] This kind of *sacred time can supposedly manifest itself sporadically at almost anytime and in almost any place that the "holy" "appears" within the secular world,* as the story of Moses and the Burning Bush illustrates. [b] But there is also a *periodic element* to this type of sacred time: for some special moments repeat with a definite regularity, as occurs within each day, as with the five sacred times of prayer for Muslims; as occurs on a weekly basis, as with the Jewish Sabbath; and as occurs on a seasonal basis, as with Easter in Christendom.

*For almost all primitive religions, however, by far the most significant example of periodic observances of sacred time is New Year's Day.* That is because religious mythology conceives New Year's Day to be the metaphysical re-enactment of the primordial creation of the universe!

Typical of traditional religions are the languages of many North American Indian cultures: their term for "world/universe/cosmos" is also their term for "year." Thus when the Yokuts and the Yuki say, "The world has passed," this also means "A year has gone by." Such religions conceive the universe as a living entity which is born, develops, and dies on the last day of the year, to be reborn on New Year's Day.

*This cosmic-temporal connection is so essential to most religions that they even incorporate it into the structure of their sacred buildings.* For example, the Algonquins and the Sioux build sacred lodges which represent both the universe and the year. They conceive of a year as a journey through the four cardinal directions, and

represent this yearly journey in their use of four doors and four windows. The Dakota Indians say, "The year is a circle around the world," and represent this by building a circular sacred lodge. In India, certain Hindus believe that building a fire altar re-enacts the creation of the universe, and since that must occur annually, they construct their altar out of 360 bricks to represent the 360 days of their "year." [2:73-75]

"The underlying meaning of all these facts," says Eliade, is that for traditionally religious people, "the world is renewed annually; ... with each new year it recovers its original sanctity, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from the creator's hands." [2:75]

Scholars call these *religious stories about creation "cosmogonic myths."* Just as the biblical story found in Genesis functions as a foundation myth for Jews, Christians and Muslims, so too do cosmogonic myths function in every religion. "At Babylon during the course of the Akitu ceremony, which was performed during the last days of the year that was ending and the first days of the new year, the poem of creation, the *Enuma elish*, was solemnly recited. This ritual recitation reactualized the [cosmic] combat between [the god] Marduk and the...monster [of chaos] Tiamat, a combat that took place ["in the beginning"] and put an end to chaos... Marduk [then] created the cosmos from Tiamat's dismembered body..." *This kind of primordial cosmic battle is part of many religions,* including Judaism and Christianity where Genesis uses the symbol of water as the chaos Yahweh must overcome to accomplish creation. That *this battle must be waged annually,* with each New Year, is shown in the ceremonial prayer said by the Babylonian priest: "May [Marduk] continue to conquer Tiamat and shorten his days! [2:77]

*In traditional religions, the old year and the old world are understood as worn out, beyond repair, and in need of replacement.* Because they have been made evil by the sins of people, it is not enough merely to discard the old year and the old cosmos. *They must be annihilated, at least symbolically.* To this end many

religions incorporate *fire rituals* in their New Year celebrations. Into these fires are cast symbols representing all that was evil in the past year. Consumed by flames, such things cease to exist, and people are made free of their burdens. What's more, *because they are reunited with their gods in the eternal present of sacred time, they are endowed once again with all of the power and glory they were given originally at the first, primordial creation. They are metaphysically re-born with an entirely new life in an entirely new year in an entirely new universe!*

*Secular critics find traditional religious views concerning the New Year to be unappealing, even unacceptable* since they seem to suggest a possible *pessimistic retreat into metaphysical escapism and a failure to assume proper human responsibility for history.* [2:92ff; 104-7] Admitting that these objections have merit, Eliade also points out that New Year theologies of traditionally religious people also exhibit a profound optimism in a future which they believe the gods will purify and make whole once again. They further show that traditionally religious people do assume responsibility, not only for human history, but for the entire universe, since they believe that it is by their re-enactment of these New Year rituals that they encourage the gods to re-create the cosmos.

*More important for people like you and me* who are not "religious" in any "traditional" way, Eliade wrote this:

The perspective changes completely when the sense of the religiousness of the cosmos becomes lost. This is what occurs when, in certain more highly evolved societies, the intellectual elites progressively detach themselves from the patterns of the traditional religion. The periodical sanctification of cosmic time then proves useless and without meaning. The gods are no longer accessible through the cosmic rhythms. The religious meaning of the repetition of paradigmatic gestures is forgotten. But repetition emptied of its religious content

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## The difference a day makes!

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necessarily leads to a pessimistic vision of existence. When it is no longer a vehicle for reintegrating a primordial situation, and hence for recovering the mysterious presence of the gods, that is, when it is desacralized, cyclic time becomes terrifying; it is seen as a circle forever turning on itself, repeating itself to infinity...."[2:107].

Then he concluded: "Definitively desacralized, time presents itself as a precarious and evanescent duration, leading irremediably to death."[2:113]

I am not a supernaturalist, and neither are most Humanists. The old, traditional religious approaches that depend upon deities re-creating the cosmos won't work for us.

Are we therefore doomed to the pessimism of death Eliade has described as the sole inheritance of the intellectual elite? I don't think so. For I think *Eliade has overlooked one thing* that can serve even the most rationalistic agnostics and atheists among us, and that is *hope!*

As this old year comes to its end and a New Year awaits, there may not be anything supernatural available to us to help make the transition. But there is, I believe, something within us that can (if you will pardon a pun) "save the day"—New Year's Day, that is. That one thing is *hope*.

*Like the very gods themselves who supposedly live from everlasting to everlasting, "hope springs eternal in the human breast."*[1:301] When asked by a stranger during a heavy thunderstorm, "Do you think it will

ever stop raining?" no less a genius than Mark Twain replied: "It always has."[6:17]

*Like every deity proclaimed by every religion, hope is mysterious:* we have no control over it, over whether we possess it, or even over what its contents are. Perhaps that's just as well, too: when George Washington was young, what he hoped for more than anything else in the world was to be a sailor in the king's navy! At one point he even had his trunk packed and his ticket bought to sail to England.[6:18]

*Like the deities, hope is also sacred (or if you prefer, irreplaceably necessary and therefore precious to the continuation and quality of human life):* it is that spark of light at the end of every tunnel. Sometimes it's hard to see; but then, as someone once pointed out: "Only when it gets dark enough, can you see the stars." [Charles Beard, redacted: 6:19]

*Finally, like all the gods and goddesses, hope is primordially creative:* hope is what allows others to forgive us so that we can be free of our burdens of guilt; and it is what allows us to forgive them so that they can begin again. Hope is what lets us take the past year, with its failures and its successes, and put all of its contents behind us so that we can undo what we did wrong and improve on what we did right.

The apostle *Paul*, who was wrong about so very many, many things, nevertheless got one thing absolutely right when he wrote that *hope abides*. [I Cor. 13:13]

Therefore, instead of New Year's Resolutions, I intend to have the

following *New Year's Hopes*:

1. I hope that I will always be for each person what he or she needs me to be.
2. I hope that each person's suffering or death will always diminish me, but that fear of my own eventual demise will never diminish my joy of life.
3. I hope that my love for those whom I like will never lessen my love for those whom I do not.
4. I hope that another person's love for me will never be the measure of my love for him or her; and
5. I hope that every one of you will always have hope! [Cf. 4:175]

## Happy New Year!

### Sources

- [1] Bartlett, John, Ed. *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. 16<sup>th</sup> Ed. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1992. Quotation is from Alexander Pope.
- [2] Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1957.
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- [7] Spinrad, Leonard and Thelma. *Speaker's Lifetime Library*. 3 vols. West Nyack, NY: Parker Publishing Co., 1979.
- [8] Symmetricom. "Leap Second to be Added on December 31<sup>st</sup>." <http://www.symmttm.com/leapsecond/>

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## Intergalactic Missionary Work

Continued from p. 2

sets of religionists, will we have<sup>8</sup> to start killing the sub-human heathens. Wait, is that us talking about them or them talking about us? I get confused. Besides, they hate us for our freedoms, our democracy, and the fact that we have Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt and they don't. Maybe we're better off not looking with too much avidity for extraterrestrials, and just enjoy the familiar, and much more pleasant, internecine wars and

battles with our earthbound neighbors, spouses and significant others.<sup>9</sup>

### Endnote References

1. Home of the Fightin' Thunderbolts.
2. Not to be confused with 3 in 1 Oil, a highly useful product.
3. Known as Mabel, Black Label by the local inhabitants. And in a totally nonsequiturous aside purloined from Dave Barry, "That would be a great name for a rock band."
4. Somewhere between 2 and 84,000±.
5. And that is why you should save it for marriage, and only with the

one you love.

6. There are known to be 8 of this subset still extant, living between a K-Mart and The True Vine Holy, Jumpin' Jehosaphat Church located in Bisbee, Arizona. Sadly, they are all too old to procreate and are therefore doomed to extinction.
7. Like a Swiss Army Knife.
8. This looks like a good place for another footnote.
9. Don't look for any internal logic or thread to this essay. I'm an INFP, for Sheit's sakes.

# LETTERS



*Ed. Note: COMMON SENSE IS PLEASED TO REPRINT this letter published in the Lakeland Ledger on Friday, December 11, 2009. I encourage our readers to notify Common Sense when letters or articles by any member appears in a publication. This is an excellent letter, but I heard of it only by happenstance. I truly hope we are not missing out on other thought-provoking pieces. Read the letter online at <http://www.theledger.com/article/20091211/EDIT02/912119976>.*

## Origins of Religious Beliefs

MANY PEOPLE, claiming to be Christians, believe they'll go to heaven when they die, with hell being the destination of non-believers. Letters from Ed Terrell [Dec. 4], Robert Bowers [Nov. 27] and others relate their views as "truth," al-

though seemingly have knowledge from different sources.

Many views miss, or ignore, information preceding the Bible and ongoing research on evolution. There are much more data available now than when philosophers before the Christian era (Plato, Socrates, etc.) attempted to describe hell, or other people determined what material should be included in the Bible, about 1,700 years ago.

Fortunately for us, Alice K. Turner's *The History of Hell*, (reliably documented) and authors whose writings denote origins of comparative biblical literature, are available. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is an earlier Mesopotamian flood story with many similarities to the later Noah story with different characters.

In quoting the creation story, Genesis 1 is often used, with few people being aware of the very different Genesis 2 version.

Biblical authors, as well as other inhabitants within the biblical world,

lacked knowledge of the majority of Earth's existence and the natives therein (people unknown to the apostles—in the Americas, for instance, for over 10,000 years).

Attempting to put all of "creation" in a similar set of religious circumstances isn't realistic. Beginning with Abraham and Jahweh, Jesus and God, then Mohammed and Allah, that is an "evolution" of ideas which doesn't use the same principles for an afterlife.

Until proponents of Christianity and other religions seek origins of religious beliefs, it is preposterous to assume that more recent writings, such as the Bible, have the answers. Too much material is wishful thinking, imaginative creation and fearful deductions. With the ridiculous apocalyptic ideas for 2012 being broached, the ignorance of the general public will continue to be exploited.

*Stella H. Darby, Lakeland*



## FOCUS ON FREEDOM

### Update: Support drops For UN's ban on Defamation of Religion

IN DECEMBER, THE U.N. GENERAL ASSEMBLY condemned defamation of religion for the fifth year running. According to the *New York Times*, support for the resolution has continued to erode. Its Reuters report states that Western countries say the proposal threatens freedom of speech.

The Islamic-sponsored resolution passed by 80 votes in favor, 61 against, 42 abstentions. That compares with 86-53-42 last year, and 108-51-25 in 2007. The nonbinding resolution has passed every year since it was proposed in 2005, prompted by a row over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper that sparked bloody protests by Muslims around the world.

The text urges states to provide "adequate protection against acts of hatred, discrimination, intimidation and coercion resulting from the defamation of religions, and incitement to religious hatred in general," stating that freedom of

speech may "be subject to limitations as ... are necessary for respect of the rights or reputations of others, protection of national security or of public order, public health or morals." The only religion specifically named as a target of defamation is Islam.

China and Russia joined the Islamic and sub-Saharan African states to vote for the resolution. It was opposed by Western along with some Latin American and small-island states.

Angela Wu, of Washington-based Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, was quoted that the resolution "provides international cover for domestic blasphemy laws that are overbroad and easy to abuse ... The concept of 'defamation of religions' undermines the foundations of human rights law by protecting ideas instead of people, and empowering states instead of their citizens."

### Atheists in office: Déjà vu all over again

IN THE DECEMBER 14, 2009 ISSUE of *The Washington Post*, Herb Silverman (Founder/President of the Secular Coalition for America; Distinguished Professor Emeritus of

Mathematics, College of Charleston) was guest columnist in the On Faith section. His commentary stems from an effort in Asheville, North Carolina to remove duly-elected Cecil Bothwell from the City Council because he is an atheist.

Herb opines, "What [Cecil Bothwell] and I have in common is not just that we are atheists, but that we are open about it. The constitutions of both North and South Carolina bar atheists from holding public office."

After learning about the South Carolina exclusion in 1990, at variance from Article 6 of the US Constitution—there may be no religious tests for public office (held by the US Supreme Court to apply also to the states)—Herb challenged the provision by running for public office, and won unanimously at the South Carolina Supreme Court after eight years. He says South Carolina wasted about \$100,000

He concluded: "Those politicians showed they would rather waste time and money on a lost cause than risk the wrath and lose the votes of the state's well-organized religious right. But South Carolina is known as a state that fights lost causes. Et tu, North Carolina?"

## 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
- 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

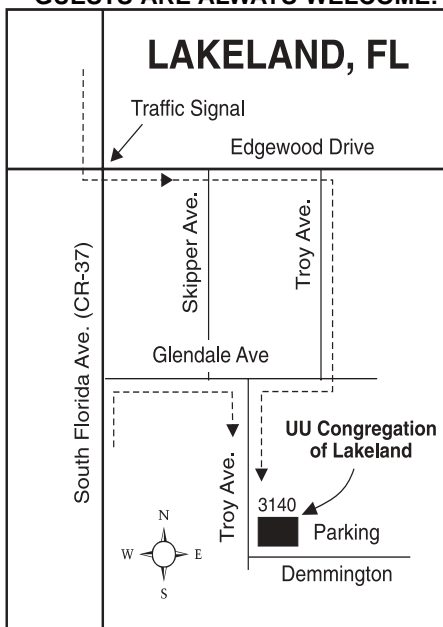
The Humanist Association of West Central Florida is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization. Contributions are tax deductible as provided by federal and state law.

## WHEN AND WHERE?

THE HUMANIST ASSOCIATION OF WEST CENTRAL FLORIDA usually meets on **the 3<sup>RD</sup> 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 **2<sup>ND</sup> MONDAY OF EVERY MONTH at 6:15 pm.**

**PLEASE NOTE: OUR MEETING PLACE HAS CHANGED ... WE WILL MEET AT**



**Mt. Fuji Steakhouse**, 2607 S Florida Avenue, Lakeland, Southgate Shopping Center between Pablo and Oak Streets. See Map below right.

Please join us ... bring your friends!!

## In Cyber Space:

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<http://hawcf.org>

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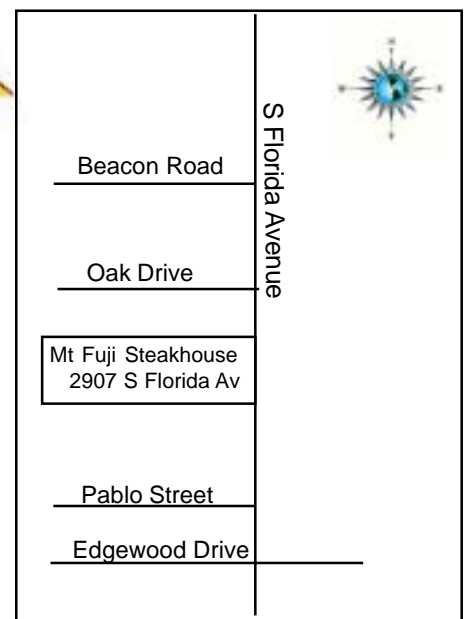
Please visit each of these sites. Comments or suggestions on either site are earnestly desired and should be brought up at meetings or made directly to webmaster Ken Schmidt:

[kschmidt@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:kschmidt@tampabay.rr.com)

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

## 2010 DUES ARE DUE

HAWCF Membership dues for 2010 are now being accepted. Your dues cover the full year: January through December 2010. Please make dues check payable to HAWCF. Give to either co-Treasurer, Al or Jane Eskenazi, or mail to HAWCF. See the Membership Form above for address & payment info.



See inside for exciting news.

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WHAT WILL 2010 BRING FOR  
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