



HOUSTON FREETHOUGHT ALLIANCE

Newsletter

For the Humanist and Freethought Community

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Calendar of Events:

Sunday, February 4 | 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *Coffee Social* | at Borders Books & Music in Meyerland Plaza (I-610 W Loop S at Beechnut) | Spontaneous informal discussions are held on first & third Sundays monthly | Contact: [Art Fay*](#)

Sunday, February 4 | 12:30 pm - 2:00 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) Brunch* | Randall's 11041 Westheimer Road at Wilcrest (S.E. corner) | Topics chosen by the group are discussed on first Sunday monthly | Contact: [Daniel Strain*](#)

Monday, Weekly | 7:00 pm - 10:00 pm | *Freethought Forum* | Starbucks at Louetta and Kuykendahl | Freethinkers gathering socially to discuss current events and anything else on our minds | Contact: [Curt Loose*](#)

Wednesday, February 7 | 7:00 pm - 10:00 pm | *North Houston Atheist Meetup* | Bennigan's Grill & Tavern at 4505 Fm 1960 Rd W | Social dinner with humanists and atheists on Houston's north side, first Wednesday monthly | [Contact Nigel Bedrock.](#)

Alternate Thursdays | 11:45 am - 1:00 pm | *Hungry Heathens* | Lunch and informal discussions at various restaurants for those who have time on a weekday | Contact: [Art Fay*](#)

Saturday, February 10 | 1:00 pm | *HAMCIAC Regular Meeting* | Montgomery Co. Library in the Woodlands (2nd floor) [From I-45 go west on Woodland Pkwy to 2nd traffic light; turn north (right) on Six Pines Dr; cross bridge & watch for wavy sculptures in the median; turn west (left) to Lake Robbins Rd; pass Woodlands Pavilion; turn left into Library parking lot] | Regular meetings are held on second Saturdays monthly | Contact: [Curt Loose*](#)

Sunday, February 11 | 10:30 am - 11:30 am with coffee available at 10:00 AM. | *Houston Church Of Freethought (HCOF) Service* | at the Holiday Inn which is located at 3131 West Loop (northbound just north of Richmond) | Services (including song, humor, lectures & discussion with children's classes & baby sitting available) are held on second Sundays monthly | Contact: [Art Fay*](#)

Saturday, February 17 | 1:00 pm - 3:30 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH)* | Darwin Day Celebration at BORDERS BOOKS & MUSIC 3025 Kirby, Houston, TX 77098 | (See: *HOH* pg.2) Contact: [Daniel Strain*](#)

Sunday, February 18 | 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *Coffee Social* | at Borders Books & Music in Meyerland Plaza (I-610 W Loop S at Beechnut) | Spontaneous informal discussions are held on first & third Sundays monthly | Contact: [Art Fay*](#)

Thursday, February 22 | 6:00 pm | *Humanist Contemplatives Club* | at Rothko Chapel, 1409 Sul Ross St. | Meet the fourth Thursday of the month | For more info: <http://www.humanistsofhouston.org/contemplatives>

Friday, February 23 | 5:00 pm | *Newsletter Deadline* | all articles, letters, and submissions of interest are welcome if on editor's desk, postmarks not withstanding (e-mail format required), | Contact: [Jim Knierien*](#)

Sunday, February 25 | 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *Ideas Club* | At Dr Louis Daily's family house at 1506 North Boulevard. See HOH WEB site for directions | Book reviews by members are held on fourth Sundays monthly, Contact: [Bob Finch*](#)

Sunday, March 4 | 10:00 am - 12:00 noon | *Coffee Social* | at Borders Books & Music in Meyerland Plaza (I-610 W Loop S at Beechnut) | Spontaneous informal discussions are held on first & third Sundays monthly | [Contact: Art Fay*](#)

Sunday, March 4 | 12:30 pm - 2:00 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) Brunch* | Randall's employee training room 11041 Westheimer Road at Wilcrest (S.E. corner) | Topics chosen by the group are discussed on first Sundays monthly | Contact: [Daniel Strain*](#)

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About the Houston Humanist Alliance:

The *Houston Freethought Alliance* is a collection of local humanist and freethought organizations in Houston, which have come together to provide a wider range of services, information, and activities to their members. While still separated in their membership, leadership, and schedules, member-organizations of the *Alliance* share the same newsletter and mailing lists. This allows our organizations to cooperate effectively and enables individual members to be kept informed of virtually all activities of interests to Freethinkers in the Houston area.

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Publisher:

[1] The Houston Freethought Alliance Newsletter (HFA NL) is published monthly by the Houston Humanist Alliance (HFA).

[2] The purpose of the HFA NL is (1) publicizing events, i.e., keeping members informed of regularly and specially scheduled meetings, (2) providing for the public at large information about humanism and humanist thought, and (3) providing a platform for members to express their viewpoints and opinions.

[3] The HFA and the editor do not necessarily agree with nor endorse the views expressed herein. Many humanists and freethinkers pride themselves with being individuals. Consensus among Humanists is therefore difficult to achieve. No one humanist can speak for all other humanists.

[4] Anyone may quote from the newsletter but is asked to please give credit where credit is due, i.e., cite author, newsletter issue (number or date), & page.

[5] All articles, letters, and submissions of interest are welcome if on editor's desk by deadline (12:00 noon on the 15th of each month), postmarks not withstanding. E-mail format required. <mailto:Jim.Knierien@thermo.com> Name, phone number, & street address required for editorial contact purposes only.

[6] The editor reserves the right to edit all submissions for space or clarity, but never with the intent to alter the thrust of the author.

[7] Snailmail editions are sent gratis to paid members of the AHA/HOH. Email editions are sent gratis to anyone else upon request. Adobe PDF editions are available gratis by sending an email to: <mailto:jim.knierien@thermo.com>.

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Explanation of iih symbol:

The ii of the iih represents two or more people. The h of the iih represents the humanness to which they aspire. A lower case h is used instead of an upper case H to indicate that it is better to become human (as opposed to inhuman) than it is to join a Humanist organization.

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Alliance member's reports:

HCOF

Houston Church of Freethought January Service program:

Introduction Jim Ashmore
"Raising Freethought Children" Jade Hems
"Religious Peer Pressure" Jim Ashmore
by Tim Gorski and Deborah Boak
"The Greatest Love of All" Whitney Houston
FTOTM Zora Neale Hurston Art Fay
Closing/Announcements Anthony Stott

After the service, many gathered for lunch at Jason's Deli on Westheimer between Augusta and Fountain View (north side of Westheimer).

As always, your directors Jim Ashmore, Ed Uthman, Anthony Stott, Nancy and Art Fay welcome your feedback and participation in Church Services and Sunday school.

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HOH

The February meeting of *The Humanists of Houston* will be a Darwin Day Celebration at: **BORDERS BOOKS & MUSIC** 3025 Kirby, Houston, TX 77098

All HOH members and the public are invited! We're hoping all our friends in HCOF, the Atheist Meetup Group, and the Asimov Humanists can also join us for this fun and intriguing event. Here is the planned schedule of events so far:

1:00-1:03 Introduction
1:03-1:20 Video: James Watson & E.O. Wilson
1:20-1:50 First Speaker (to be announced)
1:50-2:20 Questions & Answers
2:20-2:30 Video: Carl Sagan on Evolution
2:30-3:00 Second Speaker (to be announced)
3:00-3:30 Questions & Answers

One of our speakers has been confirmed as Dr. Hector Miranda, an evolutionary biologist speaking on the science of evolution. Which time slot he will speak in will depend on the other speaker and subject matter, to be determined.

See: <http://www.humanistsofhouston.org/> for more details.

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Ideas Club

The *Ideas Club* book that was reviewed for January was *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. Marian Hillar presented an excellent review.

Jerry Harris will review the book *Why Darwin Matters* by Michael Shermer on February 25.

Bob Finch <mailto:rdfinch@houston.rr.com> will provide interested parties with updated lists of books to be reviewed and the review dates.

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Dawkins and the Objectives of Humanism

By Robert D. Finch

The God Delusion

Richard Dawkins has done it again. The author of the "Selfish Gene", "The Blind Watchmaker", "Unweaving the Rainbow", "Climbing Mount Improbable" and "The Ancestor's Tail" among other wonderful titles has come up trumps again, this time with what just might be his greatest blockbuster yet: "The God Delusion". Among many accolades Dawkins was Humanist of the Year in 1996.

Dawkins' aim in writing the book is to raise consciousness among followers of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) that it is their beliefs which are the "Root of All Evil". (This was the title of an earlier documentary which he produced for the BBC). He makes it clear that his quarrel is not with Buddhism or Confucianism which he views as ethical or philosophical systems. It is the Abrahamic religions which invoke supernaturalism in the form of monotheism and which he contends have caused so much grief in our world.

Dawkins focuses attention on what he calls the God Hypothesis, the idea that there exist supernatural intelligence(s) who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us. He works over the variations of the hypothesis: polytheism, monotheism as well as gods who meddle in our daily lives and those that stand aloof, as in deism.

He goes through the arguments for the existence of God, starting with the "proofs" put forward by St. Augustine on to the modern concepts of design, and arguments from personal experience, beauty and the example of prominent scientists. Then he turns the design argument on its head by showing it is really a case for the utter improbability of the existence of a God. Evolution, on the other hand, is a very believable explanation of the existence of myriad species.

The early chapters of the book contain the main coverage of the almighty and the remainder serve to deal with related issues such as the origins of religion, and its relationship to morality. This leads on to an exposition of ways in which religion is bad for the world, and in particular its pernicious effects on children. He points out that children are not born Catholic or Protestant, Suni or Shiite, Brahmin or Untouchable: these are all attitudes which they have to be taught.

The final chapter makes the case for an alternative to religion whereby we would understand the world in terms of science and adopt an ethical system such as Humanism to guide our behavior. This would take care of the explanatory and exhortatory roles of religion. He claims that it has two remaining roles: consolation and inspiration which could also be supplied by aspects of science. He talks about a new version of the ten commandments which would reflect such a change in the moral zeitgeist. Freed of the

constraints of religion we would be able to explore our limitations, if indeed there are any.

The Reviews

One interesting question is why the book is getting so much attention. It has received numerous reviews, by itself and in conjunction with fellow Humanist of the Year (2004) Daniel Denett's "Breaking the Spell" and Sam Harris' two books "End of Faith" and "Letter to a Christian Nation". It has made the best seller lists of Amazon and the New York Times. Dawkins himself reports very large audiences on a recent book tour. He is of course an accomplished author in the genre of science popularization, with great style and panache, and he is a genius at explaining scientific concepts by means of metaphors. A case in point is to use the slit in what he calls the "mother of all burkas" as an analogy for the visible window in the electromagnetic spectrum. All three of this "new atheist" triumvirate have been attacking God and religion, clearly a path to notoriety at any time. But right now, with George Bush and the republican administration having spent six years to build up a remarkable degree of opprobrium for their war on Islamic terrorism and their agenda of faith based (Christian) government intervention, perhaps the time has indeed come for a change in the moral and political zeitgeist.

Many of the book's reviews are negative, a reaction we might expect when distinguished authors attack an established paradigm. Several reviewers claim there is nothing new in the "God Delusion" or the other books. It seems to me that there are a number of sections in which Dawkins covers new ground. His extension of the speculations about little green men is something I have not seen in any other book. His demolition of Gould's non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA) is new, as is the discussion of the "great prayer experiment". The chapters on morality contain many original thoughts, such as his ten new commandments, the importance of the zeitgeist and the attention on childhood abuse by various religions. And of course it is new to actually criticize religion at all, citing specific instances, as Dawkins and Harris have done.

Genes, Memes and Systems

There were a couple of criticisms emerging from some of the reviews which ostensibly have some substance. I would like to address these issues because I think they may be the result of Dawkins not having pursued his discussion far enough. The first concerns the subject of "memes", a concept which Dawkins originated and for which he now includes an update on progress. The "meme" first appeared in the "Selfish Gene" to signify that replicators could be transmitted in human culture in a manner similar to genetic propagation in biology. He tells us in the "God Delusion" that several authors have taken him up on his invention and that meme theory has taken off. On the other hand H. Allen Orr writing in The New York Review of Books tells us that scientists do not accept Dawkins theory of memes. Who

then is right on this subject? The answer I believe is both Dawkins and Orr. Most scientists would not be expected to accept meme theory because it is too reminiscent of system theory which is generally not welcome, so in this sense Orr is right. But I would contend these scientists are at least partly wrong: meme theory is going to be useful and Dawkins deserves credit for it. If system theory is good enough for Murray Gell-Mann of Standard Theory fame and author of the "Quark and the Jaguar" and yet another Humanist of the Year (2005), then it should be good enough for the rest of us. There is not a complete correspondence between Dawkins and Gell-Mann's ideas but the similarities surely merit further exploration. I have tried to outline the relevant aspects of System Theory in another paper (Finch, (2000)).

Religion as a Model of the World

The other point I feel needs further exploration concerns the "model" of the world which Dawkins mentions rather briefly in his final chapter. I believe that we do indeed require such a model of the world precisely because we are complex adaptive systems. My concept of religion is that it is itself this very model of the universe and our place in it. After all this is what the word "religion" means: that which binds everything together. It is unfortunate that a number of religions have resorted to the magic of supernaturalism by way of explanation and to fortify our morality. Dawkins is justified in distinguishing Buddhism and Confucianism from the Abrahamic religions for just this reason. But can he not recognize that the Unitarian-Universalist church has evolved to the point of largely rejecting supernaturalism? Can the venerable Church of England, for which Dawkins clearly retains some affection, be far behind the UUA with the likes of Bishop Spong to spur them along?

I believe this world-model nature of religion is why it corresponds to a need deeply felt by many people. One of the most perceptive reviews of Dawkins' book was by David Baltimore, who wrote "Dawkins does talk about the possibility that religion fills a deep-seated need in people, and he tries to dismiss it. But the evidence that this is the case is so strong, and the train of belief stretches so far back into human history, that the theory deserves more respect." Humanistic psychologists find a definite correlation between happiness and religious belief, as expounded by Ken Livingston in a recent issue of Free Inquiry.

Dawkins, Dennett and Philosophy

We had interesting discussions at the HOH meeting and the Ideas Club over this past weekend about Dawkins, Dennett and Philosophy. This raised again the discussion we had earlier on science and philosophy. Dawkins and Dennett had different starting points in their careers, namely Biology and Philosophy.

Dawkins has progressed through evolutionary biology into writing about physics and evolutionary theory and into statistics exhibiting a gift for clear exposition in his writing. As Marian Hillar pointed out he made a crack about philosophy on page 83 of *The God Delusion*: "I mean it as a compliment when I say that you could almost define a philosopher as someone who won't take common sense for an answer". Marian chose to omit the underlined phrase in

his handout, but it obviously shows that Dawkins is not seriously opposed to philosophy. I think his position is that he is not a philosopher himself and is not familiar with its subject matter, as he is with biology.

Dennett, on the other hand is a professional philosopher, and is at home with a much broader range of knowledge, of *wissenschaft*, as he himself put it in his interview with Bill Moyers. He is a musician and experiences the beauty of the great cathedrals. In this respect he will come across to the "average citizen and Christian" in the same way as does E.O. Wilson, for being a sympathetic figure. Both Dennett and Dawkins are accomplished academics, polished authors and speakers. I suspect they will be taken seriously in a way that Madeleine Murray O'Hare was not. Although MMOH was I believe much brighter than she was given credit for, she obviously set the cause of atheism back by her combative style and uncouth language. Sam Harris is a good speaker and writer but does not have the same impressive resume as a Dennett or a Dawkins.

Hume argued that mere philosophers contribute nothing, although the mere ignorant he really despised. He believed that the best men have equal ability and taste for books, company and business. "Indulge your passion for science, but let your science be human, and such as may have a direct reference to action and society." In another place he says "Be a philosopher, but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man". But lest the desire for practicality be overdone to the point of rejecting all metaphysics and profound reasoning he is careful to argue the case for the detailed knowledge that results from scientific and detailed scrutiny. He cites the usefulness of anatomy to the artist as an example and argues that a "similar correctness is bestowed on every art and calling". To Hume philosophy extends into all science and learning and includes politics and the law. He thought of Sir Isaac Newton as a *philosopher* who had determined the laws and forces by which the revolutions of the planets are governed. To bring the argument up to date we might list all the advances that have occurred since Hume's day: atomic theory, the germ theory of disease, electricity, genetics and reading of the genome, atomic and nuclear science, astronomy and knowledge of the universe as well as many of the advances in psychology. Hume would say all of these are branches of philosophy. He would even say that engineering and electronics and medicine as well as sociology and political and management science are all parts of philosophy. And he also argued the case for metaphysics which is often thought to be unscientific and susceptible to religious fears and prejudices.

Al Robison was quite right to remind us about E.O. Wilson's "Consilience" the central message of which was the unity of knowledge.

Bertrand Russell is often cited as the first of the analytical philosophers i.e. as being concerned with methods of thinking, as opposed to the content of the thoughts. Since his time many philosophers have lost interest in the content of science, or politics, or what used to be called cosmology, the study of the universe and man's place in it. Dennett is unusual for his interest in science and for wanting to explain its advances to the general public. My hero, Karl Popper,

urged philosophers to get back to their original responsibility of writing cosmology.

Impact on Humanist Objectives

Thus I come to my final point: the impact of Dawkins and the new atheists on the objectives of Humanism. It seems to me that we owe them a thank-you for their courage in pointing out the deficiencies of traditional religions. They have provided us with some lively new books for our outreach to the religious faithful. The three new atheists have probably reaped more publicity than the entire Humanist movement has obtained in recent years despite advertising expenditures. The American Humanist Association has been laboring to produce a five year plan. This involves making some strategic choices. One problem in the past has been the division of the non-theist population into the many splinter groups Dawkins lists in his Appendix. We need to cooperate if we wish to be effective politically. The new atheists are academics and stand out as much as for anything as being against the present tide of anti-intellectualism on the political right. It will be beneficial for Humanism to be associated with these individuals. They appear to be working cooperatively, even to the extent of sending joint (can you believe it?) Christmas cards! One can only hope that these distinguished academics will realize that organization needs more than books and publicity.

Our objectives are more than making a narrow political stance: I contend that our primary mission is the

development of a modern alternative to traditional religion. The explanation of the universe is still not complete and we may have big surprises yet in store. An ethical theory to go along with the science of nature is still an open question --- in fact it is an evolving vision of how we should behave. We still have to find consolation for suffering and death in the absence of supernatural religion and we still need to be inspired to carry on as Dawkins himself has pointed out. We need the leadership of talented academics such as these three new atheists to find our way into the future, but we have to understand that for many people religion is the foundation stone of their lives.

References

- Dawkins, Richard, (2006) "The God Delusion", Houghton Mifflin.
- Finch, Robert D., (2000), "Evolution, Adaptive Systems and Humanism", in Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism, vol. 8, Eds. Robert D. Finch, Marian Hillar and Frank Prahl.
- Gell-Mann, Murray, (1994) "The Quark and the Jaguar: Adventures in the Simple and the Complex", W.H. Freeman.
- Baltimore, David, (2007) "A Defense of Atheism": Review of Dawkins' "The God Delusion" in American Scientist, 95, 75-76.
- Livingston, Ken, (2006) "God, Aristotle, and the New Science of Happiness" in Free Inquiry, 26, 32-38.

Ron's Ramblings

By Ron Titus

[1] At the January brunch meeting of the HOH (Humanists of Houston), the Benjamin Franklin exhibit at the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences was recommended, and discussed. Some of the thoughts that ran through my head (some expressed some not): (1) What we know as historical facts needs constant re-examination. (2) What are regarded as inalienable rights are not god-made but man-made, and therefore are subject to re-examination, re-evaluation, and possible re-formation. (3) All behavior is based on survival. (4) Virtues are the behaviors that are suited for survival; vices are those that are not. (5) Regrettably, some virtues are regarded as vices while some vices are regarded as virtues. Unfortunately, it often happens that people learn which is which the "hard way", ie, only after making mistakes. To wit: war, slavery, secrecy to mask injustice. (6) Because of the possibility of unwanted pregnancies, sex among the unmarried was a vice. Since the advent of contraceptive devices, is it still a vice? (7) Some people believe that not only is promiscuity a vice, but sexuality itself is a vice. Sex is a vice and sexlessness is a virtue. (8) Chastity is the virtue by which one controls (not stifles) one's sexuality. (9) People err not because they know too much but because they know too little. (10) What religious people call "sinful" are generally the behaviors that they do not understand and are afraid of. (11) Puritanism is the fear and dread that happiness exists somewhere. (H L Mencken) (12) Humility is the virtue whereby we see

ourselves as we are; pride is the virtue whereby we take pleasure in our accomplishments. False pride is claiming recognition for accomplishments that we do not have; false humility is refusing to acknowledge our legitimate accomplishments. (13) Human behavior (morality) evolves because of changes in education, society, and the environment. (14) It is useful to remember that the universe is still evolving and has not yet arrived at its zenith of development.

[2] At the January regular meeting of the HOH, a DVD was shown reviewing the interview of Daniel Dennett and Bill Moyers who was sitting in for Charlie Rose. Again Bill Moyers seemed to me to be defensive and not open to the very clear observations made by Dennett.

[3] At the January meeting of the Ideas Club, Marion Hillar reviewed Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. He did an excellent job. From his presentation I noted: (1) Dawkin's book is the best of the three (Dawkins, Dennett, & Harris). (2) Its purpose is to raise consciousness. (3) Dawkins is a deeply religious atheist. (4) Spinoza was not a pantheist because he did not worship nature. (5) Religionists are a privileged class of people in our society. (6) The god-concept is hypothetical. (7) Dawkins has little regard for philosophers. (8) *Zeitgeist* means "the spirit of the times". (9) DNA changes.

[4] I have been watching American Idol on Fox TV. It has been fascinating to me, and I have been wondering why. Ordinary - QUITE ordinary - people around the country compete with one another to be ultimately declared America's "Idol". 'Ideal, I suspect. 'A "rock star" or at least some kind of nationally recognized celebrity. Actually, the contestant is expected by the three judges to be at least a singer. Contestants must be able to sing, sing well enough to satisfy the three judges.

Well, some contestants do satisfy the judges and are given a chance to compete in the "finals" in Hollywood. Hollywood is perceived by the contestants as a place where everyone is either a nationally recognized celebrity or a frustrated wanabe or a non-entity all together.

The contestants who do not make the grade, who do not make the cut, who fail to satisfy the judges are told so by the judges. All judges must cast a yes-or-no vote. 'And they do. But not all the judges are as gentle or as blunt as the others.

One judge ("Simon") in particular tells the rejects outright that their singing is awful and they need to consider a non-singing career.

The rejected contestants express their disappointment from passive resignation to indignant rage, challenging not only the judges' verdict but also their judgment and competence as well. While I feel for the rejects (as in "I feel your pain") and their disappointment, I am also sympathetic with the cold, heartless judge (Simon), who tells it like it is. Some, no, MOST of the contestants really do sound to me to be pretty bad – yes, "awful".

The great Jesus allegedly said "Judge not and ye shall not be judged."

But the contestants knew what they were getting themselves into. 'Or did they? Some - again no, MOST - of

the contestants seemed to me as not having a clue what they were in for. Why? 'Because their friends – or were the "friends" really cruel practical jokesters – and/or their sincerely caring mothers who told the wanabes that they were American Idol material. And were the mothers themselves frustrated wanabes who were attempting to live out their own frustrated dreams vicariously in their children?

When I ask myself "How can people be sooooo blind to their own imperfections, shortcomings, etc?", I have to ask myself: "Am I not seeing myself blindly also?"

So, Readers, Friends, be as kind as you can, but please DO let me know if I am away off track. I am over 70 years old, and if I can't handle criticism by now, I am indeed in deep dodo doo.

ALL THIS REMINDS ME of the battle going on around the country wherein some atheists are challenging not only theists for their belief in supernatural gods, belief and faith in themselves, and religion in general, but also their fellow atheists whom they consider too moderate.

My favorite "Trinity" or my "Big Three" (Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins) are the protagonists. Are they right in their challenge or is it only in the way they go about their challenge, ie, too aggressively confrontive?

I ask myself: Are people really helping their adult children when they allow them to believe that two plus two equals five? Where is the balance between confrontation and "compassion"?

[5] Considering that Quarterback Peyton Manning & the Indianapolis Colts will be playing in Super Bowl XLI on 2007 0204su, it is interesting and well to remember that, on 2006 1224, they were beaten in Houston by QB David Carr & the Houston Texans, 27-24.

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Food for thought and/or thought for indigestion

By Ron Titus

[1] Consciousness does not reside in an ethereal soul that uses the brain like a PDA; consciousness is the activity of the brain.

[Steven Pinker, "The Mystery of Consciousness", *Time*, 2007 0129, P 62]

[2] Think ... about why we sometimes remind ourselves that "life is short." It is an impetus to extend a gesture of affection to a loved one, to bury the hatchet in a pointless dispute, to use time productively rather than squander it. I would argue that nothing gives life more purpose than the realization that every moment of consciousness is a precious and fragile gift.

[ibid]

[3] As every parent of a teenager knows, compassion can often be hard work. It takes effort to summon warm feelings for someone who snarls at you while asking for money. Some parents find they have to play tricks on their own minds, such as forcing themselves to remember the teen as a cuddly baby.

[Katherine Ellison, "Mastering Your Own", *Psychology Today*, 2006 09/10, P 73]

[4] Recollect Freud's humble goal: to transform hysterical misery into common unhappiness.

[ibid]

[5] Awareness trumps thoughts, because you can be aware of your thoughts.

[Kabat-Zinn, quoted by Katherine Ellison, "Mastering Your Own", *Psychology Today*, 2006 09/10, P 75]

[6] "The rarely used objects cluttering our lives are not really objects at all but symbols of our untapped potential. They are ... artifacts of unused life."

[David Dudley, "Conquering Clutter", *AARP Magazine*, 2007 01&02, P 50]

[7] "If it's hard work to slip off a letter to a friend, maybe you're trying too hard to be terrific. A letter is only a report to someone who already likes you for reasons other than your brilliance."

[Garrison Keillor, advertisement for International Paper Co, *Psychology Today*, 8708, P 23]

[8] "One is not born a woman, one becomes one."

[Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), quoted in *Writer's Almanac*, 2007 0109]

[9] Monotheistic religions that lay claim to the one and only possible truth are doomed by their very nature to end up in conflict.

[Carolyn D Lewis, Letters, *Time*, 2006 1218, P P 9]

[10] Are dogmatic religions heretical offshoots of true religion?

[11] Superstition is the human default mode.

[Alan Bean, email dated 2006 1226tu1025]

[12] "I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours."

[Historian Stephen Henry Roberts (1901-71) quoted by Sam Harris, "10 myths—and 10 truths—about atheism", *Los Angeles Times*, 2006 1224, forwarded in an 2006 1224 email from G Alan Robison]

[13] "Religion is a childhood disease from which we have recovered."

[Daniel C Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, quoted by Freeman J Dyson, *New York Review of Books*, and re-quoted in the *HFA NL*, 2006 10, P 7]

[14] Religion is an unconscious psychosis that is both socially approved and encouraged.

[15] "Where is the oil going to come from? The Middle East, with two-thirds of the world's oil and the lowest cost, is still where the prize ultimately lies."

[Halliburton CEO Dick Cheney in 1999, quoted by Chris Floyd, "New Oil Law Means Victory in Iraq for Bush", email from Garland Pohl & forwarded by John McGee, 2007 0112]

[16] Whenever I asked about presidential impeachment, I was always told that it can't happen while the Republicans control Congress. Well? Who controls Congress now?

[17] Brave people do not torture; cowards torture. Nor do brave people authorize or condone torture. Only sadists and masochists enjoy torture.

[18] Just as racism is more offensive than is the term (word) "racism", so also is apartheid reality more offensive than is the term "apartheid".

[19] "Always give your best, never get discouraged, never be petty. Always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself."

[Richard Milhous Nixon, *Writer's Almanac*, 2007 0109]

[20] "In Germany, the Nazis came for the Communists and I didn't speak up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Trade Unionists and I didn't speak up because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I was a Protestant so I didn't speak up. Then they came for me ... By that time there was no one to speak up for anyone."

[Rev Dr Martin Niemoeller, President World Council of Churches, 1961-1968]

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Letters:

Good Morning America promoted superstition 1.4.07

ABC's Good Morning America on Jan. 4 had a feature about what kinds of drivers people are on the road based on their Horoscope signs.

This feature was total nonsense and promotes the idea that people are really different based on the balderdash of astrology and horoscopes.

There is no evidence that anyone born under the various astrological signs is different in any way from people born at other times of the year.

Keep superstitious baloney off the air. Better yet, expose superstitions so people will be educated on the subject.

Jimmy Dunne, Houston 281.584.9707
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Press Room

Center for Inquiry/Transnational Announces Opening of New Office of Public Policy in Washington, D.C.

Advocacy Group Will Bring a Bold Defense of Science and Secularism to the Nation's Capital

Washington, D.C. (November 14, 2006)—The Center for Inquiry/Transnational, a think tank devoted to promoting reason and science in all areas of human interest, announced today that it is opening a new Office of Public Policy in Washington, D.C. This initiative will mark an unprecedented drive to bring a rigorous defense of science and secular values to policy makers located at the focal point of America's political and cultural battleground.

Paul Kurtz, chairman and founder of the Center for Inquiry/Transnational and a fellow of the American

Association for the Advancement of Science, says that the foundations of our democratic society are now under attack. "The social and scientific progress we take for granted has been advanced by a basic scientific philosophical point of view: scientific naturalism," said Kurtz. "The methods of the sciences, and the assumptions upon which they are based, are being challenged culturally in the United States today as never before. Despite its success in providing us with unparalleled benefits, religious fundamentalists seek to inhibit free inquiry and to

misrepresent the tested conclusions of scientific naturalism. This is a highly charged political issue—both science and secularism are under political attack.”

With these concerns in mind, the new office released a declaration, “In Defense of Science and Secularism,” at a news conference held today at the National Press Club. Signed by Nobel Prize winners Steven Weinberg and Paul Boyer, as well as many leading scientists and public intellectuals, including E.O. Wilson, Ann Druyan, Lawrence Krauss, Peter Singer, Leon Jaroff, Arthur Caplan, and Elizabeth Loftus, the document calls on political leaders of both parties to “base public policy insofar as possible on empirical evidence instead of religious faith,” to “maintain a strict separation between church and state,” and “protect and promote scientific inquiry.”

Spokespersons for the Center say that several public-policy controversies have illustrated the public need for a broad expertise in scientific naturalism. From President Bush’s political veto of Congress’s bipartisan bill to expand federal funding of stem cell research to the Intelligent Design debate, to an appointed spokesperson from NASA insisting that references to the Big Bang be diluted with language stating that NASA takes no position on whether the Big Bang actually happened—all indicate what experts at the Center for Inquiry call “part of a broader cultural war on scientific naturalism and the Enlightenment in general.” Science advocates said this illustrates how both the will of the majority and scientific progress are under attack at the very highest levels.

Kurtz said that the new Office of Public Policy will draw on the Center’s relationship with leading scientists, academics,

and public intellectuals, who all share the Center’s stated purpose and concerns. “We intend to develop relationships with sympathetic legislators in Washington, D.C., and will provide experts to testify in legislative hearings,” said Toni Van Pelt, Policy Director for the office. “We will submit position papers, solicited from our network of fellows and scholars, and work with legislators who care about science and reason to effect legislative responses to attacks on Enlightenment values,” continued Van Pelt.

Ron Lindsay, an attorney, philosopher, and the Center’s legal director said, “We stand ready to provide the media and the American public with background, from a wide variety of experts in the physical and social sciences, on all major political issues.”

In sum, the Center for Inquiry hopes to become a full-fledged player in the public-policy arena, aspiring to the ranks of organizations such as Brookings, Heritage, and Cato, all of which serve as both think tanks and public-policy advocates. They plan to set themselves apart, however, from many of the traditional think tanks located within the corridors of the Beltway, in that it will be the only think tank committed solely to science, reason, and secularism as the critical building blocks of American democracy.

Declared Kurtz, “We have a vital role to play. We are part of the mainstream of American life—part of the Founding Fathers’ Enlightenment tradition—and essential for the vitality of future scientific research; we need to make that point abundantly clear.”

At its inaugural press conference on November 14, the newly established Washington, D.C. office of the Center for Inquiry released the text of a “Declaration in Defense of Science and Secularism.” The Declaration is endorsed by over 50 prominent scientists and scholars. This important document serves as a clarion call for improvements in

scientific understanding, support of scientific inquiry and the use of secular principles in the formulation of public policy. The text of the Declaration is set forth below:

DECLARATION IN DEFENSE OF SCIENCE AND SECULARISM

We are deeply concerned about the ability of the United States to confront the many challenges it faces, both at home and abroad. Our concern has been compounded by the failure exhibited by far too many Americans, including influential decision-makers, to understand the nature of scientific inquiry and the integrity of empirical research. This disdain for science is aggravated by the excessive influence of religious doctrine on our public policies.

We are concerned with the resurgence of fundamentalist religions across the nation, and their alliance with political-ideological movements to block science. We are troubled by the persistence of paranormal and occult beliefs, and by the denial of the findings of scientific research. This retreat into mysticism is reinforced by the emergence in universities of

“post-modernism,” which undermines the objectivity of science.

These disturbing trends can be illustrated by the push for intelligent design (a new name for creationism) and the insistence that it be taught along with evolution. Some 37 states have considered legislation to mandate this. This is both troubling and puzzling since the hypotheses and theories of evolution are central to modern science. The recent federal court decision in the Dover, Pa., case has set back, but not defeated, these efforts. Moreover, the resilience of anti-evolution movements is supported not only by religious dogmatism but also by the abysmal public ignorance of basic scientific principles. Consider these facts:

- A recent poll by the Pew Research Center revealed that 64% of Americans are open to the idea of teaching intelligent design or creationism in public schools.

- Some 42% totally reject evolution or believe that present forms of life existed since the beginning of time.
- 38% would teach only creationism instead of evolutionary theory.
- Only 26% agree with the predominant scientific view that life evolved by processes of natural selection without the need for divine intervention.
- The percentage of individuals who accept the theory of evolution is lower in the United States than in any other developed country, with the exception of Turkey.

Recent polls have illustrated other instances of scientific illiteracy:

- 20% of Americans think that the Sun revolves about the Earth
- Only 10% know what radiation is
- Less than one-third can identify DNA as a key to heredity
- In the U.S., twelfth grade students scored lower than the average of students in 21 other countries in science and math.

We think that these dismal facts portend a clear and present danger to the role of science in the U.S. In our view it is not enough to teach specific technical subjects—important as that is—but to convey to the public *a general understanding of how science works*. This requires both some comprehension of the methods of scientific inquiry and an understanding of the scientific outlook. The cultivation of critical thinking is essential not only for science but also for an educated citizenry—especially if democracy is to flourish

Unfortunately, not only do too many well-meaning people base their conceptions of the universe on ancient books—such as the Bible and the Koran—rather than scientific inquiry, but politicians of all parties encourage and abet this scientific ignorance. It is vital that the public be exposed to the scientific perspective, and this presupposes the separation of church and state and public policies that are based on secular principles, not religious doctrine. Yet government legislators and executives permit religion, instead of empirical, scientifically supported evidence, to shape public policy. Consider:

- Embryonic stem cell research, which promises to deliver revolutionary therapies, has been needlessly impeded by the misguided claim that the embryo and/or the first division of cells in a petri dish (blastocyst) is the equivalent of a human person. This is rooted in a moral-theological doctrine that has no basis in science.

- The nation spends hundreds of millions of dollars on faith-based programs of unproven efficacy, including ill-advised abstinence-only programs in such areas as drug abuse prevention and sex education, which are more successful at promoting misinformation than abstinence.
- Abstinence policies are advocated abroad and promotion of condom use rejected, heedless of the danger of AIDS and of the need for wise policies aimed to restrain rapid population growth.
- Scientific evidence of global warming is dismissed and the destruction of other species on the planet is ignored, driven by the misguided view that the Earth has been given to the human species as its dominion.

We cannot hope to convince those in other countries of the dangers of religious fundamentalism when religious fundamentalists influence our policies at home; we cannot hope to convince others that it is wrong to compel women to veil themselves when we deliberately draw a veil over scientific knowledge; we cannot hope to convince others of the follies of sectarianism when we give preferential treatment to religious institutions and practices. A mindset fixed in the Middle Ages cannot possibly hope to meet the challenges of our times.

Science transcends borders and provides the most reliable basis for finding solutions to our problems. We maintain that secular, not religious, principles must govern our public policy. This is not an anti-religious viewpoint; it is a scientific viewpoint. To find common ground, we must reason together, and we can do so only if we are willing to put personal religious beliefs aside when we craft public policy.

For these reasons, we call upon political leaders of all parties:

- to protect and promote scientific inquiry
- to base public policy insofar as possible on empirical evidence instead of religious faith
- to provide an impartial and reliable source of scientific analysis to assist Congress, for example, by reviving the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment
- to maintain a strict separation between church and state and, in particular, not to permit legislation or executive action to be influenced by religious beliefs.

Science and secularism are inextricably linked and both are indispensable if we are to have sound public policies that will promote the common good, not only of Americans but of the global community.

In-agreement signatures, for the Declaration in Defense of Science and Secularism

POST MASTER: Please return undelivered copies to sender. Thank you.

12086 Sela Lane

Houston, TX 77072-3341

Membership and Contact Information:

Whether you are a Humanist, atheist, or Freethinker seeking to pursue a meaningful life without theism, or simply reexamining your beliefs and exploring the Freethought approach to knowledge and moral issues, consider contacting one of our organizations. We will be happy to answer any questions about Freethought, Humanism, or atheism.

Humanists of Houston (HOH): Houston chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA) / Founded 1978 / Tom Brucia (281-273-9030) <mailto:tbrucia@houston.rr.com>

Humanist Association of Montgomery County, Isaac Asimov Chapter (Asimov Humanists): Montgomery County chapter of the American Humanist Association / Curt Loose <mailto:contact@asimovhumanists.org>

Houston Church Of Freethought (HCOF) / Art Fay <mailto:afay3@houston.rr.com>

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Statement of Principles:

The following are the core principles upon which our member-organizations are allied. Individual member-organizations may have missions beyond the scope of the Alliance itself, but any Houston-based group whose mission is compatible with these principles is welcome to join our community of organizations.

We are committed to freedom of thought and expression, as well as human rights and equality.

Our beliefs are based on healthy skepticism, physical evidence, the scientific method, and naturalistic philosophy - unfettered by faith, mysticism, the supernatural, or any other form of superstition.

We stand for the pursuit of moral excellence, ethical integrity, and social responsibility based on humanity's needs and happiness in *this* world and not in an alleged "after life."

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