



# HOUSTON FREETHOUGHT ALLIANCE

## Newsletter

### For the Humanist and Freethought Community

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#### Calendar of Events:

**Sunday, October 7** | 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, October 7** | 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\\*](#)

**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\\*](#)

**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, October 13** | 10:30 am | *HOH Women's Club* | Ziggy's Healthy Grill, 2202 W. Alabama at Greenbriar, Houston. | Meeting on the 2nd Saturday of each month | [Contact: Sheila Finch\\*](#)

**Saturday, October 13** | 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: Ross Henry\\*](#)

**Sunday, October 14** | 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, October 20** | 2:30 pm - 4:30 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) Regular meeting* | in the Unitarian Fellowship hall at 1504 Wirt Rd Meetings are held on the third Saturday of each month | [Contact: Daniel Strain\\*](#)

**Sunday, October 21** | 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, October 25** | 6:00 pm | *HOH Humanist Contemplatives Club* | Location varies. Please see the WEB site for information on our next session's location | Meet the fourth Thursday of the month | [WEB site: http://www.humanistsofhouston.org/contemplatives](http://www.humanistsofhouston.org/contemplatives)

**Friday, October 26** | 5:00 pm | *Newsletter Deadline* | all articles, letters, and submissions of interest are welcome if on editor's desk, postmarks notwithstanding (e-mail format required), | [Contact: Jim Knierien\\*](#)

**Saturday, October 27** 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *HOH Religion, Society, and Ethics Club* | At Dr Louis Daily's family house at 1506 North Boulevard. See HOH WEB site for directions | A moderated group discussion of Religion, Ethics, and Society. Meetings are held on the fourth Saturday monthly, [Contact: Marian Hillar\\*](#)

**Sunday, October 28** 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *HOH 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, November 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, November 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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Alliance member's reports:

## Houston Church of Freethought

The September 2007 service of The Houston Church of Freethought program was:

*"Welcome and Introduction"*

Presenter: Jim Ashmore

*"Search for Meaning"*

Presenter: Jim Ashmore

*"Freethinker of the Month" (FtoTM): Sam Harris*

By Nancy Fay Presented by Art Fay

*"12 Step Religious Addiction Recover"*

Presenter: Derek Bentley

*"Announcements"*

Presenter: Adam Hems

*"Closing"*

Presenter: Anthony Stott

## Humanists of Houston HOH REPORT

The September meeting of the Humanists of Houston was a special presentation: "HUMANIST THEMES IN STAR TREK" with Trek screenwriter Susan Sackett. The meeting was held (one time only) at the First Unitarian Universalist of Houston, 5200 Fannin (at Southmore Blvd)

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## HOH Religion, Society, and Ethics Club

The September meeting of the HOH Religion, Society, and Ethics Club was a discussion of the book "The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion" by J. Habermas and J. Ratzinger.

For the October 27 meeting Jerry Harris will present "Porphyry and Julian the Apostate vs Christians and neo-Platonism". Marian Hillar will also present "Numenius and Justin Martyr: how Christianity Adopted Greek Metaphysics" which is based on a research paper by Marian Hillar.

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## HOH Ideas Club

At the September meeting 23, 2007 Marian Hillar presented the book "*Moral Minds*" by Marc Hauser. He also presented part of his lecture "*Does Modern Science Invalidate Philosophy*".

The October meeting will be a discussion of "The Humanist Life" based on the book "*The Reason Driven Life*" by Robert M. Price, which presents a humanist based life. Dr. Price's book is based on the best selling book by pastor Rick Warren "*The Purpose Driven Life*" which proposes a "Bible based" Christian life.

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## THE SECULAR STUDENTS OF RICE

### THE HOUSTON FREETHOUGHT ALLIANCE WELCOMES THE SECULAR STUDENTS OF RICE

Our Alliance of organizations has recently added its fifth member-organization. We are very pleased to welcome the Rice University student group SSR! You can now find their contact information in this newsletter, and on the Alliance website at [www.HoustonFreethoughtAlliance.org](http://www.HoustonFreethoughtAlliance.org). As is usual for Alliance groups, we look forward to sharing announcements of special events so that members of all the groups are kept informed. We also look forward to increased cooperation and collaboration on important issues and possible joint events. Expect to hear from SSR in the pages of this newsletter henceforth!

## Research Project: Search for the Good

### Part 7. Humanism & the Naturalist Worldview

By Robert D. Finch

#### World One: Nature:

Humanists have a cosmology, by which we mean a theory of the universe and the place of humanity in it. We see the universe as one great system whose many parts interact with each other and where we ourselves are just one of those interacting parts. "Nature" is simply another name for the universe, the sum total of all things in time and space, as Webster's dictionary puts it. We accept the theories of the origin of the universe propounded by physics: the big bang followed by condensation of elementary particles and then atoms and molecules, a story told in books such as "Cosmos" by Carl Sagan (1980). Primordial dust accumulated into clouds from which stars and galaxies were formed. We believe that there is just this one reality, the world of nature and we reject concepts such as a separate world of the spirit inhabited by disembodied gods and demons. Thanks to Darwin and Mendel we now have a convincing explanation of the evolution of life driven by the mechanism of natural selection and recorded by the genetic material encoded on DNA. The reader may find modern accounts of evolution in books by Richard Dawkins (1976 & 2004) and Ursula Goodenough (1998). Old ideas of mind-body duality are being replaced by a naturalistic explanation of mental phenomena, as explained in such works as Richard Restak's (1984) "The Brain". We are approaching the point when a full explanation for consciousness and awareness will be forthcoming on a naturalistic basis.

#### The Naturalist Tradition

The earliest contributors to the naturalist tradition were Leucippus, about whom little is known and Democritus, who was born about 460 BC. These two were the originators of the atomic theory. They maintained that everything consists of invisible particles of matter which existed in empty space, and that this is all that exists. Democritus thought that the atoms themselves were indestructible but could be combined into material bodies including plants, animals and human beings. The great champion of naturalism among the Greek philosophers was Epicurus, who lived from 341 to 271 BC and wrote a book "On Nature" which contained his exposition of the subject built on the earlier theories of Democritus. Epicurus presented the world with a philosophical system which was an alternative to the mystical and dualistic concepts of Plato and Aristotle. There is an Introduction to Epicurus' thought and some selected writings in the publication by Inwood, Gerson and Hutchinson (1994). Epicurus saw death simply as the cessation of feeling and the dissolution of the atoms in the body. "Death is nothing to us" he said.. His key to good health was to take pleasures in moderation, contrary to the caricatures of his philosophy which are often made. In the communities which were established in Epicurus' name women and slaves were accepted on an equal basis, which probably did not enhance his popularity. His work was expounded in the Roman Empire by Lucretius (95-52 BC) whose poem *De Rerum Natura* is recognized as one of the masterpieces of Latin literature. The naturalist tradition lived on until it was almost eclipsed by the

coming of Christianity whose practitioners found that the works of Plato and Aristotle better suited their doctrines. It took the work of the physical and chemical scientists of the Enlightenment to revive the concepts of natural law and the atomic theory and the attention of skeptics such as Hume to re-establish naturalism as a guiding ethical principle.

E.O. Wilson (1998) has given an account of the growth of physical science in his book "Consilience". Scientific methods have been refined and improved over the centuries to make them into the sophisticated tools that they are today. We use what is called Occam's razor whereby the simplest theory which fits the facts is the one to choose. Francis Bacon first explained the process of theory formulation and correction as the way to approach the truth. It was Hume who pointed out that we recognize constancy in establishing physical law and in defining systems, including artificial ones. Natural science has advanced as if by connecting chunks of a jigsaw puzzle together. Thus Newton found that the same force of gravity, which endows objects with weight close to the Earth's surface is responsible for the rotation of the planets round the Sun. Electricity and magnetism turned out to be different aspects of the same phenomenon and Maxwell showed that light was an electromagnetic wave motion. Chemistry was joined to the unified theory through the quantum mechanical theory of bonding. Natural science has grown enormously in scope since the time of Democritus and Epicurus whose simple atoms have been isolated and studied and shown to be composed of more elementary particles. But ultimately we expect all scientific knowledge to be connected through a unified theory as Einstein and Weyl and E.O. Wilson, to mention just a few, have all anticipated. This has to be the case if everything is in fact one unified system. This then is the world of nature, or as Popper (1972) called it, World One.  
Life & Death

What are the implications of the Naturalist philosophy in the life of the individual? The doctrine that the mind or soul has an existence separate from flesh and blood is part of many ancient cosmologies. One of the important corollaries of the humanist belief expressed by Lamont (2001) that the "mind is indivisibly conjoined with the functioning of the brain" is that the mind ceases to exist when the body dies. Lamont argues that there is no possibility that the human consciousness can survive the shock and disintegration of death, with its memory and awareness of self-identity intact. Humans are mortal and we need to find meaning and satisfaction in this life. Lamont puts great emphasis on the distinction between Christianity and Humanism as regards a belief in immortality. People who have been brought up to believe that the rewards for this life lie in another one beyond the grave will have to completely rethink their attitudes and goals. The Humanist comes to the conclusion that this life is all and enough. Democritus' atomic theory was so simple and elegant that it is hard to imagine why people should not have accepted it. Perhaps it was the fear of death and the superstitions put about by religion which were responsible for the rejection.

Old religious attitudes to death persist today even among educated people despite the fact that ethicists and humanists such as Corliss Lamont (1977, 1990, & 2001) and Jane Wynne Willson (1995) have helped readers come to terms with death in sensitive, sensible ways. Memorials should be conducted for the living: in sympathy for grief but also in appreciation of the life stories and achievements of the departed. Humanistic funerals which celebrate the life of the departed have in fact become the norm not only in organized Humanism but also increasingly among Christians. The living realize that this life is all there is and are likely to focus on making the most of it. The naturalist understands that advances in medical science have extended the life-span by emphasizing healthy living and by conquering disease. The naturalist understands that the human life-span is probably determined genetically and may ultimately be brought under our own control.

### World Two: The Mind

But besides the fear of death there was also the problem of understanding how mental phenomena, (or World Two as Popper referred to them) could be explained in terms of the natural world. It has always seemed that subjective sensations, emotions, thoughts, awareness and consciousness were something different from the physical world. This is why the idea of the soul was so appealing. It was only a few hundred years ago that we first realized that it is the brain that is the seat of mental activity. Of course as Restak (1984) recounts the progress has been rapid since then. Although we still do not have an explanation of qualia (the actual experience of mental activity) it seems that hypotheses for consciousness are beginning to take shape, as Dennett (1991) has explained. Another phenomenon, which is difficult to understand is "free will" or volition. Here Dennett (2003) proposes that we can grasp what goes on as a process of decision making or making choices as a part of the data processing that goes on in the brain. The related riddles of selfish versus altruistic choices have been thoroughly explored by now and it is clear that we can indeed be altruistic, as detailed by Hauser (2006) among others.

### World Three

Popper invented the name "World Three" for the man made or artificial realm of culture, language, artifacts, theories, values, knowledge, industries and companies, religions and cosmologies such as humanism and naturalism. All of these things have been created by human beings in the process of living. Simon (1969) referred to them as "the artificial" in his discussion of systems theory. In everyday speech the term "artificial" is sometimes used as a synonym for unnatural, and we must contradict this impression to make the point that in fact all of the man made systems are as much a part of the natural world as the humans who created them. Many of the man made systems have lives that are much longer than those of their human inventors and participants. They may serve to immortalize their founders and members and influence the lives of subsequent generations. Of particular interest to us in connection with this essay is the fact that ethical systems and indeed the whole subject of ethics are also among the inhabitants of World Three.

Mary Warnock's book (2004) is of interest on this with a chapter entitled "Where Ethics Comes From". Earlier in the work she has some remarks on G.E. Moore, an influential British ethicist at the turn of the twentieth century who had written an imposing work titled "Principia Ethica" which purported to be to Ethics what Newton's Principia had been to Physics. Warnock feels that Moore's approach amounts to claiming to know what is good in advance of ethical investigation. Moore had famously accused John Stuart Mill of committing the "naturalistic fallacy" of deducing ethical rules from the physical world. This has been described as deducing "ought" from "is". But perhaps we should say in Moore's defense that he was writing before the recent work on evolutionary psychology, which in effect shows that we do indeed have at least some innate ethical principles. Warnock also directs attention to Mackie (1977) whose opinion is that Ethics is a holdover from the demise of religion. The problem with this is that neither religion nor ethics have disappeared. So where then does Ethics come from?

### Ought from Is:

There are many other ethical implications besides the issues of life and death we already discussed. Although we claim that ethics is naturalistic we have to explain that at the present time there is only one agency we know of that can generate ethical systems, and that is the human being. We use our human emotions, instincts and rationality to invent new systems and then to evaluate and modify existing ones. Thus we might just as well describe our ethics as being humanistic as being naturalistic. The humanist tradition is as old as naturalism and recently several authors have begun to explore the relationships between the two as, for example, Eller (2004), Carrier (2005), and Kurzweil (2005). Eller has adopted an anthropological approach in his book and appears to regard science as just one of various world views. Carrier explores the implications of the multi-universe theories of physics but seems to neglect the vast technological changes that could be brought about in the time scales of the universe we live in. Finally we must commend the remarkable work of Ray Kurzweil (2005) whose detailed procedures are based on knowledge of systems in general and medicine and technology. Ethics comprises a system of rules used to guide our behavior and can be compared to an academic discipline such as Engineering. Generations of teachers have influenced the shape of ethical beliefs and the ethical codes themselves can be modified by the people who use and teach them. And of course we are becoming increasingly adept at shaping our own evolution, both within the biological domain and in engineering, cultural, commercial and political systems. Our actions may affect others directly and also indirectly via effects on the environment in which we all live. So we have to adopt an attitude of responsibility toward the world we live in. In fact our responsibilities extend to Nature as a whole or the universe in its entirety. This is an exciting time because we may get answers to the question of the existence of extraterrestrial life in the near future. We even may encounter other intelligent life forms, with evolved emotional and instinctive ethical systems. If and when this happens the impact may be even more dramatic then it is depicted in science fiction and we may have to learn rapidly how to live with other intelligent agencies.

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# Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Genealogy of Morals*.

## The Third Essay: “What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?”

(3) The Priest and His Ascetic Ideal

(4) The Human Condition and the Function of Ascetic Priests

By Marian Hillar

### The Priest and His Ascetic Ideal

After discussion of the role of the ascetic ideal for a philosopher and its origin as a priest or similar figure, Nietzsche is ready to handle the problem of the ascetic priest. The priest derives his asceticism from his ideal, his faith, his determination, his power and, his interest. He stands or falls with this ideal, so there is no surprise that he will defend it to the bitter end against those who attempt to oppose it.

The important point is what value the ascetic priest places on existence. He views life as a bridge to transcendence, and that we must retrace in this life our steps to the point at which we entered, and he insists that we conduct our lives according to his ideal. What is appalling is that this is the longest and the broadest tradition. An observer from an outer planet could be persuaded that we are a race of proud repulsive creatures unable to rid-ourselves of self-loathing, hatred of the earth and of all living things, who inflict as much pain as possible on ourselves, solely out of pleasure in giving pain – perhaps the only kind of pleasure we know.” The priest does not propagate himself by biological means, he looks malevolently on all biological growth, beauty and joy, and finds delight in everything that is misshapen, in pain, disastrous, ugly. He finds joy in gratuitous sacrifice and self-castigation. He has an insatiable power-drive to dominate life itself. When he begins to philosophize he will declare an error where normal life will consider truth most authoritatively. Just like the Indian Vedas he will consider the physical objects, their multiplicity, an illusion and deny their reality. He reaches his triumph when reason itself declares that that is a realm of truth not accessible to it. We find traces of it in the Kantian concept of the “noumenal” character of things, that is that aspect of things we can never comprehend. Nietzsche urges philosophers to be on guard against such hallowed myths of “pure reason,” “absolute knowledge,” or “absolute intelligence” for they presuppose that the human “eye” cannot have active and interpretative power. Moreover, he insists that our “seeing” is perspective, that we should allow more emotions and will to be expressed in order to be more objective. In such an attitude Nietzsche again expresses his naturalistic epistemological stance.

Next Nietzsche proceeds to explain how the ascetic ideal arose. Its source is the protective instinct of life, in defense of itself. Thus the situation is contrary to what the worshipers of asceticism believe it to be. The ubiquitous existence of asceticism confirms the persistent morbidity of civilized man and his persistent struggle against death. The ascetic priest becomes an incarnation of this wish to be different, but at the same time he is the instrument of bettering the human condition. He is able to maintain in life his flock of self-tormentors, affirming life. And this is so because man becomes most anxious to live when he wounds himself most. Though the human race is the most inventive and the most daring and defiant among the creatures, it is the most unsatisfied and unrealized; certainly humans are the most precarious and the sickest of all animals.

### The Human Condition and the Function of Ascetic Priests

Next Nietzsche analyzes the human condition from his perspective of a strong man. Such a strong man is an ideal man for Nietzsche, and the weak ones are those who visit disaster upon themselves. The real danger for humanity comes from loathing

and pitying man. Those who are failures and victims, poison life and the social structure; they complain “If only I could be someone else.” “How could I get rid of myself?” Here is the vindictiveness, conspiracy of the sufferers against the successful one. They parade their innocence; with a pharisaic gesture they simulate noble indignation. As an example Nietzsche cites Eugen Dühring and his anti-Semitism. Their aim is to implant their own misery, to make the happy ones acknowledge happiness as a disgrace and doubt their happiness by saying “There is too much misery in the world!” Clearly, Nietzsche despises such people and claims that they mime only the virtues such as justice, love, wisdom, superiority. But at the same time he is asking “how [the healthy and strong] should be able to do what they alone can do, and simultaneously act the part of physicians, comforters, saviors of the sick?”

Nietzsche advises us first of all to stay away from loathing and pitying man, and that the ones who should be the “physicians” of the sick should be the sick themselves, that is, the ascetic priests. For if the priest has dominion over the sick, he is sick himself and understands them, yet he must be strong enough and master over himself with intact will to power, to be their overlord, disciplinarian, tyrant, god. He must defend them against the healthy, and also against their envy of the healthy. The priest is a new species of animal which conducts a war of cunning using his calculated superiority. But before he starts curing he must first create his patients. He carries balms too, but as he alleviates pain, he pours poison into the wounds of his patients.

The priest thus accomplishes two things, he defends his flock against themselves and all the troubles that arise among them, and, at the same time, causes accumulation of resentment and aggression and redirects it against a new object. According to Nietzsche this release of aggression alleviates the pain through emotional excitation. This is a physiological mechanism by which a strong, violent emotion dulls the pain. But it is consciously expressed by the type of reasoning; “Somebody must be responsible for my discomfort.” “I suffer, it must be somebody’s fault.” And the ascetic priest says to his flock: “You are quite right, my sheep, somebody must be at fault, but that somebody is yourself.”

According to Nietzsche these healing instincts are through the agency of the priests dominated by such concepts as sin, perdition, damnation. Their goal is to render the sick harmless and to make the incurable to destroy themselves, and to introvert the resentment of the less severely inflicted. Their goal is not the rehabilitation of the personality but to create a chasm between the sick, that is between the church, and the healthy. Nietzsche emphasizes that sinfulness is not a basic human condition, but the ethico-religious interpretation of physiological distemper. If a person feels “sinful” or “guilty” it does not mean that this person is so. Similarly if a person feels healthy, it does not mean that he is so. As an example Nietzsche cites the witch trials. In those times the judges and the “witches” themselves had no doubt about their guilt. Yet there was no guilt! For, Nietzsche states, psychological pain is not a fact but a causal interpretation of a set of facts. If one cannot get rid of a psychological pain, the fault lies in his physiology and not in his psyche.

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# Ron's Ramblings

By Ron Titus

[1] On the anniversary of the "9/11" tragedy, I thought of an old principle that I came up with years ago: "Make friends with strangers before they make themselves enemies."

[2] I saw the play "Doubt" at the Alley Theatre. The dilemma presented was fascinating to me, because I am so prone to quick judgments. 'Which only have to be reversed or revised when new evidence comes along. And I am annoyed with myself in that I seem to have to keep relearning old lessons over and over again. (Sigh)

[3] Mother Teresa of Calcutta got some footage on front pages around the world when it was revealed from her diaries that she felt abandoned by her god. This has been described as a "spiritual dryness".

It brought back memories, all good. When I experienced unpleasant "dryness", I was comforted by the belief that "God" was always there. 'And that I would get my rewards of happiness later in Heaven. "Ignorance is bliss" comes to mind.

Today, perhaps with some degree of smug arrogance (contempt? Gee, I hope not), I suggest that just maybe, just maybe, "there isn't anyone home upstairs".

I claim no regrets for my experience because it has been invaluable to me in understanding what others are still going through. The practices of sincere Christians would be unbelievable to me today had I not myself experienced them.

[4] What used to be a sure way to union with god, psychotherapists today call masochism. The Apostle St Paul said "We will share in the glory of Christ to the degree that we share in his sufferings". 'No wonder people who aspire to religious holiness seek to torture themselves. The great St John of the Cross did just that! (sigh)

[5] Mountains and valleys / deserts and oases / draughts and monsoon rains are all parts of most people's lives and

certainly that of any humanist. Humanists don't have to look for trouble; indeed, trouble will find them!

[6] It has been said "experience is the best teacher" and "faith is a substitute for experience". When experience is lacking, a reliable witness (or taking someone else's word for something) may be the next best thing.

If faith (secular, not religious) is accepting something as true on the word of another, then I believe (Bill Fricks suggests "have concluded") that most if not all people have faith. (Secular) faith begins in early childhood with parents and/or other caregivers, and develops in later childhood with teachers and other mentors. Fortunately or unfortunately, faith (secular, not religious) continues even in adulthood. To wit: doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs (and chefs), etc, etc. (Con artists depend upon gullible people for their livelihood.)

I myself take the word of astronomers who have access to telescopes and other equipment to tell me that our earth is a small part of a vast universe of galaxies, nebula, etc etc. (Oh, by the way, did it occur to you that we earthlings traveled around the sun this past year. It took us a year to do it, but it was worth it! Ha!)

But reason & logic can be even better than experience. Later reason & logic can help us detect earlier misinterpreted experiences. Reasoning includes remembering past experiences, and learning (deducing, concluding) from them.

On the other hand, wise people are advised to move cautiously, since experience too can sometimes indicate faulty reasoning & logic.

[7] Divine (not secular) faith is accepting something as true on the word of God. Comedienne Lily Tomlin reminds us: "When people talk to God, we call it prayer; when God talks to people, we call it schizophrenia."

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## Food for thought and/or thought for indigestion

By Ron Titus

[1] (T)he prevalent fear of poverty among the educated classes is the worst moral disease from which our civilization suffers.

[William James (1842-1910), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p 362]

[2] I am enjoying the police stories of Henning Mankell who writes about a Swedish policeman named Kurt Wallender. In "The Dogs of Riga," Wallender muses about the death penalty and how appalled the Swedes are at the countries which still practice this barbarism. Mankell says of Wallender, "The experience he'd gained during his years in the police force had given him this unambiguous answer:

"There are no murderers; only ordinary people who commit murder."

[email from Jim O'Leary, 2007 0821.2347]

[3] It is a truism that almost any sect, cult, or religion will legislate its creed into law if it acquires the political power to do so, and will follow it by suppressing opposition, subverting all education to seize early the minds of the

young, and by killing, locking up, or driving underground all heretics.

[Robert A. Heinlein, 2007 0911 email from Mark Siskel]

[4] Hypocrisy is an equal opportunity offensive condition.

[5] "They say that journalism is the first draft of history and maybe in a curious way fiction is the final draft. Not because it's more truthful, but because it can enter unknown territory. A writer can work his way into the impact of history on interior lives. He can examine what a character sees, thinks, feels, hears, even what a character dreams."

[Don DeLillo, novelist & author of [Falling Man](#) (2007), *Writer's Almanac*, 2007 0911]

[6] Writing causes vagueness to evaporate.

[Robert H Tucker, email dated 2007 0821.0514]

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# The Rise of Atheism

A Weekend Convention Links Non-Believers, Highlights Group's Growing Popularity  
ABC News, Sept. 30, 2007

A large convention of atheists gathered today in Virginia, where men, women and children eagerly proclaimed their belief God does not exist.

While their views still may be the minority in the country, atheists have become more vocal and visible in recent years.

T-shirts, bumper stickers and even rap songs proclaim atheists' beliefs. Atheist summer camps now exist for children.

"Over the last 20 years," said Alan Wolfe of Boston College, "the number of people willing to tell people in surveys that they don't believe in God have pretty much doubled."

Books denying God's existence have topped bestseller lists, and Congress has its first self-proclaimed atheist, Rep. Pete Stark, D-Calif.

"A lot of respectable people are coming out and saying they are very happy to dispel the myths of the Bible," said Margaret Downey of Atheist Alliance International.

Some atheists said their profile has increased because of a rise in religious extremism, like the Islamic fundamentalism behind the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 and the rise of the Christian right in the United States.

## Gathering of the Godless

Meanwhile, the Internet has helped unite non-believers. In fact, this weekend's convention sold out, and had a waiting list of 600 people.

Besides listening to speakers, convention attendees can buy merchandise like a born-again-atheist hat, atheist-on-board signs for those with kids, or after-the-rapture mints.

They also had the opportunity to mingle with celebrity atheists like authors Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.

On "Good Morning America Weekend Edition," Hitchens said American believers should recognize they live in a secular state.

"It would be better for them if they didn't give themselves false conciliation," he said. "My challenge is really to say, 'Can you name me a moral action or a statement that has been made by a believer that couldn't have been made by a non-believer?'"

And while the stigma associated with atheism may be diminishing, the majority of Americans say they would not vote for an atheist for president.

But, Hitchens said he believes people would vote for an atheist candidate.

"They haven't had an offer from a decent atheist yet," he said.

And while Hitchens said atheists tend to be liberal, he said the group doesn't back a particular presidential candidate.

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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>.

## 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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### 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 / Daniel Strain <mailto:dtstrain@yahoo.com>

*Humanist Association of Montgomery County, Isaac Asimov Chapter (Asimov Humanists):* Montgomery County chapter of the American Humanist Association / Ross Henry <mailto:rosshenry@mac.com>

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

*Houston Atheists Meetup Group.* Meets at least twice a month (once in central Houston and once in North Houston) to discuss the issues of the day and how they affect nonbelievers. / Nigel Bedrock [mailto:nige\\_the\\_atheist@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nige_the_atheist@yahoo.co.uk)

### 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."