



HOUSTON HUMANIST ALLIANCE

The Newsletter for Houston's Humanist and Freethought Community

In This issue:

Contributors, Pg. 1
Contact People, Pg.1
Calendar of Events, Pg.1
Publisher, Pg.2
Explanation of iih symbol, Pg.2
Alliance member's reports
HOH, Pg.3
HCOF, Pg.3
Ideas Club Pg.3
Essays
Post-Holiday Perambulations, Pg.3
Food for thought and/or thought for
indigestion, Pg.4
Ron's Ramblings, Pg.4
Chronicles
AHA Convenes 22 Organizations
for Inauguration Summit, Pg.5
The Center for Inquiry Grew
Rapidly Last Year, Pg.6
Letters, Pg.7
Membership and Contact
Information, Pg.8
Statement of Principles, Pg.8
iih

Contributors:

AHA, Pg.5
CSH, Pg.6
Ed Doerr, Pg.3
Art Fay Pg.7
Keith Irish, Pg.7
Ron Titus Pg.4
iih

Contact people:

Tom Brucia(281-273-9030)
<mailto:tbrucia@houston.rr.com>
Art Fay (281-933-2986)
<mailto:afay@worldnet.att.net>
Bob Finch (281-491-1608)
<mailto:rdfinch@houston.rr.com>
Ross Henry (281-288-6064)
<mailto:rosshenry@mac.com>
Jim Knierien (281-495-4392)
<mailto:Jim.Knierien@thermo.com>
Keith McCaffety (713-968-652)
<mailto:thinkbolt@yahoo.com>
G Alan Robison (713-266-4329)
<mailto:galan@prodigy.net>
iih

Calendar of Events:

Sunday, February 6 | 10:00 - 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 6 | 12:30 - 2:00 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) Brunch* | in upstairs facility of Kroger's on 1505 Wirt Rd (across street from Unitarian Fellowship) | Topics chosen by the group are discussed on first Sundays monthly | Contact: Tom Brucia*

Wednesday, February 9 | 6:30 pm | *Drug Policy Forum of Texas* | TV 26 or 95 | Drug policy reform discussed every other Wednesday | Contact: G Alan Robison*

Saturday, February 12 | 1:30 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, February 13 | 10:30-11:30 am | *Houston Church Of Freethought (HCOF) Service* | in the Magnolia Room of the Courtyard by Marriott on 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*

Tuesday February 15 | 12:00 noon | *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, February 19 | 2:30 - 4:30 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) Regular meeting* | in the Unitarian Fellowship hall at 1504 Wirt Rd | Contact: Tom Brucia*

Sunday, February 20 | 10:30 am | *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 20 | 2:00 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) presents a Classical Music Piano Concert, featuring Charlotte Mueller* | in the Unitarian Fellowship hall at 1504 Wirt Rd (see pg.2 for more details)

Wednesday, February 23 | 6:30 pm | *Drug Policy Forum of Texas* | TV 26 or 95 | Drug policy reform discussed every other Wednesday | Contact: G Alan Robison*

Wednesday, February 23 | 6:00 pm | *Houston Atheist Society (HAS)* | at Ziggy's, corner of West Alabama and Greenbriar. Meetings are held on the last Wednesday of each month. | Contact: Keith McCaffety*

Sunday, March 6 | 10:00 - 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 6 | 12:30 - 2:00 pm | *HOH Brunch* | in upstairs facility of Kroger's on 1505 Wirt Rd (across street from Unitarian Fellowship) | Topics chosen by the group are discussed on first Sundays monthly | Contact: Jimmy Dunne*

iih

About the Houston Humanist Alliance:

The *Houston Humanist 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 humanists in the Houston area.

iih

Publisher:

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

[2] The purpose of the HHA 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 HHA 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 notwithstanding. 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 HHA. 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>.

iih

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.

iih

Alliance member's reports

HOH

HOH January Sunday Brunch; Considering the tsunami event in the Indian Ocean, we principally discussed human responses – and our responsibilities – to natural disasters. Since one of the cornerstones of Humanism is “compassion”, we talked about our thoughts and feelings regarding the issue of “responsibility.”

Do we assume responsibility? Is it thrust upon us? Are we our brother's keepers? How do issues of supernatural punishment/reward impinge on our responsibilities?

The January monthly meeting of the Humanists of Houston was a excellent presentation by Nancy Friedman from "*Let Freedom Ring*" about how to combat right wing extremists. Her e-mail address is lfr@ev1.net; the *Let Freedom Ring* web site is <http://letfreedomringtx.tripod.com>

HCOF

For the Houston Church of Freethought January service Ed Uthman presented the Freethinker of the Month, and Nancy Fay presented "*Faith, Fear and Feudalism: Life in the High Middle Ages*." There was also a clip from a recent DVD of Simon and Garfunkel's recent tour singing "*Bridge Over Troubled Waters*" plus a presentation of a new concept of an ecologically friendly method of human burial.

Ideas Club

The January meeting was a presentation by Marian Hiller *The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* which consisted largely of a review of the book; *The Moral Animal; Evolutionary Psychology of Everyday Life* by Robert Wright.

iih

Piano Concert Fundraiser!

Humanists of Houston is sponsoring a Classical Music Piano Concert, featuring Charlotte Mueller performing the works of seven “Women Composers of the 19th and 20th Centuries”.

The event – intended to raise funds for Humanists of Houston – **will take place in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship at 1504 Wirt Road, Houston, at 2:00 p.m., Sunday, February 20th.**

You, your friends, family, and acquaintances are ALL invited to attend! (There's room for 125 music lovers.)

Post-Holiday Perambulations

by Edd Doerr

Christian fundamentalists, having helped enormously to consolidate the U.S. government in the hands of people unfriendly to church-state separation, civil liberties, and democratic values, have now consciously switched into a frantic “secularists are destroying Christianity” paranoia mode. Every mild attempt by public officials or civil libertarians to keep government neutral toward our rich mosaic of religious traditions is met with shrieks about the sky falling.

A few reminders are in order. About 85% of Americans identify themselves as Christians, as do over 90% of members of Congress. There are about 2000 religious radio and television stations owned and run by religious groups, nearly all of them evangelical or fundamentalist. There are more “Christian” bookstores and book displays in supermarkets than there are gas stations. Religious book publishing is expanding rapidly.

And the fundamentalist apoplexy over alleged attacks on Christmas and religious symbols is both hilarious and ahistorical. Have they forgotten that their Puritan ancestors in colonial New England frowned on celebrating Christmas and actually made it illegal? That Christmas was not a legal holiday in all states until late in the 19th Century? That Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists did not celebrate Christmas until after the Civil War, and that many fundamentalists still don't (like Ken Starr's Church of Christ) because the scriptures say nothing about when Jesus was born? That our 1796 treaty with Tripoli specifies that “the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion”? That Congress was officially in session on Christmas until 1856? That the Postal Service delivered mail on Sundays until well in the 1800s? That the first religious motto did not appear on any of our coins until the Civil War, not on all coins until the eve of World War I, and not in our currency until 1955? That “under God” was not added to the Pledge of Allegiance until 1954, after we had won two world wars against an adversary whose troops wore the motto “Gott mit uns” (God with us) on their belt buckles?

Finally, a year end survey by evangelical pollster George Barna showed these interesting results: that only 51% of senior Protestant ministers have “a biblical worldview” (i.e., a fundamentalist worldview); that “two-thirds of all evangelical Christians and one-third of all U.S. adults support a constitutional amendment to establish Christianity as the official religion of the United States”; that Bible reading and church attendance have been rising significantly in the relatively secular West Coast states; that only 7% of born-again Christians actually tithe [I guess they'd rather have government support their programs, as President Bush has been pushing]; that most Americans want “displays of the Ten Commandments on public property [though few churches display them on their internal or external walls] and creationism taught in public schools”. Obviously, those of us who care about religious freedom and church-state separation need to be a lot busier. For 2005 I would suggest increased support for and involvement with

groups like the ACLU, People for the American Way, the Texas Freedom Network, the National Committee for Science Education, NARAL, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and not least, the group I have headed for 23 years, Americans for Religious Liberty (www.arlinc.org). Building broad, inclusive coalitions to deal with these issues is critically important.

Dear Editor

For years I have been urging progressive groups and individuals to utilize the mechanism of letters to the editor – to convey information, to influence opinion, to respond to editorials, news items, op eds, and other letters. To little avail. Like talk radio, letters columns tend to contain more conservative than progressive material.

Practicing what I preach, I have published a guesstimated 2,000 letters to editors over the years, in magazines, opinion journals, and major newspapers. My third collection of letters has just been published in book form (Somebody Has to Say It, Rocinante Press, Box 6656, Silver Spring, MD 20916, \$10.)

But if progressives have not been making full use of letters columns, conservatives and fundamentalists have. An outfit based in Chicago called the “Father John A. Hardon, S.J., Media Apostolate” has been operating to “bring [fundamentalist] Catholic viewpoints to the public forum and help shape public opinion”. (FYI: I debated Fr. Hardon several years ago at a conference in Washington on educational policy; I stayed on the subject, but Hardon spent all his time attacking reproductive rights.)

The “Hardon Apostolate”, in its “tips on writing effective ‘letters to the editor’,” advises: “Use the Catechism of the Catholic Church as your inspiration”, but paraphrase rather than quote. Beyond that, their suggestions are what I myself would recommend: be brief, courteous, prompt; concentrate on a few essential points; commend when possible; write to persuade, not just to make yourself feel good.

Another outfit promoting letters to editors is Citizens for Educational Freedom (a more honest name for it would be Citizens for Educational Feudalism), founded nearly 40 years ago by Fr. Virgil Blum, a Jesuit on the faculty of Marquette University. CEF's main thrust is pushing vouchers and other gimmicks for diverting public funds to faith-based schools.

If progressives expect to counter the agendas of fundamentalists and ultraconservatives, they need to learn from them how to use the simple, democratic letter to the editor.

Nobles and Knaves

Owned by Rev. Sun Myung Moon and his pals, the Washington Times, probably the most hyperultraconservative paper in the country, would be a joke if only it were funny. It is a well laid-out paper, I must admit; too bad it's not laid-out for burial.

The Times runs a weekly editorial about the “noble” or “knave” of the week. On January 1 it ran a feature editorial, “Noble and Knave of the Year”. Heading the list of Knaves is George Soros, for being a leading campaigner against George W. Bush. Soros was followed by Ted Kennedy, “the mainstream media”, John Kerry, Jimmy Carter (for criticizing the Iraq war), Kofi

Annan, Sen. Harry Reid (for calling Justice Thomas an “embarrassment”), Rep. Jim McDermott (for leaving out “under God” when he led the House in the Pledge), the Kerry campaign, and Howard Dean.

Noble of the year is Mel Gibson, for bankrolling and producing his anti-Semitic sick film about Jesus’ last hours, which ignored the Sermon on the Mount, followed by an assortment of Iraq War “heroes”, Italian P.M. Silvio Berlusconi (for “standing firm” against terrorists), and, no surprise, “Bush’s brain” Carl Rove.

The Times wishes its readers a “Happy New Year”.

Dobson on the Warpath

James Dobson, the influential Colorado Springs fundamentalist broadcaster who operates Focus on the Family and a sister lobbying group (combined budgets for 2004, \$130 million; \$170 million for 2005), is threatening to go all out in attacking six Democratic senators up for reelection in 2006 if they try to help block Bush’s stacking the federal judiciary with ultraconservatives. The six targets are Senators Ben Nelson (NE), Mark Dayton (MN), Robert Byrd (WV), Kent Conrad (ND), Jeff Bingamon (NM), and Bill Nelson (FL). Dobson seems not to be worried about losing his tax exempt status.

Edd Doerr, president of Americans for Religious Liberty and immediate past president of the American Humanist Association, is author, editor, or translator of 24 books and has contributed to 24 other books.

Food for thought and/or thought for indigestion

By Ron Titus

[1] “Everyone is entitled to his/her own opinion, but no one is entitled to his/her own facts.”

[Patrick Moynihan, quoted by Bill Moyers on Now, PBS TV, 2004 1217f2132]

[2] “Who says you can’t herd cats?”

[Nancy Fay, quoted in an email from Art Fay (2004 1219), commenting on the success of a Winter Solstice Party of Freethinkers]

[3] “The comment may sound a bit whimsical, but it’s literally true that the leading cause of death on death row is old age.”

[California Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald M George, NYTimes, 2004 1218]

[4] If something stinks, I want to be able to smell it. “That way, I can get rid of whatever it is that stinks. If I cannot smell it, as in carbon monoxide, I may perish without a struggle.

[5] Chanting is somewhat different from conventional Western concepts of prayer. Instead of beseeching an outside force for solutions, the Buddhist musters his or her own inner resources to meet the problem. ... Instead of “I wish such and such would happen,” or “Lord, give me the strength to make such and such happen,” the Buddhist’s prayer is more along the lines of “I will make such and such happen.”

[The Buddha in Your Mirror, Middleway Press 2001, P 50-51]

[6] “Great Doubt: great awakening. Little Doubt: little awakening. No Doubt: no awakening”

[Zen mantra, quoted on the jacket of Jennifer Michael Hecht’s newly released book Doubt: A History : the Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson]

[7] Faith is suspending one’s beliefs.

[8] “I am not ashamed to be intolerant of intolerance.”

[Karyl Paige, “Intolerance”, HHA NL, 2005 01, P 3]

[9] People can change without thinking, but they cannot think without changing.

lih

Ron's Ramblings

By Ron Titus

[1] I did not formally make any New Year’s resolutions for 2005. I suspect that that is so because I don’t like the disappointment I feel when I fail to live up to my commitments.

I don’t allow myself to feel guilty about anything any more, but that does not exclude my experiencing disappointment when I am responsible for unfulfilled commitments.

It was some time in 2004 that I informally committed myself to make no new commitments. Seriously. We all have 24 hours in every given day. No more and no less. It is HOW WE USE them that comes the rub. And I was USING UP all of my allotted 24 hours!

Since yesteryear, I have not lost the habit of committing myself to SOME thing ALL the time. “For every idle word people will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment” goes an old Biblical saying. Because of that, I have almost always kept myself busy. “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” is another but non-Biblical maxim.

I’d like to complete all of my commitments, and then not make any new ones. Even that is not easy for me to do.

[2] Since backing off from an almost constant monitoring of political events, I have recouped some of my lost tranquility. “Why should I suffer internal torments from the mismanagements of other people?” I asked myself. It’s hard enough to live with my own mistakes. I resent having to live with the mistakes of my elected officials.

But right now on this planet, I do not know how to get around it. I am stuck with having to live with these political fiascos. But then again, other people have to live with MY mistakes too. Maybe it all just balances out. Sometimes I wonder. Actually, I wonder a lot! I believe that it is human to wonder. To wonder is to be human. Now isn’t that just wonder-ful? Ha!

Playing “ostrich” is not appropriate behavior for humanists. Escaping responsibilities is inhuman behavior.

[See Ramble continued on pg.6](#)

AHA Convenes 22 Organizations for Inauguration Summit

By: AHA

Leaders Gather to Strategize on How to Challenge Bush's Latest Agenda

(Washington, DC, January 20, 2005) The American Humanist Association convened leaders of twenty-two national nontheistic organizations to address the unprecedented challenges that naturalists face in the wake of the recent election results, to discuss how those results continue to be interpreted, and how President George W. Bush's latest agenda will affect every level of government and society. Humanists, atheists, Ethical Culturists, secular Jews, and other freethinkers gathered in Washington, DC, the weekend before the presidential inauguration for a vital Inauguration Summit conference.

The summit meeting brought together diverse organizations that share the common goal of preventing nontheists from being treated as second-class citizens. The summit opened with a reception for the leaders at the AHA's national headquarters the evening before the day of strategy sessions.

To make sure the sessions were successful, the bulk of the time was reserved for strategy discussion. But time was also found for experts like Americans United executive director Barry Lynn, National Organization for Women president Kim Gandy, American Civil Liberties Union legislative counsel Chris Anders, who work with the AHA here in Washington and brought knowledge of the essential issues to those assembled. To encourage participation and to get the event started with an atmosphere of giving and cooperation, the AHA underwrote the cost of the event.

Our first presenter discussed "court stripping," a dangerous tactic now being pushed in Congress by the Religious Right which would strip federal, state, and local courts of their jurisdiction to hear cases on certain issues like the Pledge of Allegiance, same-sex unions, and the Ten Commandments. Also discussed is how it's absolutely essential to the education of America's youth to keep creationism and "intelligent design theory" out of the public school curriculum.

Another presenter outlined step by step how Roe v. Wade is being threatened and explained how the anti-abortion provision recently passed in an omnibus spending bill is a direct strike on Roe. This provision allows federally funded healthcare providers to refuse to provide abortions or even refer clients to legitimate abortion providers. The Religious Right's creation of the term "fetal personhood" further lays the groundwork for restricting women's reproductive rights.

Later in the day those assembled heard how coalition work has managed to stop the faith-based initiatives in Congress but how there's little that can be done to stop over a billion dollars a year being handed out to faith-based programs by executive order. Still, strategies to prevent further expansion and entrenchment of the faith-based initiatives were explored.

This summit meeting was more than a chance for leaders in the community of reason to meet and hear from each other; it was a valuable opportunity to build the bonds that are already opening the doors of cooperation and collaboration.

To show that patriotism shouldn't be equated with religious beliefs, the AHA joined a number of those convened to unite with American Atheists in their Atheists in Foxholes march scheduled for Veterans Day, November 11, 2005, on the National Mall.

Some of the organizations gathered, including the AHA, will collaborate on a project to hold a briefing for representatives, senators, and their staffs on legislation affecting the creation-evolution debate.

Others discussed working together on lawsuits that support and enforce the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Also discussed were educational and public relations programs to inform the general public about nontheists and make sure we have a seat at the table.

All those gathered agreed to take part in an ongoing discussion group to expand upon the possibilities for coordination.

The participating organizations were American Atheists, American Ethical Union, American Humanist Association, Anti-Discrimination Support Network, Association of Humanistic Rabbis, Atheist Alliance International, Brights' Network, Camp Quest, Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, Freedom from Religion Foundation, Gay and Lesbian Atheists and Humanists, Humanist Institute, Humanist Society, HUUmanists, International Humanist and Ethical Union, Internet Infidels, Institute for Humanist Studies, Objectivity Accuracy and Balance in Teaching About Religion, Secular Coalition for America, Secular Student Alliance, Society for Humanistic Judaism, Unitarian Universalist Infidels.

The gathering attracted significant press attention including stories in the Washington Times, United Press International and the St. Louis Dispatch, as well as invitations for AHA executive director Tony Hileman to be a guest on multiple radio shows. .

iih

The Center for Inquiry Grew Rapidly Last Year

Report to Our Readers

By: Council for Secular Humanism

The growth rate of the Center for Inquiry - Transnational continued in 2004 at a rapid pace in virtually all areas of activity in the United States and throughout the world. The national elections in the United States no doubt played a role in our fortunes, for there were powerful forces arrayed against us, and our readers rallied behind us. There are very few voices on the national and international scene that are exclusively concerned with defending scientific naturalism or skeptical inquiry, let alone secular humanism, which remains the bete noire of the forces of unreason -- and especially of evangelicals and fundamentalists. Our readers knew where we stood.

We are cautiously optimistic about the long-term prospects of naturalism and humanism, in spite of current opposition. We submit that the use of the methods of intelligence -- science, technology, and reason -- mixed with courage and goodwill, is the most reliable way to solve human problems. Hopefully, education will continue to enhance the public's appreciation for science.

The tragic tsunami in Asia -- with hundreds of thousands dead, missing, or homeless -- brought about the puzzlement of religious believers who asked if God is responsible for the deaths of so many innocent children and adults. This poses the classic problem of evil, which states the difficulty in resolving the paradox of why an omnipotent and beneficent being allows such events to occur. The option for the naturalistic humanist is not prayer to unseen forces but a resolve to get out into the world and change it as best as he or she can. We believe the best response to such natural disasters is to provide aid and assistance to those who have suffered and to work out a warning system in all parts of the globe to prevent future tragedies.

We are gratified to report that our friends and readers responded to our appeal for funds through Secular Humanist Aid and Relief Effort (SHARE) by contributing over \$37,000 thus far, with donations still pouring in!

This issue raises a further question of why so many still believe in apocalyptic scenarios of the future. The fact is that there are several hundred natural disasters ("acts of God") every year on the planet: hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, forest fires, mudslides, tidal waves, plagues, and diseases. Should these events be interpreted as the effects of natural causes, or do they reveal divine punishment?

A disturbing phenomenon today is the widespread belief in "the Rapture," which holds that God will one day pluck God-fearing Evangelical Christians from their places on Earth to join Him in heaven -- while all others will be

condemned to hellfire. According to this scenario, "the chosen people" are those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Jesus will eventually return to the Earth, but meanwhile, there will be trials and tribulations, wars and rumors of war, eventual destruction, and the deaths of billions of people on the planet who do not accept Jesus. It's hardly a model of moral virtue for God to rain down death and destruction on those who do not accept Him. Are we in the Last Days? Will billions of non-Christians be murdered and tortured by God? And how do we deal with the interpretation of jihad that provokes devout believers to slaughter innocent people -- or others, in the name of God, to slaughter them in return?

We are puzzled by how illusion and mythology attract so many well-meaning and well-educated people. We respond: do not flee from reason, use your critical intelligence, put your shoulders to the wheel, and build a better future. As a matter of fact, the progressive amelioration of the human condition is occurring everywhere on the planet. China and India are undergoing a period of rapid growth, and standards of living and the health of hundreds of millions of people are being improved yearly. Medical technology, sanitation, and improved nutrition are lowering death rates. The best index of what is happening worldwide is the fact that life spans have increased by one third in the twentieth century, at least where medical science and technology are applied. This does not deny that there are severe problems, such as the growth of population and the depletion of natural resources, but it suggests that we can solve these problems as best we can without retreating into unreason, overcome by fear and trembling.

iih

Ramble continued from pg.4

But survival is a people behavior too, shared by humans and inhumans alike. I have released myself from a lot of stress, by toning down some of my exposure to the political escapades presented via the public media.

[3] When Marian Hillar was putting the finishing touches on the *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism 2004*, he told me that the only thing wrong with it was that I didn't submit an article to it.

Since then, I began pushing myself to yet another project, and last month I completed and submitted my article. I've titled it "My Humanist Odyssey: An *Apologia Pro Vita Mea*". Consider this an early commercial and recommendation to get hold of a copy when it is printed. Ask Marian for the publishing date.

Writing the article proved to be for me quite cathartic.

[4] Peace! (not to be confused with a cease-fire)

iih

Letters

Houston Chronicle Viewpoints-

With all due respect to Richard N. Ostling's article in last Saturday's Religion section entitled "The case for Christmas Day," it is replete with errors. What are known as Christmas celebrations today pre-date Christianity by over 2000 years. They began in Babylon (now Iraq) during the winter solstice period in December where their god Marduk was honored. These celebrations included giving of presents, bright fires, carnivals with floats, mummers singing and feasting with lights and songs.

The Mithra god of Persia (now Iran) was also celebrated during the same winter solstice time each year, and it gradually combined with the Marduk celebrations and migrated first to Greece, then to Rome where it combined with their centuries old Saturnalia celebrations, and it migrated northward along the Danube to Northern Europe where Scandinavians celebrated the Yule. What we know as Christmas in America today evolved during the period 1822 with the publication of Clement Moore's "A Visit From St. Nicholas" to 1870 when Christmas was declared a national holiday. Prior to 1822, the Protestants disdained Christmas celebrations as it was considered an "invention" by the Roman Catholics. As with other ancient winter solstice celebrations, though, the non-religious revelry during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the United States continued, and it was merged with the "new traditional" yearnings expressed in Clement Moore's story

Mr. Ostling is correct in his descriptions regarding the third century where Roman Emperor Aurelian declared December 25th (the date of the winter solstice at that time) the Birth of the Unconquered Sun." At that time, the Persian god Mithras was competing with the Christian god Christ for everyone's allegiance. But it was in the fourth century where Emperor Constantine declared Christianity as the state religion of Rome, and the Roman Catholic Church, unable to compete with the traditional pagan celebrations of the winter solstice, decided to join forces with the pagans by declaring December 25th as the date of Christ's birth (hence the origin of the "Christ Mass" as the only midnight mass performed which became known as "Christmas").

As a non-theist, I have no problem celebrating this time of year since it's historical origins were a natural response to the fear of the shortest day of the year

that were combined with the Christian adaptation much later. We should all revel and respect this time of year, Christians and non-Christians alike. Just know that the "reason for the season" is man's historical response to natural events.

Arthur A. Fay.
Director, Houston Church of Freethought

This is in response to Ron's Ramblings on preemptive strikes and women who murder.

Prison serves two purposes. The first is, of course, the protection of society by secluding the dangerous. The second is more direct - punishment. There must be consequences for actions.

The women in prison are not there just because they killed their husbands, but because they had other options. Self defense is a different category than that shy, unassuming, self-effacing black lady and her actions because, while her husband beat her every day, she could have left. At the time he was asleep and unable to restrain her from leaving. She chose to kill him when she could have run away. Self-defense is different because escape is not an option.

As for Clara Harris and her copycats, the situation is even worse. Their lives were not in jeopardy, so self-defense is not even an arguable consideration. Here you have women who chose murder. Just because the target was their husbands that time does not mean that the only target they would ever choose would be a would-be husband.

That argument opens the door for plenty of other justifications. "Oh, she's only a threat to a potential husband, so just don't marry her." That easily becomes, "Oh, she's only a threat to a potential employer, so just don't hire her." And then, "Oh, she's only a threat to bad drivers, so just don't cut her off in traffic."

Finally, he asks, "Are either of them really a threat to us?" Yes, they are a threat to the rule of reason over violence, a threat to our sense of justice and our hope for a just society. They are a threat to decency, and accepting their behavior is accepting that killing is an okay solution for less than life-threatening situations.

Keith Irish

iih

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, or seeking to pursue a meaningful life without theism, or simply reexamining your beliefs and exploring the humanist approach to knowledge and moral issues, consider contacting one of our organizations. We will be happy to answer any questions about humanism and/or membership.

Humanists of Houston (HOH): Houston chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA) / Founded 1978 / jimmydunne@msm.com / 281-584-9707 (1306 W Brooklake Houston TX 77077)

Humanist Association of Montgomery County, Isaac Asimov Chapter (HAMCIAC): Montgomery County chapter of the American Humanist Association / rosshenry@mac.com / 281-288-6064

Houston Atheist Society (HAS): Affiliated with American Atheist Society / Founded 2003 / thinkbolt@yahoo.com / 713-968-6520

iih

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."

iih