



Corvallis Secular Society



Volume 4, Number 12 – December 1997

Corvallis Secular Society is a Humanist and Freethought society for all nontheists of good will.

Corvallis Secular Society is a member of the Alliance of Secular Humanist Societies (ASHS),
which is affiliated with The Council for Secular Humanism.

Check out our Web page at: <http://www.peak.org/~byersr/secular/>

From the Editor:

Season's Greetings!

Some free advice for any of you out there who might someday be Editor of a monthly newsletter: Make sure you get your newsletter finished BEFORE you start the ten-hour-a-day-including-weekends Consulting Job From Hell. It'll make your life run a whole lot smoother. Trust me.

As most of you know, this newsletter will be undergoing quite a few changes when we welcome Eugene Atheists & Freethinkers into our pages in January. Many of the smaller changes have already taken place in the past few months. The newsletter seems to have grown to ten pages on a more-or-less permanent basis, all on its own, without any intentional planning to that effect. The month and year of the issue are now located at the top of each page, for easy reference. The Editor's column is now located on the front page, in anticipation of the two President's columns sharing the second page. That sort of thing.

In January, the newsletter will have its own title. Kevin Courcey will have a regular President's column next to John Dearing's column on page two. The subscription and contact information boxes will grow in size, and be moved to the bottom of the back page. The Upcoming Events column on the front page will expand to cover Eugene as well as Corvallis. (We will generally be making more of a conscious effort to include Eugene-centric as well as Corvallis-centric material, though since some of our most loyal members live in Eugene, this has never really been a problem).

In addition to all of this, I hope to spruce the newsletter up a bit, maybe change a few fonts, add some clipart once in awhile, make it easier and more fun to read. (If we could only afford color photocopying, you'd REALLY be blown away, since I produce the originals for this newsletter on my personal color printer.) If you have any suggestions for ways to make the new newsletter look better than ever, now would be the time to let me know!

Reed H. Byers

CSS memberships are due!

December is the month in which all Corvallis Secular Society memberships are due. If you haven't done so already, we encourage you to renew your membership for 1998 as soon as possible. And while you're at it... wouldn't a subscription to our newsletter make a wonderful present for an atheist friend (or possibly, for a religious family member you'd like to convert)?

Remember that our rates have changed somewhat to reflect our new partnership with Eugene Atheists & Freethinkers:

Regular CSS Household Membership: \$25/year
Newsletter Subscription Only: \$15/year
CSS Membership for EAF members: \$10/year

Please send subscription money to John Dearing, our President and Treasurer, whose address is listed below. Thank you for your continued membership!

Upcoming CSS Events

SPECIAL EVENT

Saturday, December 20th, 1:30pm: It's time once again for our annual Winter Solstice Potluck at Corl House (3975 NW Witham Hill Dr, Corvallis)! Bring your family and friends, and a favorite dish to share! If you know anybody who might possibly be interested in our cause, this would be a great time to introduce them to the group. Members of Eugene Atheists & Freethinkers are particularly invited to attend, as well. Please join us in celebrating our secular holiday!

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From the President:

My father, Donald David Dearing, died on November 4. We buried his cremated remains at sea on November 16. Burial at sea has become a family tradition, as we did the same with my mother's remains in 1994 and with my brother's remains in 1978.

To freethinkers, death raises a couple of questions: how to handle death intellectually, and how to handle it practically. The practical solution is for us freethinkers to conduct our own, secular, ceremonies.

Intellectually, religions might seem to have the edge, as they generally claim that death is not really death, but is just a passage to life elsewhere. It's kind of like having a loved one move to Australia where you won't be able to see them for a long time; you'll miss them, but if the move is a good opportunity for them, you're happy for them. But in reality, religious people seem to grieve for the deaths of loved ones as much as freethinkers do. (I think many of them don't REALLY believe in an afterlife!)

Like other freethinkers, my lack of belief in an afterlife is based simply on the observation that there is no evidence for one, and that there are many intellectual problems with the concept. I am incapable of "believing" in something simply because I wish it were true.

Actually, I'm not so sure an eternal afterlife would be so desirable. To spend an inescapable eternity with people you grow tired with after a weekend visit might really be the ultimate hell! People don't worry about where they were a hundred years ago; why do they worry about where they will be a hundred years hence?

I think a mature, humanistic view of death is expressed well by Bertrand Russell:

An individual human existence should be like a river — small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually, the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The man or woman who, in old age, can see his or her life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things they care for will continue. [Bertrand Russell]

Paul Brooks wrote about an experience which helped Rachel Carson develop her philosophy towards death:

Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, watched a fall migration of monarch butterflies with a friend in Maine one day toward the end

of her life, when she was aware she had cancer and would probably not return to that spot. That evening, she wrote, "It occurred to me this afternoon, remembering, that it had been a happy spectacle, that we had felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return. And rightly — for when any living thing has come to the end of its cycle we accept that as natural. For the monarch butterfly, that cycle is measured in a known span of months. For ourselves, the measure is something else, the span of which we cannot know. But the thought is the same: when that intangible cycle has run its course, it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to its end." [Paul Brooks: *House of Life: Rachel Carson at Work*]

In the words of Boris Pasternak, "Your life in others is your immortality."

John S. Dearing

Internet Infidels' Book of the Month

December, 1997

The December Wars: Religious Symbols and Ceremonies in the Public Square

By **Albert J. Menendez**

Synopsis: In an age of "political correctness", Christmas has metamorphosed into our most controversial holiday. Each year brings new court battles over nativity scenes on public property and acrimony in the public schools. Menendez traces this dispute as far back as the 4th century, when Catholic Orthodoxy used Christmas as a major propaganda tool and a political issue as well as a religious observance.

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You can order this 1994 hardcover now from AMAZON.COM ("<http://www.amazon.com/>") for \$16.07 -- a savings of \$6.88 (30%).

Letters to CSS

[Editor's note: *Last issue, we published two of Charles Selby's letters, which I juxtaposed to point out what I took to be a humorous inconsistency: on the one hand, he mentioned that secular types are generally not as comfortable with the dishonest schemes used by religious types to sway voters. On the other hand, he advocated a way for us to trick hardcore Christians into downloading messages off the Net which would turn out to be "secular propaganda" in the hopes of exposing them to an opposing point of view that they would otherwise never read. I called his suggestion a "dirty trick", and I haven't heard the end of it since. (Not that I'd want to. Charles' astonishingly frequent letters are one of the high points of being Editor of this newsletter.)*

Sir:

I think you are aware that there would be no First Amendment had George Washington not won the Revolution. Maybe you should contemplate a certain "dirty" trick which allowed him to do that.

In Dec. of 1776, at Valley Forge, his army was in a desperate situation. He then did what he thought was necessary: on Christmas evening, just after dark, he transported 2400 troops across the Delaware, and had them all across by three in the morning. He then advanced to Trenton, occupied by the British with some German mercenaries under a Colonel Rall. The Hessians had been celebrating Christmas, and many were drunk. At 3 AM, they were sleeping it off in their barracks.

With no warning, Washington used his artillery to rake the barracks and streets of Trenton. He won the battle, and proceeded to chase the Brits out of New Jersey, which was the turning point of the war: the victory convinced the French that they should help America, and also helped convince many Americans to leave the British side.

Whether you know it or not, the religious right has forced us into a war, not a college debate. Machiavelli and books on war might be more useful in the circumstances than the Ethics 101 texts. We cannot afford the luxury of allowing the other side to do anything, including murder, while we are bound by Little League rules. In my two letters, I was considering the means by which we might win.

Although religion is declining, members of religions still outnumber us, and they are vastly better organized. While I would not want to go so far as did George Washington, using cannon on sleeping people, I think that a little trickery, which is not illegal, is not out of bounds. The Christians are clearly attempting to use that weapon, as in noted in your article on the Prayer Amendment, on p.10: "Supporters of the ...Amendment hope that their legislation will appear even more deceptively uninvasive...". If it is sauce for the goose, it is sauce for the gander.

The religious right has for years been using what has been called "stealth politics": concealing the affiliation of

candidates with the religious right until after they have been elected, for example.

That is not political softball, though not illegal. As you know (now), some editors are not above refusing to print letters they don't like: that is another weapon in this "culture war"; you shouldn't have been shocked by it. Back during the McCarthy period, when a similar internal culture war was on, newspapers did worse: they actually modified the political-type comic strips to more closely agree with their own views. It was common to find words altered, and sometimes even the drawings. If one looked at the "Pogo" strip from several different papers, one could easily see such alterations.

The churches have always tried to censor anyone who disagreed even slightly with them, and have burned both books and authors. You must also know that neither Franklin nor Jefferson nor the other leaders of the American Revolution considered such things as spying as beyond the ethical pale: it was George Washington who sent Nathan Hale (an atheist) to spy on the Brits in New York. And the Committee of Secret Correspondence, which fomented the revolution, was no parlor game: it sent spies to Europe, and bought contraband arms from France and other places, illegally transporting them to Washington. Those men knew the old adage, "nice guys finish last". They gave us the First Amendment, but only after they won the war.

Charles M. Selby

[Editor's note: *I completely agree with Selby's assessment of the religious right's underhanded techniques for trying to "win the war". They are clearly willing to use whatever underhanded tactics they feel are necessary to make their God (or his self-selected representatives) a major force in American government. I also agree that, in a shooting war, you do what you have to, and hope later generations will understand.*

However, we are fighting a war of ideologies, not guns. I believe that our ideology is what DEFINES us. If the public sees no difference between us and them, they'll have no reason for abandoning the majority to join our cause. It is by claiming the high ground that we show the religious right for the hypocrites they are.

This does not mean letting them walk all over us! We fight back, as hard as we can, but we fight openly, honestly, and in such a way that we attract the "reasonable middle ground" to our side. If they censor textbooks, we don't respond by censoring bibles — we expose and fight their censorship, because we value the First Amendment. If they use trickery and work in the dark, then we shine the light on them — we don't search for dark corners, ourselves!

Anyway, that's my opinion. Whichever point of view you agree with, you've got to admit this — it's made for a great discussion!

Newspaper Clippings

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On the same day that the Albany Democrat-Herald published the article at left, proclaiming the now-unmistakable signs of global warming, the newspaper's Editor came out with the appalling response printed below.

Could he possibly be serious?

Newspaper Clippings

Judge Upholds Ban On “Secularized” Public Religious Display

Plastic Santa Cannot Justify Christian Nativity, Jewish Menorah

[Reprinted from American Atheists' Email newsletter, AANEWS,
edited and written by C. Goeringer, from December 5, 1997.]

A federal judge has upheld previous decisions and ruled that a religious seasonal display in front of the City Hall in Jersey City, N.J. is unconstitutional, and violates the separation of church and state. It was yet another blow to a 30-year tradition, and followed four years of legal wrangling — at taxpayer expense — to preserve a Christian nativity scene and Jewish menorah.

U.S. District Court Judge Dickinson R. Debevoise rejected city arguments that the display had been rendered secular, and was therefore constitutional, by including a likeness of a snowman and a plastic Santa Clause next to the nativity creche and menorah. “I find that the display of a creche and a menorah on the lawn in front of the (Jersey City) City Hall violated the Establishment Clause notwithstanding the addition of secular items,” Debevoise wrote. That elicited a quick response from Jersey City Mayor Bret Schundler who charged that this latest ruling was an “example of outright discrimination against religion.” The mayor also attacked the American Civil Liberties Union which had originally challenged the display, saying “If they had their way, they would get ‘In God We Trust’ off our money.”

Worse yet, Schundler said that while the city will reluctantly comply with the court finding, it will replace the menorah and nativity creche with a spot lighted sign saying that the religious items are missing on account of the ACLU. Attorney David Rocah, who represented the ACLU in the case said that he had never considered his group to be a “Grinch”, adding, “We are not prohibiting people from celebrating Christmas. We are not out to destroy Christmas... We are not out to destroy religion. What we are out to do is prevent the government from celebrating a religious holiday.”

He noted that, “It is not the business of government to celebrate religious holidays.”

Tuesday's decision represented a reversal by Judge Debevoise, who had originally held that the plastic Santa and snowman had sufficiently “demystified” the religious display so that it was, therefore, constitutional. Other symbols which had been blended with the creche and menorah included a sleigh and an evergreen tree which was festooned with Kwanaza symbols.

In June of this year, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the City's appeal on the case; that move let stand the Third Circuit Court of Appeals finding that the display was not a celebration of cultural diversity, but a religious statement. The Circuit Court noted that the “celebration of more than one religion cannot magically transform a government endorsement of religion into a ‘secular celebration of diversity and pluralism.’” ACLU lawyers had argued in their brief that “however confusing the presence of a snowman in Bethlehem may be from a canonical perspective, a reasonable observer... would invariably characterize (Frosty, Santa and the sleigh) for what they are — attempts at evasion of constitutional prohibitions through superficial secular tokenism.”

Mayor Schundler said that in protest of the ruling, the city will not even have its annual lighting of a Christmas or seasonal tree this year, but instead will have a ceremony to illuminate its sign blasting the ACLU.

Spotted On the Net:

He's YOUR god, they're HIS rules, YOU burn in hell!

Curiosity was framed. Ignorance killed the cat.

If there were a god, religion would be rendered unnecessary.

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away. —Philip K. Dick

If the Bible proves that God exists then comic books prove the existence of Superman.

Out of convicted rapists, 57% admitted to reading pornography. 95% admitted to reading the Bible.

You'll never find a dead Christian in a foxhole who didn't pray.

Although it is said that faith can move mountains, experience has shown that dynamite works better.

Atheism and Women's Rights

By Kevin Courcey

“...they distract the minds of men, driving them to madness, insane hatred, and inordinate lusts. These are they who by the permission of God disturb the elements, who drive to distraction the minds of men...”

From the *Malleus Maleficarum* — commissioned by Pope Innocent VIII in 1484, the *Malleus* describes the behavior of women considered to be “witches” and the appropriate methods of torture to be used in obtaining their confessions.

Two items caught my attention recently. One was a cartoon by Tom Tomorrow — you know, the one with Sparky the penguin. Sparky is talking to a Promise Keeper about the temptation of women in the workplace, and learns that an official Promise Keeper study guide recommends simply removing from your office the woman whom you find tempting. “Get yourself another secretary,” it suggests. “Don’t even put that stumbling block in front of you.” Who cares if she’s a single mom trying to support 3 kids, right?

The second item was an article on the Taliban of Afghanistan. The Taliban, it seems, share the same opinion of women as the Promise Keepers. They view them as temptations distracting men from the work of God, leading them off the path of righteousness. The prophet Mohammed addressed this issue in the Koran by insisting on a rather strict dress for women, one designed to completely cover up their many charms. The Taliban, like the Promise Keepers, interpret their holy book very literally, and follow precisely their creed which apparently states that it is wrong to allow humans of differing genitalia to co-mingle. To that end, they have declared that all hospitals in the capital city of Kabul should immediately cease delivering care to female patients. According to Physicians Without Borders, a woman with burns over 80% of her body was refused admission at an emergency room because the male doctor on staff would not have been allowed to remove her clothes. A comatose girl was refused admission. Two women were forcibly removed from a maternity ward while in labor.

This disparaging opinion of women seems to permeate organized religion. In Hinduism, the reward for a lifetime of being a virtuous woman is rebirth as a man. Last summer, Orthodox Jewish Rabbis went out onto their balconies and threw bags of excrement at women who had the audacity to pray at the “wrong” section of the Western Wall. Pope John Paul II recently asked a female UN representative “Don’t you think that all irresponsible behavior of men is caused by women?” Clearly these statements all embody the same antipathy toward women that fuels the evangelical Christian Promise Keepers and the Islamic based Taliban. Women as objects, stumbling blocks, temptations sent from Satan. Women who might

suddenly become an embarrassing mirror of one’s own personal inadequacies or lack of self-control.

As American suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton noted, “The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of woman’s emancipation.” Obviously she hadn’t read the Koran, but her point is well taken. According to the 1997 Encarta Encyclopedia, “The belief that women were naturally weaker and inferior to men also was sanctioned by god-centered religions. In the Bible, God placed Eve under Adam’s authority, and Saint Paul urged Christian wives to be obedient to their husbands.” The Bible, it seems, is a virtual handbook on the subjugation of women. It is filled with passages that teach that women are evil, unclean, should be kept silent, should be submissive to their husbands, and may be raped, sold, or even sacrificed. In the Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:17), a man’s wife is listed along with his other possessions; less important than his house, but equally as important as his ox, his slaves, or his donkey. Early Christian writer Tertullian said “each of you women is an Eve...You are the gate of Hell, you are the temptress of the forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law.” Not wanting there to be any question of the status of women in the new Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther decreed: “If a woman grows weary and at last dies from childbearing, it matters not. Let her die from bearing, she is there to do it.”

Fortunately, most modern societies shun this primitive view of women. And since the majority of the bias against women has come from religious teachings, atheists are perfectly suited to come to their defense. We can and should point out the religious basis of discrimination against women. We should advance a philosophy which considers women as equals in every way; a philosophy which calls into question the unspoken religious assumptions upon which discrimination, like that of the Promise Keepers, is based. We should remind the public that we need no longer pay homage to the 2000-year-old values of ignorant desert-dwelling tribesmen. We are more knowledgeable and more ethical than they were, and it is time to move on. When attempts are made to base laws on the bible, we must remind the public that women have and will suffer most under such laws.

A mere 300 years ago, women in Massachusetts were still being executed for being “witches.” It was in our current century that women finally obtained the right to vote. It is only in the last 60 years that it has been legal for a woman to even *discuss* how to prevent pregnancy with her physician. And only within the last 25 years have most women had access to contraception. Those of religious faith have fought all of these advances. Until we mature enough as a society to leave these stultifying religious creeds behind, Jefferson’s principle of maintaining a wall of separation between church and state is the only way to guarantee even the most basic rights for women. And for atheists as well.