



Willamette Freethinker



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

CSS is affiliated with the American Humanist Association (AHA) and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH).

Announcements

This newsletter should arrive a bit earlier than usual — a full week before the CSS meeting, as opposed to the usual couple of days before (at best). The reason I'm putting it out this early, is because Angela and I will be spending our USUAL last-minute-newsletter-weekend enjoying our belated annual anniversary trip-to-the-Coast!

There will be goodies, and books, a gorgeous ocean view, and above all, lots of much-needed peace and quiet. And I wouldn't be able to enjoy any of it if I were feeling guilty about not getting the newsletter out on time.

As it is, Angela and I feel guilty enough; with all the preparations for our trip, we just don't have time to come up with decent columns this month. But John's column this time is extra-long (even for John) — and it's just Part 1 of 2! So you won't suffer for lack of reading material.

In fact, we've collected so much great material this month, that even WITHOUT the Editor and Angel columns, we're still winding up with a double-size issue. Enjoy!

Speaking of enjoyment, we all had a great deal of fun last meeting, talking to Frank Pasquale about his research project, and taking turns answering his questions. Most of you should have received a survey in the mail by now. If you haven't, it's probably because we don't have you listed as a CSS member or Newsletter subscriber. Either we didn't get you marked down properly in our Highly Advanced Database System, or we're sending you this newsletter for free for some reason. Contact John Dearing, or Frank Pasquale directly, if you'd like to participate and haven't received your survey.

My Wife The Treasurer informs me that even though we ARE doing better than expected this year, due to donations and some Very Large Amazon.com Purchases made through our website, we Really Can't Make A Habit of these extra-long newsletters. I know, I know. But is it my fault there's SO MUCH amazing material these days that Simply Everyone Must Read?

CSS Meetings and Events

Calendar:

Saturday, Aug 19th 2:00-4:00 CSS regular meeting
Saturday, Sept 16th 1:00-4:00 CSS potluck
Saturday, Oct 21st 2:00-4:00 CSS regular meeting

Regular meeting time:

Third Saturday of each month, from 2:00-4:00 pm.

Regular meeting location:

Corl House (3975 NW Witham Hill Dr, Corvallis).



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From the President

Researching the Nonreligious Community And The Meaning of Humanism: Part I of 2

Frank L. Pasquale, Ph.D., is a research associate with the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Dr. Pasquale is a social psychologist and cultural anthropologist. He lives in Portland, Oregon, and is currently researching nonreligious people in the Pacific Northwest. These he defines as those “whose ways of thinking are substantially or affirmatively ‘naturalistic,’ ‘nonreligious,’ or ‘non-transcendental.’” As very little research has been done on the nonreligious members of American society, his attempt to remove the *veil of invisibility* that hides this large minority of Americans is most welcome.

On Saturday, July 15, Dr. Pasquale attended the meeting of Corvallis Secular Society, just as he has attended or will attend the meetings of other local Atheist/Freethought/Humanist groups in the region. He introduced his research, and we were able to discuss our worldviews. He has subsequently mailed a survey to each member of CSS, as he has done or will do to members of other Pacific Northwest secular groups.

A week later, on Saturday, July 22, 2006, *The Oregonian* (Portland) printed an article by Nancy Haught entitled, “agnostic atheist humanist: What do those words mean? Less — and more — than you think.”

[Editor’s Note: See page 6.]

The following letters concern these two events, and delve into the meaning of “Humanist” and of other terms.

July 25, 2006; Letters to the Editor; *The Oregonian*;
1320 SW Broadway; Portland OR 97201;
letters@news.oregonian.com

As a humanist leader in Oregon, I appreciate Nancy Haught’s article, “agnostic atheist humanist: What do those words mean?” (*The Oregonian*, Saturday, July 22, 2006). I would like to clarify those terms.

A *theist* is one with god beliefs (one who believes one or more gods really exist). An *atheist* is one without god beliefs. More generally, an atheist is without belief in the transcendent or supernatural: anything that transcends the universe or material existence. It is the burden of the theist to prove his or her claims. Since theist and atheist cover all the possibilities, an *agnostic* is simply one who emphasizes the uncertainty of his or her position. This would include atheists, plus some theists. (The atheist’s lack of belief in gods or the supernatural is not a dogma or “Belief” (with a capital “B”): it is a logical conclusion due

to the absence of evidence of same.) A *freethinker* is one who rejects authority in regard to opinion, and forms his or her views on *all* matters, including religion, on the basis of evidence and reason.

Humanism, briefly, is ethical atheism. (Neither theism nor atheism have a necessary ethical dimension.) Humanism is a worldview or lifestance free from belief in the supernatural and paranormal. Humanists use free inquiry and the scientific method to gain all knowledge and to provide meaning and values for individuals. We do not look to revelation, sacred texts, and authority for truth. We base our ethics, not on obedience to the supposed will of a god, but on human welfare or happiness in the largest sense, including the preservation of our environment. We are People of Reason, not People of Faith. This worldview is universal in application.

John S. Dearing, President;
CORVALLIS SECULAR SOCIETY

John,

July 26, 2006

Many thanks for sending this. I understand precisely what you are saying and it was well-said! But THIS said, when I stepped back a little from the use of “humanism” you describe (as a cultural anthropologist rather than an advocate), I came to another set of conclusions. These are laid out in the attached essay that appeared in the Humanist journal, *RELIGIOUS HUMANISM* (Vol. XXVII, No. 2 [Summer/Fall 2004], pp. 28-43). I apologize in advance for its length, but I haven’t the time to do justice to a briefer summary right now. I’d look forward to your observations.

Separately, I am very close to finalizing the survey form and expect to copy and mail these to CSS (and a couple of other groups) in the next few days. I WILL LET YOU KNOW THE DAY THESE ARE MAILED.

As always, many thanks!

— Frank (Office: 3309 SW. Fairmount Blvd; Portland, OR 97239; 503/248-1683)

Frank —

July 28, 2006

I will let you know when I receive my copy of the survey form, and I will encourage all CSS members to fill out and return their copies. I will inform them, per your previous email to me, that their anonymity is assured. I don’t think

we have any members who are shy about expressing their views.

I'm glad you enjoyed my letter to the editor of the 25th. Too bad *The Oregonian* didn't! Concerning our somewhat varying definitions of "humanism" and of "religious humanism," below is an email copy of the letter to you that I mailed today, along with enclosures.

Best wishes!

— John

Dear Frank,

July 27, 2006

Thank you for your email of July 26, concerning the nature and definition of "humanism" and of "religious humanism." Thanks also for the attached article, "The *humanist* Focus of Attention," on this topic.

First, let me note that I have no academic training in philosophy or any related discipline. My experience as an atheist and as a Humanist leader has been on the personal and practical side, leading a Humanist group and interacting with religious people. The vast majority of religious advocates I've communicated with have been conventionally religious in the western, Christian, tradition. Almost all been of the conservative, fundamentalist, variety. (To my knowledge, I've never even met a Taoist or a Shintoist.)

You wrote in your article [page 3, last sentence] that, given the various meanings given these words, "we simply need to clarify *religion* and *religious* whenever they are used." Exactly. I have found it best when communicating to a general audience to use terms, especially those with possible religious meaning, in their most common sense, and to avoid using "religious" words in a secular sense. For example, I speak of the *structure* of the human body, not its *design*. I realize that one meaning of the latter term is synonymous with structure, but to creationists, design implies a designer. Another example is *faith* versus *trust*. In my letter of June 27, 1999, to the *Mid-Valley Sunday* (copy enclosed), I wrote that "Recent writers...[have] tried to argue that faith has nothing to do with religion, because we all have faith. Nonsense! They are confusing faith with trust. To believe that the sun will rise on a given morning is not an example of faith, but of trust, as it is based on knowledge and experience. In contrast, the belief that the sun can stand still or even go backwards is a matter of faith, not trust: it defies knowledge and experience."

The term *humanism* is another such word. Like so many words, humanism has more than one meaning, and, over time, meanings can evolve. *Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary (M-W)* gives one meaning as "devotion to the humanities." A synonym given is humanitarianism. Closer to our interests is this definition: "a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values; especially: a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's

dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason."

I find it practical to use this latter definition as the meaning of "humanism" (lower-case), or of "philosophical humanism" [your article, page 2, *A readjustment of priorities*], and to define "Humanism" (upper-case) (or "organized humanism" or "secular humanism") as a specific secular or non-religious worldview or philosophy. It is this worldview that is promoted by the American Humanist Association (AHA), the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), and similar organizations in many countries. Humanism is free of supernatural or paranormal beliefs, and takes a scientific approach to acquiring all knowledge. A Humanist is without belief in gods or other transcendental concepts, like reincarnation, simply because such concepts have not been demonstrated, and because there are severe logical problems with these beliefs. I think it is entirely reasonable to define the worldview of Humanism thus.

In my letter of February 4, 2000, to a graduate student in the College of Oceanic and Atmospheric Sciences at Oregon State University (copy enclosed), I addressed the issue of *religious humanism*, a thoroughly nontheistic, nonsupernaturalistic lifestance (in spite of the use of the word "religious"). I noted that there are those who say that "Humanism is my religion." I wrote that, for religious humanists (and for the rest of us as well), "there can be a reverence for life, a 'spirituality', certainly a sense of wonder, without belief in the supernatural and without creeds." Clearly, one can define religion broadly enough to encompass any sincerely-held worldview, but I think this definition is too inclusive to be useful. And again, as discussed above, using a "religious" term to describe a secular concept can cause problems when dealing with politically-active conservative Christians today in this country. For politically-practical as well as philosophical reasons, I prefer to term Humanism (or secular humanism) a secular, non-religious worldview, and to avoid the term "religious humanism."

There is another possible "religious humanism": one in which those who call themselves religious humanists have a worldview centered on human values and welfare, yet *do* believe in the supernatural. Deists might fall under this definition [Deism: "a movement or system of thought advocating natural religion, emphasizing morality, and in the 18th century denying the interference of the Creator with the laws of the universe" (*M-W*).] Pantheists might also qualify. [Pantheism: "a doctrine that equates God with the forces and laws of the universe (*M-W*).] Some Unitarians consider themselves to be religious humanists. Even some liberal Christians may call themselves such.

In my own personal view, such people might be called "freethinkers," but, *if* they retain a belief in the supernatural, they are not Humanists (aka secular humanists or members of organized humanism), because Humanists, using the scientific approach to knowledge, believe only those things that are demonstrated beyond

reasonable doubt. They do *not* believe something unless and until it has been *disproven*.

(As an aside, let me note that Humanists, while always seeking knowledge, are not afraid to say “I don’t know.” The religious mind seems to need an answer — any answer — to its questions. I personally do not understand string theory in theoretical physics. Hence I neither believe nor disbelieve in string theory: I don’t know if it is true.)

As you suggested in your article (page 4, “Some Objections Addressed”), people have an amazing ability to *compartmentalize* their mind, enabling them to hold contradictory beliefs simultaneously. In the series of letters to *The Daily Barometer* in 1994 (copies enclosed), I observed (April 21, 1994) that some scientists, for example, can think logically and use the scientific method for acquiring knowledge throughout the week, then go to church on Sunday expecting to gain knowledge through sacred texts, divine revelation, and the like. Humanists try to avoid this compartmentalization, and this is why “religious humanism” in the second sense above is, in my view, an oxymoron.

The slogan [or tag line] of our local Humanist group is: “Corvallis Secular Society (CSS) is a Humanist and Freethought society for all nontheists of good will.” Every membership organization has the right and obligation to define its purposes and membership criteria. As I wrote in the first issue of our newsletter, theists are served well by the amazing variety of religious organizations in our area, but there were none for nontheists. CSS was thus formed to serve the local nontheistic community only.

In your article [page 4, first sentence], you comment on the habit of some in using *humanist* as a euphemism for *atheist* and similar, “distasteful” terms. Like you, I dislike this habit, but for somewhat different reasons. I agree that, as you define it, *philosophical humanism* does not require atheism. However, in my view, organized Humanism does require atheism: theistic, supernatural beliefs are incompatible with a scientific approach to knowledge, which is an essential component of Humanism. I also disagree with the habit, because atheism is a necessary, but insufficient, *component* of Humanism (they are not synonyms): atheism does not incorporate ethics or social concern, which are also defining characteristics of Humanism. **Perhaps Humanism could be defined as an atheistic, scientific and ethical worldview.** Finally, I note that the religious right despises “humanism” and “secular humanism” as much as they do “atheism.” In any case, we should never let our opponents select or define our terms for us.

I share your admiration for Bill Clinton’s words: “Our shared humanity is more important than our interesting differences, and makes those interesting differences possible.” I believe that Humanists can, and do, work with others to promote shared goals. Many Humanists do this through active membership in such “religion-neutral” organizations as civil rights, environmental, and population-control groups. We can do this without

shedding or hiding our identity as Humanists. The only people I know who do not want to work with those of different beliefs are religious extremists (especially Christian and Islamic).

Frank, good luck with your continuing research of the “nonreligious” members and communities of our society.

— John

[To be continued, next issue.]

John Dearing
President of CSS

“The beginning of wisdom is the awareness that there is insufficient evidence that a god or gods have created us and the recognition that we are responsible in part for our own destiny. Human beings can achieve this good life, but it is by the cultivation of the virtues of intelligence and courage, not faith and obedience, that we will most likely be able to do so.”

— Paul Kurtz

On The Killing Of Innocents:

“Until civilians — frankly, I’m not sure how many of them are actually just innocent little civilians running around versus active Hezbo types, particularly the men — but until those civilians start paying a price for propping up these kinds of regimes, it’s not going to end, folks. What do you mean, civilians start paying a price? I just ask you to consult history for the answer to that.”

— Rush Limbaugh on the Qana Massacre,
July 31, 2006

“We declared jihad against the US government, because the US government is unjust, criminal and tyrannical. It has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous and criminal . . . As for what you asked regarding the American people, they are not exonerated from responsibility, because they chose this government and voted for it despite their knowledge of its crimes in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and in other places.”

— Osama bin Laden on his fatwa
against America, March 1997

Camp: "It's Beyond Belief"

There is no God, but there is horse riding; Summer camp is for atheists, agnostics

by Michael D. Clark, *Cincinnati.com*, 7/21/2006

ST. CLAIR TWP. — It's summer camp time in America, but few camps are quite like this one.

This week, 31 atheist and agnostic youths from Ohio, Kentucky, New York and other states have gathered in Butler County for Camp Quest, one of a handful of summer camps nationwide where children are taught there is no God.

Armed with its motto "It's Beyond Belief!" Camp Quest is an alternative to religious-oriented summer camps.

Children and teens learn about the canons of rational thought, critical thinking and scientific inquiry. They're also taught to stand up for their secular beliefs while living in a world of religious believers who might question their values.

Besides the usual camp activities such as canoeing and horseback riding, campers tackle serious discussions of atheistic, agnostic and deist philosophies. They learn about famous figures - such as Charles Darwin and Carl Sagan - who shared a disbelief in a supreme being who oversees humanity.

"It's kind of an oasis for us," explains Sophia Riehemann, 16, of Bellevue. "But people who don't know me well think we come here and devil-worship or something stupid like that."

Nonbelievers make up about 14 percent of the U.S. population, according to the American Religious Identification Survey conducted by City University of New York in 2001.

Camp Quest started in Northern Kentucky in 1996.

In recent years, the camps have been held at Camp Campbell Gard in St. Clair Township. The local camp, with 31 participants, is the largest of six camps operating around the U.S.

All told, the six camps, which cost \$550 to attend, will draw about 120 participants, said Amanda Metskas, president of the Camp Quest board. The numbers might appear low, but "a lot of atheists don't tend to be joiners, and a lot of atheists and agnostics are not members of groups," said Metskas.

The six summer camps this year are up from four offered last year, she said.

Christians, or members of any other religion, are not excluded.

Camp Campbell Gard is operated by the Christian-based Great Miami Valley YMCA.

Metskas agreed to a recent interview - along with a handful of campers - away from camp premises because she said YMCA officials have ordered them not to publicly link the secular summer camp to the YMCA.

But Rick Taylor, executive director of YMCA Camp Campbell Gard, said he has no problems leasing the camp to a nonreligious group.

"We really pride ourselves on inclusion," said Taylor. "We are firmly committed to promoting a summer camping experience to all children despite their backgrounds."

Most of the children attend the camp at the encouragement of their parents, said Metskas

Alex Bock, 13, traveled from Buffalo, N.Y., to mingle for the first time with fellow atheists in a summer camp setting.

"My father's side of the family are atheists and so is my grandmother and she told me about the camp," said Alex. "It's kind of odd that I have to go all the way from Buffalo to Ohio to attend. But I really, really like it. The people here aren't weird."

Hensley Akiboh, 18, from Indianapolis, said his family "used to be Christian, but we became more free-thinking.

"Through most of my life I found I had to kind of censor myself around other people, but this camp has definitely helped me figure out whether I wanted to lead a religious life or continue with an atheist life." The campers said they like the intellectual games, including an "invisible unicorn" exercise. Campers must try to prove that imaginary unicorns - as a metaphor for God - don't exist.

"You can't prove a negative," Metskas said of the lesson.

"A lot of times in these kids' lives they are asked to prove there is no evidence of God. We teach them the burden of proof lies with the person making the claim."

Phil Burress, president of Sharonville-based Citizens for Community Values, said, "It's amazing that they are teaching kids not to believe in God. I feel sorry for them."

He said the small number of participants nationwide reveals the camp's limited appeal.

"Their numbers are not growing. And they are pushing the myth of separation of church and state in America," he said. "But if you look at the Founding Fathers, they incorporated God into our nation's founding documents."

agnostic atheist humanist

What do those words mean? Less — and more — than you think!

by Nancy Haught, *The Oregonian*, 7/22/2006

In the past 50 years or so, Jeff Strang has been a churchgoer, an agnostic, an atheist and a humanist. If anyone knows what these words mean, it ought to be him. But the president of Humanists of Greater Portland is quick to say that there's a lot of "fuzziness" around the terms.

Strang has his own working definition: "A humanist is an atheist or an agnostic with a social conscience," he says. But then he can't help contributing to the fuzz: "Some people say there's room for religious humanists, too," he adds.

As religious and secular values clash in the Middle East, in Iraq and in our own country, what we believe — or whether we believe — often becomes a point of conflict. The words we use to characterize our beliefs often mean more — and less — than we might imagine.

An agnostic "believes that the human mind cannot know whether there is a God or an ultimate cause or anything beyond material phenomena," Webster's says. But some people use agnostic to mean that they don't know whether there is a God or not. Others think it means they are seekers, or open to such proof whenever and wherever they may find it.

A humanist believes in "any system of thought or action based on the nature, interests and ideals of man . . . a modern, nontheistic, rationalist movement that holds that man is capable of self-fulfillment, ethical conduct, etc. without recourse to supernaturalism." But, as Strang observes, people may have religious beliefs and subscribe to key humanist principles.

Strang says he was raised in a Presbyterian home. His parents made him attend Sunday school and church until he graduated from high school.

"I never connected with Christianity," he says now. But he was interested in other religions, approaching them as a skeptic. Over the years, he never found the scientific evidence he was looking for.

"By the time I turned 40, I had had enough experience in the world to declare myself an atheist," he says. Then, in response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, he wanted to be part of a broader humanist community.

The Humanists of Greater Portland (www.portlandhumanists.org) includes about 150 members, who meet at 9:30 a.m. on Sundays at Friendly House Community Center, 1737 N.W. 26th Ave. They define themselves with seven key points, Strang says.

A humanist:

- applies reason, science and free inquiry to solving human problems.
- advocates freedom, happiness and progress for all humanity.
- uses the democratic process to seek justice and fairness in all societies.
- supports moral principles that have been validated by consequences.
- accepts kinship with the natural world.
- holds humans responsible for human destiny.
- and seeks natural, rather than supernatural, explanations.

Many humanists also see themselves as atheists, people who believe that there is no God. Webster's lists a handful of synonyms for atheist, including "unbeliever," which it describes as a "more negative term," and "infidel," defined as "a person not believing in a certain religion or the prevailing religion." But all three words, in actual usage, connote negative images, given the Western context. That is part of the problem.

"Context is important," says Courtney Campbell, head of the philosophy department at Oregon State University. "These words presuppose a Judeo-Christian-Islamic context," implying "a set of beliefs about the world and a divine being, about how the workings of God get manifested through institutions."

But they don't always work in other contexts, he says. In Eastern traditions, where Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and Taoism are long-standing ethical systems, the issue is not one of believing or not believing.

In Eastern contexts, human beings are considered to be "confused from the outset," Campbell says. "All of us are agnostic, in the broad sense of the term. We don't have true knowledge of authentic reality, no true understanding of universal consciousness." That comes only with the practice of a belief system, he says.

His point is that words such as atheist or agnostic may "work" in describing a Western perspective, but they may not work in an Eastern context. They may be of little global use, but they are used here in the United States, especially now.

“What’s happened in popular culture, is that the terms used to be descriptive, and now they are evaluative,” he says. “That leads to some confusion, stereotyping and mislabeling.”

If, for example, an agnostic defines knowledge of the divine as “empirically demonstrable proof,” he or she is at odds with religious people who say that such evidence must take a back seat to belief.

“Faith is often seen as the prelude to knowledge,” Campbell says. “You have to act on your faith, have your faith tested and then you gain — not empirically demonstrable knowledge — but experientially validated knowledge.”

So, agnostics and believers are defining knowledge in different ways, he says. And agnostics and atheists sometimes separate themselves by degrees.

Dave Silverman, a spokesman for American Atheists (www.atheists.org), has heard atheists described as “stubborn” agnostics and agnostics characterized as “wimpy” atheists.

“People don’t know the difference,” he says. “Atheists equate all gods and deny them all. God is equal to Zeus is equal to the Easter bunny. It’s a definitive statement.”

An agnostic argues that whether or not there is a god is unknowable, Silverman says. “But, no, it’s knowable and it’s not there,” he adds, reflecting his certainty.

His organization was founded 40 years ago by Madalyn Murray O’Hair, one of the most famous — or infamous — of American atheists, who traced atheism’s roots back to ancient Greece.

“Atheism is based upon a materialist philosophy, which holds that nothing exists but natural phenomena,” she wrote in 1962. “There are no supernatural forces or entities, nor can there be any.”

Today, Silverman says, many groups of atheists, agnostics and humanists work together to support humanitarian causes such as blood and food drives and to advocate for tolerance.

“There’s no way to overstate the amount of prejudice” that atheists face, Silverman says. “We are the last group that it’s politically OK to discriminate against.”

A University of Minnesota study supports his claim. In a sampling of more than 2,000 households, researchers discovered that Americans rank atheists below Muslims, immigrants, gays and lesbians and other minority groups in “sharing their vision of American society,” according to the research report.

“Atheists, who account for about 3 percent of the U.S. population, offer a glaring exception to the rule of increasing social tolerance over the last 30 years,” says Penny Edgell, an associate sociology professor and leader of the study, whose preliminary results were announced in March.

Many of the study’s respondents associated atheism with a range of “moral indiscretions” from criminal behavior to “rampant materialism” and “cultural elitism.” That tendency to link — or leap — from atheism to questions of morality is evidence that many Americans are not using words such as atheist, agnostic or humanist in descriptive ways anymore.

“The terms come out of contexts that are value-laden,” says Campbell, the OSU professor. “That’s why they become very controversial. . . . It’s hard to get a one-sentence definition that covers every possibility.”

“Dear God” song by XTC

Dear god, hope you get the letter and...
I pray you can make it better down here
I don’t mean a big reduction in the price of beer
But all the people that you made in your image
See them starving in the street
‘Cause they don’t get enough to eat from god
I can’t believe in you

Dear god, sorry to disturb you but...
I feel that I should be heard loud and clear
We all need a big reduction in amount of tears
And all the people that you made in your image
See them fighting in the street
‘Cause they can’t make opinions meet about god
I can’t believe in you

Did you make disease and the diamond blue?
Did you make mankind after we made you?
And the devil too!

Dear god don’t know if you noticed but...
Your name is on a lot of quotes in this book
And us crazy humans wrote it, you should take a look
And all the people that you made in your image
still believing that junk is true
Well I know it ain’t, and so do you
Dear god...I can’t believe in...I don’t believe

I won’t believe in heaven or hell
No saints, no sinners, no devil as well
No pearly gates, no thorny crown
You’re always letting us humans down
The wars you bring, the babes you drown
Those lost at sea and never found
And it’s the same the whole world ‘round
The hurt I see helps to compound
That father, son and holy ghost
Is just somebody’s unholy hoax
And if you’re up there you’ll perceive
That my heart’s here upon my sleeve
If there’s one thing I don’t believe in
It’s you...Dear god

Disowning Conservative Politics, Evangelical Pastor Rattles Flock

by Laurie Goodstein, *New York Times*, 7/30/2006

MAPLEWOOD, Minn. — Like most pastors who lead thriving evangelical megachurches, the Rev. Gregory A. Boyd was asked frequently to give his blessing — and the church's — to conservative political candidates and causes.

The Rev. Gregory A. Boyd leads a congregation outside St. Paul.

The requests came from church members and visitors alike: Would he please announce a rally against gay marriage during services? Would he introduce a politician from the pulpit? Could members set up a table in the lobby promoting their anti-abortion work? Would the church distribute "voters' guides" that all but endorsed Republican candidates? And with the country at war, please couldn't the church hang an American flag in the sanctuary?

After refusing each time, Mr. Boyd finally became fed up, he said. Before the last presidential election, he preached six sermons called "The Cross and the Sword" in which he said the church should steer clear of politics, give up moralizing on sexual issues, stop claiming the United States as a "Christian nation" and stop glorifying American military campaigns.

"When the church wins the culture wars, it inevitably loses," Mr. Boyd preached. "When it conquers the world, it becomes the world. When you put your trust in the sword, you lose the cross."

Mr. Boyd says he is no liberal. He is opposed to abortion and thinks homosexuality is not God's ideal. The response from his congregation at Woodland Hills Church here in suburban St. Paul — packed mostly with politically and theologically conservative, middle-class evangelicals — was passionate. Some members walked out of a sermon and never returned. By the time the dust had settled, Woodland Hills, which Mr. Boyd founded in 1992, had lost about 1,000 of its 5,000 members.

But there were also congregants who thanked Mr. Boyd, telling him they were moved to tears to hear him voice concerns they had been too afraid to share.

"Most of my friends are believers," said Shannon Staiger, a psychotherapist and church member, "and they think if you're a believer, you'll vote for Bush. And it's scary to go against that."

Sermons like Mr. Boyd's are hardly typical in today's evangelical churches. But the upheaval at Woodland Hills is an example of the internal debates now going on in some evangelical colleges, magazines and churches. A common concern is that the Christian message is being compromised by the tendency to tie evangelical Christianity to the Republican Party and American nationalism, especially through the war in Iraq.

At least six books on this theme have been published recently, some by Christian publishing houses. Randall Balmer, a religion professor at Barnard College and an evangelical, has written "Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America — an Evangelical's Lament."

And Mr. Boyd has a new book out, "The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church," which is based on his sermons.

"There is a lot of discontent brewing," said Brian D. McLaren, the founding pastor at Cedar Ridge Community Church in Gaithersburg, Md., and a leader in the evangelical movement known as the "emerging church," which is at the forefront of challenging the more politicized evangelical establishment.

"More and more people are saying this has gone too far — the dominance of the evangelical identity by the religious right," Mr. McLaren said. "You cannot say the word 'Jesus' in 2006 without having an awful lot of baggage going along with it. You can't say the word 'Christian,' and you certainly can't say the word 'evangelical' without it now raising connotations and a certain cringe factor in people.

"Because people think, 'Oh no, what is going to come next is homosexual bashing, or pro-war rhetoric, or complaining about 'activist judges.'"

Mr. Boyd said he had cleared his sermons with the church's board, but his words left some in his congregation stunned. Some said that he was disrespecting President Bush and the military, that he was soft on abortion or telling them not to vote.

"When we joined years ago, Greg was a conservative speaker," said William Berggren, a lawyer who joined the church with his wife six years ago. "But we totally disagreed with him on this. You can't be a Christian and ignore actions that you feel are wrong. A case in point is the abortion issue. If the church were awake when abortion was passed in the 70's, it wouldn't have happened. But the church was asleep."

Mr. Boyd, 49, who preaches in blue jeans and rumpled plaid shirts, leads a church that occupies a squat block-long building that was once a home improvement chain store.

The church grew from 40 members in 12 years, based in no small part on Mr. Boyd's draw as an electrifying preacher who stuck closely to Scripture. He has degrees from Yale Divinity School and Princeton Theological Seminary, and he taught theology at Bethel College in St. Paul, where he created a controversy a few years ago by questioning whether God fully knew the future. Some pastors in his own denomination, the Baptist General Conference, mounted an

effort to evict Mr. Boyd from the denomination and his teaching post, but he won that battle.

He is known among evangelicals for a bestselling book, "Letters From a Skeptic," based on correspondence with his father, a leftist union organizer and a lifelong agnostic — an exchange that eventually persuaded his father to embrace Christianity.

Mr. Boyd said he never intended his sermons to be taken as merely a critique of the Republican Party or the religious right. He refuses to share his party affiliation, or whether he has one, for that reason. He said there were Christians on both the left and the right who had turned politics and patriotism into "idolatry."

He said he first became alarmed while visiting another megachurch's worship service on a Fourth of July years ago. The service finished with the chorus singing "God Bless America" and a video of fighter jets flying over a hill silhouetted with crosses.

"I thought to myself, 'What just happened? Fighter jets mixed up with the cross?' " he said in an interview.

Patriotic displays are still a mainstay in some evangelical churches. Across town from Mr. Boyd's church, the sanctuary of North Heights Lutheran Church was draped in bunting on the Sunday before the Fourth of July this year for a "freedom celebration." Military veterans and flag twirlers paraded into the sanctuary, an enormous American flag rose slowly behind the stage, and a Marine major who had served in Afghanistan preached that the military was spending "your hard-earned money" on good causes.

In his six sermons, Mr. Boyd laid out a broad argument that the role of Christians was not to seek "power over" others — by controlling governments, passing legislation or fighting wars. Christians should instead seek to have "power under" others — "winning people's hearts" by sacrificing for those in need, as Jesus did, Mr. Boyd said.

"America wasn't founded as a theocracy," he said. "America was founded by people trying to escape theocracies. Never in history have we had a Christian theocracy where it wasn't bloody and barbaric. That's why our Constitution wisely put in a separation of church and state.

"I am sorry to tell you," he continued, "that America is not the light of the world and the hope of the world. The light of the world and the hope of the world is Jesus Christ."

Mr. Boyd lambasted the "hypocrisy and pettiness" of Christians who focus on "sexual issues" like homosexuality, abortion or Janet Jackson's breast-revealing performance at the Super Bowl halftime show. He said Christians these days were constantly outraged about sex and perceived violations of their rights to display their faith in public.

"Those are the two buttons to push if you want to get Christians to act," he said. "And those are the two buttons Jesus never pushed."

Some Woodland Hills members said they applauded the sermons because they had resolved their conflicted feelings. David Churchill, a truck driver for U.P.S. and a Teamster for 26 years, said he had been "raised in a religious-right home"

but was torn between the Republican expectations of faith and family and the Democratic expectations of his union.

When Mr. Boyd preached his sermons, "it was liberating to me," Mr. Churchill said.

Mr. Boyd gave his sermons while his church was in the midst of a \$7 million fund-raising campaign. But only \$4 million came in, and 7 of the more than 50 staff members were laid off, he said.

Mary Van Sickle, the family pastor at Woodland Hills, said she lost 20 volunteers who had been the backbone of the church's Sunday school.

"They said, 'You're not doing what the church is supposed to be doing, which is supporting the Republican way,'" she said. "It was some of my best volunteers."

The Rev. Paul Eddy, a theology professor at Bethel College and the teaching pastor at Woodland Hills, said: "Greg is an anomaly in the megachurch world. He didn't give a whit about church leadership, never read a book about church growth. His biggest fear is that people will think that all church is is a weekend carnival, with people liking the worship, the music, his speaking, and that's it."

In the end, those who left tended to be white, middle-class suburbanites, church staff members said. In their place, the church has added more members who live in the surrounding community — African-Americans, Hispanics and Hmong immigrants from Laos.

This suits Mr. Boyd. His vision for his church is an ethnically and economically diverse congregation that exemplifies Jesus' teachings by its members' actions. He, his wife and three other families from the church moved from the suburbs three years ago to a predominantly black neighborhood in St. Paul.

Mr. Boyd now says of the upheaval: "I don't regret any aspect of it at all. It was a defining moment for us. We let go of something we were never called to be. We just didn't know the price we were going to pay for doing it."

His congregation of about 4,000 is still digesting his message. Mr. Boyd arranged a forum on a recent Wednesday night to allow members to sound off on his new book. The reception was warm, but many of the 56 questions submitted in writing were pointed: Isn't abortion an evil that Christians should prevent? Are you saying Christians should not join the military? How can Christians possibly have "power under" Osama bin Laden? Didn't the church play an enormously positive role in the civil rights movement?

One woman asked: "So why NOT us? If we contain the wisdom and grace and love and creativity of Jesus, why shouldn't we be the ones involved in politics and setting laws?"

Mr. Boyd responded: "I don't think there's a particular angle we have on society that others lack. All good, decent people want good and order and justice. Just don't slap the label 'Christian' on it."

Feeling Strains, Baptist Colleges Cut Church Ties

by Alan Finder, *The New York Times*, 7/22/2006

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (July 22) — The request seemed simple enough to the Rev. Hershael W. York, then the president of the Kentucky Baptist Convention. He asked Georgetown College, a small Baptist liberal arts institution here, to consider hiring for its religion department someone who would teach a literal interpretation of the Bible.

But to William H. Crouch Jr., the president of Georgetown, it was among the last straws in a struggle that had involved issues like who could be on the board of trustees and whether the college encouraged enough freedom of inquiry to qualify for a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

Dr. Crouch and his trustees decided it was time to end the college's 63-year affiliation with the religious denomination. "From my point of view, it was about academic freedom," Dr. Crouch said. "I sat for 25 years and watched my denomination become much more narrow and, in terms of education, much more interested in indoctrination.

Georgetown is among a half-dozen colleges and universities whose ties with state Baptist conventions have been severed in the last four years, part of a broad realignment in which more than a dozen Southern Baptist universities, including Wake Forest and Furman, have ended affiliations over the last two decades. Georgetown's parting was ultimately amicable. But many have been tense, even bitter.

In Georgia and Missouri, disputes over who controls the boards of Baptist colleges led to prolonged litigation. In Tennessee, a clash over whether Belmont University in Nashville could appoint non-Baptists to its board led the Tennessee Baptist Convention to vote in May to remove the entire board. Belmont's trustees are still running the university, and while negotiations are continuing, the battle for control could end up in court.

The future of Baptist higher education has rarely been more fragile," R. Kirby Godsey, the former president of Mercer University in Macon, Ga., said in a speech in Atlanta in June. The Georgia Baptist Convention voted last November to sever ties with Mercer.

The issues vary from state to state. But many Southern Baptist colleges and their state conventions have been battling over money, control of boards of trustees, whether the Bible must be interpreted literally, how evolution is taught, the propriety of some books for college courses and of some plays for campus performances and whether cultural and religious diversity should be encouraged.

At the root of the conflicts is the question of how much the colleges should reflect the views of their denomination. They are part of the continuing battle among Southern Baptists for control of their church's institutions.

More than 20 years ago, theological and cultural conservatives gained control over moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention, the denomination's broadest body, representing more than 16 million worshippers. Similar shifts then occurred in many, but not all, state Baptist conventions, which have considerable independence.

The struggle has continued. Last month, the Southern Baptist Convention elected a president who promised to be "a big-tent conservative" and defeated candidates supported by the convention's establishment.

Southern Baptist colleges are affiliated with the state conventions, and it does not make sense to many members of the conventions to provide significant annual subsidies to Baptist colleges that they view as out of tune with conservative positions on central religious tenets, including how to interpret the Bible. "I did feel that Georgetown was not on the same page as most Kentucky Baptists," said Dr. York, who was president of the Kentucky Baptist Convention last year.

But efforts to rein in what many Southern Baptists see as inappropriate departures from religious orthodoxy have looked to many professors and college administrators like efforts to limit academic freedom.

The convention itself in its national and state organizations has moved so far to the right that previous diversity on the faculty and among the trustees is no longer possible," said Bill Leonard, dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest. "More theological control of the curriculum and the faculty has been the result.

David W. Key, director of Baptist Studies at the Candler School of Theology at Emory, put it more starkly. "The real underlying issue is that fundamentalism in the Southern Baptist form is incompatible with higher education," Professor Key said. "In fundamentalism, you have all the truths. In education, you're searching for truths.

The state conventions do not own the colleges, but in most cases they approve trustees and provide annual subsidies. Their power over the boards has often been at the center of contention, with the stakes often involving academic direction.

We don't want to cut our ties," said R. Alton Lacey, president of Missouri Baptist University, which has been fighting the Missouri Baptist Convention in court since 2002 over who controls the university's board. "We just don't want the conventions politicizing our boards.

The Georgia Baptist Convention's severing of ties with Mercer University followed an unsuccessful effort by the state convention, which did not have the authority to appoint the university's trustees, to gain that power. Many Baptist leaders were also troubled by a forum at Mercer on issues affecting gay men and lesbians, Dr. Godsey, the university's former president, said.

Officials at Georgetown had long been concerned that differences with state Baptists might become irreconcilable.

In 1987, college officials negotiated an agreement with state Baptist leaders that allowed either side to end the affiliation, with four years' notice. Both sides said that they had wanted to continue the relationship, but that the strains had recently become acute.

Georgetown asked the Kentucky Baptist Convention two years ago to allow 25 percent of the college's trustees to be non-Baptist, but the proposal was rejected. Only about half of Georgetown's students are Baptist, and less than half of the alumni are Baptist, Dr. Crouch, the college's president, said.

"I realized that our fund-raising depended on getting non-Baptists on our board," Dr. Crouch said.

Then, a year ago, the Kentucky convention turned down a nominee for Georgetown's board for the first time. Around the same time, Dr. York asked the college to look for a religion professor who would teach theologically conservative positions.

"You ought to have some professor on your faculty who believes Adam and Eve were the first humans, that they actually existed," Dr. York said.

Dr. Crouch and Georgetown's trustees decided it was time to exercise their escape clause. The college and the convention wanted to avoid the kind of contention becoming common in neighboring states.

"I think the fear was that I was going to lead a kind of takeover," said Dr. York, a professor and associate dean at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. "But I'm only going to fight a battle that I can win and that I want to win."

Kentucky convention delegates voted overwhelmingly in November to approve a separation; the group agreed to phase out its \$1.4 million annual contribution to Georgetown over four years, and the college became self-governing.

Dr. Crouch noted that some Baptist universities that severed ties with state conventions in the late 1980's and early 1990's have become essentially secular. He hopes that will not happen at Georgetown.

"We call ourselves a Christian college grounded in historic Baptist principles," he said.

Georgetown continues to pursue serious academic ambitions, like pursuing a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the college honor society. Only 270 colleges and universities have Phi Beta Kappa chapters, and there are rigorous standards for new ones. Among the most important requirements are freedom of inquiry and expression on campus, along with respect for religious, ethnic and racial diversity.

A Georgetown requirement that tenured professors be Christian could pose problems with the honor society. The college must also improve on a number of specific standards, including increasing the number of books in its library and reducing professors' course loads. Phi Beta Kappa considers applications over a three-year cycle, and Dr. Crouch hopes Georgetown will be ready to reapply in 2009.

"Phi Beta Kappa is the gold standard," said Rosemary Allen, the Georgetown provost.

Some of the few students on campus this summer said they supported Georgetown's decision to become independent and to improve its academic standing, although they acknowledged they had not followed events closely.

"It's good to go to a college that's religious, but it doesn't really matter to me," said John Sadlon, a sophomore. "What matters to me is getting my education."

Newspaper Letter

Gay marriage ban used shaky logic *Corvallis Gazette-Times, 8/4/2006*

Washington Supreme Court Justice Barbara A. Madsen's excuse for knocking down gay marriage (because marriage was designed for procreation by heterosexuals) was ridiculous.

I thought about couples who were infertile or chose not to procreate, not to mention that there are plenty of gay couples whose households do include children, either biologically or through adoption.

I also thought of another justification that is popular when exhibiting bigotry towards gay people: Marriage is a religious ceremony blessed by God, and since homosexuality is considered a sin (according to some people's interpretation of the Bible), it should not be legal. Does that mean that agnostics and atheist should be denied the right to marry as well?

Is Justice Madsen afraid that if gays are allowed to marry, that everyone will decide to "go gay"? Aren't gay people a small majority? And, if so, does Justice Madsen really believe that our species would be endangered if gays were married? If that is her logic, then she really is scary. Talk about activist judges!

— Melanie Lomoro, Albany

Lying and Hate Are Not “Traditional Values”

...except for the evangelical Christian Right

by Mel Seesholtz, Counterbias.com, April 12 2005

Reverend Louis Sheldon is the leader of the Traditional Values Coalition, which claims to be “an inter-denominational public policy organization speaking on behalf of over 43,000 churches.” Sheldon and TVC are pillars of the evangelical Christian Right. That’s where it gets confusing.

Surely lying with malice aforethought is a sin of some kind. It’s certainly not very nice, and most parents teach their children not to do it. Lies can cause real damage. Just look at what the lies about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction did.

TVC’s site proclaims their mission to be “Empowering People of Faith through Knowledge.” I looked up “knowledge” in several dictionaries, including the Oxford English Dictionary. The word “fact” kept appearing in all the definitions.

So if lying is some kind of sin, not nice, definitely not a family value, can cause hurt, pain, suffering and death, and if “knowledge” is based on “facts,” why is Rev. Louis Sheldon always lying with such Machiavellian malice aforethought and using such obvious non-facts to do so, and with bravado no less?

Case in point: Bakersfield, California, April 2, 2005. The occasion was a “Traditional Family Values” rally in support of a constitutional amendment barring gay American citizens from entering into the civil union called “marriage.” The event was organized by California state senator Roy Ashburn and featured the Reverend Louis Sheldon.

The press release from Sen. Ashburn’s office claimed “hundreds gathered at Patriots Park to support traditional marriage and family values.” But according to Stephanie Tavares’ April 3, 2005 report in *The Bakersfield Californian*, there were “fewer than 20 supporters of a same-sex marriage ban at the rally.” Unless the senator can’t count, “hundreds” certainly seems like an intentional lie. (Ms. Tavares also reported that “between 75 and 80 supporters of same-sex marriage” were also present at the rally.)

But the best was yet to come, when Rev. Louis Sheldon took the stage.

From Ms. Tavares’ report:

“The Rev. Lou Sheldon, chairman of the Anaheim-based Traditional Values Coalition, echoed that statement [“Marriage between one man and one woman is fundamental to civilization”], saying that America’s economy will collapse if gay marriage is allowed because the population will decrease and there won’t be enough people paying taxes.

“Sheldon also said gay marriage laws in Scandinavia have caused a rise in wife beating because men have become bisexual, which makes them beat their wives.

“The crowd of protesters laughed at him. Several said it was “absurd” and “ridiculous” to assert that being bisexual would make men want to beat their wives.”

The protesters’ comments were both appropriate and accurate. It’s also “absurd” and “ridiculous” to assert that allowing gays and lesbians to legally marry would so decimate the U.S. population that the economy would collapse.

Yes, some closeted gays and lesbians do produce children. Those out of the closet generally don’t. America’s leading demographer of homosexuality, psychologist J. Michael Bailey of Northwestern University, puts the gay and lesbian population at about two percent. That’s two percent. Whatever percentage of that two percent chose to get married would have negligible effects on the U.S. population. It seems Sheldon, like Sen. Ashburn, could use a refresher course in basic mathematics and economics.

In 2004 the Congressional Budget Office found that allowing same-sex couples to marry would actually boost federal income tax revenues by \$400 million per year until the end of this decade mainly because of the so-called “marriage penalty.” Social security payments would rise over time, as would spending on spousal health insurance benefits for federal workers. Other expenditures would be lowered, however, since spending on Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income would fall. The net impact of marriage equality, according to the CBO, would be a federal budget savings of nearly \$1 billion per year.

Beyond those stats, there’s common sense. Married couples buy houses and invest in their families’ futures. According to the Adoption Family Center, there are an estimated 8 to 10 million children being reared in gay and lesbian households. Marriage — same-sex or opposite-sex — is good for the economy. And marriage equality would be very good for those 8 to 10 million children the so-called “pro-family” forces don’t see — or care about — as they continue the holy war against those kids’ parents. Is that Christian?

Albeit briefly, Sheldon did flirt with the truth. “Commitment” and “marriage” and the “families” they create are indeed fundamental to civilization. The U.S. Supreme Court reaffirmed that self-evident truth in its 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* ruling striking down laws against interracial civil unions: marriage is “one of the basic civil rights of man” and the freedom to marry is “essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness.”

But nothing else Sheldon said had any basis in reality or truth. All of it was a calculated lie. All of it was meant to scare people and incite homophobia and the violence such self-righteous hatred inevitably inspires. It didn't work in Bakersfield. But keep up the ranting bravado, Rev. Sheldon. The more "absurd" and "ridiculous" your rhetoric (and that of the other minions in the evangelical Christian Right) becomes, the more transparent it becomes.

An April 5, 2005 posting on a web site dedicated to ferreting out moronic statements (www.morons.org) said it well: "With every passing day, the ultra-right-wing neocon rhetoric gets more insane. This may be happening because the neocon agenda requires constantly shocking and scaring people, which requires a more shocking and more scary story each time. The good news is that eventually they go so far off the deep end that any sane person must dismiss their baffleleg as crazed fantasy."

Another pillar of the evangelical Christian Right is Dr. James Dobson of Focus on the Family (and SpongeBob) fame. In a November 12, 2004 article Michael Crowley, a senior editor at the New Republic, dubbed James Dobson "the religious right's new kingmaker" and "America's most influential evangelical leader, with a following reportedly greater than that of either Falwell or Robertson at [their] peak." Nevertheless, Dobson's arguments are as absurd and ridiculous as Sheldon's. For example, in his book *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win This Battle*, he listed eleven allegedly "factual" arguments against same-sex marriage:

1. The legalization of homosexual marriage will quickly destroy the traditional family.
2. Children will suffer the most.
3. Public schools in every state will embrace homosexuality.
4. Adoption laws will be instantly obsolete.
5. Foster-care programs will be impacted dramatically.
6. The health care system will stagger and perhaps collapse.
7. Social Security will be severely stressed.
8. Religious freedom will almost certainly be jeopardized.
9. Other nations are watching our march toward homosexual marriage and will follow our lead.
10. The gospel of Jesus Christ will be severely curtailed.
11. The culture war will be over, and the world may soon become "as it was in the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37).

Conjured with obvious malice aforethought, Dobson's rhetoric and lies, like Sheldon's, were crafted to scare and incite homophobia. But he outdid Sheldon with his last "argument": same-sex marriage would bring Armageddon. The words "absurd" and "ridiculous" certain do come to mind, again. [For a detailed response to Dobson's arguments see "Out of Focus on the Family: A Response to Arguments Against Same-Sex Marriage" in *Popular Culture Review*, 16:1 (February 2005), 45-75.]

In a way, you have to pity the Sheldons and Dobsons of the world. They have so much hate inside that's all they can see outside. But their blinding hate also makes them very dangerous, as was so well expressed in 1993 by the founder of Operation Rescue and rabid homophobe Randall Terry: "I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good... Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty. We are called by God to conquer this country."

Christian conquerors. History is replete with blood-soaked Christian conquerors. From the Crusades through the 300-year Holy Inquisition, to the Salem witch hunts and the slaughter of "pagans" in the New World, Christian conquerors have committed horrific crimes against humanity. The evangelical Christian Right's political and legal campaigns against gay Americans - and all other Americans whose private or public behavior deviates from the edicts of the self-appointed spokesmen for "God" - use the same justification as those former "Christian" crusaders deployed so ruthlessly in their "holy wars."

Despite their rhetoric and actions, Sheldon and Dobson claim to be protecting and propagating what they call "traditional moral values." In the past the "traditional moral values" advocated by people like Sheldon and Dobson have included slavery, segregation, and discrimination against minorities and women. Currently that same "morality" is being used to encourage hatred of and discrimination against gay Americans.

"Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people we personally dislike."

— Oscar Wilde

"Morality is always the product of terror; its chains and strait-waistcoats are fashioned by those who dare not trust others, because they dare not trust themselves, to walk in liberty."

— Aldous Huxley

Sheldon, Dobson and the rest of the evangelical Christian Right's leaders seem to believe that "morality" is conditional upon belief in and blind obedience to the perverted version of "religion" they advocate. Gresham Riley, former president of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and president emeritus of Colorado College, addressed that mistaken link in his December 4, 2003 Op-Ed in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* following the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's ruling legalizing same-sex marriages in that state: "Religion is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for morality." Dr. Riley supported his contention by the existence of moral systems that do not depend on religion. Among his examples was the Platonic belief that moral principles are objective: "Platonic thought was the basis for many of the Enlightenment ideas of our Founding fathers, including the self-evident (to them) moral precept that all men are created equal."

(continued on page 15)

Bush Gropes, Planet Cringes

**Knead a German chancellor, banter dumbly,
reveal global ignorance. It's Dubya abroad!**

by Mark Morford, *SF Gate*, 7/19/2006

So now we know.

I mean, we sort of thought we knew, before, what kind of guy George W. Bush is, essentially our very own inept, inarticulate ex-alcoholic ex-frat-guy failed-businessman pseudo-leader who famously appeals to the most God-fearin' and least educated and least attuned among us because he is, well, one of them.

We thought we had him pegged: Just a casual and aw-shucks sort of walkin', talkin', war-happy embarrassment to the country who was rumored to be a Genuinely Nice Guy in person but who, when he traveled abroad, nevertheless caused the entire nation to pre-emptively cringe in preparation for all sorts of imminent humiliations and lots of hilarious-yet-excruciating new material for "The Complete Bushisms."

But every so often we get a glimpse of just a little more. Or, rather, less. Of what lies just beneath that carefully controlled sheen of White House spin, what happens when Dubya is away from his handlers and his prefab scripts. We get a hint of just what fuels that clueless amble, that Chosen One bumble, that graceless and decidedly dorky sort of approach to everything from ordering a Diet Coke to comprehending Middle East chaos.

Witness, won't you, the latest in a huge pile of embarrassing Bush-on-tape moments. (Warning: Not for the faint of intellect.)

Here he is, the leader of the Free World, fresh off being caught on a live microphone at the Group of Eight summit meeting muttering to his favorite poodle Tony Blair, using his bestest Texas-boy shtick, that if them gul-dang Syrians would just tell Hezbollah to knock this s— off, everything would be dandy ...

Here is the president of the most powerful nation on the planet, fresh from an awkward smackdown by Vladimir Putin on Bush's failed war in Iraq, muttering to Blair and Chinese President Hu Jintao, actually more amazed and confounded by the fact that Jintao's flight home takes about as long as Bush's to Washington ...

(Bush: "You eight hours? Me too. Russia's a big country and you're a big country. Takes him eight hours to fly home ... Russia's big and so is China. Yo Blair, what're you doing? Are you leaving?" Ah, dumb-guy banter. Makes you feel proud all over, no?)

And now, the icing on the giant cake o' domestic torture. Here is Dubya, strolling speedily into a G-8 summit meeting where powerful, intent world leaders are already

gathered to discuss, presumably, serious issues of the day, walking straight up to a seated German Chancellor Angela Merkel and giving her a weird, unsolicited shoulder rub from behind, before dashing to his seat. Oh yes he did.

The pictures, the video reveal all. Merkel reacts accordingly, is instantly creeped out, cringes and shrugs Bush away with a look of surprised revulsion.

Dubya is, of course, oblivious. His expression is his classic blank "Who, me?" stare that recalls a child caught eating a live grasshopper. He looks right past Merkel and quickly dashes away as though nothing had happened, as if the powerful German leader didn't just recoil visibly at his very touch.

It all happens in about four seconds. It is merely, on the surface, a minor infraction, a stupid gesture, a "what-the-hell?" moment you want to forget immediately but is unfortunately burned into your retina like a flaming spear of oh-please-God-no. And it speaks volumes.

Let us imagine how it would be if, say, Jacques Chirac walked up behind Condi Rice and gave her a quick little noogie on the head, on camera, before a fancy state dinner. Or maybe if Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi snuck up behind Laura Bush and gave a hearty, unexpected smack on the ass before sitting down for a chat. How charming! Or, you know, not.

Some might argue that Merkel, despite the obvious recoil, actually smiles a little after Bush grabs her (it is a little difficult to tell if it's a wince or an awkward smirk — either way, she was more than a little shocked).

Some might even suggest that Merkel and Bush have a "special" sort of odd, chummy relationship that allows him to toy with her like a kid sister or a flirty high school buddy, the kind of relationship that Bush likes best of all: devoid of seriousness or deep respect or the crucial exchange of ideas, free of that kind of icky intellectual book-learnin' that just confuses Dubya and makes him all tired and sad. And hey, maybe they're right.

Then again, this was a G-8 summit. Israel and Lebanon are burning. Iraq is in tatters. North Korea is spitting on the world. Global leaders are gathered to discuss the most pressing and violent issues on the planet, many of which the Bush administration had a clammy hand in exacerbating. Might not be the best time for the leader of the free world to give a cheesy frat-guy neck rub to his German gal-pal in front of the world media. You think?

See, now we get it. This is the bottom line, the final truth, George W. Bush in a nutshell. Bush thinks he is That Guy.

The one everybody just loves to have around, the one who sincerely thinks his goofy charm is so appealing and so innocuous and so licky-puppy friendly that he can get away with all sorts of casual infractions and weird gestures no one else would care to attempt lest they appear, you know, dorky as a pinwheel hat.

And you know what? Bush really is That Guy. Just not in the way he wants to think.

In other words, he is indeed That Guy, like the best man at the wedding party, the one standing out in the center of the room, casually and cluelessly telling off-color jokes that offend everyone but which he thinks are gul-dang hilarious and, hell, if you're offended then you're just some gul-dang hippie liberal. Haw.

He is That Guy. The one who thinks he is everybody's bestest pal, the guy everyone wants to kick back with and have a few brewskies and chat about baseball and lawn fertilizer and Jesus. After all, isn't that what we all desire of the man who decides some of the most difficult, deadly, complicated issues on the planet? Isn't that slacked, frat-guy goofiness exactly what you want trying to broker peace in the Middle East and understand global warming and stem-cell research? Sure it is.

And when it comes to women (or rather, "wimmin"), well, it's all taken one step further. Or, rather, downward. It's like an awkward scene from "The Office," where Steve Carell's character Michael Scott, the smarmy manager everyone secretly loathes but who himself believes to be the funniest and most likable and naturally gifted guy in the room, walks up to one of his female employees and grabs a mango and cracks a grossly inappropriate joke about vaginas and laughs hard, slaps everyone on the back, and then takes a big, gross bite of the mango. What a kidder!

He does not, of course, realize no one else is laughing.

Lying and Hate...

(continued from page 13)

Dr. Riley also argued that "Neither is religion a sufficient condition for moral behavior. If it were, we would not encounter so many examples of devoutly religious individuals — and of prominent religious groups — engaged in acts most people believe to be immoral. As for individuals, we have the distressing case of pedophilic Catholic priests and the suicide bombings by followers of Islam who think that killing innocents is justified on religious grounds. As for religious groups, we had evangelical Protestants who provided biblical justifications for a segregated South, and closer in time we have a Catholic hierarchy who created and sustained a culture of protection in which people were sacrificed for institutional image."

Stripped of its religious vestments, what then is "morality"? The eleventh edition of the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines it as "conformity to ideals of right human conduct." That seems simple enough. Two gay men or two lesbian women fall in love and wish to commit their lives to each other and, thereby, create a family and a home and contribute to the stability and well-being of society. In short, they wish to get married: "conformity to ideals of right human conduct." So what's the problem?

As Wilde and Huxley noted, "morality" in use, especially by politically motivated religious leaders, is purpose-driven. From Wilde's perspective, it's a means to an end: publicly expressing personal dislikes with immunity from social criticism (and legal action). From Huxley's perspective, it's also a means to an end: preventing other people from doing what the faith-based moralist is restrained from doing, just as the etymology of "religion" commands.

Religion n, [ME religioun, fr. AF religium, L religion-, religio supernatural constraint, sanction, religious practice, perh. Fr. religare to restrain, tie back].

"Religare to restrain, tie back." Spirituality is an inherent part of being human. For most it's a personally liberating and uplifting experience, an encouragement to grow and evolve to more conscious perceptions of realities and, as Huxley said, "to walk in liberty." But when personal spirituality is organized into a religion, an institution is produced and as all institutions it produces a hierarchy who concoct fundamentalist dogma that has little to do with spirituality and everything to do with maintaining social and political control. Hence, lying and hatred become not only legitimate, but "moral values" in the minds of people like Sheldon, Dobson, and the politicians who inhabit their deep pockets.

The 2006 elections would be a good time to begin to repel the "Christian" crusaders and resurrect traditional American values such as "equality and justice for all."

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"Humanists recognize that it is only when people feel free to think for themselves, using reason as their guide, that they are best capable of developing values that succeed in satisfying human needs and serving human interests."

— Isaac Asimov

"Finding that no religion is based on facts and cannot be true, I began to reflect what must be the condition of mankind trained from infancy to believe in error."

— Robert Owen

There Is No God

by Penn Jillette, 11/21/2005

I believe that there is no God. I'm beyond atheism. Atheism is not believing in God. Not believing in God is easy — you can't prove a negative, so there's no work to do. You can't prove that there isn't an elephant inside the trunk of my car. You sure? How about now? Maybe he was just hiding before. Check again. Did I mention that my personal heartfelt definition of the word "elephant" includes mystery, order, goodness, love and a spare tire?

So, anyone with a love for truth outside of herself has to start with no belief in God and then look for evidence of God. She needs to search for some objective evidence of a supernatural power. All the people I write e-mails to often are still stuck at this searching stage. The atheism part is easy.

But, this "This I Believe" thing seems to demand something more personal, some leap of faith that helps one see life's big picture, some rules to live by. So, I'm saying, "This I believe: I believe there is no God."

Having taken that step, it informs every moment of my life. I'm not greedy. I have love, blue skies, rainbows and Hallmark cards, and that has to be enough. It has to be enough, but it's everything in the world and everything in the world is plenty for me. It seems just rude to beg the invisible for more. Just the love of my family that raised me and the family I'm raising now is enough that I don't need heaven. I won the huge genetic lottery and I get joy every day.

Believing there's no God means I can't really be forgiven except by kindness and faulty memories. That's good; it makes me want to be more thoughtful. I have to try to treat people right the first time around.

Believing there's no God stops me from being solipsistic. I can read ideas from all different people from all different cultures. Without God, we can agree on reality, and I can keep learning where I'm wrong. We can all keep adjusting, so we can really communicate. I don't travel in circles where people say, "I have faith, I believe this in my heart and nothing you can say or do can shake my faith." That's just a long-winded religious way to say, "shut up," or another two words that the FCC likes less. But all obscenity is less insulting than, "How I was brought up and my imaginary friend means more to me than anything you can ever say or do." So, believing there is no God lets me be proven wrong and that's always fun. It means I'm learning something.

Believing there is no God means the suffering I've seen in my family, and indeed all the suffering in the world, isn't caused by an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent force that isn't bothered to help or is just testing us, but rather something we all may be able to help others with in the future. No God means the possibility of less suffering in the future.

Believing there is no God gives me more room for belief in family, people, love, truth, beauty, sex, Jell-O and all the other things I can prove and that make this life the best life I will ever have.

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