



# 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).

## From the Editor

### Life, Death, and... Neither

My father's cousin, Harold Adams, is quite a character.

He's always been cranky and extremely opinionated (and yes, a bit prejudiced). He was always socially awkward — the 20 years he served in the army were the best time of his life. He never married, never had kids, and lives alone in utter squalor, in an old house in Richardson, Texas.

His favorite pastime is making long, cross-country driving trips, to visit old army buddies and family members. He's got a fair amount of money, but has always refused to spend it on himself, wearing ancient, threadbare clothes rather than buy anything new, and preferring to sleep in his car on road trips, rather than stay in a motel.

He's also the family's only other atheist — and you can't help but love the old coot.

He's always been fiercely independent, swearing that he'd rather die than be hooked up to tubes in some nursing home. Unfortunately, it looks like he's heading for a nursing home anyway.

Two weeks ago, Harold had a massive stroke. He was found on the floor of his bedroom by a neighbor who checks up on him from time to time. We think he may have been on the floor for at least a day or two.

He was stiff — like rigor mortis — but still alive. The neighbor called an ambulance, and they rushed him to the hospital, and put breathing tubes in him.

Angela and I received word the next day, when the neighbor went through Harold's house looking for phone numbers of family members to call. Since Harold gave me his legal and medical powers of attorney years ago for just such an emergency, I faxed the papers to the hospital, and have been taking care of Harold's needs since.

At first, it looked like he wouldn't survive — his brain continued to swell (and become damaged) for days longer than it "should" have. But, he finally improved. He is now awake, and can speak, somewhat. Part of the right side of his brain has died; he is now paralyzed on the left side.

(continued on page 4)



Harold Adams, when he came to visit last year.

## CSS Meetings and Events

### Calendar:

Saturday, Apr 21<sup>st</sup> 2:00-4:00 CSS regular meeting

**Special Event at Corvallis Public Library:**  
Thursday, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 6:00-9:00 "Root of All Evil?"

Saturday, May 19<sup>th</sup> 2:00-4:00 CSS regular meeting

Saturday, Jun 16<sup>th</sup> 1:00-4:00 CSS potluck

### 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).

## In this issue:

- CSS Guest Member Column p.2
- Voice of an Angel p.5
- Koran Cited in Rejecting Divorce p.5
- For God's Sake p.6
- The Age of Darwin p.7
- Campaigning on a Wing and a Prayer p.8
- Special Event for Day of Reason! p.9
- Saint Gasoline p.10

# CSS Member Guest Column

## About Intercessory Prayer: A Proposal ... Maybe

by Gil Gaudia, Ph.D.

[This article is adapted from one that appeared in *Medscape* in March of 2007: "About Intercessory Prayer: The Scientific Study of Miracles", <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/552742> ]

In March of 2005, my article "Searching in the Darkness: About Prayer and Medical Cures" was published as a commentary in *Medscape General Medicine*. (1) I was motivated to write it after seeing that there were fifteen articles listed in *Medscape* on the subject of "intercessory prayer," and I found it hard to believe that so many researchers would spend their time on such an endeavor. Many of these studies were aimed at investigating the possibility that prayer could influence the outcome of a variety of medical conditions ranging from infertility to cardiac surgery. This occurred shortly after the exposure of "the Columbia University prayer fiasco" (2) and I believed that, in its aftermath, we would begin to see a diminution of interest in this allegedly scientific area of research. Yesterday, I put the word "prayer" into *Medscape's* search engine, and to my astonishment, it provided me with a list of 136 articles.

In disbelief, I went to Google, and entered the search words, "intercessory", "prayer", "cure" and "medicine," and it yielded 206,000 "hits" – an avalanche of articles that are now apparently available about this current preoccupation of American medicine. (3)

Let me emphatically state that I do not criticize anyone for praying for themselves or anyone else if they choose to. Nor do I deny that there may be benefits to some individuals that stem from prayer and similar practices like meditation or relaxation. Along with placebo effects, the alleged benefits may be the result of feelings of well-being, optimism and confidence, that result from praying. I agree, all of this may exist. I hasten to point out, though, that some studies indicate that there may also be certain disadvantages that accrue from similar psychological and physiological mechanisms. (4)

But the interaction of psychology and physiology is not the reason why I am writing about this issue. The real point is what most people mean when they say, "I'll pray for you." The meaning implies a request for intercession from a "higher power." What these references to prayer mean, is that the wishes of the supplicants will be heard by some agent and – If the agent is convinced to act – the course of events will be changed for the better, in accordance with the prayer.

Here's the incredible irony of all of the previous "experiments." Every one of them has been seeking evidence of a most trivial kind (that could even be mistaken for a placebo effect, or a statistical artifact) from an alleged

power of the most unimaginable magnitude. Power which presumably was the source of the incredible creation of hundreds of billions of galaxies, which are composed of hundreds of trillions of stars, dotted with singularities and "black holes" possessing immense gravity and crushing annihilatory densities; all of which are dancing with exquisite accuracy in spectacular elliptical orbits over a span of fourteen billion light years; power that has designed astonishingly complex molecular systems, composed of amazingly intricate atomic foundations, all operating according to the mechanics of gravity and other little-understood forces which bind atomic nuclei together while swarms of electrons maintain their balance around their stupendously dense centers in microscopic imitation of the grander galaxies; power which orchestrated the rules of light propagation and spectrums of colors all arranged in fantastically diverse, visible as well as invisible, wavelengths and patterns.

Meanwhile, they seek evidence of this breathtaking immensity by searching for a measurable difference between the arterial blood flow of a few cardiovascular patients who were prayed for and a few other unfortunates who were not . . . a difference in blood pressure between one group of hypertensives who were prayed for and another who were not. It is as if one were asking a composer with a quadrillion times the musical capacity and comprehension of a Ludwig Von Beethoven to demonstrate his musicianship by writing out the notes to "Mary had a Little Lamb."

It is disheartening to see the number of supposedly educated and intelligent professionals who are involved in the futile process of attempting to investigate that which cannot be part of the physical universe, and hence, not open to scientific examination. As I quoted him in my earlier article, Desiderius Erasmus described these people as "looking in utter darkness for that which has no existence whatsoever." (5)

Leading the field in these studies is Duke University which has a long history of interest in arcane practices, going back to the work of J. B. Rhine as early as 1927. Rhine was interested in mediums, the afterlife, telepathy and clairvoyance and as the originator of the terms "extra sensory perception" (ESP) and "psychokinesis" (PK), he provided "legitimacy" and material for prestidigitators, psychics and entertainers like Uri Geller (of spoon-bending fame), while maintaining that he was advancing a new field of science he called "parapsychology." (6)

The issue is about prayer to a deity or his representative – beings that do not exist within the known physical universe, a qualification acknowledged even by educated

believers, which should include medical researchers. What has to be understood is that those who believe in God and the power of prayer, are speaking of concepts that are not material and therefore not part of the real world. Yet they want to connect these phantasms with the scientifically demonstrated forces and structures of the physical world. . . . and moreover, have their influences measured in experiments.

If they were speaking of magic or sorcery, they would, and probably do, agree that these ideas are ridiculous and consist of superstition at best. In only one area, the field of Judeo-Christian theology, are the very same phantasms accorded the status of legitimate entity, and amenable to scientific scrutiny. Why? Why are Judeo-Christian ideas – superstitions by any accepted taxonomy of logic – allowed to maintain a grip on, not only political, social and economic values in our society, but on scientific ones as well?

### The Proposal

I have an idea about how to put this question to rest and settle things in a rational and truly scientific manner, one that would yield clear-cut results. Critics who claim that skeptical scientists are biased against religion, will now have an easy solution at their disposal, and that will be in the form of a definitive experiment. I propose an experiment on intercessory prayer, the results of which will leave no doubt about God's ability to heal the sick or the infirm. I got the idea after being inspired by a website named [whydoesgodhateamputees.com](http://whydoesgodhateamputees.com). The experiment is simple, and it could provide us with the definitive proof of the power of prayer and a lot else that has to do with religion.

This is how it could be done. All that would be required is the recruitment of thousands of amputees as subjects (who undoubtedly would love to regain their lost limbs) and millions of believers who will earnestly pray over them who (given the current American obsession with religion) should not be hard to locate. The investigators could employ as many universities and people as possible – all the willing believers in the country if necessary – to pray every day for a year that at least one amputee would have a limb regrown, and then, at the end of that year, examine all the thousands of amputees for signs of regenerating limbs.

If everyone who believes in the efficacy of prayer, prays that at least one amputee in the sample group will regenerate a new limb, and this occurs, it could offer incontrovertible proof of the power of intercessory prayer.

Any amputee who wants to be included in the experimental group would be examined beforehand by a panel of physicians to ascertain that he or she is indeed an amputee. DNA samples on the subjects would be taken before and after the study to ascertain that the amputee identified at the beginning would indeed be the person who was examined a year later. There would be no limit on the sample size. No need for randomization, t-tests, analyses of variance, factor analyses, significance levels or confidence intervals. The subjects would present themselves at the end

of the year and be examined to see if a single missing limb had been restored. Any priest, minister, rabbi or lay person would be permitted to recommend subjects for the experiment, and any could observe the examination for the regenerated limbs. There should be no limitation on the number of amputees, people who pray for them, and observers to keep everything on the up and up. When a single limb has thus been observed to have been regenerated, then we will have seen unequivocal evidence for the power of prayer.

How petty and insulting to whatever deity these investigators claim to be investigating, when the most they can ask of that which has created biological systems from algae to sequoia gigantica and amoebas to human brains – “Let me see if you can fertilize this ovum in a Petri dish with one of your hands tied behind your back.”

Let's see a real test put before the immovable object; the irresistible force; the ultimate omniscience, the omnipotent, omnipresent supremacy of all that the believers in a supernatural being endow that Master Architect with. The creator of the entire universe would have no problem recreating a limb.

### And Now About The “Maybe”

Oops! Forgot about David Hume! (7) The warning issued by the great Scottish philosopher goes like this: “No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be even more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish. . . .” Hume concludes his point by saying:

When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, [ed: or a limb regenerated?] I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

You have my apologies, Mr. Hume, maybe a limb won't do after all.

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### Comments by CSS President

Bruce Flamm, in his article, "The Columbia University 'miracle' study: flawed and fraud" (*Skeptical Inquirer*, Sep-Oct 2004) ([http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2843/is\\_5\\_28/ai\\_n6194238/pg\\_1](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2843/is_5_28/ai_n6194238/pg_1), page 6), wrote (this was quoted in Gil's earlier (3/02/2005) article at <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/498576>, "Searching in the Darkness: About Prayer and Medical Cures"):

"It must be emphasized that, in the entire history of modern science, no claim of any type of supernatural phenomena has ever been replicated under strictly controlled conditions. The importance of this fact cannot be overstated. One would think that all medical journal editors would be keenly aware of this fact and therefore be highly skeptical of paranormal or supernatural claims. One must therefore wonder if the Columbia researchers and the JRM editors were blinded by religious beliefs. Everything else being equal, if the claimed supernatural intervention had been Ms. Cleo manipulating Tarot cards rather than Christians praying, would the reviewers and editors have taken this study seriously? In any case, the damage has been done. The fact that a 'miracle cure' study was deemed to be suitable for publication in a scientific journal automatically enhanced the study's credibility. Not surprisingly, the news media quickly disseminated the 'miraculous' results."

Prayer doesn't have a prayer.

*John Dearing*  
President of CSS

**However un-Christian this may sound, I am not even predisposed against myself.**

— Friedrich Nietzsche

## From the Editor...

(continued from page 1)

Harold can understand people to some extent, and try to mumble answers to questions, but it's obvious that he will never be independent again.

I explained to the hospital that Harold wouldn't want to live like this — but a Do Not Resuscitate order only applies BEFORE the hospital begins treatment. By the time I had received word of the stroke, it was already too late to prevent treatment.

So now, medical science (and good old American "ethics") have once again resulted in an elderly person, half alive, dependent on others for everything, who isn't really himself anymore, hardly understands what's happening — and who, if he DID understand, would rather shoot himself than continue living like this.

And that's where we stand. Harold can breathe and swallow on his own, so he's been transferred to a physical therapy facility, where they will try to make him as strong as possible. In 2-3 weeks, he will be transferred to a nursing home. In the meanwhile, Angela and I will start handling his bills, and try to get some daring person to enter his house and get rid of any perishables...

Harold's been ready to die for a long time. His army buddies are all dead or dying, and he had already become too decrepit to take another driving trip to visit them anyway (the cops pulled him over and towed his car at least 4-5 times on his trip last year, for being a menace on the road).

He had run out of things to live for.

Part of me is relieved that Harold is still alive — I would hate the thought that it was my word that caused someone to die. But part of me feels that I have failed him. That I should have fought harder, done more somehow, to make sure his wishes were honored.

Angela has already told me that she feels as Harold does — if she's ever faced with life dependent on others for everything, or hooked up to tubes, she'd rather not live at all. Me? I'm more of a coward. I wouldn't want to be a burden on anyone, but all things considered, I think I'd rather live.

This is obviously a very difficult, personal choice. But I think that we, as a nation, really need to understand that Life At All Costs is not always a good answer. We obviously never want to **encourage** suicide under any circumstances — but when someone (anyone) is truly ready to go, they should be allowed some easy way to die with dignity.

Forcing someone as strong-willed and independent as Harold to live confused, half-paralyzed, and helpless in a wheelchair in some nursing home, is simply cruel.

*Reed Byers*  
Editor, *Willamette Freethinker*

# Voice of an Angel

## Medical Ethics

As our medical technology advances further and further each year, I begin to wonder how quickly our medical ethics are keeping up. Just because we CAN do something, does that mean we SHOULD? Do we keep people alive at all cost? And in the end, just how morally expensive does that cost get?

An elderly man of nearly 90-years-old has lead a full and happy life. He's made peace with his life and he's had his affairs in order for years. He's arranged for a person to handle his affairs (both financial and medical) and he's made it VERY clear he does NOT want to live if he becomes medically incapacitated. He did not want to live hooked up to tubes or machines. Said elderly man has a massive stroke leaving him permanently paralyzed on one side of his body and with extensive brain damage.

The doctors begin to hook the man up to all sorts of machines as soon as he arrives at the hospital. They do not stop to ask if that's what he wanted — after all, time is short and they choose to err on the side of keeping the shell alive. Yet once the tubes ARE in, there are no "ethics" in place to remove them. They say things like, "if we had only known, we would not have done it." Yet when they DO know, they refuse to intervene. In fact, the man tells them himself! After almost a week, the man becomes barely alert. They ask him two questions:

**Q: What is your name?**

**A: [He gives his name.]**

**Q: Can we do anything for you?**

**A: Pull the plug.**

"Best" case is the man ends up in a nursing home in diapers, unable to care for himself. He can not communicate and can barely swallow thick liquids.

Which is the more "ethical" situation?

1. Honor his wishes. Remove all medical aid and give him enough drugs to "make him comfortable". Let him die in peace.

2. Force drugs and nutrition into him. Put him into a nursing home where he can linger in a nightmare for several months before he eventually dies.

There are many out there who keep the elderly alive at all cost. They insert feeding tubes in hopes of keeping an empty shell around for a few more years. Most often these "advocates" are religious people. It amazes me how much religious people will fight tooth and nail to keep someone "alive", even when that life is a nightmare. These people believe in an afterlife — they think that "Heaven awaits" for everyone. So why torture an elderly person in a life where there is "nobody home"? It's utter and pure selfishness.

I do not advocate killing anyone. I have always been a strong advocate for the rights of the elderly. So I simply ask, shouldn't we honor the elderly who has made their wishes clear? I begin to wonder if someone has get a tattoo of "DNR" (Do Not Resuscitate) across their forehead before their wishes ARE followed?

There comes a time when we have to pause and reflect on how far we have come. Surely there has to be SOME way to make sure our medical wishes are followed. Maybe, even a way to share our medical history with doctors if we are found unconscious. Perhaps some sort of microchip implanted under the skin...

Uh-oh, that's a whole new can of worms!

*Angela Byers*

CSS Treasurer & Webmaster

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## Koran Cited in Rejecting Divorce

by Mark Landler, *New York Times*, 3/22/2007

FRANKFURT — A German judge has stirred a storm of protest here by citing the Koran in turning down a German Muslim woman's request for a fast-track divorce on the ground that her husband beat her.

In a remarkable ruling that underlines the tension between Muslim customs and European laws, the judge, Christa Datz-Winter, said that the couple came from a Moroccan cultural milieu, in which she said it was common for husbands to beat their wives. The Koran, she wrote, sanctions such physical abuse.

News of the ruling brought swift and sharp condemnation from politicians, legal experts, and Muslim leaders in Germany, many of whom said they were confounded that a German judge would put 7th-century Islamic religious teaching ahead of modern German law in deciding a case involving domestic violence.

The woman's lawyer, Barbara Becker-Rojczyk, said she decided to publicize the ruling, which was issued in January, after the court refused her request for a new judge. On Wednesday, the court in Frankfurt abruptly removed Judge Datz-Winter from the case, saying it could not justify her reasoning.

"It was terrible for my client," Ms. Becker-Rojczyk said of the ruling. "This man beat her seriously from the beginning of their marriage. After they separated, he called her and threatened to kill her."

While legal experts said the ruling was a judicial misstep rather than evidence of a broader trend, it comes at a time of rising tension in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, as authorities in many fields struggle to reconcile Western values with their countries' burgeoning Muslim minorities.

# For God's Sake

by Paul Krugman, *New York Times*, 4/13/2007

In 1981, Gary North, a leader of the Christian Reconstructionist movement — the openly theocratic wing of the Christian right — suggested that the movement could achieve power by stealth. “Christians must begin to organize politically within the present party structure,” he wrote, “and they must begin to infiltrate the existing institutional order.”

Today, Regent University, founded by the televangelist Pat Robertson to provide “Christian leadership to change the world,” boasts that it has 150 graduates working in the Bush administration.

Unfortunately for the image of the school, where Mr. Robertson is chancellor and president, the most famous of those graduates is Monica Goodling, a product of the university’s law school. She’s the former top aide to Alberto Gonzales who appears central to the scandal of the fired U.S. attorneys and has declared that she will take the Fifth rather than testify to Congress on the matter.

The infiltration of the federal government by large numbers of people seeking to impose a religious agenda — which is very different from simply being people of faith — is one of the most important stories of the last six years. It’s also a story that tends to go underreported, perhaps because journalists are afraid of sounding like conspiracy theorists.

But this conspiracy is no theory. The official platform of the Texas Republican Party pledges to “dispel the myth of the separation of church and state.” And the Texas Republicans now running the country are doing their best to fulfill that pledge.

Kay Cole James, who had extensive connections to the religious right and was the dean of Regent’s government school, was the federal government’s chief personnel officer from 2001 to 2005. (Curious fact: she then took a job with Mitchell Wade, the businessman who bribed Representative Randy “Duke” Cunningham.) And it’s clear that unqualified people were hired throughout the administration because of their religious connections.

For example, The Boston Globe reports on one Regent law school graduate who was interviewed by the Justice Department’s civil rights division. Asked what Supreme Court decision of the past 20 years he most disagreed with, he named the decision to strike down a Texas anti-sodomy law. When he was hired, it was his only job offer.

Or consider George Deutsch, the presidential appointee at NASA who told a Web site designer to add the word “theory” after every mention of the Big Bang, to leave open the possibility of “intelligent design by a creator.” He turned out not to have, as he claimed, a degree from Texas A&M.

One measure of just how many Bushies were appointed to promote a religious agenda is how often a Christian right connection surfaces when we learn about a Bush administration scandal.

There’s Ms. Goodling, of course. But did you know that Rachel Paulose, the U.S. attorney in Minnesota —

three of whose deputies recently stepped down, reportedly in protest over her management style — is, according to a local news report, in the habit of quoting Bible verses in the office?

Or there’s the case of Claude Allen, the presidential aide and former deputy secretary of health and human services, who stepped down after being investigated for petty theft. Most press reports, though they mentioned Mr. Allen’s faith, failed to convey the fact that he built his career as a man of the hard-line Christian right.

And there’s another thing most reporting fails to convey: the sheer extremism of these people.

You see, Regent isn’t a religious university the way Loyola or Yeshiva are religious universities. It’s run by someone whose first reaction to 9/11 was to brand it God’s punishment for America’s sins.

Two days after the terrorist attacks, Mr. Robertson held a conversation

with Jerry Falwell on Mr. Robertson’s TV show “The 700 Club.” Mr. Falwell laid blame for the attack at the feet of “the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians,” not to mention the A.C.L.U. and People for the American Way. “Well, I totally concur,” said Mr. Robertson.

The Bush administration’s implosion clearly represents a setback for the Christian right’s strategy of infiltration. But it would be wildly premature to declare the danger over. This is a movement that has shown great resilience over the years. It will surely find new champions.

Next week Rudy Giuliani will be speaking at Regent’s Executive Leadership Series.

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# The Age of Darwin

by David Brooks, *New York Times*, 4/15/2007

[Editor's Note: *Listen to Brooks try to make evolution and science out to just be fads, like everything else...*]

Standing on a hill in East Jerusalem, amid the clash of religious and political orthodoxies, stands a musty old museum devoted to human progress. When you walk into the Rockefeller Museum with its old-fashioned display cases crowded with ancient pottery shards and oil lamps, you can begin by looking at the stone tools of early man. Then you proceed room by room through the invention of agriculture and cities, winding up finally with the statues and reliquaries of the medieval era.

What you're really looking at is a philosophy of history. The museum was set up in 1938, when scholars still spoke confidently of mankind's upward march from primitive culture to higher civilization. History is portrayed here as a great, unified story, with crucial pivot moments when humanity leapt forward — when people first buried their dead, when they moved from animistic faiths to polytheism, when they learned to cultivate reason and philosophy.

These days, historians hate those kinds of unifying grand narratives, and the idea that history is a march of progress upward to the present. Yet I have to confess, I loved the Rockefeller Museum. Though it's dense and dry, it rekindled the University of Chicago flame that lingers in every graduate's soul and got me thinking all sorts of Big Thoughts. I also had the sensation — which I used to get during those sweeping old Western Civ courses — of seeing my own time from the outside, from the vantage point of some ancient spot.

And it occurred to me that while we postmoderns say we detest all-explaining narratives, in fact a newish grand narrative has crept upon us willy-nilly and is now all around. Once the Bible shaped all conversation, then Marx, then Freud, but today Darwin is everywhere.

Scarcely a month goes by when Time or Newsweek doesn't have a cover article on how our genes shape everything from our exercise habits to our moods. Science sections are filled with articles on how brain structure influences things like lust and learning. Neuroscientists debate the existence of God on the best-seller lists, while evolutionary theory reshapes psychology, dieting and literary criticism. Confident and exhilarated, evolutionary theorists believe they have a universal framework to explain human behavior.

**According to this view, human beings, like all other creatures, are machines for passing along genetic code. We are driven primarily by a desire to perpetuate ourselves and our species.**

**Evolution doesn't really lead to anything outside itself. Individuals are predisposed not by innate sinfulness or virtue, but by the epigenetic rules encoded in their cells.**

Creationists reject the whole business, but they're like the Greeks who still worshiped Athena while Plato and Aristotle practiced philosophy. The people who set the cultural tone today have coalesced around a shared understanding of humanity and its history that would have astonished people in earlier epochs.

According to this view, human beings, like all other creatures, are machines for passing along genetic code. We are driven primarily by a desire to perpetuate ourselves and our species.

The logic of evolution explains why people vie for status, form groups, fall in love and cherish their young. It holds that most everything that exists does so for a purpose. If some trait, like emotion, can cause big problems, then it must

also provide bigger benefits, because nature will not expend energy on things that don't enhance the chance of survival.

Human beings, in our current understanding, are jerry-built creatures, in which new, sophisticated faculties are piled on top of primitive earlier ones. Our genes were formed during the vast stretches when people were hunters and gatherers, and we are now only semi-adapted to the age of nuclear weapons and fast food. Furthermore, reason is not separate from emotion and the soul cannot be detached from the electrical and chemical pulses of the body. There isn't even a single seat of authority in the brain. The mind emerges (somehow) from a complex light show of neural firings without a center or executive. We are tools of mental processes we are not even aware of.

The cosmologies of the societies represented in the Rockefeller Museum looked up toward the transcendent. Their descendants still fight over sacred spots like the Holy of Holies a short walk away. But the evolutionary society is built low to the ground. God may exist and may have set the process in motion, but he's not active. Evolution doesn't really lead to anything outside itself. Individuals are predisposed not by innate sinfulness or virtue, but by the epigenetic rules encoded in their cells.

Looking at contemporary America from here in Jerusalem and from the ancient past, it's clear we're not a postmodern society anymore. We have a grand narrative that explains behavior and gives shape to history. We have a central cosmology to embrace, argue with or unconsciously submit to.

# Now They're Campaigning on a Wing and a Prayer

by Ellen Goodman, *Boston Globe*, 3/23/2007

He's not exactly a profile in courage. After all, Pete Stark is 75 and has represented his liberal district near San Francisco for more than 30 years. It's unlikely that he'll be tarred and feathered or sent packing for admitting that he's, well, a godless politician.

Nevertheless, last week Stark broke a political taboo. He became the first member of Congress to say publicly that he doesn't believe in "a supreme being." The next most powerful politician to identify himself as a "non-theist" in response to a question by the Secular Coalition for America was a school board president in Berkeley.

Some described Stark's admission as "coming out of the closet." Others rued the fact that God was not on his side. A spokesman for the Concerned Women for America unabashedly bashed him, saying that "a Christian worldview is proper for a politician to have."

Not surprisingly, Stark has no ambitions for the presidency. In one of those endless polls surveying whether we are "ready for" a black, a woman, a Jew, or others to be president, only 14 percent of Americans believe we're ready for an atheist. What Stark has done, however, is open a fresh chapter in this year's hefty book on presidential politics and religion.

Until the Stark moment, what captured media attention has been the subtle and not-so-subtle focus on Mitt Romney and his Mormon faith. Will his religion hurt his chances for the Republican nomination? How much?

I've been especially struck by this because I was a young reporter in Detroit when Romney's father, George, was governor of Michigan. I barely heard a peep about George Romney's faith even though at the time his church still banned blacks from the priesthood. I didn't even know George's grandfather had five wives. In 1967, this Romney's campaign to be the moderate, anti war Republican president foundered after he admitted being "brainwashed" about the Vietnam War. It had nothing to do with faith.

What happened between 1967 and 2007? How did the matter of someone's religion get back into the dead center of the public square, not to mention the cable shows and the blogosphere?

The first Romney came to political prominence after the postwar growth of ecumenical suburbs and after Jack Kennedy's famous speech: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute — where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be

Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote."

"I do not speak for my church on public matters — and the church does not speak for me," said Kennedy.

JFK's pivotal speech and his election seemed to take religion off the public table.

Fast-forward to the rise of the Moral Majority. In 1976 Jerry Falwell offered his very un-JFK opinion: "The idea that religion and politics don't mix was invented by the devil to keep Christians from running their own country."

Over the following generation, the religious right bonded to the Republican Party. It also grabbed the idea that traditional religion was the only way to frame the moral dimensions of a public issue.

So now we hear strategists calculating Mitt Romney's chances as The Mormon Candidate. One reporter even asked Romney the Mormon version of the "boxers or briefs" question: Does he wear temple garments, the special underwear of his church? Romney himself reassured a meeting of evangelical leaders that he too believes in the virgin birth, the crucifixion, and resurrection. Are these on the religious right's ecclesiastical checklist for president?

In the past several years many Americans have tried to decouple "religious" from "right." Prominent evangelicals are trying to expand the conversation about values from gay marriage to the environment, from abortion to poverty. At the same time, there are progressives as well as conservatives who connect their religious beliefs to public policy. And Democrats too are urged to wear their religion on their sleeves and in their speeches.

In 1967 and in 2007, the values of many — maybe most — Americans feel rooted in religion. As a society we need to have conversations about right and wrong. But in this increasingly pluralistic country we also need to uphold the idea that morals are not the exclusive property of any one religion. More controversially, we need to welcome the idea that values are not the exclusive property of religion itself.

Pete Stark denies that it takes courage to become the first admitted non-theist in the house. "What is courageous," he adds, "is to stand up in Congress and say, 'Let's tax the rich and give money to poor kids.'" "There are many ways to be a true believer.

# Special Event for the National Day of Reason

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**On Thursday, May 3, from 6-9 pm  
at the Corvallis Public Library,  
Corvallis Secular Society will present:**

## **“The Root of All Evil?”**

**A British television documentary that aired January 2006,  
written and presented by Richard Dawkins,  
never broadcast in the USA!**

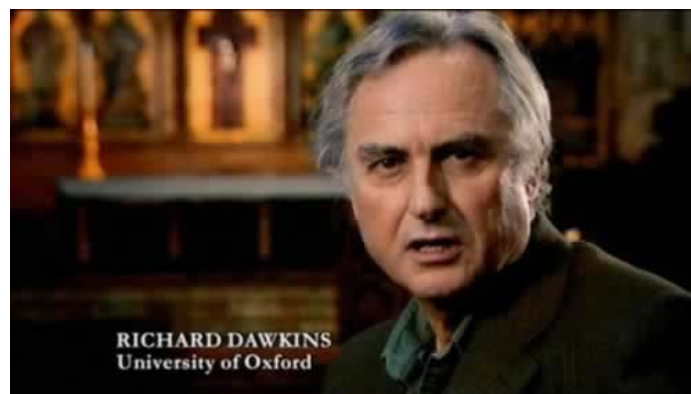
### **Part 1: The God Delusion**

“The God Delusion” explores the unproven beliefs that are treated as factual by many religions and the extremes to which some followers have taken them. Dawkins opens the programme by describing the “would-be murderers . . . who want to kill you and me, and themselves, because they’re motivated by what they think is the highest ideal.”

Dawkins argues that “the process of non-thinking called faith” is not a way of understanding the world, but instead stands in fundamental opposition to modern science and the scientific method, and is divisive and dangerous.

### **Part 2: The Virus of Faith**

In “The Virus of Faith”, Dawkins opines that the moral framework of religions is warped, and argues against the religious indoctrination of children. The title of this episode comes from *The Selfish Gene*, in which Dawkins discussed the concept of memes.

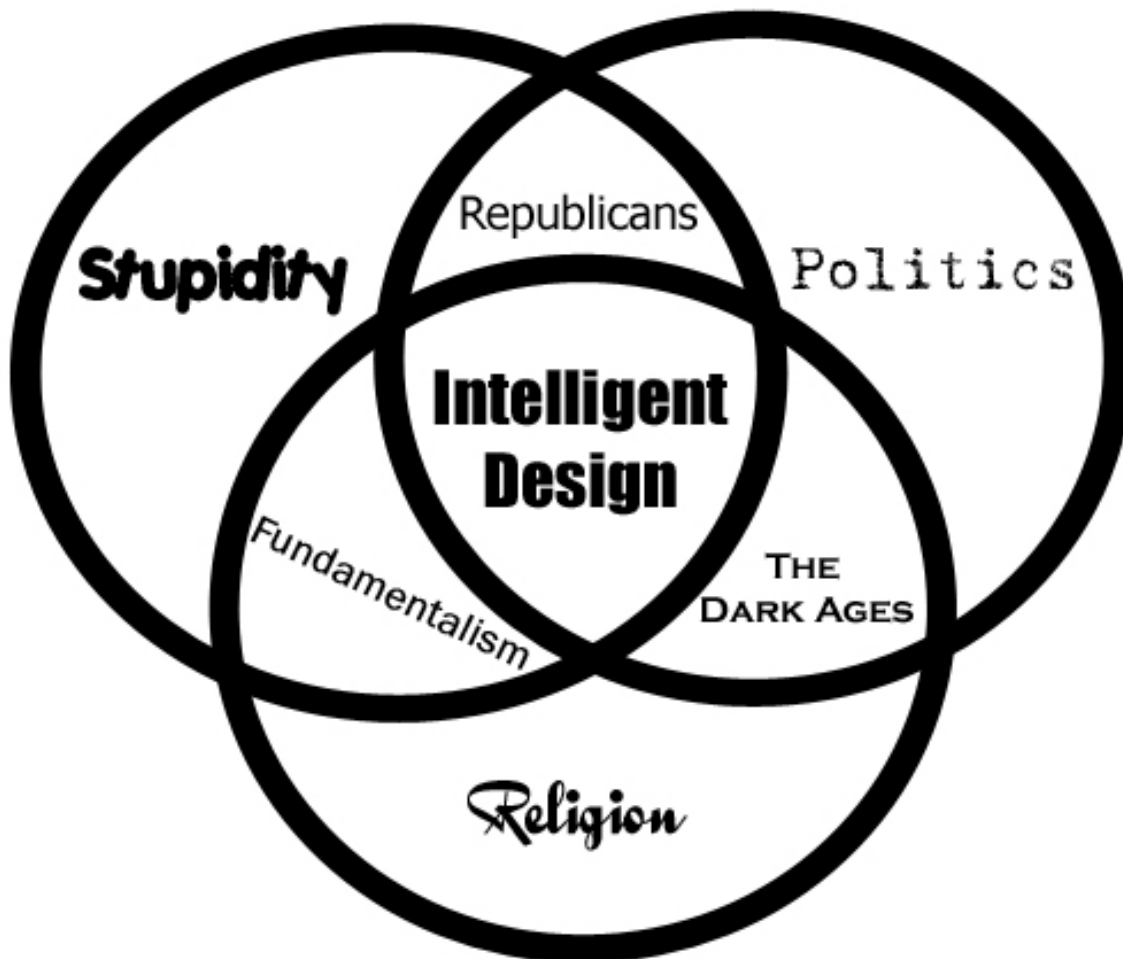



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## **About the National Day of Reason**

Many who value the separation of religion and government have sought an appropriate response to the federally-supported National Day of Prayer, an annual abuse of the constitution. Nontheistic Americans (including freethinkers, humanists, atheists, agnostics, and deists), along with many traditionally religious allies, view such government-sanctioned sectarianism as unduly exclusionary.

A consortium of leaders from within the community of reason endorsed the idea of a National Day of Reason. This observance is held in parallel with the National Day of Prayer, on the first Thursday in May (3 May 2007). The goal of this effort is to celebrate reason — a concept all Americans can support — and to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into the private sphere of worship.



\*Not to scale. Stupidity actually overlaps Religion and Politics much more than depicted.

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<p><b>To Join or Subscribe:</b></p> <p>If you enjoy reading this newsletter, and are concerned about the growing threat to the principle of Separation of Church and State in this country, then please consider joining Corvallis Secular Society, subscribing to this newsletter, or making a donation:</p> <p><b>Newsletter subscription:</b> \$18/year (\$1.50/month)  <b>Full CSS membership:</b> \$30/year (\$2.50/month)          (includes newsletter)</p> <p><b>PLEASE MAKE CHECKS OUT TO "CSS", AND MAIL TO OUR TREASURER.</b> ↗</p> <p>Memberships and newsletter subscriptions are on a calendar-year basis (i.e. they always expire in December), and we prefer they not be renewed for more than one year at a time. People subscribing mid-year only need to pay for the remaining issues for that year. This is to keep our bookkeeping as simple as possible.</p> <p>Thank you for supporting our efforts to promote atheism, humanism, and freethought in Oregon's Willamette Valley.</p>	<p><b>Contacting Us:</b></p> <hr/> <p><b>President / Treasurer</b>      John S. Dearing          President@CorvallisSecular.org</p> <p>Use this address for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions about CSS.</li> <li>• Membership or subscription payments.</li> </ul> <p>126 NW 21<sup>st</sup> St.          Corvallis, OR. 97330          (541)754-2557</p> <hr/> <p><b>Vice President / Editor</b>      Reed H. Byers          Editor@CorvallisSecular.org</p> <p><b>Webmaster / Asst Editor</b>      Angela C. Byers          Webmaster@CorvallisSecular.org</p> <p>Use this address for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newsletter submissions.</li> <li>• Comments about the CSS web page</li> </ul> <p>3035 SE 24<sup>th</sup> Ave.          Albany, OR. 97322          (541)924-9128</p>
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