



Willamette Freethinker



Volume 14, Number 10 — October 2007

A publication of Corvallis Secular Society

<http://CorvallisSecular.org>

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

Unbeliever

This month, my inbox somehow became packed with yummy secular goodness — and I can never turn down good material. It must be time for a double-size issue! ☺

My computer nickname is, fittingly enough, “Unbeliever”. But you might be surprised to learn that I’ve actually used that name since before I realized I was an atheist...

One of my favorite series of books, since my early high school days, is *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, Unbeliever*, by Stephen R. Donaldson. Back then, they consisted of two trilogies — but Donaldson always knew there was one more story left to tell, and now, over twenty years later, he is finally writing the four-volume *Last Chronicles* (the second book of which, *Fatal Revenant*, was just published last week).

Thomas Covenant starts off as the ultimate anti-hero. He’s a leper in the “real world”, abandoned by his wife and baby son, and outcast by the small rural town where he lives. He is angry and bitter at the world. Then he gets hit by a car while crossing the street, and wakes up in another reality altogether.

In this world, health and overall “rightness” are clearly visible. Healing and other magical effects are possible by accessing the “earthpower” inherent in the rocks and trees. The beauty of the Land overwhelms Covenant — when his leprosy is healed shortly after his arrival (which the doctors had assured him was completely impossible), he insists that this must all be just a dream.

He calls himself the Unbeliever, because he cannot dare to let himself believe in a world so beautiful. Leprosy requires constant vigilance, and if he were to allow this world to seduce him and cause him to drop his guard, he would quickly die in the “real world”.

Complicating the matter, is the fact that the Land’s life and beauty are threatened by a megalomaniac being known to the locals as “Lord Foul” — and Covenant is believed to be the reincarnation of the Land’s greatest hero. His wedding ring (which he still wears) turns out to be a powerful force

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CSS Meetings and Events

Calendar:

Saturday, Oct 20th 2:00-4:00 CSS regular meeting
Saturday, Nov 17th 2:00-4:00 CSS regular meeting
Saturday, Dec 15th 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).

Wandering in a vast forest at night, I have only a faint light to guide me. A stranger appears and says to me: “My friend, you should blow out your candle in order to find your way more clearly.”

This stranger is a theologian.

— Denis Diderot, *Addition to Philosophical Thoughts* (c. 1762)

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From the President

“The Camel Is Heading For Your Tent”: The Bible Literacy Project

Guest Column by CSS member Gil Gaudia, Ph.D.

The curious thing about the old Arabic tale of the kind and considerate camel owner, is that we never seem to get it. The compassionate owner, who permitted his camel to warm his nose under his tent, was victim of his own tolerance, which eventually cost him his abode. “Oh, it’s so cold and it’s only my nose, and it won’t be any problem to you,” the camel said on the first try. But then it was more and more of the beast’s body until there was no room for the owner, when the half-ton, six-foot-tall, ruminant, “ship-of-the-desert,” had finally managed to squeeze him out of the tiny dwelling. For those who may be unfamiliar with this charming tale of dromedary “chutzpa,” its message is the equivalent of “getting your foot in the door,” or “give ‘em an inch, and they’ll take a mile,” also known as “down the slippery slope.”

So now we have to confront another camel; and it’s all about the “elective study of the Bible in high schools.” “Oh, it’s so important to know about the Bible in Western society, and most of our kids are ignorant about so much of it, and it will enhance their understanding of all of literature, and make them better-informed voters,” says this camel, which masquerades as the “Bible Literacy Project.” In my opinion, this is nothing but another Christian ploy to get the camel’s scriptural nose under the tent.

The *Bible Literacy Project* (BLP) is a study that was funded by the *John Templeton Foundation*, a Christian-oriented organization that attempts to appear ideologically neutral, but is behind many efforts to “Christianize” American politics and education, indeed the country. This “patriotic” and “education-minded” study group enlisted the Gallup Organization, Inc. to survey about a thousand high school students to determine how much they knew of the Bible, and then having created their own problem (surprise – the students didn’t know very much) they set about solving it by declaring that all of education and America will inevitably suffer from this biblical illiteracy and therefore it is imperative to teach them about the Bible.

In their report called the “Bible Literacy Report” (BLR) they state, “Our primary goal... was to establish whether the ‘best’ English teachers... think that their students need to know about the Bible in order to master the literature they are already being taught.” With all due respect to English teachers, I wonder why science, math, history, anthropology and geology teachers weren’t asked the same question with regard to their subject areas? Is it reasonable to assume that English teachers are not necessarily representative of all teachers?

Upon reading the BLR, it is difficult not to find it to be one-sided; based on egocentric assumptions of the importance

of Christianity; statistically indefensible, and logically unsound. Even more questionable is the textbook it has developed and recommends in order to rescue America from biblical illiteracy entitled, *The Bible and Its Influence*. This is a book that would be suitable for a Sunday school class where the goal was to present Christianity in the most favorable possible light — not as a seriously taught and examined subject. A casual examination of some relevant topics, such as The Ten Commandments, and The Virgin Birth, make it clear that the text glosses over any possible questions about the many critical issues surrounding these subjects, and treats them as accepted truths.

Among other things, the BLP argues that much of the meaning of other literary works is being lost because of biblical illiteracy; that there are many references to the Bible in other great literature, e.g., Shakespeare. Teaching about the Bible will make these references clear and thus increase students’ general knowledge of literature. Well, there’s plenty to understand in Shakespeare that doesn’t require ever having heard of the Bible. If it is true (as some Christian scholar is alleged to have maintained) there are “1,300 biblical allusions in Shakespeare,” it is probable that there are at least 1,300,000 allusions to other ideas, concepts and historical events. The story of Romeo and Juliet is just as meaningful and tragic whether or not one knows that when Romeo spends 40 pieces of gold to buy the poison, that Judas sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Would we say that a student couldn’t appreciate the dilemma of Oedipus unless he had previously taken a course in Greek literature? Would success in a science class be contingent upon a previous understanding of a “flat earth” view? This is nonsense.

Nobody “gets” everything that could be “gotten” out of any substantial piece of literature, and the argument, as commonsensical as it seems until one seriously examines it, is nothing more than a Christian camel’s attempt to get warm.

Would this “literature” be classified as fiction or non-fiction? Would the “objective and neutral” teachers who would be expected to stick to the curriculum ask students to criticize the “literature” as they would any other literary work that was under discussion? Which version of the Bible would be the official one for the classroom?

Would the non-believing students in the classroom be allowed to voice their skepticism about the various stories such as the description of the creation of the universe in Genesis? Would the students be allowed to discuss the plausibility of the virgin birth? The resurrection? The existence of heaven and hell? Would there be discussion of

the pornographic stories such as the seduction of Lot by his two daughters with particular emphasis on their scheme to get the old man drunk and have him impregnate them?

Would there be discussions about the genocidal behaviors, not only of Moses and other “heroes” but also of God himself? Would the inaccuracies, the inconsistencies and the serious scientific absurdities of the Bible be open to discussion?

Some apologists have maintained, “As long as teachers stick to the curriculum, this is a big step in the right direction.” How in the world would this be assured? Will schools in small towns, (in some cases everyone is a Christian and the teacher of the course is also the local minister) be able to keep the class from becoming an extension of the church? Even in larger communities that are predominantly Judeo-Christian, how will the beliefs of non-believing students be protected and expressed?

If the BLP were to become successful, the religious right will then be able to say “Well we’re a Christian nation, founded by Christians, whose money says, ‘In God We Trust,’ with a Pledge of Allegiance that proclaims we are ‘under God,’ ... and we teach the Bible in our public schools.” In short, it would be a travesty, in my opinion, if this were to become an accepted course of study in the public schools, and would further encourage the Christian right to expand their influence into the government of this country.

Here’s the irony of the BLP movement and their logic in a nutshell. They have started from the dubious assumption that a sample of forty-one English teachers know the best solution to the major educational problems in America. These teachers have allegedly said that the study of English literature is suffering from the lack of biblical literacy. But the BLP does not stop there.

While it would be difficult to list all of the other implied benefits of Bible literacy, the ones specifically stated are easy to cite. In addition to its incessant emphasis on the importance of knowledge of the Bible for understanding literature, there are also references to its significance for “understanding American and Western history, culture, religion, arts and letters, language and public rhetoric.” (p.27) Not to be forgotten are, “academic success, . . . understanding of their own culture, and just to be well-grounded citizens of the United States — to know where the institutions and ideas come from.” (p.5) In one giant leap of hyperbole, the BLP asks, “Is it possible to help reduce economic disparity through Bible literacy?” (p.27)

Since so many pandering, pious, politicians are revealing and depending upon their holy image, in order to get elected these days, another major implication is that if we want to understand the political issues and elect better congressmen and presidents, we have to know more about the disingenuous topic the politicians have decided will earn them votes. In my opinion, the BLP is less concerned about Shakespeare than it is about who runs the country, and it is very unlikely that poetry has preempted politics. They say their study has revealed that students don’t know a whole lot about literature and (presto!) the solution to the

problem is to introduce the Bible into the public schools of America.

In any case, the BLP is coming to your town, to your school board and to your students. Their noses are cold and they are very eager to share your tent. It would be a good idea to be ready for them.

—Gil Gaudia

My View

In Western culture (indeed, in world culture), a familiarity with the Christian Bible is desirable (because of its great cultural and literary influence), just as is familiarity with Shakespeare. However, the Biblical Literacy Project’s approach (like that of the similar *The National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools*) is not desirable. It appears to be an attempt to Christianize the captive audience of public school children in a way that its backers hope will slip under the protections of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the US Constitution. It is also biased: it ignores other religions, not to mention non-religious, non-transcendental worldviews such as Humanism.

Even if the backer’s claimed objectives are sincere, the project is undesirable. It would be impossible to assure that all teachers of the Bible in public schools would be objective and not slip into proselytizing mode. Those who lament that so many of America’s children are biblically illiterate should consider that the churches in this very religious nation of ours should be doing a better job of teaching about the Bible. How is it possible that children in the most religious Western nation of all be biblically illiterate? The parents of these children must also bear a part of the responsibility. If clergy and religious parents don’t care enough to teach young people about their holy book, why should it be the duty of the secular, public schools?

I suggest that college students consider taking a “Bible as literature” course. By this age, the students are more mature, and the course is more likely to be presented in an objective, scholarly manner.

I also have a general wariness of having executive or legislative bodies micromanaging the curriculum of our schools. I think that determining the details of the curriculum is the responsibility of our educational professionals. And after all, if time is to be taken out of the school day to teach someone’s pet subject, that means there is less time to teach language, history, mathematics, and so on. What do the backers suggest be reduced or dropped to make room for their Biblical Literacy Project instruction?

Science?

John Dearing
President of CSS

Escaping Ceremony — Almost

by CSS member **Laura R. Gansel**, *Free Inquiry*, Oct 2007

Laura Gansel is a retired school employee who lives on a small farm in Oregon's Willamette Valley. She is a charter member of the Corvallis Secular Society.

In July 2004, my husband Chuck and I celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary. Our four daughters and their families joined us at the Glacier National Park hotel, where Chuck and I first met. It was one of the happiest times of our lives. Four months later, we experienced one of the saddest when Chuck died. We were then faced with another kind of life event to observe.

We are all longtime humanists, but the humanism we knew at that time offered few prescribed rites for this type of loss. We felt we had to find our own way.

Chuck's final illness came on quickly. I never got to ask him what he wanted done after his death. The time never seemed right — you know how that goes. Afterward, I had time to think about it on my own. After the tears had been shed and those first awful moments of sorrow were endured, the girls and I sat down around the dining table. I told them what I wanted and said that if there was anything about my choices they couldn't agree to, we would talk about it and reach a decision acceptable to all. As it was, there was general agreement with everything I had thought out. That unanimity helped sustain us through the days to come. An unspoken secondary benefit: I was letting my children know what I wanted done after I died.

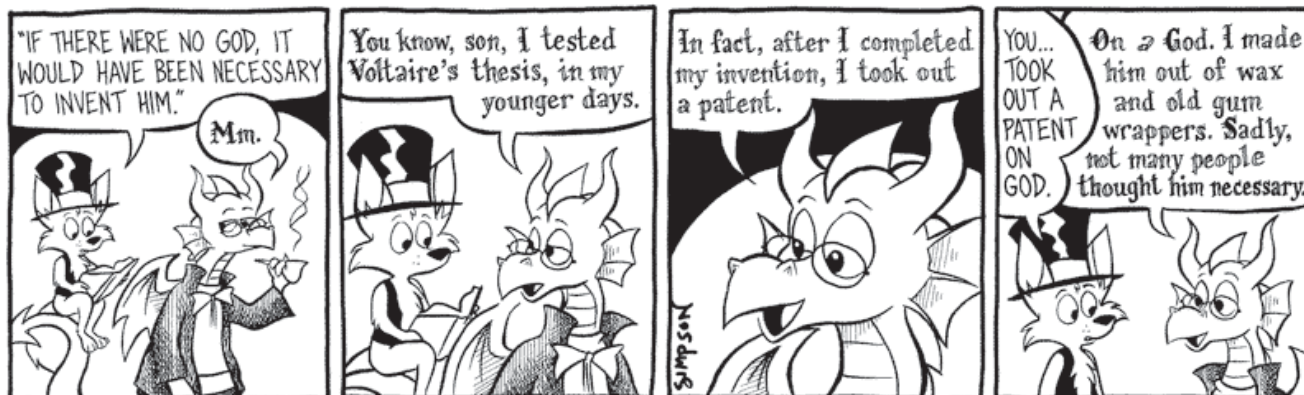
There would not be a funeral, for several reasons in addition to our general dislike of them. We lived too far from family and had no church affiliation or other social connection that might have made formal rites seem necessary. I am so glad I live in secular Oregon, where there is tolerance for a wide range of observances of death. Here we did not have to face criticism or confrontations or have to insist that our wishes be carried out. It was as we wanted it. There was no ceremony. The remains were cremated without embalming and without a casket. I took the ashes home with me and put them away in a quiet spot.

One thing we did plan from the start was to scatter Chuck's ashes on the family farm in Wisconsin, where he had grown up — a very special place for us both. When summer came, we went to Wisconsin.

Of course, nothing is that simple. Chuck's sister lives on the farm. She is a mainstay of the local Methodist church, very much tuned in to the expectations and conventions of this little town and to the rest of the family there. So what we had hoped would be a simple, small, close family affair became a full-blown memorial very much like a church service. The sister is very good at arranging such things, and we just let her go ahead and do it (although she did consult with us). I've always felt that funerals and memorial rites are for the living, not the dead who are beyond caring. Other people loved Chuck, too, and if they needed some religious rite to feel that proper grieving had been done, I wouldn't tell them they couldn't have it. My niece, a Methodist minister, came up from Texas to do the service. Fortunately, she understood our feelings and found ways to conduct it with our values in mind, while still following the proper Methodist customs.

I did insist that only the very closest family be present when we went into the woods to scatter the ashes. That would be a private and final moment, hard for all of us. We didn't want a crowd struggling across the fields out to the woods and then expecting some sort of ceremony. I put the box of ashes in my backpack and carried Chuck out to his final rest. Our small group stood in a circle. I asked if anyone wanted to share in the scattering. No one did, so I did it alone. We didn't say a lot, but I told my girls that this hill was now our place forever. Then we left Chuck there; it was hard, but we know he will live on through the trees and grass and flowers that grow in the woods where he loved to be. That's the only immortality any of us will ever really have, but it's enough.

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"Ozy and Millie"

We're Not the Crazy Ones!

by Bill Maher

from the 9/21/2007 episode of HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*

New Rule: Just because the Constitution doesn't have a religious test for office, doesn't mean I can't.

This past Monday was Constitution Day in the U.S. And while I was going over the Constitution with my two adopted kids — Zack Ono and Mogadishu — I'm home schooling them — I was struck again by Article 6, Section 3. It says, "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office." And I agree. No one should ever be disqualified for their religion. Even the funny ones. Like all of them.

But, the problem is that there is a religious test in this country. According to a recent poll, seven in ten say it's important to have a president with strong religious beliefs. The other three couldn't take the poll because it was Friday night and Yahweh wouldn't let them answer the phone.

But, fair is fair. So, for myself and the other 15-20% of American who the majority call "non-believers," but who I call "rationalists," here is our religious test for office: if you believe in Judgment Day, I have to seriously question your judgment.

If you believe you're in a long-term relationship with an all-powerful space-daddy — who will, after you die, party with your ghost forever — you can't have my vote, even for Miss Hawaiian Tropic.

I can't trust you at the levers of government because there's an electrical fire going on in your head.

Maybe a president who didn't believe our soldiers were going to Heaven might be a little less willing to get them killed.

Candidate Mitt Romney, a Mormon, believes in spiritually-blessed underwear that can protect him. He seemed like a nice man, and so do his sons, Wally and the Beav. But, I'm sorry, their religion is bat-shit. It's like Scientology without the celebrities. And he has every right to run for president while believing in magic underwear, and believing that Jesus survived his own death and will return during an Osmonds' concert in Branson. And I have every right to take that into consideration in the voting booth.

And at the end of the day, is magic underwear really that much crazier than giant arks or virgin births or talking bushes? You're either a rationalist or you're not. And the good news is, a recent poll found 20% of adults under 30 say they are rationalists and have figured out that Santa Claus and Jesus are really the same guy.

Now, 20% is hardly a majority, but it's a bigger minority than blacks, Jews, homosexuals, NRA members, teachers or seniors. And it's certainly enough to stop being shy about expressing the opinion that WE'RE NOT THE CRAZY ONES!

Just because the vote is 4-to-1, it doesn't mean the minority is wrong. People who were against this war from the start were a minority. The majority used to believe the world was flat. But if you believe that today, you'd either be packed off to Bellevue or asked to co-host "The View."

Now, 20% is hardly a majority, but it's a bigger minority than blacks, Jews, homosexuals, NRA members, teachers or seniors. And it's certainly enough to stop being shy about expressing the opinion that WE'RE NOT THE CRAZY ONES!



“Trust” Endures

by Carol Reeves, *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, 9/29/2007

Public displays of the Ten Commandments, civic prayers and the use of tax dollars to support faith-based rehabilitation and education efforts all have been challenged in recent years as examples of the United States government inappropriately endorsing religion.

But there's another national reference to religious belief that seems to fly under the radar every day whenever Americans grab a quick bite to eat at Taco Bell or plug coins into the vending machine at work:

Monday marks the 50th anniversary of the date when the words “In God We Trust” first appeared on U.S. paper currency. Congress adopted the phrase as the country's official motto in 1956, and it's been engraved on American coins since 1864.

Although four lawsuits have challenged the constitutionality of printing “In God We Trust” on U.S. legal tender, none has been successful. When the U.S. Mint began issuing the new presidential \$1 coin in February, the motto remained, though it was embossed on the edge of the new coins rather than on the front.

The United States Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit ruled in “Aronow v. United States” (1970) that the use of the phrase “In God We Trust” obviously was one of “patriotic or ceremonial character and bears no true resemblance to a governmental sponsorship of a religious exercise.”

Critics do not agree.

“We do not think that ‘In God We Trust’ should be our nation's motto, nor do we think it belongs on our coins or currency,” said John Dearing, the president of the Corvallis Secular Society.

The Secular Society is a local independent humanist group whose members base their ethics on “human happiness or welfare in the broadest sense, rather than on obedience to the will of a god, on dogma or on sacred texts,” Dearing explained.

He referred to the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution which says “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.”

“If taken literally — and how else should it be interpreted — the adoption of a religious statement as our national motto, and its placement on coin and currency, is forbidden. What part of ‘no law’ don't many judges understand?” Dearing asked. Claims that the motto is not religious are “disingenuous and absurd,” he added.



“We do not think that ‘In God We Trust’ should be our nation's motto, nor do we think it belongs on our coins or currency,” said John Dearing, the president of the Corvallis Secular Society.

“Why does the Religious Right defend it so vigorously and try to get the slogan placed on schoolroom walls and on public buildings, if it's not religious?”

“In God We Trust” is a false and divisive statement, Dearing said, because not all Americans are monotheists or believers.

“It certainly offends every Humanist and other atheist I know,” he said. Some atheists blot out the motto on currency or change it to read “In Reason We Trust.”

Dearing thinks such protests, although legal, are generally ineffective. He believes that any effort to remove the phrase from the nation's money within the current political climate would fail.

“For many of us, including myself, there are more important issues to focus on.”

Bill Lunch, a political science professor at Oregon State University, agrees the slogan is here to stay.

“Americans are more religious than any of the other industrialized democracies in the world,” he said.

Even if they don't regularly attend church or participate in religious rituals, nearly 80 percent think of themselves as either Protestant or Catholic. They would be highly critical of any move to get rid of the motto, because that seems critical of religion, he said.

Many historians believe the phrase “In God We Trust” was embraced during the 1950s — the most frigid era during the Cold War — because of Americans' distaste for “godless communism,” Lunch explained.

It was a time of uneasiness and fear and by including the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance and “In God We Trust” on the currency, Americans' were symbolically standing up against communism, he said.

Recalling the scene where legislators gathered on the steps of the Capitol Building to sing “God Bless America” after 9/11, Lunch said religion often intersects with national gestures to express a sense of community.

The fact that “In God We Trust” has endured on currency long after the Cold War ended is due partially to inertia, he said. However, Lunch also credited the significant role of religion in America.

“If a politician were to propose eliminating the “In God We Trust” moniker on our currency, he or she would get raked over the coals.”

Memorial Address for Jerry Andrus

by John S. Dearing, President of Corvallis Secular Society

Presented at the Memorial for Jerry held in Albany, Oregon, on September 30, 2007

Jerry Andrus was well-known as a world-class magician, illusionist, and skeptic. But what were his personal values? What was his worldview? What was his view of death?

I am John Dearing, president of Corvallis Secular Society. Our newsletter's tagline is: "Corvallis Secular Society (CSS) is a Humanist and Freethought society for all nontheists of good will." Jerry attended our first meeting in June, 1994, and was a member continuously until his death. I quickly discovered that Jerry was a Humanist. Humanism is a worldview that is free from beliefs in the supernatural and paranormal. Jerry felt that the existence of one or more gods was extremely improbable. Yet he called himself an agnostic, rather than an atheist, to emphasize that he could not claim with absolute certainty that no gods of any sort or kind exist.

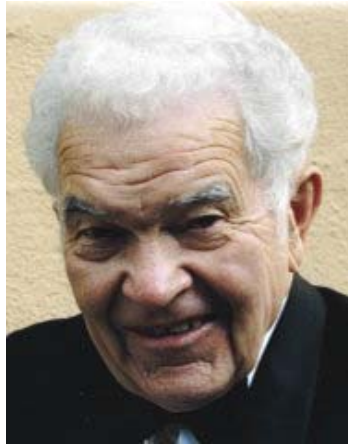
Like all Humanists, Jerry was dedicated to the use of free inquiry, critical intelligence, reason, and the scientific method in acquiring all knowledge, and in providing meaning and values for individuals. Humanism affirms the dignity and worth of every human being. Truly, Jerry was kind to all he met, and anyone could talk to him. His fame never affected his humility.

In Corvallis Secular Society's September newsletter, I wrote: "Diogenes the Cynic wandered around ancient Greece carrying a lantern and searching for an honest man. He could have visited Jerry: the search would have been over. Jerry would never tell a lie. Not even on stage. He wouldn't say 'The coin disappears'; he would instead say 'The coin appears to vanish', or 'The coin is no longer in my hand.'"

Jerry's view of death was a humanistic one. He lived life to the fullest, and never valued it the less because he knew his life, like all life, would come to a natural end. After having known Jerry for 13 years, and having discussed our mutual naturalistic philosophy with him many times, I believe that Jerry's view of life and death are well-expressed by the following two writers:

Bertrand Russell, British mathematician and philosopher, wrote: "An individual human existence should be like a river — small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and — in the end — without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The man or woman who, in old age, can see his or her life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death, since the things they care for will continue... I should wish to die while still at

work, knowing that others will carry on what I can no longer do, and content in the thought that what was possible has been done."



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

The long, productive life of Jerry Andrus has come to its end. And we indeed will carry on what he can no longer do. His life in others — in us — is his immortality. And that... is enough.

From the Editor...

(continued from page 1)

of "wild magic" in this world, and is deeply coveted by both sides of the upcoming struggle to preserve or destroy the Land.

Covenant refuses to bear the responsibility of being the Land's only hope. He initially treats the inhabitants of the Land quite poorly, since (he reasons) none of this can possibly be real. But slowly, over the course of the first trilogy, he comes to terms with his Unbelief, and finds that, "real" or not, some things are worth fighting for.

Covenant's behavior during the first book (*Lord Foul's Bane*) is so unpleasant and disturbing, that many people give up and quit reading halfway through. (Certainly, these books are NOT intended for small children, or adults who are particularly sensitive to dark imagery.) But if you manage to finish the first book, I think you'll find yourself addicted to these powerful, well-written novels...

Reed Byers

Editor, *Willamette Freethinker*

The Nonbelievers

by David Abel, *Boston Globe*, 9/16/2007

An increasing number of young people in America — and adults around the world — don't believe in God. Greg Epstein, who advises fellow atheists and agnostics at Harvard University, wants to create a kind of church for those who reject religion. But he's encountering resistance from some of the very people he wants to unite.

Rosy-cheeked angels smile from stained-glass windows, and crucifixes hang on the granite walls. The vaulting stone arches lend voices a holy echo. A chandelier-illuminated red carpet leads to the large casket, which is covered with white roses. When the balding man walks into the 165-year-old Gothic chapel, he greets mourners warmly, solemnly, with reverent words and tender handshakes, like a rabbi or a priest. But the well-wisher in a pin-striped suit is no man of the cloth. He doesn't wear flowing robes or a skullcap, and instead of a Bible or other sacred text, he carries a book titled *Funerals Without God*.

"This is Reverend Epstein," says a friend of the deceased, a physician who considered religion a pernicious fiction.

Epstein interrupts: "It's chaplain... It's OK. A lot of people aren't sure what to call me."

Over the past two years, Greg Epstein, 30, has become a kind of ministerial paradox, a member of the local clergy who disavows God, preaches to atheists and agnostics, and seeks to build the equivalent of a church for nonbelievers and others skeptical of or alienated by religion. A former lead singer of a rock band, he now serves as the humanist chaplain at Harvard University, one of a small but growing number of such chaplains for nonbelievers on college campuses. In his position, which is endowed, he has helped marry and bury fellow atheists. He has presided over baby-naming ceremonies and organized a "coming out" ceremony for a congressman, Representative Pete Stark of California, one of the few public officials to acknowledge he doesn't believe in God. He also counsels students and approximates evangelizing by handing out pamphlets with the question: "Are you a humanist?"

From the pulpit at Bigelow Chapel in Watertown (located in Mount Auburn Cemetery), speaking with the slow cadence of a clergyman delivering a sermon, Epstein tells those gathered not to expect a traditional service. "We intend, of course, no disrespect to those who have religious beliefs... We hope and believe you will find the occasion dignified and acceptable."

He continues: "A religious funeral is a celebration of a particular faith, giving homage to God. A humanist funeral is a celebration of the individual human life and his contribution to humanity."

Later, after delivering a homily that might have been heard on a Sunday morning, he explains the contradictions of his role. "I have a religious personality, without a scintilla of religious belief," he says. "If it's an oxymoron to believe that people who have ceased to believe in God still need caring and community, then I'm proud to be a walking oxymoron."



Greg Epstein. (Photo by Tanit Sakakini)

In a world where zealots crash planes into buildings in the name of God and politicians use the Bible to craft public policy, Epstein sees himself as in the vanguard of an emerging movement fueled by the rise of skepticism, advances in science and technology, and a spreading aversion toward radical religious ideologies and traditions. He and other humanists, who also call themselves atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secularists, or

brights, point to a survey published in January by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, which found that 20 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 say they have no religious affiliation or consider themselves atheists or agnostics — nearly double those who said that in a similar survey 20 years ago. Another Pew survey in March concluded the nation is witnessing a "reversal of increased religiosity observed in the mid-1990s." Today, 12 percent of Americans surveyed age 20 and older describe themselves as not religious, up from 8 percent in 1987. "This change," the survey's authors wrote, "appears to be generational in nature, with each new generation displaying lower levels of religious commitment than the preceding one."

Epstein, a Jew from New York City who trained as a "humanist rabbi" after becoming disillusioned by the music industry during a year and a half crooning for a band called Sugar Pill, embodies that generational shift. He calls himself a humanist, because he sees it as a more embracing term than atheist. "Atheism is what I don't believe in; humanism is what I do believe in," he says. He defines it as a "philosophy of life without supernaturalism that affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment aspiring to the greater good of humanity."

His deepening involvement in humanism has mirrored a rising interest in nonbelief throughout the country. Books about atheism have become a publishing phenomenon in the past few years, with five of the most popular combined

accounting for more than a million copies in print. Some have spent weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, such as Sam Harris's 2004 *The End of Faith*. The publisher of Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* had printed some 300,000 copies less than two months after it went on sale this year. Other popular titles include evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, of which there are more than a half million hardcover copies in print; *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* by Tufts University philosophy professor Daniel Dennett; and *God: The Failed Hypothesis* by Victor J. Stenger.

The spike in interest in atheism can be attributed to a backlash against militant Islam and a response to the faith-based initiatives and religiosity of the Bush administration, says Steven Pinker, the cognitive scientist at Harvard whom the American Humanist Association last year named its Humanist of the Year. But he says interest in the new literature also reflects how science is increasingly displacing religion as a way people understand the world.

"Aside from fundamentalists, most people [outside the United States] have given up on creationism and seeing the Earth as the center of the universe," he says. "More and more of what used to be the domain of religion has been ceded to science. It's the trend of modernity. I think this is a tide. We've seen it happen everywhere else in the developed world. This is the direction of history."

Students on college campuses and others have begun to organize nonbelievers. The number of campus groups affiliated with the Secular Student Alliance, for example, has increased by more than 50 percent in the past two years, to more than 80 groups, says August E. Brunzman IV, executive director of the Albany, New York-based alliance. Since January, the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York, a science-promoting umbrella group, has sponsored or helped organize more than 50 atheist outfits on campuses from the University of Georgia Law School to the University of Texas at Austin to Kent State University in Ohio, says D.J. Grothe, the center's vice president of outreach. The MySpace atheist and agnostic group has grown by about 10,000 members a year since it began in 2004 and now is about one third the size of MySpace's largest Christian group, says Bryan J. Pesta, an assistant professor of management at Cleveland State University, who moderates the group.

"We need to get visible and let people know that we're much more like [believers] than different from them," Brunzman says. "By banding together under the umbrella of nontheism, we can show the country that we are a sizable part of the population, and we can show closeted nontheists that they are not alone."

In a world where zealots crash planes into buildings in the name of God and politicians use the Bible to craft public policy, Epstein sees himself as in the vanguard of an emerging movement fueled by the rise of skepticism, advances in science and technology, and a spreading aversion toward radical religious ideologies and traditions.

Five years ago, to try to change the low opinion many Americans have of atheists (a national Gallup poll this year found more than half of those surveyed would not vote for an atheist for president), a group of four organizations started the Secular Coalition for America. Now, the coalition employs a full-time lobbyist in Washington, regularly issues press releases about everything from stem cell research to religious language used by politicians, and represents eight national organizations with more than 25,000 members, more than a third from the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Lori Lipman Brown, the coalition's director, acknowledges they have a long way to go in a country where, polls show, two-thirds of the population still believes in God. But the venom she used to hear has faded.

"When I'm on right-wing radio or Christian radio, I no longer hear people say as much that I'm immoral or liable to commit murder," she says. "Now, it seems, they acknowledge it's possible that I could be a good person."

Humanists trace their roots to the ancient Greeks, among them philosopher Diagoras, who burned images of the era's gods. Their apostate forebears include the philosophers David Hume, who promoted skepticism and logical reasoning during the Enlightenment; Karl Marx, who likened religion to opium; Friedrich Nietzsche, who gained infamy by declaring God dead; and novelist Ayn Rand, who argued that reason is our only guide to action. Even Mother Teresa doubted the

existence of God, according to a new book that unveils her private journals and letters. Humanists align themselves with more recent proponents of ridding society of God, including the author Dawkins, the popular astronomer Carl Sagan, and the novelist Kurt Vonnegut, who in 1980 asked a Unitarian congregation in Cambridge: "How on earth can religious people believe in so much arbitrary, clearly invented balderdash?"

Today, Americans appear to be following a larger trend of people around the world abandoning organized religion, particularly those in wealthier, more educated countries. In the 2007 Cambridge Companion to Atheism, Phil Zuckerman, a sociologist at Pitzer College in Claremont, California, studied religion surveys in some 50 countries. Over the past 50 years, according to a 2004 survey he cites, the percentage of people believing in God has plunged in Sweden, where as many as 85 percent of the population now say they don't believe in God; Australia, where about 25 percent are nonbelievers; Canada, where as many as 30 percent don't believe in God; and Japan, where about 65 percent are now nonbelievers.

Overall, according to the *2007 World Almanac*, there are nearly 1 billion nonbelievers in the world, which would

make them the world's third-largest persuasion, after Christianity and Islam.

While the ranks of nonbelievers are increasing, they likely account for a decreasing percentage of the world's population, as religious nations tend to have higher birth rates, Zuckerman notes. In India, for example, he cites surveys that show between 3 percent and 6 percent of the population say they don't believe in God. In the Middle East, where Islam — the world's fastest-growing religion with about 1.3 billion adherents (about 800 million fewer than Christianity) — thrives, Zuckerman cites surveys showing that fewer than 1 percent of those in countries including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, and Syria say they don't believe in God. "Making definite predictions of the future growth or decline of atheism [is] difficult," Zuckerman writes. "What is clear is that while most people continue to maintain a firm belief in deities... in certain societies, nonbelief in God is definitely increasing."

Here in the United States, where atheism remains a relatively weak current against the tides of religion, the rising interest in Godlessness is most visible on college campuses and among recent graduates. Many of them regard religion as the perpetuation of superstitions and mythology and see the world's largest faiths as sowing division and enmity more than the peace they profess.

Nina Lee, president of the Tufts Freethought Society, says a university survey of the Class of 2009 showed nearly one-third of her fellow students cited no religious affiliation — equal to those identifying themselves as Christian. Many of those who listed a religion, she says, are not actually religious. "I don't think people are taking religious beliefs as seriously as they used to, but they still go through the habit of using religion as a way to meet people and as a social space," says Lee, 22, a senior majoring in psychology who was raised by Chinese Buddhists but who embraces humanism today. Lee studied religion but says she found no evidence to support it — her prayers to Jesus and Buddhist deities went unanswered, she says — and faults religion for standing in the way of science.

"I oppose any ideology that motivates people to ignore or deny scientific evidence, especially when that evidence is crucial for improving people's lives," she says.

David Rand went to Hebrew school until he was a senior in high school. But the 25-year-old graduate student at Harvard never really believed in God and was excited to find like-minded students when he left home. "I don't think religion is the source of all evil, but I think it can be a source of division in a world that does not need division," says Rand, who studies biology. "I don't find the answers offered by religion satisfactory. Trying to find answers rationally is much more satisfying... I think there's also pleasure and beauty in natural explanations."

Zach Bos, 25, who works at Boston University and serves as director of the group Boston Atheists, grew up going to Sunday Mass, was active in his church's youth group, and was confirmed as a Catholic. But now, he says, "my

atheism is sustained by the continual absence of evidence for a single supernatural event. You might as well ask if my belief in gravity is sustained; it is only insofar as I haven't seen any apples falling up off the tree today."

Still, for Bos and the others, there's something missing, and it's a void Greg Epstein wants to fill.

From his office in Harvard Yard, where the shelves are crammed with hundreds of books including *Who's Who in Hell*, *Politics at God's Funeral*, and *Losing Faith in Faith*, Epstein can't escape the religious. He works in the bowels of the Memorial Church, where prayers literally seep through his walls and an organ groans from above. Crucifixes abound, and the surrounding offices are filled with Harvard's faith-oriented chaplains. But unlike other humanists, many of whom argue that acceptance of even moderate views about religion legitimizes religious extremists, Epstein is more ecumenical in his atheism. He has even sparked controversy by criticizing more militant, religion-bashing atheists — in a press release promoting a conference on humanism last spring, his office referred to that group as "fundamentalists." His goal is to prod nonbelievers to go beyond denouncing religion and denying the existence of God; he wants them to focus on what they value, what unites such a disparate array of people and views. "Life can be lonely, challenging, and we need community," he says. "We do want to be part of something bigger than ourselves."

In the office of his chaplaincy, which has an endowment worth more than \$2 million and pays him a salary of \$20,000, Epstein keeps a stack of cards printed with a summary of the American Humanist Association's Humanist Manifesto III, a successor to a draft from 1933. The foldout card lists maxims such as "Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis"; "Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience"; and "Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness."

Epstein wants those bullet points to be more than bromides. Ironically, he would like humanism to share some of the accouterments and traditions of religion, sans notions of heaven and hell, of course. He envisions common songs, rites for weddings and funerals, and common spaces that might substitute for churches. "We have this critical mass of people that need more," he says, adding that nonbelievers need to build humanism so that it's thought of as beautiful and inspiring. "You should be able to get out and say, 'I did humanism.'"

But Epstein's vision and criticism of fellow atheists has angered some of the very people he wants to unite. R. Joseph Hoffmann, a senior vice president at the Center for Inquiry, argues that Epstein has "abused" his links to Harvard "as a shortcut to the legitimacy he craves."

In a letter that has made rounds in the blogosphere since last spring, Hoffmann wrote: "If the word spiritual works, they wear it; but if they need to spin things in a secular direction to win friends and influence people, they spin

away like sodden spiders. This is Gen-X humanism for the Passionately Confused, and owes almost nothing to philosophy, intellectual commitment, or serious political involvement. It's about bringing people to the table because eating together is always nice. Family-time, yes?"

The letter added: "What makes Epstein special is his determination to turn his role into that of World Leader of the New Humanism, using the Harvard name as a whip to bring recalcitrant or struggling humanist groups into his new order."

In one posting on his popular atheism blog, Brian Flemming, the director of the film *The God Who Wasn't There*, called Epstein a "train wreck" who "seems determined to take the worst possible approach in his response to the controversy he started" when he used the "fundamentalists" label, which atheists consider a religious epithet.

"The accusation that blunt but reasoning atheists... are equivalent to the dogmatic fundamentalists on the other side is false, quite dumb, and constantly deployed by their enemies to derail useful conversation," Flemming wrote. "And that is not something of which you want to be part."

In response to his critics, Epstein — who speaks softly and has a gentle, rabbinical way about him — says the "fundamentalist" label was misinterpreted but that he has no intention of curtailing his efforts to promote a more communal humanism. "I'm proud to say I want and need to be part of a supportive community. Sadly, this can stir up the emotions of a few atheists who have been wounded by religion and want to distance themselves from it... It's true that religion has done some terrible, irrational things, but the key question for a humanist isn't 'Who am I angry at?' It's 'How can I make this world a better place?'"

On his blog at Harvard, Epstein wrote that he hopes atheists avoid vilifying believers as they have disparaged atheists. "I don't even have a problem with all the people who are blogging about me right now and slamming me as some kind of representative of 'appeasement,'" he wrote. "We want to be treated as equals? Let's raise hell about it, fine, but perhaps think twice about slamming me so hard as some kind of Uncle Tom (I definitely heard that one on a few blogs) if I want to speak for myself, and for the millions of atheists and Humanists out there who actually *like* and care deeply about a lot of religious people and don't feel the need to hurt their feelings in addition to disagreeing with them."

The rift occurred as Epstein was about to assume a much larger mantle. After months of planning — arranging satellite links, choreographing schedules, and securing speakers such as the novelist Salman Rushdie, the Pulitzer Prize-winning scientist E.O. Wilson, and Nobel laureate and economist Amartya Sen — Epstein used his perch at Harvard to host more than a thousand nonbelievers at the humanism conference in Cambridge in April.

As a jab at his critics and to draw a distinction between their views, he titled the gathering "The New Humanism."

The conference, which featured speakers including Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz and a performance by the folk singer Dar Williams, was so packed that organizers had to turn people away. The panel discussions, stamped with Epstein's agenda, had titles like "Toward an Abrahamic Humanism" and "Dialogue Among Religions, Cultures, and Civilizations." There was even an invocation read for the dead.

The most attended event was at Memorial Church, beneath a large crucifix, where Rushdie received an award. As the author of *The Satanic Verses* spoke amid the surrounding emblems of religion, he joked: "Thank you all for coming to this little Black Sabbath." Rushdie talked about growing up without religion and said his family celebrated holidays from many religions. But he later wondered: "Where's the one for the unbelievers? Where is the Kwanzaa for the atheists? Surely we could make one of those up, [like] Atheismas."

The allusions to religion upset some atheists, a few of whom described events at the conference as "religious humanism." Rebecca Watson, the editor of *Skepchick* magazine who spoke at a panel presentation titled "The Next Generation of Humanism," says she supports the building of a support network for humanists. But on her blog, she wrote about the conference's "disturbing trend of kowtowing to religion." She cited a teleconference Epstein organized with the Southern Baptist Convention and his dubbing the earth "The Creation," which Epstein later explained was a reference to the title of E.O. Wilson's latest book.

"A number of the talks were sermons," she wrote. "I mean, they were really, really sermons, just without the god. The syntax, the tone, and some of the message (such as pleas for money) made many in the audience noticeably uncomfortable."

A few weeks later, while working on a book about what he calls "cultural humanism" and planning a class at Harvard Divinity School he has titled "Humanist Polity: Building a Community for Atheists, Agnostics, and the Non-Religious," Epstein learned of the death of 66-year-old physician Don Burke. He had attended the conference and helped support the humanist chaplaincy, which was founded in 1974 by Catholic priest turned atheist Thomas Ferrick and endowed in 1995 as part of a \$100 million gift to Harvard by the philanthropist John L. Loeb.

Leading the service for Burke was a chance to act on his vision, to begin filling the emptiness inherent in atheism. So Epstein, who succeeded Ferrick as humanist chaplain two years ago, began perusing *Funerals Without God* to prepare for this day, his first humanist funeral. Standing at the pulpit of the ornate chapel in Watertown, Epstein delivers a eulogy that could be appropriate in any tradition. He reads a poem, Wendell Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things," about the beauty of nature, asks those gathered to stand in honor of the man, and provides time for silent prayers (or reflection).

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Pentagon Sued Over Mandatory Christianity

by Jason Leopold, *Truthout*, 9/18/2007

A military watchdog organization filed a lawsuit in federal court Tuesday against the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and a US Army major, on behalf of an Army soldier stationed in Iraq. The suit charges the Pentagon with widespread constitutional violations by allegedly trying to force the soldier to embrace evangelical Christianity and then retaliating against him when he refused.

The complaint, filed in US District Court in Kansas City, by the nonprofit Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF), on behalf of Jeremy Hall, an Army specialist currently on active duty in Speicher, Iraq, alleges that Hall's First Amendment rights were violated beginning last Thanksgiving when, because of his atheist beliefs, he declined to participate in a Christian prayer ceremony commemorating the holiday.

"Immediately after plaintiff made it known he would decline to join hands and pray, he was confronted, in the presence of other military personnel, by the senior ranking ... staff sergeant who asked plaintiff why he did not want to pray, whereupon plaintiff explained because he is an atheist," says the lawsuit, a copy of which was provided to Truthout. "The staff sergeant asked plaintiff what an atheist is and plaintiff responded it meant that he (plaintiff) did not believe in God. This response caused the staff sergeant to tell plaintiff that he would have to sit elsewhere for the Thanksgiving dinner. Nonetheless, plaintiff sat at the table in silence and finished his meal."

Moreover, the complaint alleges that on August 7, when Hall received permission by an Army chaplain to organize a meeting of other soldiers who shared his atheist beliefs, his supervisor, Army Major Paul Welborne, broke up the gathering and threatened to retaliate against the soldier by charging him with violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The complaint also alleges that Welborne vowed to block Hall's reenlistment in the Army if the atheist group continued to meet - a violation of Hall's First Amendment rights under the Constitution. Welborne is named as a defendant in the lawsuit.

"During the course of the meeting, defendant Welborne confronted the attendees, disrupted the meeting and interfered with plaintiff Hall's and the other attendees' rights to discuss topics of their interests," the lawsuit alleges.

The complaint charges that Hall, who is based at Fort Riley, Kansas, has been forced to "submit to a religious test as a qualification to his post as a soldier in the United States Army," a violation of Article VI, Clause 3 of the Constitution.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation said Defense Secretary Robert Gates is named as a defendant in the lawsuit because he has allowed the military to engage in "a pattern and practice of constitutionally impermissible promotions of religious beliefs within the Department of Defense and the United States military."

The lawsuit seeks an injunction against Welborne from further engaging in behavior "that has the effect of establishing compulsory religious practices" and asks that Gates prevent Welborne from interfering with Hall's free speech rights.

Mikey Weinstein, founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, an organization that seeks to enforce the law mandating the separation between church and state in the US military, said the lawsuit would be the first of many his group intends to file against the Pentagon.

"This landmark federal litigation is just the first of a galaxy of new lawsuits that will be expeditiously filed against the Pentagon in a concentrated effort to preserve the precious religious liberties guaranteed by our beautiful United States Constitution," Weinstein said Monday. "Today, we are boldly stabbing back against an unconstitutional heart of darkness, a contagion of fundamentalist religious supremacy and triumphalism noxiously dominating the command and control of the technologically most lethal organization ever created by humankind: our honorable and noble United States armed forces."

A Pentagon spokesman said he could not comment on the lawsuit because he has not yet seen it.

Weinstein, a former White House attorney under Ronald Reagan, general counsel H. Ross Perot and an Air Force Judge Advocate (JAG), has been waging a one-man war against the Department of Defense for its blatant disregard of the Constitution. He published a book on his fight: *With God on Our Side: One Man's War Against an Evangelical Coup in America's Military*. Weinstein is also an Air Force veteran and a graduate of the Air Force Academy. Three generations of his family have attended US military academies.

Since he launched his watchdog organization nearly two years ago months ago, Weinstein said he has been contacted by more than 5,000 active duty and retired soldiers, many of whom served or serve in Iraq, who told Weinstein that they were pressured by their commanding officers to convert to Christianity.

The lawsuit also includes examples of other alleged constitutional abuses by Pentagon officials.

Last month, the Pentagon's Inspector General responded to a complaint filed last year by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation alleging that Defense Department officials violated military regulations by appearing in a video promoting a fundamental Christian organization.

The Inspector General agreed and issued a 47-page report that was highly critical of senior Army and Air Force personnel for participating in the video while in uniform and on active duty.

The report recommended that Air Force Maj. Gen. Jack Catton, Army Brig. Gen. Bob Caslen, Brig. Gen. Vincent Brooks, Maj. Gen. Peter Sutton, and a colonel and lieutenant colonel whose names were redacted in the inspector general's report, "improperly endorsed and participated with a non-Federal entity while in uniform" and the men should be disciplined for misconduct. Caslen was formerly the deputy director for political-military affairs for the war on terrorism, directorate for strategic plans and policy, joint staff. He now oversees the 4,200 cadets at the US Military Academy at West Point. Caslen told DOD investigators he agreed to appear in the video upon learning other senior Pentagon officials had been interviewed for the promotional video.

The inspector general's report recommended the "Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff of the Army take appropriate corrective action with respect to the military officers concerned."

The Army generals who appeared in the video appeared to be speaking on behalf of the military, but they did not obtain prior permission to appear in the video. They defended their actions, according to the inspector general's report, saying the "Christian Embassy had become a 'quasi-Federal entity,' since the DOD had endorsed the organization to General Officers for over 25 years."

Jason Leopold is senior editor and reporter for *Truthout*. He received a Project Censored award in 2007 for his story on Halliburton's work in Iran.

What I Have Lived For

Prologue to Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography*

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a great ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy — ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness — that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss. I have sought it finally, because in the union of love I have seen, in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and

The Nonbelievers...

(continued from page 11)

Epstein relays a story Burke told him of how he came to identify as a humanist after growing up in Ireland, where some people believed in ghosts. He "could not believe in such unseen things and was outraged by the way such beliefs terrified people into living their whole lives in unnecessary fear," Epstein says. "And so from his early boyhood he sought a more rational, scientific way of life."

Then he addresses death by quoting Sherwin Wine, a humanist Epstein considered a mentor. "It is so overwhelmingly final that it fills our lives with dread and anxious fear," Epstein says. "We cry out at the injustice of destiny and wait for answers that never seem to come."

To cope with it, he says, humanists need a certain courage. "Courage is loving life, even in the face of death. It is sharing our strength with others, even when we feel weak. It is embracing our family and friends, even when we fear to lose them. It is opening ourselves to love."

Before closing with a meditation on the precariousness of life, Epstein offers lines adapted from a familiar Christian burial rite.

"His body we commit to be burned and returned to the cycles of nature," he says. "Earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes."

**Seeking the truth
Is the basis of knowledge.
Telling the truth
Is the basis of morality.**

— John Dearing, CSS President

though it might seem to good for human life, this is what — at last — I have found.

With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux. A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate this evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.

In America, Nonbelievers Find Strength in Numbers

by Jacqueline L. Salmon, *Washington Post*, 9/15/2007

A legion of the godless is rising up against the forces of religiosity in American society.

"People who were ashamed to say there is no God now say, 'Wow, there are others out there who think like me, and it feels damned good,'" said Margaret Downey, president of the Atheist Alliance International, whose membership has almost doubled in the past year to 5,200. It has a 500-person waiting list for its convention in Crystal City later this month.

Focusing fresh attention on atheism in the United States was the publication last week of a book about Mother Teresa that lays out her secret struggle with her doubts about God. *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* has led some high-profile atheists to say that her spiritual wavering was actually atheism.

"She couldn't bring herself to believe in God, but she wished she could," said Christopher Hitchens, a Washington-based columnist and author of *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, the latest atheist bestseller.

In the past two years, five books touting atheism have hit the bestseller lists, outselling such religious tomes as Pope Benedict XVI's book on Jesus, and popular Christian novelist Tim LaHaye's latest book, *Kingdom Come*, according to Nielsen BookScan.

Representatives of atheist and humanist groups say the books probably haven't converted many religious people. But, said Lori Lipman Brown, a lobbyist for the Secular Coalition for America, which represents eight atheist or humanist organizations, the books "tremendously increase the visibility of nontheist rights."

Nontheist is another term for atheist, or someone who does not believe in a supreme being.

A study released in June by the Barna Group, a religious polling firm, found that about 5 million adults in the United States call themselves atheists. The number rises to about 20 million — about one in every 11 Americans — if people who say they have no religious faith or are agnostic (they doubt the existence of a God or a supreme deity) are included.

They tend to be more educated, more affluent and more likely to be male and unmarried than those with active faith, according to the Barna study. Only 6 percent of people over 60 have no faith in God, and one in four adults ages 18 to 22 describe themselves as having no faith.

Javier Sanchez-Yoza, 21, a biology major at George Mason University, is a former born-again Christian who gave up his belief in God two years ago and is starting an atheist club at school. He turned atheist after growing skeptical of Christian friends' arguments for creationism.

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"If they can be wrong about creationism, what else can they be wrong about?" Sanchez-Yoza said.

For the younger generations, charter schools based on humanist principles have opened in New York City and Florida. CampQuest, an Albany-based group, runs five overnight camps around the country for atheist kids.

The budget of the Council for Secular Humanism has climbed 40 percent in the past two years, approaching \$8 million this year. The council opened a public-policy think tank in Washington last year to push leaders of both parties for policies based on the humanist principles of "science, reason and

secularism" instead of religious faith, said Paul Kurtz, the council chairman.

In March, Congress had its first self-avowed atheist when Rep. Pete Stark (D-Calif.) said he does not believe in a supreme being.

The movement formed its first political action committee in 2005, when American Atheists, which advocates for the separation of church and state, formed the Godless Americans PAC.

Despite atheists' increased vocalism and visibility, it seems that the rest of America isn't buying in.

In a nationwide poll last year by University of Minnesota researchers, Americans rated atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants and other minority groups in "sharing their vision of American society." They also associated atheists with everything from criminal behavior to rampant materialism. According to a recent USA Today/Gallup Poll, more than half would not vote for an atheist for president.

Kathy Griffin's Jesus Remark Cut From Emmy Show

by Reuters, 9/11/2007



LOS ANGELES (Reuters)—Comic Kathy Griffin's "offensive" remarks about Jesus at the Creative Arts Emmy Awards will be cut from a pre-taped telecast of the show, the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences said on Tuesday.

Griffin made the provocative comment on Saturday night as she took the stage of the Shrine Auditorium to collect her

Emmy for best reality program for her Bravo channel show "My Life on the D-List."

"A lot of people come up here and thank Jesus for this award. I want you to know that no one had less to do with this award than Jesus," an exultant Griffin said, holding up her statuette. "Suck it, Jesus. This award is my god now."

Asked about her speech backstage a short time later, an unrepentant Griffin added, "I hope I offended some people. I didn't want to win the Emmy for nothing."

The speech drew fire from a leading Roman Catholic group, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which condemned Griffin's remarks as "obscene and blasphemous."

"It is a sure bet that if Griffin had said, 'Suck it, Muhammad,' there would have been a very different reaction," Catholic league president Bill Donohue said in a statement posted on the group's Web site. He called on TV academy president Dick Askin to denounce Griffin's "hate speech" and on Griffin to apologize.

An edited version of the Creative Arts Emmys is set to air on cable television's E! Entertainment Network on Saturday, the night before the live Fox network broadcast of the main Primetime Emmy Awards.

"Kathy Griffin's offensive remarks will not be part of the E! telecast," an academy spokeswoman said on Tuesday. An "abbreviated version" of her acceptance speech will air, instead, she said.

Griffin's reaction to the imbroglio, according to a statement issued by her publicist: "Am I the only Catholic left with a sense of humor?"

"A lot of people come up here and thank Jesus for this award. I want you to know that no one had less to do with this award than Jesus," an exultant Griffin said, holding up her statuette. "Suck it, Jesus. This award is my god now."

A Little Scoop on Bush, Chirac, God, Gog and Magog

by Jacques Sterchi, 9/17/ 2007

Rue89 in partnership with *La Liberté*, Fribourg

Translated from French by Truthout
language editor Leslie Thatcher.

In 2003, University of Lausanne theology professor Thomas Römer received a telephone call from the Elysée. Jacques Chirac's advisers wanted to know more about Gog and Magog ... two mysterious names pronounced by George W. Bush while he was attempting to convince France to enter the war in Iraq at his side. In its September edition, the University of Lausanne's review, *Allez savoir*, reveals this story that could seem fantastic did it not, as *Allez savoir's* Editor-in-Chief Jocelyn Rochat emphasizes, reveal the religious underpinnings of Bush's policy.

Apocalyptic prophecy: Bush would have declared to Chirac that Gog and Magog were at work in the Middle East and that the Biblical prophecies were in the process of being fulfilled. That was several weeks before the intervention in Iraq. The French president, to whom the names of Gog and Magog meant nothing, was stupefied.

In *Allez savoir*, Thomas Römer details: Gog and Magog are two creatures who appear in Genesis, and especially in the most arcane chapters of the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel. An apocalyptic prophecy of a global army giving final battle in Israel.

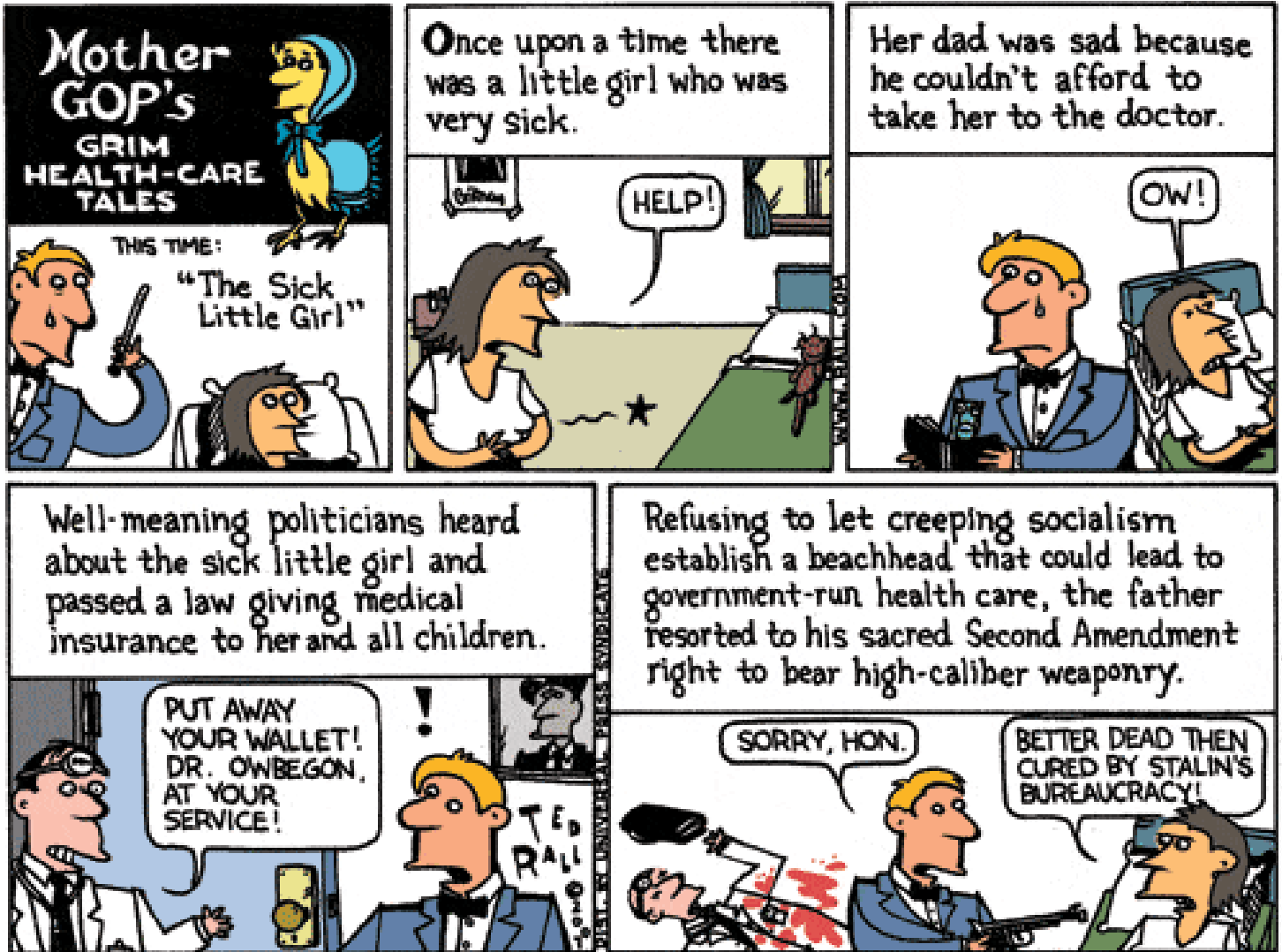
"This confrontation is willed by God, who wants to use this conflict to erase his people's enemies before a New Age begins," continues Thomas Römer.

According to him, George W. Bush is not the first to look for an incarnation of Gog and Magog on earth. Ronald Reagan had deemed that the cold war and the atomic bomb's existence made Ezekiel's prophecy realizable....

If today the University of Lausanne reveals these explanations Thomas Römer supplied to Jacques Chirac, it's because the latter has left the Elysée. For Jocelyn Rochat, this little international policy professional secret raises a vast question: our lack of religious education, our ignorance of Scriptures at a time when religious foundations are far more crucial than we'd like to believe in political and military decisions. Religion is not confined to the private sphere, Jocelyn Rochat concludes. A parameter to take into account "at the risk of no longer understanding the way the world works today."

**Reality can change belief,
But belief cannot change reality.**

— Ev Sherr, CSS member



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