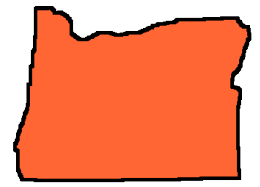


Willamette Freethinker



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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: Going Home Again...

Angela and I won't be able to make it to the CSS meeting this month. We're going to be in Houston, visiting my parents.

My mother (80) has just had full knee-replacement surgery, and my father (96) requires full-time care — so he's staying at the nursing home where my mother will soon be receiving physical therapy. Once that is finished, they hope to be able to return home and resume their lives "as usual".

Wish us luck...

There's a new secular group forming in Eugene! Specifically, a student group at the University of Oregon, called the "Alliance for Happy Atheists". Corvallis Secular Society welcomes this new group, and wishes them all the best! See page 10 for more information...

The most annoying thing to me about religion in general, and Christianity in particular [well, OK, *ONE* of the most annoying things], is that deep down, nobody seems to actually believe it.

Oh, they all CLAIM to believe it. Righteously, fervently, how-dare-you-doubt-my-faith, all that.

But seriously — what percentage of Christians is ACTUALLY not afraid to die? If they TRULY believed in heaven, what's to fear?

Some tiny minority of Christians, of course, actually believe what they preach. Such as the "One Mind Ministries" in Maryland, where a woman was recently convicted for starving her son to death for refusing to say "Amen" — and insisted during the plea bargain on a "resurrection clause", reversing her conviction if her son is literally, bodily, resurrected. Call her crazy, but at least she "puts her money where her mouth is".

But most Christians are quite happy to play it both ways. They insist in their faith that Jesus heals — yet they race to the doctor with every sneeze or snuffle.

(Then, if they get better, they praise God — but if they *DON'T*, they sue the doctor. This is just hypocrisy of the worst sort.)

I'm convinced that, by and large, Christians know this is all a game. You're SUPPOSED to say you believe all this crap to be in the "cool kids club", so they do. It's cheap, it's easy.

And it's annoying as all hell.

They don't go to church — church numbers continue to decline, across the board. They don't change their lives in ANY noticeable way. They behave exactly as they would otherwise.

But they "believe". Never doubt.

And if atheism was suddenly cool tomorrow, they'd all be atheists and would swear they never believed that stuff. (And it STILL wouldn't change their behavior one bit...)

Reed Byers
Editor, *Willamette Freethinker*

CSS Meetings and Events

Calendar:

Saturday, Apr 18 th	2:00-4:00	CSS regular meeting
Saturday, May 16 th	2:00-4:00	CSS regular meeting
Saturday, Jun 20 th	1:00-4:00	CSS solstice 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).

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From the President:

Is Religion Compatible with Science and Secular Reason?

From the time our species developed the capacity to ponder the nature of our environment and of ourselves, religion has explained things. Where did the universe come from? How did life on Earth come about? Where do we go when we die? Do the animals, plants, and even inanimate objects around us have spirits? Do gods exist? How do we influence spirits and gods? How do we protect ourselves from the forces of nature that we don't understand? What is our purpose in life? How are we to treat other people? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Religion had explanations for everything. People rarely questioned how their religious leaders could have all the answers: such questioning was unwise. Religion (or "faith") was the source of knowledge and of morality. It was a rock: an immovable object that people could cling to in the midst of a swirling sea of danger and uncertainty.

Then science and philosophy arose. And immovable objects were found to not exist.

Ethics, per Wikipedia, "is a branch of philosophy which seeks to address questions about morality, such as what the fundamental...nature of ethics or morality is (meta-ethics), how moral values should be determined (normative ethics), how a moral outcome can be achieved in specific situations (applied ethics), how moral capacity or moral agency develops and what its nature is (moral psychology), and what moral values people actually abide by (descriptive ethics)."

Many religious people claim that morality requires a grounding in religious belief. However, this isn't true, as the study of ethics, or even the unbiased observation that nonreligious people, on balance, behave at least as well as religious people do, demonstrates. The fact that the moral values of religious people worldwide are "all over the map" (not consistent) demonstrates that a single standard of behavior has not been implanted by a god in all people, and is not revealed in the world's collected sacred texts and religious leaders' pronouncements.

Our emphasis here, however, is the relation between religion and science: how we gain knowledge, and how certain that knowledge is. Religion traditionally gains knowledge (or what it claims is knowledge) from sacred texts, authorities, revelation, creeds, faith, dogma, and the like. Such knowledge is often regarded by the faithful as certain, infallible, and eternal. Many people of a religious temperament have a strong need for certainty.

Science, in contrast, uses observation, experimentation, reason, revision of conclusions based on additional data, confirmation of results by others, and so forth, to gain knowledge. The results are never "sacred" or beyond critical analysis. To a greater or lesser extent, all scientific knowledge, theories and conclusions are tentative, always subject to refinement or even abandonment. Those of a scientific bent of mind can live with uncertainty, even as they seek to reduce it. (It's OK to say, "I don't know.")

Some of our scientific knowledge approaches certainty, like our Theory of Evolution, while other knowledge is more tentative, such as that found in theoretical physics.

Fundamentalists tend to believe that their sacred text is inerrant. The fear may be that admitting that anything in their holy book is false undercuts the reliability of the entire book. Christian fundamentalists may insist that the "days" of creation in Genesis are, to us, really ages or eons. But this "interpretation," they don't seem to realize, means that the Bible does not mean what it plainly says, and is thus not literally true, but is true at best only in a symbolic, metaphorical way. (Do they realize how "liberal" this position is?)

More moderate and reasonable believers tend to accept at least some of the knowledge provided by science, and are willing to consider their Bible or other sacred text as human-written and imperfect. They do not consider their holy book as a science textbook, an authoritative source of history, or perhaps even a perfect guide to morality. (It is difficult, in fact, to determine what they do consider in their bible to be true, and especially how they make that determination.) They may accept evolution, yet still believe in the virgin birth and in the resurrection of Christ!

Since science and religion take such different approaches to the acquisition and validation of knowledge, it would seem that they are irreconcilable. The empirical nature of science does indeed contradict the revelatory nature of faith. Only if religion holds beliefs of the natural world that do not conflict with the knowledge provided by science can such beliefs expect to not be challenged. (And our knowledge of the natural world is growing, leaving less and less room for such beliefs.)

The one remaining area where science and religion may avoid outright conflict is the belief in the realm of the supernatural. Religious people tend to believe in this realm that is said to exist outside of nature — outside of reality. Science deals with reality, so any beliefs "people of faith" may have about this supernatural realm probably cannot be disproved. But why believe in a realm of existence ("heaven" and "hell") outside of nature? There is no reason to believe it exists, and if it does, it can have no influence on the real universe.

Perhaps the only real way that science and religion can be compatible (coexist) to thinking people is in the trivial sense that one can "compartmentalize" one's thinking, with science and reason in one compartment, and religion, faith and (other) superstitions in another. This astonishing ability, one that atheists seem to lack, accounts for those scientists who can perform adequate or even brilliant scientific investigations during the week, then profess belief in miracles on Sunday.

The late Stephen Jay Gould (a prominent and respected paleontologist, evolutionary biologist, and historian and popularizer of science), to my mind, made a great

intellectual blunder when he proposed that science and religion form “non-overlapping magisteria” (NOMA) which provide two independent ways of arriving at truth. Arriving at truth is gaining knowledge, and, in my view, religion provides no knowledge. Gould argued that religion makes no claims about nature. This is patently false. Examples: Jesus was born of a virgin and, after crucifixion, came back to life. Mohammed ascended to heaven on the back of a white horse. The god Brahma emerged from a lotus flower that grew from the navel of Vishnu. And faith-based healing works. (Seen any missing limbs restored lately?)

The New Republic published an article, “Seeing and Believing,” on February 4, 2009. The author is Jerry A. Coyne. Per Wikipedia, Coyne “is an American professor of biology, known for his commentary on the intelligent design debate. He is currently a professor at the University of Chicago in the Department of Ecology and Evolution. His concentration is speciation, ecological and evolutionary genetics.... Coyne is a critic of creationism, and its intelligent design (ID) variants, calling it ‘the latest pseudoscientific incarnation of religious creationism, cleverly crafted by a new group of enthusiasts to circumvent recent legal restrictions.’”

In his article, Coyne noted that only 25 percent of Americans accept evolution while 79 percent believe in miracles. Among 34 Western countries surveyed for the acceptance of evolution, the US ranked 33rd, just above Turkey. Liberal theologians and religious scientists are trying to reconcile religion and science. The Templeton Foundation is attempting to “buy” this compatibility with lavish grants and prizes. The National Academy of Sciences, America’s most prestigious scientific body, issued a pamphlet stating that faith and science are compatible, because some scientists are religious, and some religious groups accept evolution. This of course does not prove that science and religion or faith are compatible. (It does suggest that the Academy knows where its funding comes from.)

In science, truth requires the possibility of falsifiability: that theories are open to being proven false or in need of revision. But religious “truths” are not falsifiable, so we can’t know if these truths are wrong. Yet different religions have different “truths.” Coyne points out that “Christianity unambiguously claims the divinity of Jesus, and many assert that the road to salvation absolutely depends on accepting this claim, whereas the Koran states flatly that anyone accepting the divinity of Jesus will spend eternity in hell. These claims cannot both be ‘true,’ at least in a way that does not require intellectual contortions.” The difference between scientific and religious truths rests on your answer to one question: “How would I know if I were wrong?”

Coyne concludes with what Humanists understand well: “So the most important conflict...is not between religion and science. It is between religion and secular reason. Secular reason includes science, but also embraces moral and political philosophy, mathematics, logic, history, journalism, and social science — every area that requires us to have good reasons for what we believe. Now I am not claiming that all faith is incompatible with science and secular reason — only those faiths whose claims about the nature of the universe flatly contradict scientific observations. Pantheism and

some forms of Buddhism seem to pass the test. But the vast majority of the faithful — those 90 percent of Americans who believe in a personal God, most Muslims, Jews, and Hindus, and adherents to hundreds of other faiths — fall into the ‘incompatible’ category.”

Edge (<http://edge.org>) published some brief responses by selected contributors to Coyne’s article referenced above. I thought the best was by Steven Pinker, a prominent Canadian-American experimental psychologist, cognitive scientist, and author of popular science. He is a professor at Harvard University. He wrote:

Jerry Coyne applies rigorous standards of logic and evidence to the claims of religion and to the attempts to reconcile it with science. Many scientists who share his atheism still believe that he is somehow being rude or uncouth for pressing the point. But he is right to do so. Knowledge is a continuous fabric, in which ideas are connected to other ideas. Reason-free zones, in which people can assert arbitrary beliefs safe from ordinary standards of evaluation, can only corrupt this fabric, just as a contradiction can corrupt a system of logic, allowing falsehoods to proliferate through it.

Science cannot be walled off from other forms of belief. That includes meaning and morality — reason connects them all. The same standards of evidence that rule out unparisimonious, unfalsifiable, or empirically refuted hypotheses in science also rule out crackpot conspiracy theories, totalizing ideologies, and toxic policy nostrums. Moral systems depend on factual beliefs, informed by psychology and biology, about what makes human beings suffer or prosper. They depend on standards of logical consistency that make it possible to apply the principle of fairness. And they depend on meta-ethical propositions about what morality is, and on how we can decide what is moral in particular cases. Just as coherent biological reasoning cannot proceed under the assumption that God can step in at any moment and push the molecules around, coherent moral reasoning cannot proceed under the assumption that the universe unfolds according a divine merciful plan, that humans have a free will that is independent of their neurobiology, or that people can behave morally only if they fear divine retribution in an afterlife.

Reason is non-negotiable. Try to argue against it, or to exclude it from some realm of knowledge, and you’ve already lost the argument, because you’re using reason to make your case. And no, this isn’t having “faith” in reason (in the same way that some people have faith in miracles), because we don’t “believe” in reason; we use reason.

Why do so many scientists get anxious when Coyne and others apply standards of coherence and evidence — the very standards they rely on in their own work — to the propositions of religion? One fear is that people (other than them) cannot lead meaningful and moral lives without it.

(continued on page 5)

Does God Exist?

A report on a Socratic club debate

by Robert Neary, CSS member

On Thursday evening, March 12th my friend William and I attended another in a series of public debates hosted by the Oregon State University Socratic club. The topic for the evening was “Does God exist”. Taking the position in support of God was Michael Gurney, professor of Theology, Multnomah Biblical Seminary — arguing against the existence of God, Martin Erwig, associate professor of computer science, OSU.

Each of the debaters was allowed twenty minutes to state their position, twenty minutes of debate between them and the remaining time opened to the auditorium for questions from the audience.

Gurney was clearly an experienced debater. Though his presentation was drawn mostly from a written script, he adroitly attempted to state his case for the existence of God. In simplest terms, the proof of God’s existence is the fact that the universe exists. We can prove the universe exists; modern cosmology shows that the universe had a point of creation. For an object (the universe) to exist, it had to have had a cause. In other words, cause creates event. Some “thing” had to create the conditions for the cause, those conditions being put in place by God.

Gurney went on to give some statistics academic believers are prone to do, citing the statistical improbabilities of the (astronomically) low likelihood that a universe would unfold to allow the purely natural development of physical man and human consciousness. Some of these arguments are simplistic and specious, but often they resonate with believers; for example, the argument that the likelihood Mount Rushmore would naturally erode to the point of creating likenesses of former US presidents is statistically impossible.

What those who purport the impossible odds from randomness forget is that the natural universe isn’t exactly completely random. One could argue that you could knock billiard balls around on a pool table around ad nauseum and they would never combine to form a new type of object. However, carbon, hydrogen and other atoms are not simple billiard balls sitting on a cosmic pool table. Rather, these components, cooked from stellar furnaces, have unique properties which allow them to interact in certain predictable ways into completely new combinations. Add energy into the mix, in the forms of kinetic, heat, gravitational and the like, and chance becomes less random and more opportunistic.

Unfortunately, Erwig had come prepared expecting to debate the existence of a “personal” God, and so had to shift gears to address the position presented by Gurney. The new tactic among believers now is not to spar with

non-believers about the lack of evidence but instead claim: Yes, we indeed have proof you require — the existence of the universe itself is proof of a God.

Erwig proposed, as have most non-believers that there is no proof, no evidence, that a God or Gods exist. However Gurney has adopted the new stature of Christian apologist by donning the trappings of science; essentially, dressing the believer in a white lab coat. They will selective pick from research in quantum mechanics, astrophysics or research in brain-mind consciousness to support their position that the core structures of these sciences were placed there by a God. However Erwig reaffirmed that this argument is simply a variation on a “God of the gaps” - One cannot justify explaining away scientific unknowns within these disciplines by simply attributing them to a supernatural source. This is a shaky strategy for believers as the body of human knowledge is added to every day — religious knowledge, not so much.

Gurney used another tactic of scientific creationists and dropped several names (argument from authority) of notable scientists involved in the study of consciousness. Though lacking in details, his position is that human consciousness cannot merely be explained as simply the result of electro-chemical reactions within a complex network of neurons. Consciousness, he suggests, is ultimately of divine origin and exists beyond the physical limitations of the brain. I had hoped that during the question-and-answer period, I could ask if Gurney believed that deity-based consciousness also existed in brains too damaged to function normally; such as in people suffering little or no brain function due to trauma, disease or autism. I would suggest that if consciousness exists independently from the brain, wouldn’t it continue to exist if the physical brain ceased to function normally?

I have recently become interested in investigating people in academia, educated and literate individuals who claim to be “believers”. I find this curious, as is more often is the case, people generally lose their religious beliefs as they become educated and worldly. Why would otherwise intelligent, learned people, adopt a rather baseless belief in a supreme being?

The answer to this question often comes out in these types of forums during the question and answer period. Forced to deviate from their prepared positions, the true underlying nature of their belief is tickled to the surface. The audience was treated to a peek at the believer under Gurney’s white lab coat when he freely admitted, in answer to William’s question, that he believed in angels, demons and devils. In another question he stated that he believed in God because of the “historical evidence”

of the resurrection of Christ. To me, this position blew his credibility as a seeker of empirical truth regarding the existence of (a cosmic) God, and instead, revealing him actually to be a typical “hopeful” believer using the trappings of academic and scientific arenas to justify an essentially mystical belief.

Agnostics like me often face criticism from both by believers and non-believers alike; the assertion being that either one believes in God or one does not. Yet to me, there are two mutually exclusive positions that one must take as a believer: Either you deem, from a scientific, or even philosophical, position that the universe was set into motion from the intent of an unknown force (possibly God), or you believe in a fatherly biblical god of nice fuzzy soft things who will cuddle you for eternity after you die. The two positions are contradictory; one cannot have it both ways — Either god rolls the dice and merely observes the end result (impersonal God), or after rolling them, selectively manipulates the outcome of the roll to suit his end (personal God). When someone chooses to pick both positions, I can only conclude that they are projecting their personal faith into whatever argument, scientific, philosophical... seeing only that which they wish to justify. “One believes readily what one hopes for earnestly” is a quotation I have heard.

Indeed I came away feeling that Gurney wants to have it both ways. Any credibility I might have had for Gurney’s argument regarding the origins of the universe dropped away when he admitted that his belief is based on the historical evidence that Jesus was resurrected. Here Erwig pointed out that the term “historical evidence” is somewhat a contradiction; one may have evidence of historical events, but history itself is not necessarily evidence. History is revised and often based on hearsay, questionable eyewitness accounts and subject to the biases of the author. If history was infallible, one could conclude that the stories about George Washington chopping down the cherry tree actually happened. It may have, but we have no “evidence” to support such a historical claim; no hatchet-scarred tree trunk at Mt. Vernon nor hatchet on display in the Smithsonian.

Gurney’s true faith now on the table, his proof of God’s existence then fell to his reliance on “scripture” and the miracles of Christ. Erwig took several opportunities to point out that biblical records are unreliable, having been revised and recopied from questionable eyewitness stories. Biblical scholars will often emphasize that the scriptures are of manmade, not spiritual, origins. And yet, merely the use of the term “scriptures”, as Gurney used it, implies that the holy books are of supernatural origin.

Of the stories of miracles, Erwig pointed out that there are people today who claim to be divine and able to perform miracles; healing, levitation and other supernatural acts even in the presence of eye witnesses. But are they to be believed? Why believe that Jesus was the only one capable of performing miracles and not some guy pulling these tricks off today in India?

Gurney also cited revelation as another proof of God. But whose revelation are you to believe? Joseph Smith had several, as has L. Ron Hubbard and any number of others throughout history. Erwig proposed that both suppositions, that Mohammed rose to heaven on the back of a horse, and Jesus rose to heaven on a cloud, were equally preposterous. Yet Christians and Muslims each differently proclaim one event to be true and the other false. At this point a believer can only fall back on unsubstantiated faith.

Early in the presentation, Gurney spoke of faith and trust being the same thing. William, sitting next to me, had been taking notes during the presentation — I glanced over at something he had written: Trust is based on evidence and experience. We trust that our spouse will continue to be faithful, that the sun will come up tomorrow and that the check is in the mail, based on our experience of facts. Faith is based on nothing; it is pure unsubstantiated belief.

Gurney is an adroit debater and had a lot of citations and prepared arguments at the ready. Unfortunately, his lofty goal of presenting a scientific basis for a belief in God lost traction as he revealed that he is really a Christian apologist seeking to bolster his faith with scientifically-appearing justifications. Erwig held his ground, reiterating that, although science is not perfect, it is a process, not an answer in itself — and the only appropriate tool at our disposal for attempting to answer the big question, does God exist.

From the President...

(continued from page 3)

This is an empirical proposition, and evidence from contemporary Europe — unprecedentedly secular, and unprecedentedly peaceable — is relevant. Another is a fear of rupturing ties of family, community, culture, symbolism and ritual. But these can survive without a theistic belief system — think of secular rituals such as a moment of silence to commemorate a colleague, or the wearing of poppies on November 11. And the largest portion of the family and cultural ties that hold together communities of American Jews, Chinese, Italians, and other ethnic communities are not theological propositions.

But the reconciliationist arguments do depend on theological propositions, and there is no reason that they should not be subjected to the standards of reason.

My View

Religion is incompatible with science, and more generally, with secular reason. As George H. Smith wrote in *Atheism: The Case Against God*, “Faith as an alleged method of acquiring knowledge is totally invalid and as a consequence, all propositions of faith, because they lack rational demonstration, must conflict with reason.”

John Dearing
President of CSS

Hysterical Fear Affects the Right

by Jaime O'Neill, *Paradise Post*, 4/12/2009

There's a level of hysteria on the right that hasn't been seen in a long time, even from people who are so prone to fear and hysteria.

For right wingers, the sky is always falling: the commies are under every bed, the "liberals" are gonna get us all, the environmentalists are bent on driving us into the poor house, the French are going to impose their hated lifestyle upon us, the wimps are going to make us register our firearms, the gays are going to turn our kids into homosexuals, the atheists are going to take Christmas away from us, the unions are going to bring down the capitalist system, the illegals are going to deprive us of our hoped-for careers as lettuce harvesters, the global warming scientists are going to put an end to the free enterprise system, the do-gooders are going to force us all to drive dinky little cars, the welfare recipients are going to drain away the hard-earned money of defense contractors, the politicians are going to put bureaucrats in charge of our health care while denying us the right to choose our own doctors, the peaceniks are going to dismantle the Pentagon, and the terrorists are on their way to blow up our shopping malls with the active collusion of our newly-elected Muslim president, the most dangerous threat to the Republic we've ever seen, if you don't count Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and Jimmy Carter.

Furthermore, taxes on the rich are going to be raised by 4 percent, thereby turning us into a socialist country, and depriving the entrepreneurial classes of any further motivation to be wealthy. Once the government has robbed the wealthy corporate CEOs of their desire for more money, all the jobs those fat cats haven't already exported overseas will disappear, along with all that we once held dear. Meanwhile, the homosexuals will have taken marriage away from "normal" people, and once our guns have been confiscated by Chairman Obama and the Chicago mobsters who support him, we will be unable to resist the imposition of a police state in which any of us can be carted off to concentration camps in the dead of night.

Even for people who make their living by saying outrageous things, the current blather from right wing media is just over the top. It is dangerous, and it borders on sedition. It agitates the most paranoid and unstable people in our midst, and it is the rhetorical equivalent of yelling "fire" in a crowded theatre. Tap into just about any source that pumps out the right wing line, and you will encounter the most incendiary and anti-democratic stuff imaginable. Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck encourage their listeners to "take their country back," and that nut job congresswoman from Minnesota, Michelle Bachmann, warns that the Obama administration is planning "re-education camps" to indoctrinate American youth and convert them to socialism.

The Bull Goose Loon, Rush Limbaugh, goes off on a retired Marine who calls in to complain about Limbaugh's endorsement of torture, and Limbaugh, who evaded wearing his nation's uniform, says it's men like that Marine who are responsible for the fall of the country. Meanwhile, Newt Gingrich and Dick Cheney (both of whom also evaded military service) go around accusing the Commander in Chief of making us all less safe, and they make these charges while the president is overseas.

Closer to home, the editor of the paper you hold in your hands thinks that Obama is leading the "death march of freedom," destroying everything the nation ever stood for, and being really mean to rich people who should, I guess, be allowed to take massive amounts of taxpayer money without conditions. It's OK for the government to give billions to the big power players whose past practices killed the goose that was laying their golden eggs, but it is not all right for the government to regulate those businesses, or to meddle in the way that money gets spent. I wish I could get those kinds of loans from my credit card companies.

They set lots of conditions when they lend me money, and if I don't meet those conditions, they jack up my interest rate, or screw up my credit rating so I can't borrow money from other lenders. But, according to the editor of this paper, when the U.S. taxpayer bails out companies that have grown too big to fail, companies whose collapse could imperil the entire global economic system, then the government should just fork over the cash and get the hell out of the way because free enterprise should be free of government interference even when those enterprises are surviving only because the U.S. treasury is floating them.

The editor of this paper also accuses Obama of "attacking" us from abroad, and says that the popular chief executive who currently occupies the Oval Office has been forcing companies to take loans, and then refusing to allow those companies to pay them back. The editor of this paper compares Barack Obama to Hugo Chavez, the leftist dictator of Venezuela, and he alleges that "the government" sent protesters to picket the homes of corporate CEOs, though he provides no evidence that "the government" did anything of the kind.

There's a lot of reckless play with facts going on, from Fox News down to the Paradise Post. What makes it so reckless is that it increases the danger that some emotionally unstable nut job will do what the guy did back in Binghamton, New York when he went ballistic (literally) and killed 13 people because Glenn Beck and others had told him Obama was planning to take everyone's guns away. There is no anti-gun movement afoot, but when the hysteria merchants pump fear at the lunatic fringe day in and day out, there are bound to be consequences.

This I Believe

by Judith Warner, *New York Times*, 4/9/2009

On Wednesday morning, a friend sent me an article from *Gourmet* magazine. It was called “Who Invited This Guy?” and it was a Passover meditation of sorts, by Bruce Feiler, the author of “Walking the Bible,” who’d once retraced the Five Books of Moses through the desert and learned that the ancient Israelites didn’t cross the Red Sea, didn’t build the pyramids and didn’t normally sit “erect,” rather than reclining, while eating.

My friend had been planning to read the article out loud at her family’s first-night seder, but when I invited her to my house, for the second night, she’d decided to ditch her own seder and instead bring her charoset, gefilte fish, flourless chocolate cake with raspberry sauce, children, husband, mother and chosen text to me.

“It’s not really my holiday,” she said.

Both her parents had been born Jewish, but she’d been raised with no religion and her mother self-identified as Episcopalian.

“So long as it’s O.K. with you,” she said.

Sure, it was O.K. with me.

I am Jewish. But for nine years, from age 5 to 13, I attended an Episcopal school, went to chapel, sang in the choir. To this day, in good moods, my mind fills with hymns, and on a certain kind of spring day, a day that’s full of promise and hope, I see sunshine streaming in through stained glass windows, graceful specks suspended in the light over highly polished wood pews.

I would never call myself a Christian. But if you begin the Lord’s Prayer, I will join in, with feeling.

“It is worthy of remark that a belief constantly inculcated during the early years of life, while the brain is impressible, appears to acquire almost the nature of an instinct; and the very essence of an instinct is that it is followed independently of reason,” Charles Darwin wrote in “The Descent of Man.”

My heart sings to the organ chords of the Doxology.

It is an instinctual, not altogether reasonable, sort of a thing.

I know there are a lot of people who view people like my friend and me as “confused.” And yet, I can tell you that she and I — and my somewhat striking number of other friends whose faiths are other than what they “ought” to be by virtue of their upbringing — don’t feel confused at all. Some of us just can’t find a home for ourselves in the categories of identity that make sense for other people. Some of us are defined by little bits and pieces of experience and belief that together form a mosaic that for us, at least, is coherent and whole.

Having a very abstract sense of faith — or religion, or God, or whatever you want to call it — works perfectly for me. According to *Newsweek* this week, having such a “post-

modern” form of faith is becoming increasingly common among many other Americans as well.

But how do you pass that on to children? Can children apprehend religion or spirituality or even uplift in such a nontraditional way?

My children’s school is ultra-self-consciously secular. They’ve never even learned the words to “Kumbaya.”

My girls prepare the Jewish holidays with my mother, much as I did. But they do not drive, as I did, out to Brooklyn on the second night of Passover, for a non-seder dinner with my father’s relatives, my grandmother at the head of the table, matzo balls mysteriously designated for particular people. (“Monogrammed,” my father once mumbled.)

That world is gone — dead or dispersed.

My mother, like my father before her, when he was alive, performs our seders very quickly, skipping pages peremptorily, reciting the prayers almost ironically. I think it started as a rebellion against the interminable-seeming seders of her — and his — youth. (My *Gourmet*-reading friend’s mother says hers, in Hebrew, were incomprehensible.) Now it’s a habit. Instinctual, almost.

“The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds irresistibly upon the young, but to stir up their own ... Not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs,” William Ellery Channing, the Unitarian theologian, once said.

What identity will my children have to rebel against, in the course of growing up? Is there a way to make their experience be a moving-toward, instead of away?

About six months ago, I asked Julia and Emilie if they’d consider trying out a Unitarian service one day with me.

“No way,” Emilie, then eight, declared, before I could even finish the sentence.

“I think that enough harm has been done in the name of religion,” said Julia, who had not long before studied the conquest of the Incas and had moved on to the colonization of Africa. “I don’t want to be a part of it.”

I don’t care what they say.

Writing this — while my mother shops and cooks, polishes silver, sets the table, decants the wine — I am thrilled at the prospect of later celebrating Passover with our motley Jewish-Catholic-Episcopalian crew, commemorating events we don’t believe in, confirming an identity that doesn’t quite fit, united in the love of one another.

And on Sunday, I am going to Easter services, in a church where people define rebirth and renewal in all sorts of personal ways. My mom, I know, will be happy to come with me.

Newspaper Letters

Salem Statesman-Journal, 3/18/2009
**Founders did not create
 'one nation under God'**

Shari Silbernagel (letters, Feb. 23) unfortunately represents a large portion of Americans who have been misinformed about the founding of this country.

Shari says we were "founded on: one nation under God." In fact, when our Founding Fathers drew up the Constitution, they very deliberately left out any mention of God, and stated that the power of the government came from "We the People." They broke with long tradition in Western history by not specifically crediting any supreme being with a role in the founding of the country.

The phrase "one nation under God" is from the Pledge of Allegiance, and it wasn't added until 1954, during the height of the red scare. Of course the pledge itself is not even a founding document, having been written in 1892.

However, the biggest error in Silbernagel's letter is the implication that godlessness results in "the mentality that there is no right or wrong." Have you forgotten Pat Tillman, an atheist who quit his NFL career to fight the Taliban?

There are millions of nonbelievers in America, and most of us have strong values, including support for freedom of belief and nonbelief, as our founders intended.

— Larry Nelson, Salem

Corvallis Gazette-Times, 3/25/2009
A modest proposal for stem cell benefactors

It appears that the president has stirred up the religious-beliefs-versus-scientific-facts argument with his proposal for new stem cell research.

I have a simple solution: For those of you who hold that a spirit/soul is being destroyed by embryonic stem cell research, you don't have to (as an adult) participate in any cures that may occur as a result of that research.

No one forces the Amish to use autos or other modern devices, they have a right to their beliefs. That doesn't mean I have to live by their beliefs. It does mean that I have to respect their right to their chosen life style, and vice versa.

For those of you who disagree, please don't use the old saw: "I don't want my tax money used for something I think is immoral." I believe war and the death penalty are immoral, but I still have to pay my taxes.

I commend the president for taking this bold step towards allowing research in this controversial area.

— Roger Paul, Corvallis

Corvallis Gazette-Times, 3/27/2009
**We should reconsider fairness, wisdom of
 our culture's priorities**

A few items to think about today, gleaned from several days of newspapers:

- The United States maintains 1,000 military bases around the world outside the United States; 200 of those bases are in Germany.
- More than 7,300,000 Americans are in prison or on parole.
- It costs \$400,000 to keep a soldier in Iraq for a year.
- It costs \$35,000 to house a prisoner for a year.
- Several hedge-fund managers earned salaries in excess of \$1,000,000,000 last year. One man was paid \$2.5 billion for his efforts. And there are several thousand families in Oregon who are, or are soon to be, homeless.

The question: Are we making good decisions as a culture? Are we living in a sustainable civilization?

— Kirk S. Nevin, Corvallis

Corvallis Gazette-Times, 4/09/2009
**Science on climate no longer
 a matter of debate**

As a retired research geologist, I continue to be somewhat dismayed (but not particularly surprised) by letters regarding climate change from people who apparently are propelled by political ideology rather than knowledge of climate science. A member of the scientific community was absolutely right to note that the existence of global warming no longer is an issue in science but an issue only in politics.

The statement in Jean Nelson's April 6 letter, "today we're in a period of cooling," is manifestly erroneous. This is not the case, as is shown by shrinking glaciers in much of the world, shrinking and thinning ice caps, rising sea surface temperatures, acidification of the world ocean, etc. Potentially catastrophic effects already are evident, including diminished fresh water supplies in much of the world — an effect that can lead to widespread global hunger. The Earth has encountered warming cycles before, but never with 6.7 billion souls on the planet.

The supporting evidence for warming is broad and voluminous and is supported by the vast majority of the world's scientists.

— Samuel H. Clarke, Corvallis

John Clark Lahr

CSS member

Nov. 11, 1944 — March 17, 2009



John Lahr was surrounded by family when he peacefully passed away at home on Tuesday, March 17, at the age of 64, from malignant brain cancer.

John was gentle, caring, imaginative and passionate. He was born Nov. 11, 1944, in Indianapolis, Ind., to Paul and Irene Lahr. The family moved to Buffalo, N.Y., in 1951. Growing up, he enjoyed baseball, track, Boy Scouts, science, performing magic tricks and teasing his big sister.

Curiosity defined John. Throughout his life he loved taking things apart simply to understand how they worked, sometimes fixing them or building something new.

He earned a Bachelor of Science in physics from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., and went on to earn a doctorate in seismology at the Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory of Columbia University in Palisades, N.Y.

From 1971 through 2003, John studied earthquakes as a research seismologist for the U.S. Geological Survey in Menlo Park, Calif., and later Fairbanks, Alaska, and Golden, Colo. His primary focus was earthquakes and tectonic processes in southern Alaska, and for many years he was the project chief of the Alaska Seismic Studies Project. John's 1994 paper on the seismic activity accompanying the 1989-1990 eruptions of Alaska's Redoubt volcano is widely regarded as a landmark paper clearly defining different types of seismic events related to volcanic processes. His earthquake location computer program, Hypoellipse, continues to be used throughout the world. He also provided important early research on the use of earthquake location techniques to find the origin of gunshots in a community. As a scientist, John took pleasure in collaborating with others, and will be remembered for his generous nature.

One of John's special joys was science education outreach. He felt that the earth sciences are being seriously

neglected in the U.S. educational system. John loved the Exploratorium, San Francisco's hands-on science museum, where he helped teach in several summer teacher-training programs.

John and his wife, Jan, moved to Corvallis in 2005. The activity closest to John's heart in retirement was the Seismographs in Schools Program of the Incorporated Research Institutions for Seismology (IRIS), for which he taught teacher workshops, traveled to schools throughout the country, worked with many more teachers via e-mail and phone, and helped in the development and troubleshooting of the equipment and software.

John's inquiring mind was always active and he loved the arts of science and illusion. In addition to various professional groups, he was a member of the Corvallis Secular Society, Oregonians for Science and Reason and the International Brotherhood of Magicians. He was a lifelong Unitarian Universalist and the church was always an important part of his life.

Of all his passions, the greatest was his family. He was an incredible father, husband and friend and was loved by many. John will be remembered for his joy in the wonder of life.

He is survived by his wife, Jan; sister, Marybeth Ketz, and husband, Gerry, of New York; daughters Taya Lahr of Bainbridge Island, Wash., and Elizabeth Cooper and husband, Justin, of Salinas, Calif.; son Nils Lahr and wife, Kristi, of Redmond, Wash.; and grandchildren Bjorn and Elodie Lahr, Kyla LaMasters and Sienna Cooper.

Thanks go to Benton Hospice, Mennonite Home Care and the "helper brigade" of the UU church. A celebration of John's life will be at 2 p.m. Sunday, April 19, at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Corvallis.

In lieu of flowers, donations in John's memory can be made to the John C. Lahr Educational Seismology Fund. Checks should be made payable to IRIS, Reference John C. Lahr Educational Seismology Fund, and mailed to IRIS; 1200 New York Ave. N.W., Suite 800; Washington, DC 20005.

One of the great strengths of the United States is ... we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation. We consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values.

— President Barack Obama,
press conference in Turkey, April 6, 2009

If faith cannot be reconciled with rational thinking, it has to be eliminated as an anachronistic remnant of earlier stages of culture and replaced by science dealing with facts and theories which are intelligible and can be validated.

— Erich Fromm,
Man for Himself (1947)

The Alliance for Happy Atheists

A new atheist group comes — at last! — to U of O...

Hello! My name is Lucy Gubbins, and I am one of the founding members of the University of Oregon’s new freethinking organization, the Alliance of Happy Atheists (AHA!). As you may possibly know, the University of Oregon has been without an official or unofficial group supporting atheist, agnostic, or otherwise freethinking students for a tragically long time.

Beginning in February of this year, myself and about 10 other students came together to create what we hope becomes a long-lasting, professional, and fun group for nonreligious students on campus. We started advertising for our group two weeks ago, and had our first official meeting this previous Thursday. Group membership tracked via our Facebook group skyrocketed from 19 to 90 in just a week, and we had over 100 people attend Thursday’s meeting — it was absolutely incredible!

If you are in any way interested in supporting our new group, please let me know! As a group kick-off event, we hope to celebrate the National Day of Reason (May 7) with a whole week of secular-oriented activities to promote our group throughout campus and the greater community.

What we’re looking for:

- Ideas for possible events
- Anyone interested in speaking, lecturing, or participating in a debate
- Groups or group representatives willing to join us, to show partnership/solidarity
- Funding for printing costs, room charges, speaker fees, et cetera

I am also very interested in speaking with anyone who has experience organizing a large-scale event such as this, especially under the relative time constraints.

Outside of the May event, we want to simply let all other Oregon freethinking organizations know that we're finally creating a presence for ourselves on the UO campus, and hope to show our partnership in any way possible!

Thank you, and I look forward to hearing from you!

Lucy Gubbins
Lgubbins@uoregon.edu
865.603.8945



To Join or Subscribe:

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:

- Newsletter subscription:** \$18/year (\$1.50/month)
- Full CSS membership:** \$30/year (\$2.50/month) (includes newsletter)

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Thank you for supporting our efforts to promote atheism, humanism, and freethought in Oregon’s Willamette Valley.

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