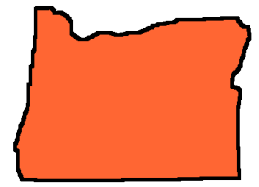


Willamette Freethinker



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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: Personal Business...

John "El Presidente" Dearing apologizes for not having a column this month. He says this is the second time it's ever happened — frankly, I can't remember the first time.

Angela "El, ummm, Assistant Editore" Byers' column remains on hiatus for the time being, until health and free time permit.

So that leaves me as the "regular feature" this month.
WAVE Hi there.

I've been meaning to publicly thank our friend, neighbor, and fellow CSS member Nina Lesiak for taking on the duties of folding, stuffing, stamping and mailing these newsletters. She started 3-4 months ago; if you've received a *Willamette Freethinker* since then, it's been with her assistance.

It's gained Angela and me a free evening each month that used to be dedicated to newsletter work, and we really appreciate it. Thank you, Nina!

The Houston trip was everything we expected — exciting, fun, and utterly exhausting. We had great weather for the flight out, great weather for the flight back, and massive thunderstorms and tornado watches for most of the time in between. Have I mentioned that Angela HATES thunderstorms and tornados? :)

My mother is recovering nicely from the knee replacement surgery (it will be MONTHS before she's back to where she was before the surgery, but that is only to be expected). My father looks surprisingly well for 96 years old. I am thrilled to hear how much he enjoys reading this newsletter every month. *WAVE* Hi Dad!

Houston has changed quite a bit since I lived there, nearly 15 years ago. It's bigger uglier, and frankly, it just feels a lot more impersonal. I'm sure much of this is just subjective, but still. The Six Flags Astroworld amusement park has been torn down and is now just an empty field. The Astrodome itself sits seemingly forgotten, with the enormous Reliant stadium next door virtually eclipsing it.

The freeways are wider, there's more tollways than ever, and it's harder than ever to actually get where you're trying to go.

It FEELS like a city (and state) where Business and The Almighty Dollar are worshipped above all else.

Even the subdivision where I grew up (where my parents still live) now just feels DEPRESSING. Where it used to be young and pretty, now it feels old and worn out. The trees are overgrown, the houses are decrepit...

All told, I'm really glad I live in Oregon now.

The hotel where we stayed was lovely, and the bed was so comfy, we found out who made it and we're buying one ourselves. And therein lies a story that I'll save for our meeting...

Reed Byers

Editor, *Willamette Freethinker*

CSS Meetings and Events

Calendar:

Saturday, May 16 th	2:00-4:00	CSS regular meeting
Saturday, Jun 20 th	1:00-4:00	CSS solstice potluck!
Saturday, Jul 18 th	2:00-4:00	CSS regular meeting

Regular meeting time:

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

Regular meeting location:

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

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Survey Shows Why Americans Change Religions

Matthai Kuruvila, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4/27/2009

Catholics who leave the fold largely do so because they disagree with church teachings, while Protestants who leave their particular denominations tend to do so because of life changes, such as marriage or moving.

Those are some of the key findings in a demographic survey released today by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, which sought to explain why there is so much fluidity among Americans with regard to religious identity.

What they found was that Americans move between and among religions even more than previously known — and for myriad reasons.

In a survey released in 2006, the Pew Forum found that 28 percent of Americans have left their childhood religion, through conversion to another faith or abandonment of institutional religion altogether. They also found that an additional 16 percent had switched between Christian denominations.

Now, the Pew Forum has found that an additional 9 percent of Americans have left the faith of their childhood at some point during their lives for a different religion only to return. That means that a majority of the nation — 53 percent — has identified with a religion different than their own at some point during their lives.

“It really puts an exclamation point on the degree of churn that characterizes religion in the United States,” said Gregory Smith, senior fellow at the Pew Forum.

The survey found that American religious identity moves in all directions. No category of belief is fixed. Even among people raised unaffiliated with any religion, 54 percent now claim a specific religious identity and account for 4 percent of the U.S. population.

Disenchantment

One of the few constants is the proportion of Americans who are atheists — roughly 2 percent of the general population. Indeed, even as an increasing number of people do not identify with any specific religion, the Pew Forum found the reason for leaving has substantially less to do with belief that science disproves religion than it does with disenchantment with religious people and institutions.

Only 23 and 24 percent of former Catholics and Protestants, respectively, became unaffiliated because they thought science disproves religion. By contrast, 55 and 53 percent of former Catholics and Protestants, respectively, became unaffiliated because they believe that religious people are hypocritical, judgmental or insincere. The unaffiliated account for 16 percent of the adult population, even though only 7 percent of the population was raised without religion.

“The study shows the continued rise of the spiritual-but-not-religious category,” said Stephen Prothero, who teaches in the department of religion at Boston University and is the author of “Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn’t.”

The survey found that a majority of the formerly unaffiliated converted to organized religion, and 4 in 10 currently unaffiliated people said religion plays at least a somewhat important part of their lives.

The result, Prothero said, is that even the unaffiliated “are basically saying they’re looking for more of a spiritual experience.”

Spiritual exploration

Religious exploration doesn’t necessarily mean dilution of the faith, said Carlo Busby, co-owner of Sagrada Sacred Arts, an Oakland store that caters to spiritual exploration by offering books, music and other items for Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists.

In his 15 years of running the business, Busby said, “If anything, I think people become more rooted in their own faith if they explore another tradition and realize that other traditions have developed similar responses and yearnings.”

The most dynamic periods of religious change are the teen years and early adulthood.

The survey found that 79 percent of Catholics who became unaffiliated, 85 percent of Protestants who became unaffiliated and 72 percent of unaffiliated people who joined organized religions did so before age 24. Very few people change religious identity after age 50.

Mass attendance was a powerful predictor of whether a child would stay Catholic. Among lifelong Catholics, 69 percent regularly attended Mass as a teen, while only 44 percent of unaffiliated former Catholics did.

But Catholic education — including Catholic school, childhood religious education classes in a church or teen youth groups — had a negligible impact in predicting whether a child would stay a Catholic as an adult.

Personal responsibility

The findings are not surprising, said the Rev. Dan Danielson, the top administrator for the Diocese of Oakland. Religious education classes are often more about the motivations of parents or grandparents than kids, he said.

Recognizing that, the diocese encourages personal motivation by shifting the age for confirmation to the junior year of high school or later.

(continued on page 3)

Young Americans Losing Their Religion

by Dan Harris, ABC News, 5/6/2009

New research shows young Americans are dramatically less likely to go to church — or to participate in any form of organized religion — than their parents and grandparents.

“It’s a huge change,” says Harvard University professor Robert Putnam, who conducted the research.

Historically, the percentage of Americans who said they had no religious affiliation (pollsters refer to this group as the “nones”) has been very small — hovering between 5 percent and 10 percent. However, Putnam says the percentage of “nones” has now skyrocketed to between 30 percent and 40 percent among younger Americans.

Putnam calls this a “stunning development.” He gave reporters a first glimpse of his data Tuesday at a conference on religion organized by the Pew Forum on Faith in Public Life.

The research will be included in a forthcoming book, called “American Grace.”

This trend started in the 1990s and continues through today. It includes people in both Generation X and Y.

While these young “nones” may not belong to a church, they are not necessarily atheists.

“Many of them are people who would otherwise be in church,” Putnam said. “They have the same attitudes and values as people who are in church, but they grew up in a period in which being religious meant being politically conservative, especially on social issues.”

Putnam says that in the past two decades, many young people began to view organized religion as a source of “intolerance and rigidity and doctrinaire political views,” and therefore stopped going to church.

This movement away from organized religion, says Putnam, may have enormous consequences for American culture and politics for years to come.

“That is the future of America,” he says. “Their views and their habits religiously are going to persist and have a huge effect on the future.”

This data is likely to reinvigorate an already heated debate about whether America is, or will continue to be, a “Christian nation.” A recent Newsweek cover article, entitled “The End of Christian America” provoked responses from religious thinkers all over the spectrum.

Research Finds Churchgoers More Likely to Vote

Putnam, author of the book “Bowling Alone,” which tracked the decline in civic and community engagement in America (exemplified by the diminution of bowling

leagues), fears the reduction in religiosity could have widespread negative impacts.

His research shows that people who go to church are much more likely to vote, volunteer and give to charity.

However, he says, it’s possible that the current spike in young people opting out of organized religion could also prove to be an opportunity for some.

“America historically has been a very inventive and even entrepreneurial place in terms of religion,” he says. “We’re all the time inventing new religions and reinventing religions that we have. It’s partly because we have a free market in religion. That is, we don’t have a state church.”

Given that today’s young “nones” probably would be in church if they didn’t associate religion with far-right political views, he says, new faith groups may evolve to serve them.

“Jesus said, ‘Be fishers of men,’” says Putnam, “and there’s this pool with a lot of fish in it and no fishermen right now.”

In the end, he says, this “stunning” trend of young people becoming less religious could lead to America’s next great burst of religious innovation.

Survey Shows Why... (continued from page 2)

“The lower the grade, the more they’re dependent on their parents’ decisions about them doing these things and the less they’re doing it on their own,” he said.

When he ran the Catholic Community of Pleasanton for 22 years, Danielson and parents saw how engaged teens were with music. So he implemented a teen Mass that had a heavy emphasis on music — including a rock band. It became so popular that it was split into two Masses and, to his surprise, the teens even asked to create their own choir.

“It’s basically listening to what are their influences to teenagers and young adults and (understanding) how the church can meet that and still preserve our religious values — reverence, sense of prayer, sense of god,” Danielson said.

The larger challenge, he said, is young adult ministry, where there is so much diversity. The young adult population includes undergraduate and graduate students, people in low-skilled jobs, others in budding professional careers and some still living with parents.

“We just need a lot more creative thinking in that area,” he said. “Our worship has to be alive, and the preaching has to be relevant. It can’t be pious thoughts from Galilee’s hills.”

Reclaiming America's Soul

by Paul Krugman, *New York Times*, 4/24/2009

"Nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past." So declared President Obama, after his commendable decision to release the legal memos that his predecessor used to justify torture. Some people in the political and media establishments have echoed his position. We need to look forward, not backward, they say. No prosecutions, please; no investigations; we're just too busy.

And there are indeed immense challenges out there: an economic crisis, a health care crisis, an environmental crisis. Isn't revisiting the abuses of the last eight years, no matter how bad they were, a luxury we can't afford?

No, it isn't, because America is more than a collection of policies. We are, or at least we used to be, a nation of moral ideals. In the past, our government has sometimes done an imperfect job of upholding those ideals. But never before have our leaders so utterly betrayed everything our nation stands for. "This government does not torture people," declared former President Bush, but it did, and all the world knows it.

And the only way we can regain our moral compass, not just for the sake of our position in the world, but for the sake of our own national conscience, is to investigate how that happened, and, if necessary, to prosecute those responsible.

What about the argument that investigating the Bush administration's abuses will impede efforts to deal with the crises of today? Even if that were true — even if truth and justice came at a high price — that would arguably be a price we must pay: laws aren't supposed to be enforced only when convenient. But is there any real reason to believe that the nation would pay a high price for accountability?

For example, would investigating the crimes of the Bush era really divert time and energy needed elsewhere? Let's be concrete: whose time and energy are we talking about?

Tim Geithner, the Treasury secretary, wouldn't be called away from his efforts to rescue the economy. Peter Orszag, the budget director, wouldn't be called away from his efforts to reform health care. Steven Chu, the energy secretary, wouldn't be called away from his efforts to limit climate change. Even the president needn't, and indeed shouldn't, be involved. All he would have to do is let the Justice Department do its job — which he's supposed to do in any case — and not get in the way of any Congressional investigations.

I don't know about you, but I think America is capable of uncovering the truth and enforcing the law even while it goes about its other business.

Still, you might argue — and many do — that revisiting the abuses of the Bush years would undermine the political consensus the president needs to pursue his agenda.

But the answer to that is, what political consensus? There are still, alas, a significant number of people in our political life who stand on the side of the torturers. But

It's hard, then, not to be cynical when some of the people who should have spoken out against what was happening, but didn't, now declare that we should forget the whole era — for the sake of the country, of course.

these are the same people who have been relentless in their efforts to block President Obama's attempt to deal with our economic crisis and will be equally relentless in their opposition when he endeavors to deal with health care and climate change. The president cannot lose their good will, because they never offered any.

That said, there are a lot of people in Washington who weren't allied with the torturers but would nonetheless rather not revisit what happened in the Bush years.

Some of them probably just don't want an ugly scene; my guess is that the president, who clearly prefers visions of uplift to confrontation, is in that group. But the ugliness is already there, and pretending it isn't won't make it go away.

Others, I suspect, would rather not revisit those years because they don't want to be reminded of their own sins of omission.

For the fact is that officials in the Bush administration instituted torture as a policy, misled the nation into a war they wanted to fight and, probably, tortured people in the attempt to extract "confessions" that would justify that war. And during the march to war, most of the political and media establishment looked the other way.

It's hard, then, not to be cynical when some of the people who should have spoken out against what was happening, but didn't, now declare that we should forget the whole era — for the sake of the country, of course.

Sorry, but what we really should do for the sake of the country is have investigations both of torture and of the march to war. These investigations should, where appropriate, be followed by prosecutions — not out of vindictiveness, but because this is a nation of laws.

We need to do this for the sake of our future. For this isn't about looking backward, it's about looking forward — because it's about reclaiming America's soul.

Obama Curtails “Day of Prayer”, but Defends it Against Lawsuit

by Associated Press, 5/6/2009

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — President Barack Obama is scaling back White House plans for Thursday’s National Day of Prayer even as his administration defends the tradition in federal court in Wisconsin.

Obama’s position has disappointed Christian conservatives, who want the president to do more to mark the day, and an atheist group that wants him to end the tradition.

The Obama administration has asked a judge to dismiss a lawsuit filed by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, which claims the day violates the separation of church and state. In a rare alliance, 31 mostly Republican members of Congress and a prominent Christian legal group are joining the administration to fight the lawsuit.

Congress established the day in 1952 and in 1988 set the first Thursday in May as the day for presidents to issue proclamations asking Americans to pray.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said Tuesday that Obama would issue such a proclamation Thursday but not hold any public events with religious leaders as President George W. Bush did.

Gibbs said Obama prays privately and his plan for the day was in line with those of past presidents. Still, Obama drew a rebuke from the National Day of Prayer Task Force, a private group that promotes prayer events around the country.

“We are disappointed in the lack of participation by the Obama Administration,” said task force chairwoman Shirley Dobson, wife of Focus on the Family founder James Dobson. “At this time in our country’s history, we would hope our President would recognize more fully the importance of prayer.”

The task force estimates 2 million Americans attended more than 40,000 events marking the day last year.

Meanwhile, Freedom From Religion Foundation Co-Director Annie Laurie Gaylor welcomed Obama’s more subdued observance but said she has been shocked by his administration’s strong defense of the day in court.

The Madison-based group of 12,000 atheists and agnostics filed the lawsuit near the end of Bush’s second term in U.S. District Court in Madison. The suit asks a judge to declare the law unconstitutional and to order presidents and governors to stop issuing prayer proclamations.

The lawsuit also claimed federal and state governments work too closely with Dobson’s task force to promote the day and give it a Christian bent. Among other things,

the task force asks governors and mayors to issue prayer proclamations and suggests specific Bible verses and themes to quote in them.

The Obama administration asked U.S. District Judge Barbara Crabb to dismiss the case in March. The administration argued the group has no legal standing to sue, said the tradition’s roots date to 1775 and that most presidents have invoked faith in a higher power.

It also said the day does not promote religion and argued that preventing presidents from issuing a proclamation would unfairly restrict how they communicate with Americans.

“It was very right-wing,” Gaylor said of the administration’s arguments. “One would expect that under a Reagan or a Bush, but I did not expect that under an Obama.”

She said the day disenfranchises the millions of Americans who do not believe in God or pray and suggested Obama implement a “national day of service” instead.

Thirty-one members of Congress, including House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio and Rep. Eric Cantor, R-Virginia, have filed a friend-of-the-court brief opposing the lawsuit. They call the prayer day “deeply embedded in the tradition and history of this country.”

The Alliance Defense Fund, an Arizona-based group of Christian lawyers that is representing Shirley Dobson and the task force, has made similar arguments in asking for the case to be dismissed. Crabb is expected to rule on the motions in coming weeks.

Gullibility and credulity are considered undesirable qualities in every department of human life — except religion. . . . Why are we praised by godly men for surrendering our 'godly gift' of reason when we cross their mental thresholds? Atheism strikes me as morally superior, as well as intellectually superior, to religion. Since it is obviously inconceivable that all religions can be right, the most reasonable conclusion is that they are all wrong.

— Christopher Hitchens, “The Lord and the Intellectuals,” *Harper’s* (July 1982)

The Free World Bars Free Speech

by Jonathan Turley, *Washington Post*, 4/12/2009

For years, the Western world has listened aghast to stories out of Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern nations of citizens being imprisoned or executed for questioning or offending Islam. Even the most seemingly minor infractions elicit draconian punishments. Late last year, two Afghan journalists were sentenced to prison for blasphemy because they translated the Koran into a Farsi dialect that Afghans can read. In Jordan, a poet was arrested for incorporating Koranic verses into his work. And last week, an Egyptian court banned a magazine for running a similar poem.

But now an equally troubling trend is developing in the West. Ever since 2006, when Muslims worldwide rioted over newspaper cartoons picturing the prophet Muhammad, Western countries, too, have been prosecuting more individuals for criticizing religion. The "Free World," it appears, may be losing faith in free speech.

Among the new blasphemers is legendary French actress Brigitte Bardot, who was convicted last June of "inciting religious hatred" for a letter she wrote in 2006 to then-Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, saying that Muslims were ruining France. It was her fourth criminal citation for expressing intolerant views of Muslims and homosexuals. Other Western countries, including Canada and Britain, are also cracking down on religious critics.

Emblematic of the assault is the effort to pass an international ban on religious defamation supported by United Nations General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann. Brockmann is a suspended Roman Catholic priest who served as Nicaragua's foreign minister in the 1980s under the Sandinista regime, the socialist government that had a penchant for crushing civil liberties before it was tossed out of power in 1990. Since then, Brockmann has literally embraced such free-speech-loving figures as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whom he wrapped in a bear hug at the U.N. last year.

The U.N. resolution, which has been introduced for the past couple of years, is backed by countries such as Saudi Arabia, one of the most repressive nations when it comes to the free exercise of religion. Blasphemers there are frequently executed. Most recently, the government arrested author Hamoud Bin Saleh simply for writing about his conversion to Christianity.

While it hasn't gone so far as to support the U.N. resolution, the West is prosecuting "religious hatred" cases under anti-discrimination and hate-crime laws. British citizens can be arrested and prosecuted under the 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act, which makes

it a crime to "abuse" religion. In 2008, a 15-year-old boy was arrested for holding up a sign reading "Scientology is not a religion, it is a dangerous cult" outside the organization's London headquarters. Earlier this year, the British police issued a public warning that insulting Scientology would now be treated as a crime.

No question, the subjects of such prosecutions are often anti-religious — especially anti-Muslim — and intolerant. Consider far-right Austrian legislator Susanne Winter.

She recently denounced Mohammad as a pedophile for his marriage to 6-year-old Aisha, which was consummated when she was 9. Winter also suggested that Muslim men should commit bestiality rather than have sex with children. Under an Austrian law criminalizing "degradation of religious doctrines," the 51-year-old politician was sentenced in January to a fine of 24,000 euros (\$31,000) and a three-month suspended prison term.

But it is the speech, not the speaker, that's at issue. As insulting and misinformed as views like Winter's may be, free speech is not limited to non-offensive subjects. The purpose of free speech is to be able to challenge widely held views.

Yet there is a stream of cases similar to Winter's coming out of various countries:

- In May 2008, Dutch prosecutors arrested cartoonist Gregorius Nekschot for insulting Christians and Muslims with a cartoon that caricatured a Christian fundamentalist and a Muslim fundamentalist as zombies who meet at an anti-gay rally and want to marry.
- Last September, Italian prosecutors launched an investigation of comedian Sabina Guzzanti for joking about Pope Benedict XVI. "In 20 years, [he] will be dead and will end up in hell, tormented by queer demons, and very active ones," she said at a rally.
- In February, Rowan Laxton, an aide to British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, was arrested for "inciting religious hatred" when, watching news reports of Israel's bombardment of Gaza while exercising at his gym, he allegedly shouted obscenities about Israelis and Jews at the television.
- Also in February, Britain barred controversial Dutch politician Geert Wilders from entry because of his film "Fitna," which describes the Koran as a "fascist" book and Islam as a violent religion. Wilders was declared a "threat to public policy, public security or public health."

Emblematic of the assault is the effort to pass an international ban on religious defamation supported by United Nations General Assembly President Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann.

- And in India, authorities arrested the editor and publisher of the newspaper the Statesman for running an article by British journalist Johann Hari in which he wrote, "I don't respect the idea that we should follow a 'Prophet' who at the age of 53 had sex with a 9-year-old girl, and ordered the murder of whole villages of Jews because they wouldn't follow him." In India, it is a crime to "outrage religious feelings."

History has shown that once governments begin to police speech, they find ever more of it to combat. Countries such as Canada, England and France have prosecuted speakers and journalists for criticizing homosexuals and other groups. It's the ultimate irony: free speech curtailed for the sake of a pluralistic society.

Even countries that the United States has helped liberate have joined the assault on free speech, rejecting the core values of our First Amendment. Afghan journalist Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh was sentenced to death under Sharia law last year just for downloading Internet material on the role of women in Islamic societies that authorities judged to be blasphemous. The provincial deputy attorney general, Hafizullah Khaliqyar, has been quoted as saying: "Journalists are supporting Kambakhsh. I will arrest any journalist trying to support him after this."

Not only does this trend threaten free speech, freedom of association and a free press, it even undermines free exercise of religion. Challenging the beliefs of other faiths can be part of that exercise. Countries such as Saudi Arabia don't prosecute blasphemers to protect the exercise of all religions but to protect one religion.

Religious orthodoxy has always lived in tension with free speech. Yet Western ideals are based on the premise that free speech contains its own protection: Good speech ultimately prevails over bad. There's no blasphemy among free nations, only orthodoxy and those who seek to challenge it.

After years of international scorn, the United States can claim the high ground by supporting the right of all to speak openly about religion. Otherwise, free speech in the West could die with hope of little more than a requiem Mass.

Jonathan Turley is a law professor at George Washington University.

Obama Promises Major Investment in Science

by Randolph E. Schmid, *AP*, 4/27/2009

WASHINGTON, (AP) — President Barack Obama promised a new era of science and technology for the nation, telling the National Academy of Sciences on Monday that he wants to devote more funds to research and development.

America has fallen behind other countries in science, Obama said.

"I believe it is not in our character, American character, to follow — but to lead. And it is time for us to lead once again. I am here today to set this goal: we will devote more than 3 percent of our gross domestic product to research and development," Obama said in a speech at the annual meeting of the National Academy of Sciences.

That 3 percent would amount to about \$420 billion.

"We will not just meet but we will exceed the level achieved at the height of the space race," he said.

That pursuit of discovery a half century ago fueled the nation's prosperity and success, Obama told the academy.

"The commitment I am making today will fuel our success for another 50 years," he said. "This work begins with an historic commitment to basic science and applied research."

And he set forth a wish list including solar cells as cheap as paint; green buildings that produce all the energy they consume; learning software as effective as a personal tutor; prosthetics so advanced that you could play the piano again and "an expansion of the frontiers of human knowledge about ourselves and world the around us."

"We can do this," Obama said to applause.

In recent years, he said, "scientific integrity has been undermined and scientific research politicized in an effort to advance predetermined ideological agendas."

He then drew chuckles, commenting: "I want to be sure that facts are driving scientific decisions, not the other way around," Obama said.

"At such a difficult moment, there are those who say we cannot afford to invest in science, that support for research is somehow a luxury at a moment defined by necessities. I fundamentally disagree," Obama said.

"Science is more essential for our prosperity, our security, our health, our environment, and our quality of life than it has ever been," he said.

Obama said he plans to double the budget of key science agencies over a decade, including the National Science Foundation, Department of Energy Office of Science and the National Institutes of Standards and Technology.

It was often said that a black man would only be President "when pigs fly" ... and indeed, 100 days into Obama's presidency... swine flu.

— Anonymous

Lockdown: Are Teens (and Taxpayers) Paying the Price at Christian Reform Schools?

by Michele Tresler-Ulriksen (CSS Member)
Published in the May/June 2009 *Humanist*

The year was 1986. I was a somewhat normal sixteen-year-old, enjoying the Southern California summer weather, trips to the beach, and preparing to start my junior year of high school in Orange County. However, my puberty-driven rebellious behavior was brought to a screeching halt on the morning of September 1. What was supposed to be a family outing to the San Diego Wild Animal Park was actually a carefully executed plan by my parents to deliver me into what would be the worst experience of my life: a year in a locked-down, all-girl, unlicensed, unregulated fundamentalist Baptist reform school.

The isolated facility was called Victory Christian Academy and was located in the desert town of Ramona in San Diego County, California. The twelve-foot-tall chain-link fence surrounding the former FBI bunker — and the fact that the facility was in the middle of nowhere — made it the perfect place to hold teens undetected with no state oversight or accountability. I was immediately dragged through the front doors and to a back dorm where I was placed against my will in a small walk-in style closet they called the Get-Right Room. This solitary confinement room was where they put you if you swore, gave the staff any problems, rolled your eyes, refused to eat, or refused to get saved by converting to their version of fundamentalist Christianity. Most of us got acquainted with the Get-Right Room upon our arrival.

During my year at Victory, I witnessed extreme mental, emotional, and verbal abuse not just directed toward me, but toward most of the girls there. I remember the “Rap Sessions” where we were encouraged to call out others’ imperfections in front of staff and students. I remember girls being harassed because of their eating disorders; underweight girls were force-fed and food was withheld from overweight girls. Vegetarians were forced to eat meat in large quantities. Girls whose aptitude was below the majority of the group were forced to sit in the corner and were called stupid. Lesbians were ousted in chapel and told they were going to burn in hell. The words “slut” and “whoremonger” were used often. What our parents saw when they went up to look at the facility and when they would come for monthly visits was not the abusive reality we girls encountered on a daily basis. There were girls who had bi-polar disorder or severe depression and anxiety disorders. There were those with drug and alcohol problems, victims of precarious living situations, victims of sexual abuse, prostitutes, and runaways. Then there were the girls who had been placed there simply because Mom and Dad didn’t like their rock music, their friends, or didn’t approve of them slipping away from the

Christian upbringing they deemed so important for entry into adult life.

The cure-all for each problem was the Old Testament; six hours a day of indoctrination. We were told again and again that we were worthless sinners and that we were each a disgrace to God and our parents. We were told that all the sin in the world was caused by Eve and that this was the reason girls have a menstrual cycle and painful childbirth. We were told that a woman’s place is in the home, not a classroom, and that God had intended us to bear children, which, according to the preacher, should be our sole lot in life.

It was all about submission and subjugation. We were voiceless, completely isolated from the outside world, and stripped of our civil liberties and freedoms. There was no phone for personal use, no television, no movies (except those about the rapture which we were forced to watch), no reading material or books (except the Bible), no music, no medical or dental care, no licensed therapists, no college-degreed staff — in essence, no normalcy of any kind. We were not allowed to wear pants. We were not allowed to talk about our problems. There were intercoms and floor alarms everywhere. We could only talk and use the restroom at certain times. Most of us had nightmares often. It’s no wonder that we all walked out of there with no self-esteem and immediately started to make bad choices.

Victory Christian Academy was operating without a license from the U.S. Department of Education to teach school. The Christian booklets I completed that were supposed to count as my junior year of high school were deemed later by a proper school counselor to be sixth and seventh grade work. I ended up getting my GED, as did many others.

The facility was run by preacher Mike Palmer, whose hatred toward anyone who didn’t share his radical right-wing views resonated loud and clear from the pulpit each night in chapel. His divisive intolerance didn’t in any way teach the loving side of religion, or any form of spirituality, which might have had a more positive effect on us. If Palmer had taught love and acceptance instead of fear and hate, I’d be writing something very different about my experience.

Just as only one version of religion was taught and tolerated at Victory, science was considered hogwash. The Old Testament was taken as literal truth and embraced as law; logic and reason were seen as the devil’s tools on every level. Girls who had previously been diagnosed

with emotional disorders were told that the devil was controlling their minds, and if they were depressed, it was because they weren't letting go and giving their problems up to God. The owners didn't believe in any form of professional counseling. Psychotherapists were going to hell too, for lying and having a college degree.

Escape attempts were common. One girl tried to run during her six-month parental visit. Her parents brought her back and her year started over. Another who tried to escape by climbing the fence ended up breaking her ankle. I also remember three suicide attempts: a girl drank cleaning fluid and another slashed her wrists in the shower, which resulted in razors being taken away from everyone. A third Victory student tried to starve herself and was put in the Get-Right Room for a week.

I didn't witness any deaths while at the facility but one did occur about a year after I left. Fifteen-year-old Carey Dunn, who had already been at the facility for two years simply because her parents didn't approve of her boyfriend, died when a stack of lumber fell on her head while she helped with a construction project for Palmer and his wife. Dunn's death prompted the State of California's Department of Social Services to take a closer look at the school and the preacher, who owned the facility. After many attempts and court battles, the school was finally ordered closed down by a San Diego judge in 1992. Evidence of abuse and neglect had been found by authorities. The Fire Marshal also concluded that the facility was a death trap and cited numerous safety violations. The Get-Right Room, where some girls were kept in the dark for days or weeks at a time, was also illegal.

In the twenty-two years following my Victory experience, I was able to make some clear decisions about what's important to me. One is a commitment to expose these kinds of facilities for what they promulgate in the world: immoral thuggery, degrading behavior akin to spiritual rape (and even physical rape — more on this later), and divisive intolerance, which evokes the worst kind of arrogant and illegal abuse of power. There are thousands of survivors of such institutions, and many of them aren't doing well in the world.

I've received many emails from women who were at Victory during and after my time there. Many convey deep thoughts and personal details about their post-Victory lives, most of which are characterized by depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide attempts, recurring nightmares, low self-esteem, insecurity, difficulty with relationships, accidental pregnancies, and trouble finishing high school. Many of the women who have contacted me complain of a strained relationship with their families still twenty years later. And to my knowledge none of them have maintained the level of religiosity that the home tried to brainwash us with. Almost all of them mention that they have struggled with drug addiction or alcoholism through the years while struggling to cope with the painful memories of

being trapped in the Get-Right Room at Victory Christian Academy.

I consider myself among the more fortunate in that I maintain an independent and fulfilling life, but not a day goes by in which I don't relive the traumatic events that occurred more than twenty years ago at a center supposedly devoted to the work of God. And my commitment goes deeper than naming the kind of abuse that I and others experienced there. It is a commitment to place a spotlight of public awareness directly on all such institutions, for there are similar schools located in many states. They need to adhere to basic standards of behavior and treatment that support civil liberties, freedom of speech, and equality — or else be closed down.

It's difficult to obtain a count of how many of these so-called fundamentalist boot camps are in operation around the country because they aren't licensed or regulated by any state or federal accrediting agency. Based on watch lists and survivor chat groups found on the Internet, one can safely assume there are dozens in operation today, possibly hundreds. States where they seem to thrive are those in the Bible Belt, such as Texas, Florida, and Mississippi. Reform schools get funding through state faith-based initiatives, voucher programs, churches, and from parents. And some of these programs can cost as much as an Ivy League university, which strikes me as fraudulent since they offer inadequate education. A fair number of reform schools use Accelerated Christian Education, a curriculum in use since 1970 in Christian home schools. I remember this teaching method from my days at Victory. The booklets were called PACEs (Packet of Accelerated Christian Education) and consisted of pages of Bible verses that we were forced to memorize. The only history we learned consisted of Old Testament doctrine; we were told that if it wasn't in the Bible, it simply didn't happen. When I asked questions about evolution and fossils, I was told that dinosaur bones were a hoax created by liberals. And as punishment for questioning the story of Adam and Eve, I was given hundreds of lines of scripture to write out of the book of Genesis.

**“We want to fund programs to
save America one soul at a time.”
— George W. Bush**

When George W. Bush became president, he created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and established Centers for Faith-Based Initiatives in five federal agencies: the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and departments of Labor, Justice, and Education. This was not Bush's first foray into the funding of faith-based groups. In 1997, when he was governor of Texas, the state legislature passed a program there allowing deregulation for faith-based reform schools. The legislature then passed a bill allowing the creation of alternative accreditation programs in which faith-based child-care centers could forego state licensing

and instead receive accreditation from one of these newly created private agencies. Deregulation was an essential component of the faith-based initiative because it ensured that more faith-based providers would be eligible for government funds. And it substantially reduced health and safety requirements and oversight for these religious facilities.

That same year the state of Texas approved the Texas Association of Christian Child-Care Agencies (TACCCA), whose board was comprised of eight pastors, three of whom also operated child care facilities. Upon TACCCA's creation, the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (TDPRS) no longer held jurisdiction over childcare programs or certain schools and so could not investigate complaints of abuse. Also upon creation of TACCCA, then-Governor Bush invited the Roloff Homes, centers for troubled youth founded by fundamentalist Baptist preacher Lester Roloff, to return to Texas. Incidentally, Roloff — who, among other things, was notorious for paddling pregnant girls who were living in his homes for unwed mothers — was an associate of Victory's Mike Palmer.

In 1985, after numerous allegations of abuse and a refusal to accept state oversight, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Roloff Homes either had to be licensed by the state or be shut down. They chose the second option and moved to Missouri where they stayed until Bush asked them back, buoyed by deregulation. The Roloff homes were accredited by TACCCA, which was supposed to uphold the same standards as TDPRS. However, the association never conducted a single legally required surprise inspection at any of its facilities. In 1999 the state of Texas issued a finding of physical abuse and medical neglect at Roloff's Rebekah Home for Girls. The following year brought a criminal trial where administrators from a Roloff home for adults were found guilty of abuse.

Although Texas abandoned its alternative accreditation program in 2001, those who wished to avoid state interference still had options. The Florida Association of Christian Child Caring Agencies (FACCCA) was created to do the same thing TACCCA did in Texas. After Victory Christian Academy was closed down in Ramona, California, FACCCA welcomed them to open up in Jay, Florida, where they are still operating today (as Lighthouse Ministries of Northwest Florida), despite rape and abuse allegations by former teens who have exited the program. Many complaints have been made against FACCCA facilities, but because the association doesn't seem to require facilities to allow participants access to victims' services, it is impossible to provide statistical data about the actual occurrence of abuse. The allegations that have been made, however, indicate the absence of any real regulation by FACCCA.

One could argue that deregulated systems such as those in Texas and Florida are unconstitutional as they violate the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause by placing program participants in a less protected class than children in state-regulated programs. Likewise,

one could assert that deregulation also violates the First Amendment's establishment clause by allowing special treatment for religious groups. And the quality of teachers at Christian reform schools is another issue. A staff member's background goes unchecked and they rarely have anything but a high school diploma, making them unsuitable candidates to teach certain subjects and work with kids who have mental health issues. One simply has to be a Christian and he or she is deemed suitable to work in the facility with kids.

Beyond the obvious damage such schools inflict on individuals is the danger that they may receive funding through faith-based initiatives, including President Obama's Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Under Bush's federal faith-based initiative, money was distributed in the form of block grants to the states, which were more or less free to spend it as they saw fit. There was no requirement that only licensed facilities be funded, unless a state had its own laws to that effect.

Another way fundamentalist boot camps like Victory Christian Academy can receive money is through state voucher programs. Under the Supreme Court's 2002 ruling in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, there would be nothing to stop a state from funding a Christian reform school through vouchers as long as it was merely one choice among others. And because many proposed state voucher programs are aimed at "at-risk" or troubled youth, presumably this would make it more likely for Christian reform schools to be involved. Writing in the March issue of *Church & State*, Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State notes that state legislatures are increasingly becoming battlegrounds for Christian conservatives on issues such as religious-school voucher subsidies. "Religious and political groups that promote public aid to private education, aware that their influence in the U.S. Congress has dwindled, are placing renewed emphasis on state capitals," writes Boston. "At last count, fifteen states were considering some type of voucher or tuition tax credit/deduction proposal. That number is expected to grow as legislative sessions continue in the states."

Boston acknowledges that many Americans are wary of vouchers because they know that private schools aren't accountable to the public and play by their own set of rules. But perhaps they aren't aware of the highly abusive nature of the rules at certain types of schools. Representative George Miller (D-CA) tried for several years to conduct an investigation into reform schools, but the Bush Administration thwarted his efforts. It wasn't until the Democrats took control of Congress in 2007 that he was given the opportunity to launch an investigation into the abuses he had heard so much about in relation to these types of facilities, which included boot camps and wilderness programs in remote areas of the United States. Miller held a full committee hearing in October 2007 that heard compelling testimony from parents whose children died in lockdown programs that were intended to reform them. It was a huge step forward in exposing abuse in

alternative residential treatment facilities, some licensed and some not; some religious, some secular.

It is imperative that the public, parents especially, are aware of what goes on behind closed doors at some of these unlicensed camps and schools. Parents are under the assumption that they have taken their troubled teens to a loving place when, in fact, many of us who have exited these programs have similar stories of abuse, have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and struggle for years to overcome the low self-esteem incurred from the experience. Any parent who is thinking of putting their teen in one of these locked-down facilities needs to do their homework and check to see if it has a clean record with Social Services and the Better Business Bureau, and has no pending investigations with the Department of Health and Human Services. It is also critical that a school is licensed by the Department of Education to assure that the curriculum is up to benchmark standards. One can also check to see if a school or camp is on the watch list of the International Survivors Action Committee (www.isaccorp.org). Those that don't allow prospective clients to interview kids inside the program should not be considered. This policy usually means there is something the owners wish to hide from parents who are considering enrolling their troubled teen in the program.

2009 Update: Recent Events in Fort Dodge

Shortly after my memoir *Reform at Victory* was published in 2008, I received an email from a concerned citizen in Fort Dodge, Iowa, who stated that sixty-nine-year-old Michael Palmer was living there and was possibly trying to open another unlicensed reform school for troubled teens. After some discussion with her, I concluded that this was the same Mike Palmer I'd known. I contacted authorities as well as a local reporter to inform them of Palmer's presence in Fort Dodge and to tell them about his checkered past (which, in addition to the closure of the California site and rape allegations from a Florida student, includes a raid by Mexican authorities on the Genesis-by-the-Sea girls school he ran in Ensenada, Mexico, that was subsequently shut down). I then heard from reporter Abigail McWilliam from the Fort Dodge Messenger newspaper, who had started to dig for information and, in doing so, found out that there is an unlicensed reform school much like Victory that has been in operation since 1996 in Fort Dodge. This newfound information prompted a series of investigative pieces about my experience, Palmer's past trouble with the law, Lester Roloff, and The Anchor Character Training Center (an unlicensed facility in Fort Dodge from which many teens have escaped). She also tracked down Rebecca Ramirez, who says she was raped by Palmer while a resident at the Jay, Florida, home in the early 1990s. McWilliam's articles were published in the Messenger on February 27, 2009. It usually takes media coverage or the publication of a book to alert the Department of Health and Human Services to the existence of these abusive facilities. Of course, by the

time an investigation is underway much abuse has taken place inside those walls and fences. Thankfully, since these stories have hit the Fort Dodge news circuit and word of my book has spread throughout the community, the citizens of Fort Dodge will see to it that Palmer doesn't open another reform school, at least not in their community. It pays to speak out.

Michele Tresler-Ulriksen was born and raised in Orange County, California, and spent a year at Victory Christian Academy, which is the basis of her first book, *Reform at Victory* (Pizan Media, 2008). As an adult she has studied film and creative writing at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco and spent four years in public radio in Oregon, where she still lives and works as a freelance writer. Her work has appeared in *World Kid Magazine*, *Freethought Today*, *Willamette Freethinker*, *The Peaceworker*, *Humanist Stories*, *Red Room*, *Alternatives Magazine*, and *The Commuter*. For more information please visit www.ReformAtVictory.com.

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Survey: Support for Terror Suspect Torture Differs Among the Faithful

by CNN.com, 4/30/2009

WASHINGTON (CNN) — The more often Americans go to church, the more likely they are to support the torture of suspected terrorists, according to a new survey.

More than half of people who attend services at least once a week — 54 percent — said the use of torture against suspected terrorists is “often” or “sometimes” justified. Only 42 percent of people who “seldom or never” go to services agreed, according to the analysis released Wednesday by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

White evangelical Protestants were the religious group most likely to say torture is often or sometimes justified — more than six in 10 supported it. People unaffiliated with any religious organization were least likely to back it. Only four in 10 of them did.

The analysis is based on a Pew Research Center survey of 742 American adults conducted April 14-21. It did not include analysis of groups other than white evangelicals, white non-Hispanic Catholics, white mainline Protestants and the religiously unaffiliated, because the sample size was too small.

The president of the National Association of Evangelicals, Leith Anderson, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The survey asked: “Do you think the use of torture against suspected terrorists in order to gain important information can often be justified, sometimes be justified, rarely be justified, or never be justified?”

Roughly half of all respondents — 49 percent — said it is often or sometimes justified. A quarter said it never is.

White evangelical Protestants were the religious group most likely to say torture is often or sometimes justified — more than six in 10 supported it. People unaffiliated with any religious organization were least likely to back it. Only four in 10 of them did.

The religious group most likely to say torture is never justified was Protestant denominations — such as Episcopalians, Lutherans and Presbyterians — categorized as “mainline” Protestants, in contrast to evangelicals. Just over three in 10 of them said torture is never justified. A quarter of the religiously unaffiliated said the same, compared with two in 10 white non-Hispanic Catholics and one in eight evangelicals.

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