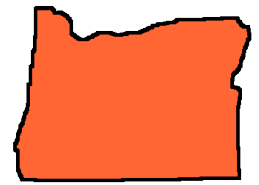


Willamette Freethinker



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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: Dumbocracy

The following is not fiction. It is not a satirical piece from *The Onion*, or a Tina Fey sketch on *Saturday Night Live*. This exchange actually occurred, in real life:

BILL O'REILLY:

Do you believe that you are smart enough, incisive enough, intellectual enough to handle the most powerful job in the world?

SARAH PALIN:

I believe that I am because I have common sense. And I have, I believe, the values that are reflective of so many other American values. And I believe that what Americans are seeking is not the elitism, the kind of a spinelessness that perhaps is made up for that with some kind of elite Ivy League education and a fact resume that's based on anything but hard work and private sector, free enterprise principles. Americans could be seeking something like that in positive change in their leadership. I'm not saying that has to be me.

"Hi. My name is Sarah Palin. I value valuable values. You should vote for me, 'cause, like, I isn't edjumacated like SOME spineless elite Ivy League libruls I cud name. I like it when big business makes lots of money, 'cause then, they give some to me. And that would be a positive change that Americans could be seeking something like."

This is the lasting legacy of George Bush. A woman who saw the movie *Idiocracy*, and saw a bright vision for America's future.

I've heard it said that we should HOPE for a Palin presidential run — that it would be a disaster for the Republican party.

All I can say is, I hope so — but deep down, I don't believe it. Eight years of Bush have left me afraid that a Palin Presidency could actually happen.

The Mayans may have been on to something. The world COULD end in 2012...

Reed Byers
Editor, *Willamette Freethinker*



CSS Meetings and Events

Calendar:

Saturday, Jan 16 th	2:00-4:00	CSS regular meeting
Saturday, Feb 20 th	2:00-4:00	CSS regular meeting
Saturday, Mar 20 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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From the President: Blasphemy

Blasphemy, according to *Merriam-Webster*, is “the act of insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God; the act of claiming the attributes of deity; the irreverence toward something considered sacred or inviolable.”

Wikipedia notes that “Some countries have laws to punish blasphemy. Some countries have laws to give redress to those who are offended by blasphemy. Those laws may discourage blasphemy as a matter of *blasphemous libel*, *vilification of religion*, *religious insult*, or *hate speech*.... Countries use blasphemy laws to victimize non-members of, and dissident members of, the ruling sect or cult. Countries with a state religion are the most punitive users of blasphemy laws.”

The Abrahamic religions take blasphemy seriously. In *Judaism*, the third book of the Torah, *Leviticus 24:16* states that those who speak blasphemy “shall surely be put to death.”

In *Islam*, blasphemy is irreverent behavior toward holy personages, religious artifacts, customs, and beliefs that Muslims respect. For instance, it is blasphemy to speak ill of Muhammad or Islam. It is blasphemy to express an atheist or secular point of view or for a non-Muslim to touch a Quran or to say that the Quran is boring. It is even blasphemy to name a teddy bear *Muhammad* or any other prophet’s name. (The *Sudanese teddy bear blasphemy case* concerns the arrest, trial, conviction, imprisonment and subsequent release of a British schoolteacher working at Unity High School in Sudan in 2007.) The penalties for such behavior vary by jurisdiction, and can include fines, imprisonment, flogging, amputation or beheading.

In *Christianity*, major creeds and theologians have regarded blasphemy as a serious, if not the most serious, sin. For example, Thomas Aquinas said that blasphemy is more serious than murder. *The Heidelberg Catechism* states that “no sin is greater or provokes God’s wrath more than the blaspheming of His Name”. In *Luke 12:10*, blaspheming the Holy Spirit is spoken of as unforgivable – the eternal sin.

Under “blasphemy law,” Wikipedia states: In some countries, blasphemy is not a crime. In the United States of America, for example, a prosecution for blasphemy would violate the Constitution according to the decision in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc v. Wilson*. The United Kingdom abolished its laws in England and Wales against blasphemy in 2008. In Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has recommended that countries enact laws that protect the freedom of expression. Some countries, especially countries which have Islam as the state religion, regard blasphemy as a serious offence. Pakistan, for example, has legislation which makes execution a penalty for blasphemy. In place of prohibitions against blasphemy, or in addition to prohibitions against blasphemy, some countries have laws which give redress to anyone who feels insulted on account of his religion. These laws forbid hate speech, the vilification of religion, or “religious insult”.

In the *US*, because of the First Amendment (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press....”), there are no laws against “religious insult” or “hate speech.” However, prosecution against “hate crimes” occurs, and “hate speech” can be entered in evidence. In *Canada*, hate speech that targets and identifiable group, including a religious group, is prohibited.

European Initiatives, per Wikipedia: “The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg adopted on 29 June 2007 Recommendation 1805 (2007) on blasphemy, religious insults and hate speech against persons on grounds of their religion. This Recommendation set a number of guidelines for member states of the Council of Europe in view of Articles 10 (freedom of expression) and 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) of the European Convention on Human Rights. The Assembly held that blasphemy should not be a criminal offence. In place of blasphemy or in addition to blasphemy in some European countries is the crime of ‘*religious insult*’. A religious insult is forbidden in Andorra, Cyprus, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine.

“On 23 October 2008, the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe’s advisory body on constitutional matters, issued a report about blasphemy, religious insult, and incitement to religious hatred. The report noted that, in Europe, blasphemy is an offence only in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Liechtenstein, the Netherlands, and San Marino. In its conclusions, the report stated ‘it is neither necessary nor desirable to create an offence of religious insult’ and ‘the offence of blasphemy should be abolished.’”

In Ireland, a new law was passed on July 9, 2009 and went into effect on January 1, 2010 making blasphemous libel a crime for material “that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion; and he or she intends, by the publication of the matter concerned, to cause such outrage”.

United Nations: In 1999, Pakistan, at the urging of the *Organization of the Islamic Conference* (OIC), proposed a resolution entitled “Defamation of Islam.” The UN Commission on Human Rights (now the UN Human Rights Council) (UNHRC) changed the name to “Defamation of Religions.” Since 1999, annual resolutions have passed condemning “defamation of religions.” Beginning in 2005, the United Nations General Assembly adopted annually a resolution entitled “Combating Defamation of Religions.”

Just last year, On March 26, 2009, the UNHRC passed a resolution, proposed by Pakistan, which condemned the “defamation of religion” as a human rights violation

by a vote of 23-11, with 13 abstentions. Supporters of the resolution argued that it is necessary to prevent the defamation of Islam, while opponents argued that such a resolution was an attempt to bring to the international body the blasphemy laws prevalent in some Muslim countries. On September 30, 2009, a similar resolution was considered at the UNHRC's twelfth session. The European Union's representative, Jean-Baptiste Mattei (France), said the European Union "rejected and would continue to reject the concept of defamation of religions." He said, "Human rights laws did not and should not protect belief systems." Nevertheless, the UNHRC adopted the resolution without a vote.

In New York, on October 29, 2009, the UN's Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian & Cultural) approved a draft resolution entitled "Combating defamation of religions" by a vote which had 81 for, 55 against, and 43 abstaining. On December 18, 2009, the General Assembly approved a resolution deploring the defamation of religions by a vote of 80 nations in favor and 61 against with 42 abstentions.

As I write this column (January 7, 2010), *The Washington Post's* "On Faith" section^[1] has a discussion on the topic, "Is blasphemy a crime?" One view was expressed by Herb Silverman (Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston).^[2] He was asked, "Atheists are others are protesting a new law in Ireland, under which a person can be found guilty of blasphemy if 'he or she publishes or utters matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion.' The penalty is a fine of up to about \$35,000. Should Ireland or any nation have a law against blasphemy? He replied:

Those of us who point out that emperors of all religions have no clothes continue to be considered blasphemous by any standard. But what are we to do about those poor believers required by their religion to blaspheme against other religions? Those who believe that the New Testament is to be taken literally blaspheme against Jews when they recite Mathew 27:25: "The blood of Jesus will be on all Jews and on their children." Those who endorse the First Commandment, "You should not have any gods but Yahweh," are blaspheming against those who promote Jesus, Allah, or one of the 7000 other god candidates. In fact, I'm blaspheming against Orthodox Jews by violating the Third Commandment, the one against taking the Lord's name in vain. Technically, I should only write G-d.

By such criteria, I doubt there's a writer on this panel who's not a blasphemer. But wait, there's an out! You are only guilty of blasphemy when thin-skinned religionists display bad manners. The crime of blasphemy has little to do with what you say, and lots to do with how others feel: so insulted and outraged by it that they want you silenced and punished. In other words, those uncivil libertarians opposed to free speech determine what is blasphemy.

Who among us believes that every Sunday people literally eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus Christ, that the angel Moroni led Joseph Smith to a magic stone which helped him translate gold plates from Egyptian hieroglyphics into English, and that the Qur'an was given to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel? Some may believe one of these stories, but nobody believes all three. Everyone thinks at least two of these three religious stories are foolish. And speaking of foolish, I've often been given a biblical explanation from Psalm 14:1 for why I am: "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God." I'm not outraged by such a comment, but I would be outraged were someone punished for telling me what they believed to be true. Atheists don't insist on the right not to be insulted, just on the right to be treated as others.

Many new religions sprang from blaspheming old religions, from questioning or criticizing the "sacred." The dominant religion in this country was a protest religion, reflected in its name, Protestant. If I said we would be better off if we had no sacred cows, that could be construed as a criticism of the Hindu religion. And if I said that blasphemy shouldn't be punished because it's a victimless crime, well that, too, could be considered blasphemous.

My View

Blasphemy is a victimless crime. But *laws* against blasphemy have victims. These include Humanists who speak out against religion. Consider the case of *Dr. Younus Shaikh*, the Humanist leader in Pakistan who spent more than three years on death row after being charged with blasphemy in 2000. Consider the case of *Dr. Taslima Nasrin*, the Humanist writer from Bangladesh who listened to a mob of 300,000 people demand that she be hanged for blasphemy. In response, her government issued an arrest warrant against her for "hurting religious feelings." Consider the case of the *Danish cartoonists, editors and publishers* living in fear of their lives because they dared to poke fun at the Prophet Mohammed. (Now a Jordanian court has summoned these Danes on charges of blasphemy. Jordanian prosecutors say that they hope the case "will help establish an international law against slandering religion.")

All ideas, including religious beliefs, should be subject to examination and critical analysis. Freedom of expression all over the world should prevail: laws against "blasphemy" are always inappropriate. These laws are very much an immediate concern to Humanists and civil libertarians. The facts that such a law just went into effect in Ireland, and that the UN votes regularly in favor of the same, are of grave concern. Humans, not belief systems, have rights.

John Dearing
President of CSS

1. <http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/>

2. http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/herb_silverman/2010/01/everybodys_a_blasphemer.html

Voicing Our Disbelief

by Russell Blackford, *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 1/4/2010

In recent years, we have witnessed a flood of books, aimed at the popular market, issuing robust challenges to theistic religious belief. A rather puzzling expression, “the New Atheism”, has been applied to this body of work, particularly the contributions of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. They, in turn, are sometimes referred to, apparently with affection, as “The Four Horsemen”.

The most prominent books in this New Atheist flood are, perhaps, Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Hitchens' *God is Not Great*. But then there are *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, both by Harris; *The Atheist Manifesto*, by Michel Onfray; *Breaking the Spell* by Dennett; *Against All Gods*, by AC Grayling; *Infidel*, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali; and *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, by Victor J. Stenger. The list continues, and the titles show that the authors mean business.

Why, however, do we need this “New Atheism”, and what's so new about it? There's a sense in which nothing is very new here, and a great deal of journalistic hype is involved. But there's something to the idea, all the same. Here's the deal.

Religious teachings promise us much. They offer a deeper understanding of reality, more meaningful lives and morally superior conduct, and such extraordinary (if illusory) benefits as rightness with a Supreme Being, liberation from earthly attachments, or a blissful form of personal immortality. It all sounds good, and if some of these teachings are rationally warranted it would be well to discover which. At the same time, however, religious teachings can be onerous in their demands; if they can't deliver on what they promise, it would be well to know that. I take it, then, that there is an overwhelming case for rational examination of religious teachings. Even if reason can take us only so far, we ought to explore just how far.

But it might appear that scrutiny of religion's claims is not an urgent task, at least not if the scrutiny is conducted in public, and especially not in modern, apparently secular, Western democracies. Hasn't religiosity become rather unobtrusive since the bad old days when heretics were burned? So why is there any need to engage in strong, publicly prominent criticism of religious teachings, the organisations that promote them, or the leaders of those organisations? Perhaps rational critiques of religion should be available somewhere — maybe in peer-reviewed philosophy journals — but no great effort should be made to debunk religion in popular books, magazine or newspaper articles, media appearances, and

so on. Or so it might be argued. In that case, it might be said, the New Atheism is unnecessary, and perhaps even undesirable. Why offend people, why stir up distrust and division, as the Four Horsemen seem to do?

I disagree. In the 1970s, or even the 1990s, it was possible to think religion had been declawed, and that further challenges to religious philosophies, institutions, and leaders were unnecessary. On this view, all the hard work had been done, and religion was withering away after

the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, Darwin, and the social iconoclasm of the 1960s. Against that background, it became taboo to criticise religion in the public sphere; it was widely assumed that religion was retreating, in any event, and didn't need to be fought anymore. Attacks on people's “deeply-held beliefs” even smacked a little of cultural imperialism.

In the academy, bright minds in philosophy turned to other topics. Bright young atheists and sceptics were certainly not steered into philosophy of religion, which looked like an intellectual dead end.

But the situation now looks very different, even in the supposedly enlightened nations of the West. For a start, a revived Christian philosophy is well entrenched within Anglo-American philosophy of religion.

More importantly, perhaps, religious organisations and leaders continue to exert social power. All too often, they seek to control how we plan and run our lives, including choices about how we die. At various times, religious lobbies have opposed a vast range of beneficial, or at least essentially harmless, activities and innovations. Even now, one religion or another opposes abortion rights; most contraceptive technologies; stem-cell and therapeutic cloning research; physician-assisted suicide; and a wide range of sexual conduct involving consenting adults. We still see intense activism from the religious lobbies of all Western democracies, and even in relatively secular countries, such as the UK and Australia, governments pander blatantly to Christian moral concerns.

The situation is far worse in the US, where religious conservatives regrouped with dramatic success during the 1970s and 1980s, establishing well-financed networks, think tanks, and even their own so-called universities. Slick attempts are made to undermine public trust in science where it contradicts the literal Genesis narrative; a rampant dominionist movement wants to establish an American theocracy; the recent Bush administration took the country some considerable way down that path; and the election of a relatively liberal president has produced

Yes, there are liberal forms of religion, but whatever good will we might feel towards them should not make us hesitate to speak uncomfortable truths. In particular, we ought to insist that religious leaders are not our moral leaders, despite their affectations.

hysteria on the religious right (polling shows that many American conservatives now believe that Barack Obama is the Antichrist). American religiosity is real, and there is nothing subtle or liberal-minded about its most popular forms.

Meanwhile, we are confronted every day by the horrors of political Islam, with its ambitions to extend sharia law universally and its ugly violations of human rights wherever it actually has power. Many critics of religion were radicalised by the traumatic events of 9/11 when thousands of people were murdered by terrorists. Islam doubtless has moderate and even liberal manifestations, but prominent, politicised forms of Islam take a hard line against secularism, modernity, and all forms of liberal thought.

In a different world, we might be content to argue that the church (and the mosque, and all the other religious architecture that sprouts across the landscape) should be separate from the state, and that discussions about public policy should rely on secular principles such as the Millian harm principle. More radical attacks on religion's truth-claims and moral authority would be less urgent if the various sects agreed, without equivocation, to a wall of separation between themselves and the state. Unfortunately, however, they often have good reasons (by their own lights) to oppose such strict secularism. Many religious sects, including many mainstream Christian denominations, do not distinguish sharply between guidance on individual salvation and the exercise of political power. They may be sceptical about the independence of secular goals from religious ones, or about the distinction between personal goals and those of the state. Some groups do not accept the reality of continuing social pluralism. Instead, they look to a time when their (allegedly) righteous views will prevail.

When religion claims authority in the political sphere, it is unsurprising — and totally justifiable — that atheists and sceptics question the source of this authority. If religious organisations or their leaders claim to speak on behalf of a god, it is fair to ask whether the god concerned really makes the claims that are communicated on its behalf. Does this god even exist? Where is the evidence? And even if this being does exist, why, exactly, should its wishes be translated into socially-accepted moral norms, let alone into laws enforced by the state's coercive power? When these questions are asked publicly, even with a degree of aggression, that's an entirely healthy thing.

Atheists and sceptics should, no doubt, defend secularism. But if we are realistic, we will understand that the idea of secularism has little traction in societies where the authority of religion is considered legitimate and taken for granted. For many religious groups, moreover, secularism

is not an attractive ideal. Advocating secularism and directly challenging the authority of religion should not be viewed as two alternative strategies for atheists and sceptics who wish to resist the political influence of religion. Rather, these strategies are mutually supportive and ought to be pursued in tandem. That is the lesson that we need to learn.

In short, there is plenty of reason to challenge religions and contest their doctrinal claims, not just as an academic exercise, but as a matter of real urgency. Atheists and sceptics should deny the authority of religious organisations and leaders to pronounce on matters of ultimate truth and correct morality. This will require persistent, cool argument, but also moments of outright denunciation or even unashamed mockery of religion's most absurd actions and truth-claims.

As it appears to me, the scientific picture is incompatible not only with fundamentalisms of various kinds but also with many supposedly "moderate" views that continue to postulate a loving, providential creator. When we challenge those views, we do not attack a straw man. We are challenging mainstream Abrahamic understandings whose adherents continue to seek power and influence.

We should never flinch from expressing the view that no religion has any rational warrant — that these Emperors really have no clothes — and that many churches and sects promote cruelty, misery, ignorance, and human rights abuses. Yes, there are liberal forms of religion, but whatever good will we might feel towards them should not make us hesitate to speak uncomfortable truths. In particular, we ought to insist that religious leaders are not our moral leaders, despite their affectations.

To a large extent, the New Atheism is merely the restoration of normal transmission. Earlier this decade, some philosophers, public intellectuals, and high-profile scientists, decided, for a mix of reasons, that enough was enough and it was time to break the taboo against explicit and popular criticism of religion. They were, in fact, not the only ones who felt that way: even before most of the New Atheist books appeared, I was starting to hear rumblings. People around me were beginning to say that it was necessary to re-engage in the public sphere with religion's truth-claims. Nonetheless, Dawkins and the other Horsemen opened up a publishing market and sparked an important debate. Thereby, they performed a public service.

The current debate about the truth-claims, moral authority, and social value of religion is very timely. It reflects the cold fact that the struggle of ideas is far from over, and that this is, after all, a good time to subject religions and all their claims to sceptical scrutiny. Those of us who do not believe have more than enough reason to dispute the unwarranted prestige enjoyed by the many variations of orthodox Abrahamic theism (and, indeed, all other religious systems). The time has come, once again, when critiques of theistic religion must be put strongly, clearly, openly, and unremittingly. What's new about the New Atheism is its restoration of some balance — that,

(continued on page 7)

Councilman Under Fire for Atheism

by David Zucchino, *LA Times*, 12/20/2009

HOMETOWN: ASHEVILLE, N.C. Councilman under fire for atheism Cecil Bothwell, a member of the Unitarian Universalist church, declined to mention God in his swearing-in ceremony. Angry conservatives say his stance violates the state constitution.

When Cecil Bothwell took the oath of office as a city councilman this month, he did not swear to uphold the U.S. and North Carolina constitutions "so help me God." He merely affirmed that he would, without mentioning the Almighty. Nor did the political newcomer place his hand on a Bible. He simply kept it at his side.

Bothwell, you see, is an atheist — or as he often describes himself, a "post-theist." And that has outraged some in this picturesque mountain resort who say Bothwell violated an obscure clause in the state constitution that disqualifies from elected office "any person who shall deny the being of Almighty God."

A conservative group has distributed pamphlets warning locals that Bothwell is "Satan's helper" and a "radical extremist" who is "bashing religion." A supporter of Southern heritage has threatened to sue Asheville for allowing Bothwell to take office.

The controversy has lighted up talk-radio phone lines nationwide and prompted hundreds of calls and e-mails to Bothwell, a soft-spoken environmentalist who lived for 21 years in a house — which he built himself — that relied on solar power and a gravity-fed water system.

"I didn't anticipate all this attention," Bothwell said last week, after presiding at his first City Council meeting. "I haven't even done anything yet."

Raised a Presbyterian, Bothwell began questioning Christian beliefs as a young man. He's a member of the Unitarian Universalist church, which includes atheists and agnostics as well as believers in God.

H.K. Edgerton, a former local NAACP president who has paraded wearing a Confederate Army uniform and waving a Confederate flag, said his lawyer was preparing a lawsuit against Asheville.

"If you're an atheist and don't believe in God and still want to hold office, I have a problem with that," Edgerton said. "And the constitution of North Carolina has a problem with that."

Asheville City Atty. Robert W. Oast Jr. declined to comment on what action the city would take if Edgerton follows through with his plan to sue.

Six other states have provisions outlawing atheists in public office. The North Carolina clause was in the state constitution when it was drafted in 1868. In 1961, the U.S. Supreme Court reaffirmed that states were prohibited under the U.S. Constitution from requiring a religious test to serve in office. The court ruled in favor of an atheist in Maryland seeking to serve as a notary public.

But David Morgan, editor of the Asheville Tribune, a conservative weekly, said the issue was not the separation of church and state. It was a matter of honoring the state constitution.

"I don't find any need in my day-to-day life for God to explain things to me," he said. "When religion gets tangled up with government, it always causes problems."

"If you don't like it, amend it and take out that clause. But don't just pick and choose what parts you're going to obey," Morgan said. "This is serious business. I mean, the belief in God is not exactly a quirk."

In an editorial, Morgan wrote of Bothwell: "He is taking an oath he obviously doesn't believe in."

Oast, however, pointed out that the state's general statutes permit officeholders "with conscientious scruples against taking an oath" to affirm, rather than swear, their oath of office — without being required to say "so help me God."

As for Bothwell, he says his atheism is irrelevant to his duties as a councilman.

"I don't find any need in my day-to-day life for God to explain things to me," he said. "When religion gets tangled up with government, it always causes problems."

And while his fellow council members are "bemused" by the whole affair, Bothwell said, he's not worried about being forced from office. He said the controversy was manufactured by political opponents "who don't want to see a progressive on the council."

Bothwell ran on a platform of energy conservation, government transparency and campaign finance reform. But what really upset his opponents, he said, was his book "The Prince of War," which is highly critical of the Rev. Billy Graham, who lives outside Asheville.

Another newly elected council member who took the oath this month, Esther Manheimer, did so with her hand on two sacred Jewish texts: the Pentateuch and the haphtara. She replied, "I do," to an oath that included the phrase "so help you God." Bothwell merely promised his "solemn affirmation."

Manheimer, a lawyer, said the clause banning nonbelievers is unconstitutional. "Mr. Bothwell, therefore, is entitled to hold office to the same extent I am," she said in an e-mail.

Last week, the first City Council meeting for new members opened with a prayer. There was no mention of God — only a plea for “justice and peace” and for the safety of U.S. troops overseas.

The council rotates responsibility for the opening prayer. Bothwell said he doesn't object, although he would prefer a moment of silence.

When his turn comes, he said, he may read from Charles Darwin's “On the Origin of Species” or Stephen Hawking's “A Brief History of Time.”

Bothwell predicted that the furor would pass, allowing him to focus on political objectives, which include retrofitting businesses and homes to reduce energy consumption. That's what many voters who elected him want, he said.

After nearly three decades in this eclectic city in the southern Appalachian Mountains, he said, his progressive — and sometimes contrarian — views are well-known.

“We have a lot of characters in town,” Bothwell said. “And I may be one of them.”

Voicing Our Disbelief...

(continued from page 5)

and the sheer number of people who have come to the same realisation.

Of course, there has been a backlash, and not just from the pious. Terry Eagleton, for example, has sharpened his literary talons to attack the New Atheists — particularly Dawkins and Hitchens — in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*. Throughout 2009, much of the blogosphere has been dominated by an acrimonious row about something that evolutionary biologist Jerry Coyne calls “accommodationism”. This involves two ideas: first, that supposedly “moderate” kinds of religion (including Roman Catholicism) are compatible with science; and, second, that it is unseemly and ill-advised for science-minded people to criticise “moderate” religion even in a thoughtful and civil way.

Although I am not hostile to all religious people, no matter how theologically and politically liberal, I stand alongside Coyne in rejecting accommodationism. It is, I think, clear, that only the most non-literalist kinds of theology — together with rarefied views such as eighteenth-century-style deism — are philosophically compatible with the picture of the universe and ourselves that we see emerging from science. As it appears to me, the scientific picture is incompatible not only with fundamentalisms of various kinds but also with many supposedly “moderate” views that continue to postulate a loving, providential creator. When we challenge those views, we do not attack a straw man. We are challenging mainstream Abrahamic understandings whose adherents continue to seek power and influence.

It doesn't help when opponents of the New Atheism attempt a silly and unfair tu quoque! riposte — or perhaps just try to wound feelings, express spite, or incite anger — by branding forthright critics of religion as “fundamentalist atheists”. This expression should be contested vigorously whenever it appears. A fundamentalist atheist would be one who believes in the inerrancy of an atheist text — perhaps one of the New Atheist books, such as *The God Delusion* — even in the face of results from rational inquiry. However, I have yet to encounter such a person, and in any event such a label has nothing to do with the writings of Dawkins, Hitchens and the other Horsemen. Let's be clear that the word “fundamentalist” does not mean “forthright” or “outspoken”. To use the word so loosely involves overlooking what is wrong with fundamentalism in the first place, namely its dogmatic resistance to all the findings of science and reason (as when Young Earth Creationists insist, against all the evidence, that the Earth is only six to ten thousand years old).

None of this is to deny that some atheists show apocalyptic or authoritarian tendencies. They may wish to eradicate religion in a dramatic way within their own lifetimes, rather than merely contesting religious truth-claims (with more realistic goals in mind). Some may even be tempted to advocate state action in an attempt to impose non-belief. Unfortunately, all social movements attract people with these tendencies, and even very liberal-minded individuals should beware the siren calls to apocalyptic and authoritarian thinking. Exasperation can make such thinking seem attractive. For that reason, atheists should engage in a degree of mutual scrutiny (and, indeed, self-scrutiny!), as well as in scrutiny of religious claims.

Still, much of the adverse reaction to the New Atheism — much of the distaste, bemusement, and discomfort expressed even by many atheists — is ill-founded. It displays a foolish sentimentalisation of religious faith, and often a failure to appreciate the real-world problem of religion's persistence. Critics of forthright atheism display a naivety about religion's ongoing power and influence in the public sphere, all too obvious even in Western democracies.

There are now many people who do not believe in any God or gods, or in the truth of any religious dogmas involving supernatural entities and forces, and are prepared to say so in public. Many of them have interesting reasons for their views, and it's valuable for all of them — for all of us — to speak up. It doesn't even matter if we don't all entirely agree in our thinking; in fact, the last thing we should want is the hardening of contemporary forthright atheism into a kind of quasi-religious sect with its own body of orthodox dogma. We should go on scrutinising religion from all angles, while discussing our own differences thoughtfully, carefully, and often.

In all, this is a good time for atheists and sceptics to stand up and start debating. There's no time like now to voice our disbelief.

Newspaper Letters

Corvallis Gazette-Times, 12/15/2009

Calm down over display of Santa Claus, bunnies, etc.

I am a rabid separation of church and state citizen, and am active in various organizations to insure that concept is enforced. But please ... trees (that are not decorated with religious symbols), Santa Clauses, talking snowmen, reindeer, Easter bunnies and the like are not Christian religious symbols, and they should not be confused as religious symbols when displayed by various government offices.

On the other hand, Nativity scenes, crosses, crescents, menorahs, holy books, the Ten Commandment tablets, etc., are religious symbols, and are not appropriate to display in government offices.

Let's lighten up and let the winter solstice be celebrated without attacking our government offices for cheering up their workplaces with what are, after all, pagan symbols of the winter solstice, celebrating the increase in daylight and less darkness each day following.

William Switzer [CSS member]
Corvallis

Corvallis Gazette-Times, 12/13/2009

Health care is capitalist, too

Mr. Rebel told the Albany Area Chamber of Commerce last Wednesday that today's debate about health care reform is "a collision between capitalism and socialism." He could have used the words "social responsibility" instead of "socialism". We have a responsibility and even self-interest in making sure everyone has access to good health care.

Chancellor Bismarck in the late 1800s realized that if he didn't make sure everyone had access to health care he would not have a productive workforce. His model of health care is still being used in many capitalist countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and Japan, countries which value not only social responsibility but economic survival.

Mr. Rebel went on to say that health care is the only thing we buy with somebody else's checkbook. If he means that health care services are abused when there is a third-party payer, I agree. But if he means that we should not use our tax money to ensure the health of our society, I disagree. The cost of excluding a third of our people is painfully obvious. Our population's health outcomes and administrative efficiency are among the poorest of all the industrialized world because we have a system that prioritizes profit above health and the common good. The equivalent of Albany's population dies each year in the U.S. because Americans are systematically excluded from insurance and health care.

It's time for single-payer, improved and expanded Medicare for all.

Mike Huntington, MD
Corvallis

Corvallis Gazette-Times, 12/13/2009

Act to avoid climate disaster

In his Nov. 29 letter "Warming hoax is over," John Jones continues to deny the reality of climate disruption due to increasing concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide from human activity. This is not a hoax, nor a fraud.

Concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are approaching 390 parts per million (ppm), higher than at any time in the past 650,000 years.

Climate scientists are sincerely alarmed about the consequences of the rising heat load of our planet due to greenhouse gases. These consequences include extreme weather events, for example the recent devastating floods in Cumbria, England (warmer air holds more moisture, thus can deliver more rain). Unpredictable weather patterns will make farming increasingly difficult.

Melting glaciers and land-bound ice sheets are likely to raise sea level by up to 3 feet over the next century, flooding beaches and coastal communities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) website documents the evidence for these scenarios in great detail. We must act together to avoid future climate disasters. Denial is a luxury we can't afford.

Evelyn Sherr [CSS member]
Corvallis

Corvallis Gazette-Times, 12/17/2009

Oh, Solstice tree; Oh, Solstice tree?

I agree with William Switzer's letter of Dec. 15 letter, "Calm down over displays of Santa Claus, bunnies, etc."

Apparently many of your readers are not aware that long before the origin of the Christian religion, plant greenery was an essential part of communal celebration in December in northern Europe. The celebration marked the end of winter in the northern hemisphere.

The December (Winter) Solstice, the shortest day of the year, is on the 21st, and in that era, it took two or three days to confirm that the hours of daylight were getting longer. Thus, Dec. 25 became the day of celebration for the return or renewal of the sun.

In the Catholic Church's endeavor to convert the non-Christians in Europe to the new Christian religion, the Catholic Pope mandated Dec. 25 as the date of the birth of Christ and permitted the use of evergreens in the celebration.

Thus, both Christians and non-Christians are following a very old custom, which should be acceptable to all who welcome the annual return of sunshine.

Perhaps, instead of referring to "Christmas" trees, we should say "Solstice" trees!

And a "Merry Solstice" to all!

Kenneth Kidd
Corvallis

Ireland's New Blasphemy Law is a Disgraceful Inhibition of Free Speech

by Roy Greenslade, *UK Guardian*, 1/6/2010

Reading Monday's Irish Times, I came across a surprising story tucked away at the bottom of a news page, Atheists rally over blasphemy law. Surprising? Well, atheists don't generally get much coverage in Ireland.

It long ago struck this atheist that it was a barmy law. I recall that the Irish president, Mary McAleese, enacted the defamation law last July and to my dismay that she, for whom I have high regard, had failed to send it to the supreme court to test its constitutionality.

The oddity is that the law, which restricts free speech, is tied to the official recognition of the country's press council, which is supposed to champion freedom of expression.

Anyway, after a delay, the new law came into force this week. It defines blasphemy as publishing or uttering "matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion." However, it may be a defence if the statement has "genuine literary, artistic, political, scientific, or academic value". The punishment? A fine of up to 25,000 (£22,400). Full wording here.

Rightly, Irish atheists have launched a campaign against a law that reads like some kind of throwback to the Ireland of the 1950s, when Archbishop John McQuaid held sway in the land, having previously influenced the drawing up of the Irish constitution.

But modern Ireland is very different. The Catholic church is no longer the power that it was. Fewer people attend mass. Priests are not only no longer feared, they are also

not so respected, especially since the shocking revelations of child abuse.

Ireland is also something of a multi-cultural society, with many thousands of immigrants, many of whom are not Catholic. The church still plays a central role in affairs, especially in rural communities in the west, but I detect far greater cynicism towards priests than I did on my first visits in the late 1960s.

So the blasphemy law runs counter to the spirit of the times. I note also that it is now attracting international attention. The headline on the website of the global press watchdog, Reporters Without Borders, says it all, Making blasphemy an offence takes Europe back several centuries. In condemning the law, it says:

Its definition of blasphemy leaves a lot of room for arbitrary interpretation. Who will decide or rule on the 'sacred' nature of a belief that is generally only determined by those who share it? How many adherents are needed to be counted as 'substantial'? Who is going to be responsible for this strange calculation?

It urges the European Council to look into the law and calls on Ireland to repeal it. "While all of Europe's citizens must clearly be able to practice their religion freely and without being threatened, it is just as important that those who make a different choice should be able to enjoy the same guarantees without being exposed to any possible sanction."

Hear, hear to that.

FFRF Freethought of the Day — 1/8/2010

On this day in 1697, Scottish medical student Thomas Aikenhead, 18 or 19 years old, was hanged to death for blasphemy, in Britain's last execution for blasphemy. The young Edinburgh student was found guilty of denying the trinity, and was convicted on the testimony of five "friends" to whom he had confided his strong religious doubts. Evidence against him were "atheistic" books in his possession. The Church of Scotland urged his "vigorous execution."

"... it is a principle innate and co-natural to every man to have an insatiable inclination to the truth, and to seek for it as for hid treasure..."

— Thomas Aikenhead, letter to friends on date of execution, January 8, 1697

Hillary Clinton on Blasphemy Laws, 2009

"...Now, some claim that the best way to protect the freedom of religion is to implement so-called anti-defamation policies that would restrict freedom of expression and the freedom of religion. I strongly disagree. The United States will always seek to counter negative stereotypes of individuals based on their religion and will stand against discrimination and persecution. But an individual's ability to practice his or her religion has no bearing on others' freedom of speech. The protection of speech about religion is particularly important since persons of different faiths will inevitably hold divergent views on religious questions. These differences should be met with tolerance, not with the suppression of discourse."

The 2010 Northwest Freethought Alliance Regional Conference

<http://www.nwfreethought.org/>



March 26-28, 2010
Renton Technical College
Renton, WA



Speakers

Ophelia Benson, the opening keynote speaker, is the co-force behind several books and a superb website, the goal of which is "fighting fashionable nonsense." She will open our conference talking about being as critical of what we agree with as what we scorn. (See <http://butterfliesandwheels.com> or Wikipedia to learn more about her.)

Dr. David Domke, banquet keynote speaker, is a University of Washington Communications professor and author of *The God Strategy* and *God Willing? Political Fundamentalism in the White House*. He was one of the two top-rated speakers at the 2009 conference, and will be the keynote speaker at the Saturday banquet in 2010. He'll be sharing ideas from his most recent research.

Anu Garg, the closing keynote speaker, is the founder of wordsmith.org, which goes to 750,000 subscribers in 200 countries, and has often included freethought ideas in the daily quote. He'll talk about his philosophical path from Hinduism (330,000 dieties) to where he is now (none at all). He's a member of FFRF and AU.

History

The first Northwest Freethought Conferences were planned and run by the Corvallis Secular Society, Eugene Atheists and Freethinkers, Humanist Association of Salem, Humanists of Greater Portland, and United States Atheists. The first conference, attended by 100 people, was held in 1998. Subsequently, conferences were held in 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002.

The 2009 conference, "Darwin@200, and Other Matters," at Portland State University was the resumption of this series. It featured Dr. David Domke, Roy Speckhardt, and Dr. Bob Park as keynote speakers. For 2010, we hope to expand the program to include a wider variety of speakers, workshops and panels.

The Northwest Freethought Alliance coordinates the efforts of more than 40 freethought groups in the Northwest, including member organizations of the Northwest Freethought Coalition (NWFC), in planning and hosting this annual regional conference.

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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:

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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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