“GOOD NEWS:” RELIGIOUS DOGMA WANING?

Do all Christian believers hold that non-Christians are damned? This is what we’re regularly told by the media and by the Christian religious leaders the media features. This is an official doctrine and a central tenet of Christianity. It is why Christians take their missionary work and proselytization so seriously. It is even why heretics were executed for centuries in Europe lest “the saved” lose their salvation by listening to such doubters.

But a survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and published late last February found otherwise. Seventy percent of more than 35,000 Americans and an overwhelming majority of the 26% of those polled who identified themselves as Christian evangelicals indicated that their own religion was not the only way to salvation. Fifty-seven percent of evangelicals agreed with the statement that many religions can lead to eternal life. Fifty-three percent of evangelicals agreed that “there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion.”

This is truly “good news.” It suggests that there is more flexibility than might have been supposed among believers whose public image is that of closed-minded homophobic worshippers of a book of fables opposed even to the basics of modern science. To be sure, such bigots remain at large. But their ranks include, it seems, those whose brains continue to stubbornly try to function.

It is not clear how helpful this is or may be for Freethinkers. But it may be a start. If so many Christian fundamentalists can - even if grudgingly - see “other religions” as having some merit, then there is some hope that they could learn to be equally tolerant of those of us who remain skeptical of all theologies.

Atheists often ask: “Would a loving God torture or otherwise hate and disparage any of his alleged children simply because they did not believe the stories in the Bible?” At least some Christians are ready to say that no, such a deity - their own Christian God - would not behave and does not behave that way. After all, the Bible’s Jesus character often said “He that hath ears, let him hear.” Perhaps Christians could be led to understand that we atheists do not “hath ears” for the Christian message, and that this is no crime, but simply the way our consciences work.

FREETHINKERS ABROAD

Executive Director Zachary Moore travels somewhat extensively for his career, but often has the chance to see some interesting places and people. Just this month, he was in England, where he had the chance to tour Westminster Abbey and see the graves of several noted freethinkers and scientists, including George Eliot, Isaac Newton, and Charles Darwin.

If you would like to share pictures of your travels with the NTCOF, please forward them to Pastoral Director Tim Gorski or Zach, and they could be shared here in the bulletin, on our website, or during the service.

Charles Darwin’s gravesite at Westminster Abbey in London, England. Just around the corner one can find Isaac Newton’s grave, adjacent to the altar where Anglican worshippers congregate throughout the day to pray and read from their scriptures.

HELP DURING HURRICANES

Hurricane season is upon us, and emergency services have already been called into action to help those in need who have been affected by nature’s whim. As freethinkers, we know that there is no supernatural entity we can turn to in order to clean up the messes left be these so-called “acts of god.” Please consider volunteering your time or donating money to worthwhile secular charities like the American Red Cross, where our own Operations Director Don Lewellyn was hard at work this month overseeing the Samuel Grand Hurricane Shelter here in Dallas.

www.redcross.org
BIBLE STUDIES FOR FREETHINKING CHILDREN

©2002 by Deborah Boak and Dr. Tim Gorski

What should Freethinking parents teach their children about the Bible?

I think all children need to know the Bible as literature and to appreciate something about the philosophical ideas it contains. Like it or not, the book is a part of our culture in many ways. Just consider how it’s affected our language:

Antediluvian – meaning old, is, literally, “before the flood.”

“As Old as Methuselah” – means very old; since the biblical Methuselah was supposed to have lived 969 years.

“The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse” – even if you don’t know them, you should know that they’re not on the Olympic equestrian team!

“The patience of Job” – you wouldn’t know that this means very patient if you didn’t know that Job put up with all sorts of tragedies just so God could win a bet with Satan.

And we could certainly think of many more examples of words, idioms, sayings and clichés that have their roots in the Bible.

Likewise, how could an intelligent person possibly understand the last 2000 years – and even more, perhaps – of history without knowing anything about the Bible? The Bible is, in part, the reason that there was a Dark Ages. It’s part of the reason why European politics worked the way it did for the last 1000+ years. It’s why the Crusades were fought and the Inquisition happened. It was used to justify the subjugation of “the heathen” all over the world for hundreds of years from the fifteenth century on. The Bible also played an important role in the Reformation, in King Henry VIII’s break with the Roman church, and, of course, it was one of the first books to be printed with Gutenberg’s movable type. Just to be told that the Bible and its teachings were responsible for these things is not enough, though. An intelligent person – which is what we want our kids to be – needs to know the how and the why of it. We should not follow the example of believers who try to “protect” their children by keeping them in ignorance.

Of course, I do not recommend the usual Bible story books for children that are sanitized and falsified for the purpose of indoctrination. Teaching children anything about the Bible can wait until they are old enough to grasp the real issues involved. In my experience, children who get to be 8 or 9 years old are ready to be acquainted with the traditional stories of Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, Jonah and the Whale, Job, and so on.

By this time Freethinking children should already be comfortable and confident in exercising a healthy degree of skepticism. And this is important, because we should not just teach our children the Bible stories. We should teach them the whole story. They need to appreciate, for example:

- that in Genesis God created flowering plants before any of the animals, including fish, and even before he created the sun and moon (children can be challenged to find other such discrepancies!)
- that there are really two creation stories in Genesis. In one God creates all the plants and animals and then humans. In the other he creates Adam and only later makes other plants and animals and even brings the animals before Adam to see if any are a “help meet” for him. Only when Adam rejects the companionship of everything from rhinos to lobsters does God decide that maybe Adam needs a woman!
- Read the Cain and Abel story as well – and ask: why does God not have “respect” for Cain’s offering? Nowhere in the story does it say.
- Similar problems exist with respect to the Noachian Flood story. After Noah is told to and takes two of every animal into his gopherwood ark, God comes back and tells him to take seven of every “clean” animal. And God hadn’t even told anyone yet which animals were “clean” and “unclean”!
- Of course, there’s also the delightful story of how God tells Abraham to kill his son Isaac and how Abraham is more than willing to do it. But this story should not be told without also telling the later story of Jephthah’s daughter (it begins at Judges 11:30). This time it is the “man of God” who, with the idea that he is keeping a promise to God, goes ahead and does kill his daughter, whose name we never even learn. No sheep caught in a thicket for Jephthah’s daughter!
- Also of note is that God “hardens the heart” of Pharaoh in Exodus – and then punishes him for it! This is an important passage because it bears on Saint Paul’s analysis of who is to blame when an all-powerful God allows bad things to happen.

There are lots of other things of this kind that children need to learn about the Bible and its teachings. But the purpose of this kind of instruction is not to persuade our kids that the Bible is a terrible book. The purpose is to educate them as to what the Bible actually is: a collection of material that is part myth, part history (though not much!), part philosophy and a very large reflection of the people and the times in which it was written.

Freethinking children need to be educated about the Bible in a way that is honest, straightforward, and rational. This book, despite the foolish claims made for it, is a part of the heritage of our civilization and all who are art of it, including our kids. We should not want our children to think that anyone who sees anything of value in the Bible is an evil person. But we do want them to appreciate that anyone who thinks this book is the “Word of God” has either not read it, doesn’t understand it, or is, well, - nuts!
The North Texas Church of Freethought couldn’t accomplish all that it does without the important volunteer work provided by its leadership, who serve their fellow freethinkers out of their own love of freethinking values and desire to help fulfill our shared mission.

Don Lewellyn joined the NTCOF family around three years ago; he had previously been attending a Unitarian church, but the leadership there had changed and adopted a very traditional religious posture. Coming to the NTCOF was “like a breath of fresh air” for him, especially being able to find so many intellectual people with whom he could have interesting discussions about topics he cared about. Before entering ‘retirement’ (although he still manages to keep fairly busy), Don worked as a consultant for some of America’s largest banking companies. Don volunteered to serve as Operations Director of the NTCOF, where he provides oversight and initiates projects to improve our behind-the-scenes management. He also regularly contributes to the monthly service through a variety of interesting historical topics, Moments of Science™, and of course as one of our recurring Santa Clauses in December.

**DIRECTOR PROFILE: DON LEWELLYN**

**TEXAS FREETHOUGHT CONVENTION - SUN, OCT 26th**

The FIRST-EVER opportunity for freethinkers, atheists, humanists, and other secular-minded individuals in the great state of Texas to gather together in a convention will be this coming October, on Sunday the 26th. Held at the Saengerrunde Hall of the historical Austin landmark, Scholz Garten, this convention brings together individuals from the NTCOF, the Metroplex Atheists, American Atheists, Corpus Christi Atheists, the Atheist Community of Austin, and many more. For more information, check out the official website: www.texasfreethoughtconvention.com

**HELP US HELP FREETHINKERS**

In addition to the key individuals such as Don who have volunteered to take on the responsibility needed to keep the NTCOF running and reaching out to freethinkers such as yourself who are looking for intellectual respite and a social support system, it’s clear from the Feedback Session we initiated last month that we’ll need a more concerted effort from the NTCOF family members to support the directors in their tasks. Two specific committees were identified in an open debriefing session last month as CRITICAL needs to move us forward- if you have any time to donate to this worthy cause, we and your fellow freethinkers would be extremely grateful if you would contact Executive Director Zachary Moore at today’s service or by email: exec-director@churchoffreethought.org

**FINANCIAL COMMITTEE**

NTCOF is looking for several volunteers (especially those with financial or legal expertise) to help our Finance Committee Chair, Cody Evans, with tasks such as:
- Organizing garage sales and other fund raising activities
- Ensuring the safe, secure investment of NTCOF funds
- Assembling instructions to set up recurring electronic payments
- Creating legal documents to help individuals establish endowments, bequests, etc
- Presenting the above and soliciting contributions from supporters
- Overseeing and planning for Building Fund contributions

**TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE**

HTML, MySQL, RSS, MeetUp, MP3, Facebook, YouTube

If you’re familiar with these terms, the NTCOF desperately needs your generosity and assistance with these tasks:
- Maintaining information and content on our website
- Providing technical support in website and forum upgrades and user issues
- Updating our upcoming events on MeetUp.com and Facebook
- Recording, editing, and uploading monthly service recordings and updating our podcast feed
SEPTEMBER EVENTS

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and friendly discussion at Jason’s Deli in Irving, located just south of I-635 on MacArthur, at 7770 N. MacArthur Blvd., phone (972) 432-0555. Easy driving directions: To reach Jason’s from the Holiday Inn: turn RIGHT out of the parking lot onto Esters Blvd., RIGHT onto Freeport Parkway, RIGHT to enter I-635 EAST. Exit I-635 at MacArthur Blvd., then RIGHT onto MacArthur, and RIGHT again just ahead into the Jason’s parking lot.

Games Night: The NTCOF Games group meets nearly every Friday night at the smoke-free IHOP at 2310 Stemmons Trail in Dallas. The IHOP is adjacent to the Radisson Hotel along North-west Highway, about a ½ mile east of Loop 12. For the latest details, join the NTCOF Games e-list by sending any e-mail message to:

ntcof_games-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Secular Singles: The Freethinking NTCOF Singles typically meet for lunch and Freethought fellowship on the last Sunday of each month at Mimi’s Café in Grapevine. To get up to speed on the NTCOF Secular Singles e-list, just send any email message to:

ntcof_singles-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Food Critics: Enjoy visiting different restaurants in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, as well as meeting socially with your fellow freethinkers? The NTCOF Food Critics dinner might be right for you! To catch up on the details, contact Social Director Brad Watson by email at:

social@churchoffreethought.org

Obnoxious Ball: Pay attention today during the service, as Brad will be explaining the concept of this totally ridiculous and completely fun new game. More details (and a potential trial run) to come in October.

HALLOWEEN PARTY - OCT 31st

Martina Kolmeder and Clinton Smith will be graciously hosting their annual Halloween Party, this year on Friday, October 31st. Costumes are encouraged and children are welcome, however costumes have been somewhat mature in the past, so you may want to take that into consideration. Since the party will be held on Halloween, bring candy to pass out to the neighborhood children and a healthy potluck dish to share.

If you’d like to come, plan to arrive at 6:00 PM, and get the rest of the details by emailing Martina and Clinton at:

technetronic@airmail.net

MYTHMAS PARTY - DECEMBER

Please see BRAD WATSON if you’d like to help plan our annual ‘Mythmas’ party in December

FINANCIAL REPORT

Folks, you hear this over and over, but it’s true: Freethought is NOT Free! Our continued growth is only possible through your generous donations and contributions to the church- our success depends on the commitment of ALL our members. We just shared a more detailed financial summary, but here’s a snapshot of our financial activity from the past month:

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