The North Texas Church of Freethought
BULLETIN
A Rational Approach to Religion
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TODAY’S SERVICE

State/Church Separation
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“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

That’s how the First Amendment reads. The Fourteenth Amendment extended this obligation beyond Congress to the states as well, which transformed the principle of separation of state and church from a restricted constraint on the federal government to an expansive principle covering government at all levels from dog-catcher to Senators and Presidents. That’s the idea, anyway. Never mind the “National Day of Prayer” proclaimed this past May. Oh, yes - President George Bush, proudly following in the tradition of previous occupants of the Oval Office, and in his official capacity as Chief Executive of the United States and the Commander-in-Chief of America’s armed forces, said that you should pray to God. Be glad he didn’t tell you to slaughter a ram and burn it up on an altar in order to send a biblical “sweet savor” aloft!

Ceremonial Deism - the Supreme Court’s excuse for “In God We Trust” being put on our money long after the heyday of Deism - is one thing. But being told what and how to worship is quite another. We have a long way to go, don’t we? Just remember this: if we lived in an ideal world, there would be no need for freethinkers.

We’re mostly concerned about obvious and egregious violations of the Establishment Clause: kids being forced to pray to Jesus in public schools or suffering persecution because they don’t, 50 foot tall concrete crucifixes in public parks, marking highway fatalities with crosses ... that sort of thing. It doesn’t please us when public officials behave like clergy either.

But everyone has the right to their opinions on religious questions. If we want that right for ourselves, then we obviously have to recognize it for others, even public officials. If we want to be able to go to a public park and think our thoughts and express what we believe, then we have to tolerate others doing the same. Although even the U.S. Supreme Court hasn’t been very clear-headed about it, this is why crèches on the lawn of City Hall make a kind of perverse sense when there’s menorahs and reindeer around too, because if seasonal symbols are going to be displayed at all, the government shouldn’t be singling out religious seasonal symbols for exclusion. (Besides, few things are more effective than having Baby Jesus up next to Rudolph

SPECIAL GUEST:
LORI LIPMAN BROWN

Lori Lipman Brown was hired by the Secular Coalition for America in September, 2005 as its first director and first full-time employee. She directs the Coalition’s activities and lobbies members of Congress on issues arising out of the inappropriate incursion of religion into civil law.

Ms. Brown addresses the interests and concerns of America’s atheists, freethinkers, humanists, agnostics, and other nontheists through media appearances and speaking engagements. She has been a frequent political commentator on television and radio, including appearances on The Situation Room with Tucker Carlson and The O’Reilly Factor, The Colbert Report, as well as a regular contributor to a variety of print media.

Before joining the Secular Coalition for America, Ms. Brown served as a Nevada State Senator from 1992 to 1994 with a legislative focus on public education, mental health care, and the repeal of laws criminalizing consensual sexual activities. She has also been a private practice attorney, and has taught Constitutional law, American history, and education law at the college level. Brown also taught English, speech and drama at the high school level, and served as a National Education Association diversity trainer.

In June of 2008 Ms. Brown proudly accepted the Secular Student Alliance’s Freethought Backbone Award. Other honors she has received include Civil Libertarian of the Year from the Southern Nevada chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, Legislator of the Year from the Nevada chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, Friend of the Center award from the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Southern Nevada, the Mark DeWolfe Award from Interweave Continental, and an award from Valley Outreach Synagogue.

Ms. Brown obtained her J.D. from Southwestern University School of Law in 1983, and her B.A. in communications from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 1981.

Ms. Brown will be speaking at today’s service on the subject of “Now Hiring: Pastor-in-Chief?”

For More Information, Visit
The Secular Coalition For America:
www.secular.org

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the Red-Nosed Reindeer at demonstrating how very similar they are!

Of course, there are some forums where we think that any sort of significant religious expression is inappropriate. The public schools are one such place, because they represent a captive audience of children who have been sent there by their parents for a specific purpose. No one sends their kids to school to be harangued - even by other children - about their religious opinions, no matter what those opinions are. Yet, of course, we have people who train their children to proselytize their playmates, and teachers and administrators who encourage such bad manners, usually while complaining about society's declining morals. How do we get it across to some people that we already respect their right of conscience and simply expect the same consideration by keeping such places as the public schools completely secular? Denying the access of god(s) to certain places is not at all the same as denying god(s). The extremists claim that the schools teach atheism. Yet they have no idea what the schools would be like if we did teach atheism there. For starters, we’d have Thomas Paine’s “Age of Reason” as a textbook.

These questions should lead us to realize a curious thing about the First Amendment. For in order to have state/church separation, which is to say, for everyone to have freedom from other people’s religion, you have to know what religion is. And if you want to ban governmental establishments of religion, you have to know what establishments of religion are. To my mind, this is the weakest part of the wall: deciding what belongs on the “church” side. To the extent that the government determines that one thing or another is or isn’t a religion, isn’t that a Constitutionally impermissible encroachment on the church by the state?

Like speech and the press, which now include telephone conversations and radio and television broadcasts and ought to include computer networks like the internet, religion means something a little different now than what it meant to people in the late 18th Century. For at that time the notion of god(s) was still thoroughly entwined with philosophical and even scientific thinking. No one had offered a decent alternative to the Argument From Design, for example, or the notion that something or someone was needed as a Final Cause for the workings of nature. There was also still a widespread impression that natural processes had a kind of purpose or end that they were aiming towards. This is called teleological thinking. This was the age in which the German philosopher Leibniz supposed that, with all its pain and evils, this was still “the best of all possible worlds.”

Things are quite different today. So much so that we can scarcely imagine a time only a hundred or two hundred years ago when theology had any relevance to philosophy or science. The idea that evolution is going somewhere in particular, for example, is history. When we see a few scientists comparing the Big Bang concept to the “Let There Be Light” pronouncement in Genesis, it is more of a poetic allusion than anything else. The emancipation of the sciences from divine rule that Isaac Newton began has been almost completely accomplished. To be sure, there are still those that preach the “God of the gaps,” which is to say a role for the supernatural in the many areas of science where we remain ignorant. That God has to be wedged into cracks and crevices is testament to the ascendency of human reason. Even so simple and impersonal a God as that of Deism has become an obsolete excrecence of human understanding. Freethinkers today, many of whom might have been Deists in the time of Jefferson, now entertain theologies that are somewhere along a continuum from a puzzled ignorance to a skeptical enlightenment to a weary and somewhat impatient indifference.

Oh, yes, we have a theology, a very simple one: Not! We see no reason for believing in the supernatural, or in anything that’s not rationally related to our experience. But there are no particular doctrines that are necessary to religion. Buddhists don’t believe in God, for example. Most Jews don’t believe in an afterlife. And if one or another superstition isn’t necessary to religion, then none of them are necessary to religion. I am absolutely convinced that just as science has been cleansed from mysticism, so can religion. Just because we reject god(s) and devil(s), fairies and leprechauns doesn’t reduce our religious stance to zero.

Thomas Paine said: “My religion is to do good.”
And Abraham Lincoln said: “When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That’s my religion.”

The reason this works is because the whole point of god-belief - so they say - is that it has practical consequences. Boy, does it have some consequences! But whereas the doctrines of believers lead them to definite - and rigidly dogmatic - conclusions, our denial of such nonsense (they admit it’s non-sense when they say it takes faith to accept it) leads us to begin just about where they leave off. That is, where their analysis stops - they don’t dare go any further after being told what their god(s) want - that’s where we begin. Our concern is to directly consider how we ought to behave towards others, how we can best raise our children, and how to go about living happy and productive lives.

I want to leave you with this idea that beliefs - faith beliefs especially - are an ending. While freethought is a beginning. Remember that when you next find yourself in a position to share your beliefs with someone. Don’t share them, in other words. Because that’s not how you got to where you are. Don’t share your beliefs. Share your thinking. Share your doubts. Share with others, when you can, what’s really enriched your life and the only thing that can make this world a better place.

THINK ABOUT IT!
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.

Georgene Harkness and her husband Howard joined the NTCOF very soon after its inception in 1994. They had seen some news features within the Dallas Morning News that noted the founding of a church that advocated freethought rather than dogma. The photographs printed alongside those stories showed normal people that one might find in just about any walk of life, and the relatability appealed greatly to them both. Although it took a little bit of courage to publically associate with freethinking strangers, NTCOF Founder and Director Emeritus Mike Sullivan made them feel right at home as soon as they walked in the door. Since that time, Georgene and Howard have rarely missed a service (aside from vacations), and the rest is history.

Georgene loves the feeling of newness and regrowth in the NTCOF, especially the emphasis toward learning what our church family needs and wants from her and the other Directors, and is committed to working to satisfy those needs. In the future, she hopes to see more new members and visitors to our services, additional participation by all members, and a way to start saving for a church building of our own. If this latter becomes a reality, then our opportunities to service our members will expand greatly.

As Treasurer, Georgene keeps dutiful records of our donations and bills, provides financial oversight and helps to keep the NTCOF leadership and membership informed about our financial needs.

George Hrab is an unabashedly atheist and freethinking musician who has performed for President Clinton at the White House, entertained at the Super Bowl, played gigs at The Kennedy Center, and even shared the stage with Elton John at Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center. His hugely popular “Geologic Podcast” (www.geologicpodcast.com) combines his love of scientific skepticism, musical talents, and comedic instincts.

Mr. Hrab’s efforts have not only been noticed by the New York Songwriters’ Circle, where he successfully performed at their famed Bitter End showcase, but have also been recognized by various radio and television stations, including performances and interviews on NPR affiliate WDIY, WZZO, RCN-4, WLVR and many others.

Mr. Hrab will be visiting the North Texas area on Friday, November 21st. Reserve that evening if you’d like to meet him, and check our website calendar for venue updates which will be posted as available.
ANOTHER GREAT DEBATE: NOV 7th

“Intelligent Design and The Existence of God” will be held from 7:00 - 10:00 PM on Friday, November 7th at the Will Rogers Auditorium (3401 W. Lancaster Ave, Fort Worth). Sponsored by St. Andrews Episcopal Church, this debate will feature Dr. Denis Alexander (Anti-ID/Theist), Dr. David Berlinski (Pro-ID/Theist), Dr. Lawrence Krauss (Anti-ID/Atheist), Dr. Bradley Monton (Pro-ID/Atheist), and Dr. James Tour as moderator.

Dr. Krauss is a physicist, public advocate for science, and noted atheist. Tickets will be $10 for adults and $5 for students at the door.

ROAD CLEAN-UP: NOV 8th

Make sure to mark down Saturday, November 8th at 9:00 AM so you don’t forget to join the rest of your fellow community-conscious freethinkers at the Dillard’s parking lot of the North Park Mall, so we can all fulfill our obligation to keep the two-mile stretch of Northwest Highway clean between Preston Road and North Central Expressway.

Be sure to send Keith Geissler an email to let him know that you’ll be ready to go bright and early:

keith.geissler@gmail.com

DR. BARBARA FORREST: NOV 11th

Dr. Barbara Forrest, author of “Creationism’s Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design,” will be speaking at 6:00 PM at SMU on Tuesday, November 11th in the Hughes-Trigg Student Center on the subject: “Why Texans Shouldn’t Let Creationists Mess with Science Education.” Admission is free but you must RSVP to www.tfn.org.

This event is sponsored by the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund and the SMU Departments of Biological Science, Anthropology, Philosophy, Center for Teaching Excellence and Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development.

The North Texas Church of Freethought
A Rational Approach to Religion

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NOVEMBER 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 Northwest 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 meets at the Vineyard restaurant in the Hilton DFW Lakes Executive Conference Center in Grapevine (1800 Highway 26 East). 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

COMING IN DECEMBER

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’ve shared a more detailed financial summary earlier in the year, but here’s a snapshot of our financial activity from the past month:

Total Income: $938.37
Total Expenses: $1,623.71
Difference: -$685.34

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