Today we’ll be joined in our service by Santa Claus, although my fellow Freethinker Tom Flynn, one of the editors of Free Inquiry magazine and author of The Trouble With Santa, argues that both Christmas and Santa Claus are myths and frauds with which supporters of reason ought to have nothing to do. I nevertheless have more in common with Tom than with almost anyone else who will be observing the usual holiday rituals this season. For, you see, he and I - and certainly you and I as well - are bound to disagree on a great many things. And, yet, there is something far more fundamental, in the most important sense of the word, that we Freethinkers strive to keep our thoughts and actions in compliance with.

When this church was set up, we knew that some people would object to the very idea of its being called a church. We knew that many unbelievers would be suspicious of something that seemed even remotely similar to faith-based religions. And we knew that we would have to depend on people coming together to form a community supportive of rational efforts to come to grips with the human condition even though those people would often hold wildly divergent, antagonistic, and even mutually exclusive and irreconcilable points of view on many of what are considered the most important issues of the day.

We are proof that it is possible to resist - and, perhaps, to overcome - a far more ancient and insidious error, a far more socially ingrained habit of mind, and a far more destructive idea than that of savior-gods born of virgins, magical incantations as a means of controlling supernatural powers, and flying reindeer. It’s an idea that is so pervasive, and so much taken for granted, that people are people are virtually blind to how corrupting it is. Instead, they readily accept the idea that human beings should be classified and considered according to their beliefs.

In fact, it is thinking that is far more important than believing. Moreover, when you’re believing, you’re not thinking. And when you’re really thinking, you’re not believing. It will be an enormous step forward in human progress when this value becomes a part of the bedrock of society.

To be sure, beliefs change. And those who prize conformity of opinion have often tried to bring it about by such change by coercion, the result of which, as Thomas Jefferson observed, is that “millions of innocent men, women, and children ... have...”

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'Twas the night before Christmas, I laid down in dread.
While visions of credit cards danced in my head.
The interest charge. The overdraft fee.
I wished that Christmas would once more be free.

For others that day is made for good cheer,
But it’s the most expensive day of the year.
You buy mountains of gifts of expensive design,
To those who without them would live on just fine.

You get back useless toys, you get junk galore.
I wish the whole thing I could just ignore.
And just as I was ready to doze off to sleep,
A red clad fatso cried with voice deep:

"Why do you despise me, and like not my day?
You think of another, perhaps better way?"
I told him: “Remember, I’ve just been laid off.
At this drain on savings allow me to scoff.
I’m going to shoot you right where you stand.”
He shook off his robe, yanked the beard with his hand.
I saw Alan Greenspan before me did stand.
"For that, evil Santa, you’re going to die.
For decades you have been a blight on the land,
I’m going to shoot you right where you stand."

Emotional blackmail the red fatso tried.
"For that, evil Santa, you’re going to die.
For decades you have been a blight on the land,
I’m going to shoot you right where you stand.”

I took out the handgun I kept by the bed,
And pointed at Santa who stood there in dread.

--Ori Pomerantz
been burnt, tortured, fined, [and] imprisoned" so that "one half the world [has been made] fools, and the other half hypocrites." Jefferson knew, as we do, that authentic belief is only arrived at through a process of careful thought that often requires a great deal more honesty and courage than is commonly supposed. That is to say, real beliefs are possible only when people have the opportunity - and feel the freedom - to continually replace those they have with better ones.

The complicating consideration in all of this is that so many of our beliefs, opinions, and attitudes are not so straightforwardly connected to facts and reason. If it were otherwise, we'd be discussing science and not religion, ethics, philosophy, "eupraxophy," or whatever you want to call it. In my personal opinion, superstition and unreason ought to be separable from the subjective aspects of the human condition that religion has historically tried to address. I think this can be done without this important dimension of the human experience being entirely reduced to clinical psychology or neurochemistry. To me, the result is a kind of functional religion. Nor do I see any reason, in trying to accomplish this task, to stand outside of the protections of the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom just because faith-based efforts to make some sense of the human condition as a whole have been so ridiculous in theory and so disastrous in practice.

There are aspects of Christmas which represent something like fossil relics of a time when superstitions were the best science available. At least the winter solstice- the real reason for the season regardless of what people call it- does mark an astronomical event that it took some observation and intelligence on the part of human beings to recognize. We owe no debt to any god(s) for this bit of knowledge - or any other. There is also something cheering in that people for so long, all over the world, have always preferred to celebrate the return of the sun - to the Northern Hemisphere; and Easter the sun’s crossing over to the higher latitudes - rather than the Sun’s retreat later in the season. It’s reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin’s remarks at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 near the conclusion of the proceedings. Concerning a painted sun on the back of the President’s chair, Franklin commented that “I have often ... looked at that ... without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting: But now at length I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting sun.”

As for Santa, and again speaking only for myself, I’m not particularly worried about my children not ultimately figuring things out for themselves, as I did. In fact, with all due respect for the arguments of Tom Flynn, I think I can make a good case in favor of the Santa Claus tradition. For one thing, it affords the maturing intellects of children the opportunity of an object lesson in distinguishing fact from fiction that strikes very close to what they most cherish. For many of them - I know it was true in my case - their eventual success in solving the puzzle may even embolden them to consider the very similar problems of theology, a tissue of nonsense that has much in common with Santa Claus, elves and reindeer, and being rewarded with gifts or punished with coal in one’s stocking.

The Santa Claus tradition offers adults some useful food for thought as well. Isn’t it astounding, for example, how easily such a massive conspiracy is accomplished, year after year, in plain sight, simply for the amusement value of a sort of monumental practical joke on the very young? And isn’t the real value of children’s reaching a mature understanding of it all precisely one of their accomplishing it by the power of their own intellects, rather than of simply being told the answer? Life offers very few answers, after all. The most precious ones are those that our own experiences - rationally considered - afford us. I truly pity anyone who has never had the pleasure of realizing that they had not quite got something right but that now they had a better understanding of it.

Finally, I think that along with the very important traditions of renewing our recognition of the value of peace and goodwill, of thinking of others with cards, gifts, and social gatherings and events, and of planning to make the next year better than the last, the Santa Claus tradition should remind us that the difference between true beliefs and false beliefs lies in our knowing and appreciating the significance of all of the relevant facts, and our having the time and ability to make intelligible sense of them. In the real world, almost without exception, we are forced to make judgments - and even important decisions - without having had the luxury of such thorough contemplation. For this reason, as we go through life, there ought to be a certain amount of tolerance and charity that we extend to others who, though we may not agree with them, appear to be making some sort of effort to reach their conclusions through a reliance on facts and reason, however imperfectly. Conversely, and for the same reasons, we ought to harbor a certain amount of caution and humility where our own beliefs are concerned, in addition to remaining open to the rewarding opportunity of improving them whenever possible.

I think those are among the important ingredients in goodwill. It is possible to agree to disagree, if it can only be agreed to leave aside - without failing to acknowledge - our subjective preferences and prejudices in favor of the objective facts, and to rely on thinking, rather than believing, as the basis for human interaction. It is, without a doubt, an easy thing to say and a most difficult thing to do. But it can be done. Out of honest goodwill can come real peace. There is not one person on this planet who cannot, in principle, change their mind by choosing the better over the worse.
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.

Howard Harkness and his wife Georgene joined the NTCOF very soon after its inception in 1994. Georgene had seen a news article printed in the Dallas Morning News that noted the founding of a church that advocated freethought rather than dogma. Since that time, Howard and Georgene have rarely missed a service (aside from vacations), and the rest is history.

Howard likes that the NTCOF is a place where he doesn’t have to pretend that he is something other than what he is not. In the future, he hopes to see the church grow and purchase a church building of our own.

As Music Director, Howard cultivates and inspires our musically-inclined members to contribute musically to our services. Please see Howard if you have a musical talent that you would like to exercise, bring out of retirement, and especially show off to the rest of your freethinking family!

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**SOLSTICE CARDS NOW AVAILABLE FOR 2008**

The North Texas Church of Freethought is proud to offer you a secular alternative for your holiday card needs this year. Our resident artist and Social Director Brad Watson contributed a beautiful oil painting for the front image, and you can now purchase these cards from our CafePress site for only $24 for a pack of 20.

www.cafepress.com/ntcof

Inside the card, you’ll find the following verse that’s perfect to send to your freethinking friends and family:

*May the bright light of human reason illuminate the nights of your solstice season.*

Order yours today!
SOLSTICE PARTY: SAT, DEC 13

Our annual Solstice/Mythmas party will take place from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM on Saturday, December 13th at the Bent Creek Clubhouse on 1240 Bent Creek Drive, Southlake, TX 76092. Bring $5 for pizza, your favorite snacks or beverages, and a wrapped CD, DVD, or book for a fun gift exchange. RSVP to Brad at: social@churchoffreethought.org

SPAGHETTI CLAUS IS COMING TO TOWN...

...WILL YOU BE TOUCHED BY HIS NOODLY APPENDAGE?

DECEMBER 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

Video Game Night: For those of you that want to indulge your affinity for blowing up aliens, illegal street racing, or portly Italian plumbers, the Video Game Night is for you! This month, we’re meeting at Keith and Susette Geissler’s house on Saturday, December 20th, at 6:00PM. Send your RSVP to: kgeissler@gmail.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

15 YEARS OF NTCOF

Founded in 1994, next year marks our 15th anniversary serving freethinkers, atheists, and secular humanists in the Dallas/ Forth Worth metroplex. Consider a resolution to help make 2009 our best year ever, by taking the initiative to donate your time, money, or both!

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

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The North Texas Church of Freethought
A Rational Approach to Religion

Tim Gorski, MD Pastoral Director
Zachary Moore, PhD Executive Director
Deborah Boak Youth Director
Cash Foley Outreach Director
Georgene Harkness, CPA Treasurer
Howard Harkness Musical Director
Don Lewellyn Operations Director
Brad Watson Social Director

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December 2008