



SUPERNATURALISM (part II)

Freethinkers often consider that people are either “religious” or “secular.” Or theists are distinguished from atheists and agnostics. But a more important distinction is that between naturalism and supernaturalism. For polls show (see last month’s bulletin) that a majority of Americans believe in “psychic powers,” ghosts, and other such claims. This is what those who champion facts and reason have a problem with, not just deities and “religious” superstitions.

Naturalism is said to be the idea that “nature is all that there is.” But this begs the question of what “there is” is. No one knew anything about dark matter 100 years ago, and we have known of dark energy for less than 20 years, to take two examples. If the nature we knew in the past was not “all that there is,” how, then, can we know that the nature we know today is “all that there is?” Supernaturalists exploit this tentative character of naturalism. They say that their paranormal beliefs involve “subtle energies,” other regions of the putative “multiverse,” and unwarranted extrapolations of quantum effects.

Naturalism is the idea that “nature” is what can be seen, heard, touched, or what we can build machines to detect for us, that the objective world we share is based on perceptions and interpreted by reasoning that are independent of anyone’s personal, private, subjective experience or even of consciousness altogether. Otherwise it could be said that you are not even reading this right now. It could be said that what you think you are experiencing is just a simulated hologram created by extra-dimensional quantum computers built by a galactic civilization of bacterial intelligent beings. Or, as David Hume put it in his 1748 Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding:

“If we reason a priori, anything may appear able to produce anything. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man control the planets in their orbits. It is only experience, which teaches us the nature and

bounds of cause and effect, and enables us to infer the existence of one object from that of another.”

American scientist and author Isaac Asimov said it like this:

“I believe in evidence. I believe in observation, measurement, and reasoning, confirmed by independent observers. I’ll believe anything, no matter how wild and ridiculous, if there is evidence for it. The wilder and more ridiculous something is, however, the firmer and more solid the evidence will have to be.”

This is why naturalists reject not only theology but “psychic powers” and the rest of paranormalism. Do people have weird experiences? Yes, but such things are best explained by misperceptions, misunderstandings and faulty recall, many of which have been demonstrated and studied under controlled conditions. Stimulation of specific regions of the brain, in particular, has been shown to cause certain “paranormal” experiences. So it is clear that the human body and its sensory and neural interpretive systems are subject to all sorts of errors and distortions, which is why, as Asimov observes, multiple independent observations are important even in legitimate science.

We know that belief in deities, in angels and demons, and in other “religious” claims, besides being unsupported by evidence, is counterfactual and irrational. But the same is true of supernaturalism generally:

- ✦ A brain affected by Alzheimer’s, Huntington’s or other neurodegenerative processes is surely better than a dead brain. Yet believers in an afterlife claim that one’s consciousness is not destroyed by having a dead brain (or even a decayed brain) when a damaged brain clearly causes severe impairments.
- ✦ If “psychic powers” were real then ESP/telekinesis would interfere with natural processes. Scientific research would not be reliable and airplanes could crash if pilots or passengers doubted the principles

of aeronautics!

- ✦ If “psychic powers” existed, they would confer a huge survival advantage and evolution would have seen to it that pretty much everyone would have them for the same reason that pretty much everyone can see and hear.
- ✦ If ghosts are real the whole world would be jam-packed with them including many more ghosts of animals than humans. Poltergeist activity would swamp out the doings of the living.
- ✦ If something like “remote viewing” worked, exploratory space probes and even medical diagnostic procedures and imaging would be superfluous.
- ✦ Lotteries and casinos could not exist if the laws of chance were affected by paranormal means.
- ✦ Enormous sums have been charged to taxpayers to show that prayer, homeopathy and other methods at odds with scientific principles do not work.

The point is that religious superstitions are just one part of a much larger domain of paranormalism, pseudoscience and irrational and counterfactual nonsense. Like the promises of swindlers, much of it is appealing and seems plausible. Analyzing it to the point of showing it is nonsense takes time and effort, access to and familiarity with information that may not be readily available, and habits of thinking that many people have not formed. But these are the same tools that expose the absurdities of theology. If religious foolishness is to be countered, it can only be through dissemination of a more general reliance on facts and reason.

The corollary is a foundational element of the Church of Freethought: that there is really nothing wrong with religion that cannot be corrected by eliminating the supernaturalism that has been too long connected with it. It is no bad thing – indeed, it is quite a good thing! – to make sense of our subjective human experience in ways that contribute to human satisfaction, well-being and peace. But this cannot and should not be done by a “faith” exception to reason, in opposition to facts or as an “add-on” to the cooperative enterprise of making sense of objective experience we call science.

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS
TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED,
APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:

**- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason’s Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant “The Vineyard” - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: Nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Le Havre, Carcassonne, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club January 14, 2017 5:30 pm, THE BOOK: Good without God by Greg Epstein, Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University Location: Farina’s Winery on Main Street in Grapevine

Communitas Dinner Group: (To be Announced)
Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at twitter.com/ntcof !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“RUINS OF EMPIRES!”
Guest Speaker
Thomas Christian Williams
> Sunday, January 1, 2017 <
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western;
starts at 10:30 but come early for coffee,
snacks - you can bring! - and conversation)**

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

Pastor (It’s a Job Description, NOT a title!)	Tim Gorski
Presenters	Tim Gorski
Social Media Czar	Aaron Kelton
Book Club Lord	Nirav Assar
Welcome Coordinator	Mark Barnick
Videographer:	John Gauthier
WebPage/Management	Saturn Consulting

mailing address: 1001 N Waldrop Dr #815
Arlington, TX 76012
(214) 702-2050
Website: www.churchoffreethought.org
Email: info@churchoffreethought.org