



THE CHURCH OF FREETHOUGHT AT 21

Two days ago the Church of Freethought completed 21 years of regular monthly services. We have now begun our 22nd year.

When the North Texas Church of Freethought began operation in late 1994 and held its first service on February 5th of 1995, we had nothing more complicated in mind than simply doing what all the other churches do, but without the supernaturalism. We saw churches as units of social organization rooted in shared opinions about religion that did not need to be factually absurd and irrational. We wanted to validate a devotion, not to doctrines and dogmas, but to facts and reason. We wanted to give voice and recognize the value of rational opinions about religious questions, those having to do with the meaning of life, our place in the world and our relationships with our fellow human beings, better ways to think, behave, and deal with our feelings and the how and why of having a sense that we know what it is to live life well. Naturally, this was an effort to create and maintain community and support for religious rationalists – Freethinkers – who consider that notions such as deities, prayers, heaven and hell, reincarnation, and especially the idea of conformity of belief about such things are not just mistaken but cause all sorts of harm. Perhaps one of the greatest harms is that these traditional and expedient “answers” to the problems of existence, hinder a genuine appreciation of those very religious questions with which all thoughtful people everywhere must eventually, somehow, struggle to address.

The idea of doing what other churches do, but without the supernaturalism, is a simple one. But the doing of it is less than simple. This has little to do with the nature and substance of Freethought, which began with the ancient Greek philosophers and has been expanding ever since. Indeed, Freethought is far richer and offers many more avenues of exploration than theism, and without condemning honest questioning as “sinful.” But history and personal histories have tended to poison the ground of religious inquiry and produce a certain inertia of attitudes and behaviors that work against a positive reinvention of religion and church. Human progress is often challenged with such obstacles.

The more obvious difficulty is that Freethinkers are reluctant to self-identify or “come out.” This is understandable given the hostility of believers that hinge on suppositions that, for example, unbelievers

reject theology because they reject the very idea of right and wrong and want “to be their own gods.” A bit more charitable is the idea that unbelievers are “mad at God” because of some unhappy event in their lives. These are baffling ideas since the adherents of one sect do not attribute such motives to adherents of other sects. Christians, for example, do not say that Muslims must feel offended by Jesus. Muslims do not say that Christians “hate Allah.” Nor do Mormons say that those who reject their teachings do so because they want to be alcoholics.

The less obvious difficulty is that Freethinkers are inexperienced, uncomfortable, reluctant or even opposed to creating and maintaining functional churches. This is not difficult to understand either. Many unbelievers have had unhappy encounters with traditional faith-based churches or are deeply troubled by the crimes connected with them. Thus, quite a few unbelievers, while they are not “mad at God,” may be said to be “mad at” churches both for personal and historical reasons. In short, churches and their leaders have too often set bad examples that lead Freethinkers to suppose that churches are a bad idea and can serve no good purpose.

Some unbelievers take this further, even much further. They equate “religion” with everything evil and noxious and even insist that religion was never about anything but social control, oppression and destruction. They may lump all believers with the most ignorant, bigoted and hateful zealots of the most extreme superstitious ideologies, even saying that such people are the “real,” the most authentic followers of a religious tradition such as Christianity or Islam. But this is simply not consistent with the facts. Worse, it carries with it the obvious conclusion that the world can never be put right until and unless all religion is totally eradicated forever. And this is as foolish as saying that since cyanide, strychnine and numerous other substances are deadly chemicals, that all chemicals are bad and must be completely eliminated. The truth is closer to what religious scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith observed:

“I’m not saying that religion is a good thing. I’m saying that it’s a great thing. It can make you better or it can make you much worse. But it means that you take the question of how to live seriously.”

The word “great” here does not mean some-

thing better than good. It means something substantial, important, significant, momentous, even extraordinary. This is precisely why thoughtful people devote their attention to the objects and questions of religion. Thus, even though deities are imaginary – especially because they are imaginary! – they are useful thought experiments in understanding the vital concerns of humanity. And if, to take another example, the hope of an afterlife addresses humanity's fear of death, it should be obvious that eliminating the first does nothing to alleviate the second.

This brings us to one of the most troublesome difficulties in doing what churches do, but without supernaturalism. It is something that many believers and unbelievers seem to agree on, usually implicitly and often explicitly. This is the idea that religion is superstition, that its essence is belief in the supernatural. But this is as wrong as to say that religion is burnt offerings and even human sacrifice, just because it once was such things. Just because unbelievers reject claims of the supernatural does not mean that they "have no religion." Freethinkers are not "religious nothings" whose ideas, opinions, and thinking about religious questions "don't count." Unbelievers must embrace the fact that a rational view concerning religious questions, which goes far beyond rejection of the supernatural, is their religion. And, indeed, that real religion has and ought to have far more to do with thought than with belief.

It is true that, given the cultural and religious baggage with which humanity is burdened, progress in religion must begin with some "negatives." But there is every indication that people are ready or nearly ready to accept these, which are: 1) that deities are not actual beings "out there" in the reality that all human beings share, 2) that any claims about what is "out there" in that reality that are at odds with objective facts and reason are simply pseudoscience and nonsense, and 3) that religion is not and can never be an excuse or justification to hate other people, to hurt other people, or to deny anyone their inalienable human rights.

Once those things are out of the way, we can discuss the details and get on with the necessary business of doing what churches do but without supernaturalism. Once this is underway, there will be a simple answer to the complaint often made by believers that religious rationalists only want to tear down faith-based doctrines but have nothing to offer in their place. We shall say: we do have something, and it is something better. Watch us, we are doing it now.

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-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant "The Vineyard" - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: This is 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 Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club February 20, 2016
 THE BOOK: Breaking The Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon by Daniel C. Dennett. Available FREE at http://skepdic.ru/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Daniel_C_Dennett_Breaking_the_Spell_Religion.pdf Location/details to be announced (check website!)

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

PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES"
> Sunday, March 6, 2016 <
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western)

The North Texas Church of Freethought
 The Fellowship of Unbelievers

Pastor (It's a Job Description, NOT a title!) Tim Gorski
 Presenters T.A.M., Will Smith & Tim Gorski
 Operations Coordinator Will Smith
 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