



BULLETIN of THE NORTH TEXAS CHURCH OF FREETHOUGHT

The Fellowship Of Unbelievers

Resisting Supernaturalism and Irrationalism Since 1994

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COUNTERING SUPERNATURAL CLAIMS

Of all the claims made by the major religions, supernaturalism most requires countering. For supernaturalism is the greatest enemy of reason. It is the negation of the principle that reason is the necessary and sufficient – indeed, the only – tool for making sense of the facts of existence. And if supernaturalism were true, if it were a valid concept for understanding the real world, then the value of reason would be doubtful in practice and worthless in the abstract. Understanding this is key to Freethought.

“Supernatural” comes from the Latin, meaning above or beyond nature. The term – and presumably the idea of entities and forces – “principalities and powers,” as Paul puts it in his Letter to the Ephesians – that are beyond or above the natural world – first shows up in the 15th Century. It took that long for the idea of an observable world governed by “Laws of Nature” to have firmly taken hold. Thus, the 1400's are generally considered the beginning of the Renaissance, the end of the Late Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern period. Christopher Columbus' first voyages to the Americas occurred at the end of that century. And within 300 years the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote in his 1748 Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, in a section “Of Miracles,” that:

“No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood be more miraculous ... no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle.”

In the early 20th Century the discredited idea of supernaturalism reappeared under a new name: “paranormalism.” For some time, by this title, it even enjoyed something of a reputation as a subject amenable to scientific study. This was parodied in the film Ghostbusters. But, popular belief to the contrary, there has never been any credible evidence for the paranormal.

Yet there remain many defenders of super-

naturalism. Almost all are theologically motivated. They justify their claims by appeals to “holy books” and other religious authorities said to have had special revelations. The more sophisticated combine their claims with an attack on the rejection of supernaturalism as a supposedly arbitrary and unproven assumption. But what is this “naturalism” they say is unwarranted? Is it, as supernaturalists say, the claim that the natural world is all there is?

In fairness, some who reject supernaturalism may look at it that way. But what supernaturalists call “naturalism” is simply the obvious, that we cannot know anything unless it is of or about evidence or perceptions of some kind. For there is nothing else to know of or about. Thomas Jefferson expressed this in an 1820 letter to John Adams:

“When once we quit the basis of sensation, all is in the wind. To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise.”

When it comes to knowing anything about the world that we share, about sensations – perceptions – that are observer-independent, we can only have recourse to the same sort of perceptions. No one can justifiably assert, on the basis of a dream or other purely subjective experience, that they have acquired knowledge about objective reality that can only be – or must be – accepted by others on their say-so “by faith.” How could such assertions possibly be verified, especially when, as is the rule with revelations from alleged deities, different people make mutually exclusive claims? We can only say of subjective experiences that they may carry special meaning for our subjective understanding. But for objective understanding, the same sort of perceptions are necessary, which is to say, objective experiences that anyone can verify in order to reach agreed-upon conclusions.

To accept supernaturalism is to reject this

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analysis. It is, as Jefferson put it, “to reason otherwise.” It is, in fact, to reject reason. Yet no one completely rejects reason. Even supernaturalists accept and make use of the generalizations of objective experience with which we reason. It is only when believers come to consider their peculiar supernatural faith-beliefs that they choose to disregard reason. It is supernaturalists who must therefore account for and justify their departure from reason, not “naturalists” who do not choose to deviate from it. For if “naturalism” requires justification, then supernaturalists’ disregard of reason in favor of faith at whatever point they choose to do this becomes all the more difficult. For they need both to justify their reliance on a naturalist approach up to that point as well as their disregard of reason after it.

Now there are two other senses in which we may think of supernaturalism. The first is the inference that there is a reality beyond what the German philosopher Immanuel Kant called “the veil of perception.” It is this world that Kant called “noumena” that gives rise to our perceptions and measurements of “phenomena.” For we do not perceive things directly with our senses. Even the machines we use to detect what our senses cannot have their limitations. It is as if, as the Greek philosopher Plato speculated, we perceive shadows projected on the wall of a cave in which we are imprisoned by our physical nature. For all we know, we are “brains in vats” being fed all of our sensory experiences by extraterrestrial/extradimensional beings. But we can discern no way of overcoming this handicap for now. And there are no facts and no reason – none – to suggest that anything or anyone from the world of “noumena” is in contact with us.

The second sense in which human experience can be considered to surpass or transcend objective reality is that so much of it is subjective. All of our perceptions are colored by our personal circumstances and individuality. Two people may perceive the same thing but are affected by it differently. It is all the more apparent when it comes to internal sensations and especially of emotions connected with family and friends, to say nothing of our hopes and fears, expectations, ambitions and so on. Here subjectivity dominates and how we try to make sense of it all is not as clearly connected with reason. Even science can say very little about such things despite the fact that, in principle, all the physical events in our brains could be mapped and measured.

If there is a “supernaturalism” with which religion may legitimately be concerned it is this, which is the fundamental insight on which the Church of Freethought is predicated.

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 I-635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums on most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast/coffee (or not), in the atrium of the Embassy Suites DFW Airport North – on Bass Pro Drive in Grapevine beginning at 10:00 AM.

Game Night: Most Friday nights 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 Imperial 2030, Dominion, Evolution, Le Havre, Ticket To Ride, and other fun games!

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 www.twitter.com/ntcof !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“1692: THE NEW ENGLAND
WITCHCRAFT HYSTERIA”
The Downfall of “Spectral Evidence”
> Sunday, October 7, 2018 <
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then take the frontage road east just past the Best Western; service starts at 10:30 but come early for coffee and snacks - you can bring some! - and conversation)**

**THANK YOU !!
FOR YOUR GENEROUS
DONATION OF TIME & FINANCIAL
SUPPORT to the NTCOF !!
It is needed, appreciated and
Tax-Deductible !**

**The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers**

Pastor (It's a job description, not a title!)..Tim Gorski
Presenters (how about YOU?).....Tim Gorski
Social Media Czar.....Aaron Kelton
Welcome Coordinator.....Mark Barnick
Videographer.....John Gauthier
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