



# BULLETIN of THE NORTH TEXAS CHURCH OF FREETHOUGHT

The Fellowship Of Unbelievers    25 YEARS OLD !    Beginning Religion Over Again Since 1994

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## MYTHS WE LIVE BY

Myths are commonly seen as the primitive fairy-tales of our distant ancestors. These include Noah's Ark, King Midas, Pandora's Box and the heroic exploits of Thor, Hercules and others. Sensible people know that these are fictional. A more modern category of myth are foolish falsehoods that persist because they offer a perverse appeal – or profit! These include the belief that vaccines cause autism and mercury poisoning, that quantum physics explains consciousness, that a crashed extraterrestrial spacecraft was recovered by authorities near Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 and that chupacabras, Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster lurk just beyond the view of science.

In his Commencement Address at Yale University on June 11<sup>th</sup> of 1962, then-President John F. Kennedy (JFK) spoke of another sort of myth:

“For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie – deliberate, contrived and dishonest – but the myth – persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.”

The great irony is that, after his assassination, JFK's administration became strongly linked with Arthurian myth. This happened when his widow, four days after his burial, quoted to a journalist a line from a Broadway musical: “Don't let it be forgot, that for one brief, shining moment there was Camelot.” The linkage has persisted ever since, which was surely Jackie Kennedy's intention. Not that anyone came to truly believe that JFK vanquished America's enemies, presided over a magical Golden Age before departing for Avalon and would return again to save the nation in its hour of greatest danger. But these themes were evoked, clothing JFK's Presidency with an aura of heroic if not super-human greatness and lent the whole Kennedy family a kind of royal luster. The Bay of Pigs fiasco, the

subsequent Cuban Missile Crisis and the seeds of the disastrous Vietnam War and its associated domestic strife that were then sown faded into obscurity. They were replaced by speculations that JFK, had he lived, would have taken steps to avoid all the problems of the later 1960's and set America on course for a New Renaissance. For this “fit the narrative” of “the shining moment” of Camelot.

It is not hard to grasp that Arthurian legend came to “frame” the Presidency of JFK, and that this proved more powerful even than the “persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic” falsehoods and half-truths that JFK spoke of. But the most powerful – and the least understood sort of myth may not even seem mythic. In her book The Myths We Live By, British philosopher Mary Midgley wrote:

“We are accustomed to think of myths as the opposite of science. But in fact they are a central part of it: the part that decides its significance in our lives. ... Myths are not lies. Nor are they detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning. ... Such ideas are not just a distraction ... [or] a disease. They are the matrix of thought, the background that shapes our mental habits. They decide what we think important and what we ignore. They provide the tools with which we organise the mass of incoming data. When they are bad they can do a great deal of harm by distorting our selection and slanting our thinking. That is why we need to watch them so carefully.”

What Midgley means by “myth” may be as simple as the idea of nature as a machine:

“machine imagery, which began to pervade our thought in the seventeenth century ... [as] scien-

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tists were fascinated ... by the ingenious clockwork automata of the day. ... [this] worked well for the solar system, to cover the whole of knowledge, and ... is still potent today. We ... see ourselves, and the living things around us, as pieces of clockwork: items of a kind that we ourselves could make, and might decide to remake if it suits us better. Hence the confident language of 'genetic engineering' and 'the building-blocks of life' ... But physics, the original source of this dream, has now largely abandoned it. The clockwork model proved unsuitable for many central purposes, along with the simple atomic theory that fitted it."

Midgley quotes Richard Dawkins saying:

"we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes . . . we are survival machines, robot *vehicles* blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes,"

It is easy to see how this all fits with the idea of what Midgley calls "social atomism," that people are not just machines but are parts of larger machines in which they cooperate and compete.

Midgley's use of the word "myth" to refer to such organizing principles of understanding is questionable. But her point, that certain ideas function as interpretative frameworks that are widely accepted while most often not even being recognized for what they are, deserves serious consideration. These foundational ideas occupy a central and essential place, not just in science but in our culture generally and in our social and political institutions. This is what makes it difficult even to recognize them and almost impossible to question them. It's not even about whether they are true or false. It is a matter of how well they apply to facts and to our lives in varied circumstances. Even in science, we have reached a point where one "myth" – that all matter consists of particles – can and perhaps must coexist, depending on the context, with a different, mutually exclusive "myth," that all matter consists of interacting fields of mathematical probability.

This analysis can and should be applied to religious thought. But here the obstacle is not just the difficulty of recognizing and critically examining interpretive frameworks. It is a reluctance if not refusal to even consider amending or rejecting such "myths" – let alone the fairy-tale myths ! – in favor of alternatives on any kind of reasonable timescale. For dogmatism, even more than supernaturalism, is the distinguishing mark of the traditional religions.

**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](http://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)(and you can bring whatever you want to eat!), in the atrium – usually towards the back – 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, Terraforming Mars, Le Havre, Caverna, and other fun games!

**Have Another Idea?** Email or call! Read bulletins, articles and post on the FORUM under SERVICES at [www.churchoffreethought.org](http://www.churchoffreethought.org) LIKE US at [facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/](https://www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/) and sign up for our Twitter feed at [www.twitter.com/ntcof/](https://www.twitter.com/ntcof/) !

## PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH "SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE"

> Sunday, January 5, 2020 <  
**HERE at the Hawthorn Suites  
DFW Airport North  
at 10:30 AM**

## THANK YOU !!

FOR YOUR TIME and  
**FINANCIAL SUPPORT**  
of 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  
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