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The Fellowship Of Unbelievers

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Preaching Rational Religion Since 1994

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RELIGION REINVENTED

Thomas Paine's (1737-1809) Common Sense (1776), in arguing for the American colonies "final separation" from the British Crown, pointed out:

"We have it in our power to begin the world over again."

As it happened, Paine played a role in revolutionizing religion as well. His pioneering textual criticism of the Bible in The Age of Reason led to widespread skepticism of biblical absurdities. The eventual backlash was fundamentalism, a term unnecessary for thousands of years when the truth of everything in the Bible was not to be questioned.

Yet the Bible, especially by the time of the New Testament, was in its own way an innovation that remade the previously existing tribal religions. We cringe at the biblical "eye for an eye" principle, itself borrowed from the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi. But it was progress then to proportion the punishment to the crime. And the rabbis of the time, observing that an offender may have no eyes or be blind, decided that the principle referred to fixed monetary damages. An enforced sacrifice of time on the Sabbath was also an improvement over child or animal sacrifices, though Jews were still killing doves in their temple up until its destruction in 70 CE.

Since the Enlightenment, scientific progress has been astounding. We probe the origins of the universe, fly spacecraft around and onto other planets and asteroids. We sequence DNA and tinker with genes. We study how the neurons in the brain produce mental states and the neurological basis of morality. In doing so, we gained an appreciation of how unacceptable are ignorance and factual misrepresentation and shaming people over such things as gender roles and consensual sexual practices. The result has also been that the gaps into which a deity can be squeezed have never been smaller. Even the

"fine tuned universe" argument is untenable since an all-powerful supernatural god would not be constrained to choosing specific values of the fine structure or coupling constants. It is true that our understanding of ourselves and our world is very far from complete. But we now know how vitally important it is to admit "we don't know" when that is the case instead of insisting "God did it."

What does all this have to do with remaking religion? For the first time, understanding that we ourselves, our bodies as well as our mental states, are molecular machines, it is possible to ask whether there is anything left at all for religion to legitimately do? Is there anything that we need to make sense of besides the natural world of objective reality that science has dealt with so well?

To begin with, theorized parallel universes, extraterrestrial super-beings or anything else that has no point of contact with the natural world of objective reality, things that we cannot perceive in any way, don't count. We cannot have knowledge or make any sense of such things since they are not, by definition, a part of our reality. And to anyone who may, necessarily without evidence, assert otherwise, we may say that an infinite number of baseless speculations are just as real. Or, in other words, they are all unreal until and unless sufficient theorizing may reveal a point of contact that does allow us to detect such things. And then they are science.

So there is no valid interpretation of the supernatural that has any place in our understanding of the world, not in science and not in religion. But is there anything else? In fact, there is. It is the internal, subjective, private and personal experience of "what it is like" to have a specific conscious experience. Philosophers call this component of experience "qualia." Importantly, qualia pervades all of our experience. Indeed, what we call "objective" perceptions are simply the subset of our subjective

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perceptions that happen to correspond to the reported subjective perceptions of others. They are “inter-subjective” but not the same as two people each have their own qualia. Even a telepathic “mind-meld” inserts the qualia of each participant.

It is this singular, internal, subjective, private and personal experience of “what it is like” to have a specific conscious experience, to be oneself, and to feel any and every emotion that it is possible as a human being to feel, that remains beyond the reach of science. The most detailed and exhaustive account that someone may give of a conscious experience, or the most complete and precise description of everything going on in their brain, is not the same as the experience itself. It is this, therefore, that is the obvious and only legitimate subject matter of religion. For everything else is the province of science. And this makes sense. For although science can be left to scientists, each and every human being has their own qualia that they must make sense of. They are the only ones who can.

Note that this conception of religion has nothing to do with either the scientific facts about the world we share or supernatural claims about it. It has nothing to do with the protection or help of divine power. It is not a link to magical omnipotence or omniscience. It certainly is not infallibly beneficent, either. On the contrary, while strong religious sensibilities may manifest as saintly virtue and bliss, they may also motivate murderous desperation, rage, cruelty and madness. Despite this, and despite the subjectivity of our existence as humans, there is clearly great value in sharing with each other our internal feelings. This, looked at properly, is a far more daunting challenge than the more limited task of science, so that no one ought to feel any regret over religion's being “pushed out,” much less “relegated,” to addressing this important problem.

But will religion – and its leaders – and we – be up to the challenge of this different and yet somewhat familiar role for religion to play? Can worn-out ideas and pretensions concerning supernatural forces pervading or standing above space-time and human needs be given up? Can we manage a never-ending exploration of the individual subjective human condition that may have few if any final answers? Can we find purpose and meaning in the struggle to make sense of the qualia of the human predicament?

Can we begin religion over again? It's time we do!

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:
“THE STUFF OF
THOUGHT”**

**> Sunday, March 3, 2019 <
HERE at the Hawthorn Suites
by Wyndham Hotel
DFW Airport North 10:30 AM**

**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
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Social Media Czar.....Aaron Kelton
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