

NOSHA NEWS

Newsletter of the New Orleans Secular Humanist Association
Summer 2007

New Orleans Secular Humanist Association

330 Julia St., Apt. 233
New Orleans, LA 70130

(a 501c3 corporation)

<http://nosha.secularhumanism.net>

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NATIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Council for Secular Humanism
American Humanist Association
Atheist Alliance International
American Atheists, Inc.

MEETINGS

3rd Saturday of month, 2:00 pm
New Orleans Public Library
219 Loyola Avenue

N.O. COX CABLE TV
CH 76 "Humanist Perspective"
Sat. midnight; Sun. noon
CH 78 "Atheist Viewpoint"
Tues. 10:30 am; 10:30 pm

PERCY PRESTENBACH: A QUINTESSENTIAL ATHEIST

At its anniversary meeting on August 18, NOSHA bestowed its Humanist Award upon Percy Prestenbach, Jr., which read as follows: "For whom 'Humanism' and 'Atheism' are not simply descriptions of his chosen lifestyle, but are causes worth actively promoting, without concern as to popular disdain and retribution. For more than 20 years, Percy has maintained memberships in secular organizations and has been a crusader for freedom from religion in the New Orleans area."



Percy says, "I was born an atheist and was christened a Roman Catholic a few days after birth." When he later "came to his senses" he vowed to "never again be fooled by any religious superstitions." In 1979 when he first learned about Madalyn Murray O'Hair and American Atheists, he became a member of that organization and has attended eight of their annual conventions, as well as spending a week doing volunteer work at their Austin, Texas offices. He was part of the original group who formed an American Atheists chapter in New Orleans in the early 1980s (pictured above are members of that group; Percy is second from left, top row).

NOSHA members who attend our meetings have seen Percy's white pick-up truck completely decorated with atheist slogans and materials, as well as the only Louisiana license



plate with the single word, "ATHEIST" (see above). As he drives around in this moving billboard, he also distributes NOSHA flyers and other atheist materials to shopping malls and bus stops. He has written innumerable letters to the editor of *The Mississippi Press* and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*.

Before the award was bestowed (pictured above Percy and Harry Greenberger), an interview with Percy taped over a year ago for the NOA-TV program, "The Humanist Perspective," was shown. In the interview Percy related how his "coming out" at the age of 21 was at first unaccepted by some family members, but he stood his ground. In the interview, Percy expressed that for him, atheism is "freedom of the mind."

Each of us express our non-theism in our own way, but the NOSHA Board found Percy's outstanding dedication deserving of our "Humanist Award." Congratulations, Percy, and keep up the good work!

THE PARADOX OF HUMANISM

Robert Sutton

I was "born" Catholic, but I've been an implicit atheist ever since I was old enough to think for myself. A couple of years ago I became a full fledged Naturalist, which ironically sparked my interest in trying to learn why people have the "need" to believe in god. I traveled around the country and through a frightening Bible belt, growing ever more lonely and worried that our world is headed toward a supernaturally inspired sectarian end. The most disturbing fact I found was that many of the theists believe that if one isn't a "good believer," then they are a bad person.

The more religious folks I observed and spoke with, the more I realized the desperate need to fight this mental poison called "faith." Emboldened with my newly found explicit atheism, I tested my beliefs against every supernaturalist I could get my words on. I'm sure everyone reading this can sympathize with the frustration I experienced, for the supernaturalists do not play fairly in the realm of debate. If they could only realize how ridiculous "nothing can be proven" or "because The Book says so" is, to an analytical and critical mind. Even more frustrating is speaking with people who don't see the need to have common definitions for the words we use. Statements such as "god is love" are an insult to anyone trying to have a meaningful conversation. I personally worked hard to find a common definition to what constitutes a Christian. Believing that Jesus is the one and only son of the one and only god is what I deduced. But most of the Christians I spoke with seemed to think that it was lacking the essence of Christianity.

Back in New Orleans, I searched the net for a freethinkers club. That led me to NOSHA and a new word in my vocabulary, Humanism. There have been several manifestos written, beginning in 1933 with an oddly flavored #12: "religious humanists aim to foster the creative in man..." Then I read the Amsterdam declaration and had an anti-religious experience. I say anti-religious because unlike the religious dogmas, which would never surface without indoctrination, in my intent to not be a bad person, Humanism paralleled conclusions I had personally come to. The 2002 Amsterdam declaration of Humanism can be summed up in that it is ethical, rational, supports democracy and human rights, that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility, and that we embrace the value of creativity and imagination. Dogma finds the individual, but with Humanism, the individual can find the tenets on their own.

The tenets of Humanism do not describe a philosophy; they describe a healthy human being and society. The Buddhist belief that all life is suffering is a philosophy and a poor one at that. Number five of the life affirming Amsterdam declaration is "Humanism is a

response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion." The fact is that if 4/5 of the world turned to humanity and rationality instead of ghosts and gods to ensure a rich, egalitarian and peaceful world, for the future of our species and rest of life on earth, Humanism would be obsolete. That is the paradox. We are mere examples, proof to the religious, that people can be good without god. I don't believe there's much debate amongst Humanists as to what our essence is.

(Robert joined NOSHA earlier this year, one of several younger members of the fold. We thank you, Robert, for sharing your observations of humanism.)

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ELLERY SCHEMP TO ADDRESS NOSHA

Ellery's Protest: How One Young Man Defied Tradition and Sparked the battle Over School Prayer, a newly released book by Stephen D. Solomon, published by the University of Michigan Press, is described as an engrossing story of one of the landmark cases in the history of the First Amendment. The story began in 1956, when Ellery Schempp was a 16-year-old public school student who protested the compulsory prayer and bible-reading in his classrooms, culminating in a Supreme Court decision in his favor—one of the most important rulings on religious freedom in U.S. history. Today, Ellery Schempp is an accomplished physicist, credited with over 33 publications in peer-reviewed journals of science.

Thanks to Barbara Forrest, who arranged for Dr. Schempp to address a group at Southeast Louisiana University, he has agreed to also address the NOSHA meeting on Saturday, September 15 as part of his visit to Louisiana.

Following his talk, a limited number of the books will be available, pre-signed by Stephen Solomon, and autographed by Dr. Schempp for those who wish to purchase them. This is a talk and an event not to be missed, even if you are an infrequent NOSHA meeting attendee.

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TEXAS ATHEIST COUPLE FIGHTING "DOUBLE WHAMMY" SCHOOL PROSELYTIZING

(The following article was excerpted from the American Atheist AA Nwqa on 8/30/07.)

First was the required "moment of silence" which has been in effect since 2003, mandating that youngsters "reflect, pray, meditate or engage in any other silent activity" at the start of the school day. There is also a new law requiring students to recite not only the Pledge of Allegiance to the U.S. flag (complete with the statement "one nation, under God"), but a similar paean that

commands "Honor the Texas flag; I pledge allegiance to thee, Texas, one state under God, one and indivisible."

It's all too much for David Wallace Croft, a 39-year-old computer programmer who along with wife Shannon, has filed suits against both statutes which, he argues, violate the separation of church and state and promote monotheistic religion.

Croft is no stranger to the First Amendment battleground in Texas. In 2003, he demanded that his local school board excuse his children from recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance that incorporates "one nation under god" language. He then challenged a school policy permitting the Cub Scouts to hold recruiting events because the group excludes Atheists; and he took on the selection of songs played at school events because of their sectarian, religious nature.

In March, 2006 Mr. and Mrs. Croft filed suit in federal court against the Carrtollton-Farmers Branch School District and Gov. Rick Perry over the state's three-year-old "moment of silence" law. Writing in his personal blog, David Croft opined: "Moment of silence bills have been popping up in additional states. To have millions of public school children waste a minute of education each day for a practice that has no secular purpose seems to me like a great sin."

Indeed, the "moment of silence" is the latest in a series of legal maneuvers designed to undermine and circumvent key U.S. Supreme Court rulings which restricted prayer in the public school system. Those decisions include the 1962 ruling in *ENGEL v. VITALE* overturning a New York law requiring the recitation of the "Regent's Prayer" which had been composed by a state-appointed committee. The "prayer" was designed to be non-denominational and non-sectarian in an attempt to not endorse or promote a specific religion. Justices ruled, however, that the "prayer" entangled the state in the business of promoting religion.

Other forms of classroom prayer were challenged in the *ABINGTON TOWNSHIP v. SCHEMPP* case, and in *MURRAY v. CURLETT* filed by Atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Her suit questioned the legality of organized prayer and Bible verse recitation in public schools; the cases were combined and the high court struck down the practices in 1963.

Since then, school prayer advocates have attempted to promote "voluntary prayer" and "student-initiated" religious recitation. Both strategies have met with limited success, in part due to the inevitable sectarian content of the prayer. The period of silence, however, lacks any clear superficial religious formulation, and supporters insist that students would be free to use this interval to pray, meditate or even study.

Critics caution that it is a sham designed to smuggle religion into the schools.

The first legal test of the "moment of silence" was the *WALLACE v. JAFFREE* case in 1985 when the U.S. Supreme Court examined an Alabama law permitting state schools to begin each classroom day with a period for "meditation or voluntary prayer." In a 6-3 decision, the justices noted that state law makers enacted the statute with the intent of promoting religion, and cited instances from the legislative record.

The State of Virginia had a "moment of silence" law since 1973 which gave school districts the option of implementing the practice. A new statute went into effect in 2000, requiring all public school students to observe the period of silence, however. When challenged in court, supporters successfully argued that the law had a "secular purpose." State Attorney General Mark Early claimed, "A moment of silence will contribute to maintaining order and discipline in our classrooms and allow students time to thoughtfully prepare themselves for the upcoming educational activities of the day."

A U.S. District Court Judge agreed, and upheld the constitutionality of the Virginia statute. He opined that the law "was enacted for a secular purpose, does not advance or inhibit religion, nor is there excessive entanglement with religion ... Students may think as they wish ... and this thinking can be purely religious in nature or purely secular in nature. All that is required is that they sit silently."

The Texas law being challenged by Mr. Croft and his family may prove to be a formidable challenge. Legal experts consulted by the Dallas Morning News say that the family has little chance of prevailing in court, "mostly because legislators carefully worded the law to say students could choose whether to 'reflect, pray, meditate or engage in any other silent activity.'"

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A CHRISTIAN NATION?

(The following is excerpted from an August 7, 2007 piece by Carol Hamilton posted on CommonDreams.org.)

On August 6, 2007, the New York Times reported on an interesting dispute between the campaign of Sam Brownback and that of Mike Huckabee. . .

. . . interested and even amused me, because on another website, I've recently been fielding comments from people who believe that we live in "a Christian nation." Yet here they were, Catholic and Protestant political figures, quarreling just as they did back in the 16th and 17th centuries-the very reason that a separation was proposed between Church and State.

It's hard to figure where in the Bible my correspondents found any discussion of checks and balances, the separation of powers, the regulation of commerce, or impeachment.

What about the influence of John Locke? I asked them. Locke, himself a devout Christian from a Puritan

family, inspired Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom written in 1777 and passed, thanks to James Madison, in 1786. Jefferson's statute is particularly indebted to Locke's Letter Concerning Toleration (1689). In it Locke declared, "Neither Pagan nor Mahometan, nor Jew ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of his religion. The Gospel commands no such thing."

As Locke knew, religious strife-not only between Catholics and Protestants, but among Protestants-had resulted in "factions, tumults, and civil wars," causing the death or exile of thousands of Europeans. "It is not the diversity of opinions (which cannot be avoided)," Locke wrote, "but the refusal of toleration to those that are of different opinions that has produced all the bustles and wars that have been in the Christian world on account of religion." The only way to avoid such conflicts was to separate Church and State.

. . . Locke was not only the first influential proponent of religious toleration and freedom. His ideas inspired every Revolutionary in the Founding generation-all those who signed the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

. . . It's therefore all the more unfortunate that American citizens like my recent correspondents are ignorant of, or hostile to, our intellectual history and credit the Bible for every idea under the sun. It's unfortunate also that the MSM, particularly CNN, sees fit to interrogate presidential candidates about their "faith," because such interrogation is profoundly un-American. "I never told my own religion, nor scrutinized that of another," wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1816. And to the scientist Joseph Priestly Jefferson complained:

"The Gothic idea that we are to look backwards instead of forwards for the improvement of the human mind, and to recur to the annals of our ancestors for what is most perfect in government, in religion and in learning, is worthy of those bigots in religion & government, by whom it has been recommended, & whose purposes it would answer. But it is not an idea which this country will endure."

* * * * *

"Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects?"

--James, Madison
Fourth President of the U.S.

"What James Madison and the other men of his generation had in mind when they wrote the First Amendment was that there should be no official relationship of any character between government and any church or many churches, and no levying of taxes for the support of any church, or many churches, or all churches, or any institution conducted by any of them.

--Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.)
Former U.S. Senator

ACLU FIGHTS FAITH-BASED FUNDING IN LOUISIANA

(The following was excerpted from a news release from the Louisiana ACLU.)

Early in August, the ACLU of Louisiana filed a lawsuit asking a federal judge to halt the payment of state taxpayer money to two Louisiana churches. "The government cannot simply choose to subsidize its favorite houses of worship with taxpayer dollars," said Daniel Mach, Director of Litigation for the ACLU's Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief.

The state's general appropriations bill, HB1, signed into law in July unconstitutionally directs taxpayer dollars in the amounts of \$100,000 to Stonewall Baptist Church in Bossier City and \$20,000 to Shreveport Christian Church. The grants were not subject to any oversight or competitive bidding process, and the bill offers no purpose or justification for the challenged earmarks. According to the ACLU, while the state can, in certain circumstances, provide funding to religious organizations for some programs that provide non-religious social services, the First Amendment squarely bars the government from funneling direct, unrestricted, cash payments to churches.

Repeated attempts by the ACLU to learn more about the grants were largely ignored by the state, which refused to respond to several requests for documentation. The ACLU of Louisiana has filed the lawsuit on behalf of itself and its members in an effort to reaffirm the basic constitutional ban on government-funded religious activities.

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IT TAKES A VILLAGE . . .

Maybe not a village, but at least a committee. It is well known that in all volunteer organizations a small cadre of its members does most of the work, and so it is with NOSHA. But we can become more successful and supportive through active participation of more of our members in various committees which most of the other secular groups around the country have developed. After making requests for such active participation at recent meetings, a few volunteers have sighed up. But this is a solicitation to reach others that might not have been in attendance at those meetings.

Call or e-mail to say that you will help to advance NOSHA by participating in one or more of the following committees:

- Refreshments for meetings (NOSHA reimburses)
- Arranging social events (potluck dinners; solstice Picnics, movies and other outings)
- Public outreach, such as tabling at events
- Writing newsletter articles
- Participate in NOAccess TV programs

Harry Greenberger, hpgreenx@yahoo.com, 504-282-5459

VOLUNTEERS CORNER

NOSHA thanks those who volunteered to work the telephones at the public TV station's (Channel 12, WYES) annual art auction on Saturday, June 23. Those who came were **Dave Schultz, Connie Gordon, Keith Welsh, Robert Sutton, and Patrick and Patricia Lastrade**. Our participation as an organization was recognized on air, so it was not only good publicity, but good that we were seen supporting our community. Thanks again to all who came. We hope more of you will step up next time a call for volunteers goes out.

NOSHA would like especially to thank **Lanny Goldfinch** for hosting a potluck dinner at his home on Sunday, July 8. About 20 people turned out for good food



and stimulating conversation. NOSHA would like to share more social occasions. If you have room in your home or your back yard, please consider hosting such an event.

Cudos to **Tom Stine** for volunteering to present at the July NOSHA meeting. Tom shared with us a video entitled "The Assault on Humanism" which portrayed some of the attempts by religious fundamentalists to demonize the efforts of free-thinkers and non-believers to keep religion out of government, science, and the classroom. The film generated a lively discussion to follow.

Thanks also to **Gina Cedotal** for baking and decorating the delicious cake to commemorate NOSHA's eighth anniversary celebrated at the meeting on August 18. And thanks to **Will Hunn** for bringing the drinks.

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NEW HELP FROM IRS

If you have an Individual Retirement Account (IRA) and are at the age which requires annual withdrawals, there is a special way that you can contribute to NOSHA.

Only until the end of 2007, you can donate a part of your required withdrawal tax free to a tax-exempt organization (such as NOSHA) and it is not treated as an itemized deduction. See instructions for a qualified

charitable distribution (QCD) on page 25 of your 2006 IRS booklet. Contact your IRA account holder and ask for the NOSHA distribution.

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RANDY OLSON CONTRIBUTION

In April NOSHA sponsored a screening of Randy Olson's "Flock of Dodos" at Zeitgeist Theatre, with our share of the ticket sales to be paid to Randy under a special arrangement with him. The cash proceeds, which were small, were given to Harry Greenberger, who wrote his personal check to Mr. Olson.

When the check did not clear Harry's bank, he sent word to Randy Olson that, if the check were lost, he would replace it. That was followed by a telephone call from Olson in which he said he had the check and was tearing it up at that moment as his contribution to NOSHA, which he deemed a worthwhile group. That amount has now been deposited to the NOSHA account.

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NOSHA MEETING DATES

Sept. 15 – Ellery Schempp, subject of recently released book, "Ellery's Protest" – talk and book signing

Oct. 20 – Prof. Trent Holliday, Tulane University paleo-Anthropologist will speak on "Neandertals and Modern Humans: Ancestor and Descendent, or Distant Cousins"

Nov. 17 – Julie Mickelberry, Planned Parenthood of Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta

Dec. 15 – Topic and speaker to be announced

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NOSHA T-SHIRTS

We still have a number of NOSHA T-shirts on sale for \$10.00 each. They will be available at the NOSHA meeting on September 15. If you live out of town, I can send you one. NOSHA member **Julio Torres** is shown below wearing his T-shirt in Washington D.C.



If you want one to be mailed to you, e-mail me at crgado@bellsouth.net.

AND GOD CREATED PETS

(Thanks to **Michael Malec** for sharing the following story with us.)

A newly discovered chapter in the Book of Genesis has provided the answer to "Where do pets come from?"

Adam and Eve said, "Lord, when we were in the garden, you walked with us every day. Now we do not see you any more. We are lonesome here, and it is difficult for us to remember how much you love us."

And God said, "I will create a companion for you that will be with you and who will be a reflection of my love for you, so that you will love me even when you cannot see me. Regardless of how selfish or childish or unlovable you may be, this new companion will accept you as you are and will love you as I do, in spite of your selves."

And God created a new animal to be a companion for Adam and Eve.

And it was a good animal.

And God was pleased.

And the new animal was pleased to be with Adam and Eve and he wagged his tail

And Adam said, "Lord, I have already named all the animals in the Kingdom and I cannot think of a name for this new animal."

And God said, "I have created this new animal to be a reflection of my love for you, his name will be a reflection of my own name, and you will call him DOG."

And Dog lived with Adam and Eve and was a companion to them and loved them.

And they were comforted.

And God was pleased.

And Dog was content and wagged his tail.

After a while, it came to pass that an angel came to the Lord and said, "Lord, Adam and Eve have become filled with pride. They strut and preen like peacocks and they believe they are worthy of adoration. Dog has indeed taught them that they are loved, but perhaps too well."

And God said, "I will create for them a companion who will be with them and who will see them as they are. The companion will remind them of their limitations, so they will know that they are not always worthy of adoration."

And God created CAT to be a companion to Adam and Eve.

And Cat would not obey them. And when Adam and Eve gazed into Cat's eyes, they were reminded that they were not the supreme beings.

And Adam and Eve learned humility.

And they were greatly improved

And God was pleased.

And Dog was happy.

And Cat didn't give a damn one way or the other.

2008 NOSHA DUES

It has been NOSHA's custom to start accepting dues for the year to come on our anniversary date. August was our anniversary, so any dues paid now will be for 2008.

Since Hurricane Katrina, we have lowered our dues to the rock-bottom amount of \$5.00, but with higher meeting room costs and other expenses, we are now restoring annual dues to the pre-K amount of \$15.00.

However, we do have one way of making that amount a bargain. If you are a renewing member, you may bring in a new member for the one price of \$15.00. That's two for the price of one. What a deal!

Please use one form on the next page to accompany your dues payment. Use the second form for the new member you are bringing in. Come on. It's a great way to increase our membership roster.

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"The time has come to knock off this religion business in American politics. There's no end to the mischief that can occur. It is like putting nitroglycerine in a Waring blender."

-- Lowell Weicker (R-Conn)
Former U.S. Senator

"The 'establishment of religion' clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups and vice versa. In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect 'a wall of separation between church and state.'"

-- Justice Hugo L. Black for the majority
Everson v. Board of Education (1947)

"When Pat Robertson says there is no constitutional doctrine of separation between church and state, I say he is wrong. When Pat Buchanan calls for a holy war in our society, I say he is wrong. When Ralph Reed says a pro-choice Republican isn't qualified to be vice president, I say the Republican Party will not be blackmailed."

-- Arlen Specter (R-Pa)
U.S. Senator

"Humanists everywhere have defended the separation of church and state. We believe that the state should be secular, neither for nor against religion. We thus reject theocracies that seek to impose one moral or religious code on everyone."

-- Humanist Manifesto, 2000

"When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in a flag carrying a cross."

-- Sinclair Lewis
American writer (1885-1951)

The New Orleans Secular Humanist Association (NOSHA) was formed to provide an opportunity for like-minded people to meet and exchange ideas and to promote awareness of secular humanist viewpoints in the community. We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems. We reject efforts to explain the world in supernatural terms and to look outside nature for salvation. We strive to make the public aware of the importance of the separation of church and state, to oppose the teaching of creationism and other religious doctrines in the public schools, and to provide a voice of reason when superstition is presented in the media. We believe in enjoying life here and now, and in cultivating moral excellence. We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest we are capable of as human beings.

To become a friend of THE NEW ORLEANS SECULAR HUMANIST ASSOCIATION, complete, clip, and mail in the following form:

Check one: New Member Renewing Member Mailing list only Newsletter by mail

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone and/or e-mail: _____

2008 Annual dues are \$15.00. Make checks payable to “NOSHA” and mail to Connie Gordon, 2509 Giuffrias Ave., Apt. 603, Metairie, LA 70001.

NOTE: For those of you who receive the newsletter by standard mail, the year for which you have last paid membership dues is reflected in the upper right corner of the mailing label.

Use for the “new” member you’re bringing in.

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