

NOSHA NEWS

Newsletter of the New Orleans Secular Humanist Association
Winter 2007

New Orleans Secular Humanist Association

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(a 501c3 corporation)
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NATIONAL AFFILIATIONS

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

MEETINGS

One Saturday a month, 2:00 pm
Old Metairie Branch
Jefferson Parish Public Library

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

THE CONSTITUTION AND THE CITY COUNCIL

Desirous of repeating his opening of a session of the New Orleans City Council with a secular "invocation," NOSHA President, Harry Greenberger, contacted Larry Bagneris, Executive Director of the city's Human Relations Commission, as well as Councilman Arnie Fielkow (a Jew who regularly sits through Christian invocations), neither of whom agreed to assist. Then Harry went directly to the Reverend C. James Smith, who was described by the *Times-Picayune* as the Council's "chaplain." Rev. Smith allotted the February 1 meeting date to Harry, without comprehending the non-religious component of his secular humanist organization.

During the delivery of the invocation, Council President Oliver Thomas registered visible surprise, if not outright shock, at what he was hearing. At the conclusion of the invocation, Thomas immediately called upon Rev. Smith to offer the "usual" prayerful invocation. When Rev. Smith had concluded his prayer, invoking "the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" to conclude, Thomas loudly declared, "Amen! The beauty of democracy!" Oliver Thomas might understand democracy, but apparently he has less familiarity with the U. S. Constitution.

Those of us in attendance were somewhat uncomfortable to see Harry and Rev. Smith whisked immediately behind closed doors. Harry told us afterwards that behind the scenes but in earshot of Harry, Rev. Smith was told in no uncertain terms that "nothing like that would ever happen again." As Harry emerged and joined his fellow humanists in attendance, at least one councilperson approached him to say she agreed with him entirely.

Two days later the *Times-Picayune* wrote about the event with the caption "(UN)EQUAL TIME." The article began: "In his continuing quest for respect, atheist Harry Greenberger got a moment in the sun when he delivered a secular invocation to open Thursday" council meeting. But Greenberger was quickly eclipsed by the Almighty." The article went on to quote almost verbatim much of Harry's invocation and a bit of Rev. Smith's prayer.

Harry says that research is underway regarding court rulings in other parts of the country as to the constitutionality of prayers at city council meetings. Perhaps a change is in store locally as well.

The entirety of Harry's February 1 city council "invocation" may be found on the following page.

**CITY COUNCIL INVOCATION
FEBRUARY 1, 2007
By Harry Greenberger**

Over 200 years ago when our founding fathers held their constitutional convention to produce the document to establish the rules of governance for their new country, Benjamin Franklin proposed that each session be opened with a prayer. The other authors of the constitution, including future Presidents of the United States, allowed the motion to die by adjournment and the world’s first entirely secular government, instituted by the consent of the governed, came into being without invoking supernatural assistance.

We Secular Humanists consider it unnecessary for public meetings to routinely commence with an “invocation,” and we find it inappropriate and unconstitutional for those invocations to be religiously sectarian. In this multi-cultural community, Council invocations in the name of Jesus Christ are inconsiderate to the Jews, Muslims and Buddhists on the Council and in the city, and even without such sectarian limitations, they omit and are offensive to the non-believers who also might be on this Council and are certainly a part of your constituencies.

That is why I requested the opportunity to open this session of the City Council by “invoking” not the supernatural, but the Constitution of the United States and the concepts of intelligence, reason and experience in the conduct of this meeting. We ask not that you bow your heads to seek the wisdom and strength to do what is right for our city, but that you look over the New Orleans gathered here and do what is best for us by utilizing the wisdom and strength that you already have, along with our shared humanity, compassion and tolerance in considering and voting on issues which affect our well-being.

We ask this, not as a prayer, but in the name of reason, humanity, the golden rule and freedoms guaranteed us by the United States Constitution. To that we should all be able to say “AMEN.”

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MEMBERS’ PUBLISHED LETTERS

The following letter by **Connie Gordon** appeared in the *Monroe News-Star* on January 31, 2007:

In Molly Fold’s recent letter to the *News-Star*, she suggested illegal immigration is largely because uncivilized and unaccomplished Mexicans are jealous of our great accomplishments and they believe the U.S. stole their land. She further attributes all the successful civilizations of the world to Europeans who constantly had to fend off the jealous, less-civilized onslaught of outsiders.

Where does Folds get her information? She doesn’t realize the first great civilization on this planet arose in the fertile valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in ancient Mesopotamia – today’s Iraq – and that while primitive tribes of hunter-gatherers were wandering Central and Northern Europe thousands of years ago, the glorious empires of Greece and Rome were thriving.

Before that, the great cities of Timbuktu in Central Africa and Thebes and Alexandria in Egypt were centers of great culture. In fact, some of those “oil rich countries” in the Middle East that she sees as uncivilized were at one time greatly advanced in science and math, building some of the world’s first observatories and developing the very mathematical system Folds uses today – better Arabic numbers than Roman numerals. Much of the demise of those cultures came after colonization by European nations.

Fast forward to the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. The empires of the Incas and Aztecs and even the Iroquois Nation were destroyed by greedy and jealous Europeans. As for those Mexican “illegals” who think that the U.S. stole from them, they’re right. All humanity has contributed to world advancements.

The following letter by **J. Michael Malec** appeared in the *Monroe News-Star* on February 17, 2007:

Two recent letters on opposite sides of the question of “media bias” both seem to agree on one statement: “Americans have a deep interest in maintaining the Constitution.”

Most Americans don’t much like the Constitution, particularly the Bill of Rights. Most people seem to think that the various freedoms in the Constitution should apply to people like them, but not to others.

Amendment XIV guarantees “equal protection of the laws.” Everywhere in Louisiana, except New Orleans, you might add, “as long as you’re not homosexual.”

But the first 10 amendments seem to be the least liked by Americans. The Fourth Amendment protection against warrantless search and seizure is something Americans want for themselves, but when they think someone has broken a law, they don’t think law enforcement should be hindered by the Constitution.

The First Amendment is probably the most disliked. Freedom of religion, but not for Wiccans of course. No establishment, but prayers in school are OK (Christian only).

Do Americans have a “...deep interest in maintaining the Constitution?” Only in the abstract. When it comes to the rights it protects, they don’t like it much when it protects the rights of people they don’t much like.

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SWEDEN: LEAST RELIGIOUS AND MOST PROGRESSIVE?

By Charlotte Klasson

In September 2006, we visited Thomas’ relatives in Sweden beginning in the port of Helsingborg, a city with just over 100,000 residents in the southernmost part of the country called [Skåne](#). We try to visit our family “across the pond” every three or four years, and this was a priority since Katrina uprooted us to Mississippi and back again to the Crescent City. Of course, we had many amazing tales of our own to tell our gentle family!

This is part of the country where our photo was taken



in front of *Ales Stenar* or Ale’s Stones, 58 boulders raised in the outline of a ship in Ystad, [Skåne](#), which possibly illustrates early religious expression. During the Bronze Age, the idea to construct or “raise” ships of stone is almost exclusively Scandinavian, and the ship had significant meaning to the people of this era as a symbol of their coastal trade and commerce. It was common to bury the dead in a *skeppssättning* (ship setting) that was made of a number of large stones placed in the shape of a ship, the tallest stones at the bow and stern ranging in length between six and 46 meters. The customary reason for these “ship burials” is the dead were cremated and their bone fragments were placed in urns, the ship symbolizing the “circle of life and death.”

From the tip to the top, Sweden is one of the cleanest and most orderly of Scandinavian countries where social values of tolerance and respect have won out centuries after the infamous and violent raids of the early Nordic Vikings. The rumors that religion plays a much less prominent role in Swedish society, while contradictory statistics abound, are every bit true: (www.sweden.se)

- Almost 8 out of 10 Swedes are members of the Church of Sweden - 7 million.
- Only 1 in 10 Swedes thinks religion is important in daily life.
- Around 7 out of 10 children are christened in the Church of Sweden.
- Just over 5 out of 10 weddings take place in church.

- Almost 9 out of 10 Swedes have Christian burials.

While some of the numbers would hint otherwise, themes of nationality and authoritarianism are not as popular now for the Protestant Lutheran churches (accounting for 87% of population’s official religion) and reflects the attitudes of modern Swedes who are known as a people of high literacy, low unemployment, and “one of the lowest percentage rates of belief in God in the western world.” It should be noted that Lutheranism has relinquished its claim as the state religion, however, and only five-percent of the population regularly goes to church. Also, due to immigration, Islam is now the country’s second largest religion after Christianity.

Socially, Sweden has a very progressive view of the family values: Sweden has an extensive child-care system that guarantees a place for all young children from two to six years old in a public day-care facility. From ages 7-16, children attend compulsory school. After completing the ninth grade, 90% attend upper secondary school for either academic or technical education.

While this has caused a strain and need to adjust some services in recent years, Swedes still benefit from an extensive social welfare system that provides for childcare and maternity and paternity leave, a ceiling on health care costs, old-age pensions, and sick leave among other benefits. Parents are entitled to a total of 12 months' paid leave between birth and the child's eighth birthday, with one of those months reserved specifically for the father. A ceiling on health care costs makes it easier for Swedish workers to take time off for medical reasons.

One of the reasons for the contradictions in Swedish religious and public customs (being non-religious and progressive socially, yet participating in very traditional activities within the church) is that Swedes utilize the church for ceremonial activities. For Swedes, community and family harmony are an extremely important part of everyday life and events that bring everyone together such as christenings and funerals are part of that traditional fabric. The typical non-religious Swede still finds value and personal satisfaction by participating in these conventional parts of family life even as they acknowledge that their modern society promotes science and reason.

Sweden is perhaps an excellent example for the rest of the world when it comes to the marriage of true values and modernity: taking care of our community by utilizing the compassion of the “golden rule,” and yet striving for the progress that the pursuit of science and commerce demands from us all.

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“The World is my country. To do good is my religion.”
 -- Thomas Paine

GOD HELP US WHEN FAITH SILENCES REASON

(The following is excerpted from an op-ed piece by Robyn E. Blumner which appeared in the St. Petersburg Times on Sunday, January 7, 2007.)

According to televangelist Pat Robertson, God told him that the United States will be victim to a massive terror attack in 2007. That comes on the heels of his 2006 prognostication in which God told him the United States would be hit by terrible storms and a possible tsunami. He claims that the spring storms in New England last year partially fulfilled his prediction.

But if God is talking to Robertson, why is the Almighty being so cagey? Why didn't God alert Robertson to the terror attacks that would occur on Sept. 11, 2001? Why all the vagueness about precisely what will happen and when?

The most sensible explanation, and the one most readers are probably thinking, is that Robertson is not actually conversing with God. Robertson is making this stuff up out of his own warped imagination and hedging his bets by being hazy on the details. We think this because there is a healthy skepticism about televangelists who claim to be speaking for God.

But Robertson has been declaring his direct line to God for a long time, and even when he gets things wrong - raising the specter of a fallible deity or a feint by Robertson - he retains a remarkably large and loyal following as well as the support of elite Republican political leaders. His television show, *The 700 Club*, has a daily viewership of more than 800,000, people who undoubtedly think of themselves as the "values" voters of America.

To these viewers and the millions like them, author Sam Harris has addressed his *Letter to a Christian Nation*. In its sparse 90 pages, Harris makes a clear, direct challenge to those who subscribe to the inerrancy of the Bible, the existence of a personal God who responds to prayer and the exalted morality of the Christian religion.

You're wrong, Harris says, and by harboring such irrational and demonstrably false views (for example, the Bible has many internal inconsistencies and even bad math) you are hampering reason and human advancement. Harris' book is a study in inherent logic and sense which makes it a withering rejoinder to evangelicals and fundamentalists. But it is also a warning to religious moderates - people who use religion to fill communal and emotional needs without plumbing faith and its relationship to reality too deeply. Harris takes them to task, too, for not using the same standards of reasonableness when it comes to religion that they use in all other spheres of life.

The danger of this lapse, Harris rightly notes, is that religion has been and still is the cause of terrific human

suffering (undeniably tempered by many good works). Yet its purveyors are often not called to task, protected by the shield of "religious tolerance."

The hostility and violence generated from religious differences in places like Iraq, Nigeria, the Balkans and Israel is an obvious consequence of religious certainty leading to blind hate. But there are more subtle ways that religion harms more than helps.

Harris uses the example of stem cell research, in which the "values" voter would rather protect the "life" of a human embryo of 150 cells (compared with more than 100,000 in the brain of a fly) than allow extremely promising medical research to go forward. Research that has the potential of offering breakthroughs for therapeutic care for virtually every human disease or injury has been stymied due to lack of government funding because conservative Christians believe that a microscopic clump of cells has been imbued with a soul.

"The moral truth here is obvious," Harris asserts. "Anyone who feels that the interests of a blastocyst just might supersede the interests of a child with a spinal cord injury has had his moral sense blinded by religious metaphysics. The link between religion and 'morality'... is fully belied here, as it is wherever religious dogma supersedes moral reasoning and genuine compassion."

Harris cites numerous other examples, such as the religiously grounded opposition to the new inoculation against the human papillomavirus (HPV).

The vaccine would shield women from a disease that infects half of all Americans and leads to nearly 5,000 deaths from cervical cancer every year. Yet some Christian conservatives believe that the HPV acts as a disincentive to premarital sex. Their "moral" equation is that an increase in human suffering, disease and death is an acceptable trade-off to potentially reducing fornication. That same calculation keeps condoms out of HIV prevention programs. And these people get away with calling themselves "moral."

Why do we give religious personages such a pass? And why don't we laugh Robertson right out of Dodge? Because way too often, faith silences reason, even among reasonable people.

CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS

With other organizations around the area regularly providing assistance for projects and people needing help, NOSHA would like to be a part of such community service and we hope to establish a cadre of concerned humanists. If you are interested or willing to participate, please contact: Amy Smith at readdzealot@ad.com or call 259-2952.

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ALSO OF INTEREST TO HUMANISTS . . .

KEARNY, NJ—In an 11th grade history class this fall, the teacher was accused of violating the very U.S. Constitution he was teaching about. The teacher began the school year by telling his class that evolution and the Big Bang were not scientific, that dinosaurs were aboard Noah’s ark, and that only Christians could get into heaven. He even went so far as to tell his students that if they rejected Christianity, “then you know where you belong.” One reasonable student actually taped the lectures and reported the teacher to the school board. Disciplinary action has been taken. One wonders in how many other classrooms this is happening.

ATLANTA, GA—Legislation has been introduced that would allow the predominately white affluent and Republican northern suburbs of Atlanta to form their own county, leaving the remaining poorest, mostly Democrat, and predominately black neighborhoods to fend for themselves. If the legislation gets to the floor, racial and political lines will be drawn and according to one state senator, “There will be blood on the walls.” If passed, the measure would have to go to a statewide vote, but some say the proposal has strong support.

PENSACOLA, FL—Kent Hovind, the evangelist who runs the Creation Science Evangelism Ministry as well as Dinosaur Adventure Land (featuring animated prehistoric creatures coexisting with humans and other modern mammals) has been sentenced to ten years in federal prison plus \$600,000 in back taxes. His crime, failing to pay payroll taxes for his employees and endeavoring to obstruct and impede the “administration of internal revenue laws” in several ways. The government Mr. Hovind eschews in tax evasion is the same one, which guarantees his freedom of religion and speech so he can denounce scientific realities and preach creation science.

AUSTIN, TX—Bypassing the state legislature, Gov. Rick Perry signed an order making Texas the first state to require young women get vaccinated against human papilloma virus, the leading cause of cervical cancer. While this new vaccine should be added to those required against measles, whooping cough, mumps, etc., should it really be the governor’s edict that accomplishes this? In Texas, as in most states, parents are now allowed to opt out of inoculations by filing an affidavit objecting on religious or philosophical grounds, but at least those other vaccines were approved by a majority vote of the state legislature.

RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA—This country’s religious police (for real) recently arrested several hundred foreigners, both men and women, for attending a party in Jiddah where there was drinking and mixed dancing. Saudi Arabia follows a strict interpretation of Islam under which it bans alcohol and meetings between unrelated

men and women. A judge sentenced 20 of those arrested (all foreigners) to receive lashes and serve several months in prison. Doesn’t a conservative theocracy sound great?

BRASILIA, BRAZIL—This predominately Roman Catholic country’s health ministry recently proceeded with plans to put condom vending machines in schools. A study showed that most parents approve of the idea. To increase condom distribution, the ministry also launched a contest for technical schools to design a better condom vending machine. Test machines will go into schools early next year as well as in bars, clubs, and even police stations. Imagine that in the puritan U.S.

MIAMI, FL—A minister who has the number 666 tattooed on his arm believes he is God, saying, “the spirit that is in me is the same spirit that was in Jesus of Nazareth.” Interesting, his name is Jose de Jesus Miranda. He has a following, reportedly in the thousands. Born in Puerto Rico and with a history is heroin addiction, he said he learned he was Jesus reincarnate when he was visited in a dream by angels. Sounds familiar. Do the names Jim Jones and David Koresh ring any bells?

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA—A Catholic school principal has recently had to organize sensitivity training for students in his school who were making anti-Semitic slurs at students from a predominately Jewish school. The incident occurred at a basketball game between the two institutions when students from the Catholic school chanted “We love Jesus,” and painted the word “Jew” on the gym wall. The principal touted the importance of teaching the students tolerance and understanding and said that diversity training would become a part of the Catholic school’s curriculum.

JERUSALEM—More than 20 years ago, archeologists in Israel uncovered a burial cave containing 10 ossuaries—small caskets used to store bones—which some say contain the bones of Jesus and his family. One of the boxes bears the inscription, “Judah, son of Jesus,” implying that Jesus may have had a son. With an impending documentary made by American filmmaker, James Cameron and others, religious scholars and many Christians are a tad upset, because if the discovery is to be believed, it means Jesus didn’t raise bodily from the dead and ascend into heaven. It wouldn’t be the first time myths were proved as just that, myths. As one NOSHA member said on this topic, “How can a fictional amalgam character have bones to be found?”

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“Dear faithful people, I say goodbye to you, but I will be with the merciful God who helps those who take refuge in him and who will never disappoint any faithful, honest believer.”

--Saddam Hussein, in a farewell letter to the Iraqi people prior to his execution

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DARWIN DAY CELEBRATIONS

IN SHREVEPORT

On Sunday, February 11, Shreveport Atheists held their second annual Darwin Day celebration. Del Brennan, who maintains her membership in NOSHA, has established the small atheist group in northwest Louisiana when she moved there several years ago.

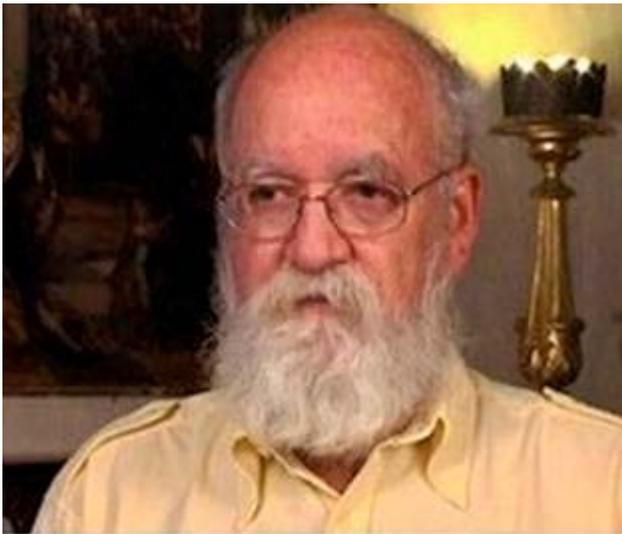
This year’s event was held at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church and included a panel discussion exploring evolution versus creationism, a social hour during which videos about Charles Darwin could be viewed, and an evening lecture about Darwin’s life.

Participating in the panel discussion were NOSHA’s own **Dave Schultz**, associate professor of biology at Nicholls State University, making the case for evolution. Presenting the creationist perspective was Shreveport surgeon, Dr. Milton Slocum. Slocum described himself as an “old-Earth creationist,” meaning he believes God created the earth and every living thing on it, but that He took millions of years to do it.

The event was well attended, albeit mostly by members of Dr. Slocum’s church added to a few interested Unitarians and the small group of atheists who hosted.

IN NEW ORLEANS

Darwin Day at the University of New Orleans was held on February 23, and featured only one speaker this year. Those of us in attendance were spellbound by the presentation, “The Evolution of Religion” presented by



Daniel C. Dennett. Dr. Dennett is Director—Center for Cognitive Studies and Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University and author of several books, including *Consciousness Explained*, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, *Freedom Evolves*, and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*.

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WHERE IS GOD?

Is there really a god you ask yourself,
As you take your bible off the shelf.
This is alleged to be god’s word,
Written by Scribes who claimed to have heard
The voice of god, or so they said.
But the voice was only within their head.
When people hear voices others cannot hear,
They’re mentally ill is what we fear.
But when they claim the voice is god,
We view them as holy rather than odd.
So in your search for god, the answer you find,
God exists one place, and that’s in man’s mind.

Don Boos, 2004

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NOSHA T-SHIRT

New NOSHA T-shirts will go on sale at the next meeting, March 17. The price is \$10.00 and will only be available at the meeting. We have had a limited number printed, but if sales go well, we can order more. Here’s what they look like. If you want one, you’ll have to come to a meeting.



NOSHA MEETING DATES

- March 17 – Mind Reader Mark Faulkner will present “Mind-reading and other scams”
- April 21 – To be announced
- May 26 – To be announced
- June 16 – To be announced
- July 28 – To be announced
- August 18 – To be announced
- September 15 – To be announced

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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: _____

2006 Annual dues are only \$5.00. 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.

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