

New York City Atheists

December 2002

Serving the tristate area ■ An affiliate of American Atheists

(212) 330-6794 PO Box 1187, New York, NY 10013
<http://foody.org/atheist.html> atheist@foody.org

Events

Come to our January meeting!

Sunday, January 19, 2003, 1-5 P.M.
(second-to-last Sunday of the month)
Source of Life Conference Center
352 Seventh Avenue, 16th floor (between
29th and 30th Sts.)
Guest speaker: Warren Allen Smith, author
of *Celebrities in Hell* and *Who's Who in Hell*
Donation requested

Also of atheist interest:

HumanLight

The new humanist holiday party
<http://humanlight.org>
Dining, speeches, music, games, dancing,
and other activities. Meet other regional
freethinkers.

Two dates and locations:

Friday, December 20, 2002, 7:15 P.M.
Plainview/Old Bethpage Library, 99 Old
Country Road, Plainview, Long Island

Sponsored by Long Island Secular Humanists
Free; bring food and refreshments
For registration or driving directions, e-mail LISH at
LISecHum@aol.com

Please offer or ask for a ride! E-mail atheist@foody.org
or call (212) 330-6794

Sunday, December 22, 2002, 1-5 P.M.
Russian Hall, 4 Woodhull Ave., Little Falls,
NJ

Sponsored by NJ Humanist Network (an American
Atheists affiliate) and the Council for Inquiry-Metro NY
Admission: Adults \$15.95, free 18 and under
For registration or driving directions, call CFI-Metro NY
at (973) 655-9556, or email CFIMetroNY@aol.com
Please offer or ask for a ride! E-mail atheist@foody.org
or call (212) 330-6794.

Atheist Meetup

Enjoy coffee, drinks, or a light dinner with
your fellow heretics!

Tuesday, January 15, 2003, 7 P.M.
Manhattan location: vote for it at <http://atheists.meetup.com>
(free registration required)
Location will be announced in e-mail, you need not register with Meetup to participate.

Next Meeting in January; Generous Donations

The fiscal news, first: NYC Atheists is again fiscally stable, so it can continue as usual unless members vote otherwise. Generous donations of \$748 at November's meeting and \$175 by mail (see "Treasury Report" in this newsletter) rescued our balance from a record low of \$8.89. Thanks to all who contributed so we can continue serving atheists and other freethinkers in the tristate area. Donations, which are still welcome, are anonymous unless otherwise requested.

Our next meeting will be on Sunday, January 19, 2003, at the usual hour and place (see the Events column at left). This is the *second-to-last* Sunday of the month, since the last Sunday wasn't available for rental. The featured speaker will be Warren Allen Smith, author of *Celebrities in Hell* and *Who's Who in Hell*.

This past November's meeting voted to cancel December's meeting, since even for atheists, a busy holiday season might mean low attendance. But there are three social alternatives for December. The December Atheist Meetup (see "Manhattan Atheist Meetups" in this newsletter) has just taken place and was promoted in e-mail. There are also two parties for HumanLight, the new humanist holiday: Sunday, December 20, 7:15 P.M. in Plainview, Long Island, and Sunday, December 22, 1-5 P.M. in Little Falls, northern New Jersey (see the Events column).

Ron Barrier, March Video, and Discussion at November Meeting

Video snippets of the Godless Americans March on Washington began our November meeting, which drew a record 30 attendees. (See "Videos of GAMOW" in this newsletter to order your own tapes.) We discussed the religious protesters, who exploited the open stage by waving their signs behind it until they were removed, or were blocked by banners such as "Atheists Bless America." We talked about the "satanists," whose attendance was controversial but in the end unremarkable. Some asked whether there would be another march. Another national intergroup event may be held in a few years, this time warmly indoors, but in the meantime many groups offer regional conventions.

Atheist activist Ron Barrier, the national spokesperson for American Atheists and cohost of the cable TV program *Atheist Viewpoint*, was the featured speaker. Like many atheists, Barrier came from a religious background, gradually questioning his faith. Intrigued by religion's attacks on secularism ("Atheism was treated as an obscenity"), he asked questions of his priest ("He didn't touch me") and began to read about atheism, which "didn't sound evil, threatening, or dogmatic." He said he found freethought literature to be more "palatable" and lacking the "unwarranted aggression" and hypocrisy of religion, though he

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still attended church for several years.

"Religion is a mental discipline that values hypocrisy," said Barrier. "Look at Darrell Lambert, well liked, competent, but when he stood up in a Boy Scout meeting and said he could be moral without an invisible pal, the Boy Scouts gave him ten days to come up with a supreme being." The Scouts, said Barrier, would prefer Lambert's hypocrisy instead of what atheists would value -- his honesty, forthrightness, and ability to doubt. "No one should be forced to choose between religion and their own personal integrity."

Religion's bottom line is fear of punishment for disbelief, said Barrier. He said that non-denominationalism exists so people can pick what they want from religion, and that since most people won't jump the hurdle to atheism, atheists need to tackle religious ideas. Why is faith considered "warm and comforting," asked Barrier, when facts are considered "cold and hard"? Facts make the world go around; they're what we depend upon.

Describing his several years of debates and media appearances, Barrier said moderators often ask him whether he expects "retaliation" for his atheism. He finds this striking: "No one asks guest religious clergy if they expect retribution" from atheists. Atheists doesn't smash windows, he said, but "they do challenge the very core of [religion's] existence."

Candidly discussing the Godless March on Washington and the politics of freethought, Barrier apologized for C-SPAN's use of the caption "American Atheist Rally," which he said was unexpected. The march's purpose was to break down barriers between freethought groups, he said. He added that differences between freethought groups are "just part of human nature," and said that he doubted whether the march could have been accomplished in the past, when groups were "based on major personalities," including the late American Atheists founder Madalyn O'Hair.

Atheist activism, said Barrier, centered on public recognition for atheism as an intellectually valid point of view, a norm instead of an aberration; on using our separate-but-equal status to bring our ideas into public debate; and on integrating atheism into culture and law. Christians, he said, currently are using an atheist book, Ibn Warraq's *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, to critique the Koran just as atheists have critiqued the Bible. He described his work with Staten Island clergy to persuade them of atheism's strengths. He urged people to fight for atheists' rights as citizens, such as running for public office.

Videos of GAMOW

The C-SPAN video covers the Godless March on Washington rally, runs over 4 hours, sells for \$59.95 plus \$7 shipping, and is available now. It may return to its previous price of \$135. Order online at <http://store.yahoo.com/c-spanstore/173662.html>, and order by phone at (877) 662-7726. To send a check or money order, write to C-SPAN Archives, PO Box 66809, Indianapolis, IN 46266-6809.

A video commissioned by American Atheists will cover only rally highlights, but will include footage of the march itself, plus some interviews. To be about an hour long, it will sell for \$19.95. Order through American Atheists (908-276-7300) or contact Dan Ginavan at LightLyre via e-mail at lightlyre@eudoramail.com or by phone at 785-542-5013.

When one audience member addressed the canard that religion keeps people moral, "keeping you from murdering and pillaging," Barrier said that claim fascinated him, since it means the religious are confessing "what horrible things *they'd* do to the community without [a] god belief."

Barrier said that he's been invited to many debates about the existence of a god, and he began a long discussion by asking the audience whether he thought such debates had value. Some said no, that theists pack the audiences and that no minds would be changed, or that it becomes "a battle of wits." "Nothing positive will come out of a rational debate with irrational people," said another.

But some also said that they thought debates were valuable for publicly airing the issues, building contacts, and sharpening intellectual skills. One said he never would have learned about freethought had he not been exposed to active debates. An atheist teacher of debates said that debates could reach a broader audience even if they were mostly "preaching to the choir," and he said he frequently was invited to religious classes.

Some said we should focus on church-state separation. "The public has to be toilet-trained on the structure of this county. Teach the history."

When one attendee insisted that atheist debaters need science doctorates, Ron compared the religion of theologians with that of popular piety, and said that he himself stuck to the "meat and potatoes."

Debates are part of marketing, said one member, who added that the word *godless* was a tactical error. "I love the freethought

community very much," said Ron, laughing, but he admitted that such disagreements could be aggravating. "We don't think alike, and [among freethinkers] there will always be critics." The Godless Americans March could have been called *secular* or *nontheist*, he said, but *godless* was a tactical decision that drew in many people and attracted press.

"Our political community is not as sophisticated as the religious political community," from which we must learn, concluded Barrier.

After a break for socializing, we regrouped in a circle for more discussion. First, we passed around a letter from a church that offered to change our "bad habits" by praying over an enclosed piece of brown paper on which we were to write our first names -- not our last names, since "God already knows" those.

Some proposed some alternative Manhattan weekend meeting locations, in case donations again fall short. Several informal groups use public atriums in corporate buildings, although chairs are usually monopolized by midday, there may be no rest rooms, and such atriums sometimes close without warning. Informal coffeehouses such as Dunkin Donuts require little spending, but they lack the comfortable privacy of rented space, and large groups can be considered disruptive.

Upcoming proposed projects include sidewalk tabling; street theater; selling books at March's annual Small Press Book Fair in midtown; and a bake sale with angel food cake, devil's food cake, and other mythologically oriented pastry. One member urged more summertime picnics. For fundraising, suggestions included commissions, if available, from online sales via Amazon, EvolveFish, eBay, or book publishers such as Prometheus Press. For free publicity, we might be able to get meetings listed in journals such as *Time Out*, *New York*, the *New Yorker*, the *Village Voice*, and *New York Press*.

Can instrumental music be atheist? asked a member. We talked a little of the philosophy and enjoyment of music, especially with the approach of Christmas music. Another member showed off currency marked with his "Keep God off Money" stamp, and we discussed the

practice's legality. Another mentioned President George W. Bush signing into law Senate bill 2690, which declares "In God We Trust" the national motto.

We talked about religious invocations before public meetings and the swearing in of jurors. A member described his success in asking judges or other officials, in advance, to omit sectarian references. Complain to hotels that offer Gideon Bibles, said another, who added that many hotels no longer offer them anyway. We also discussed the efficacy of prayer in medicine, with one member suggesting that meditation offered beneficial alpha brain waves. Another attributed that to the Hawthorne effect, an increase in efficacy thanks to attention from an observer. A member who once worked in a Christian Science facility described the high death rate there. Another said that late New York City cardinal John O'Connor had been on pain medication for terminal cancer till the church withdrew it so he could share Christly suffering. This led to a discussion of Mother Teresa, which in turn would have led to even more discussion, but lack of time forced the meeting to close.

Manhattan Atheist Meetups

Hang out with your fellow atheists at the Atheist Meetup Day, a regular monthly Manhattan event declared by the social Web site Meetup.com! Meetup, which proposes local gatherings for hundreds of special interests (e.g., women voters, dog lovers, Saturn drivers, veterans) has picked the third Tuesday of each month for the Atheist Meetup, and invites you to sign up at <http://atheists.meetup.com> (free registration required) to help pick one of three locations before each Meetup. No one runs the show; everyone pays for herself or himself.

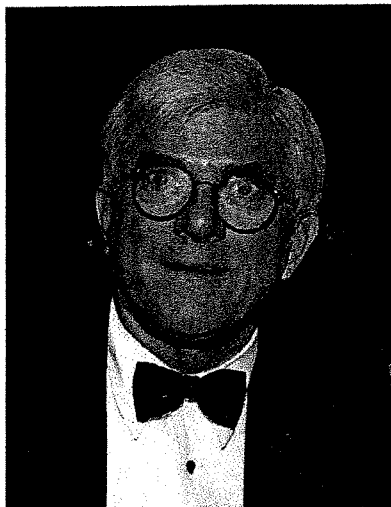
November's Atheist Meetup had been threatened with cancellation because of too few participants. Several New York City Atheists members rescued the event by signing up. On November 19 at the Half King bar/restaurant in Chelsea, ten atheists came, seven of them NYC Atheists members. We started with beers and settled into a light dinner, talking all the while. It was a good time lasting till around nine. Atheist Meetups also took place that evening in Washington, D.C.; Seattle; Atlanta; Philadelphia; L.A.; Chicago; San Diego; and Ithaca.

By press time, a second Atheist Meetup will have been held on Tuesday, December 17, at the Half King. The next Atheist Meetup will be on Tuesday, January 15, 2003. Locations are voted on by Atheist Meetup registrants from a short list offered by Meetup, which earns or will earn payments from businesses that offer themselves as choices. New York City Atheists can continue joining future Meetups, or it can consider its own weekday venue, depending on the will of our membership.

Treasury Report

Early November's balance was \$68.29. We spent \$42.55 on postage for November's newsletter, and \$16.85 on cold drinks for October's meeting, bringing the treasury down to a record low of \$8.89. (That meeting's \$195 room and TV rental fee had been paid in early November.) Members donated \$748 at the November meeting (\$223 in cash and \$525 [\$500 + \$25] by check), and \$175 by mail (\$100 + \$50 + \$25). We have spent \$160 for the room rental for the upcoming January meeting. As of early December, the treasury balance is \$771.89, excluding the cost of this newsletter's postage.

Donahue Debates Church-State Separation



The TV program *Donahue* invited atheists to attend its November 20 show on "the blurring line between church and state." Ellen Johnson, president of the national group American Atheists, forwarded the invitation to New York City Atheists, which alerted its own members via e-mail. The featured guests were Jerry Falwell (Falwell Ministries), Barry Lynn (Americans United for the Separation of Church and State), Tyler Deveny (who sued his high school to oppose a

prayer at his graduation ceremony), Sandy Rios (Concerned Women for America), Michael Newdow (the atheist winner of the decision declaring unconstitutional "under God" in the pledge of allegiance), and Erin Wiegand (who sued her high school to support spoken prayer before sports games).

The show was responding to the federal court decision that declared unconstitutional Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore's Ten Commandments monument, which he had sneaked into the rotunda of that judicial building.

New York City Atheists member Peter, who attended the *Donahue* show, reports, "Before the show Donahue asked how many in the audience were atheists. I would say that about 10 percent of the people there raised their hands. Donahue seemed to take this response in stride.

"I was pleasantly surprised at the audience tone. It was very much against the happenings in Alabama and very anti-Falwell. Donahue even said before the show that he thought that the audience would be more evenly split. He didn't seem to hide his feelings, which were in line with the general tenor of the audience.

"To me, the show seemed to go quickly and was a bit confusing. I wasn't sure when we were on the air and when not. We seemed to go back and forth quickly. Falwell, even though he was on via satellite, quickly felt the tone of the audience and made some remark about the audience being an elitist New York crowd. This went over about as well as all his other comments.

"Some female Falwell defender who was a guest said that she was in Korea at the time of 9/11 and prayed as she watched it on TV. I was mad at myself for not asking her who she was praying to and for what.

"Falwell accused Barry Lynn [one of the anti-Alabama guests] of being for the removal of 'under God' in the Pledge, the removal of 'In God We Trust' from our money, etc. Lind had no trouble agreeing."

You can read the show's transcript online at <http://www.msnbc.com/news/838274.asp>

The Sticky Side of Christmas

The increase in police around the fabled Rockefeller Center Christmas tree is not only to control crowds or ward off terrorists. The *New York Observer* has revealed the hitherto unknown Rockefeller Center Christmas tradition of "bumping," in which men squeeze through the crowds to rub themselves against women and girls, especially those wearing fur coats. The "bumpers" focus on families and school groups. One year, the police arrested the pastor of a small Manhattan church. "They put their hands in the holes [in their pockets] and play with themselves," said an investigator.

The Rockefeller Center tree has new competition: a 32-foot-tall, lighted Canadian fir placed near the "miracle debris" cross and a menorah at the World Trade Center site. "They can take down the towers, they can remove the structures, but they can't take away the symbols we hold so dear," said the New York City Fire Department's Jewish chaplain. Further competition comes from "world's largest menorah," made of steel and 32 feet high -- "the largest allowed under Jewish law" -- which is lit by politicians with blowtorches at an Upper West Side community center.

In other Christmas news, former police officer Charles Schwarz, who in early December was to begin a prison sentence for the 1997 torture of Abner Louima, won a postponement so he can spend Christmas with his family. "The defendant and his family are practicing Catholics and Christmas is an extremely important religious holiday for them," said Schwarz's lawyer.

Sources: "Round That Big Tree, But Beware 'Bumpers'," *New York Observer*, 11/25/02; "Judge Gives Schwarz Christmas at Home," *Daily News*, 12/3/02; "Christmas Tree Erected at World Trade Center Site," Associated Press, 12/2/02; "Lighting of Huge Menorah Begins Chanukah," *Daily News*, 12/10/01.

Suit Says Menorah is Secular

A Jewish group that was refused permission to place a nine-foot metal menorah on New Jersey public land has challenged the ruling in federal court. The Watchung Memorial Lighting Group claims that its constitutional rights of freedom of speech and expression were violated. The menorah's critics claim that it promotes religion. But an attorney for the group cites a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in a similar case that determined that a menorah was "a form of secular speech."

Sources: "Jewish Group Seeks Federal Court's Approval to Place 9-foot Metal Menorah on Public Land," Associated Press, 12/5/02.

Buggy Deaths Plague Amish

Two Old Order Amish children died and four family members were injured recently when a van struck their horse and buggy on a bridge in Holtwood, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

The Amish's religious practice of separating themselves from the modern world is not limited to a preference for nineteenth-century technology. In courts, the Amish have won several exemptions from public law, including refusal of public schooling after eighth grade; nonpayment of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid taxes; and the refusal to use orange traffic reflectors on horse-drawn buggies. Between 1996 and 2000, there were 371 traffic accidents in Pennsylvania involving buggies, 16 of them fatal, according to the state Department of Transportation. The crashes claimed 18 lives and left 442 people injured.

Source: "Boy, 3, Dies of Injuries from Amish Buggy Crash," Associated Press, 10/31/02; "Second Boy Dies of Injuries from Amish Buggy Crash," Associated Press, 11/6/02.

Media Masks KKK's Religious Roots



A Manhattan federal judge has ruled that when New York City enforced an obscure 1845 anti-mask law to discourage the American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan from demonstrating in Foley Square, the city unconstitutionally limited free speech.

Although the Ku Klux Klan is always identified as a racist group, it is almost never identified as a religious group, despite being led by a minister, restricting its membership to "white men or women of the Christian faith," and "honor[ing] the holy cross as a symbol of Christian faith, and recogniz[ing] the sacrifice of holy blood, which was shed, that all men might receive forgiveness of sin, and have life everlasting. We light the cross in recognition that Jesus Christ

is the light of the world."

Sources: "Judge: Can't Unmask Klan," *Daily News*, 11/20/02; "Racists Get Right To 'Hide'," *New York Post*, 11/20/02.

Mass Moonie Wedding



Two hundred couples were married recently in Manhattan by Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church. The local ceremony was broadcast live to locations in Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, and 145 countries, where additional couples gathered to be married remotely by Moon.

"If some didn't look ecstatic at the prospect of starting married life, it may be because many of the couples who tied the knot in New York's Manhattan Center yesterday had only just met," said the *Daily News*. A church representative refused to say how many of the couples were strangers to each other. He said that the practice has "waned somewhat" in the church.

The two-hour wedding began with prayers by a rabbi, an imam, a minister, and a Native American. Moon then recited wedding vows in Korean as the English translation appeared on a giant screen.

Sources: "Moonies Tie 200 Knots In City," *New York Post*, 9/15/02; "500 Followers of Moon Rise and Shout, 'We Do'," *Daily News*, 9/15/02.

Soul Food?



Wal-Mart Supercenters have introduced a new assortment of frozen prepared meals called Mary Ellen's Blessings at Home. The entrees' manufacturer, Request Foods, is marketing the new product line in partnership with Winning at Home, an advocacy organization led by Dan Seaborn, a promoter who works with groups such as Focus on the Family and the Promise Keepers.

The entrees include a prayer and a sharing activity, provided by Winning at Home, with the goal of "bring[ing] busy families back to the table." Packaging prayer and table talk with otherwise unremarkable entrees with names such as "Honey Sesame Chicken and Noodles" originated with Chef Bubba of Dallas, Texas, after reading the book *The Prayer of Jabez* by Bruce Wilkinson.

Request Foods said its mission is "to honor God in all it does, to help people develop, and to pursue excellence."

Source: "Wal-Mart Supercenters to Start Offering New Line of 'Inspirational' Frozen Entrees," *The Meetingplace* (<http://www.meetingplace.com>), 9/4/02.

Solstice, Anyone?

By George Rowell

Reprinted from *Pique* (newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York), December 2002

We are now entering our winter solstitial holidays and can expect to be inundated, flooded, and deluged with a vast media glut. Every year it increases, and starts earlier; the Radio City Christmas Spectacular is now advertised in August. Though it might not appear so on the surface, I think this flood will help secularism and humanism.

To paraphrase a critic of a few years ago, TV is "a vast cavernous maw that devours all its children and demands more and more." Today, the print media have become another "maw." Just visit your local newspaper and magazine store, you may be surprised. It is filled with ephemera of the printed

word, mostly lifestyle magazines you may have never heard of. And what are they filled with? Celebrity trivia, of course. Now, with the solstitial holidays, they all shift emphasis slightly, but how many articles can you read about decorating with Christmas candles?

So, many of them puff up articles with factoids on the origin of Christmas customs: that Christmas coincides with the ancient Roman Saturnalia; that December 25th was Mothers' Day to the pagan Anglo-Saxons (Earth Mothers, not the ordinary mortal ones); and more about the origin of Christmas trees than you really want to read.

I contend that these facts, trotted out every winter solstice, contribute to the desacralization of Christmas. The Christian religious will observe their ancient rites, but some may look around and think: "Didn't I read in that magazine that these wreathes, candles, and decorations come from some ancient pagan source?" Certain doubts may be raised in the believer's mind. Christianity's thefts of ancient solstitial festivals are too transparent to be hidden anymore.

A common complaint about the Christmas season is that it is "commercialized." I have even heard this from some secular humanists. They complain that the emphasis is: go out and buy! Well, so what? You are not forced to follow these instructions. (I am completely oblivious to Christmas advertising; was I inoculated early with something?) And, since we're not buying things for ourselves, but gifts, isn't gift-giving supposed to be a virtue? And won't commercialization help spread a more secular approach to the holidays (Hallowe'en is already quite desacralized and commercialized, and has been for a long time), which will also make them more humanistic by de-emphasizing religious exclusivity, and tend toward a more general communal period of festivity?

As Bertrand Russell says in *The History of Western Philosophy*, "Primitive religion, everywhere, was tribal rather than personal. Certain rites were performed, which were intended, by sympathetic magic, to further the interests of the tribe, especially in respect of fertility: vegetable, animal, and human. The winter solstice was a time when the sun had to be encouraged not to go on diminishing in strength; spring and harvest also called for appropriate ceremonies. These were often such as to generate a great collective excitement, in which individuals lost their sense of separateness and felt themselves at one with the whole tribe."

When we think about it, we must realize that our solstitial festivals hang on more by inertia than for any valid reasons. In the U.S.A. there is no longer any worry about hunger at the hinges of the seasons. But mankind's urge to party cannot be stopped by the mere lack of a good reason.

Also, as Russell says, sympathetic magic was intended to further the interests of the tribe, for instance bringing in holly to keep the wood elves warm and

friendly to us. Now, we retain the customs, but don't believe in sympathetic magic anymore, and no longer understand their original purpose. Magic regalia has become décor. Ornament, tinsel, baubles and their accessories live a life of their own. They float along everywhere on a human desire to "pretty things up." They need no justification.

The tinsel and baubles of Christmas must subliminally enter the minds of some believers. Some, at least, must think: "More tinsel than substance, and what was that substance?"

So it becomes much easier for secular humanists to point out that these religiously oriented (and stolen) tribal festivities were originally, and should be, communal, nonsectarian festivals. Two factors help this: more and more knowledge of the pagan origins of our festivities, and emphasis on the holidays as a time to give gifts. This last one may not seem like an advance, but it advances secularism, not religious particularism.

A modest proposal: With doubt and desacralization spreading, I think Americans should take another step forward. We have all looked at our calendars and seen "Memorial Day, Thursday, May 30," but also "Memorial Day (observed), Monday, May 27." This happens for other holidays, too, because this worthwhile adjustment gives people more three-day weekends.

We should do the same for Christmas. When was Jesus really born? June, maybe? And who cares? Christmas Day, as we all know, was originally an ancient pagan festival celebrating the turning of the year. This year "Christmas" falls on Wednesday, a very inconvenient day. Let's change the calendars. We'll have "Christmas Day, Wednesday, December 25," but then add "Christmas Day (observed), Monday, December 23." Another three-day weekend. Other so-called religious holidays should also receive this treatment, e.g.: "Easter, Sunday, March 31," then on Monday, April 1, add "Easter (observed)." Three more days! Other so-called religious holidays should also receive this treatment, e.g.: "Easter, Sunday, March 31," then on Monday, April 1, add "Easter (observed)." Three more days!

The media glut (more information), and increased commercialization have led to desacralized holidays, and can lead to more! Secular humanists should see that opportunities for advancing our cause are being made easier by the media glut in our country, and try to take advantage of it.

Solstice and the New Year

By John B. Hodges

Reprinted from AACHAT (e-mail list of American Atheists members), November 16, 2002

Dave Miller has written an excellent essay, "Humanists and the Holidays" (*LISH Inquirer*, December 2001) in which he tells how his family has developed ways of celebrating New Year's Eve/Day as an alternative to Christmas. He said in passing that he could not feel any enthusiasm for the Winter Solstice, it did not mean anything to him.

Many atheists/humanists celebrate the Solstice; the American Atheists organization, and I believe also the Freedom From Religion Foundation, support the practice. But it is also true that there are advantages to celebrating a holiday (like the New Year) that the rest of the culture also celebrates.

It occurred to me recently that the Solstice is, after all, just the New Year by a different calendar. Remember what a year is: one trip of Earth around the Sun. How do we know when this is, how do we measure it? By studying the movements of the Sun and stars across the sky. The solstices and equinoxes are natural marking points for the quarters of the year. It is a cycle, so we could pick any arbitrary point as the "beginning"; I recall reading of one culture that started their year at the Spring Equinox.

The calendar we use today is the result of piecemeal amendment over centuries. The awkward fact is that the days do not fit into the year evenly (evidence against intelligent design)- almost, but not quite, 365 and 1/4 days per year. Early efforts at making a calendar did not work right, the calendar drifted with respect to the seasons. Their instruments for measuring celestial movements, and for measuring time, were not as good as ours today. Several changes were made in the calendar, and at least one "ad-hoc" adjustment of eleven days, to make it fit the true length of the year.

Those doing the tinkering were not concerned with making the months line up with the solstices and equinoxes; they just wanted the total length of the calendar year to match the solar year. So, it happens that the calendar bequeathed to us by tradition starts the New Year twelve days after the Solstice.

I suggest we use this as a happy chance to celebrate both. We can teach our children the meaning of each; thus we introduce them to astronomy and history, and the fact that the world is often imperfect, and human institutions grow by amendment.

Cultures all over the world have some sort of holiday near this time, it has never been the exclusive property of Christianity. In its conquest of Europe, Christianity tried to suppress older religions by preempting their holidays (and sacred sites), making up Christian replacements. It would be unquestionably legitimate for Atheists and Humanists, (in the modern context of religious freedom), to do the same.

I am an advocate of "Sustainable Civilization", which includes the use of solar energy, so the movement of the sun has a practical significance to me. I learned about solar energy while I was living in Denver, Colorado in the late 1970's; Denver is a city on largely

flat ground, and the streets are laid out in a rectangular grid oriented directly north, south, east, west. This made every building a sundial; walking to work each morning I could tell time and season by the shadows. The solstices and equinoxes are quite real to me. I hope for a future when solar energy will be widely used; in such a future, most folks will be aware of the compass points and celestial calendar, for very practical reasons.

Recently I have been reading about the Epic of Evolution, and of the Epic of Evolution Society, a group of writers, many with long strings of credentials, who seek to make the story of evolution as understood by science the central myth of our time. Examples include Connie Barlow with her book *Green Space, Green Time*, and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story*. They propose to tell the history of the universe, solar system, Earth, life, and humankind in the form of epic poetry, with all the usual storytelling techniques, intending to make it a source of meaning for people's lives, serving the same psychological function that religious "origin myths" presently serve.

The story they tell starts with the "Great Radiance" (mundanely known as the "Big Bang") and proceeds through to the hoped-for future expansion of humankind through space. In this context, I suggest that perhaps the Winter Solstice might be a good candidate for "Great Radiance" themes (up to formation of Solar System and Earth), Spring Equinox for Cambrian Explosion (history of life), Summer for Savannah Dreams (history of humankind), Autumn for Sustainable Harvesting (futurist hopes).

For family togetherness and celebration, we could assign the quarterly holidays for special appreciation of children, youth, mature adults, and seniors respectively.

If we wished, we could recall these themes throughout the year. First quarter, note and observe dates of relevance to astronomy, physics; second quarter, celebrate geology, biology; third quarter, paleontology, anthropology, history; fourth quarter, ecology, engineering, medicine, other applied fields. (Mathematics, music, literature and art would be appreciated throughout the year, as essential to all human endeavor.) We could assemble a calendar of dates relevant to all these themes, as an educational tool for all ages.

I'm reading two books now that I recently bought; *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea*, by Carl Zimmer (this is the companion volume to the recent PBS TV series on evolution), and *An Intimate Look at the Night Sky*, by Chet Raymo. Though I haven't yet finished either, I can recommend them as being beautifully written. The natural universe as revealed by science is far vaster, more fascinating, and more useful than any prophet's fantasies. How to celebrate these stories in music, song, story, and drama, is another question. Let the talented try their hands.

So Merry Solstice and Happy New Year -- "On the twelfth day of Solstice."

New Skeptical TV Series

Critical Eye, a new series hosted by William B. Davis (The *X Files*' "Smoking Man"), looks into the science behind the paranormal, new age philosophies, and the unexplained. Produced by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal and *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine (of the Council for Inquiry), the series is investigating 34 topics including: subliminal messaging, alien abduction, acupuncture, ghosts, astrology, exorcism, Stonehenge, near-death experiences, and the lost city of Atlantis. Each topic will be addressed by leading experts and scientists. These subjects will be brought to life through lively debate and extraordinary visuals in order to shed light on their scientific relevance. The show airs on the Discovery Channel's affiliate, the Science Channel, on Mondays at 8 P.M. and 11 P.M. EST, as well as Tuesdays at 12 P.M., 3 P.M., 4 P.M., and 7 P.M. (Manhattan Time Warner Cable, channel 111; Manhattan Microwave Cable, channel 309; Queens, channel 111.). For more information see <http://www.science.discovery.com/tuneins/criticaleye.html>

Other TV Shows

Humanist Perspective. Hosted by Joe Beck and aired on Cablevision Public Access, it can be seen on Wednesdays at 6:30 P.M. on channel 71 of the Woodbury system, and on Wednesdays at 7:00 P.M. on channel 70 of the Hauppauge and Brookhaven systems.

What Is Secular Humanism? Produced by Long Island Secular Humanists and aired on Cablevision Public Access, it can be seen on Tuesdays at 6:30 P.M. on channel 71 of the Woodbury system, and on Sundays at 2:00 P.M. on the Hauppauge and Brookhaven systems.

Atheist Viewpoint. Produced by American Atheists and aired in Staten Island on Saturdays at 4:00 P.M. and Sundays at 6:00 P.M. on channel 35. It is not yet available elsewhere in New York City.

Rabbi Gets Jail, Not Death, for Hired Murder of Wife

A jury found him guilty and sentenced to 30 years to life in prison Fred Neulander, a prominent South Jersey rabbi, for hiring a friend to murder his wife in 1994 so he could maintain at least two extramarital affairs.

The case, which had stalled in 2001 thanks to a hung jury, was worthy of a soap opera or prime-time police procedural. The Neulanders' daughter was on the phone with her mother moments before she was killed. Their son was one of the EMTs responding to the 911 call. Fred Neulander's secret mistress, a radio celebrity, later married the policeman guarding her during the investigation. The hit men whom Neulander was convicted of hiring had come forward to plead guilty to the crime, but were exposed as chronic liars with personality disorders. During the second trial, Neulander's son begged the jury to spare his father's life, only then to hear his father, expressing no remorse, say that he still loved his wife. The penultimate sensation was the news of Miss Vicki, the former wife of the late singer Tiny Tim, falling in love with Neulander and supporting him during his imprisonment.

Neulander's rabbinical role added to the drama. His mistress was a widow whom he had converted, enrolled in his synagogue, and courted after counseling her for the loss of her husband. Neulander is one of very few clergy who have faced capital punishment. Defense witnesses from Neulander's congregation testified that he was an intelligent and compelling preacher and a compassionate spiritual leader. His defense during sentencing was framed as a sermon, weighted with biblical references and delivered "as though he was addressing a group of school children," said the Associated Press. Legal experts had said that his clergy status could make a jury either believe his testimony, or convict him out of sense of betrayal. But he escaped capital punishment when the jury, which could not reach unanimity on a death sentence, as required by New Jersey state law, forcing automatic lesser sentencing.

In 1992, shortly after counseling the recently widowed Philadelphia radio talk-show host, Elaine Soncini, Neulander began dating her and helped convert her to Judaism and to become a congregant in his synagogue. In 1994, his wife, Carol, was beaten to death in their home. When the affair with Soncini became public, Neulander resigned his senior rabbi post, citing unspecified moral indiscretions but denying complicity in the murder. Neulander was named a suspect, and an old friend of his testified that the rabbi said he wished he would arrive home one night and find his wife dead on the floor, and asked for help in having her killed. A grand jury expired without returning an indictment, but in 1998, Neulander was charged with conspiracy to murder and being an accessory to murder, and was freed on \$400,000 bail.

One month before Neulander's trial, a private investigator, Leonard Jenoff, told a reporter at a diner that he and his former roommate, Paul Daniels, beat Carol Neulander to death for \$30,000. Jenoff and Daniels were arrested and charged with murder and conspiracy to commit murder, and pled guilty. Charges against Neulander were upgraded to capital murder, felony murder and conspiracy, and he was jailed without bail. In the October 2001 trial, Jenoff and Daniels were the prosecution's key witnesses, but their contradictory and at times bizarre testimony deadlocked a jury for 43 hours over seven days, after which the judge declared a mistrial. The second trial, which was moved to a remote county seat in a futile attempt to reduce media attention, focused on the credibility of the prosecution witnesses.

For full coverage and archives of the case, visit the Web site <http://www.southjerseynews.com/neulander>. See the February and October 2001 newsletters, or <http://foody.org/atheist/insanity1101.html#rabbi> and <http://foody.org/atheist/insanity1001.html#killer>, for previous summary coverage.

Sources: "Jury Finds Rabbi Guilty in Murder Plot," *New York Times*, 11/21/02; "Rabbi Gets Jail, Not Death, for Hired Murder of Wife," *New York Times*, 11/23/02; "Clergy on Trial Might Seem More Credible -- or More Heinous -- to Jurors," *Newsday*, 10/14/01; "Chutzpah of Wife-Slay Rabbi: 'I Still Love Her'," Associated Press, 11/23/02; "Younger Son Asks Jury to Spare Rabbi's Life," *New York Times*, 11/22/02; "Family Has Sense of Justice Although Rabbi's Life Spared," Associated Press, 11/22/02; "Killer Rabbi's Celeb Love," *Daily News*, 11/22/02.

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