

The Idaho Humanist

Humanists of Idaho is a chapter of the American Humanist Association and the Council for Secular Humanism. We are a non-profit corporation organized to promote ethical, democratic, and naturalistic Humanism in the state of Idaho through public awareness, education, and community involvement.

Nov-Dec 2001

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Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. It affirms the dignity of each human being and supports individual liberty consonant with social and planetary responsibility. Humanism advocates participatory democracy, the open society, human rights, and social justice. Free of super-naturalism, it recognizes human beings as part of nature and holds that all values—be they religious, ethical, social, or political—have their source in human nature, experience, and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological and ideological abstractions, and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

—*The Humanist*,

Official publication of the American Humanist Association

Volunteers Needed

Three members of the Humanists of Idaho went to help answer phones at Idaho Public Television on November 18. It turned out to be a busy night, so those of us who came were busy jumping from phone to phone for over an hour. We took orders for 45 videos totally over \$900 in sales. Thanks to volunteer John Harms for helping us help our friends at IPTV.

We have also been asked to bring five volunteers for an on-air event the evening of December 2nd to take membership pledges for IPTV. Exact time to be determined. We have also been asked to do video sales again on December 6th, starting at 6:30 PM.

We are still hoping to sponsor a family for the holidays through the Women's and Children's Alliance shelter. We expect to have details soon. If you can help with any of these volunteer activities, please call LeAnne Struble at 362-6873.

Volunteer Thanks

Two of our volunteers deserve special thanks this month. For many years, Joe Voight has served as our treasurer as well as steward of the Permanent Building Fund. The fund was created so that Humanists of Idaho will someday be able to purchase a building for a humanist center. It is kept in a separate account from our general funds. Ten percent of membership dues go into the fund, securing it for the future, thanks to Joe's diligence.

Paul Rolig has graciously volunteered to take over the task of overseeing the fund. The membership approved the transfer at the November meeting.

Thanks to Joe and Paul for keeping this important project moving forward.

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Don't Shut Out The Non-Religious

Tom Flynn is the Editor of Free Inquiry.

If you watched the World Series, you might think “God Bless America” had become the national anthem. I admit it’s easier to sing than “The Star-Spangled Banner.” But it begins with the word “God,” and in a land of unprecedented religious diversity that is exclusionary language.

America is digging in for what may be a long war and people are clutching elements of their traditional identities closer, including the Christianity most Americans share. Most, but not all.

A new City University of New York study finds that a record 14 percent of American adults have no religion. America’s Jewish minority holds steady at about six percent. Meanwhile Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious groups are rising sharply. Given that, it’s astonishing that anyone can seriously expect all Americans to unite around “God Bless America.” As the war against terrorism grinds on, America seems poised to shut out the non-religious and members of non-mainstream faiths.

After 40 years of improving the way the nation treats religious outgroups, now is no time to turn back the clock.

LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION

More than 30 million Americans live without religion. We felt no less devastated by the national tragedy than anyone else. If anything our sense of loss was greater, since we envision no next-worldly existence in which the victims might be made whole for what was torn from them. Yet what opportunities did we have to join with fellow Americans to express our anguish? After Sept. 11, religious services spilled out of the nation’s houses of worship and onto the steps and rotunda of the Capitol, into municipal sports arenas, public parks, and civic buildings. Where were the secular memorial or

remembrance events that all Americans could share?

A PUBLIC SQUARE FOR ALL

In time of anguish Christians, Jews, and Muslims naturally yearn for the solace of their faiths. But when they gather in the public square they should remember that they are not alone there. On Sept. 11, Rep. David Bonior (D-Mich.), spoke of “all Americans — Christian, Jewish, and Muslim,” excluding the non-religious and also millions of minority believers. Sorry, Rep. Bonior, they’re Americans too. In October, the House of Representatives voted 404-0 to encourage public schools to go on using “God Bless America” in the face of religious diversity concerns. Rep. Henry Brown, (R.-S.C.) who introduced the bill, cited lawmakers’ singing of “God Bless America” on the Capitol steps as precedent. Sorry, Rep. Brown, two wrongs don’t make a right.

NO CRUSADE

Administration officials insist we’re in a war against terrorism, not a crusade of Christians against Muslims. Some Americans seem to think it’s Christians against everybody else.

I hope our nation can relearn the lessons of inclusiveness. To say “Christians, Jews, and Muslims” is not to speak of all Americans. To say “people of every faith” still is not enough. America includes people of every faith, and of none. The vocabulary, the music, and the allusions public officials choose when they address the nation should reflect that diversity.

Non-religious Americans have money and energy to contribute, blood to donate, and emotional (if never “spiritual”) support to offer. If you insist on freezing us out of the fight against terrorism, we’ll understand. But next time the call goes out for “all hands on deck,” forgive us if we assume you’re talking to somebody else.

Help Afghan Women

For several years the Feminist Majority Foundation (www.feminist.org) has been a leading critic of the Taliban's repressive treatment of women. They have been working to educate the international community and have been working directly with non-governmental organizations on the ground to provide essential health and education services.

Now that the Taliban have pulled out of most of Afghanistan, there is a pressing need to quickly restore the role of women in Afghan society and provide essential services. The web site www.helpafghanwomen.com includes an online petition, donation form, and an Afghan crafts web site where all the products are handmade by Afghan women in refugee camps, and all of the proceeds help Afghan women and girls.

We would like Humanists of Idaho to become an Action Team for this project. At the December meeting we'll have a copy of the petition and will be collecting donations to help women in Afghanistan as a group. We also encourage all of our members to consider supporting this cause directly as well.

Book Review

LeAnne Struble

Each year my husband Chris and I wonder what we should do about the holidays. How do we make it a memorable time for our girls and still promote the values we have as a family? This question has prompted many discussions in our house. We don't want our girls to feel different as they grow up, but we also want them to understand what it is that we believe.

A chance trip to Hastings to rent a video may have solved this dilemma. While in the store a book caught my eye. First because the name of the main character was the same as my niece, and second because of the title. The book is called "*A Solstice Tree for Jenny*", by Karen

L.Shragg. I picked up the book and was immediately struck by the author's dedication, "for John, the wind beneath my Humanist wings". This alone intrigued me enough to purchase the book.

The book is the story of a young girl, who believes her house is the ugliest on the block because there are no lights, or menorahs to decorate the windows. Her parents explain why they don't celebrate the holidays like their neighbors, and even though Jenny understands she still feels left out. The next day at school she tells a teacher about her problem. The teacher gives her a book of solstice stories. Jenny reads the stories and then shares the book with her parents and asks them what they do believe. Together the family decides to put up a solstice tree decorated with slips of paper that have what they believe in written on them. The parents recapture the joy they used to feel at this time of year, and pass that joy to their daughter. Jenny can't wait to share her solstice tree and its messages with all of her friends.

This was a well written book that explained Humanist beliefs in a clear and easy to understand way. It in no way attacked those who celebrate religious holidays but explained clearly why those who are not religious don't celebrate these days. It also showed how so many of our beliefs are alike, the difference being in the way we learn them.

I believe this story and the tree it talks about will become a tradition in our home, one that our girls can proudly tell their friends and teachers about. Maybe with each telling of the story of their solstice tree they will bridge the gap of intolerance.

Contacting Your CongressPerson:

www.house.gov

www.senate.gov

The Role of Fantasy

Chris Struble

Two new movies expected to do well during the holidays are J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and J.R.R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*. Both are based on fantasy novels by British authors, filled with magic, wizards, and fantastic creatures.

The immensely popular Harry Potter books tell the story of a young man who finds escape from an abusive home life into a secret world of witchcraft and sorcery. The books have been criticized and even burned by some fundamentalist Christians because of their emphasis on the occult arts. The movie is drawing fire as well. One pastor described the stories as "enticing children and young people to a practice that is just the opposite of what the church teaches". Another declared that "children as young as kindergarten age are being introduced to human sacrifice... and possession by spirit beings" by the Harry Potter stories.

Quite apart from the fact that any magic spells in Harry Potter are completely made up, and couldn't possibly work even if magic really existed, it simply isn't true that the occult is the opposite of Christianity. The primary promoters of the idea that evil spirits exist and can possess people, or that such forces can be controlled by witchcraft are fundamentalist Christians. These ideas originate in Sunday sermons. After all, what is the crucifixion of Jesus if not a story of human sacrifice, of the death of one person taking away the sins of others? What else is the story of Jesus exorcising a horde of demons if not a story of possession by spirit beings? Isn't it Christians who talk about spirits entering their bodies ("the holy spirit was really moving in him today")? The opposite of Christianity would be a book that denied the existence of such beings or efficacy of such practices.

So I don't believe for a minute that the fundamentalists are afraid of their kids believing in witches or spirits. Then what is it? I

believe it has to do with the way fantasy can ignite the imagination of a child generally. Just as the greatest threat to an authoritarian god is knowledge of good and evil ("eat not of the tree of knowledge, lest ye die"), the greatest threat to authoritarian religion is knowledge of the difference between fantasy and reality.

Religion is after all a kind of virtual reality, and depends for its continued survival on unquestioning belief in that reality. A child who can read Harry Potter as a work of fiction may be able to read the Bible stories in the same way. A child who can also imagine another world where the rules are very different, may question why the rules of this world can't be different. This is anathema to religious conservatives.

What frightens them is not that their children will replace the virtual reality of religion with the alternative virtual reality of Harry Potter, it is that their children will be able to construct their own virtual realities, their own explanations and sources of meaning.

What about humanists? Should we be concerned about exposing our children to stories with dragons, wizards, and spirits? I think not. Children are going to be exposed to such things anyway. Better to expose them in a way that frees their imagination and gets them to understand early the difference between fact and fantasy.

I believe its healthy for children to think about worlds where the rules and histories are very different, so long as this is balanced with a strong science education. Our future may even depend on it. A child who imagines dragons and wizards today may grow up to imagine the solution to poverty or terrorism tomorrow.

Some fantasy stories also use a magical setting to deliver a subtle humanistic message. For example, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Michael Moorcock's *Elric* series both involve reluctant heroes who oppose magic and use it reluctantly, and who set out to create a world where the influence of both good and evil magic

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Humanism After 9/11

Chris Struble

Now that some time has passed since the September 11th attacks, it may be a good time to ask what long term impact the attacks will have on the prospects for humanism.

In the days after the attacks, people poured into churches, and the churches poured out onto the streets. Congress erupted "spontaneously" into "God Bless America". Religious leaders and other public figures blamed the attacks on secularism. At the same time leaders attempted to deflect all blame from Islam, declaring "Islam is peace".

Within days, however, the secular community responded. Comments by Jerry Falwell and others blaming the attacks on secularism were quickly retracted. Ibn Warraq, author of "Why I am Not a Muslim" released a statement pointing passages in the Koran that could be interpreted to advocate violence against non-believers and people of other faiths. Locally, Humanists of Idaho got our first interview with the television media, which went very well, with Nicolle Foster giving a brief statement to Channel 2 News.

As the hysteria of the first weeks died down, it began to be replaced with a steady political campaign to erode our rights:

Next Meeting

This month's membership meeting will be on Thursday, December 6. Since we're volunteering for IPTV video sales that night, we'll leave from IPTV afterwards and meet at a restaurant.

Volunteers should come to Idaho Public Television at 1455 N. Orchard at 6:30 PM. If you would like to join us for the meeting afterwards, come at 8 PM. We will pick a local restaurant to meet at after we are finished.

* In October, Congress passed a non-binding resolution supporting display of "God Bless America" signs in schools and public buildings.

* Congress passed anti-terrorism legislation that erodes civil liberties.

* The President gave himself the authority to create military tribunals to try and convict foreign citizens suspected of terrorism without due process.

* The President is attempting to resurrect his "faith-based initiatives" agenda while attention is focused elsewhere.

* A bill currently in Congress, H.R. 3051, would declare the song "God Bless America" as the "National Hymn" of the United States.

* Congress Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) is planning to introduce a constitutional amendment establishing a right to pray on public property.

Fantasy

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is greatly diminished, and where people can one day be free to live under natural law. Both long for peace and the simple pleasures of home and loved ones, but are destined not to enjoy them themselves but only make it possible for others to do so in the future.

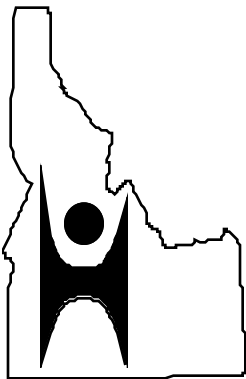
The struggle of such heroes to free their worlds from domination by magic is (minus the sword fighting of course) not unlike the efforts of humanists to free our world of dogma and superstition, to make a world where people can one day live in peace and be free from fear of ghosts, goblins, angels or spirits, not because they no longer exist, but because people realize they never existed in the first place. We may not live to see such a world in our lifetimes, but the hope of such a world is worth the effort.

It is essential that humanists speak out while this campaign continues.

In the long run I believe the prospects for humanism and for humanizing the world's major religions have improved. People of faith everywhere must be asking themselves what it is in their beliefs that causes such violence. The world community also has an opportunity to free the people of Afghanistan and bring Islamic countries closer to democracy, if we take it.

Upcoming Events

- Dec 2, 2001 Pledge Drive At Idaho Public Television,
1455 N. Orchard, Boise. Details inside.
- Dec 6, 2001 Video Sales at Idaho Public Television, 6:30
PM. Business meeting afterwards.
- Dec 21, 2001 Winter Solstice



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