The 2019 Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Ohio Tree of Knowledge Displays

by Margaret Downey

The Freethought Society (FS) is proud to announce that Tree of Knowledge displays were put up in three different states during the 2019 winter holiday season. This article will highlight displays in Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Ohio.

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania a 10-foot-high artificial pine Tree of Knowledge was placed in the lobby of the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) on Sunday, December 2, 2019. On the day of the installation, PES Leader Hugh Taft-Morales delivered a speech about the joy of serving others. His speech is reprinted and adapted as an article in this publication. After the Taft-Morales speech, the Tree of Knowledge was decorated and a holiday reception took place in the upstairs meeting hall.

I put up a temporary Tree of Knowledge display at the Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia’s Winter Solstice party. FS supporters Marjory Goldman, Zenos Frudakis and Greg White helped to decorate the wrought-iron decorative tree frame using double-sided laminated book cover ornaments and bright red bells that were made to look like apples.

The display included a snake coiled around the bottom of the frame to reflect the biblical story of Adam and Eve. The mythical account is that God placed Adam in the Garden to tend it but he warned Adam not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God supposedly said, “For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

The serpent tempts Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but Eve conveys to the serpent what God said (Genesis 3:3). The serpent replies that she would not die if she eats the fruit of the tree. He persuades Eve to eat by saying, “Then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.”

According to the Bible story, Eve ate the fruit and then gave it to Adam. He also ate. God, who was walking in the Garden of Eden, discovers the “sin.” To prevent Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life and living forever, both Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden.

The serpent is punished for its role in the “fall from grace” when God changes the serpent into a snake to forever crawl on its belly and only eat dust.

I enjoy the opportunity to talk about this absurd Bible story with anyone who notices the snake at the base of a Tree of Knowledge display and inquires about its significance. Snake superstitions have flourished since ancient times as the creature seems mysterious and feared by many even though snakes are a valuable member of the Earth’s ecosystem.

On Monday, December 2, 2019, a white wire Tree of Knowledge was placed in the rotunda of the Rhode Island Statehouse by local members of the Freedom from Religion Foundation. The Tree of Knowledge was one of five secular displays in that location. The Rhode Island Humanist Book Club put up a sign featuring the quote by Rhode Island founder Roger Williams; “God requireth not an uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state.” The Humanists of Rhode Island displayed a sign stating “Tis the season to celebrate the birth of Roger Williams (born December 21, 1603) and separation of church and state.” The Rhode Island Skeptics displayed a sign proclaiming axial tilt as the reason for the season. The Rhode Island Atheists displayed a sign, strategically placed next to the Tree of Knowledge, featuring the Robert Green Ingersoll quote, “Give me the storm and tempest of thought and action, rather than the dead calm of
ignorance and faith. Banish me from Eden when you will; but first let me eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.”

Religious displays in the Statehouse rotunda included a menorah and three nativity scenes from around the world. Secular displays outnumbered religious ones for the second year in a row.

In Ohio, the Cleveland Humanist Alliance and Cleveland Freethinkers joined forces to celebrate Humanlight, the winter solstice and in general the winter holiday season. A potluck celebration took place at the River Grove Chestnut Shelter in Willoughby Hills, which is an eastern suburb of Cleveland. Leaders and members in both organizations helped to make the event a success.

Carlos Castells created a Secular Jeopardy Game for the celebration. Categories included Bible knowledge, famous secular thinkers, famous rock guitarists, and much more. Game questions included:

Answer: This book of the Bible condemns the eating of anything from the water that doesn’t have both fins and scales...
Question: What is Leviticus?

Answer: This famous atheist authored books such as *The Portable Atheist*, *The Missionary Position*, and *God is Not Great*
Question: Who is Christopher Hitchens?

Sharon Hogan organized a book exchange to go along with the placement of Tree of Knowledge. She placed books under and around the Tree. Attendees were asked to bring a secular-themed book to swap, with a note from the former owner about why they wanted to share the book. The book exchange was quite a success. Not everyone brought a book to exchange, but some people arrived with five books! All extra books were donated to local community libraries.

A raffle was conducted and many attendees donated prizes. Megan Denman donated a spa basket that contained homemade soap and sugar scrub. Lisa Mosham donated the children's book *Learning Moon*. Mosham wrote the book several years ago. *Learning Moon* is available through Amazon at the following link:


Castells and Hogan unexpectedly donated Cleveland Cavaliers basketball game tickets when they arrived at the event. The tickets became an addition to a gift basket that included wine, cheese and crackers. Suzy Wernet generously donated two beautiful bags she created for the raffle.

The Ohio event was made extra special with live musical performances. Mark Tiborsky played the guitar and the harmonica. Tiborsky also sang rock songs such as *No Sugar Tonight*, *New Mother Nature*, *Lonely People*, *Space Oddity*, and *People Got to Be Free*.

Castells added his voice to the impromptu band when they sang *Celluloid Heroes*, *Blue Christmas*, and *Imagine*. The music was familiar to many in the audience and some audience members were inspired to sing along.

Denman accompanied the musicians by playing the piano, but she also performed solo arrangements from the *Nutcracker Suite* and *A Charlie Brown’s Christmas*.

Pictured above is the 2019 Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES)/Freethought Society (FS) Tree of Knowledge. The 10-foot-high tree is in need of replacement as we approach the 10-year anniversary of displaying it at the Ethical Society Building, located at 1906 South Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In December of 2020, PES and FS will host an anniversary celebration. Please watch for details throughout the year. Tax-exempt Tree of Knowledge earmarked donations can be made online at: https://www.ftsociety.org/donate/
Pictured left in front of the 2019 Philadelphia Tree of Knowledge are (left to right) Margaret Downey, Founder and President of the Freethought Society and Hugh Taft-Morales, the Leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES). The tree was situated in the PES lobby for one month during the Winter holiday season.

A new style of Tree of Knowledge created by the Freethought Society is pictured right. The lightweight iron frame is decorated with laminated book covers and bright red bells that resemble apples. This Tree of Knowledge can be easily transported. Standing next to the tree that was displayed at the Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia’s Winter Solstice party are (left to right) Marjorie Goldman, Greg White, Downey and Zenos Frudakis.

The Tree of Knowledge pictured above was part of the 2019 holiday display at the Rhode Island Statehouse. The display featured a sign with the Robert Ingersoll quotation, “Give me the storm and tempest of thought and action, rather than the dead calm of ignorance and faith. Banish me from Eden when you will; but first let me eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge.” Standing within the display is Rhode Island resident and Freethought Society supporter Tony Houston.

Pictured right is the 2019 Cleveland, Ohio 4-foot-high Tree of Knowledge created by Cleveland Humanist Alliance and Cleveland Freethinkers. It was displayed at the River Grove Chestnut Shelter in Willoughby Hills, Ohio.