



The Freethought Society News

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Articles on topics of interest to freethinkers are welcomed and will be considered for publication.

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The 2021 Secular Day of the Dead/ Día de los Muertos Secular Online Event

The second annual Zoom Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event took place on Tuesday, November 2, 2021. Secularists all over the country gathered virtually for almost three hours. The event was sponsored by the following nontheist groups:

The Freethought Society
(FS)

www.FtSociety.org

Hispanic American Freethinkers
(HAFree)

<https://www.hafree.org>

American Atheists
(AA)

<https://www.atheists.org>

Center for Inquiry
(CFI)

<https://centerforinquiry.org>

Secular Student Alliance
(SSA)

<https://SecularStudents.org>

Freedom From Religion Foundation
(FFRF)

<https://ffrf.org>

Atheists United
(AU)

<https://AtheistsUnited.org>

Secular Coalition for America
(SCA)

<https://secular.org>

“Contrary to the name, the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event is actually a celebration of life,” said **Victoria de la Torre**, co-founder of the secular concept.

“The 2021 Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event honored many Hispanic traditions and rituals in a way that celebrated our one and only life,” de la Torre added.

Margaret Downey, another Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular co-founder and president of FS, said, “More and more people are abandoning their religious upbringing but still wanted to celebrate the beauty of their Hispanic culture, and this is why the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular was created. Many nontheist Hispanics want to continue traditions and cultural rituals, but in a secular way.”

Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, honors all dead loved ones. Traditions connected with the holiday include creating private altars called “ofrendas” to honor the deceased using sugar skulls and marigolds, as well as displaying the favorite foods and beverages of the deceased. Some families and friends will make a point on this day to visit the graves of loved ones with these items as gifts. Some also leave possessions of the deceased at the gravesite.

On November 2nd secularists joined together online to enjoy Hispanic food and beverages in the comfort of their own home and enjoy the entertainment provided. Some attendees shared the life legacies of dead loved ones. Almost 300 people registered to attend the bilingual event. The Zoom technician was **Samantha McGuire**, National Field Director for AA.

Secularists are not so different from the religious community when it comes to grief and the need to honor the life of someone who has died. The acknowledgment of a one and only life — without religious connections — is needed and appreciated by those who grieve. The online 2021 Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event provided that opportunity.

(Continued on next page.)

Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of FFRF, said this about their cosponsorship: “Many cultures have celebrated harvest times, the wistful change of seasons as leaves turn color and autumn segues into winter. This is a natural time not only to feast, but to reflect on death and seasonal cycles. How fitting it is to reclaim the Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos for secular reflection. Secularists understand that the only afterlife that should concern any of us is leaving our descendants and planet a secure and pleasant future.”

David Tamayo, founder of HAFree, said in regards to being a co-sponsor, “I wanted people to know that this day is a celebration of life, which is the opposite of the sadness of death. I think we accomplished that goal very well this year.”

Robyn Blunner, CEO of CFI, stated, “I enjoyed remembering and celebrating the legacy of **Tom Flynn**, editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine and director of the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum. He died suddenly this year and he is very missed. Vaya Sin Dios, Tom.”

The event started with a traditional Columbian folk dance performance by **Margarita Reyna** and **James Nunnolley**.

Hollywood legend and Broadway musical star **John Davidson**, who lived in San Miguel, Mexico for almost seven years, performed a 10-minute concert of his favorite Mexican songs.

After the cosponsors welcomed everyone to the event, **Julia Sweeney** interviewed **Jon Huertas** about his journey from heartsick and holy to happy heathen. The entertaining 20-minute interview was humorous and in-sightful. During the session, Huertas revealed his very interesting and colorful life experiences.

Honoring videos were provided by **Fernando Alcantar**, **Hugh Taft-Morales**, and **Consuelo Cortes-Fleming**. Alcantar honored the life of murder victim **Matthew Shepard**, Taft-Morales recognized the legacy of PES leader **Richard Kinnery**, and Cortes-Fleming paid homage to the literary work of **Gabriel García Márquez**.

After a short break and piano performance by **Christine Magallanes-Jones**, the floor was open to anyone who wanted to honor the life of a deceased loved one. Many people shared special stories, life lessons learned, and admiration for their deceased loved ones.

The event ended with songs sung in Spanish from **Abraham Steve Mackey** and **Gary Stockdale**.

The recorded program can be viewed at the following FS YouTube channel link:

<https://youtu.be/b8zv5exWiPM>



The above photos of Sweeney and Huertas captured a special moment during the interview portion of the 2021 Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event.

Huertas is best known for his roles as witch hunter Brad Alcerro in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*; Sergeant Antonio ‘Poke’ Espera in HBO’s *Generation Kill*; Joe Negroni in the film *Why Do Fools Fall in Love*; homicide detective Javier Esposito in *Castle*; and Miguel Rivas in *This Is Us*. Huertas's acting career started in 1993 when he portrayed an uncredited part in *The Webbers*. In 1999, he appeared in two films: the horror movie *Cold Hearts* and the action movie *Stealth Fighter*. From 1998 to 1999, Huertas portrayed the role of Antonio in the television series *Moesha*. Huertas was elected to serve a one-year term, beginning September 25, 2010, as an alternate member of the National Board of Directors and as a member of the Hollywood Division Board of Directors of the Screen Actors Guild. In June 2011, Huertas made his debut music video single called *Sex Is the Word*. In October 2019, Huertas appeared on *The Rookie*. He portrayed Alejandro Mejia/Cesar Ojeda in the episode *The Bet*.

Sweeney is an actor, comedian, author and director. She was a cast member on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) from 1990 to 1994. On SNL, she portrayed many characters, including Pat, an androgynous person who mystifies others. The Pat character was quite popular. Julia has been in numerous TV shows, films and voiced parts in animated TV and film. She did several one-person comedy shows; her first was called *God Said, Ha!* It played on Broadway at the Lyceum theater. **Quentin Tarantino** produced the film version that Julia starred in and directed. It was bought later by Disney. Julia created another one-person show called *Letting Go of God*. That show chronicled her path from Catholicism to atheism. She performed that show in New York City off-Broadway. It was filmed by and shown on Showtime. She currently is working as an executive producer of and as an actor on the TV series *Work-in-Progress*, which is airing on Showtime.



Photos from the 2021 Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular



Above left is cofounder and cohost of the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event, **Victoria de la Torre**. Prior to November 2, 2021, de la Torre was a special guest on the Interfaith Alliance channel. Journalist **Welton Gaddy** conducted the interview on his show *State of Belief Radio*. View the show at: <https://www.facebook.com/StateofBelief/videos/262022139205583> The life legacy of Justice **Ruth Bader Ginsburg** was recognized and appreciated by de la Torre.

Above right is **David Tamayo**, the founder and president of Hispanic American Freethinkers (HAFree) — one of eight co-sponsors of the 2021 Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos Secular event. Tamayo was also a cohost on November 2. During his welcome, Tamayo honored the life and work of educator and author **Hector Avalos**.



Above left is **Margaret Downey**. She is a cofounder of the Secular Day of the Dead/Día de los Muertos. Downey was also a cohost of the November 2nd event. During the welcome Downey honored the life of **Robert Green Ingersoll** as her “Secular Saint.”

Above right is **Louise Danielson**. She won the prize for the “Best Hair Ornament.” Danielson lives in Denmark, but attends as many Freethought Society Zoom events as possible.



In the lower left photo **Memo Benumea** is sitting next to his family’s honoring table. His children helped decorate it. The table decor included photos as well as the favorite food and drinks of several dead loved ones. The prize for the “Best Zoom Setting” went to the Benumea family.



Do Atheists Go to Heaven?

by Herb Silverman

Atheists are the only ones who say unequivocally that atheists don't go to heaven. Most heaven-believing religions seem to have a clause that allows even atheists to integrate the neighborhood. The road, however, is usually narrow and littered with obstacles.

Pope Francis (**Jorge Mario Bergoglio**), seeking common ground with people outside the Catholic faith, once implied that atheists who do good works are good people and might get to heaven without passing the "Go" of Christianity. This is not the official Catholic position, which is that those of us who do not accept Jesus as our savior are doomed to the fires of hell.

Speaking of heaven and hell, I once gave a sermon at a Unitarian Universalist Church, a human-centered religion with which I find much common ground. I began by telling the congregation that I had more in common with Christian conservatives than with them. To puzzled looks, I explained: "Unitarian Universalists believe everyone goes to heaven, Christian conservatives believe very few go to heaven, and I believe nobody goes to heaven. So I'm closer to them than to you."

The audience laughed, since most didn't believe in a heaven and many had never thought about what the "Universalist" in their name meant.

Aside from deciding who allegedly goes to heaven, there have been countless claims by so-called experts about the specifics of an afterlife. How do we determine who the experts are? The number of experts on any given topic is inversely proportional to the evidence available on that topic. And by that criterion, we are all experts on the afterlife because there is absolutely no evidence for its existence. Anyone can make up stuff about heaven or quote stuff from books made up by others.

Unlike, say, biology or geology, there is no academic discipline called "heaven-ology" or "hell-ology," unless such topics are included in a course on mythology. However, there is scholarship documenting what different cultures believed about the afterlife and how such beliefs have evolved.

Being certified by a religious body gives you no special knowledge of an afterlife. I should know. I am certified as a Humanist Celebrant through the Humanist Society, designated a religious nonprofit organization. I've performed 15 Humanist weddings, none of which have mentioned any gods, heaven, or hell.

We atheists shouldn't get too comfortable about Christian love for us. There's a strain of Christianity that says my cat is more likely to wind up in heaven than I am. The gist of the argument is that cats don't reject Jesus, but many humans do. I'm partly okay with a theology that praises cats. If more people loved their neighbor as much as they loved their pets, we would have a better and more peaceful world.

When it comes to discussions about heaven and hell, I prefer **Mark Twain's** quip: "Go to heaven for the climate, hell for the company." According to Christian conservatives, when you die you will either be in the company of people like Twain, **Albert Einstein**, **Steven Weinberg**, and many other atheists and Humanists, or people like **Jerry Falwell**, **Billy**

Graham, and **Chuck Colson**. Living in South Carolina, I'm used to the heat. So it's an easy choice for me.

There are probably as many ways to think about heaven and hell as there are believers in heaven and hell. I think the right way to think about heaven is also the right way to think about hell — both are nonexistent.

All this afterlife theology raises a lot of questions. Here are just 10 I've wondered about:

1. Why is faith not only important but perhaps the deciding factor about who winds up in heaven or hell?

When I'm asked what I would do if I meet Jesus when I die, I say I would then have enough evidence to become a believer. Apparently, though, that would be too late. If a creator god exists, why would she create so many evidence-based approaches if she wants us to make faith-based decisions?

2. Why do the last 30 seconds of life matter so much?

If **Adolph Hitler** repented on his deathbed for his role in the Holocaust or other atrocities and accepted **Jesus**, some say he would go to heaven. I think it would be more reasonable (though what's reason got to do with it?) for a person to be judged on lifetime actions rather than on an end-of-life belief.

3. If we have free will on Earth, will we have free will in heaven?

If so, might we sin and go from heaven to hell? If not, will we be heavenly robots? If a god can make us sinless in heaven, why didn't he create us sinless on earth? So many ifs, so few sensible answers.

4. What moral purpose does eternal torture serve?

We want to rehabilitate evil-doers on earth with the hope that they will learn from past mistakes. Even in capital punishment cases we try to execute as painlessly as possible. Why would a purportedly all good and compassionate god burn people for eternity?

5. What happens to people who died before Jesus was born — or didn't hear of Jesus?

If they can still go to heaven, how does Jesus matter? If they are all condemned to hell, how is God merciful?

6. If our goal in life is to go to heaven, shouldn't we be committing infanticide?

Wouldn't it be a blessing to baptize newborn babies and then kill them? Or perhaps encourage abortions, since presumably all fetuses go to heaven?

7. How much more deserving is the worst person in heaven than the best person in hell?

Our earthly binary divisions are usually arbitrary. People may vote when they are eighteen and buy alcohol when they are twenty-one, but they are not permitted to do so on the day before. We recognize such rules for what they are — distinctions without a real difference. Not so when it comes to the cut-off between an eternity of bliss and an eternity of torture.

8. How could heaven be a happy place?

Can you be blissfully happy in heaven knowing that some of your loved ones are being tortured in hell? And what do you do for an eternity in heaven without getting bored?

9. Why did God torture his son?

Couldn't he come up with a less bloodthirsty way to allow us into heaven than by torturing and killing his innocent son to make up for a misdeed of an alleged first couple? We praise God for an action for which we would incarcerate any human. God seems inhumane, but I suppose that's because God isn't human.

10. Wouldn't a loving god who wants us all to go to heaven make it unambiguously clear how to get there?

Christians, let alone those of other faiths and none, disagree about what to believe or do. Faith? Good works? Some believe we were predestined for heaven or hell before birth, and there's nothing we can do to change the outcome. Others say we are all given the gift of faith to accept Jesus as savior and thus go to heaven, but that some people refuse the gift. I didn't refuse a gift I was never given. A gift is different from a belief in a gift.

I think these questions can best be answered by applying Occam's Razor: In trying to understand something or search for truth, it's best to get unnecessary information out of the way. That's why I don't believe the wishful thinking about eternal life found in ancient "holy" books.

My wish is for people to focus on helping our fellow human beings and treating them with respect and compassion. If, by any remote chance, a loving and judging deity or force exists, perhaps he, she, or it will respect you and me if we value behavior above belief.

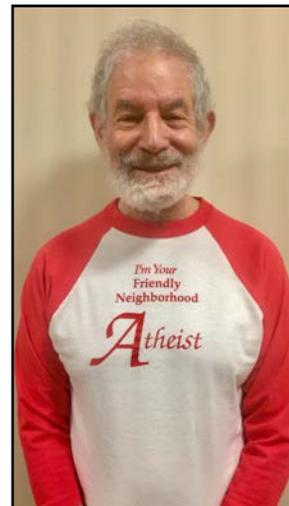
Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society's ezine, *The Freethought Society News*. He is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston, South Carolina.

Silverman ran for governor of South Carolina in the 1990s to challenge a state law that required religious belief to hold public office.

In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were ineligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won an unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, which struck down this religious test requirement.

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both of these books are available through [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

When designating "The Freethought Society" as your chosen AmazonSmile benefits recipient, it automatically increases the organization's funds.



Freethought Society Tables at University Job Fair

The operation of the Freethought Society (FS) includes many tasks and responsibilities. Duties can be easy yet time-consuming, or difficult and extremely demanding. For almost eight months FS founder and president **Margaret Downey** has worked on all these duties without assistance.

Downey's last office assistant, **Heidi Ickes**, took a high-paying job elsewhere in March 2021. In the past, filling the job opening was usually accomplished through word-of-mouth or through contacts with students who attended West Chester University which is located near the FS Pennsylvania office. The COVID health crisis, however, created many hiring complications, and the need to find qualified employees has been a major problem all around the country.

Rather than offer just sympathy, United States Representative **Chrissy Houlihan** (D-PA) took action. Her office arranged for an October 12, 2021 job fair on the campus of West Chester University.

FS was one of about 200 businesses that participated in the job fair. Houlihan's office provided each exhibitor with a table, two chairs, and table coverings. Downey worked the table with FS vice-president **Glen Loev** (photo right). They were proud to display two eye-catching posters, newsletters, and a variety of complimentary brochures.

During the day, Downey and Loev interviewed four possible employees, but for various reasons the applicants were not a good fit. Consequently, FS is still looking for a part-time office assistant.

A graphic designer stopped by the table and there was an instant connection. She agreed to work at home on projects calling for her expertise and she joined FS as an interested supporter.

During the event Downey introduced herself to people working at various school district tables. She gave the representatives information about the "Life and Work of Thomas Paine" assemblies she conducts and encouraged them to fill out the grant application at:

<https://www.ftociety.org/wp-content/uploads/Application-for-Thomas-Paine-Assembly-1.pdf>

While the position of office assistant was not filled that day, Downey and Loev made many new contacts. Several exhibitors visited the FS table to learn more about the organization and quite a few people mentioned their admiration of the work done by FS. All visitors to the table signed up to receive the FS ezine.



2021 Freethought Society Secular Student Scholarship Awarded

Thanks to an anonymous donor, the Freethought Society (FS) was able to offer a \$1,000 scholarship to a Secular Student Alliance (SSA) member. Interested students attending school in Pennsylvania completed an SSA questionnaire and submitted their answers with hopes of winning the \$1,000 scholarship. FS board of directors voted on the submissions. Below is the winning submission and information about Ane, the winner of the \$1,000 FS scholarship. As per the SSA agreement, only the first name of the student will be used. Ane is a student at the York Academy Regional Charter Upper School. She plans to attend Cornell University or Virginia Tech to earn a mechanical engineering degree. Ane has an interest in a science-related career in engineering. Having grown up in a secular household, Ane believes these traits help her maintain a healthy skepticism of religion.

I hope to attend college for engineering, specifically mechanical engineering. I hope to pursue a career where I can work hands-on with what I am creating, coming up with ideas, and building new things that benefit society as a whole. I've enjoyed building things and coming up with new solutions to problems for as long as I can remember, and I want to maintain that active, "get your hands dirty" approach throughout the rest of my life and career.

My top choices for post-secondary education are Cornell University and Virginia Tech, although I am looking at various STEM-oriented programs across the East coast. Riding horses is something that I've been doing for the past five years, and it's become very important to me over that time. I would like to continue doing so through and after college, so finding a school that offers some sort of equestrian team, club, or program is a strong priority for me.

I consider myself to be an atheist, and expect to continue to be one for the rest of my life. I did not always see myself as an atheist, although I have been one for as long as I've been able to have rational thoughts and completely understand what exactly religion means. When I was younger, my aunt would take me to her church. She was the one who watched me as a child, and so I was brought along not to instill certain beliefs in me, but just for ease of childcare. This caused me to, as a young child, begin to believe in a God. Looking back on this time, I can see how my beliefs were not borne out of an actual understanding of religion, but rather because it was what I was around. I think that this weak connection with religion is what eventually resulted in me becoming an atheist. My parents are both non-religious, and so I never grew up in a religious household. When I became old enough to actually understand what religion was, what types of religion existed, and how religion presents itself in modern society, I realized that it didn't apply to me.

I don't see my beliefs changing throughout the rest of my life. I am firm in my secularism, and have been able to speak to it in conversations relating to religion in society both with my peers and elders. My secularism is something that influences my daily life, in what I see to be a positive way, and I see this continuing throughout my adult life.

I've been interested in STEM and pursuing a science-related career for as long as I can remember and my interest in math and science has led me to learn more about topics that draw me closer to my secular beliefs, not away.

The fundamentals of engineering are based on logic and theories that can be tested and affirmed. I am a logical and critical thinker. I believe these traits help me maintain a healthy skepticism of religious and other largely accepted



social systems and to question the status quo. Many of my life decisions and beliefs are based on evidence and I am critical of things that I see in the world that might otherwise be misinterpreted. These aspects of my personality interact with my secularism and helped establish and maintain it for times ahead.

Unfortunately, I have had very limited opportunities to engage in secular activism in my community, partially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While I live in a country where the majority of the population declares themselves Christian, I live and attend a more diverse inner city school where every belief seems to be represented in the population. However, even in

that more liberal, open-minded environment it is necessary to remind the older administrators that each student has a right not to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance, something that I have had to discuss with teachers before. I have volunteered with Planned Parenthood, but I have not yet had the opportunity to volunteer with one of their chapters in person due to COVID-19. If possible, I intend on volunteering in person in the near future. I believe that access to healthcare, including reproductive rights, is a right everyone deserves. In our world, religious ideology often gets in the way of proper healthcare access, and I would like to work towards reducing those limitations.

Over the past year, I have been volunteering with a local charity called York Fresh Food Farms (Y3F). Y3F provides locally grown, organic produce to low-income families in the city of York. Volunteers, like myself, help tend the gardens and engage with community members. At the same time, this program also provides education about healthy food and eating practices. I began volunteering with Y3F in Fall of 2020 and have continued since, something that has allowed me to meet many new people and open my mind to be more understanding of people in all types of situations.

My fluency in Spanish has provided additional support for non-English speaking residents.

In 2020, I also volunteered as a teen advisor on the Board of Directors for a local community theater. I currently serve on a committee focused on increasing diversity and inclusion so as to help the theatre accurately reflect the community that it serves.

In my sophomore year of high school I created and led a campaign to provide free feminine hygiene products in all of the girls' bathrooms at my school. I attend a Title 1, inner city school, which means that many students come from situations of poverty.

Period poverty, or lack of access to proper menstrual care, is a serious issue in the global community that I wanted to

tackle. I presented a proposal to the Board of Trustees of my school with respect to the need to provide these basic items. I also met with the Chief Commercial Officer of a locally headquartered company that has since become an international supplier of feminine hygiene products to gain support and funding for my campaign. Ultimately I was successful, and now all girls' bathrooms in my school provide easily accessible free feminine hygiene products.

I was proud to attend the first Women's March in 2017, as well as some local Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the summer of 2020.

This academic year, I plan to continue volunteering with York Fresh Food Farms. I also hope to begin volunteering with a local chapter of Planned Parenthood in person if allowed. I've admired Planned Parenthood since I became aware of the organization and I'd like to help with their goal of providing healthcare to women. I participated with their "Get Out the Vote" campaign before the 2020 election, which encouraged people to get to the polls. I also plan to continue being involved with a diversity committee of a local community theater.

The right and responsibility to be engaged in political decision making through voting was taught to me from a young age. Voting rights are something that have become even more important to me with today's climate of voter restrictions. As I did last year, I plan to participate in "get out the vote" campaigns for my local Democratic Party as a way to advocate for the people that I believe can positively impact my community. I turn 18 in December, and plan to register to vote as soon as I am legally able to.

I also plan on volunteering with various, smaller school-held events. These are less structured and scheduled but they allow me to help out within my school and community, something that I'd especially like to do before I graduate. I am currently working on getting a student position on my school's Board of Trustees created so that student voices are heard.

I appreciate many of the resources that SSA offers on its website, such as legal assistance for schools violating the separation of church and state, and sexual education resources for students whose schools do not offer adequate teachings. The legal resources are the most impactful to me, as I come from a county where religion has been an issue in school teachings before. In 2005, the case *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* brought a major challenge against teaching "intelligent design" in schools to federal courts. Not since the Scopes case and trial had a public school been so blatant in their push for the elimination of basic biology.

The Dover School District is less than three miles from my own and I recognize the significance of the decision. SSA offers resources to help ensure that something like what happened in the Dover Area School District doesn't happen again, which I think is something very important.

I also see myself joining or creating an SSA chapter at whatever school I attend for my secondary education. I've always seen the many religious and spiritual organizations that often make up clubs or societies within my community, and never felt like there was something I could be a part of that recognized my personal beliefs. SSA does that for me. Being a member already, I hope to be able to use the resources available through SSA to advocate for myself and others and better my school and community. Having nonreligious

perspectives in a world full of opposing beliefs is imperative in a healthy society, and I'd like to do what I can to help make that possible.

I will be the first graduating class (2022) of my high school. It opened in 2011 with myself as part of the first 2nd grade class, and I've been with it since. Being a part of a recently established school has posed many difficulties for me, especially a school that is part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Over the past decade I, with the help of my parents, have had to advocate for myself and my educational needs. We had to push for advanced math classes that fulfilled my needs as a gifted student, something that I think really helped me develop an interest in STEM education. In my sophomore year of high school, I had to convince my school board to offer a physics class during my junior and senior year, as I knew my abilities and opportunities in pursuing an engineering career would be severely limited without it. I was successful, but not without other difficulties. Being in a first generation IB school has come with many challenges. It is known for being a rigorous program even for students in well-versed schools, let alone one that has never done it before.

Being a part of the first graduating class meant that my class was always the "guinea pig," the first to know when something wasn't working with the school and needed to be fixed. A decade of being the class to experience all of the first-attempt issues has not ended with senior year. I do not know if my school plans to offer any scholarships to students, and I do not think that I've had the "standard" college prep experience. My parents and I have had to do almost everything related to college admissions so far by ourselves, from researching schools and scholarships to figuring out how we're going to pay for them.

I feel as though this has impacted my college admissions and acceptance opportunities as well. Due to the limited extracurriculars offered at my school, I feel as though I am at a disadvantage when compared to students coming from established schools. All of my extracurriculars and volunteering have had to be separate from the school, and I don't have the same "standard" extracurriculars as other students. Regardless, I am confident that the work I have put in will allow me to get into my goal schools.

This is how I hope the SSA Student Activist Scholarship can help me. The money would help me to attend my goal college and get an invaluable learning experience with the best education possible, while limiting how much debt I have. Over the past months, I've found that engineering majors tend to have an additional cost attached to them as well, from computer costs to extra admissions prices. These only create barriers to my pursuit of higher education, and I hope that SSA will help me break them down.

Secular Student Alliance Scholarship Donor Sought

The Freethought Society (FS) is searching for a donor to sponsor the 2022 Secular Student Alliance scholarship. The scholarship could be named after the donor or be anonymous. While the 2021 scholarship was \$1,000, any amount above that denomination would be appreciated. All donations to FS are tax-deductible. If you are interested in becoming a donor, please contact us by email: info@FtSociety.org

The Light of Day: John Burroughs and a Freethinker's Religion ~ Part One of a Two-Part Essay ~

by Chris Highland

Rabble-rousing radical **Thomas Paine** turned the history of religion on its head with one statement:

“Do we want to know what God is? Search not the book called the Scripture, which any human hand might make, but the Scripture called the creation” (*The Age of Reason*).

Nature is the ultimate theologian. Nearly a century later, naturalist **John Muir** was much more interested in “Nature’s Bible” than the scriptures he was forced to memorize as a young boy in Scotland. In terms of the God question, he scribbled down his own wild gospel:

“Beauty is God”
and
“No synonym for God is so perfect as Beauty” (*Journals*).

Neither Paine nor Muir needed a church or structured religion. Neither needed a scripture or self-appointed authorities (clergy) to direct them toward truth or ethical living. Paine pointed the way with the sword of his pen to a revolutionary religion as he had to a revolutionary form of government. Muir pointed the way with his walking stick and became a trail guide leading deep into the wilderness of the living scripture of Beauty.

I suppose there are many ways of tracing a progression of naturalistic thought post-Paine. Woven into the fabric of American religious history is a bright thread that might seem insignificant, yet may also hold the whole cloth together, even as it potentially tears it apart. **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, **Henry David Thoreau** and their circle sought a way to transcend tradition. “I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me a love of nature,” saith Saint Henry in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

Walt Whitman insisted he was one “Who includes diversity and is Nature” and “Who contains believers and disbelievers” (“Kosmos”). The Poet also asserted “We are Nature” leaving us a poetic tradition that celebrates humanity as intimately interrelated with the natural world.

Abolitionist believers, like **Lucretia Mott**, **William Lloyd Garrison**, **Frederick Douglass** and **Sojourner Truth**, held to an earthy, muscular faith that found injustice fundamentally anti-human as well as unnatural.

As I track the naturalistic history of freethought, I continually encounter one nature-essay writer and thinker who appears just ahead of me, further down the trail where many in secular or sacred communities seem reluctant to go. He ventures into adventurous models of the world, sauntering out into wild places even Muir resisted and Paine may not have thought of.

John Burroughs (1837-1921) built his “Slabsides” cabin near the Hudson River in New York State, using that rustic base camp to write and explore the world of birds, animals, mountains and fields. In his nearly thirty books appearing between 1867 and his death in 1921, the Sage of Slabsides revealed an intimacy with Nature and with the great

questions that arise from that intimate relation. Enjoying friendships with the likes of President **Theodore Roosevelt**, **Thomas Edison** and Muir, his writings were extremely popular in the late 1800s beginning with *Wake-Robin*, a book he wrote while in Washington, D.C. during the Civil War. One friend encouraged his writing as well as his freethinking. The friend spent his days writing too, also visiting wounded soldiers in Washington’s make-shift hospitals. The friend, Whitman, became a life-long companion in the pursuit of a larger living home greater than any religion has built. As Burroughs wrote:

“We are housed in our opinions, and we resist being turned out of doors and having another and a different roof built over our heads”
(*The Light of Day*, 1904).

In this two-part essay I can only touch on Burroughs’ views but I intend to shine a bright light on his illuminated understanding of nature and his reason-based, scientific-oriented philosophy that completely redefined and replaced traditional theological frameworks. He began to build something new, leaving an enlightening work in progress, a type of vocation that seems urgent for today.

The Great Migration from Faith to Freethought

Several years ago my wife (a current minister) and I (a former minister) were given a private tour of the Slabsides cabin by Burroughs’ great-granddaughter. We stood in the small rooms where Burroughs wrote and entertained guests such as Roosevelt, Muir, Whitman and women from Vassar. Walking that land we felt we were entering a sanctuary, which is exactly what Burroughs sensed. From cabin to meadow and forest, he was immersed in something ever larger. His expansive vision is evident in startling passages that could have been written by **Carl Sagan**:

“Our religion is at fault, our saints have betrayed us, our theologians have blackened and defaced our earthly temple, and swapped it off for cloud mansions in the Land of Nowhere.

The heavens embrace us always; the far-off is here, close at hand; the ground under your door-stone is a part of the morning star. If we could only pull ourselves up out of our absorption in trivial affairs, out of the petty turmoil of our practical lives, and see ourselves and our world in perspective and as a part of the celestial order, we could cease to weep and wail over our prosaic existence.”

(*Accepting the Universe*, 1920).

Yes, “if we could only.”

What may capture the attention of contemporary freethinkers most is Burroughs’ somewhat novel naturalistic philosophy. Drawing from a range of study among his beloved birds, he presents us with his own migratory thoughts and philosophical peregrinations, ushering readers into wild areas usually left to professional philosophers and

theologians. Burroughs brings his experienced scientific senses into a deep dialogue with explorers of ideas. With his naturalist's eye wide open he treks about the great questions of life and the universe, drawing us into the constant flow of things, toward an acceptance of the cosmos and an emergence from the dark, ignorant past into the full sun of a clear day, hence his books *Accepting the Universe* and *The Light of Day*. He offers us a fundamentally positive hopefulness — something we can live with in the great house of the universe.

The natural environment presented Burroughs with a literal world of ideas. For him, Nature was a vast classroom of wonder displaying lessons for the scientist and for the philosopher. In *Field and Study* (1919) he wrote:

“To find an interest in natural history one must add something more than the fact, one must see the meaning of the fact.” The only way to discover this meaning is to leap into the woody classroom: “The wild life around one becomes interesting the moment one gets into the current of it”



Significantly, this naturalist launched his scientific mind deep enough into that current to be carried along into the wilds of religious thought as well.

Burroughs is both intriguing and disturbing in his dismantling of modern religion. He is equally radical in what he replaces the old religion with. His perceptive scientific mind pushed him to take on the most sensitive issues of faith. Yet Burroughs had no interest in founding some new religion. He said that one who attempted that would no doubt be crucified. While he understood that the masses of people “are not yet prepared for a religion based upon natural knowledge alone,” he was confident that “the time is surely coming” (*The Light of Day*). Somewhat optimistic perhaps?

There have always been indigenous, Earth-centered or “homegrown” religious beliefs and practices. Natural philosophers as well as some seasoned naturalists have identified something “sacred,” though not necessarily religious, in the natural world. Poets, perhaps especially Whitman, have sung the praises of a divine world. What Burroughs recognized and somewhat urged us toward (echoing Thoreau, Emerson, Fuller, Whitman, Muir and others) was an open-air religious sense driven by reason, science, and an enlightened Paine-full vision.

For us to grow up and be healthier as a human community, we must, in Burroughs' mind, abandon the God of the Puritans, and Calvinism in particular — a deity who was “a monster too terrible to contemplate.” We must not simply bury the awful God of those reformers. It is ours to seize the heart of the religious sentiment, present in all religious tradition, and reframe it for a grown up world. Burroughs acknowledged the wisdom, the fundamental gift, of the historic religions. Yet he saw that we can and must do better. Burroughs was pleased that even in his time, large numbers of people were already understanding that “the earth is divine, and that God is everywhere.”

Like Paine, Burroughs celebrated the dawn of a new age of Reason. A universalist message to be sure, yet centered in Nature as the primary teacher, not easily packaged in a formal religious structure. Of course, for freethinkers, what

Burroughs meant by this Universal God sets the context for the whole discussion.

A New Reformation?

In this reformation of invented religious experience, John Burroughs becomes our field guide (if not reforming, reframing heretic). When he defines the “religious sentiment” as “the wonder and reverence and love we feel in the presence of the inscrutable universe” (*The Gospel of Nature*, 1912) he prepares the way for the non-supernatural creative energy he identifies. It is clear from his writings that any serious rethinking of divinity must begin and end with What Is, and for Burroughs the seminal question becomes “Is there an outside to the Cosmos, a beyond?” He answers this question as clear as the blue sky:

“We accept Nature as we find it, and do not crave the intervention of a God that sits behind and is superior to it.”

Burroughs' sympathies lie with pantheism, yet beyond any theism. There is no one who “sits apart from Nature” to rule, judge or determine anything. Ultimately this means, “When we see [humanity] as a part of Nature, we see [humanity] as a part of God.” There is no beyond, no Other, no outside. There is only what is, and we call this Nature, Cosmos, the Universe, and sometimes we name it God. In short, Burroughs posits a rational replacement for God:

“I have to postulate this universal creative energy that pervades the worlds as animating the atoms...”
(*Leaf and Tendril*, 1908).

We can almost hear **Albert Einstein**, **Marie Curie**, **Steven Hawking** and others say “Amen!”

Burroughs admits that difficulties and contradictions crop up when we identify Nature with God, but even greater difficulties arise if we refuse to identify and unify the two. For instance, “evil.” For Burroughs, nothing short of a radical inclusion, a balance of the good and bad is obvious and necessary. “Nature embraces all; she fathers and mothers all; [knows] no evil apart from the good and no good apart from the evil.” Elsewhere this embrace of contradictions is stated:

“When we call the power back of all ‘God,’
it smells of creeds and systems of superstition...
but when we call it Nature, it smells of spring and summer,
of green fields and blooming groves,
of birds and flowers and sky and stars.
I admit that it smells of tornadoes and earthquakes,
of jungles and wildernesses, of disease and death, too, but
these things make it all the more real to us.”

Our challenge is to be in constant dialogue with that reality, to humbly yet boldly stand at the confluence of these rivers we judge good and bad, admitting we do not understand it all, “that in these seas we can find no soundings” (*Accepting the Universe* 1913).

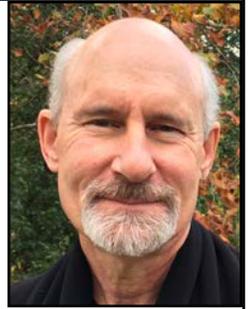
What are the “scriptures” to guide us in the formation of this radical reformation? For a person who saunters the natural way, a fertile library of texts are freely laid open in the mountains, streams, trees and wildlife, as well as the wild terrain of the human mind. Burroughs declared, in the manner of his trail companions Thoreau, Muir and Paine before him:

"The book of nature is like a page written over or printed upon with different-sized characters and in many different languages... . We all read the large type more or less appreciatively, but only the students and lovers of nature read the fine lines and the footnotes... . For my part, my delight is to linger long over each page of this marvelous record, and to dwell fondly upon its most obscure text" (Leaf and Tendril).

Wisdom can be read on the open pages of the Earth. It is living and active, "sharper than a two-edged sword," not bound in leather (the skin of dead animals whose wisdom is lost) or gilded in gold (more highly valued than the mountains and streams from which it is mined). These higher scriptures cannot be handed on by tradition any more than a mountain range, a flock of geese or a school of fish could be handed on. These scriptures are nothing less than the scattered pages of unbounded, radical freedom. Who better to interpret and preach these new "gospels" but new "clergy" like John Burroughs?

Note: Part Two of this essay "The Light of Day: John Burroughs and a Freethinker's Religion" will be printed in the March/April 2022 issue of *The Freethought Society News*.

Chris Highland is a teacher and writer. A former minister and chaplain in the San Francisco Bay Area, Highland is now a freethinking Humanist celebrant. He is the author of many books, including *From Faith to Freethought*, *A Secular Gospel*, and *Meditations of John Burroughs*. He writes the weekly "Highland Views" column for the *Asheville Citizen-Times* (a *USA Today* affiliate). Highland and his wife live in Asheville, North Carolina. His website www.chighland.com, is entitled "Friendly Freethinker." This two-part essay is adapted from *Life After Faith*, 2010.



Freethought Society President Receives Award

On October 10th organizers of the 2021 California Freethought Day presented Freethought Society founder and president **Margaret Downey** with a beautiful award. Below is a photo of Downey holding the award, made of dark blue glass, and a reprint of her acceptance speech:

Thank you so much for recognizing my long-time involvement with the secular/nontheist community.

This award provides me with the chance to thank those who have assisted my efforts for almost 40 years. Don't worry, I know that I only have a few minutes in the program to deliver this acceptance speech so I'll be general in my message of thanks.

People will know who they are as I give a general nod to those who are instrumental in fulfilling the goals of the Freethought Society. The goals have been, and always will be, to provide educational opportunities as well as to work as a cooperative organization in an effort to bring nontheist groups and people together.

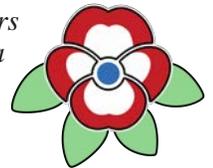
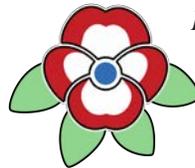
This award is not about me as an individual. It's about the friends, supporters, board members and volunteers who have helped the Freethought Society reach its goals.

While this award has my name on it, I know that we are not merely individuals alone — who we are is what happens when we all work together.

I want to acknowledge the wonderful board members of the Freethought Society — past and present. Everyone works hard to produce our ezine and they pitch in at every turn. All the volunteers who help the Freethought Society are worth their weight in gold. I also thank the terrific cosponsorship of so many of the Freethought Society events. We could not reach our cooperative goals without:



*The Freedom From Religion Foundation
The American Humanist Association
Hispanic American Freethinkers
Secular Coalition for America
Secular Student Alliance
The Center for Inquiry
American Atheists*



We also thank organizations such as the DragonCon Skeptrack, the Freethought Alliance, Atheists United, and the Philadelphia Ethical Society for collaborating with us to host our programs.

A thank you would not be complete unless we acknowledge our many donors. We rely on small and large donations to survive and serve.

I wish I had time to mention every name of every donor. Instead, I will just convey a huge thank you and tell you how appreciative we are of the generosity from supporters and donors.

Lastly, I thank the talented entertainment friends who have helped us provide great programming over the years. There is not enough time for name dropping so I'll just thank the actors, comedians, magicians, singers, musical performers and poets who have participated in our special events — giving so generously of their time and talents. Thank you so much.

So, before the music starts to indicate that I need to close this acceptance speech, we hope you will sign up to receive a complimentary ezine or become a subscriber to the Freethought Society Meetup group.

I enjoy hearing from fellow nontheist people, so I invite all of you watching to send me an email, introduce yourself, share your journey story with me, give me your event ideas, and provide us contact information about who we should host as a speaker. My email address is margaret@FtSociety.org. I love my secular/nontheist community and every voice is important. Thanks again for this wonderful honor and the beautiful award.



Freethought Society Three-Month Zoom Calendar

To receive notices about online Zoom events, you must become a member of the Freethought Society Meetup group. Join the Freethought Society (FS) Meetup group at: <https://www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/>. Each listing will have a unique Zoom link listed in the description of the event at the Meetup page. FS meetings will implement security features and will be recorded for replay on social media. Those who join the meeting consent to be recorded and agree to abide by the FS Anti-Harassment and Code of Conduct Policy found at the FS website: <https://www.ftociety.org/freethought-society-code-of-conduct/>

January 29

Please join **Thomas Paine** enthusiasts on **Saturday, January 29, 2022 at 1:00 PM (PST)/4:00 PM (EST)** for, as far as we know, the very first Zoom celebration of his birth. Zoom connections will be made from all over the world and everyone will be invited to deliver a toast in celebration of the life and work of this great patriot and freethought hero. The event is presented by the newly formed [Thomas Paine Memorial Association](#) (TPMA), a 501(c)3 organization, with the purpose of educating the public and installing statues of Thomas Paine in Washington, DC and other places of significance to the life of Thomas Paine.

Actor **Ian Ruskin** will speak about his experiences portraying Thomas Paine. He will share photos of appearances and will include an overview of his “Walk in the Footsteps of Thomas Paine” that took place in England.

Freethought Society president **Margaret Downey** will be talking about the many Thomas Paine-themed activities she has sponsored, including her “Walk in the Footsteps of Thomas Paine” that took place in Paris, France.

Sculptor **Zenos Frudakis** will join the festivities from his studio in Glenside, Pennsylvania and TPMA board members will be introducing themselves. Board members speaking at the event are **Gary Berton, Robyn Blumner, Christopher Cameron, Annie Laurie Gaylor, John de Lancie, Marnie Mosiman de Lancie, Ann Druyan, Thomas Legg, and Julia Sweeney.**

Closing remarks will be delivered by Congressman **Jamie Raskin.**

James Klueh will perform two Thomas Paine-themed songs prior to the interactive social hour. Please visit the link below to register for this exciting international event:

https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/_ZwpdeCurj8tG9U-4tRxN-SaOQAZOX4KHHIt

February 26

In celebration of the 2022 Black History Month, the Freethought Society is pleased to host author **Norm Allen** on **Saturday, February 26, 2022 at 11:45 AM PST/2:45 PM EST.** Allen’s speech will high-light the founding and the work done by African Americans for Humanism.



A 15-minute pre-event entertainment comedy show will be presented by **Jeremiah Camara.** Camara is the director and producer of the unique documentary film *Contradiction: A Question of Faith*, which examines the saturation of churches in African American communities coexisting with poverty and powerlessness.

Allen will discuss his trailblazing efforts as the first full-time African American Humanist activist traveling the world to promote humanism, freethought, and skepticism.

Allen has promoted organized humanism in Europe, African, Asia, Latin America, and North America. His book,

African American Humanism: An Anthology (1991), was the first to demonstrate “the extent to which humanism and freethought have helped to access, explore, interpret, and substantially develop the history and ideals of Black intellectualism” and activism. Allen also edited the *AAH Examiner*, the only journal explicitly by and for Humanists of African decent.

Please visit the below link for more details and to obtain the Zoom link for this event:

<https://www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/>.

March (date to be announced)

Chetan Ahimsa is an actor from Kannada, India. He is also a political/social activist who will be the March 2022 (weekday/evening event) Zoom speaker for the Freethought Society.

Ahimsa made his on-screen debut in the 2007 cult classic film *Aa Dinagalu* and was awarded “Best Actor” in the Udaya Film Awards for the film.



Following *Aa Dinagalu*, Ahimsa appeared in a cameo role in **Puneeth Rajkumar’s** 2009 film *Raam*. He received more critical acclaim for his role in the 2009 film *Birugaali*. His film career is vast, but of special mention is the 2017 film *Athiratha*. In that film Ahimsa received very positive reviews, but the film failed at the box office when right-wing extremists tore down posters and tried to prevent the film from being screened due to Ahimsa’s political stances. An online campaign, organized by Hindu fundamentalists, boycotted *Athiratha*, also citing Ahimsa’s efforts against the caste system in India. Ahimsa will not stop and continues to take acting roles, in spite of being threatened and even arrested for making “offensive remarks.” Read more at: <https://bit.ly/3Ilf31P>

Ahimsa also continues to fight for art, equality, justice, rationality, and non-violence. He will talk to us through a Zoom connection during March 2022 (date to be determined) and tell us what motivates him to be an activist.

Ahimsa credits his mother, **Mangala Kumar**, and his father, **Amar Kumar** (both doctors), for providing him with the willpower to continue his important activism work. As a young adult Ahimsa studied the writings of **Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy.**

Revered as “**Periyar**,” Ramasamy was an Indian social activist and politician who started the Self-Respect Movement and [Dravidar Kazhagam](#). He is known as the Father of the Dravidian, a social movement that advocates to eradicate the ills of the existing caste system including untouchability. Ahimsa will talk about Periyar’s importance in India’s rational thinking movement and acceptance of atheism.

Watch for the March Zoom meeting details in upcoming issues of *The Freethought Society News*, at the Freethought Society’s [Meetup](#) page and website (www.FtSociety.org).

The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. We educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas.

FS publishes *The Freethought Society News* every other month. The publication is delivered as an ezine via email and is complimentary to supporters, donors, like-minded individuals and all those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in locations across the United States via Zoom or in person when possible. FS activities and services depend on financial contributions from supporters. Donations may be sent using this form or via the FS website (<https://www.paypal.com/us/fundraiser/charity/1554941>). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). All donations, large and small, are helpful and appreciated.

Yes! I would like to:

- become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to the Freethought Society):
\$30 Individual Supporter \$40 Family Supporter \$20 Student \$1,000 Supporter for a Lifetime
- become a "Freethought Star" by setting up an automatic monthly donation to FS from your bank or through PayPal in the amount of (circle one): \$5 \$10 \$15 \$20 \$25 \$30 \$35 \$40 \$45 \$50 \$_____ other (per month)
- earmark a donation to (insert project, event or committee name): _____

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State and Zip: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone: _____ Cell: _____

Check here if you prefer your sponsorship to remain anonymous.

FS will send a complimentary ezine to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS publication.

Name: _____ Email: _____

Mail this form to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366 or scan and email this form to: Ezine@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society

Supporters of FS often want to do more than just make a financial contribution. Listed below are committees designed to fulfill the mission, goals, and vision of FS. Volunteers are needed in all committees listed. Please contact FS to volunteer at: volunteers@FtSociety.org.

Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee

(nontheism explained in classroom settings)

Anti-Discrimination Support Network

(assist Secular Coalition for America gathering reports)

Community Outreach

(locate tabling opportunities)

Diversity Outreach Committee

(brainstorming about and developing programs to appeal to minorities)

Free Speech Zone Committee

(research and implement displays in public venues)

Helping Hands

(provides helpers to seniors in emergency situations)

Jump into the Jean Pool

(collection of jeans for donations)

Literature Placement for Prisoners

(providing literature to prison libraries)

Meetup Committee

(planning events)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators

(schedule, manage speakers and venues)

Secular Celebrations

(develop, organize, and implement new nontheist celebrations)

Speakers Bureau

(provide FS a resume, photo, and speech subjects/titles)

Special Events

(coordinate unique events of interest to nontheists)

Sole Searching

(collection of athletic shoes for donations)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee

(work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee

(promote and support the concept nationwide)