The Freethought Society News
Editors: Margaret Downey, Glen Loev, Carol Roper and Other Volunteers
Published by: The Freethought Society | http://www.FtSociety.org
Mailing address: P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, Pennsylvania 19366-0242
Phone: (610) 793-2737 | Fax: (610) 793-2569 | Email: Newsletter@FtSociety.org

March/April 2015
Volume 7, Number 2

The Freethought Society News ezine is published by The Freethought Society (FS) for the nontheist community.

Free subscriptions are available for supporters, donors and like-minded individuals upon request.

Contact FS at:

newsletter@FtSociety.org

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

Submit articles (5,000 word count max) for review by the FS editorial board. Please submit articles with a bio and photo, a suggested title, and relevant photos/clip art to:

newsletter@FtSociety.org

FS is an educational nonprofit organization.

Donations and financial support are encouraged and appreciated. For donation information, please see the last page of this newsletter.

Articles herein do not necessarily represent official positions of FS.

Tax ID Number: 23-2738574

Protesting BSA Assemblies in Public Schools

by Margaret Downey

My article "Boy Scout Assemblies in Public Schools Protested," published in the November/December 2014 *Freethought Society News,* reported that the Octorara School District had allowed the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) to hold recruitment assemblies during school hours, on school grounds in September 2014. The assembly was endorsed by teachers and administrators, who helped gather the children to hear the BSA recruitment pitch. Thanks to a concerned parent, we discovered that allowing BSA access to students was a long-standing tradition that had never been questioned, even after BSA became a ***private*** organization in 2000. The United States Supreme Court case *Boy Scouts of America et al. v. Dale* (530 U.S. 640, 2000) drew a clear distinction between what BSA was founded as (open to the public organization teaching "Scoutcrafting"*) and what they had become (a private organization with selective membership guidelines that excluded gays and atheists).

The BSA 1916 Charter states that BSA is a nonsectarian organization. BSA was not designed to be driven by any particular religion or religious group. Today, however, BSA is being run by religious fundamentalists (mostly Catholics, Far Right Christians, and Mormons) who are dictating current policy.

What is most peculiar is that there are no prayers said in meetings, nor are there any religious teachings within the BSA structure. Church attendance is not required, even on BSA outings. There are no religious duties that a nontheist would not perform, other than the mention of God in the Scout Oath. The word "God" could easily be changed to "Good" during a recitation. Adding one more "o" to the word is not disruptive or argumentative — just honest — an honored tenet of BSA members. Consequently, there are no good reasons to exclude members on the basis of religion.

An in-person meeting with **Dr. Thomas Newcome**, the Octorara School Superintendent, was not productive. Dr. Newcome's position is that since there has not been an actual incident of discrimination against a nontheist he considered that matter closed and contends that until such an incident occurs, BSA can continue recruitment assemblies in the Octorara School District. He has stated this position to the press (see: December 11, 2014 *Philadelphia Gay News*, "School District Under Fire For Hosting Scouts Assembly") and added that the issue of discrimination against nontheists did not apply to local troops in the Octorara since there were no reported local cases — even though national BSA membership guidelines specifically state that BSA requires its members to believe in God and to recite an oath to God at every troop meeting.

BSA will not grant membership to anyone whose convictions do not allow them to recite the Scout oath, and they terminate memberships of anyone who is discovered to be an atheist or agnostic. This means that over 20 million Americans are excluded from BSA due to their nonreligious life stance. Included are people who identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, secular Jews, nontheistic Buddhists, some Unitarians, and animists (animists believe in spirits but do not believe in God). This exclusion applies to both children and adults, so even if a child professes a belief in a God, his nontheist parent(s) can not volunteer for BSA.

BSA's rejection of a nontheist is based on "moral" grounds. On every membership application and sprinkled within the pages the BSA handbook are words such as, "you can't be the best kind of citizen without the obligation to God." This is another way of saying that, according to BSA, a person simply cannot be moral without a belief in God.

The nontheist community has suffered great harm with the spreading of this misconception. BSA continues to try to justify this untruth by preventing nontheists from having any opportunity to prove otherwise. Negative stereotyping lives on at the hands of BSA, as they violate their own tenets of being "friendly," "kind," and "trustworthy." BSA is certainly not being "brave" when they are frightened of even allowing one nontheist child into their organization.

There is no evidence to support the claim that nontheists are more immoral than others. While approximately 10 percent of Americans are atheist or agnostic, less than 1 percent of the prison population profess no belief in a god. If nontheists are immoral people wouldn't there be a much higher percentage of us behind bars?

Where might you find a higher percentage of nontheists? The National Academy of Science charted belief in God as low as 5.5 percent among biologists and 7.5 percent among physicists and astronomers in a 1998 study.

BSA ignores the fact that there are many nontheists who are ethical, patriotic and law-abiding citizens who have a lot to contribute to BSA. These citizens want to be able to join BSA — the world's largest youth group — just like everyone else.

The Center for Inquiry sent the following letter to Dr. the Octorara School Superintendent, **Dr. Thomas Newcome** on January 15, 2015:

Dr. Thomas Newcome
Octorara School Superintendent
228 Highland Road, Suite 1
Atglen, PA 19310

Dear Dr. Newcome,

I am writing to you as Legal Director of the Center for Inquiry, a 501(c)(3) charity whose mission is to foster a secular society based on science, reason, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values. A major part of our mission is to promote equal treatment under the law for secular individuals, and to ensure that the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state is maintained. Such separation is of particular importance when it comes to the education system. Our public school system can neither promote a particular religion over other religions, nor religion as a whole over non-religion. Religious instruction is properly the responsibility of the parent, not the public school system.

It has been brought to my attention that the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) are permitted to use public school facilities in the Octorara School District to conduct recruitment assemblies during school hours, with teachers being used to escort the pupils and to distribute materials. Partnering with a sectarian organization such as BSA in this fashion violates the school district's responsibility to maintain an environment that neither favors a particular religion, nor religion in general. Such cooperation with BSA is also troubling when Octorara School District's non-discrimination policy, and its commitment to LGBT equality, is considered.

BSA is an explicitly sectarian organization. It is the official position of BSA that atheists and agnostics may not participate either as Scouts, or as adult volunteers. The Scout Oath, that all Scouts must swear, states that "On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God …" The Boy Scout Handbook states that "[a] Scout is reverent towards God. He is faithful in his religious duties."

BSA is therefore, by its own clear admission, an organization which is not open to the entire community served by the Octorara School District, as it explicitly excludes those who do not have a faith in God. I am sure that you agree that is clear that permitting an organization that actively excluded Jewish people, or Hindus, in public school facilities would be unacceptable. On what grounds, then, is it permissible to permit recruitment in schools by an organization that tells your atheist and agnostic residents that they are not welcome?

BSA's exclusionary policies do not end with preventing atheists and agnostics from joining or volunteering. A similar policy of discrimination is apparent towards members of the LGBT community. Up until January 1, 2014, BSA maintained a policy preventing homosexuals from becoming Scouts. While this policy has been revoked, a ban on homosexual adults acting as leaders in the organization continues. Under this ban, not only are the gay parents of a Scout prohibited from volunteering for the organization, but, upon turning 18, an openly gay Scout can be required to quit the organization.

BSA's commitment to the exclusion of atheists, agnostics, and adult homosexuals is deep-seated. Indeed, in 2000, the organization fought a case all the way to the Supreme Court maintaining that, as a private organization, its right to view homosexual lifestyles as contradictory to the Scout's "requirement to be morally straight" and "clean in word and deed" permitted it to refuse to allow homosexual members and leaders regardless of any local anti-discrimination laws.

BSA's status as a private organization with strong religious beliefs cuts both ways. While the Supreme Court ruled that the law did not require BSA to end its discriminatory policies, as a private organization with explicitly religious goals and practices it cannot then benefit from preferential treatment from the government without this being a violation of the Constitution's mandate of separation of church and state. By permitting BSA to advertise on public school property, and to hold assemblies during school hours to recruit members, Octorara School District actively adds its approval to the sectarian message of BSA. It sends a clear message to atheist and agnostic citizens, as well as to members of the LGBT community, that they are not full members of society, and that organizations can not only exclude them, but that such exclusionary organizations are supported by the government. Such a discriminatory action violates the School District's constitutional duties.

I look forward to hearing from you that Octorara School District will, in the future, comply with constitutional requirements concerning permitting recruitment in public schools by sectarian, faith-based organizations.

Yours Sincerely,

Nicholas J. Little, Esq.
Legal Director

On January 29, 2015 *The Philadelphia Gay News* published an article entitled "Scouts Recruitment Assemblies

Blasted," written by **Tim Cwiek**. It is reprinted below with permission from the editor.

The Center for Inquiry, a New York-based nonprofit that promotes the separation of church and state, is urging a local school district to stop hosting Boy Scouts of America (BSA) recruitment assemblies.

"We're one of the biggest secular organizations in the country, with more than 50,000 members," said Nicholas J. Little, the center's legal director. "It's important for the school district to hear from us."

The Octorara Area School District, in Chester County, hosts BSA recruitment assemblies for elementary school students, despite BSA's policy of excluding LGBT adults and nontheist children and adults.

In a Jan. 12 letter, Little urged district officials to stop hosting the assemblies, saying the district "sends a clear message to atheist and agnostic citizens, as well as members of the LGBT community, that they are not full members of society, and that organizations cannot only exclude them but that such exclusionary organizations are supported by the government."

Little said he hopes to resolve the dispute through dialogue with district officials.

"The Octorara school district is going above and beyond what is required by law, and what is reasonable," Little told PGN. "There's a very big difference between letting the BSA use some space after school and giving them preferential treatment during school hours, and making it seem like it's a school activity."

Even if the district doesn't mandate attendance at the assembly, the issue still isn't resolved, Little added.

"Even if the assembly is made voluntary, there's a question as to how voluntary it really is," he said. "There's a lot of peer pressure that needs to be considered. It's simply not appropriate to have this assembly during school hours and seemingly endorsed by the school.

Little said district superintendent Thomas L. Newcome hadn't responded to the center's letter.

"We're hoping to hear from Dr. Newcome, and we'll be following up shortly if we don't receive any reply," Little said.

Newcome had no comment for this story but in prior statements noted the BSA Chester County Council "has shown no discrimination in practice that anyone has brought forward."

"It has been our experience that the BSA troops in the Octorara community are open and welcoming to all children," Newcome added.

Little challenged Newcome's description of local BSA troops.

"It's all well and good for the district to say local BSA troops are open and welcoming. But if BSA rules exclude all nontheists and all LGBT adults, that doesn't sound open and welcoming to me."

Little expressed hope that the dispute can be resolved without litigation.

"It would be best if this could be settled just by people talking. However, if the school board and Dr. Newcome aren't willing to address the problem in good faith, then we will have to consider all available options."

Freethought Society president Margaret Downey also expressed hope that the situation can be resolved without litigation. Her group also opposes the BSA assemblies.

"We do not want to sue the school, not now and hopefully never," Downey told PGN. "School funds should be used to educate, not litigate. The goal is for Octorara to avoid any wrongdoing by being proactive in protecting students from any harm."

BSA recruitment assemblies are scheduled to take place at Octorara schools in early September 2015. The next step in protesting the assembly plans are for a group of concerned people to attend a school board meeting. The goal will be to address the issue in person, showing a strong force of concern and to make sure the entire board is aware of the protest efforts.

On **Monday, April 20, 2015**, the Octorara School Board meeting will take place at **7:00 PM**. All concerned readers are welcome to help address this issue. Local parents and a few teachers who have contacted FS are unable to speak up. Some fear for their jobs and some fear retaliation in the community. We must be their voice. The April 20th meeting will take place in the Octorara Junior High School Multi-Purpose Room. The address is:

Octorara Junior High School
226 Highland Road
Atglen, PA 19310

All meetings are open to the public and we will have an opportunity to address the school board towards the end of the meeting. Please have short and specific commentary ready. Contact me for any assistance needed and to create your brief statement of protest. Car pools are available.

Phone: (610) 357-9432

Email: Margaret@FtSociety.org

It is very important that we have a strong showing of people at the School Board meeting on April 20. All readers who are interested in this issue, please take a stand with us now whether you live in the district or not. What happens in Octorara will have an effect in school districts around the nation. Please attend and plan to speak.

***Scoutcrafting:**

BSA Founder **Baden Powell** describes Scoutcrafting as the act of encouraging self-reliance, resourcefulness, and confidence in a person's own ability. Scoutcrafting develops skills to be used in the outdoors and provides training for what to do in emergency situations.

Freedom From Religion Foundation Weighs In

February 25, 2015

Dr. Thomas Newcome
Superintendent, Octorara Area School District
228 Highland Road, Suite 1
Atglen, PA 19310

Regarding: District Endorsement of Discriminatory and Religiously-Exclusionary Organization

Dear Dr. Newcome:

I'm writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to bring your attention to serious constitutional concerns occurring in the Octorara Area School District (OASD) and its practices concerning Boy Scouts of America (BSA). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization that works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public about nontheism. We represent more than 21,500 members across the country, including more than 700 members in Pennsylvania and two chapters in the state, Nittany Freethought and Central PA Rationalists.

It is our understanding that OASD hosts recruitment assemblies for BSA at its elementary schools during the school day. We have received a complaint about this practice. We are writing to ensure that the District is aware and on notice that BSA maintains an unambiguous and unacceptable policy of discrimination, explicitly barring nontheist youths and families from membership and participation, as well as barring adult members who are gay or lesbian.

It is our understanding that OASD refuses to stop hosting BSA recruitment assemblies, in part, because no local instance of discrimination by the BSA has been reported to you. This is not surprising, nor does it indicate a lack of discrimination. First, BSA policy explicitly bars children who do not profess belief in god.

Although it advertises itself as a fun youth club open to any boy, BSA has a history of blatant discrimination against nonreligious boys. The BSA national office mandates a religious litmus test, forcing the parents of boys interested in joining to sign a "Declaration of Religious Principles" which must be returned with membership fees. The membership form states, "The Boy Scouts of America maintain that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing his obligation to God. ."

Naturally, this discourages any non-believing children and families from even applying. In other words, the bar is set to eliminate any interest nonreligious children may have in the BSA. We also do not find it surprising that parents would fail to report discrimination by a private organization to a public school superintendent. Just because the District isn't aware of something does not mean it is not happening.

If BSA insists on standing for bigotry, then it should stand alone — without the support of our public institutions. There are now more atheists and agnostics than Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus combined. There are nearly three times as many atheists and agnostics as Mormons. More than 62 million Americans (19%) are not religious. And, most relevant, younger Americans are far less religious than any other demographic: 1 in 3 Americans aged 18-29 are not religious. That's a lot of children and young people to exclude.

There are many notorious instances of BSA discrimination against nonreligious boys and their families:

*Denying 6-year-old **Mark Welsh** of suburban Chicago of the right to join Tiger Cubs, after being solicited through his public school. When his father encountered the Declaration of Religious Principles and explained to BSA officials he could not in good conscience sign it, Mark was told he was an undesirable candidate and left the sign-up meeting in tears. Welsh's case is particularly relevant given that he was solicited through his public school.*

*Stripping model Boy Scout **Darrell Lambert** of Oregon of his Eagle Scout badge in 2002 because he is an atheist. Darrell was a Scouting and community volunteer who had won first place in his state athletic medicine competitions and volunteered as a search and rescue worker. He was singled out for his atheism by his district commissioner, who told the class an atheist cannot be a good citizen.*

*Twins **William** and **Michael Randall** were expelled with no warning from the Orange County Cub Scout pack despite three years of model membership. BSA appealed their challenge under the California Unruh Civil Rights Act and won the right to expel the twins. An agnostic den leader who sent a supportive letter to the Randalls was expelled, a common practice against those within BSA who have protested bigotry at the national level.*

It is difficult, indeed, impossible to imagine a public school district helping to recruit for or endorsing an anti-Semitic boys' organization, or an organization that limited membership to whites only. The BSA policy excluding nonreligious boys and families should be as socially unacceptable.

From a policy standpoint, the District is violating several of its own rules. First, the District is teaching students that good citizenship includes discriminating against nonreligious children, and openly gay and lesbian people. The District is reinforcing the negative stereotypes that lead to alienation and bullying. While the BSA recently reversed its practice of discriminating against gay youth members, it has affirmed discrimination against adult leaders. The BSA's position is that, "[W]e do not grant membership to individuals who are open or avowed homosexuals or who engage in behavior that would become a distraction to the mission of the BSA." Insultingly, the District did not even deign to debate its policy of discrimination against the nonreligious.

District Policy 103 requires the "district to provide an equal opportunity for all children to achieve their maximum potential through the programs offered in these schools regardless of…creed, religion,…." This policy puts a duty on the superintendent to "[r]eview current and proposed programs, activities and practices to ensure that all students have equal access thereto and are not segregated on the basis

of…religion, creed…in any duty, work, play, classroom or school practice...” By allowing a discriminatory organization to tout its message on school time, the District is violating this policy.

This practice also violates Policy 103.1, the District “is an equal opportunity education institution and will not discriminate on the basis of…creed, religion…in its educational programs, activities, or employment practices as required by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.” Those federal laws also speak to the illegality of this arrangement.

It is laudable for public schools to encourage students to become active, charitable, and caring citizens, but the school cannot use that goal as an avenue to support a discriminatory organization that excludes based on religious belief for membership. The District cannot continue to sponsor recruitment assemblies for this discriminatory program. When the District allows the BSA into the schools to recruit and to further BSA’s discriminatory message during instructional time, it is placing its stamp of approval on that highly objectionable message. In short, BSA openly rejects membership applications by nonreligious parents and boys. BSA has never apologized for the pain it has caused youngsters who have been told “any boy can join” then robbed of the right to have fun with their friends. It has changed its rules midstream, advertising itself as a civic, patriotic club emphasizing fun and skills, then insidiously demanding a religious test. Hard-working, longtime adult volunteers also have been summarily expelled for expressing concern over BSA’s unkind discrimination.

By collaborating with BSA, OASD is sending the message that it prefers religious belief over non-belief, and more than that, that believers are preferred and nonreligious students are outsiders. Not only is this message of endorsement divisive, but it is also a violation of the U.S. Constitution’s Establishment Clause. Sending an exclusionary religious message is especially egregious and cruel when the students at an event or assembly are so young and impressionable. Elementary school students cannot be expected to distinguish between a school-sponsored message and a message promoted by a third party at a school-sponsored event during the school day. It should be common sense that a public school should avoid hosting or promoting any assembly promoting an activity or a group that, on its face, excludes, disinvites or offends many OASD students based on invidious discrimination.

It is vital that OASD respect the diversity of its student body, abide by its own non-discrimination policies, and cease hosting recruitment assemblies or any related promotions for BSA.

May we hear from you at your earliest convenience so we may assure our complainant what steps the District is taking to remedy this situation?

Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-President
Freedom From Religion Foundation
P. O. Box 750
Madison, WI 53701

More Help From Friends

Below are letters that were sent to the School Superintendent, Dr. Thomas Newcome:

Letter One:
I am writing to request you to follow the Octorara mission statement “promoting educational excellence in a safe and secure environment.” The Boy Scouts of America (BSA) is a discriminatory organization which opposes the rights of non-theists and gays.

In the spirit of fairness, as well as state and federal guidelines against discrimination, I urge you to withdraw support for any inappropriate BSA activities on school premises and access to students. It is not appropriate for a public school to endorse such a biased organization.

Dr. Deepak Doraiswamy

Letter Two:
I recently read about the controversy caused by the Octorara Area School District’s decision to host a Boy Scouts of America (BSA) recruitment assembly this past September. I am not a student of that school district, but as a gay man I would like to share my perspective on this matter as I’m sure it resounds with the gay students in your district.

The policies of BSA are unarguably discriminatory against gays, and when school officials permit BSA to use school property they are effectively condoning discrimination against gay people. When adults condone the idea that gay people are inferior, it encourages heterosexual kids to do the same, and the message sent to the gay student from both their peers and the adults they look up to is devastating to the emotional well being of the gay student. This is true regardless of whether or not anyone has complained or presented a case of discrimination.

Gay kids are constantly receiving messages that they are inferior, even to the point of not deserving to live. This causes incredible pain and often the wounds to their sense of self-worth are so great that it impairs their ability to thrive as happy adults. All kids should be cherished and valued, because they are our future. Dr. Newcome, I don’t express these ideas to you as mere speculation. I lived them.

When I was a gay student, the adults I depended on did not denounce the discrimination of gay people, and it took me nearly 20 years to unlearn the awful message that their actions (or lack thereof) sent.

I know there are gay students that are just like me in your school district, and it's naive to expect them to take a stand as I’m sure you can imagine how difficult that would be. Please, don't send the devastating message to those students that it’s OK to discriminate against them.

I can’t tell you how important it is that you send the right message not only to the students that are discriminated against by BSA's policies (gays, nontheists, and others) but to all of the students in your school district. Please do not condone the discriminatory policies of BSA or any other group or individual. I can't express any more how hurtful it is.

Jason Steiner

Homophobia in American African Migrant Churches

by Leo Igwe

A lot has been said about how American evangelists are supporting efforts and campaigns to legislate against gay marriage in Uganda and other African countries. But there is very little mention of African churches that are re-exporting a homophobic gospel to Europe and America. Many African Pentecostal groups are extending their mission overseas. They are promoting programs and activities that undermine the rights of gay people in this region. These churches are mainly from West Africa, particularly from Nigeria. They are establishing branches in immigrant communities in Western countries where they propagate "Africanized Christianity." Yes, they qualify their Christianity as African because they think American and European Christians have drifted from preaching the true word of God. They claim that Western churches have teachings and practices that are incompatible with their Africanized Christianity. But this is only a ploy to create a gospel niche for themselves where they can promote doctrines that go against the human rights laws of these countries. One of these homophobic African churches in the United States is the Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries (MFM).

This church has its headquarters in Nigeria but it has branches in Europe and North America. MFM preaches against homosexuality. It regards homosexuals as sexual perverts in need of salvation and redemption. One of the prayer points of the Los Angeles branch of MFM is "Deliverance Prayers Against Homosexuality and Sexual Perversion." The prayer point urges those who are caught in the sexual bondage of homosexuality, lesbianism, and other forms of sexual immorality to understand that their bondage can be broken "through the power of the blood of Jesus." MFM branches in New Jersey and Katy, Texas have adopted the same prayer programs. To learn more see these links:

mfmnewjersey.com/?page_id=1297
firepowerministry.org/blog/?page_id=3287

Another MFM branch of the church in Houston, dubbed the United States. and Caribbean Regional Headquarters, compares homosexuals and lesbians to dogs. See:

mfmhouston.com/MESSAGES/PARALYZING%20SATANIC%20DOGS.htm

At the website, you will find the following wording:

> *"The Bible refers to homosexuals and lesbians as dogs. Anyone who has ever engaged in these kinds of things would need to receive deliverance from the spirit of the dog, which has entered into him or her. Generally, in the spirit world, dogs symbolize sexual perversion. So, if you see yourself being pursued in the spirit by a dog, check your sexual life. It means that something must be wrong somewhere, whether in your heart or your activities. Psalm 22:16 says, 'For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed* [sic] *me: they pierced my hands and my feet.'"*

Unfortunately, praying against homosexuality is a policy of the North American Network of MFM and it is documented at this link: mfmnorthamerica.com/?page_id=1297

All human rights communities should be concerned about this church and its affiliates. These homophobic prayers should not be seen as innocuous intercessions and supplications to God. The prayer programs are actually teachings that negatively and unfairly shape the minds and attitudes of the congregants. The hateful prayers are statements of opposition against homosexuality. Humanists, secularists, and religious individuals who support the rights of gay people should speak out against the activities of MFM. Perhaps a strong effort can be made to petition the leaders of the offending MFM branches to sanction the hateful prayers.

Just as the world came out and roundly condemned American evangelists who sponsored or supported the "Kill the Gays Bill" in Uganda, we should also condemn expressly African pastors and churches that are propagating hatred and persecution of gay people in the United States. Hate speech should not be considered a constitutional right when so many lives are at stake. Individuals and organizations must bring attention to the dangerous situation and publicly criticize African churches that are praying against homosexuality. There is a slight risk in such a protest. Criticism could be misconstrued as some type of racism. But condemning the activities of homophobic churches has nothing to do with racism. That would be a counter argument to avoid the real problem of hate speech. Protesting hate speech is a clear effort to protect the universal human rights of dignity, safety, equality and protection against fear of bodily harm.

The nontheist community can work and campaign for the respect and recognition of gay rights in the United States, Uganda, Nigeria, and in other parts of Africa. Together, we can object to African Pentecostal churches eroding the gains we have made in Europe and some of North America. We need to act now and complain about the dangerous church doctrine that equates homosexuals to dogs. Such an analogy and hatred has no place in contemporary America.

I urge readers of this article to form a protest committee and take action. Coordinate your efforts with other groups that are equally appalled by the situation. Form alliances to put an end to bigotry and hatred. It is our duty to demand social changes to better the world.

About the author:

Leo Igwe served as the Western and Southern Africa representative for the Humanist and Ethical Union. He bravely worked to end a variety of human rights violations, including anti-gay hate, sorcery, witchcraft, ritual killing, human sacrifice, caste discrimination, anti-blasphemy laws, and most importantly child and adult witch superstitions. Igwe is currently involved in a three-year research program on "Witchcraft Accusations in Africa" at the University of Bayreuth in Germany.

The Real Life "Evil Spell" That is Killing Haiti

by Billy Almoza

Superstition is a widespread phenomenon in Haiti, especially in rural areas. Superstition is a plague ravaging the mental health of all who live in Haiti. Strangely, because of the power of superstition, few Haitians consider death a natural phenomenon. A "natural death" in Haiti means that the "sickness gods" will it so. Most Haitians always conclude that there must be some type of supernatural cause for death. My fellow citizens find it difficult to comprehend the logical aspects found in our natural world that cause the death of everything and everyone.

People who are experiencing a headache do not seek help in a health facility or through the care of a doctor. Instead they seek help from a "bòkò" or "oungan" to discover what might be causing the pain.

Bòkòs and oungans are believed to be powerful sorcerers in the Voodoo religion. An estimated 80-90 percent of Haitians practice Voodoo. I know someone who almost fell as they stumbled over a rock. She went directly to a bòkò to try to figure out the cause of this near fall and to stop the spirits from further torturing her with near-fatal accidents!

When a vehicle accident occurs, most Haitian people think it is an event guided by a supernatural force. They do not realize that accidents are simply caused by drivers who are just plain careless and who do not abide by traffic regulations.

If a parent has a child who is very smart and performing well in a school, the parent will hold back the child out of fear that the child will be hurt by supernatural powers — gods that object to children having ***too*** much knowledge.

As in every culture, some individuals and business people declare bankruptcy. In Haiti, however, there is denial that careless bookkeeping and business errors are the cause for financial failure. Instead, Haitians immediately turn to supernatural causes and say that spells and spirits are to blame.

Dreams are of great concern to Haitians. Depending on the nature of the dream, the dreamer can go to a oungan to try to find a spiritual explanation. The advice, of course, is not free, so you can imagine the money being made by an oungan to just make up something that sounds convincing to the dreamer.

If a man shakes hands with a friend and experiences pain in his hand afterwards, he may think the handshake caused a bad spirit to pass into him from his friend. Many friendships are lost due to the assumption that bad vibes can be transmitted from person to person and cause pain.

Rural residents in Haiti are often the most superstitious. In secluded rural areas, sick people go to Voodoo priests instead of going to the hospital to get scientifically sound medical solutions for their illness. The priest will say whatever might give the ill person some pleasure and comfort. Without any expertise in medicine the patient is told to "serve the spirits" before their time to die comes. During illness, "souls" are vulnerable and people can become zombies and unsettled ghosts, unless there is "spiritual resolution."

The resolution will cost money and a Voodoo priest has no problem accepting the challenge of saving one's soul. The proper thing would be to direct the ill to a medical facility, but accepting that such a scientific power exists diminishes the supernatural power of the bòkò/oungan.

There are two important aspects that give strength to superstitions in Haiti:

1) The Creole language is very rich in proverb and metaphor. It is a language that is formed from many other languages and has its basic roots in the Haitian culture. There are many stories that have been invented and these myths remain in the memory of all generations who see these stories as absolute truth.

2) Religion also plays an important role in why superstition in Haiti remains so ingrained. Religious leaders, whether Catholic, Protestant or Voodoo, rely on an idealistic dogma to convince people that they have power. If a Catholic priest commits an improper action, the faithful forgive him. Why? Because they are sure he is the representative of God. Believers fear that questioning a priest will cause misfortune to befall the entire community.

In my opinion, all religious leaders are given too much power and credit. I have witnessed religious leaders intervening in family matters, for example prohibiting two people from being together — not for any logical reasons — just because the "spirits" might not like the union. When religious leaders speak, they are not questioned. The faithful fear that questioning the church or its leaders will condemn themselves to hell, or worse — Zombie Land.

These examples of superstitions in Haiti are small reflections of the many harmful and outrageous beliefs held by many. I could write a book about all of them, but I think you have a better understanding of what is happening in Haiti now. I am proud to call myself a freethinker and to have replaced superstition with science, investigation of supernatural claims, and thinking rationally. If superstitions prevail in Haiti, we have no hope for any advancement of our society and no hope to solve our long-standing economic and financial problems. We must continue to reach out to citizens of Haiti with presentations, classes, and scientific education opportunities.

About the author:
Billy Almoza is the founder of the Freethinkers of Haiti which has since changed it's name to Mouvement de la Jeunesse pour la Liberte de la pensee (MOJELIPH). In English this means, "Youth Movement for Freedom of Thought in Haiti"

Representatives of this group have gone to villages throughout the region to teach classes on critical thinking and how to make and use solar box cookers. Their mission is to bring science appreciation to fellow citizens and to help the environment. Their goal is to achieve a more rational Haiti by advocating freedom of thought and the promotion of reason. Contact Almoza at: mojeliph_haiti@yahoo.com

Two Movie Recommendations

by Dennis Middlebrooks

Movie One:

About a year ago, I saw the critically acclaimed Danish film *A Royal Affair* at The Paris Theater in New York City. The film is now available on DVD dubbed in English or in Danish with English subtitles.

This is a wonderful motion picture that I can highly recommend to my fellow heathens. *A Royal Affair* tells the true and tragic story of one of the great heroes of the 18th century Enlightenment, the German freethinker **Johann Friedrich Struensee**, who becomes the court physician to the oafish and mentally ill **King Christian VII** of Denmark at the time of a backward feudal society.

Struensee's brilliance greatly impresses the Danish monarch and his wife, **Queen Caroline Matilde**, who both soon fall under the influence of Struensee's progressive political views, to the horror of the reactionary elements in the Danish court. Struensee soon becomes the King's Royal Advisor and is able to pass laws outlawing torture, the slave trade in Danish territories, and capital punishment for minor crimes. He was also able to pass laws eliminating many privileges for the aristocracy and establishing various educational, agrarian and social reforms benefiting the common people. Struensee also exposes the young Crown Prince and successor to the throne, **Frederick VI,** to Enlightenment thinking.

As it turns out, however, the Queen, whose husband was sexually inept, is not just impressed by Struensee's mind. They become lovers, with the Queen giving birth to their daughter, who is passed off as the King's child to widespread ridicule. The illicit affair pursuades Struensee's powerful enemies to turn the King against him. A brutal conspiracy in 1772 results in the arrest of Struensee. He is beheaded along with a close friend, **Enevold Brandt**. Struensee's progressive reforms are reversed. Happily, this sad climax is mitigated by closing credits indicating that Struensee's daughter and the Crown Prince eventually come to jointly rule Denmark in the early 19th century. Together they reintroduce many of Struensee's reforms, paving the way for Denmark belatedly abandoning feudalism for Enlightenment views. It was further noted that Struensee has long been a revered figure in Denmark, even though he was not Danish.

This is a lush period piece with gorgeous sets, costumes and scenery. The performances are first rate, particularly that of Danish actor **Mads Mikkelsen**, who brilliantly portrays Struensee as an enlightened, but also reckless, individual who became a martyr for rationalism and human dignity.

Movie Two:

The indie film *The Ledge* had a very limited release in 2011. One of the benefits of residing in New York City is that I had the opportunity to see this film in the short time it appeared at the Independent Film Center in Greenwich Village.

Shortly before I saw "The Ledge" I had the privilege of meeting the director of the film, **Matthew Chapman**, at The Players Club in Manhattan. An atheist, he is a British journalist by trade and happens to be the great-great grandson of **Charles Darwin**. Chapman's film deals with an intriguing dilemma faced by a progressive young urban atheist named Gavan who is seen standing on an upper floor ledge of an office building. An African-American police officer is summoned to the scene to talk him back into the building.

We learn through flashbacks why he is on the ledge. His neighbor Shana is married to Joe, a devout and controlling Christian fundamentalist. Gavan, suffering from the psychological scars of the tragic death of his young daughter and subsequent marriage collapse, acts neighborly towards the couple, and engages in spirited debates with Joe. Most atheists will be familiar with the type of discussions they have. However, it soon becomes clear that Gavan is more interested in Shana (played by **Liv Tyler**) than arguing with Joe about God.

Lo and behold, the sins of the flesh are soon upon them. Gavan and Shana are fervently in love and clearly "soul mates." Joe soon discovers Shana's infidelity and plots revenge. He lures Shana to an upper floor hotel room that he rented under an assumed name. He binds and gags her at gunpoint. Joe then calls Gavan to tell him the cat's out of the bag and that he is "old school" when it comes to vengeance.

Gavan is given a choice: Either he goes to the office building directly across the street from the hotel, climb out on the upper floor ledge on eye level with the hotel room where Shana is being held, and jump to his death at exactly noon, or Joe will blow Shana's brains out. Any attempt to call the police would produce the same result for Shana.

So Gavan is out on the ledge, looking across the way at Joe and the bound Shana as the minutes tick away. The police lieutenant, who has issues of his own, desperately tries to coax Gavan back in. What will Gavan do? Sorry, no spoilers here! See *The Ledge* on DVD, through Netflix or Red Box rentals to find out.

This film did not receive favorable reviews, but I enjoyed it. It was nice to see a likeable and sympathetic atheist character portrayed in a motion picture juxtaposed against a not-so-likeable Bible-thumpin' fundie. There was a good deal of tension at the end.

In my opinion, a weakness of the film is Chapman's attempt to weave two unrelated plot lines together, with the story of Gavan, Joe and Sarah as the main plot, with the secondary plot dealing the same day marital traumas experienced by the police lieutenant.

Anyway, folks, this is a film directed by a direct descendant of Charles Darwin! That alone makes it worth seeing.

Religious Bullying: Money Before Spirituality

by Alberta Parish

As a former church member, I would fear attending church on Sunday morning and even suffered a few panic attacks prior to service. Imagine being fearful of attending worship services. Many people view church as a happy place, but for me it was anything but joyous, especially on days when I did not have ten percent of my income to give to the church. There was no doubt in my mind that many sermons were personal verbal attacks upon members who were not regular tithers.

Due to financial hardship, I was unable to give ten percent to the church many Sundays. Although I gave what I could, this was not sufficient for church leadership. Many times I had to choose between whether to give tithes or pay my electricity/gas bills. Of course I chose the latter. Church leadership was never understanding of people not being able to give tithes, but instead criticized those who were not regular donors.

I remember how many Sundays the pastor preached entire sermons during which she scolded her parishioners for not being regular tithers. On various occasions, she even threatened to call members into her office regarding their non-payment of tithes and offerings. The pastor also told parishioners that they did not truly care about the "House of God" if we were not giving tithes to God. She effectively used the pulpit to prey upon our emotions. But God was not the one who needed our money! She did!

I recall the pastor even threatening to ask people to leave her church if they were not paying tithes, as she claimed that non-tithers were taking up space that others could have. The pastor asks people to leave her church for not paying tithes and offerings, while there are manipulative persons, adulterers, deceivers and hypocrites whom she allows to remain in her church! Why? They are regular tithers. Such is the hypocrisy of the church!

Having been a consistent member of the church since age 13, I often felt intimidated, harassed and bullied by what I knew were personal verbal and emotional attacks upon my character by church leadership. If I'd known then what I know today, perhaps I would have walked away from organized religion many years ago. Even now, I have no desire to attend a worship service anywhere in the world let alone in Atlanta, Georgia. I have no desire to be a religious person. I would rather be real than be a Christian lacking morality, honesty, straightforwardness and integrity. I have dealt with far too many dishonest and unhappy Christians, and have no desire to be one myself.

I now realize that my former pastor must have been a very unhappy individual. As a result, I suffered the consequences of her unhappy existence while I sat under her ministry as a "religious slave" from 1987 until 2011. As a result of religious bullying, I am unable to trust people and think that many — especially religious people — are very phony. I won't even give many people the benefit of the doubt as I think that people have some sort of ulterior motive which could be detrimental to me.

I don't trust church leaders. I wouldn't even trust God, if there were such an entity known as God in the cosmos. I am not sold on the belief that there is one Father-Like, Old Man Deity of the Universe. The Sun, being recognized for thousands of years by ancient civilizations, was once revered as the Supreme Ruler of the Universe, not some Old Man sitting high in the sky and among the clouds, as the Church would have us believe.

This is my story, and I wanted to share it to educate others on the importance of how to differentiate religious bullying from spirituality. Church leadership threatening to excommunicate members because they fail to pay tithes and offerings on a consistent basis is clearly a form of religious bullying. Making personal verbal attacks upon a person's character because he or she is not the perfect Christian or the perfect tither is clearly a form of religious harassment and intimidation. These acts should never be tolerated under any circumstances in a society that promotes human rights.

I know now that my former church leadership did not have my best interest at heart but instead had a personal agenda, which had absolutely nothing to do with saving my life and my soul. Church leaders preach a good game about saving lives and saving souls, but I believe they destroy more lives and souls than they save.

About the author:

Alberta Parish is a freelance writer who has many years of experience writing essays and fiction. She is also the author of *The Evil Within Him*, which is available at Amazon.com.

Parish resides and works in Atlanta, Georgia and is a supporter of the Freethought Society.

Secular Coalition for America

2015 Lobby Day & Secular Summit

April 30, 2015

- Meet directly with your representatives and/or their staffs
- Gain direct lobbying experience
- Valuable lobbying skills for use at the state and local levels
- Insight into recent legislation affecting secular Americans
- Network with other secular leaders
- Interact and hear directly from lawmakers
- Attend our first ever Secular Awards Dinner

Register now!

secular.org - lobbyday.us

The Freethought Society's 2015 Three-Month Activities Calendar

March 16

The Freethought Society (FS) is very pleased to host **Bruce Hanes, Esquire** on **Monday, March 16, 2015** at **7:00 PM**. He is an adjunct professor teaching politics/electoral law at Philadelphia University. Hanes is also a Montgomery County Register of Wills and Clerk of the Orphans' Court.

Hanes' presentation "Marriage Equality — What's The Problem?" will highlight how it came about that on July 24, 2013 the Montgomery County Orphans' Court Clerk issued the first same-gender marriage license in the history of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The presentation will be about the reasons for and the consequences following that simple act. The move defied a state law that had been in existence since 1996.

FS will host Hanes at the **Ludington Library** (**5 South Bryn Mawr Avenue, Bryn Mawr, PA**). A SEPTA stop is located across the street from the library.

April 9

FS is very happy to be hosting **Sarah Levin** on **Thursday, April 9, 2015** at **7:00 PM**. She is the Outreach Coordinator for the Secular Coalition for America (SCA).

Levin will present a speech entitled "Taking Action: How to be a Citizen Lobbyist." Her presentation will take a look at the newest religiously-unaffiliated Americans. They comprise the largest religious demographic in the country and the numbers continue to grow each year. It is now more important than ever to train and organize secular activists at the grassroots level to impact public policy. How can you make an impact as a secular activist? How can busy folks with families incorporate secular activism into their hectic lives? And how can one event in Washington, D.C. inspire and prepare you to become engaged in the political process?

As a student, Levin was a leader of the Rationalist and Atheist student group at American University, where she graduated cum laude with a Bachelor's degree in International Studies. She also serves as the Secular Student Alliance's Volunteer Network Coordinator for secular student groups in the Washington, D.C. area.

FS will host Levin at the **Ludington Library** (**5 South Bryn Mawr Avenue, Bryn Mawr, PA**). A SEPTA stop is located across the street from the library.

May 18

FS is very pleased to host **Barry Lynn**, the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU).

In his presentation "Separation Anxiety: The First Amendment at Risk" Lynn will provide updates about the newest events in church-state separation. Some of the topics he will are same-gender marriage license refusals, upcoming Supreme Court cases, memorials on public grounds, and, of course, his interactions with the Religious Right.

Please plan to attend this informative presentation on **Monday, May 18, 2015** at the **Ludington Library** (**5 South Bryn Mawr Avenue, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania**). The event begins promptly at **7:00 PM**. A SEPTA stop is located across the street from the library.

May 31

FS joins with the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia (EHSP) and the Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia to host **Paul H. Halpern** as a speaker on **Sunday, May 31, 2015** at **4:00 PM**.

Halpren's presentation "Einstein's Dice and Schrödinger's Cat: How Two Great Minds Battled Quantum Randomness to Create a Unified Theory of Physics" is based on Halpren's new book of the same name.

The presentation will take place at **1906 South Rittenhouse Square Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103** (EHSP Building).

Albert Einstein dedicated the final decades of his life to a fruitless search for unification. Even on his deathbed he asked for pencil and paper in a vain attempt to complete his calculations. Less familiar, but similarly intriguing, are the efforts of Austrian physicist **Erwin Schrödinger** to solve the same riddle and beat Einstein, with whom he had collaborated, to the answer. The relationship between the two extraordinary physicists offers a riveting tale about a deep friendship challenged by the temptations of scientific glory.

Halpern is Professor of Physics at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. A prolific author, he has written more than a dozen science books and numerous articles.

The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. FS publishes *The Freethought Society News* every other month.The newsletter is delivered as an ezine via email and is complimentary to supporters, donors, like-minded individuals and those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in many locations across the United States, with emphasis in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey. FS activities and services depend on the financial contributions of supporters. Funds may be sent using this form or via the FS website (www.FtSociety.org/donate/). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). Please donate generously.

Yes! I want to:

( ) become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to the Freethought Society):
$30 Individual Supporter **$35** Family Supporter **$20** Student **$1,000** Supporter for a Lifetime

( ) become a "Freethought Star" by setting up an automatic monthly donation to FS from my bank or through PayPal in the amount of (circle one): **$5 $10 $15 $20 $25 $30 $35 $40 $45** $_____(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 email a complimentary newsletter to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS newsletter.

Name: _____

Email: _____

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society

Supporters of the Freethought Society (FS) often want to do more than just donate. Listed below are various committees organized by FS. The committees were designed to fulfill the mission, goals and vision of FS. We seek to be of assistance to nontheists, educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas. Please see the FS website or contact FS to volunteer at: volunteers@FtSociety.org.

Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee
(nontheism explained in classroom settings)
Anti-Discrimination Support Network
(assist Openly Secular 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 and in emergency situations)
Media Outreach Committee
(press coordination and writing press releases)
Membership Committee
(watching for and connecting with possible supporters)
Monthly Meeting Coordinators
(schedule and manage speakers and venues)
Secular Celebrations
(develop and implement new nontheist celebrations)
Speakers Bureau
(provide FS a CV, photo and list of subjects to participate)
Special Events
(coordinate interesting and unique nontheist events)
Thomas Paine Memorial Committee
(assist with assemblies and work on themed events)
***Tree of Knowledge*/Winter Display Committee**
(make ornaments, find venues, write articles, and support the winter symbol concept nationwide)