



The Freethought Society News

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Mailing address: P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, Pennsylvania 19366-0242
Phone: (610) 793-2737 | Email: Ezine@FtSociety.org

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Ruth Bader Ginsburg: The People's Justice

by Jonathan L. Friedmann, Ph.D.

If secular humanism had a seat on the United States Supreme Court its record would be identical to that of Justice **Ruth Bader Ginsburg's**. On issue after issue, case after case, Ginsburg grounded her opinions in reason and science, a passion for democracy and human dignity, a dedication to fairness and equality, and jurisprudence devoid of religious dogma or ideology. As **Sunil Panikkath**, president of the American Humanist Association, remarked upon learning of her death:

*“Among all the Supreme Court justices in the history of our republic, Ruth Bader Ginsburg ranks alongside **Thurgood Marshall** as having done the most to advance the humanist ideal of an ethical society with equal rights and equal justice for all, irrespective of their identity.”*

Bader Ginsburg's worldview was shaped at a young age. She was born into a working-class Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn in 1933. She recalled, as a young girl, seeing a sign outside an inn that read “No Dogs or Jews Allowed.”

Bader Ginsburg's concern for the disadvantaged was heightened each year on her birthday, when her mother took her to a Jewish orphanage to share blocks of ice cream with the orphans. In eighth-grade, she was dissatisfied with cooking and sewing assignments in her home economics class, and longed to join the boys in shop.

Following her mother's early death, Bader Ginsburg was told that only males were counted in the quorum (*minyán*) required for reciting the mourner's prayer (*Kaddish*). She decided then that she would live as a secular Jew, committed to the liberal ethical ideals of her culture but removed from the superstition of ritual observance.

Bader Ginsburg graduated from Cornell University at the top of her class in 1954. She was married the same year and had her first child in 1955, shortly after her husband, **Martin D. Ginsburg**, was drafted into military service. During her first year at Harvard Law School, Martin was diagnosed with cancer. Despite this hardship, the challenges of motherhood, and institutional barriers at the male-dominated school (she was one of nine women in a class of 500), Bader Ginsburg remained a top student. Her husband recovered from cancer, graduated from Harvard, and began work at a New York City law firm. Bader Ginsburg transferred to Columbia Law School, graduating in 1959.

Gender discrimination was rampant in the early 1960s. Her first job, clerking for United States District Judge **Edmund L. Palmieri**, was secured only after a Columbia professor refused to recommend any other graduates until she was hired. Bader Ginsburg received a few offers from law firms but always at a much lower salary than her male counterparts. She entered academia instead, teaching at Rutgers University Law School from 1963 to 1972 and then at Columbia, where she became the university's first tenured female professor.

During the 1970s, Bader Ginsburg also directed the Women's Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, arguing six landmark cases before the United States Supreme Court, five of them successfully. In 1980, President **Jimmy Carter** appointed Ginsburg to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. She served on that court until 1993, when President **Bill Clinton** appointed her to the United States Supreme Court.

Until her death on September 18, 2020, Bader Ginsburg was a powerful and consistent voice for humanistic values. During her twenty-seven years on the Supreme Court, she

wrote numerous majority and dissenting opinions on cases ranging from gender and voting discrimination to the free exercise of religion and separation of church and state. Below are some highlights

Her first opinion came in the 1995 education case *Missouri v. Jenkins*. She joined the dissent in condemning the overturn of desegregation plans for the Kansas City, Missouri School District: “Given the deep, inglorious history of segregation in Missouri, to curtail desegregation at this time and in this manner is an action at once too swift and too soon.”

In her majority opinion in *United States v. Virginia* (1996), which struck down male-only admissions at the Virginia Military Academy (VMI), Bader Ginsburg wrote: “There is no reason to believe that the admission of women capable of all the activities required of VMI cadets would destroy the Institute rather than enhance its capacity to serve the ‘more perfect Union.’”

Bader Ginsburg authored the majority opinion in *Olmstead v. L.C.* (1999), ruling that people with mental disabilities have the right to community-based housing under the Americans with Disabilities Act: “Institutional placement of persons who can handle and benefit from community settings perpetuates unwarranted assumptions that persons so isolated are incapable or unworthy of participating in community life.”

Friends of the *Earth, Inc. v. Laidlaw Environmental Services* (2000) case sided with South Carolina residents seeking penalties for industrial pollution without having to prove injury. Bader Ginsburg included these words in her majority opinion: “A would-be polluter may or may not be dissuaded by the existence of a remedy on the books, but a defendant once hit in its pocketbook will surely think twice before polluting again.”

Her dissent in the 2013 voting rights case, *Shelby County, Ala. v. Holder*, challenged Chief Justice **John Roberts**’ contention that America had significantly changed since the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965 and that its enforcement was therefore no longer needed. Her pointed remarks included this gem: “Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.”

Bader Ginsburg’s dissenting opinion in *Gonzales v. Carhart* (2007), which upheld the federal government’s Partial-Birth Abortion Act, chided the unprecedented approval of a ban that made no exceptions for a woman’s health. She argued that such restrictions undermine “a woman’s autonomy to determine her life’s course, and thus to enjoy equal citizenship stature.”

Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. (2014) ruled that for-profit corporations can opt out of regulations on religious grounds — in this case the inclusion of certain types of contraceptives covered under the Affordable Care Act. Bader Ginsburg dissented: “Until this litigation, no decision of this Court recognized a for-profit corporation’s qualification for a religious exemption from a generally applicable law, whether under the Free Exercise Clause or RFRA (Religious Freedom Restoration Act). The absence of such precedent is just what



one would expect, for the exercise of religion is characteristic of natural persons, not artificial legal entities.”

American Legion v. American Humanist Association (2019) concerned the forty-foot-tall “Peace Cross” situated on state property in Bladensburg, Maryland. Technically a Latin cross, it was erected in 1925 and was commissioned by the American Legion as a World War I memorial on what was then private land. According to the novel majority opinion, such religious displays are exempt from the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause because their religious symbolism fades with the passage of time. In her dissenting opinion, co-authored with Justice **Sonia Sotomayor**, Bader Ginsburg wrote:

“By maintaining the Peace Cross on a public highway, the Commission elevates Christianity over other faiths, and religion over non-religion....The venue is surely associated with the State; the symbol and its meaning are just as surely associated exclusively with Christianity.”

Contrary to what her critics claimed, Bader Ginsburg’s dissent in the Bladensburg case was not a “radical leftist” attack on religious freedom. Nor did Bader Ginsburg hold animosity toward religion per se. A verse from Deuteronomy was framed on the wall of her Supreme Court chamber: “Justice, justice you shall pursue” (Hebrew: “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*”).

Justice, in its original Hebrew sense, as well as today, means fairness, neutrality, even-handedness, impartiality, and non-discrimination. Bader Ginsburg’s minority status as a Jew and as a woman in a patriarchal system fueled her sensitivities about Christian supremacism and other forms of bigotry and prejudice. As she reflected in a 2018 interview: “It makes you more empathetic to other people who are not insiders, who are outsiders.”

Bader Ginsburg was only the second woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court during its 231-year history. The first, **Sandra Day O’Connor**, served from 1981 to 2006. As of this writing, there are currently two female Supreme Court justices **Elena Kagan** and **Sonia Sotomayor**, both appointees of President **Barack Obama**. The scarcity of women on the court, no matter their political views, was troubling to Bader Ginsburg. Half-jokingly, she said there would be enough women on the nine-seat court when there were nine. □

Jonathan L. Friedmann, Ph.D. is the author or editor of 25 books and hundreds of popular peer-reviewed articles. Friedmann is the community leader and education director of Adat Chaverim-Congregation for Humanistic Judaism, Los Angeles. He is also the director of the Jewish Museum of the American West, and associate dean of the master of Jewish studies program at the Academy for Jewish Religion California.



Faith and Why I Reject It

by Abraham Steve Mackey

Hebrews 11:6 King James Version:

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.”

The above Bible passage in the book of Hebrews is quoted in Christian circles and sermons about as much as any other verse in the sixty-six books that comprise what most Christians consider “holy scripture.” Thus, faith is paramount to being a Christian. The action of “faith” is what makes you a believer. Those who do not believe, according to the Bible’s book of Revelation, the final chapter, are the worst of the worst.

Revelation 21:8-10 King James Version:

“But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.”

As you can see by the above Bible passage, in the “eyes of God,” those who do not believe are the same as those who solicit prostitution. In other words whoremongers are “Johns,” and condemned to fire and brimstone. Furthermore, if you do not believe or “walk by faith” you are considered doomed and awaiting the same fate as a witch or a wizard (very bad magic dealers), and the same as someone who worships false idols — no matter how sincere and honest you’ve been in life, if you do not believe in Jesus then God and his book consider you the same as a liar. All because you do not believe what you are supposed to believe according to the Bible’s collection of writings as interpreted by most, if not all, of the many fundamental Christian sects.

I added that last sentence because there are many Christian believers who do not believe nor do they tout the condemning “fire and brimstone” brand of faith that the evangelical, fundamental, pentecostal, etc. people are so devoted to.

So, why do I reject faith when so many find it prized, wholesome, and good? Because in simple terms faith is believing in, trusting in, counting on, and promoting as absolute truth something that no human being actually knows. Not one! Allow me to repeat that — not one person on Earth knows for sure anything about God, heaven and or the so-called “afterlife.” Zero! Nobody! Nothing! Nada! Zip!

Therefore, to be an upstanding person of faith — someone in “the light” and on their way to glory — they have to decide what it is they hope is true and then pretend is actually is true for themselves and for everyone else. Establishing faith as the foundation of your reality is the way to construct your world view to coincide with a predefined set of biblical parameters.

When I was in the midst of my “faith days” we had a couple of sayings that were often quoted among us. One saying was “the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it.” Another, as one preacher used to zealously shout, “the Bible says it, and that settles it, whether you believe it or not!”

The other aphorism we were delighted to glibly pass on was “Feed your faith and starve your doubts to death.” In other words you make up your mind that not only is the Bible absolutely true and surpasses all other “truths,” it is even more so that your particular brand of belief is the one and only really precise truth. Other Christian sects might be close but you and your group have the real inside scoop. Thus, the avid Baptist believer accepts the zealous Charismatic believer but knows that they are just a “wee bit off.”

Unless a believer has come to a place of understanding that they do not know it all or that their faith is but one of many valid viewpoints. Questioning and critical thinking should, but does not kick in when an alternative or opposing view is expressed. Their inner response, built by devotion to the dogmas that define their own faith, makes it impossible to truly consider the validity of other world-views.

I reject faith. I deplore the idea that I can “know the all encompassing source and person of the truth” and thus deny, to one degree or another, the soundness and the possibilities of someone else’s understanding of reality.

Faith sets the groundwork for delusion. Delusion, no matter how you dress it up, is a symptom of a possible mental disorder. To believe you know the truth to the exclusion of all other streams of thought is pitiful at best and lethal at its worst.

I spent more than thirty years in the bowels of Christendom. It took me about four years of questioning, examining my doubts, listening to others in and out of the faith world, rechecking things I had presumptuously accepted as foundational biblical-based truth, a thousand other conversations, arguments, and general head spinning to finally come to my own decision. My final decision was that I would be much better off to live my life as if there is no God.

I recommend that idea to anyone. It does not mean that I declare there is no God. It simply means I am going to live my life for myself. Since I do not know if there is a God or not, I refuse to pretend like I know there is. “Pretend” is a strong word, but nonetheless a very accurate description of what it is to “live by faith.” The better pretenders actually can make a very lucrative career out of their professional pretending. If I am going to give my money to someone they damn well better know what they are talking about. When a business fails to deliver the goods as advertised, we should demand our money back.

Faith? No thanks. I’ve been there, done that. ▣



Abraham Steve Mackey has been a businessman, an actor, and a preacher. He currently considers himself a Freethinker and if you ask him what he loves best, he will tell you it’s what he is doing now. Five evenings a week, Tuesday through Saturday, Mackey performs,

singing with his guitar, the music of the 60s and 70s that inspired him so greatly in his youth. Send him a Facebook “friend request” at:

<https://www.facebook.com/abraham.mackey>

Catch his 6:00-7:00 PM (PDT) “Facebook Live Stream Music Hour” performances. You are sure to be entertained.

Angels Among Us?

by Bernie J. Taylor

The belief in angels as the messengers of the one God in the Abrahamic tradition is at the core of that belief system. Prophets from Abraham to Daniel to Muhammed and Mary, mother of Jesus, are told of as hearing the voice of the one God through intermediary angels. Had there not been angels representing the one God among those ancient pastoralists then the messages left to us by the Abrahamic prophets would surely be more mortal than divine.

One cannot scientifically prove or disprove if angels spoke to the Abrahamic prophets. There is no test for angelic interaction even if the remains of the prophets are someday unearthed. We can utilize the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology and comparative mythology to track the evolution of angels — those human-bird avianoids — deeper in time than Abraham and to the present in order to better understand from where the idea emanates and what purposes they may have served.

We can begin our journey by pulling back the masks of the earliest avianoids to view human-bird shamanic characters on the Gallery of Discs in the Spanish Cave of El Castillo (34,000 years ago); on the Agnus Dei panel in the Grotte de Pair non Pair in Gironde, France (25,000 years ago); and in the so-called “Shaft of the Dead Man” in the French Dordogne Lascaux Cave (17,000 years ago). **Pablo Picasso** appears to have reintroduced the Agnus Dei bird-man character in his 1936 Curtain Design for Romain Rolland’s play, *Le 14 Juillet*. Whether they are on a cave wall or a stage, these images tell us that we are crossing the threshold into a supernatural realm. The shaman-artist-storyteller is our guide.



Figure 1 on the left, the Agnus Dei panel’s central character, is the “dancing vulture” shamanic bird-man with large hands similar to those in Picasso’s Curtain Design for Romain Rolland’s play, *Le 14 Juillet* (1936). The dancing vulture is the angelic intermediary between the earthly and spiritual realms. This avianoid wears the full head mask of a large beaked-bird most representative of a griffon vulture or black vulture. The deeply-fingered feathers are at the ends of the wings or the hands of the avianoid. A feathered neck runs down over the shoulders and the breast protrudes in the fashion of the vultures.

Figure 2 on the right: This shamanic experience of the Paleolithic cave artists is consistent with a wide range of avianoid characters found in the archaeological record. Those angels by so many names and masters include the falcon-headed Horus who was an intermediary to the divine for the ancient

Egyptians. His body is distinctly human as are those of many other Egyptian animal-headed deities.

In ancient Babylon, an important deity was the winged Ishtar. She is the oldest known deity in the Babylonian archaeological record which suggests an earlier origin to their avianoid tradition. The ancient Assyrian genie was eagle-headed with wings. There were few distinctions between the genie and the king, outside of the wings, indicating synergy between the two that resembles preceding hunter-gather hierarchal spiritual beliefs.

The Greek Zeus, god of sky and thunder who ruled over Mount Olympus, transformed himself into the eagle Aquila to swoop down and abduct the beautiful young boy Antinous who would become his cup bearer.

In Hindu mythology, the giant bird Garuda carried the gods to heaven. Garuda has the golden body of a strong man with a white face, red wings, an eagle’s beak, and a crown on his head. The Garuda is sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists and is the national symbol of Indonesia and Thailand.



In the Westernized practice of yoga, we find this mythical being in the pose *Garuḍāsana*, where the often spiritual but not religious practitioner transforms into and gains strength from an eagle. Yoga poses include a host of other animal beings assisting the individual on his or her own inner journeys until *Shavasana* — the corpse pose.

These avianoids are transformative characters that we easily recognize as they speak to our psychological willingness to interact with and draw strength from other animal beings. We fully embrace the Chicken Dance in a drunken stupor at an Oktoberfest. We accept ballet dancers in Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* as waterfowl. The Muggles among us waited patiently for the next message delivered to **Harry Potter** by an intermediary owl so that we could begin a new book in the series. This is the same readiness that allows us to be captivated by the stories of supernatural centaurs and mermen from the ancient Greeks and Spiderman, Batman and Aquaman in the present.

The mythical imagination effortlessly accepts that the supernatural is at the core of our being. To live an exclusively logical existence, if even possible, would deprive oneself of what is most fascinating about the human experience and which many would consider not truly living at all. Yoga without the animal being helpers would be barely indistinguishable from a military calisthenics regime.

We find the avianoid intermediary worldwide among indigenous peoples who dance with bird ceremonial dress ranging from a single feather to full wings and beaked masks. To reach these shamanic spiritual leaders we must travel to the ends of the highways from our secular cities, past the fringes of faith-based agricultural communities with their stone churches and domed mosques, where pastoralists and hunter-gatherers roam the harsh deserts, on remote high mountain pastures, across the cold northern tundra, and under the canopies of lush tropical jungles. In these secluded fifth world places, the shamanic spiritual leaders continue to dance, costumed in the feathers of birds as if tens of thousands of years from the Paleolithic cave artist visions had not passed.

Such people are found in the records of first contact Russian anthropologists at the turn of the last century who observed

Siberian shamans putting on the guises of birds. In their avianoid ceremonial dress, the shaman danced in the actions of birds and other animal beings which assisted him or her in entering the spirit world. It is in the spirit world — the land of the dead, whether that be above or below — where the living shaman asks for and receives assistance in mortal matters from more powerful deceased shamans. These departed shamans are the saints in the Christian vernacular who gave assistance on their own accord and without a one God to guide them. The embers of this practice have been reignited since the fall of the Soviet experiment by Siberian shamans who provide us with a glimpse into long lost western mystical beliefs.

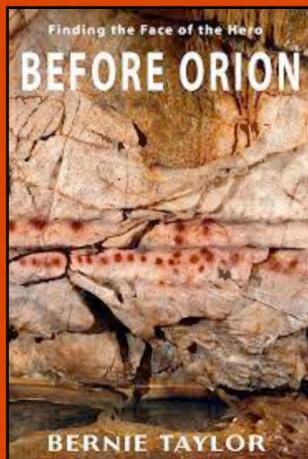
Those Siberian shamans, and perhaps the yoga practitioners among us, dance with the grace and strength of birds and other animal beings that are believed to help complete a psychological inner journey. These avianoids are the forbearers and cousins of Abrahamic angel traditions, where powerful messages are perceivably transferred between mortals and the divine. These same avianoids remind us of how far we have traveled through tens of millennia on our own inner journeys, and how easily supernatural messengers have shaped our group psyche along the way. □

Bernie J. Taylor is a naturalist, author, and archaeoastronomer.

Taylor is available for podcast interviews and live audience presentations. His talks explore the origins of religions, popular culture, and modern art through Paleolithic cave art, mythology and hunter-gatherer traditions.

Taylor shifts the audiences' perspectives in his highly visual and engaging programs through a better understanding of mankind's distant past to the present. He regularly presents to community organizations, public grade schools and university symposiums/classes. Taylor's two major books are *Biological Time* (2004) and *Before Orion* (2117). More on Taylor's work can be found at:

www.beforeorion.com



Before Orion proposes that select cave paintings are fundamental pieces in the human journey that irrevocably impacted some of the artistic styles, religious practices, and stories that are still with us.

This book is available on Amazon.com. Designating the Freethought Society as your benefits recipient in the AmazonSmile program automatically increases the Freethought Society's bank funds.

Welcome New Board Members

Olga Bourlin

Bourlin is former editor of *The Human Prospect*, a journal published by The Paul Kurtz Institute for Science and Human Values.

Having grown up in China and Brazil before emigrating to the United States at age nine has given Bourlin an abiding love of history and a relentless curiosity about



cultures around the world. She has written for *Free Inquiry*, *The Human Prospect*, *Apogee*, *The Secular Humanist Press*, and *The Examiner*, and is an independent history contributor for BlackPast.org. A big fan of the First Amendment, Bourlin was a co-founder and co-chair of the Northwest Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce.

Marjorie Goldman

Goldman was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where her parents put a high value on knowing about her Jewish heritage while being cheerfully non-observant and unapologetically atheistic in the home. She shared her secular Jewish values with her children at the Jewish Children's Folkshul in Philadelphia, where she served for several years as the coordinator of the Bar and Bat Mitzvah programs. Since becoming affiliated with the Freethought Society, Goldman has enjoyed joining **Margaret Downey** in voter registration drives at Philadelphia area colleges, with Goldman as **Susan B. Anthony** and Downey as **Alice Paul**. Goldman is employed at her local public library, where freedom of speech is protected and free thought is supported. She also does some theater work, including her one-woman presentations as Anthony, along with standardized patient work at area medical schools.



Patrick Inniss

Despite enduring a Christian education at the hands of the Sisters of Notre Dame, and from Jesuits, Pat became an atheist as a young adult. His commitment to activism, however, didn't happen until 1988 when his daughter was denied participation in a Scouting program. This energized him to initiate a campaign protesting discrimination against atheists and gays in the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) and to also address the concerns of nonbelievers more broadly by participating in and eventually leading freethought groups. These efforts, along with pressure brought by others, led to the elimination of the belief requirement in the BSA's Explorer program.



For several years, Inniss was the editor of *Secular Subjects*, the newsletter of the Rationalist Society of St. Louis. In that same period, he also produced dozens of installments of *Freethinking 101*, a local access cable show. Some of these are still viewable on YouTube.

After moving to Seattle in 1993, Inniss became an active member of the Humanists of Washington, and eventually co-founded a new freethought group, Seattle Atheists. □

White Evangelicals Create Atheists

by Herb Silverman

I'd like to say that atheist activists deserve the credit for people leaving religion, but lately I have come to think White Evangelical Protestants deserve a lot of credit, too. President **Donald Trump** has inadvertently exposed the hypocrisy of many White Evangelicals who voted for him and continue to support him despite his deplorable behavior in office, including his unapologetic sexual harassment, adultery, and overall dishonesty. Do they now suggest that a president's religious beliefs might not matter? Many seem driven by Trump's attacks on abortion rights, immigrants, African Americans, women's equality, gun control, science, climate change, and other social issues.

Some White Evangelicals recognize the dangers of climate change and welcome it as the biblically-predicted Apocalypse. They believe that God is using climate change to enact His wrath on the world. They quote 2 Peter 3:10:

"The day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up."

Some who want to "Make America Great Again" long for the days of white privilege when they could discriminate against those of a different race and those who had non-Christian religious beliefs or no religious beliefs. They would also like to use their privilege to take away rights from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Some White Evangelicals (called Christian nationalists) want to turn America into a Christian nation, replacing the secular nation we are currently. They represent this Republican president's base supporters. I know some atheists and humanists who consider themselves Republicans, but I have yet to meet one who supports Trump.

Surely a lot of Christians recognize the danger of ignoring social justice issues to focus exclusively on an anti-abortion agenda. Some might even worry that religious leaders are selling their own souls for personal power and political influence instead of pursuing their more traditional mission of saving souls.

It's difficult to determine what Christian principles Donald Trump embraces, unless you consider it Christian to nominate judges put forth by conservative White Evangelicals. I know he disagrees with Luke 6:29: "If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer your other cheek." (I couldn't find a biblical passage that says "Slap him back ten times harder.") Nor does Trump follow Luke 14:1: "He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Many of us wish Trump would heed Proverbs 12:15: "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice."

One of my favorite Trump lies occurred during his 2016 campaign. He said he couldn't disclose his tax returns because of audits (though he could, if he wanted to), adding, "Maybe I get audited so much because I'm a strong Christian." Really? How much faith does that statement require? I think Donald Trump is an atheist because I can't picture him believing in a



power higher than himself. On the other hand, Trump might think that he is a god.

Some Christian conservatives have apologized many times for being on the wrong side of history, including issues of slavery, misogyny, and anti-Semitism, positions that can be found in the Bible. I believe Christians will one day admit to and apologize for metaphorically embracing

Trump as a false savior.

When it comes to abortion, which seems to be the Christian Right's main concern, I cannot find a biblical statement made against a woman's right to choose. Jesus was silent about this issue. Evangelicals also fail to acknowledge that their God performs the most abortions because at least half of fetuses are spontaneously aborted, referred to as a miscarriage, often before the woman even knows she is pregnant.

When a culture matures enough to find statements in ancient "holy" books to be ridiculous, believers either ignore such portions or find creative interpretations for what God really meant. Atheists decide how best to behave without appealing to divine authority or so-called "holy books," and they treat the Bible like any other book written by humans, agreeing only with passages that make sense to them.

Many Americans wrongly believe that tax dollars should go to support Christian symbols and beliefs, feeling that Christians are under attack and deserve special rights. With conservative American churches losing the moral authority they once possessed, and losing members, they are pursuing government support. But as **Benjamin Franklin** said:

"When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support, so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of the Civil Power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one."

It doesn't bode well for separation of religion and government that white Christian nationalists currently have such influence over the government. With Trump's blessing, they have introduced legislation to bring back school-sponsored prayers and demand that sex education classes in public schools teach "abstinence only" instead of preparing teens to avoid pregnancy and disease. They also want to promote anti-science religious teachings, discriminate in foster care and adoption, and pass religious refusal in healthcare.

I see no difference between the refusal of county clerks to grant marriage licenses to gay couples today and the refusal to grant such licenses to interracial couples in previous generations based on "Christian" beliefs. Invoking religion to refuse to bake wedding cakes for gay couples is no different from invoking religion to refuse to serve black people at a lunch counter. Religious freedom gives you the right to practice your belief, not the right to discriminate against those who don't share your beliefs.

President Trump has appointed more than 200 judges, most of whom seem hostile to the separation of religion and

government. He has ordered every department in the Executive Branch to work on faith-based partnerships, and created the “White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative,” an office that undermines religious freedom by giving taxpayer money to religious groups and allowing them to discriminate with little accountability and no transparency.

Not only are Trump’s cabinet members very religious but they also seem to oppose the separation of religion and government, blaming secularism for what they consider societal ills. **Ben Carson**, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, referred to the separation of religion and government as “crap” prompted by “political correctness.” Attorney General **William Barr** said, “The separation of church and state is for losers, liberals, and America-hating atheists.” Secretary of State **Mike Pompeo**, on the State Department website, said he swore an oath to the Constitution, but added, “My first calling is to my Savior.”

As a freshman at Temple University in October 1960, I was in the audience when Catholic presidential candidate **John F. Kennedy** campaigned there. I appreciated the religious diversity he had advocated the previous month when he assured Protestant ministers in Houston that he believed in an America “where the separation of church and state is absolute.” True to his word, and as the first Catholic president, Kennedy gave evidence-based secular arguments for his decisions. A secular Constitution, where the separation of religion and government is absolute, helped make America great. Whatever you think about Trump wanting to build a wall between Mexico and the United States, we must not let him tear down the wall between religion and government.

The good news is that “nones,” people who are religiously unaffiliated, are the fastest growing religious demographic in the country, comprising nearly one-quarter of all Americans

(more than Catholics or evangelicals). Not all are atheists or agnostics, but a significant percentage are — especially among young adults. As our culture becomes more diverse, it offers more openness toward other points of view. The internet has played a significant role in empowering young people with inquiring minds to learn about countless religious beliefs, and a lot of them have examined the available evidence and stopped believing in any gods.

Many disliked the white nationalist “Christian values” they were being taught or the political influence their churches exerted on issues like LGBTQ and women’s rights, not to mention the negative effect of scandals like pedophilia. And there’s no doubt that the abundance of influential scientific findings marginalizes even more the outdated teachings in some religions. The “nones” are being welcomed by atheists and humanists who support civil rights and social justice issues. There are some former and perhaps current Christians who now believe that humanist positions are more consistent with the message of Jesus than with the message of White Evangelicals.

When religion mingled with politics is no longer business as usual, then we together can make America even greater. □



Herb Silverman is regular contributor to *The Freethought Society News* ezine/ newsletter. He is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both books are available on Amazon.com. Designating the Freethought Society as your benefit recipient automatically increases the organization’s funds.

Message From Margaret Downey

On Sunday, August 16, 2020 the Freethought Society (FS) Board of Directors hosted a zoom birthday party to help me celebrate my 70th trip around the sun. At one point in the event there were over 100 people in attendance. It lasted almost four hours!

Michael Steven Martin was the host and he worked closely with **Heidi Ickes** (the FS Executive Assistant). Martin did a wonderful job managing the Zoom technology which involved showing videos, working the chat and initiating the spotlight function. He started the event with a slide show of biographical information which included photos of my childhood, family members, my projects, special events, and much more.

Thanks to the pre-event work done by Ickes, friends from all over the country responded to the Zoom party notification. The entire event was recorded and can be viewed at the following link: <https://youtu.be/r0XAqNo3Fuw>



I am very grateful to all the people who attended the party. I also thank the wonderful folks who sent videotaped birthday greetings for the party, gifts, birthday cards, and donations to FS. The earmarked donations help me to continue my activist work as the proud founder and president of FS. Many thanks and love to all. □

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My Religion Rejection Story

by Donald B. Ardell

I was born Catholic. By coincidence, my parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts and everybody in the Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood where the stork dropped me off were also Catholic.

Actually, I checked the records recently and discovered I was not born Catholic. I was born a “None.” However, I became a Catholic at age two days. That’s when my parents took me to the local Catholic Church and had me baptized.

Thing is, I don’t recall being asked what religion, if any, I preferred or even if I consented to the medieval ritual of baptism. If I had any interest in religion at the time, which I suspect I did not, I would have picked Pastafarian or Jedi. Pastafarianism, come to think of it, hadn’t yet been discovered so I probably would have gone with the Jedi order, with its glorious 25,000 year tradition of doing good and keeping the peace. This religion focuses on raising Humanist leaders who serve throughout the cosmos. That would have been just the thing when I got here in the middle of July, 1938. Alas, at this time, the Jedis must have been elsewhere, keeping law and order in other galaxies. Thus, **Adolf Hitler**’s stormtroopers were going about breaking windows and otherwise doing permanent damage to the idea that any group henceforth could ever claim to be a master race. Der Fuhrer was drafting what in two months would be known as the Munich Agreement that, after being signed by Prime Minister **Neville Chamberland**, encouraged German troops to occupy the Sudetenland, after which nearly everything here on Earth went to shit for the next six or seven years.

But Christianity? The Roman Catholic Church? No friggin’ way! I may have been only two days old at baptism time, but I was certain I had not committed any sin, which is what this foolishness is designed to eradicate or absolve with holy water and magic words. The Catholic religion considered my first sin to be an original one. How could that have happened? I was innocent and I could have proved it. I was never out of my mother’s sight those first 48 hours.

Anyway, the baptism ceremony seemed totally ridiculous, but I was not sufficiently resolute of will or strong enough of body to invite the priest, my parents or the crowd of relatives and friends to bugger off and leave me be. I missed the chance to assert that I did not intend to commence my life as the star of a mindless ritual of superstition. My alleged sin was neither accurate, sensible nor original. I didn’t do what they said I did (arrive with a sin) so I didn’t need a baptism, and I would have told them so, if it had occurred to me.

The fact is, I barely remember the baptism — I only recall that the priest who tried to drown me was decked out in a silly robe, looking like **Charlton Heston**, while my parents, glowing and happy and dressed in their Sunday finery, approved wholeheartedly. I was clothed only in a loaded diaper. I must have been mortified.

Throughout my preschool and first three grade years, I didn’t think much about Catholicism. I didn’t challenge what I was told — nobody, not my parents and certainly not the priests or nuns, wanted little Catholics (or adults, for that matter) to think for themselves, to challenge or question anything about church teachings. Doubt was not good; faith was all one needed. Some guy named Thomas was a doubter, and no nun or priest ever spoke well of the old boy.

By fourth and fifth grades, however, I began to lose interest. Not to rebel — just to zone out when exposed to Lent, Holy Days of Obligation, prayers, sacraments, rituals, miracles, and especially the horrors of Hell. Nuns used to compete among themselves to see who could scare us the most with illustrations of what Hell was like. Compared with these cloistered ladies, **Hieronymus Bosch** was painting verdant, peaceful landscapes.

I remember a lesson on eternity and Hell described by Sister Saint George: She drew a line on the blackboard between our schoolyard and the moon, a distance of 238,900 miles. We were to imagine how long it would take if a sparrow could fly to the moon, take a peck, and fly back to deposit the peck in the schoolyard, then continue round trips until the entire moon was moved to earth, presumably filling the schoolyard. “That’s how long we would be in Hell,” she said, writhing and screaming and thirsty beyond belief “if we died with a mortal sin on our soul.” And if that were not enough to appreciate how long we would suffer, the dear lady in black and white with the nun behavioral clicker on her hip announced that the bird would have to return the moon to where she got the peck, and that this cycle would be never-ending. It was rumored that several classmates decided then and there to declare a calling from God to become priests.

I remember reading **Theodosius Dobzhansky**, an evolutionary biologist, who famously proclaimed in 1973 that “nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.” I had never encountered the word “evolution,” never mind a chapter in biology about it. In 12 years of Catholic education, nothing made sense about astronomy either, or of geology, human sexuality or the nature of other religions, for one simple reason — nothing of the kind was even broached. The only lesson that came close to an understanding of our own solar system, galaxy or the larger universe was the lesson given by Sister Saint George featuring the bird pecking at the moon to convey the enormity of time. Good thing I did some remedial education in such matters during a few years of military service before enrolling at George Washington University.

There are countless factors large and small that, over time, affect my thinking about Catholicism specifically, and religion in general, even while still in grade school. By the time I finished high school I was certain all of it was dotty and daft.

The first factor was exposure to the writings of skeptics, particularly **Bertrand Russell**, **H. L. Mencken**, **Madalyn Murray O’Hair** and **Sinclair Lewis**. The latter’s book, *Elmer Gantry*, was enormously influential and led to the second major factor in my mental liberation from childhood indoctrination.

The second factor was **Billy Graham** and, to a lesser extent, television and radio preachers of the early 1950s, including Bishop **Fulton Sheen**, **Percy Crawford** and **Oral Roberts**. My parents listened to these fire and brimstone mountebanks because they liked the music! I was always gobsmacked that my otherwise sensible parents were not appalled at the drivel that emanated from these grotesque creatures, let alone being attracted to their programs. If what these holy men had on offer was religion I definitely wanted no part of it.

My parents were nominal Catholics. My dad was raised Methodist, and only switched to Catholicism because that was the only way he could marry my mother. That's how it was in the mid-30s and some time thereafter. Save for having me baptized and sending me to Catholic schools because parochial schools were alleged to be superior and safer than the nearby public schools, they were nominal Catholics. They wanted to believe in God and an afterlife, but neither discouraged my growing resistance to religion.

The third factor was the doctrine of eternal punishment, and "a God who lacked a pardon power," to borrow a phrase from "The Great Agnostic," **Robert Green Ingersoll**. It was much easier to turn against this horrific idea than to live with it.

The final factor was a streak of independence and an inclination toward rebellion. This quality did not always give me the best results growing up, but served me well in breaking the bonds of religion.

For me, the absence of religion is one key condition of happiness. My life as a freethinker is reliant on reason and is one way I live in accordance with the condition of happiness free from religion.

I'll conclude this journal of my religion rejection story with these words from Ingersoll:

I am doing what little I can to hasten the day when the human race will enjoy liberty, not just of body but liberty

of mind, and by liberty of mind I mean freedom from superstition, and added to that, the intelligence to find out the conditions of happiness, and added to that, the wisdom to live in accordance with those conditions."



Don Ardell is a lifelong promoter of wellness based on reason, exuberance, athleticism and liberty. He lectures nationally about wellness. Ardell is also a Robert Green Ingersoll enthusiast and lectures about him often.

Ardell is a champion triathlete, having won more than a dozen national and seven world championships in the sport. He is the

publisher of an online quarterly newsletter the "Ardell Wellness Report." His website is:

www.donardell.com

His latest book, *NOT DEAD YET: World Triathlon Champions 75+ Offer Tips for Thriving & Flourishing in Later Life* is available on Amazon.com. When ordering, please participate in the AmazonSmile program designating the Freethought Society as your benefits recipient.



Things to Consider Before Calling Yourself a Christian

James A. Shaw, MD

Dr. Shaw's, *Things to Consider Before Calling Yourself a Christian*, offers a critical examination of the historical origins of the Christian Church and insightful analyses of doctrine and metaphysical precepts embraced by the Christian faith. As noted by Shaw, factually unsupported faith-based beliefs form the basis of all religions, including Christianity. This short book provides the reader with a well researched foundation from which to pursue his or her own inquiry into the history of Christianity, as well as focusing discussions for personal introspection. Lighthearted quotations, anecdotes and commentary provide humorous interludes throughout the text.

Dorrance Publishing Co.
585 Alpha Drive, Suite 103
Pittsburgh, PA 15238

Reviews: Amazon.com



Steve 5.0 out of 5 stars [Am I really a Christian?](#)

Dr. Shaw gently explores the obvious and not so obvious flaws in Christian dogma, while not offending the reader in any way. One admires his use of reason, as a scientist, to question the very foundations of Christianity and for that matter of virtually all religious belief.



AI 5.0 out of 5 stars [An important book.](#)

This is a wonderful book for people who want to think deeply about the history of Christianity. The exploration of the evolution of Christianity over two millennia is absolutely fascinating.



Amazon Customer 5.0 out of 5 stars [This book will make you think.](#)

I thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Shaw's book. I wish it was available for me to read way back when I was an impressionable kid with many questions.

To Purchase (\$12.00):

www.amazon.com
www.dorrancebookstore.com
ISBN: 978-1-4809-5514-1

The Last Remaining Freie Gemeinde in the United States

by Nick Schweitzer

The 1840s in central Europe was a time of social, intellectual and religious unrest, culminating in numerous movements that attempted to unify and liberalize the states and principalities that make up today's Germany. An important intellectual catalyst behind the protests was the Freie Gemeinden: congregations or societies that wanted to free religion from dogma and the authority of revealed truth. They sought to base a person's search for meaning in reason, critical thinking, the study of nature and world history, the inspiration of music and the arts, and principles of democracy. The various movements were never really unified, and they were eventually put down in what was called the "Revolution of 1848." Many Germans then emigrated to the United States, where some of them were referred to as "48ers" by fellow citizens.

Though the majority of German immigrants to the United States were Catholic or Lutheran, among them were a significant number of freethinkers who established scores of Freie Gemeinden — possibly numbering in the hundreds although there is no official census and estimates vary. By the late 1800s there were Freie Gemeinden in large and small communities across the United States, including in Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; St. Louis, Missouri; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and San Francisco, California.

What is now known as the Free Congregation of Sauk County, Wisconsin, still reveres its proud heritage as the last remaining Freie Gemeinde in the United States. The congregation in Sauk City, Wisconsin, was established in 1852 and currently has its home in Park Hall, a simple but stately meetinghouse built by the congregation in 1884. Anti-German sentiment during World Wars I and II forced many German establishments and customs to disappear, and attrition nationwide has continued to the point where the Free Congregation of Sauk City is the last survivor. The Congregation is now in its 168th year, and due in part to the World Wars in Europe it may be the longest continuously operating community of its kind in the world.

One factor that helped our Congregation survive was an affiliation with the American Unitarian Association in 1955. This is reflected in our current Statement of Purpose, which declares that we are "guided by the principles of both our Freethought founders and the Unitarian Universalists, come together as a religious community to help one another in strengthening the spiritual, ethical, and moral dimensions of our lives, and to be of service to our world."

A more inspiring and still honored statement of the purpose of a Free Congregation is included in the "Fundamental Principles" published in 1851 by **Eduard Schroeter**, the Sauk County society's speaker from 1853 to 1886:

"We call our society the United Free German Congregation. Its purpose is to unite the foes of clericalism, official dishonesty, and hypocrisy, and to unite the friends of truth, uprightness, and honesty — all those holding the same views, but now found scattered among all religions, churches, and sects. By such a union of our strength we intend to erect a firm bulwark against the pernicious system of church, sect, and clerical domination. While making our first

appeal to the Germans we do not wish to be understood as excluding other nationalities; rather we shall make it our business to enter into fraternal relations with others who are aiming at reforms similar to our own.

All authority rests in the congregation, and in it all its members, men and women alike, shall have equal rights. The foundation for the congregation shall be Reason, and the great teachings of Nature and History. The purpose of the congregation shall not be the subjection of human beings to an external authority, the respect for a person or a book, in order to secure their bliss by such unconditional obedience, but the exact opposite of this, their mental and moral freedom, their independence and individuality in thought, will, decision, and action. The means to this end, consequently, are not "supernatural and incomprehensible means of grace," but the natural and comprehensible means by which a human being influences and inspires the mind and heart of his fellows — through speech, song, and the mutual exchange of opinions.

We do not exclude certain rites and ceremonies, so long as they are not compulsory and are sensible and beautiful (i.e. in connection with birth, death, marriage, etc.). We have no dogmas or decrees, fixed for all time, but only fundamental principles and general views of the world which are subject to continual clarification. We seek to attain for ourselves an independent view of life and in accordance with it to shape our individual lives. We do not decree a theoretical atheism that denies or disbelieves the existence of a Supreme Being, but we acknowledge a practical atheism, by living so that we can interpret our Supreme Being as we desire and hold our own conception of immortality. We know of no priestly office as the sole bearer of the spirit and the truth, nor of a laity as mere empty vessels to be filled by it, as the Catholic and Protestant churches do, to a greater or lesser extent. But we do recognize a speaker or teacher, whom the congregation is free to select and appoint after it has satisfied itself of his vocation, qualification, and moral character."

I hope to reunite remnants of those vanished Freie Gemeinden in the United States and Europe with my research and passion for the freethought community. □



Nick Schweitzer is a retired attorney, Administration Law Judge, and a Supreme Court Referee. He is an amateur scientist and dramatist. Among his ten full-length and seven one-act community theater productions is notably "One Step Braver," the story of Ellery Schempp's successful Supreme Court challenge to Bible reading or prayers in public schools.

Freethought Society Two-Month Zoom Calendar

To participate in the online Zoom events listed below, you must be a member of the [Freethought Society Meetup](#) group.

Join the Freethought Society Meetup group at: www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/

Each event will have a Zoom URL link listed in the description of the event. Connections will be secure, educational and fun!

December 12

On **Saturday, December 12, 2020** The Freethought Society (FS) and the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) will co-host a Winter Holiday Zoom event during which a *Tree of Knowledge* will be decorated in the FS office located in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The event starts at **11:45 AM (PST)/2:45 PM (EST)** with a 15-minute Pre-Event Social piano concert featuring **Rollin Wilber**. Wilber's musical presentation was filmed at the PES building located at 1906 Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Authors of books that are always included on our *Tree of Knowledge* will be in attendance. **Margaret Downey**, president of FS, and **Hugh Taft-Morales**, leader of PES, will introduce special guests with technical assistance from **Michael Steven Martin**. Invited authors and titles of their book that each chose to discuss include:

Dan Barker

God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction

Rob Boston

*Why the Religious Right Is Wrong
About Separation of Church & State*

Christopher Cameron

Black Freethinkers

Tom Flynn

The Trouble with Christmas

Annie Laurie Gaylor

Women Without Superstition

Karen Garst

Women Beyond Belief

Abby Hafer

The Not-So-Intelligent Designer

Bailey Harris

My Name is Stardust

Elle Harris

Elle the Humanist

Hemant Mehta

I Sold My Soul on eBay

Julian Musolino

*The Soul Fallacy:
What Science Shows We Gain
From Letting Go of Our Soul Beliefs*

David Orenstein

*Darwin's Apostles: The Men Who Fought to Have Evolution
Accepted, Their Times, and How the Battle Continues*

Ben Radford

The Martians Have Landed!

Herb Silverman

Candidate Without a Prayer

Katherine Stewart

The Good News Club:

The Christian Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children

Tom Krattenmaker

Onward Christian Athletes

Marlene Winell

Leaving the Fold

As each author speaks (5-10 minutes each), a laminated copy of the book cover they are discussing will be placed on the *Tree of Knowledge* at the FS Chester County office.

After the formal presentations conclude there will be a 10-minute break with entertainment from **Abraham Steve Mackey** and Taft-Morales. Get yourself a holiday drink and rejoin us for a Post-Event Social. Attendees can help select additional laminated book cover ornaments that will adorn the 2020 *Tree of Knowledge* during this time. The list of available book cover ornaments can be found at this link:

<https://www.ftsociety.org/menu/tree-of-knowledge/>

As each book cover ornament is placed on the *Tree of Knowledge*, the person who made the selection will be invited to talk for 3-5 minutes about why the book is of significance and should be included.

Please refer to the Meetup link information under the headline of this page to learn how to participate in this event.

January 23

FS is pleased to host author **Katherine Stewart** on **Saturday, January 23, 2021** at **Noon (PST)/3:00 PM (EST)** for an online Zoom meeting. Stewart's presentation is entitled "The Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism."

For too long the religious right has masqueraded as a social movement preoccupied with cultural issues such as abortion and anti-LGBT equality. Stewart reveals a disturbing truth: this is a political movement that seeks to gain power and impose its vision on all of society. America's religious nationalists aren't just fighting a culture war, they are waging a political war on the norms and institutions of American democracy.

By pulling back the curtain on the movement's inner workings and leading personalities, Stewart explains how Religious Nationalism works — and how to fight back. Stewart's presentation is based on her book, *The Power Worshipers*.

Please refer to the Meetup link information under the headline of this page to learn how to participate in this event.



The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. We assist nontheists, 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 those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in locations across the United States, with emphasis in the tristate area of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey as well as Southern California. FS activities and services depend on financial contributions from 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 would like to:

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Ezine@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society

Supporters of the Freethought Society (FS) often want to do more than just making a financial contribution. Listed below are committees organized designed to fulfill the mission, goals and vision of FS. Please see the FS website or contact FS to

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 the homeless)

Meetup Committee

(social events and improving online communications)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators

(schedule and 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 donation to the homeless)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee

(assist with assemblies, city proclamations, and work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee

(make ornaments, find venues, write articles, and support the Winter symbol concept nationwide)