Freethought Literature Prison Library Placement Program
by Margaret Downey

About ten years ago, Dr. Richard Dawkins donated his book *The God Delusion* to every prison library operating in the United States of America. He was inspired to do so thanks to the urging of Leslie Zukor.

When Zukor was a student at Reed College (2005 through 2010) she joined the Reed Secular Student Alliance — an on-campus group organized by students interested in the separation of religion and government as well as the promotion of nontheism. Her membership in the Alliance inspired her to think about various community projects she could organize. In 2005, Zukor started the Freethought Books Project as a way to push back against the religious influences that prevail in prisons. Zukor noticed that rejected and old used books filled donation boxes on campus. She thought that students could do better.

Zukor’s Freethought Books Project also included a prisoner pen pal program. The prisoners she communicated with were the recipients of books donated to her by the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), Daniel Dennett, Prometheus Books, and Dawkins. During the time she ran the program, Zukor said that it was “very rewarding to interact with prisoners, showing them the joys of freethinking and secular humanism.” Her project was recognized by the national office of the Secular Student Alliance and won the Secular Student Alliance’s Best Service Project Award in 2006.

When Zukor moved on to other interests she gave all the books she collected to Jesse Markus, who was working with the Center for Inquiry (CFI). The change of hands and the Freethought Books Project’s history was picked up in early 2014 by the Religion News Service, and that led to coverage in *USA Today* as well as *The Washington Post*. Her efforts were also featured as articles about in the FFRF’s newspaper, *The Freethought Today*. CFI abandoned the donation attempts when their boxes were returned for being in violation of the many restrictions and requirements put in place by prison authorities. The effort is fraught with difficulties. When the Freethought Society (FS) hired a part-time employee Heidi Ickes, we learned just how difficult the task would be. Over a ten-year period, FS has received hundreds of letters from inmates, all of whom refer to finding our contact information in the back of *The God Delusion*. I never had the time to process those letters in any way until Ickes was hired.

Together, Ickes and I devised a way to handle the letters without directly communicating with inmates one-on-one. When we receive a letter it is reviewed and categorized. Some letters are forwarded to legal advisors if we see civil rights violations. Some letters are given to Humanist Counselors located in the area of a facility housing the inmate if a letter warrants such assistance. Most of the letters, however, have become part of the FS Prison Freethought Literature Prison Library Placement Program. When there are three or more inmate letters from one facility, we write to the prison chaplain and/or the department that handles the library. The greater the number of requests for freethought literature from a facility, the higher the chances we have of having our materials shelved and available for all who use the library. We obtain the rules for donations, a proper address to send boxes and/or flat envelopes, mailing restrictions/requirements, and the name of an administrative contact who has agreed to shelve the materials.

FS donates newsletters and books we have in stock. We then notify other national groups who have agreed to participate in our Freethought Literature Prison Library Placement Program. They donate using the contact information and guidelines we provide. We have received many wonderful thank you letters. This program allows inmates access to humanist, Secular Jewish, freethought, and nontheist worldviews. The educational literature we have sent focuses on philosophical diversity and being good without God. Financial donations to support this effort can be sent via mail or at the FS website.
The Enlightenment was rightly known as the Age of Reason. It seemed that everywhere throughout the 18th century, people from philosophers like Voltaire (1694-1778) to Jesuit priests like Benito Feijóo (1676-1764) were decrying superstition. Science was spreading, even taking hold of the popular imagination, and old myths were being rejected as scholars studied the scriptures with new philological and analytical tools. There seemed to be no traditional knowledge that reason was not eroding. As the 18th century French philosopher Denis Diderot (1713-1784) said in his novel *The Indiscreet Jewels*, this new form of knowledge, this new way of thinking, this new insistence on reason, was toppling temples of tradition. He compared it to a child growing to the size of an unstoppable behemoth. Because the power of reason was so corrosive in the eighteenth century, eroding traditional myths, power structures, ideologies, mores, and social structures, there was a tendency then as there is now to emphasize the destructive results of Enlightenment reason.

In the past several centuries, reason has been blamed for everything from the terror of the French Revolution to the Holocaust. Postmodernism has rejected it as oppressive and imperialistic, romanticism dismissed it as hopelessly inhuman, and contemporaries decried it as the source of all of society’s evils.

It is true that Enlightenment reason was destructive of many traditional ideals: social hierarchies where one could not and should not rise above the station into which one was born — God chose that; the unconditional obedience that all subjects owed their king; the obedience that wives owed their husbands; the fantastical superstitions that the poor believed and practiced; the seemingly unbreakable bond between Church and State. However, the Enlightenment was not only destructive, it was also creative, redemptive, and liberating.

The Enlightenment was liberating because of its other great force: human empathy. We may associate empathy with a reaction to Enlightenment — a child of 19th century romanticism. In truth, empathy was born in the Enlightenment, often guided by the very thinkers who promoted reason. Perhaps the first new source of empathy in the 18th century was the novel. As Lynn Hunt argues in *Inventing Human Rights*, “Novels made the point that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings... reading novels created a sense of equality and empathy through passionate involvement in the narrative.”

While modern readers accustomed to reading fiction may not easily understand the emotive power of 18th century novels, reactions in the middle of the 18th century to novels such as Samuel Richardson’s (1689-1761) *Pamela* and *Clarissa* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712-1778) *Julie* were nothing short of life-changing. People spoke of the trials of the lives of the heroines of these novels as if they were their own, weeping when they learned of their tragedies, being distraught over the misfortunes, and above all feeling keenly what it meant to be a defenseless soul subject to the tyranny of fate or the injustice of fellow humans.

Hunt cites Thomas Edwards, who wrote that he “never felt so much distress in [his] life” as he had for Clarissa in Richardson’s novel of that title. A military officer wrote to Rousseau that upon reading a particularly emotional scene in *Julie*, he had never “wept such delicious tears.” Even the ever-reasonable Diderot praised the novel for the emotions it produced in him. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) praised novels as having the power to raise our moral sense and increase our charitable behavior towards others. These reactions to the emotions caused by the characters’ pain in these novels show how unusual it was for readers to experience the kind of emotional connection with real people that they felt with the fictional characters.

Eventually, fictional empathy made what could anachronistically be called “headline news” in the Calas Affair. On October 13, 1761, Marc-Antoine Calas was found dead from hanging. An angry mob accused his father, Jean Calas, who was a Protestant, of killing his son to stop his pending conversion to Catholicism. With no evidence against him except frenzied emotions, Jean Calas was found guilty of murder and duly tortured to extract a confession. He was waterboarded, stretched on the rack until his limbs were dislocated, and tied to a cross where his arms and legs were broken. He refused to confess to a crime he did not commit and was eventually tortured to death. Once the case reached the ears of several important men in Paris who protested against its obvious injustice, Voltaire learned of the case. He became convinced that Jean Calas had been wrongly convicted, and took the story public to help exonerate the elder Calas. Remarkably, the verdict was overturned, Marc-Antoine’s death was deemed a suicide, and the family was paid restitution by the king.

Voltaire’s book, *A Treatise on Tolerance*, was born of these remarkable circumstances as he gave voice to a deeply-rooted human emotional sense that his culture was beginning to share: that all humans should at least be free enough to think what they choose to think and worship how they choose to worship — if only because they are human. The opening paragraph of this work cries for empathy by making its readers see that we all need to fear if injustice goes unchecked: “… the accused person has no other defense but his virtue... arbiters of his destiny have nothing to risk in putting him to death but their having been mistaken, and where they may murder with impunity by decree, then every one is ready to cry out, every one fears for himself, and sees that no person’s life is secure in a court erected to watch over the lives of citizens, and every voice unites in demanding vengeance.” Voltaire asks the reader to feel the injustice done to Calas as something personal — an injustice that could have befallen anyone. In the rest of the essay, Voltaire attacks the Catholic Church, the ignorant mob of Toulouse (where Calas lived), and the city’s magistrates. What makes Voltaire’s attacks humane rather than vindictive is the empathy he creates in his readers. By relating facts surrounding the case and pointing out the rabid illogic of those who condemned Calas to death, Voltaire shows that fanaticism violates more than logic — it violates our very sense of being human.

Because of the public outcry surrounding cases like the Calas Affair, greater empathy towards fellow humans was bound to take on a more global perspective, eventually achieving legal stature. This movement gained momentum...
behind a remarkable book by a young Italian thinker named Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794). With the Enlightenment in full swing, Diderot’s L’Encyclopédie being published, as well as Voltaire, and Rousseau becoming household names, ideas prepared the way for changes to the legal system that would reflect the increased rationality in the air and the increased empathy in people’s hearts. Beccaria’s book, On Crimes and Punishments (1764), did just that. He insisted that all people are equal and should therefore have equal rights under the law. Beccaria, in the words of Jonathan Israel, “discredited the entire legal culture of the Western world as archaic, barbaric, violent, and irrational.” What brought him to this realization was not an in-depth study of the institutionalized injustices of his day, which were familiar to everyone, but his feelings for the sufferings of other people. He realized that we are all brothers and sisters, that even criminals deserve to be treated humanely, and that the arena where the greatest violations of our natural instincts towards sympathetic treatment of others lies in how we punish crimes. And so, he brutally attacked all those practices that de-humanized fellow beings. Beccaria denounced torture as inhuman not only because it was inhuman but also because it was useless in obtaining a true confession; if “pain should be the test of truth,” he wrote in On Crimes and Punishment, “the robust will escape, and the feeble be condemned.” Moreover, torture in its very nature, he taught, punished people before they were known to be guilty. Torture, therefore, was both inhuman and irrational — a theme that Voltaire developed in his writings on the Calas Affair.

While it may not be possible to measure such an ethereal quality as empathy, documents that express a growing sense of empathy made their way into the public sphere. From the rich and attractive sentimentalism of novels to the un-shakeable logic of Beccaria’s case against torture, the idea was spreading in the 18th century that part of being human is feeling the suffering of others. No single document brings together these themes better than Sophie de Grouchy’s (1764-1822) Letters on Sympathy (1798). The piece was written as an introduction to a French translation of Adam Smith’s (1723-1790) The Theory of Moral Sentiments. De Grouchy uses Smith’s work to forward her own deep understanding of human sympathy; in doing so, she reflects the ideas of an age in which sympathy became a dominant theme. “Sympathy,” she begins, “must belong to every being capable of feeling and thinking.” As simple as it may sound, this was a new idea for the public of the eighteenth century, a time in which the common people — the masses — were often deemed to behave like animals, concerned only with bodily pleasures, incapable of higher sentiments.

De Grouchy develops a psychology of sympathy founded on our natural instincts as children to be disturbed by others’ pain — instincts that are later numbed by social distinctions. This feeling of sympathy, she says, is what makes us human; indeed, the mere fact that we can feel makes kind feelings towards others possible. When we see others suffers, she says, we know that “we too are subject to this life-destroying tyrant, thus drawing us closer to the sufferer...” This ability depends to a degree not only on our humanity but on our ability to reflect upon our feelings, which is why laws should enhance human equality to allow everyone the time and ability to reflect on what we share as humans. Humans who have that ability to reflect on the suffering of others gain greater empathy and do so to such a degree that, she notes, they can then conceive of “the abstract idea of... suffering.” But, de Grouchy adds, there is no guarantee that we will develop such sensitive minds. Indeed, society’s laws and practices make it so that we often ignore our fellow creatures and seek “satisfaction of a greater number of ‘needs.’”

To keep people from falling into the trap of egocism, materialism, and social conformity to the superficial, the answer, according to de Grouchy, is lifelong education. Unfortunately — and here her rational Enlightenment side shines through — people have a strong need to believe in unfounded myths, leaving aside their powers of reason. People are so easily persuaded, she says, that merely stating “an opinion forcefully and persuasively, skillfully concealing any uncertainties” is enough to convince people of the truth of virtually anything. She warns that deceptive people even succeed at smuggling in unrelated ideas on the coattails of commonly accepted ones. As part of her psychology of belief, she even anticipates the modern principle of confirmation bias, whereby ideas that resonate with our currently held beliefs are more easily adopted. Following these illicit rhetorical moves deprives people “of their critical power” and disables them from apprehending abstract concepts such as sympathy towards all. Therefore, de Grouchy says, “education should... provide the ability to acquire general ideas and to experience these abstract and general feelings.” Without that education, people can resist reason and sensibility, leading to lost opportunities for happiness, feelings of emptiness, and an inability to love.

Empathy during the Enlightenment brought together important ideas regarding freedom of thought. Novels in the 18th century opened up a world of human emotion that resonated with readers and made them more sympathetic toward their fellow humans. This empathy makes possible important legal moves such as codified protection of one’s body. It also makes possible the idea that if we feel others’ suffering and choose to protect them against harm, we must recognize that the protection should extend to an individual’s mental life as well. Voltaire showed the world what happens when zealotry extends to punishing un-sanctioned belief — calling into the question the very notion of sanctioned belief. He did so, not coincidentally, by drawing on the well of human empathy. Beccaria forced Europe to look at corporal punishments through the eyes of reason and empathy and in doing so, produced changes in European legal codes that still exist today. And de Grouchy gave voice to the 18th century’s efforts to eliminate injustice by developing a psychology of empathy that she thought could be enhanced in all humans because empathy is there naturally. While there are numerous arguments favoring freethought, these authors knew that the foundation of freethought is our innate and cultivated sense that others feel pain as we do.

About the author:
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National Day of Reason
by Herb Silverman

An annual abuse of the United States Constitution called A National Day of Prayer was signed into law in 1952 and, since 1988, observed on the first Thursday in May. This country was founded as, and remains, a secular nation, where individuals can pray to one, many, or no gods. Our nation’s Constitution does not favor one religion over another, or religion over no religion.

The First Amendment freedoms of religion and speech empower people to promote or criticize religion without government interference. Our founders were a product of the Age of Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason. Both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison opposed government-sponsored prayer proclamations.

Here’s a possible solution to the problem of having an official National Day of Prayer: Have the government sponsor two separate days — a National Day of Prayer and a National Day of Non-Prayer, a day on which Christians might then appreciate how atheists and humanists feel about our government taking a position on religion. That said, I don’t need the government or anyone telling me to set aside a special day to not pray, because every day I happily do not pray. On the other hand, those who want to pray every day are free to do so without government urging. Our government should never tell its citizens when, how, or whether to pray.

A Hindu friend of mine would be both surprised and delighted if the government were to call for a national day to recognize the god Vishnu, to which Christians would object even more strongly than I would. Vishnu is as real to me as Yahweh, Zeus, or any other gods. National Vishnu Day would at least give Americans something to think about, and thinking is more effective than praying.

Some Americans believe we are a Christian nation and that the government should sponsor Christian prayers. Historically, the overwhelming majority of Americans have been Christians, and Christianity is still the dominant religious belief. However, the majority of Americans are also white, and most do not call America a white nation or ask the president to promote a National White Day.

Actually, in my home state of South Carolina, a former head of the Charleston County school board objected to having a “Black History Month.” So he proposed a “White History Month,” which I’m pleased to say received proper public disapproval.

We tend to give priority to black history, women’s studies, and LGBT programs over their race, gender, and sexual orientation counterparts. This is not because we know all there is to know about whites, men, and heterosexuals, but because we recognize how underrepresented have been the contributions of certain groups against whom we have long discriminated. Similarly, a Non-Prayer Day would be more enlightening than a Day of Prayer.

Another idea is that the government recognize the National Day of Reason on the same day as the National Day of Prayer. Enlightened people who started the National Day of Reason recognize that reason, not prayer, is what the world needs more of today. Unfortunately, most of our current leaders feel it is safer for them politically to promote prayer rather than reason. If that trend continues, perhaps future generations will think of our time as the “Age of Dis-Enlightenment.”

A 2012 article in the Christian Post described how the American Humanist Association and the Secular Coalition for America have joined forces to counter the National Day of Prayer by promoting a National Day of Reason. In the article, an irate Christian spokesperson, Billy McCormack, called the National Day of Reason “a blatant assault on Christianity.” He added, “Secular fundamentalists believe in and serve their god called ‘reason’ and want the nation to equate it with the Lord Jesus Christ.”

I expect some Christians may be uncomfortable hearing a Christian spokesperson describe “reason” as an assault on Christianity. Our founders, who wisely separated religion from government, would be appalled by those who call for the separation of reason from government.

I strongly support the National Day of Reason, although I wish it was not needed. There would be no need for a National Day of Reason if there was not a government-endorsed National Day of Prayer. It is disturbing that so many Americans seem to object to reason. Would these same individuals also complain about a National Day of Science? There was a time when Americans would feel embarrassed by their ignorance of science or their disdain of reason. Not so much anymore.

In 2003, the first year of the National Day of Reason, our local secular humanist group in Charleston, South Carolina, helped persuade Mayor Joseph P. Riley to issue a proclamation for a Charleston Day of Reason. In addition to several whereas clauses, the proclamation stated, “I proclaim Thursday, May 1, 2003, as a DAY OF REASON and encourage all citizens, residents, and visitors to join in observing this day and focusing on the employment of reason, critical thought, the scientific method, and free inquiry to resolve human problems and care for the welfare of humankind.”

Unfortunately, after the proclamation was issued I got an angry call from the mayor saying I should have informed him that the Day of Reason fell on the same day as the National Day of Prayer. I told him it was not my responsibility tell him that, and furthermore, it also happened to be on May Day.

I’m happy to say that the mayor did not hold a grudge and always greeted me afterward in a friendly manner. He even agreed to donate to the Secular Coalition for America after my wife and I gave a nice contribution to the International African American Museum in Charleston, a much-needed project spearheaded by Mayor Riley.

In 2014, just before I went to our Secular Humanist Reason Fest meeting, out of curiosity I stopped by the nearby National Day of Prayer rally on the steps of the city’s historic Exchange Building. Intended to unite all who pray, the rally turned out to be more divisive than I had anticipated. The rally theme came from Romans 15:6: “So that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The minister who led the rally decried the mounting godlessness and prayerlessness in America, adding that our national government has called for a National Day of Christian Prayer.

Rally helpers handed out a “prayer list” calling for prayers asking God to send angels to our city to kick demons out (perhaps me); to defeat witchcraft, false prophets, and...
Baphomet (who is a devil, another deity, or whatever); to end secret societies; to save Muslims and close mosques; and to promote prayer in all schools and at government functions.

While at the rally, I also talked to Orthodox Rabbi Yossi Refson, whom I had met when we were on a public panel to discuss Bill Maher’s movie Religulous. When Rabbi Refson told me he was scheduled shortly to offer a prayer at the rally (possibly as the token non-Christian), I asked if his congregation might be uncomfortable seeing a photo of him praying with a large cross behind him. He said he hadn’t noticed the cross, and looked chagrined. As I was leaving, I invited him to our more inclusive Reason Fest event that was about to begin.

Some participants at our Reason Fest described their paths to reason, telling why and how they left religion. Stories from former Catholics, Baptists, Mormons, evangelicals and other “formers” were often moving and sometimes funny. Many had first questioned their faiths after learning about what seemed to be incredible doctrines of other faiths, and then recognized that their own made no more sense.

Rabbi Refson decided not to speak at the prayer rally and came, instead, to our Reason Fest. When our event ended, he told me how much he had enjoyed being with our group. He thanked me for pointing out the large cross under which he would have spoken, and said that my kindness had been a real “mitzvah” (a good deed). My reasonable non-prayer for America is that we all treat every day as a National Day of Mitzvah.

Here’s one final difference between the National Day of Prayer and a National Day of Reason, which for some has morphed into a Secular Week of Action. Many secular groups observe the National Day of Reason (or the week) with social, political, and charitable actions that make a positive impact on their community. Secular groups are coming together to demonstrate our shared commitment to making this world a better place in the here and the now.

Robert Green Ingersoll, a 19th century Republican known as “The Great Agnostic,” said it best “The hands that help are better far than the lips that pray.”

About the author:

Herb Silverman is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston (CoF), founder of the Secular Coalition for America, founder of Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, founder of the Atheist/ Humanist Alliance student group at CoF, and recipient of the American Humanist Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

Silverman ran for Governor in 1990 to challenge the provision in the South Carolina State Constitution that prohibited atheists from holding public office. After an eight-year battle, Silverman won a unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, striking down this religious test requirement. His books include Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt and An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land. Browse through a collection of his public speeches and debates at:


and

https://www.herbsilverman.com

An Atheist Stranger
In A Strange Religious Land
Paperback:
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Candidate Without A Prayer
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Fifty years ago this July, I was an 18-year-old college freshman in Brooklyn who, along with nearly 600 million other people across the globe, watched as the American astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first human to set foot on the moon, uttering the famous words, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” He and his fellow Apollo 11 astronauts became international heroes upon their successful return to Earth. I recall seeing the ticker-tape parade in Manhattan for all three Apollo 11 astronauts, who visited many cities across the globe in the weeks following their return from the moon. Armstrong remained a revered figure for the rest of his life, and the entire country mourned his passing in 2012 at age 82.

As an ardent freethinker, I find it interesting that as per his Wikipedia biography, when Armstrong applied at a local Methodist church to lead a Boy Scouts of America (BSA) troop in the late 1950s, before he became involved with NASA, he gave his religious affiliation as “Deist.” It was further noted that his very devout mother was “deeply disappointed” in his unorthodox religious views.

Keep in mind that this was an era of intense public piety in the United States of America, when “under God” was inserted in the Pledge of Allegiance (1954), “In God We Trust” became our official national motto (1956), and atheism was associated with “godless communism.” Snake oil salesmen like Billy Graham and Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York were major celebrities and widely viewed as paragons of virtue by millions of Americans. Any open declaration of nonbelief could have had dire consequences to a person’s private and public lives. Certainly, Armstrong could have simply stated he was a Christian when he applied to be a BSA troop leader at that Methodist church. That may have been unacceptable to him, as he appeared to be a very intellectually honest person his entire life. By claiming he was a Deist, he at least was acknowledging a belief in a “higher power,” albeit one that did not intervene in human affairs and could just as well not exist in the first place. Of course, only Armstrong knew whether he was actually a sincere Deist, a rare designation back in the 1950s as well as today, or he may have been an atheist or agnostic who knew an honest answer as to his religious views would certainly put the kibosh on his involvement with BSA, an organization that has long considered belief in a deity as essential for all patriotic Americans.

So the first Man On the Moon was either a covert atheist or agnostic — or a Deist — the next best thing!
¡Bienvenidos todos!

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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 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, 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.

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Supporters of the Freethought Society (FS) often want to do more than just donating money. Listed below are various committees organized by FS. The committees are designed to fulfill the mission, goals and vision of FS. We assist 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.

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