

The Secular Gazette

Supporting Science, Reason and the Separation of Church and State

Issue #29 February 1, 2012

From the Editor

So many news stories lately – which ones to add? Hmm... As you might have noticed, I've added two extra topics to the Secular Gazette- Politics and Religious Right Watch to include more stories. These new columns will give you updated news in these specific areas of secularism.

I've also condensed the Local Events section to the Local Groups section – there are simply an ever-expanding amount of events going on in the southern California area and it's hard to keep up. This is very good news indeed. More individuals are turning away from religious superstitions than ever, with the latest polls at 18% from just one year ago at 15%.

I've also heard from religious blogs that pious leaders know why their numbers are dwindling. The internet. The foundation of all of human knowledge. And these leaders are afraid. Church attendance is down. More kids are on the internet than ever, and it so happens that the under 29 age group is even more secular than the 18% of all Americans – all because the under-29ers are linked-into the online and social sites which make it easy to research the pros and cons of belief and to see the hypocrisy of it all.

More power to them this 56 year-old says. I wish I had the convenience of a home computer when I was their age. If this trend continues we will soon (OK I'm being a bit optimistic here) be like the Scandinavian countries – 85% non-theistic. It's a stretch – but I still can have hope!

Bruce Gleason

Billboard Fever

Backyard Skeptics, a 501C3 organization, has once again added a new billboard off the 55 Freeway and Edinger, facing south. As with the billboard in Westminster, this billboard is being shared and produced by American Atheists based in New York, NY. This is the seventh billboard campaign Backyard Skeptics has implemented.

Bruce Gleason of Backyard Skeptics says "There is no reason why family members should not accept a relative with a different ideology than their own. If a family member disproves, maybe they should know that those with no belief in God or gods can be good without believing in a deity. Many faiths preach their adherence to tolerance but often ostracize family members who have either decided to believe in a different faith or no faith at all. This negative attitude is not only hypocritical but does not promote tolerance or love for one another."

Dave Silverman, President of American Atheists stated, "There are millions of atheists in the United States and a significant portion of them are in the closet. They are afraid of the repercussions of outing themselves. The more atheists who come out of the closet the easier it will be for the next group of atheists who follow suit."

Blair Scott, Communications Director for American atheists agreed, "A recent study showed that Americans distrusted atheists as much as rapists. It is no wonder that many atheists are afraid to

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Tell your family you don't believe in gods.



...they just might agree.

[AmericanAtheists.org](#)



[BackyardSkeptics.com](#)

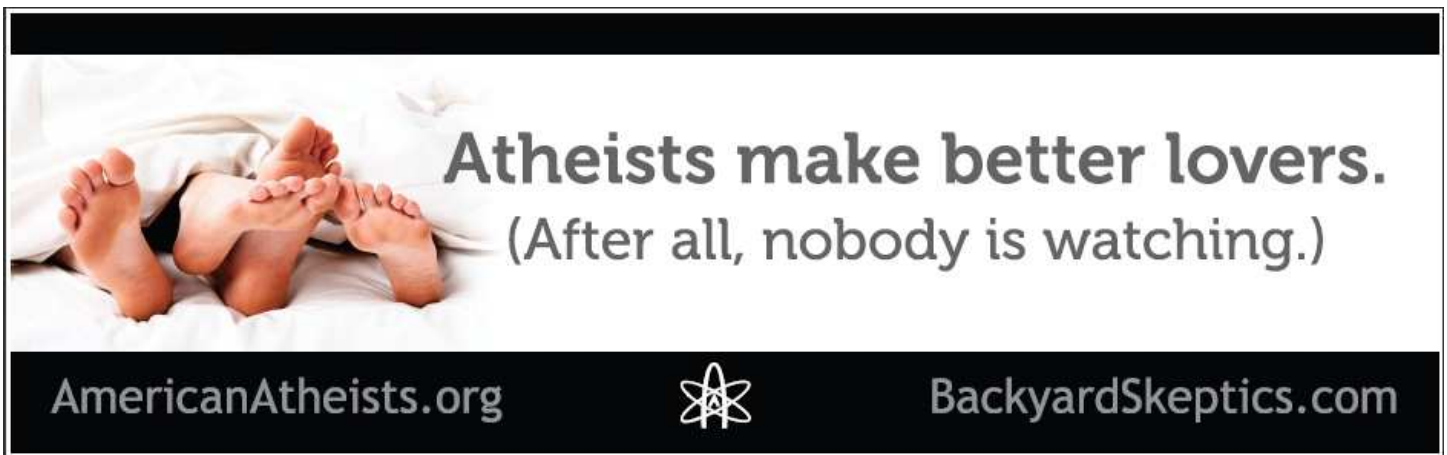
come out of the closet. Atheists coming out of the closet have experienced similar reactions to gays and lesbians coming out of the closet.”

Mr. Scott continued, “Recent studies have shown that people who know a gay or lesbian personally are less likely to be bigoted. Atheists can learn from that research and come out to our family and friends. Many Americans distrust atheists in their mind, but they love and trust atheists every day of their lives: they just do not know that the person they love and trust is an atheist.”

Now in its fourth decade, American Atheists is dedicated to working for the civil rights of atheists, promoting separation of state and church, and providing information about atheism. The organization was founded by Madalyn Murray O’Hair, the noted atheist activist, as the result of her successful battle against mandatory school prayer and Bible recitation

Our newest billboard will be up on February 10

I’m very proud to place our 8th billboard campaign at 14582 Beach Boulevard, Midway City, just south of Westminster in the second week of February. The billboard is in the parking lot of the America Legion Hall (no word on what they will think of it yet). The artwork we choose was to add a little flare of humor to atheism. I’d like to here what you think! Email me at <mailto:bruce@backyardskeptics.com>.



I’m also looking for ideas for new messages. Email me if you think you have a worthy concept.

Should atheists present a Rose Parade float in 2013?

If you were watching the rose Parade on Jan 2, you might have seen the ‘Jesus float’ pass by. I’m hoping that the committee that decides on which floats are allowed would accept a secular floats as well. With over 47 million Americans watching and another 38 million from 220 countries, wouldn’t this make a great statement of the pluralistic society America represents? The average cost for a float is \$200k, but it would probably be lower if the float were smaller.

Your thoughts? <mailto:bruce@backyardskeptics.com>.



Alain de Botton puts faith in temples for atheists



By **Sameer Rahim**

7:00AM GMT 30 Jan 2012

In his poem "Church Going", Philip Larkin anticipates a time when faith completely vanishes from England. "And what remains when disbelief has gone?/ Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky". Alain de Botton disagrees. In his new book *Religion for Atheists*, the popular sage argues that, although many in the West have little time for organised religion, they still have feel nostalgic for its "consoling, subtle or just charming rituals". De Botton, who was raised an atheist, likewise feels an affinity for religiously inspired architecture – especially old churches.

He tells me that a false choice is often presented between faith and scepticism. "Either you have to accept lots of beliefs that are unbelievable or you end up in a spiritual and aesthetic wasteland," he says. "But maybe the choice doesn't have to be that stark." As a way of bridging that divide, de Botton has come up with ambitious scheme that he calls *Temples for Atheists*. These will be secular spaces for contemplation, starting with one in London but then spreading across the country.

The proposed London temple, designed jointly by the architect Tom Greenall and Jordan Hodgson, will be a huge black tower placed among the skyscrapers in the City of London. The tower will be built from different types of stone from across human history forming a kind of geological timeline; at its base is a band of gold 1mm thick signifying man's time on Earth relative to the planet's age.

De Botton hopes this monument to humbleness will be a cure for modern egotism and navel-gazing. "Often a religious building plays around with our perspective: it's very large, or it's very old or both. It recalibrates us in space or time, so you walk in and feel tiny."

De Botton once wrote a book called *The Architecture of Happiness* and is a part of *Living Architecture*, a scheme to encourage innovative buildings in beautiful corners of Britain. He says that a new temple could compete with great historical churches. "It will have a timeless quality."

What would happen inside? "There isn't a liturgy, there isn't a Bible," he says, comparing the temple to an art gallery. The inspirational singing you find in at Sufi shrines or African churches are very distant from his vision: it all sounds rather sedate and middle class. De Botton admits as much: "My target of a lot of this is kind of the sixtysomething male academic from Oxford who attacks believers and says religion is ridiculous." A key indication of the temple's popularity will come from its fund-raising.

De Botton is personally extremely wealthy (there are



A concept image of the City of London temple, designed by the architect Tom Greenall and Jordan Hodgson

has only £7.25 million – earned from book sales and teaching), but, rather than calling on rich pals, he would prefer small donations, "just like Chartres Cathedral".

I mention that the people who funded Chartres and, in more recent times, the Hindu Temple in Neasden, west London were doing so for an established community and with the promise of a heavenly reward. "The Tate Modern was funded not by people who wanted to go to heaven but people who thought it was a good project," he says. (In fact, more than half of the £134 million it cost came from the lottery or government agencies.)

He insists he has no ambitions to set up an alternative religion. "Religions are hierarchical, structured," he says, while his project is "all about thinking for yourself and not having a central authority". Would people pray in the temple? "No, no. People would probably behave as they would in a museum."

De Botton wants to reclaim atheism from strident anti-religion figures such as Richard Dawkins. While this is a laudable aim, I can't help thinking there is something misconceived about the project. What we find beautiful is inevitably bound up with the values of the people who made it: a Protestant may recoil from a rococo Italian church or a Muslim find a synagogue too plain for his tastes not because of an abstract aesthetic sense but because it seems foreign to the way they worship. The strict beliefs that de Botton shies away from are exactly what thrill and terrify visitors to a sacred space: the thought that it was built in the name of truth.

There is another possible future for this impressive-sounding Temple for Atheists. If not enough people wander in, de Botton could hold lectures there and maybe move the School of Life he already runs to the site. With his calming voice calling for a renewal of "community, beauty, sympathy, kindness, a moral structure" – priorities few could disagree with – he might get a more devoted following than he imagines.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/9045391/Alain-de-Botton-puts-faith-in-temples-for-atheists.html>

Skeptic's Corner

[Andrew Wakefield lashes out](#)

http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2012/01/andrew_wakefield_lashes_out.php

Posted on: January 6, 2012 10:45 AM, by PZ Myers



Poor Andy. Once upon a time, he had the power to kill children just by doing some very bad science [with anti-vaccine promotion] and writing a few very bad papers, and now he's reduced to living in Texas and being supported by mobs of New Age cranks. He's powerless and bored, but his ego is still being inflated by sycophants...so what does he do? He decides to sue the British Medical Journal and journalist Brian Deer for defamation.

He has no medical career left. His entire life is now tied to his anti-vaccine crusade, and he's got nothing to contribute, other than his status as a martyr to the cause, so what he's done now is crawled up on a cross and is asking for more nails to be hammered in. He knows he can't lose in the grand scheme of things; if he wins the court case (which won't happen), he's a hero; if he loses (the inevitable result), he's a victim of the evil forces of Big Pharma, and his defeat proves that the bad guys are out to get him, so he must be right.

Orac explains why he's going to lose the court case:

I find it very amusing that Dr. Wakefield claims his "professional reputation" was damaged by Deer's most recent article. The reason, of course, is that Dr. Wakefield's reputation was destroyed by his having done and publicized his bad science, by his having intentionally consorted with the anti-vaccine movement and continued (in my opinion) to crank out bad science in the service of smearing the MMR with the claim that it causes autism. Wakefield destroyed his own reputation by doing fraudulent science. That happened years before Brian Deer ever wrote that BMJ article a year ago. Wakefield had already been found guilty by the General Medical Council of "serious professional misconduct," which included acting in ways not in the clinical interests of disabled children. Shortly after that, he was struck off the medical register, and fired from Thoughtful House. All of this happened many months before Brian Deer wrote his article.

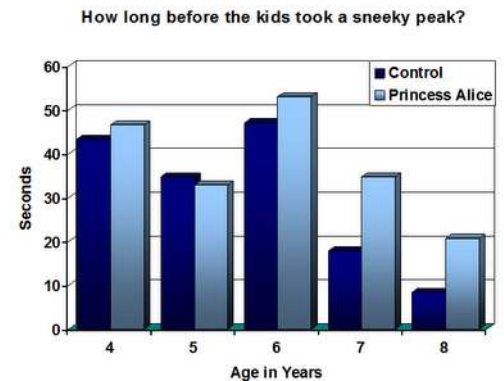
To put it bluntly, Andrew Wakefield no longer had any professional reputation to be trashed. This will be a major problem for him in any libel action, because one has to prove damage to one's reputation to be successful in a libel suit.

http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2012/01/andrew_wakefield_lashes_out.php

[Do Kids Have to be Taught about the Supernatural?](#)

One of the big questions about our supernatural instincts is to what degree they are innate, and to what degree they are learned. While there is [some evidence](#) that kids are born with an instinctive belief in omniscience beings, other evidence suggests [the exact opposite](#).

Here's a new study by Ashley King, a grad student at the University of Arizona. She ran a group of 124 children aged 4-8 through a carefully designed study designed to see whether they understood what supernatural omniscience is.

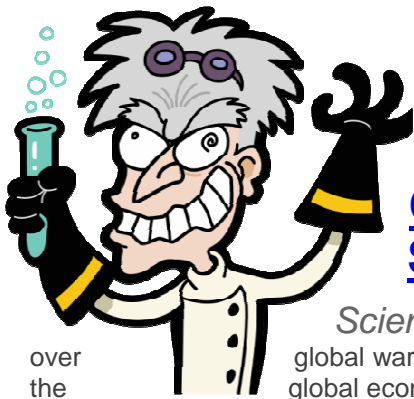


The basic set-up has been used in previous studies. Half the kids were shown a video of someone calling herself "Princess Alice" who said she had special invisible powers and would be present through the whole ensuing test. The other half were just shown a video of the same person wearing jeans and t-shirt who simply welcomed them and said she was a friend.

After a few other tests, they were given a puzzle by the experimenter. Basically, this involved some numbers hidden on the bottom of wooden blocks that were shown to the child and shuffled behind a screen. The child then had to guess where the different numbers were – an impossible task of course.

The experimenter then was called out of the room – she told the child that she would be gone for exactly three minutes, and left a clock showing how much time had elapsed. Question is, for how long could the children resist the urge to cheat by taking a quick peek at the numbers on the blocks?

More: <http://www.secularnewsdaily.com/2012/01/31/do-kids-have-to-be-taught-about-the-supernatural/>



Science News

Can the Economy Bear What Oil Prices Have in Store?

ScienceDaily (Jan. 26, 2012) — Stop wrangling

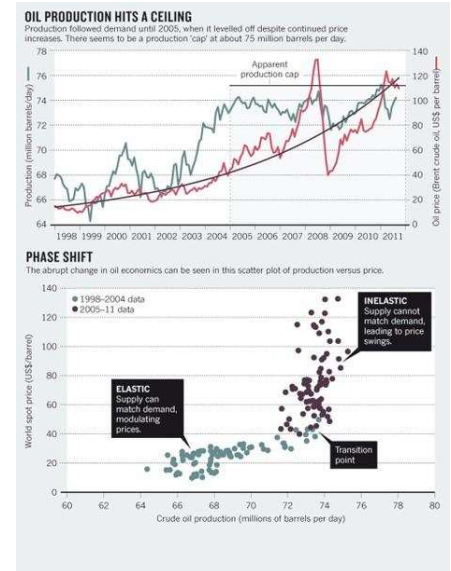
over the global warming and instead reduce fossil-fuel use for the sake of the global economy.

That's the message from two scientists, one from the University of Washington and one from the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, who say in the current issue of the journal *Nature* (Jan. 26) that the economic pain of a flattening oil supply will trump the environment as a reason to curb the use of fossil fuels.

"Given our fossil-fuel dependent economies, this is more urgent and has a shorter time frame than global climate change," says James W. Murray, UW professor of oceanography, who wrote the *Nature* commentary with David King, director of Oxford's Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment.

The "tipping point" for oil supply appears to have occurred around 2005, says Murray, who compared world crude oil production with world prices going back to 1998. Before 2005, supply of regular crude oil was elastic and increased in response to price increases. Since then, production appears to have hit a wall at 75 million barrels per day in spite of price increases of 15 percent each year.

More: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/01/120126223609.htm>



Earth's Energy Budget Remained out of Balance Despite Unusually Low Solar Activity, Study Finds

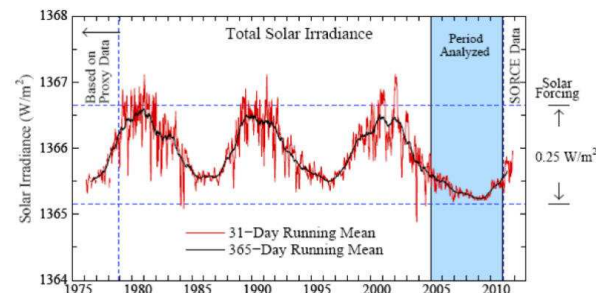
ScienceDaily (Jan. 30, 2012) — A new NASA study underscores the fact that greenhouse gases generated by human activity -- not changes in solar activity -- are the primary force driving global warming.

The study offers an updated calculation of Earth's energy imbalance, the difference between the amount of solar energy absorbed by Earth's surface and the amount returned to space as heat. The researchers' calculations show that, despite unusually low solar activity between 2005 and 2010, the planet continued to absorb more energy than it returned to space.

James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS) in New York City, led the research. *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* published the study last December.

Total solar irradiance, the amount of energy produced by the sun that reaches the top of each square meter of Earth's atmosphere, typically declines by about a tenth of a percent during cyclical lulls in solar activity caused by shifts in the sun's magnetic field. Usually solar minimums occur about every eleven years and last a year or so, but the most recent minimum persisted more than two years longer than normal, making it the longest minimum recorded during the satellite era.

More: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/01/120130172611.htm>





Church-State News

American's United for the Separation of Church and State [Candidates And Religion: Voters Want Policy Plans, Not A Profession Of Faith](#)

During this election cycle, a lot of candidates have been pandering incessantly to the Religious Right under the assumption that wearing one's religion on one's sleeve will mean more votes.

Turns out they're wrong.

A survey conducted by LifeWay Research, which is the research arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, found that just 16 percent of Americans are more likely to vote for a candidate who speaks regularly about his or her religious beliefs.

In fact, religious discussion is a turnoff for many voters. Thirty percent of poll respondents said they were less likely to vote for candidates who flaunt their religious commitments.

This just goes to show how out of touch some politicians really are.

"Different people get a different picture in their mind when a political candidate shares or shows their religious convictions," said Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research. "While some Americans warm up to this, many don't see it as a positive."

The survey also revealed some interesting trends about voting preferences by age and race.

Thirty-seven percent of Americans age 65 and over were the most likely to say a candidate's expressed religious views would have zero influence on their choice of a candidate. More here: <http://au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/candidates-and-religion-voters-want-policy-plans-not-a-profession-of-faith>



[2 House bills promote religious symbols at war memorials](#)

WASHINGTON — The House on Tuesday passed two bills endorsing the use of religious symbols at military memorials. One writes into law the propriety of displaying religious markers at war memorials while the other orders that the Interior Department add to the World War II Memorial in Washington a plaque with Franklin Roosevelt's prayer to the nation on D-Day.

The first bill would codify the existing practice of allowing religious symbols at military monuments established or acquired by the federal government. It was introduced by San Diego Republican Rep. Duncan Hunter in response to a 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals ruling a year ago that a cross placed on Mount Soledad in nearby La Jolla, Calif., in 1913 was unconstitutional.

The bill, Hunter said, "ensures that Mount Soledad and any other war memorial will withstand these attacks by allowing the inclusion of all symbols of religion and personal faith on war memorials established and under the control of the federal government." The 43-foot cross, which became a memorial to Korean War veterans and now honors all veterans, has been the center of legal challenges for more than two decades. In 2006, Congress passed a law transferring the property to the Defense Department.

The second bill would install at the World War II Memorial on the Mall a plaque or inscription with Roosevelt's prayer on June 6, 1944, when Allied forces invaded Normandy. It passed 386-26.

More: http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2-house-bills-promote-religious-symbols-at-war-memorials/2012/01/24/gIQAURdtNQ_story.html



Politics

[JFK vs. Romney & Santorum on Separation of Church & State](#)

Separation of church and state, a defining issue in our history, is also a defining issue for Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum. The emergence of Romney as the GOP frontrunner and the rallying of top religious right leaders to Santorum at a meeting in Texas over the Martin Luther King Day weekend casts the two politicians' views in sharp relief.

Both candidates have staged high-profile speeches to define themselves in relation to John F. Kennedy's famous 1960 campaign speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association - a speech that has served as the model for how politicians balance religion and public life for a generation. But when they stepped up to the podium to define themselves in the bright light of history, each pandered to the religious right.

Kennedy had sought to allay concerns about how he would navigate his Catholic faith and his constitutional responsibilities. "I believe in an America," he declared, "where the separation of church and state is absolute - where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote - where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference - and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him."

"I believe in an America," Kennedy continued, "that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish - where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source - where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials - and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all." More here: <http://www.truth-out.org/tale-three-speeches-about-separation-church-and-state/1327079352>

[Santorum Tells A Mother Her Gay Son Is Engaging In Unhealthy Activity That Government Should Not 'Promote'](#)

By **Igor Volsky** on Jan 25, 2012 at 9:05 am



Rick Santorum railed against the LGBT community at a campaign stop at Community Christian Academy in Stuart, Florida on Tuesday, telling a woman that her gay son engages in unhealthy activity that the government should not "promote":

"Everybody in America should have the same rights, and I would agree with that," Santorum said. "Everyone in America should have rights that are endowed to them by the Creator, those are unalienable rights. And your son, just like everyone else here, has those unalienable rights."

But, Santorum said, "There are certain things that government does that gives people privileges in order to promote activity that are healthy for society and are best for society. And those things we promote would give people advantages or benefits, government benefits because we think that is healthy activity. Mothers and fathers coming together, forming healthy marriages, having children and raising those children. Every American child has the right, and the government should support the right to have and know their mother and father and be raised by their mother and father."

In excluding gay people from his definition of "healthy marriages" and families, the former Pennsylvania senator is ignoring the 2 million children who are currently living with LGBT parents, and is instead relying on the preposterous gay-people-are-a-public-health-risk arguments that are perpetuated by some of the nation's most ardent anti-gay organizations (and Santorum supporters). The stigma this kind of rhetoric perpetuates undermines the many gay and lesbian people who are eager to enter into marriages, raise children, and receive all of the legal rights and responsibilities that opposite-sex couples enjoy.

More: <http://thinkprogress.org/lgbt/2012/01/25/411111/santorum-tells-a-mother-her-gay-son-is-engaging-in-unhealthy-activity-that-govt-should-not-promote/>

More on [Rick Santorum: "the dangers of contraception in this country"](#)



"One of the things I will talk about that no president has talked about before is I think the dangers of contraception in this country, the whole sexual libertine idea ... Many in the Christian faith have said, 'Well, that's okay ... contraception's okay.'

"It's *not* okay because it's a license to do things in the sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be. They're supposed to be within marriage, for purposes that are, yes, conjugal...but also procreative. That's the perfect way that a sexual union should happen. We take any part of that out, we diminish the act. And if you can take one part out that's not for purposes of procreation, that's not one of the reasons, then you diminish this very special bond between men and women, so why can't you take other parts of that out? And all of a sudden, it becomes deconstructed to the point where it's simply pleasure. And that's certainly a part of it—and it's an important part of it, don't get me wrong—but there's a lot of things we do for pleasure, and this is special, and it needs to be seen as special.

"Again, I know most presidents don't talk about those things, and maybe people don't want us to talk about those things, but I think it's important that you are who you are.

I'm not running for preacher. I'm not running for pastor, but these are important public policy issues."

<http://www.religiousrightwatch.com/sciencehealth/>

Religious Right Watch

[Gerson Goes Goofy: Columnist Bashes Obama's Decision To Side With People Over Prelates](#)

I know that there are thoughtful conservative commentators in the world, but I do have to wonder why, when it comes to issues of religion and church-state separation, so many of them go off the deep end.

Consider Michael Gerson. The former speechwriter for President George W. Bush is now a syndicated columnist, and, while I don't agree with much of what he says, he sometimes writes columns that make me think.

Yesterday was not one of those columns. Gerson [chose to comment](#) on President Barack Obama's decision to require almost all employers, including some religiously affiliated organizations, to provide birth control coverage in their health care plans. Rather than provide thought-provoking commentary, Gerson came off sounding like a hysterical Free Republic poster but with better spelling.

Obama's decision, he asserts, was an "ambush." Gerson adds, "Both radicalism and maliciousness are at work in Obama's decision – an edict delivered with a sneer."

So, ensuring Americans access to birth control is malicious and radical? If so, then a lot of Americans are malicious and radical because a lot of Americans use birth control. (In one poll, [86 percent](#) of Americans said they think the effect of "the pill" has been good for society.)

The administration's rule was not handed down with a "sneer." In fact, the administration deliberated over this for a long time. Obama even met with Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan, head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, at the White House prior to the decision. More <http://au.org/blogs/wall-of-separation/gerson-goes-goofy-columnist-bashes-obama%E2%80%99s-decision-to-side-with-people>



Evo Education

[Seriously? Indiana & New Hampshire Want to Teach Creationism](#)

Submitted by AUSCS on Jan 4, 2012 By Rob Boston

It looks like opponents of creationism are going to have their hands full in 2012. The new year is just a few days old, and already we've seen several anti-evolution bills popping up in the states.

In Indiana, state Sen. Dennis Kruse [has introduced](#) S.B. 89, a bill that would allow public schools in the state to "require the teaching of various theories concerning the origin of life, including creation science, within the school corporation."

Kruse has been on this crusade for a number of years and has introduced versions of this bill before. They always died. But Republicans now control the state Senate, and Kruse is chairman of the Senate Education Committee. From this powerful perch, he can agitate for this misguided legislation.

There remains one huge problem with the bill: It is patently unconstitutional. Our good friend Genie Scott, executive director of the [National Center for Science Education](#), told the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette that Kruse's bill would run afoul of *Edwards v. Aguillard*, a 1987 Supreme Court [ruling](#) that struck down a Louisiana law requiring "balanced treatment" between creation science and evolution.

"The law is very, very clear on this," Scott said. "If this bill is passed, it is going to be challenged, and they will lose. The case law is so strong against them."

Meanwhile, some New Hampshire legislators [have introduced](#) a pair of truly kooky bills. State Rep. Jerry Bergevin's bill, H.B. 1148, would order the state board of education to "[r]equire evolution to be taught in the public schools of this state as a theory, including the theorists' political and ideological viewpoints and their position on the concept of atheism."

Bergevin believes that teaching evolution leads to Nazism and school shootings.

"I want the full portrait of evolution and the people who came up with the ideas to be presented," [he said](#). "It's a worldview and it's godless. Atheism has been tried in various societies, and they've been pretty criminal domestically and internationally. The Soviet Union, Cuba, the Nazis, China today: they don't respect human rights.... [W]e should be concerned with criminal ideas like this and how we are teaching it... Columbine, remember that? They were believers in evolution. That's evidence right there."

A separate New Hampshire bill, H.B. 1457, introduced by Reps. Gary Hopper and John Burt, would

mandate that the state board of education "[r]equire science teachers to instruct pupils that proper scientific inquire [sic] results from not committing to any one theory or hypothesis, no matter how firmly it appears to be established, and that scientific and technological innovations based on new evidence can challenge accepted scientific theories or modes."

This bill is more of the tiresome "evolution is just a theory" stuff we've been seeing out of the creationists for years.

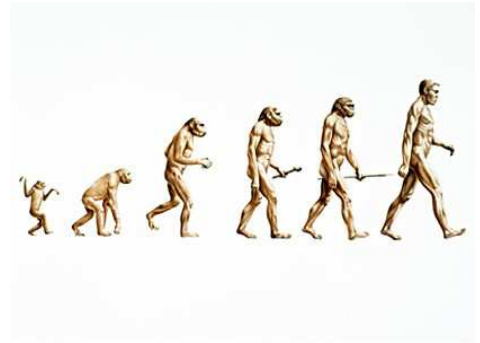
But science marches on, and those who labor to keep our young people in ignorance are powerless to stop it. Inconveniently for them, life forms keep evolving. For example, you might have seen this [interesting story](#) about a hybrid shark recently found off the coast of Australia. It is being called an example of evolution in action.

Call me old-fashioned, but I believe our children ought to learn accurate information, not biblical literalism pretending to be science. When we short-change our kids by downplaying instruction about evolution, we're only hurting them. Unless they go to a Bible school or an institution run by Jerry Falwell's sons, in college young people will be taught evolution upfront and without apology. They'll do better in Biology 101 if they get some exposure to the idea in secondary school.

I'm sure we'll see more dangerous bills like this in other states as the year goes on. Last year, anti-evolution bills were introduced in a spate of states. Thankfully, all were defeated. Advocates of good science education and church-state separation will have to work hard to achieve the same results this year.

Our children deserve nothing less.

<http://www.opposingviews.com/i/religion/christianity/seriously-indiana-new-hampshire-want-teach-creationism>



Does Islam Forbid Even Studying Evolution?

Nidhal Guessoum

Professor of Physics and Astronomy at American University of Sharjah, UAE

Posted: 01/ 4/12 03:18 PM ET

A few weeks ago, a [story](#) broke in the media about British Muslim students "[increasingly](#)" refusing to attend biological evolution classes. Even medical students, it was reported, were part of that worrisome development. The story quickly went quasi-viral; even the BBC and Al-Jazeera International ran shows about it.

Before I discuss this, I must note that one should be careful not to take sensational stories for a general trend, thus one should ask how many Muslim students in the UK and elsewhere are opposing evolution classes.

Evolution, while largely rejected as a paradigm by Muslims, including highly educated ones, is nonetheless studied in countries like Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, and the UAE. No case of students boycotting evolution classes in those countries has ever been reported. There have been occasional reports of students "resisting" the study of evolution in some western universities ([in Holland](#), more specifically), but nothing widespread to make it a general trend. Perhaps Muslim students elsewhere are also rejecting evolution but pragmatically "compartmentalizing" its study as simply part of the curriculum, without turning it into a political issue. More: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nidhal-guessoum/islam-evolution_b_1175776.html



Bill would like you to call him.....

There an atheist in New York who saw my profile in the Freedom From Religion Foundations newsletter, Freethought Today, and called me up to chat. Bill has Parkinson's disease and is unable to use a computer. He is an atheist, but does not get out much. He enjoys conversation over the phone and has asked be to give his phone number to all the Secular Gazette readers so you may call him for a little conversational enjoyment. His phone is 718-815-8084. He lives in New York, so don't call him after 6pm PST time. Please call and give him 5 minutes of pleasure speaking to another non-believer. He would love to hear from you.

Looking for a good tax write-off?

Freethought Alliance is a 501C3 organization and will gladly use your tax-deductible donation to promote secular values and the public education of non-belief. Use the DONATION button at freethoughtalliance.org to make your donation of any amount.

[God is Imaginary](#)

[#8 - Think about Near Death Experiences](#)

Many Christians find the phenomenon of Near Death Experiences (NDEs) to be proof that "God" and the "afterlife" exist. As described in this article, an NDE contains these characteristics:

The sudden awareness that one has had a 'fatal' accident and not survived.

An out-of-body experience. A sensation of floating above one's body and seeing the surrounding area.

Pleasant feelings, calmness.

A sensation of moving upwards through a tunnel or narrow passageway.

Meeting deceased relatives or spiritual figures

Encountering a being of light, or a light (possibly a religious figure, i.e. Jesus, God, Buddha)

Being given a life review

A feeling of being returned to the body, often accompanied by a reluctance to return

Things like heart attacks, near-drowning and severe loss of blood can all trigger near death experiences.

NDEs have been experienced by thousands of people and have been widely cataloged in a variety of books. Many of these books are "spiritual" or "religious" in nature.

What is not mentioned is that there is a drug called Ketamine that produces all of the elements of an

NDE when it is injected into normal, non-dying people. In other words, an NDE is a natural, chemically induced state that the human brain enters. The trigger for an NDE is lack of oxygen to the brain and body. If you read scientific papers like these, you find that there is a completely chemical and completely non-spiritual reason for the features of every NDE.

Is this a direct proof that God is imaginary? No. However, it is a direct proof that the NDE (which many people use as "indisputable" proof that God and eternal life exist) has no supernatural meaning. We can scientifically prove NDEs to be chemical side-effects rather than "a gateway to the afterlife" as many religious believers claim.

<http://godisimaginary.com/i8.htm>



By Brian Dunning

Re-printed with permission

Finding Amelia Earhart

Popular modern reports claim Amelia Earhart made it to an island and survived for a time. Might that be true?



Today we're going to point the skeptical eye at some of the rumors surrounding one of the twentieth century's great mysteries: The disappearance of pioneering woman aviator Amelia Earhart, when her airplane disappeared over the Pacific Ocean on her famous 1937 flight around the world. Conventional wisdom says that she simply ran out of fuel and ditched into the ocean, but stories have persisted for decades that she might have made it safely to an island, perhaps even survived for some time. Here are there, various artifacts have been found: A shoe, a zipper, a scrap of aluminum. There are even some crazy stories: that she made it back to the United States and lived out her life under an assumed name, or that she was captured by the Japanese and executed as a spy. Let's take a look to see if any of these alternate explanations can withstand scrutiny.

Amelia Earhart and her navigator, the highly experienced and esteemed Fred Noonan, were on the third-to-last leg of their circumnavigating flight in her Lockheed Electra 10E, a 1200 horsepower, state-of-the-art twin engine aircraft. They took off from Lae in Papua New Guinea on July 2, 1937, headed for a remote refueling stop in the South Pacific, a tiny island called Howland. From there they would continue to Honolulu for a final refueling before completing the journey in Oakland, California.

And as everyone knows, they never made it to Howland. A US Coast Guard cutter, the *Itasca*, was on station at Howland transmitting a radio direction-finding signal, and made sporadic voice contact. Most historians agree that a half-hour time zone difference disrupted both parties' attempts to establish two-way voice communication, and a photograph of the Electra taking off from Lae appears to show that a belly antenna (of unconfirmed purpose) may not have been in place. And to top it off, it turns out that Howland's position was misplaced on Earhart's chart by about five nautical miles, but which would still have kept it within visual range. Whatever role these problems may have played, if any, is unknown; but Earhart's final radio transmission to the *Itasca* said they were in the immediate vicinity of Howland. And ever since then, the best analysis is that they ran out of fuel, ditched in the Pacific Ocean, and perished.

But one group of historic aviation enthusiasts called TIGHAR (The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery) has been tirelessly promoting their hypothesis that Earhart and Noonan flew not to Howland, but by mistake to an island 650 km to the southeast, now called Nikumaroro but then called Gardner, where they crashed and survived for a time as castaways. TIGHAR's hypothesis and claimed discoveries saturate virtually all television and print reports of Earhart for the past decade, but these media outlets almost never mention that TIGHAR's is a fringe theory supported by poor evidence and that has almost no serious support from mainstream historians or archaeologists.

Here's the problem with TIGHAR's findings. Even though they meticulously document and preserve every artifact, they exhaustively research each one to find matches with real objects from the 1930s, and they look exactly like what such an expedition should look like, their overall methodology is fundamentally, fatally unscientific. It's unscientific in that it's done completely backwards. TIGHAR begins with the assumption that Amelia Earhart crashed, camped out, and died on Nikumaroro. They take everything they find — every anomaly in a photograph or in a story, every piece of bone or manmade artifact found on the island — and try to match it to their assumption, rather than trying to objectively assess its origin.

More: <http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4295>





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Promoting Science, Reason and Critical Thinking

“Comparing the World Contributions: Science and Religion”

UCI May 19 & 20th, 2012

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Mr Deity



Michael Shermer



Brian Dunning



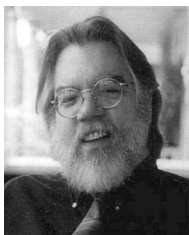
Barbara Forest



Jim Underdown



Aron Ra



Robert Price



Phil Zuckerman



Richard Carrier



Dan Barker



Dave Richards



Heina Dadabhoy

Jan 1 – May 10 Pre-Registration:

Saturday afternoon: \$60, Saturday night debate: \$10, Sunday:\$90, All-weekend pass:\$135
At-The-Door:

Saturday afternoon: \$70, Saturday night debate:\$10, Sunday:\$110, All-weekend pass:\$160

Child-Car services: \$20 per day. \$15 catered dinner Saturday \$10 lox lunch on Sunday
Students \$30 Saturday, \$35 Sunday, \$50 All-weekend pass www.Freethoughtalliance.org

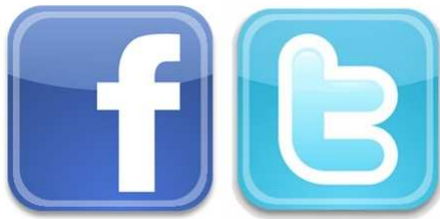
[Backyard Skeptics](#)

is part of Freethought Alliance, a 501C3 grass-roots organization based in Villa Park, CA which sponsors monthly meetings with interesting secular speakers, dinner-and-a-movie nights, science-oriented field trips, outreach programs for letting others know about our secular community and atheist advocacy programs. If you are local to Orange County you are welcome to join our meetup group to receive announcements of upcoming events. <http://www.backyardskeptics.com>

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<http://freethoughtalliance.org/fta/donate/>



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[NEWS \(more at \[backyardskeptics.com\]\(http://backyardskeptics.com\)\)](#)

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[1/24/12 TV psychic Sally Morgan sues Daily Mail for defamation](#)

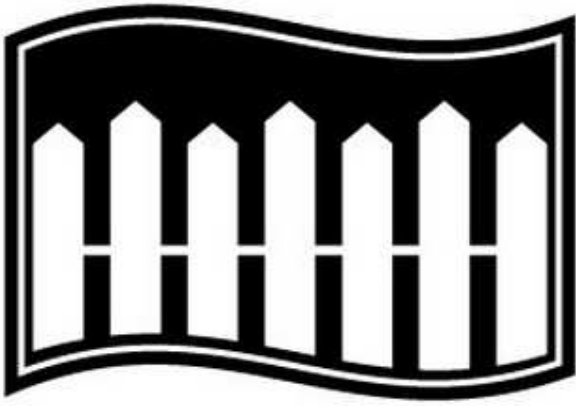
[1/17/12 Alaska Airlines ends decades-old prayer card tradition](#)

[1/26/12 Ohio State Football Player Tweets: Show Atheists "Some Hate"](#)

[1/23/12 The Most Dangerous Place to be an Atheist](#)

[NCSE Tackles Climate Change Denial](#)

[1/20/12 Army Chaplains Deny Soldier Right to Identify as Humanist](#)



Backyard Skeptics Events

<http://backyardskeptics.com/wordpress/events/2/>

(like our new logo?)

Feb 8 - cosmos episode in San Juan Capistrano

Feb 9 BYS South at Denny's in Mission Viejo

February 18, Goldstone Deep Space Satellite Complex north of Barstow. all-day field trip

April 28 - 11am Pasadena DooDah Parade - Join us!

We're Planning:

Blackstar Canyon visit with the OC Astronomers Club

Habitat for Humanity volunteer day

Music Appreciation night – rock, classical and jazz

Mt Wilson Observatory night (we are renting the 60" telescope for the evening!)

Orange County Freethought Alliance Conference May 19 & 20, 2012

Borego Springs overnigher with the OC Astronomy Club

Joshua tree camping overnigher in June.

Other Local Groups:

[Atheists United \(Los Angeles\)](#)

[Center For Inquiry Los Angeles \(CFI\)](#)

[IIG – Independent Investigations Group](#)

[Freethought Book Club of OC](#)

[Generation Atheist \(Los Angeles\)](#)

[Godless Liberals \(Pasadena\)](#)

[Humanists of orange County](#)

[IEAA – Inland Empire Agnostics and Atheists](#)

[Long Beach Atheists](#)

[Mindful Mending \(Seal Beach\)](#)

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Born Atheist

Chapter 23

How deep is your love?

How deep is your love? The Bee Gees

One would like to think that . . . devout Christians would also behave in a manner that is in accord with Christian ethics. But pastorally and existentially, I know that that is not the case--and never has been the case. Reverend Richard John Neuhaus

I want religionists to become atheists. Because of this, I am interested in how deeply they believe in their religion and therefore how open they may be to a different point of view. To a religious outsider such as me, it is difficult to imagine that even one person believes in religion. However, I cannot ignore conduct that demonstrates belief, such as flying airliners into buildings. But I remain convinced that a large number of people who say they believe, do not. My guess is that more than 50% of them have a "soft" belief in religion. They go through the motions of demonstrating belief, but in their hearts they know it is not so. If you were their best friend and they confided in you, they would admit that they do not believe in god. One way of examining the depth of belief is to look at what religionists do, another is to look at what they say.

What they do.

The way many religionists conduct themselves shows soft belief. One example is birth control. The Catholic Church condemns birth control and makes its users subject to eternal damnation in hell. However, a study reveals that 97% of sexually active Catholic women have used church-prohibited birth control. Either they do not believe it condemns them to hell or they do not believe their god evaluates their every move. But whatever the reason, it means they do not believe a major tenet of their faith. Their conduct with regard to birth control shows that their belief is not very deep.

Another example is sex before marriage. Although most religions condemn premarital sex, one study estimates that 95% of Americans have sex before marriage and this has been going on for quite some time. For women born in the 1940's, nine out of ten reported having sex before marriage. In a nation where about 80% of the people claim to be religious and 95% engage in remarital

sex, the numbers show that conduct and belief are inconsistent.

Another angle, true believers should be happy to die. In their belief system, death leads to an eternal paradise. That is one of the most effective sales gimmicks religion offers. Yet, very few religious people welcome death. Surprisingly, atheists, who accept that they will cease to be when they die, are more comfortable with death than religionists. The fact that most religionists fear death, rather than celebrate it, shows a lack of belief in one of the most important aspects of their faith. Similarly, when religionists are ill, most call for a doctor before they call a religious practitioner. It seems they find religion fine for ceremonies and holidays, but when their health is at stake, the majority of them prefer science.

Looking at morality and criminality, many religionists engage in conduct that, if they believed in their religious doctrine, would condemn them to hell. Clergy who sexually abuse children are an example. Ted Haggard's story (Chapter 17) indicates he was much more concerned about being caught by his spouse and parishioners than answering to the god he claims to serve. The willingness of religionists to engage in patterns of illegal conduct shows both that they do not think their god is watching them and that they do not expect their god to punish them.

An interesting anecdote about what religionists do is one atheist's challenge to proselytizers who show up at his door. A sign on his front door says, "If your purpose is religious, to tell us about your God's love for us or to convince us that we need Jesus to be our personal savior, please don't knock. Instead, bow your head and pray as sincerely and intently as possible for this door to disappear. When it does, feel free to come on in . . . we will definitely want to hear what you have to say!" He relates his experience, "But no one tries. If they really believed, at least they would give it a try." Although many religionists are dramatic about their faith in public, in private they act as if they have no belief at all.

More: <http://bornatheist.com/23.html>

Are Constants Constant?

By Gary Hurd

Central to the problem of teaching science in America's classrooms is the issue of creationists that are active in denying the validity of the sciences. Children are exposed to this dogma for years before they ever enter a science classroom.

The more commonly self-professed creationists believe that the universe was created about 6000 years ago based on the various "table of generations" (Hebrew toledot) scattered in the Bible. And this places them squarely against the sciences of geology, and astronomy which conclude that the universe is 13.73 billion years old (to within 1% accuracy, and the Earth was formed much later, 4.55 billion years ago (to within 1%) (1, 2).

Young Earth Creationists have attacked these results in several ways. They have argued that radioactive decay was much faster in the past invalidating radiometric dating methods such as the Uranium/Lead, or Potassium/Argon series (3). And they have argued that the speed of light was much faster in the past, making the distances from the Earth to far away stars misleading (4). There are many individual problems with these arguments. For example, if radioactive decay were sufficiently rapid for 4.5 billion years to appear like 6,000 years, enough energy would have been released that the Earth would still be a glowing cloud of gas. However, both of these arguments can be addressed within the single question, Is the Speed of Light Constant?

There is in fact a single answer, "Yes."

The Fine Structure Constant Alpha is the strength of the electromagnetic force. It is expressed as $\text{Alpha} = e^2/(h/2\pi)c$, where e is the electron charge, Planck's constant h , divided by 2π , and c is the speed of light. So a direct measurement of the fine structure constant over time entails measuring the constancy of the speed of light. Creationist publications were the loudest promoting some preliminary results from a team led by John Webb, University of New South Wales, which reported in 1999 that the "fine-structure constant," appeared to have changed by about six parts in a million over the last 12 billion years (5). YE creationists saw this as confirmation their "YEC physics" of inconstant constants might be supported by real data.

The notion of inconstant constants was not only a theoretical challenge, there are critical technologies in electronics, and new "nano design" that are threatened. Teams of researchers sought to find the exact parameters of the fine structure constant. After years of effort they found that (to their relief) constants are constant. Alpha variation is limited by earth bound

measurement to less than $-1.9 \pm 2.3 \times 10^{16}$ per year (6). Astronomical measurements of quasar B0218+357 yield a variation in Alpha less than 1.8×10^{-6} (95% confidence level) at approximately half the universe's current age, or ~6.2 billion years (7).

Compare two numbers, 0.00000018, the largest possible variation in the speed of light for the last 6.2 billion years, and 2,288,333 the factor that the speed of light must have gone faster for "Young Earth physics" to invalidate an ancient universe. They are over a million millions apart, which is the gap between science and creationism.

1) "Age of the Universe," NASA, the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP) http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/uni_age.html

2) "Ancient Earth, Ancient Skies: The Age of Earth and its Cosmic Surroundings" Dalrymple, G. Brent, 2004 Stanford University Press

3) "Scientific Creationism" Morris, Henry M. 1985, Green Forest, AR: Master Books, p. 139.

4) "The Atomic Constants, Light, and Time" Norman, Trevor G. and Barry Setterfield, 1987, Flinders University of South Australia, School of Mathematical Sciences, Technical Report. "Has the speed of light decayed?," Aardsma, Gerald E., 1988, Impact #179, Institute for Creation Research, El Cajon, CA.

5) See, "Further Evidence for Cosmological Evolution of the Fine Structure Constant" J. K. Webb, M. T. Murphy, V. V. Flambaum, V. A. Dzuba, J. D. Barrow, C. W. Churchill, J. X. Prochaska, and A. M. Wolfe, Phys. Rev. Lett. 87, 091301 (2001) - Published August 9, 2001, "Changing Constants Cause Controversy" Charles Seife, Science 24 August 2001: Vol. 293. no. 5534, pp. 1410 - 1411 DOI: 10.1126/science.293.5534.1410b, and "Skewed Starlight Suggests Particle Masses Changed Over Eons" Adrian Cho, Science 21 April 2006: Vol. 312. no. 5772, p. 348 DOI: 0.1126/science.312.5772.348,

6) "Frequency Ratio of Al+ and Hg+ Single-Ion Optical Clocks; Metrology at the 17th Decimal Place" T. Rosenband, D. B. Hume, P. O. Schmidt, C. W. Chou, A. Brusch, L. Lorini, W. H. Oskay, R. E. Drullinger, T. M. Fortier, J. E. Stalnaker, S. A. Diddams, W. C. Swann, N. R. Newbury, W. M. Itano, D. J. Wineland, and J. C. Bergquist Science 28 March 2008 319: 1808-1812; published online 6 March 2008 6 March 2008 [DOI: 10.1126/science.1154622] (in Reports)

7) "Strong Limit on a Variable Proton-to-Electron Mass Ratio from Molecules in the Distant Universe" Michael T. Murphy, Victor V. Flambaum, Sébastien Muller, and Christian Henkel Science 20 June 2008 320: 1611-1613 [DOI: 10.1126/science.1156352] (in Reports)

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[Dan Barker 2 DVD set - Jesus Myth or Fiction? and Why I Became An Atheist \\$20](#)

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Funny Stuff



National Secular Links

Here are several secular links to other organizations supporting secularism, science and skepticism around the world:

Americans United for Church and State Separation, National au.org

American Humanist Assoc. americanhumanist.org

Atheist Alliance International atheistalliance.org

American Atheists atheists.org
ACLU.org

BERTRAND RUSSELL SOCIETY
www.users.drew.edu/~jlenz/brs.html

CFI centerforinquiry.net

camp-quest.org

Freedom From Religion Foundation ffrf.org

jennymccarthybodycount.com

Meetup.com (search for humanist, agnostic, atheists or church and state in your area)

National Center for Science Education ncse.com

People for the American Way pfaw.org

Richarddawkinsfoundation.org

James Randi Educational Foundation randi.org/site

Southern California Secular Humanist Conference.org (in San Diego)

Whatstheharm.net

Local Southern California groups and links

Ateos Unidos: The group for Spanish speakers!
3rd Saturdays at 11 a.m. at the Center for Inquiry West, 4773 Hollywood Blvd.
Contact Liliana at 323-466-4223.

Americans United Meets the third Sunday of the month at 1:30pm at the [Irvine Ranch Water District](http://www.au-oc.org/) 15600 Sand Canyon Ave. Irvine, CA 92618 <http://www.au-oc.org/>

AU General Meeting: 4th Sundays, 11:00 a.m. at Center for Inquiry West, 4773 Hollywood Blvd. Presentation followed by lunch and afternoon activity.
Board meets briefly at 10:30 a.m. for members' concerns. Childcare is available.

<http://atheists.meetup.com/705/>

Atheists United Santa Clarita: 2nd Sundays, 11 a.m., at Greenhouse Café, 26586 Bouquet Cyn. Rd., Santa Clarita <http://atheists.meetup.com/670/>

Atheists United San Fernando Valley: 3rd Thursday, 6:30 p.m., Kountry Folks Restaurant, on Sepulveda Blvd. and Chase St.
Contact Henry at 818-988-2806, after 5:00 p.m.
<http://atheists.meetup.com/614/>

[Atheists United South Bay/Torrance](http://atheists.meetup.com/729/): 3rd Sundays, 7p.m., At Marie Callender's, 2979 Artesia Blvd, Redondo Beach <http://atheists.meetup.com/729/>

Adopt-a-Highway: Help us keep our roads clean in the name of atheism! AU hosts the southbound strip of the Glendale Freeway, Hwy 2, south of the 210. Keeping the road clean allows us to keep our signage there. Good exercise, and fun company! Two Saturdays a month. Dates vary. Contact Steve 310-670-7131

BackyardSkeptics.com – meets once a month in Villa Park (Orange County) also see meetup.com/backyard-skeptics

Center for Inquiry -Lectures 1st and 3rd Sundays, 11a.m. 4773 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles.
Free for members of CFI, \$6 for non-members
<http://centerforinquiry.net/la>

FreethoughtAllaince.org – sponsors debates and events in southern California

Free Thinkers for Liberty.org Freethinkers for Liberty is an organization of humanists and others who reject all superstition, in favor of rationality and critical thinking, who also respect the freedoms our forefathers described in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Freethinkers Toastmasters: Want to improve your speaking abilities in a fun and supportive group? Join FTTM on 2nd & 4th Saturdays at 2 p.m. at the Center for Inquiry West.
More information: David: 310-479-6318.
<http://www.freethinkersclub.org>

GALAH: Gay and Lesbian Atheists and Humanists- 2nd Sundays, 1 p.m., Center for Inquiry West, 4773 Hollywood Blvd.
Contact Ken Wolverton 818-554-9858 or galahla@aol.com

Contact Brian Parra for info: 805-794-4714,
venturaatheists@yahoo.com
<http://atheists.meetup.com/494/>

[Ventura "Freethought Parents Network":](#)
Kids playgroup meets every Tuesday at 11am,
Locations subject to change
<http://www.meetup.com/freethoughtparents/>

[WestValley Secular Humanists:](#) Last Sundays, 2 p.m.,
Daphne's Greek Café, 5780 Canoga Ave. Unit B,
Woodland Hills
<http://secularhumanism.meetup.com/17/>

[Generation Atheist:](#) A meeting group for atheists in
their 20s and 30s, 3rd Sundays, location changes
monthly. <http://atheists.meetup.com/724/Hollywood/>

East LA: 2nd Tuesdays, 7 p.m. at Atwater Village in
Glendale .Contact Steven Gibson 562-900-2834.
<http://atheists.meetup.com/212/>

[Humanist Association of Orange County](#) Meets the
third Sunday of the month at 1:30pm at the [Irvine
Ranch Water District](#) 15600 Sand Canyon Ave. Irvine,
CA 92618 <http://www.meetup.com/OCHumanists>

Humanist Association of Los Angeles: 2nd Sunday,
11:00 a.m., Colorado Center Community Room (same
as Yahoo Center), 2500 Broadway, Santa Monica (near
corner of 26th Avenue and Broadway); Contact: Larry
Taylor 310-479-2236, larry-a-taylor@att.net

Inland Empire: 1st Wednesday, 7 p.m., Riverside
Unitarian Church 3657 Lemon St., Riverside Contact
JanGoings@aol.com
<http://atheists.meetup.com/499/>

Lancaster "Antelope Valley Freethinkers" 4th Thurs.,
7pm, Camille's Garden Cafe, Lancaster
<http://atheists.meetup.com/615/>

Long Beach: 3rd Fridays, 7 p.m., at Hometown Buffet,
290 E. 4th St.
Meal cost is \$16. Contact Rodney 562-437- 4370 or
Hank Schultz,
whschultz@mac.com.
<http://atheists.meetup.com/487/>

Military Assoc. of Atheists and Freethinkers

Orange County Atheists, meets one a month at the
IHOP across from OC Airport
<http://www.ocatheists.com/>

Orange County Atheist United Chapter: 2nd Sundays,
10:30 a.m.,
Tee Room, 3100 Irvine Ave Newport Beach
Contact Norman 310-408-8653 (cell).

[San Diego New Atheists and Agnostics](#)
<http://www.meetup.com/atheists-518/>

San Diego Coalition of Reason

[Atheists United Ventura:](#) 4th Mondays, 7pm,
E.P. Foster Library, 651 E Main Street, Ventura.