

PANViews



Newsletter of PA Nonbelievers, Inc., affiliated with American Atheists, Atheist Alliance International and the Council for Secular Humanism.

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President's Report

Josh CruverKibi

The PA Nonbeliever Annual meeting will be this Saturday March 2nd, from 12 to 2 PM. The meeting will be a potluck like last year at the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, 1280 Clover Lane, Harrisburg, PA 17113. We will mostly be hanging out and enjoying food with a brief but necessary interruption to vote on board members.

Thank you everyone who signed up or renewed their PA Nonbeliever membership for 2024. If you renewed or started your membership before February 25th, you will be able to vote for board members at the meeting. The board members whose terms are up are mine (Josh CruverKibi), Brennan Hillyard, Nick Consoli, and Elan Lift. We also have one open board position. If you are interested in joining the board, you can make yourself available to be voted onto the board at the annual meeting.

I am also excited to announce that PA Nonbelievers will have a booth at the American Atheist convention this year in Philadelphia! The American Atheist Convention will be at the Loews Philadelphia Hotel, Thursday March 28th through Sunday March 31st. We are planning to have the PAN booth open all day Friday and Saturday at the convention. So, if you are at the convention stop by and say 'hi' or hang out and help at the table.

Calvin and Hobbes



Atheist News in Pennsylvania– The Nation – The World!

Schools and Their Lawyers

Several York County school districts are contracting with the Independence Law Center, a Christian law firm. The ILC has worked with many Pennsylvania school districts to institute book bans and anti-LGBTQ policies, according to the York *Dispatch*, yorkdispatch.com.

The Harrisburg-based firm provides help, for free, “to preserve religious liberty.” So far in York County, ILC worked with Central York on what books should remain in its libraries, and with Red Lion on what bathrooms students can use, what sport teams they can join, and what pronouns they can use.

This parking spot is **SAVED!**



The Dover and South Western districts are considering hiring ILC, although both already have contracted with other legal firms. The districts haven’t talked about what exactly they want ILC to consult about.

Dover’s school board president, David Conley, did offer some explanation about why he thinks an arrangement with ILC would be worthwhile. “Our main objective in creating this agreement is to seek the wisest legal counsel possible to assist us in the evaluation and formulation of district policies,” he said. South Western offered a bit more information. They are looking for a special counsel to deal with “policy formation for facilities use, student records and sports.”

At a previous meeting, board president Matthew Gelazela noted he had talked to several law firms, all of whom felt the board’s position on bathrooms is defensible. What is that position? “Our bathrooms should be separated according to birth sex,” Gelazela explained. “That’s how we protect our students.”

The Red Lion school board dropped an appeal in a public records dispute that requested information about the district’s use of ILC in forming its anti-LBGTQ policies.

ILC describes its goals on its website, Independencelawcenter.org:

We defend human life at all stages and defend the rights of the people to freely exercise their religion, as well as all the other First Amendment freedoms that depend on that first freedom. We protect and advance these and other self-evident truths through advocacy in courts of law and courts of public opinion, and through legislative, local, and educational policy development.

The website offers this information about ILC, as well:

About Us

The Independence Law Center is a public-interest civil rights law firm affiliated with the Pennsylvania Family Institute, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization funded through tax-deductible contributions that works to preserve religious liberty, promote marriage and the family, protect human life, and improve education and policy for our clients. We are here to assist and represent individuals, private entities, as well as government entities through legal advice, legal representation, and testimony before legislative bodies.

Failure to Report

The Pennsylvania State Police have charged Rhett Hintze, a stake president of seven Pennsylvania Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-Day Saints churches, of knowing about, yet failing to report, sexual assault allegations against a Lebanon County church leader, per abc27.com. (According to newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org, a stake president is a volunteer who “oversees Church programs in a defined geographic area composed of individual congregations called wards and is responsible to help the members of his stake in their efforts to follow Jesus Christ.”)



“Failure to report or refer” is a third-degree felony, which can carry a prison term of up to seven years. Because of his leadership role in the church, Pennsylvania’s Child Protective Services Law makes him a mandated reporter. The law was expanded in 2014 as a result of the Jerry Sandusky/Penn State scandal to increase the categories of people who are mandated reporters, and to increase the penalties for not reporting allegations.

A man who was in a leadership role in the LDS Lebanon ward, Shawn Cory Gooden, was charged with sexually assaulting minors in Virginia in 2022, and in Berks County in 2023. The assaults occurred between 1997 and 2000, and the victims were between 8 and 12 years old when it happened. There was another allegation in French Creek State Park (located in Berks and Chester counties) in 2000.

Police claim that Hintze knew about the allegations against Gooden in 2020, when Gooden was a church leader, because both Gooden and one of the victims told him. Gooden was arrested about two years later.

The LDS issued a statement reiterating that it is working to prevent abuse and will address any such incidents. However, the statement concluded as follows: “The Church trains its leaders and supports their lawful efforts. The charges now brought by local prosecutors for failing to report the abuse are misguided, and the Church will vigorously defend him.”

Court Issues

The recent Alabama court ruling that embryos created during in-vitro fertilization are “extrauterine children” has caused consternation across the US. According to USA Today, usatoday.com, the Department of Health and Human Services estimated in 2020 that there are at least 600,000 frozen embryos in storage; the National Embryo Donation Center thinks the number could be as high as 1 million. About 2% of US births, or about 100,000, are the result of IVF. Embryos have been treated as the private property of the donors, to be implanted, given away or destroyed without any input from the government. As a result of this decision, many IVF facilities in Alabama have stopped their procedures, fearing prosecution.

THE STORY OF PASSOVER



Where an allknowing God needed help
to kill the right babies.

For nonbelievers, the decision is particularly disturbing because of its dependence on Christian faith. Alabama Chief Justice Tom Parker wrote the following in an opinion attached to the ruling; "In summary, the theologically based view of the sanctity of life adopted by the People of Alabama encompasses the following: (1) God made every person in His image; (2) each person therefore has a value that far exceeds the ability of human beings to calculate; and (3) human life cannot be wrongfully destroyed without incurring the wrath of a holy God, who views the destruction of His image as an affront to Himself."

This decision may be a step too far, even for Alabama. CNN reports that both Democrats and Republicans in the Alabama House and Senate are working on "clarifying" legislation to protect IVF in the state. Democrats have introduced a bill that would assert that fertilized human eggs stored outside of a uterus are not considered human beings under state law. Republicans are planning similar legislation.

That being said, some anti-abortion activists were thrilled with the ruling. The Associated Press, apnews.com, reported the following quotes: It's "a tremendous victory for life," said the powerful Christian legal firm Alliance Defending Freedom. "A beautiful defense of life," said Tony Perkins, head of the Family Research Council.

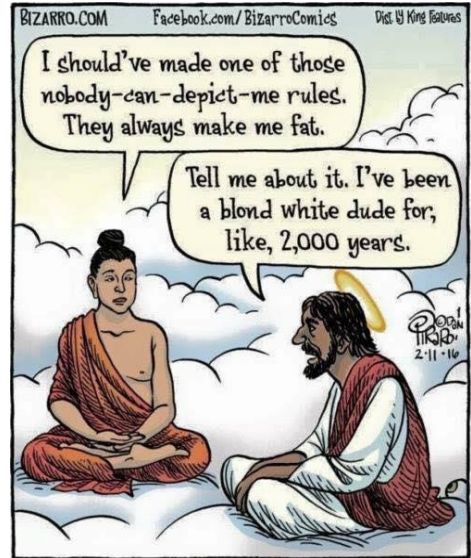
Chief Justice Parker elaborated on his views a few days later in an online interview with evangelist Johnny Enlow. According to nbcnews.com, Parker explained that he believes in the "Seven Mountains Mandate," which states that Christians are meant to rule over seven key areas of American life, including religion, family, media, business, education, arts/entertainment and government/military.

There is some disagreement on the movement's basis. Some followers use Revelation 17:9: "And here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains." Others point to Isaiah 2:2: "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains." Finally, some quote Deuteronomy 7:1, comparing the seven mountains to the seven kingdoms Israel was supposed to drive out of Canaan.

In his interview, Parker said, "God created government, and the fact that we have let it go into the possession of others, it's heartbreaking. That's why he is calling and equipping people to step back into these mountains right now."

Matthew D. Taylor, a senior scholar at the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies in Maryland, is familiar with the Seven Mountains. "The Seven Mountains is not about democracy," he notes "In fact, I would argue that the Seven Mountains itself is a vision that is antidemocratic." According to Taylor, this ideology has grown in influence since the 2016, when conservative Christians embraced Donald Trump, and Trump, in return, formed relationships with pastors who preach about Seven Mountains.

David Barton, who has written about US history with a strong Christian conservative slant, is a Seven Mountains believer. He pushes the idea that separation of church and state is a misinterpretation of the Constitution, based on a flawed understanding of Thomas Jefferson's 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists, in which Jefferson said: *Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.* (This seems clear.)



Among other things, Seven Mountain proponents think that any laws or court rulings limiting the influence of religion in schools or government (like the ones banning mandatory school prayer) are an insult to the founders' idea of America.

Fringe ideas? Maybe. But in a survey last year Paul Djupe of Denison University about 20% of American adults (and 30% of Christians) agreed with the statement "God wants Christians to stand atop the '7 mountains of society,' including the government, education, media, and others."

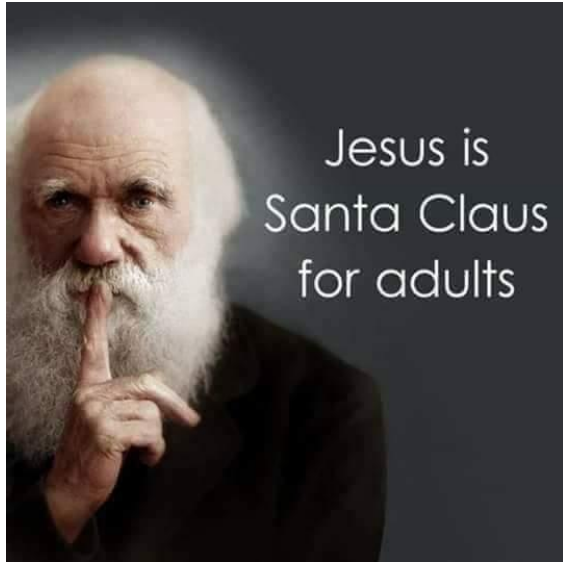
In other court/religion news, the New York *Times*, nytimes.com, reports that Supreme Court Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr. again criticized the court's decision recognizing same-sex marriage. His remarks were in a statement about why the court had rejected a request to hear Missouri Department of Corrections v. Jean Finney. Finney sued her employer, the Department of Corrections, because a co-worker retaliated against Finney when she began a same-sex relationship. Finney won, and the Department of Corrections appealed because jurors who opposed gay marriage were excluded from the jury.

Alito said that because of the Court's same-sex marriage decision, people who oppose homosexuality can be "labeled as bigots and treated as such." The Finney case, he said, "exemplifies the danger" from the court's 2015 decision, *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

Finney's lawyer asked potential jurors about their religious beliefs, asking, among other things, "How many of you went to a religious organization growing up where it was taught that people that are homosexuals shouldn't have the same rights as everyone else because it was a sin with what they did?"

The Department of Corrections' brief before the Supreme Court said that the lawyer's questions endorsed the idea that "a person with traditional religious beliefs should never sit on a jury when a party has been in a same-sex relationship because when a prospective juror believes as a religious matter 'that is a sin, there's no way to rehabilitate.'"

The Supreme Court voted against hearing the appeal, on technical grounds, not related to this issue. But Alito's statement – which was gratuitous, because the Court was not going to hear the appeal – is just another scary signal about where US courts may be headed.



Medical Workers and Religion

In 2019, during Donald Trump’s presidency, the Department of Health and Human Services enacted a rule that could strip federal funding from health care facilities if they required workers to perform any services – such as abortions, contraception, gender-affirming care, or sterilization – that conflicted with the worker’s religious or moral beliefs.

Federal laws exist that allow health care providers to refuse to provide care in certain circumstances. The Trump administration rule would have expanded how the laws could be implemented.

HHS says that it is trying to find a balance between providing health care and honoring the religious beliefs of health care providers.

“Some doctors, nurses, and hospitals, for example, object for religious or moral reasons to providing or referring for abortions or assisted suicide, among other procedures. Respecting such objections honors liberty and human dignity,” the department said. But it further noted, “patients also have rights and health needs, sometimes urgent ones. The Department will continue to respect the balance Congress struck, work to ensure individuals understand their conscience rights, and enforce the law.”

According to thehill.com, the Biden administration has partially rescinded this rule. The changes are detailed; but according to Modern Healthcare, modernhealthcare.com, “The Biden administration tossed the parts of the Trump administration regulation that courts ruled unlawful, including the provisions expanding it to cover more workers and some of the reporting requirements. HHS retained a mandate that employers notify employees of their rights under the conscience rule.”

The new rules limit who is covered under the law. Under the 2019 rule, for example, someone working at a facility could refuse to drive a patient to another facility to receive an abortion. Under the Biden rule, the workers covered are those who would actively assist in or carry out the procedure, per nursejournal.org. In addition, the rule clarifies that workers must provide services in emergency situations.

National Prayer Breakfast Was Bad Enough

PAN members have long been appalled by the National Prayer Breakfast, an annoying but (relatively) moderate religious event. According to Rolling Stone, rollingstone.com, Joe Biden offered what Rolling Stone described as a “bland” prayer at that event, saying “America should remember its character of ‘honesty, decency, dignity, and respect,’ and find strength in togetherness.”

Rolling Stone reports on a new, crazier event. Recently House Speaker Mike Johnson and two dozen members of Congress held the second-annual National Gathering for Prayer and Repentance, at DC’s Museum of the Bible. Speakers prayed their fellow Christians would “tie the hands of Satan” and “bind the demonic forces” loose in America.

This National Gathering was Speaker Johnson’s idea. Rolling Stone points out speakers didn’t look for repentance for any personal faults but instead were apologizing for the failure of Christians to force others to follow their ideology. For example, pastor Ché Ahn, a leader of the New Apostolic Reformation, a religious movement that wants Christians to dominate the world so Jesus can come back sooner, lamented: “We have abdicated our responsibility to occupy until You come.”

Other speakers claimed that Christians “have been given legal power and authority from Heaven,” and prayed for 100,000 LGBTQ Americans “to be saved and transformed by the power of God.” Some of the participants are into Old Testament practices; the National Gathering began with a bearded man simultaneously blowing two shofars, or trumpets made from animal horns. One of the horns represented a “call to arms,” a speaker explained, and the other was “the sound of travail before a holy and righteous God.”

Pastor Jonathan Cahn told the audience that American is fighting the influence of three pagan gods from the Old Testament, who are staging a “repossession” of the US, because America has abandoned Christianity. Cahn named these three false gods as Baal, “the spirit that drives God out of every realm of public life”; Ishtar, “the spirit of sexual immorality” and “unbridled lust”; and Moloch, who tempts parents to engage in “the sacrifice of their own children.”

Rolling Stone notes that Cahn didn’t seem to think this struggle was metaphorical. More from his sermon: “We must pray for the power of God to cast out the spirits of darkness, from our land, from the halls of our Capitol here. Cast out the gods, cast out the spirits, and set America free!”

This is disturbing on its own. It’s especially disturbing that the Speaker of the House – third in the line of succession to the presidency – supports it.

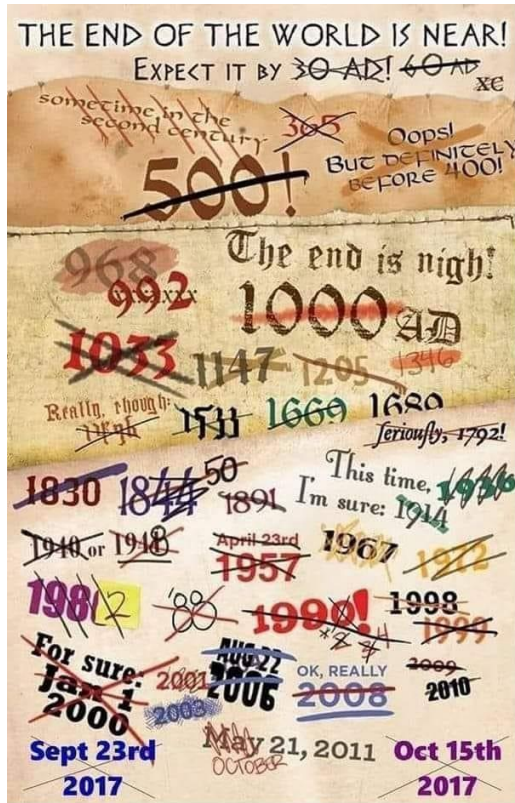


Trouble at Boys Town

Boys Town was founded by Father Edward Flanagan in 1917. Located in Omaha, Nebraska, it started as a home for orphaned boys, and enjoyed a great public reputation. The phrase, “He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother,” was supposedly said to Father Flanagan by a boy carrying another boy on his back, and Father Flanagan was sympathetically portrayed by Spencer Tracy in the 1938 movie, “Boys Town.”

The Des Moines *Register*, desmoinesregister.com reports that the institution is having problems. In recent years it has morphed into a facility for troubled and at-risk youth, both boys and girls. According to the story, the organization had invested millions of dollars in residential programs throughout the country. However, in 2017 three large programs, in California, Texas and New York had to close, because, Boys Town said, regulatory and environmental issues made it impossible for them to continue. But the closings also followed serious cases of rape and employee neglect.

In June 2015 three teens living in a Boys Town facility in Brooklyn, New York escaped and then raped and robbed a woman in Manhattan. The city of New York ended its contract with the organization, and at least four employees were arrested for lying about performing mandatory bed checks. Further investigation uncovered management problems at other Boys Town group homes.



The Archdiocese of Omaha has been involved in picking national directors for the organization, including Rev. Stephen Boes, who recently left. As has been the case with many Catholic dioceses, there has been an investigation uncovering widespread sexual abuse in the three in Nebraska dioceses, including Omaha. Several priests accused of sexual abuse had worked at Immaculate Conception at Dowd Chapel on the Boys Town campus. There were also credible reports of abuse by Rev. Patrick Henry, now deceased, who had worked at Boys Town as a social worker and house parent in the 1960s and 1970s, before he entered the priesthood. Henry was “laicized” (removed from the priesthood) by the Cleveland diocese in 2019. The investigation discovered that church authorities knew of the abuse, did nothing to stop it, and never notified authorities.

“The most troubling finding... is the fact that on numerous occasions when there was an opportunity to bring justice to the victims, those in authority chose to place the reputation of the church above the protection of the children,” Attorney General Douglas J. Peterson wrote when the investigative report was released.

Although Boys Town certainly appears to the outside eye to be a Catholic institution the church seems to be trying to distance itself. Archbishop George Lucas issued a video apologizing to Catholics in Nebraska and issued a statement to the Register. *“Boys Town is not a Catholic organization as defined in canon law. The Archdiocese of Omaha partners with Boys Town specifically as it relates to appointing a pastor at Immaculate Conception (Dowd Chapel). The archdiocese has not yet assigned a priest to lead Immaculate Conception, and Father Boes’ assignment also remains pending.”*

Neither Boes, who apparently has now retired, nor the archdiocese responded to the Register's questions about clergy abuse at Boys Town. The organization insists it has policies and procedures in place to protect its residents, and that it investigates complaints. Apparently, that wasn't always the case.

Satan’s Darlings, Taylor and Travis

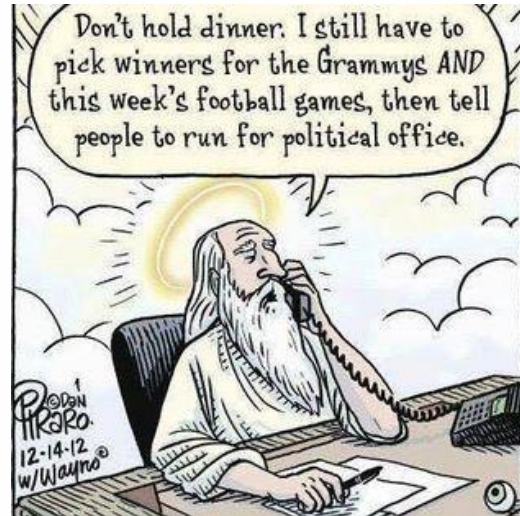
Wildly successful pop singer Taylor Swift seems to attract crazy right-wing rumors. She is dating Kansas City Chief player Travis Kelce. Prior to the Super Bowl the internet was awash in rumors that the NFL allowed the Chiefs to reach the playoffs, and then would let them win the Super Bowl, so that after the game Swift would join Kelce on the field where they would both endorse Joe Biden; some of the rumors suggested Biden would join them. Although the Chiefs did indeed win, Biden didn't show, Swift and Kelce didn't endorse anybody. (By the way, right-wingers appear to assume Swift is a liberal because she encourages people to register to vote.)

According to meidiate.com, there's still more. OAN's Alison Steinberg ranted about sports, about how they brainwash people, and how much attention Taylor and Travis were getting. She concluded by saying, “Just imagine for a moment if people were as dedicated to Jesus as they are professional sports. I think the country might look pretty different if that were the case. But sadly, as we know, it's not.”

Samaa.com reports that Hank Kunneman, a prominent minister and MAGA supporter, accuses Swift of promoting Satanism, by using Satanic rituals and witchcraft during her concerts. Kelce has made commercials for Pfizer encouraging people to get the Covid vaccine; Kunneman thinks Swift's Satanism may include a link with Pfizer.

Swift attended many of Kelce's Chiefs games, and the TV broadcasts would show her reacting to Kelce's performance. Kunneman was unhappy about that, referring to her as "some lady, some girl," and questioning why the broadcasts showed her. (Swift is pretty popular. Her most recent world-wide tour grossed more than \$1 billion.)

This is not the first time Swift has been linked to Satan. Yahoo Finance, finance.yahoo.com, notes that in 2016, the internet was abuzz with pictures of Swift and Zeena Schreck, former high priestess of the church of Satan, pointing out a resemblance. Swift was a clone of Schreck, the story went, the daughter of Church of Satan founder Anton LaVey.



According to Forbes, forbes.com, last fall Swift posted to her fans on Instagram: "I've been watching videos of you guys in the theaters dancing and prancing and recreating choreography, creating inside jokes, casting spells, getting engaged, and just generally creating the exact type of joyful chaos we're known for." Crazy people leapt on the "casting spells" part as proof Swift is a witch.

So far, at least, this nonsense has not affected her popularity.

Novel Fundraising

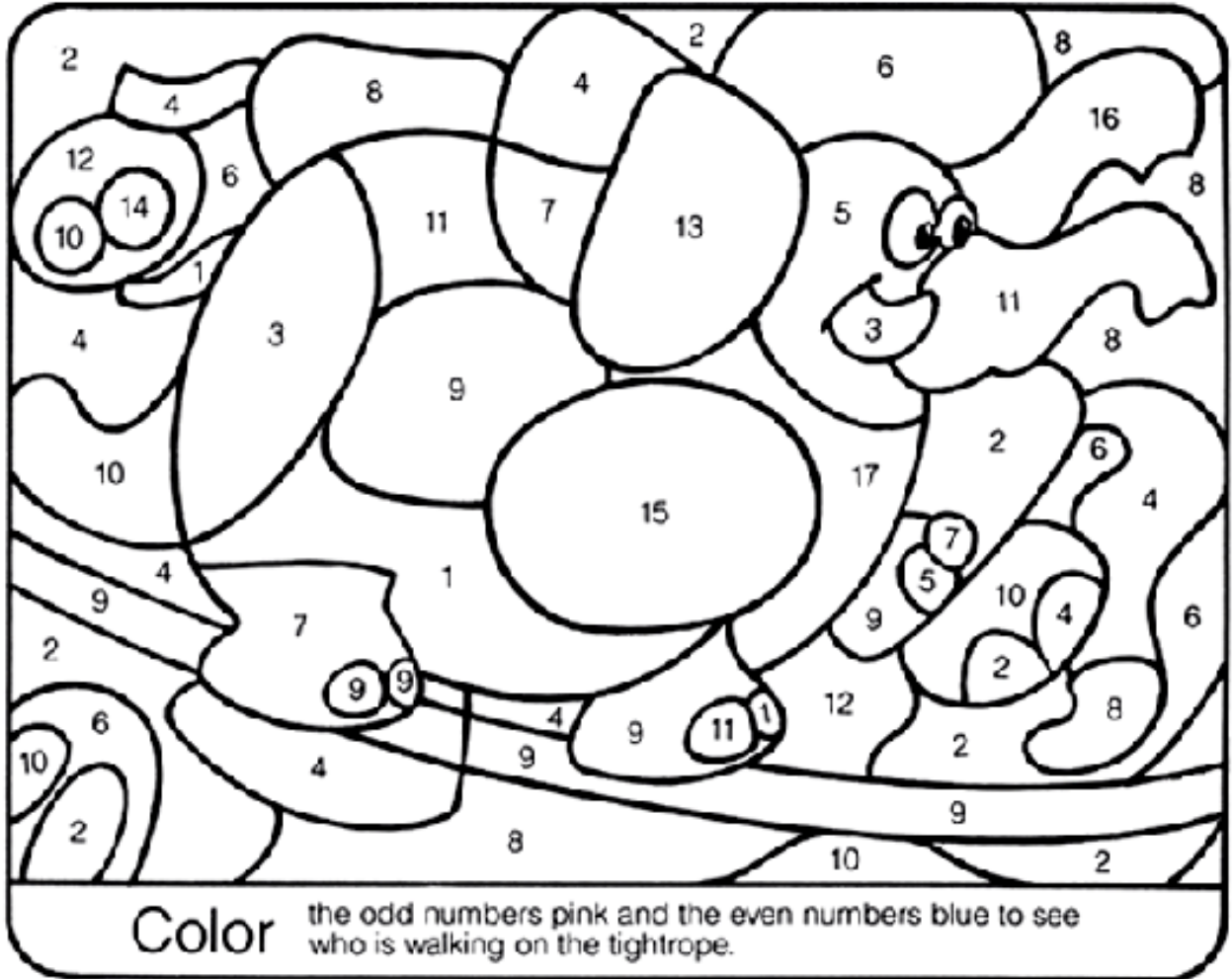
Times are tough for churches. They are losing members and revenue. The New York *Post*, nypost.com, tells the story of a Methodist Connecticut pastor who has come up with an exciting fund-raising project. He's selling crystal meth out of the church's parsonage.

Herbert Miller, 63, pastor of Woodbury United Methodist Church, was arrested as he attempted to sell drugs to someone who had alerted the police. He had crystal meth in both rock and liquid form in a hypodermic needle, ready to be injected.

Apparently, Miller wasn't actually dealing for money. In exchange for the meth, he would watch gay couples engage in sexual activity. He was only hired by Woodbury in July; his name has been removed from their website.

FUN!

Odd and Even Color by Number



Logic Puzzles

Solutions at the end of *PANViews*

1. Susan and Lisa decided to play tennis against each other. They bet \$1 on each game they played. Susan won three bets and Lisa won \$5. How many games did they play?
2. If five cats can catch five mice in five minutes, how long will it take one cat to catch one mouse?
3. There is a barrel with no lid and some wine in it. "This barrel of wine is more than half full," says the woman. "No, it's not," says the man. "It's less than half full." Without any measuring implements and without removing any wine from the barrel, how can they easily determine who is correct?
4. There are three bags, each containing two marbles. Bag A contains two white marbles, Bag B contains two black marbles, and Bag C contains one white marble and one black marble. You pick a random bag and take out one marble, which is white. What is the probability that the remaining marble from the same bag is also white?
5. Three men are lined up behind each other. The tallest man is in the back and can see the heads of the two in front of him; the middle man can see the one man in front of him; the man in front can't see anyone. They are blindfolded and hats are placed on their heads, picked from three black hats and two white hats. The extra two hats are hidden and the blindfolds removed. The tallest man is asked if he knows what color hat he's wearing; he doesn't. The middle man is asked if he knows; he doesn't. But the man in front, who can't see anyone, says he knows. How does he know, and what color hat is he wearing?
6. There are three crates, one with apples, one with oranges, and one with both apples and oranges mixed. Each crate is closed and labeled with one of three labels: Apples, Oranges, or Apples and Oranges. The label maker broke and labeled all of the crates incorrectly. How could you pick just one fruit from one crate to figure out what's in each crate?

Member Submissions

What Verse Will You Contribute?

Josh CruverKibi

In my experience, verses are typically not created for people who do not make a lot of noise or are not within the popular group think or power. I found early on in life that waiting for recognition or trying to be, or copy, the group to have verses written or sung about me would be a wasted life. Either the verses will never come, or I will hear verses about what is familiar and comfortable to the group and not familiar and unique to me and my autonomy.

Ah a glorious song sung in a circle facing in on each other about their universal verses. Easy, simple, and familiar verses make up the most poppy and platinum selling records, while the hard problems often need a bold change and will often not be understood by the group or for years after the actions and verses had been created.

My verses like my life lived are unique and context specific. Like the verses in “Thus Spake Zarathustra” or the “Orkneyinga Saga”, they are best not read by nor intended for the guardian, determinist, or traditionalist. My verses have been and will continue to be about how to adjust to changing environments while discovering or keeping a sense of self. An unending and perpetual verse until death of awareness and balance for personal and environmental interactivity.

If I can make more verses to help myself and others be free of absolute and shortsighted thinking, I would be very happy about my life lived. Absolutism in the mind is like the damming of the river. And the river, like life, stops at the absolutes. I find this lines up well with the philosophical and ethical expectations for counseling others, so I suppose that some of my verses will be written and sung within my client’s minds. However, the preferred verses for their minds will not refer to me, but to their own versed self. So, I may be determined to be doomed to not be sung about or I exist existentially free from the group’s simple verses.

MY ATHEIST JOURNEY

John Wolff (originally 9/21/09)

Judging from some of the vitriolic comments on the Web, it appears that few Americans understand much about atheism. Here are my sentiments, with apologies for the length and self-centeredness, but I cannot presume to speak for atheists at large. After all, we are a very diverse and argumentative bunch.

My atheism means this: there is no evidence of the existence of any supernatural beings, thus all religions are bunk, invented by those who profit from their followers. Show me some evidence of god, and I’ll fall on my knees and repent. Further, although like most – perhaps all – people, I am subject to both rational and irrational emotions, but that is not evidence of a “spiritual” universe separate from the physical world of our brains.

As humans we have an innate desire to understand and control our circumstances, thus we feel a need to find a cause for everything that happens. Reason or logic or plausibility is not a prerequisite. We have evolved an aversion to chaos and randomness, thus it becomes easy to follow a leader who claims that he, like our parents, has all the answers; that god or his angels have spoken to him, and he knows that throwing a virgin into the nearest volcano will appease the god and bring rain. All civilizations have felt the same need to invoke magic or gods or celestial bodies. We may sneer at those who believed that Earth was carried by a turtle, or that a charioteer moved the sun, or that the gods resided in plants or animals, or that “sacred places” existed. An objective view will show that our current mainstream religions remain exactly the same thing, although now fleshed out with technology and large buildings and often endowed

with tax loopholes to reinforce the “opiate of the people”. And we still have Jerusalem, and Mecca, and St. Peter’s, and Lourdes. All places worthy to defend by oppressing or killing the nonbelievers.

As children, we are all limited to following our parents’ beliefs and indeed, for a few years, they are our gods in every sense. In my opinion, that dependence programs us to expect a “guardian angel” or “savior” in later years. Only those who develop intellectual curiosity and knowledge about this fabulous world will manage to develop independent thinking. Yet only a portion of those will then reach the maturity to conclude that religions are based either on wishful thinking or on deliberate exploitation by religious leaders. Even the most outrageous stories have followers. The most outrageous statements get traction if repeated often enough. Then the media pick it up and repeat it yet again, like: “homosexuals at Disney World cause hurricanes in Florida.”

The promise of eternal life will trump any rational thinking, and I understand that anything that can buttress that hope or belief is greatly sought after. I would never presume to force my views on anyone. The only thing that atheism can promise people is to rescue them from a fear of hell. And when faced with making a living in this country, it may be necessary to hide true feelings about religion in the face of near 80% of the public being antagonistic to nonbelievers – especially if the job entails dealing with the public at large or with a religious boss.

I have no need to fear a god or eternal damnation because of my “original” or any other sin. I do not need a preacher to tell me what rituals to perform. I do not need a hierarchy that tolerates abuse of children to tell me what books I may read or what movies I may see. I do not need religious belief to behave properly and try to speak the truth at all times – it seems inborn in the majority of humans. I bear no ill will toward religious people, especially if their religion and/or devotion brings them joy, peace, hope of reunion with dead relatives, or whatever good feelings are advertised. Only if their religiosity intrudes into the political area or is imposed on me, do I resent it. Many religious people are well meaning and benevolent, and many churches do provide social services. My own life was saved by a religious institution in WW II, albeit at the cost of conversion.

I would never want to destroy anyone’s hope or good feelings by preaching, haranguing, or bullying them to recognize the silliness of their blind faith. But I deplore ignorance of science and history – although the latter is often re-written by the victors and the truth may be hard to discern. I have no problem with people praying, except when it is forced on me in public arenas, and especially when our elected officials choose to endorse ostentatious and hypocritical prayer instead of concentrating on the civic job they were elected for. It is deplorable that overt atheists have little chance of being elected to any public office. I have no problem showing respect for people who have religious beliefs that I consider strange and weird, as long as they show me the same respect for my ideas and don’t try to convert me. But I certainly have a problem with all so-called missionaries who invariably use some sort of bribery in order to gain converts, whether at my front door, or “in darkest Africa”. And the relentless ignoring of the constitutional separation of government from religion is a major issue pushed by the religious fundies.

I understand that meditation or religious belief can provide feelings of peace and pleasure; I had those feelings and was a devout believer from age 10 to 16. Since then, however, I never gave much thought to religion at all. My concern is rather more about civil liberty and politics than religion. It doesn’t matter how many sects or beliefs are practiced or invented, or how many people can be talked into committing suicide to find the next world. Religious belief in the abstract is inoffensive and unimportant, but when religious moralists infringe on our culture and civic life, it becomes intolerable. Ronald Reagan raised my consciousness with his attempt to fund a sectarian college; that motivated me to join the ACLU, which until then had always seemed a bit too radical. It was not until George W. Bush started to mix religion with politics, government, and war that I became more energized. That administration with attorney general Ashcroft, who led official prayers at meetings and draped those horrible statuary breasts that offended him, turned me into a more militant atheist who found it important to rail against Christian takeover. Until recently, I did not even care how many religious monuments and symbols were erected on public land, but I changed my opinion because of the relentless takeover of politics and the re-writing of history by the right-wing fundamentalists. Other religions have different but equally offensive features, but powerful

Christianity is the target in our country. It isn't so much about religion vs. atheism as it is about freedom, equality, and civil rights.

As a nonprofit educational organization, PAN is not permitted to endorse any particular political party or candidate. Despite such tax-exemption rules, evangelicals consider themselves sufficiently powerful to regularly taunt the IRS by ignoring the rule and openly endorsing their candidates. I have heard (and do not doubt) that local candidates for office here in Lancaster County have to be approved by the churches in order to even be considered. A candidate's actual religion matters little, compared with the source of their money and political clout. It's all about power, politics, and advertising. It does not matter how many ridiculous verses there are in any "holy book" or how many religious statues are on mountaintops. What matters is how easy it is for the authorities to affect our personal life via religion-based rules. And that, in turn, depends on our elected senators and representatives and those who finance them.

I will never understand how any sane human could ever believe that a book – any book – is divinely inspired or the verbatim word of a god (as interpreted by those in power). Even events of the previous day can get distorted and misreported. How about centuries-old stories? Any human knowledge is tenuous and subject to review and correction and is never absolute. But then to invent and try to justify creationism in order to make the biblical creation story literal is truly "beyond belief." Even in my Catholic altar boy days in Europe, the bible was never considered as verbatim truth and evolution was fully accepted and never questioned.

One of the most disgusting aspects of Christianity is the "repent and you shall be saved" dogma. You can commit the most vile crimes, but as long as you repent or go to confession, you will be saved. It does not matter what you do to your fellow man, as long as you repent – even if only on your deathbed. And as has always been the case, those who yammer loudest about their piety and the immorality of others usually have something to hide themselves. Our hypocritical politicians caught with their pants down, are welcomed back with open arms, as long as they repent (as they always do – when caught).

In the US, some things have improved during my lifetime, but many of these improvements are incomplete or under attack. Women have way more freedom and opportunities – but there is still no ERA. The Voting Rights Act has eliminated much discrimination – but it can be circumvented with dirty tricks and lack of enforcement. We have Head Start for disadvantaged kids – but financing continues to be uncertain. Overt racial bias is frowned upon, but in many places it flourishes underground; not all that far underground in the former Confederate states. We have Medicare and Medicaid – but many are excluded from the "privilege" of health care. Meantime, those programs are currently financially unsustainable, all the while contributing to the drug industry's profits and advertising. We have improved reproductive rights and the government has been ousted from our bedrooms to a large degree – but abortion availability has been severely restricted, mostly by religious obfuscation and even murder. Gays are now recognized and many have come out of the closet, but they are still denied rights in many states and in the service.

Religious lobbies and corporate money have affected legislation in the areas of reproductive freedom, equal rights, medical research, taxpayer support of vouchers for sectarian schools, incarceration of addicts, and corruption of elected officials. We are not so different from those countries that have an officially endorsed religion. Thankfully, the various Christian sects don't kill each other like they do in some other religions. They keep proclaiming this a "Christian nation" to whip up "crusades" against the world except when their dogma predicts that it will speed the second coming (Israel). Instead of the Christian "love thy neighbor" injunction, they play up old racial and religious resentments to divide us. But the erosion of personal freedoms is not the end of the problem. The extremists have created a pervasive atmosphere in the US that is anti-science and anti-education and in favor of perpetuating religious myths and "spirituality". In the entire world, we are ahead of only Turkey when it comes to belief in evolution! Science is disdained unless it can quickly result in items to be manufactured (in China) and sold at a profit. I fear that once they get their act together and stop suppressing their dissenters and women, European and Asian countries will eat our lunch.

Throughout history, even those who were persecuted because of their religious beliefs, when given more freedom, turned right around and persecuted those “others” who held different notions. The Puritans were the poster-child example of that. A bit like abused children predictably turning into abusing parents when they grow up. It seems impossible for most to break away from what they learned as children, and true to precedent, the current crop of fundies is ready to force their beliefs on everyone. Tribalism seems built into our genetic history. It likely was very useful at one time providing needed group cohesion; these days it manifests itself as fear of the “other”, the “outsider”. It will take a very long time to change humanity into more rational thinkers without need of a supernatural crutch. Our tribal heritage evidently still persists in our DNA.

I resent the powerful religion industry because I am forced to support churches, their staffs and beliefs via tax exemptions and the fact that they sway the votes of their adherents. That industry has used power to incite and justify wars and torture from before the Inquisition to the present day. Right-wing fundamentalists can swing elections and have gained such power and wealth under our recent regimes that they have become a threat to our way of life. They are so convinced of their self-righteous duty to proselytize that they will stop at nothing. Lying for Jesus is a virtue, as demonstrated in the Dover creationism trial and in much of the right-wing propaganda. They have refined the Big Lie method – invented by the Nazis – and have fine-tuned it for talk radio and tailored it to our latest communication techniques. Repeat it often enough, and some of it will stick. It does not need to be true at all.

Worldwide, wars and genocide and torture continue unabated, frequently based on religion and ethnicity. I hope that we will evolve further beyond our murderous and lying ways, but at this rate, it will take tens of millennia.

PAN News & Updates

PAN’s Annual Meeting, Saturday March 2 from 12 to 2 pm at the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, 1280 Clover Lane, Harrisburg, PA 17113.

Meetings – PAN holds in-person and online meetings. Locations, times, and dates below.

Online meeting: Fourth Thursday of the month at 6:00 pm. We hope to split the meeting into an hour of chat and an hour of presentation or more structured discussion. Anyone with a book/movie review, discussion topic, or potential guest speaker should contact Dietrich

Dellinger @ guyinnagorillasuit@gmail.com

Chambersburg – Second Thursday of the month, 6:30 pm, Volcano Japanese Restaurant
955 Wayne Ave, Chambersburg

Cumberland/Mechanicsburg –Third Thursday of the month, Gather Your Party Gaming & Hobby, 219 North Hanover Street, Carlisle, PA. This group plays board (atheist) games!

Harrisburg– First Wednesday of the month, 6:30 pm, Zeroday Brewing Company Taproom, 923 North 3rd Street.

Lancaster – Fourth Wednesday of the month, 6:00 pm, Centerville Diner, 100 S. Centerville Rd.

Lebanon - Second Wednesday of the month, 6:00 pm, Plaza Azteca in Myerstown.

Reading – Third Thursdays at 7:15pm, 3rd & Spruce Drafthaus, 238 S 3rd Ave, Reading, PA 19611

York Meeting – First Sunday at noon, Mexitaly Brick Oven Brewhouse, 2440 East Market St.

How to Contribute to PAN

Giant Cards - We will have Giant grocery store cards available for purchase at PAN meetings. You pay face value for the card and use the face value at the store, but Giant lets PAN have 5% of that face value. If you shop at Giant, anyway, use the cards in lieu of cash and help PAN. What could be easier?

Pennies for PAN - Finally, we are happy to take money the old-fashioned way. You can give your tax-deductible contribution to a Board Member at one of our meetings or events, you can donate via PayPal on our website, www.panonbelievers.org, or you can mail a check to us at PA Nonbelievers, Inc. PO Box 702, York, PA 17405. Remember when you donate you can indicate what fund you want your donation to go to, you can find the list of our funds on the PAN website in the Donate section.

PAN Board of Directors

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Logic Puzzle answers:

1. Eleven. Because Lisa lost three games to Susan, she had lost \$3 (\$1 per game). So, she had to win back that \$3 with three more games, then win another five games to win \$5.
2. Five minutes. Using the information we know, it would take one cat 25 minutes to catch all five mice ($5 \times 5 = 25$). Then working backward and dividing 25 by five, we get five minutes for one cat to catch each mouse.
3. Tilt the barrel until the wine barely touches the lip of the barrel. If the bottom of the barrel is visible then it is less than half full. If the barrel bottom is still completely covered by the wine, then it is more than half full.
4. 2 out of 3. You know you don't have Bag B. But because Bag A has two white marbles, you could have picked either marble; if you think of it as four marbles in total from Bags A and C, three white and one black, you'll have a greater chance of picking another white marble.
5. Black. The man in front knew he and the middle man aren't both wearing white hats or the man in the back would have known he had a black hat (since there are only two white hats). The man in front also knows the middle man didn't see him with a white hat because if he did, based on the tallest man's answer, the middle man would have known he himself was wearing a black hat. So, the man in front knows his hat must be black.
6. Pick a fruit from the crate marked Apples and Oranges. If that fruit is an apple, you know that the crate should be labeled Apples because all of the labels are incorrect as they are. Therefore, you know the crate marked Apples must be Oranges (if it were labeled Apples and Oranges, the Oranges crate would be labeled correctly, and we know it isn't), and the one marked Oranges is Apples and Oranges. Alternately, if you picked an orange from the crate marked Apples and Oranges, you know that crate should be marked Oranges, the one marked Oranges must be Apples, and the one marked Apples must be Apples and Oranges.