December, 2024



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

Visit us on the web at panonbelievers.org or like us on Facebook at facebook.com/PennsylvaniaNonbelievers
Follow us on Twitter @panonbelievers

President's Report

Josh CruverKibi

"Faith is believing what you know ain't so." Mark Twain, Following the Equator

Why doesn't an atheist or agnostic just go along with the popular and prevailing faiths and beliefs of the social groups we are born into? Wouldn't it be easier? Why can't we just ignore contradictions once we discover or notice them?

It all starts with doubt. A crack in the faith veneer. But there is more to us not taking the complacent path to faithful group think. We 'struggle' to ignore the details and the logic of ideas, constructs, and things that do not appear to fit together. Reality, and more consequentially, what we are consciously aware of, needs to make sense. Whereas, for others, the feeling of faith fills in the unknown. We may want something to be true, but we struggle to deny by faith, what we perceive does not fit or make sense. For us the material, the measurable, the sentience, the actions speak louder than faith or prayer.

However, atheism is not perfect skepticism. We all have learned beliefs, faiths, biases, and blind spots that make us susceptible to illogical and compromised thinking. We are as vulnerable to manipulation as any religious population, just from our particular blind spots. We need to engage and practice our critical thinking skills in every area of our lives, just as much as we checked our religious faith. In this regard, I think that an important distinction needs to be made between what we want, feel, or would like to be true and what we can materially and measurably say is true or likely. Have we filled in the gap between what is and what we desire to be true with faith?

The recent election, for example, would be a good test of our faith bias. Do we have faith in the current systems of government to be equitable and free to all citizens despite the influence of powerful and moneyed interests? I would say that the results of the recent election demonstrated that a majority of the American population does not have faith in the equitability of our current systems of government. Despite our thoughts on rational critical thinking, faith and groupthink affected the outcome and participation in this election.

I think this should be a point of inflection. First, are we acting, or inactive, in 'faith' that our system of government is democratically perfect, that enough people are good and or civically informed and involved, and that everything will happen as we want, or think is right. Second, if we consider ourselves critical thinkers and have a set of ethics and mission statements to bring about change, what could we do differently when we fail? Third, if we set lofty goals with expectations of perfection, like scaling Mount Everest, are we being realistic about what can be achieved through this faithful adherence to perfection, if we do not set up multiple base camps along the way and allow space for mistakes, progress, or leaning?

The atheist and agnostic's critical thinking and problem-solving skills are what set us most distinctly apart from those that act in faith. Our skills in thinking got us out of our blind religious faiths and should also free us from beliefs and biases in other parts of our lives. In the founding and separation of

America from British colonialism; critical thinking, problem solving, debate among intellectual rational minds, and a non-faith-based head of state were paramount and foundational. However, I have become increasingly concerned that a digital faith has replaced critical thinking skills as well as religious faiths, as digital media dominates our time otherwise spent in contemplation. A digital apathy, like the apathetic inaction of "thoughts and prayers", exists where an otherwise active and critical thinking mind would be.

I think that active, critical thinking, problem-solving minds will be the societal crux between a free future and an apathetic population waiting, in faith, for someone or something else to make up the difference in their absence.

"the tools of skepticism are generally unavailable to the citizens of our society. They're hardly ever mentioned in the schools, even in the presentation of science, its most ardent practitioner, although skepticism repeatedly sprouts spontaneously out of the disappointments of everyday life. Our politics, economics, advertising, and religions (New Age and Old) are awash in credulity. Those who have something to sell, those who wish to influence public opinion, those in power, a skeptic might suggest, have a vested interest in discouraging skepticism."

Carl Sagan, The Demon-Haunted World

PA Nonbelievers Membership Drive

It is also that time of year for the PAN Membership Drive. PAN membership runs on the calendar year, so all current memberships expire on January 1, 2025. If you would like to continue or become a member of PA Nonbelievers, we can take your membership applications online. You can start or renew your membership on our website: http://www.panonbelievers.org/. You can also use the printable form and send your membership in through the postal service if you prefer. We will count anyone who has signed up or renewed their membership since September, for 2025 memberships.

Your membership helps PA Nonbelievers continue our mission to create a sense of community for Atheists, Agnostics, and Humanists in Pennsylvania, continue to engage in educational outreach, raise secular awareness, and increase rational and critical thinking skills in our Pennsylvanian communities.

I hope that you will continue to volunteer and support our community through PAN membership and participation events next year. Membership also gives you the right to vote and run in PA Nonbelievers elections in March at our annual meeting.

2024 PAN Winter Solstice

PA Nonbelievers will be having a winter solstice party,
Sunday 12/15 from 12:00 – 2:00 PM. The location will be 1975 York Haven Road,
Etters. This will be a potluck and hanging out like last year's Solstice. Just bring
whatever you feel like bringing. There will be chips, soda, water, plates, and
plasticware. There will be additional parking next door at the storage facility. Feel free
to let me know if you are going via: cruverkibipan@gmail.com or just show up.



Atheist News in Pennsylvania— The Nation — The World!



God and Trump

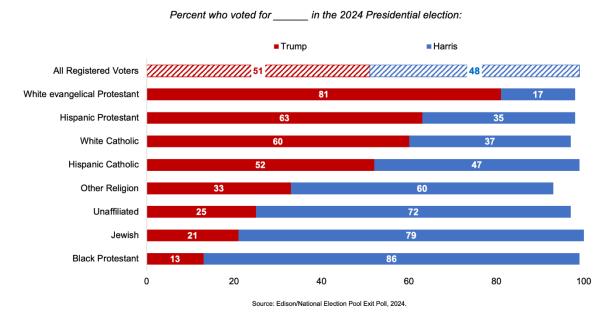
Religious Trump voters are now more convinced than ever that Trump was chosen by God, according to the New York *Times*, nytimes.com. Trump has claimed God saved him from the attempted assassination in July, and he mentioned his divine mission in his victory speech on election night. "Many people have told me that God spared my life for a reason. And that reason was to save our country and to restore America to greatness, and now we are going to fulfill that mission together. We're going to fulfill that."

Jason Rapert is the president of the National Association of Christian Lawmakers, founded in 2019 to expand Christian influence in government. He announced, "We are rejoicing!" after Trump's victory, calling Trump's success a "Red Sea moment in America," referring to God delivering his people to freedom in the book of Exodus.

The article points out that Vice President-elect JD Vance represents a brand of Catholicism that promotes traditional family life, and Mike Johnson, Speaker of the House, is an outspoken evangelical Christian.

How did religious groups vote? PRRI Research, prri.com, shows that there were no big surprises:

FIGURE 1. 2024 Presidential Election Exit Polls, by Religious Affiliation





Religious Variety

Pennsylvania neighbor Montgomery County, MD is the most religiously diverse county in the United States, according to a Public Religion Research Institute study. Religionnews.com reports that this is a change. The last time PRRI did this kind of study, in 2020, the New York counties of Brooklyn and Queens came in first and second, with Montgomery placing third. Brooklyn is now second, and Queens is tenth.

The survey ranks counties with at least 10,000 residents. A county with a 1 rating would be completely diverse, with the same number of people in each religion, and a county with a 0 rating would be completely homogenous. Montgomery County's rating was .86. Only 56.8% of Montgomery County's residents speak English at home.

While the survey measures religious participation, the largest single group is religiously unaffiliated, representing 17.8%. Nationally, in 2024, the Pew Survey found 28% of the US population was unaffiliated.

The next largest group in Montgomery County is black Protestants, at 10%. Other Christian groups include white mainline Protestants at 9.6%, Hispanic Catholics, 7.7%, white Catholics, 7.4%, Hispanic Protestants, 6.9%, and white evangelical Protestants, 5.4%. Other religious groups are Orthodox Christians, 2%; Hindus, 2.7%; Jews, 9.3%; Muslims, 3.2%; Buddhists, 2.7%; and Unitarian Universalists, 1.3%. The article notes that PRRI doesn't count Seventh-Day Adventists as one of their categories, but they have a "significant presence" in Montgomery County.

These diverse groups have caused problems in the Montgomery County school system, regarding the treatment of LGBTQ+ issues in the curriculum. In 2023, Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox Christians legally challenged the school's policy of not allowing parents to opt their children out of studying books with LGBTQ+ characters. Moms for Liberty, the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the Montgomery County Muslim Council opposed the decision as well. The legal case has been dismissed by a US District Court and the 4th US Circuit Court of Appeals, but the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, representing the plaintiffs, intends to appeal.

Becket's website, becketlaw.org, describes itself as "a non-profit, public interest legal and educational institution. We are the leaders in the fight for religious liberty and the only law firm that defends all religious beliefs."

It's Not Just Faces

According to the Associate Press, apnews.com, and mint, livemint.com, the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan have proclaimed their interpretation of Islamic law, to "combat vice and promote virtue." As is usually the case, these rules overwhelmingly apply to women.

The 114-page book goes into detail with rules about public transportation, music, shaving and celebrations. Women of course must be veiled, to keep from tempting poor, weak men, in front of all male strangers, and all non-Muslims.

None of this is new, or surprising. But one rule did catch observers' eyes. A woman's voice, it is proclaimed, is "intimate." The voice is categorized as "awrah," or intimate, and may only be heard publicly when it is absolutely necessary. Therefore, a woman's voice may not be heard in public – no singing, reciting or reading aloud in public. This rule applies even when only other women are around. It's particularly sad to realize that Afghan women originally gained the right to vote in 1919 – before women in the US did. The right was rescinded in 1929, when the reformers leading the government were overthrown.

Fact: Your kid is statistically significantly safer around a drag queen than a member of the clergy.

The Taliban claims all of the rules are meant to protect women. They are tightening restrictions on men, too, checking at mosques to make sure beards are being properly grown. But men can still speak.

Spectacular Christian Scammer

Billionaire investor Sung Kook "Bill" Hwang has been sentenced to 18 years in prison because of the collapse of his Wall Street Firm, Archegos Capital Management. According to Reuters.com, Hwang had been convicted by a jury of 10 criminal charges, including wire fraud, securities fraud and market manipulation. The article noted that Archegos' collapse, which took less than a week, stunned Wall Street, costing banks there more than \$10 billion.

His lawyers fought for a shorter sentence. On what basis? That Hwang is a fine, Christian man, whose foundation gave lots of money to charity. Christianity Today, christianitytoday.com, notes that the name of his firm, "Archegos" is a Greek word for "leader," and that it was used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus. Christianity Today's story about Hwang was entitled, "Wall Street's Most Famous Evangelical." Hwang started the Grace & Mercy Foundation with about \$600 million. The foundation fights homelessness, poverty and human trafficking, among other good causes.

Hwang was accused of lying about Archegos' investments so he could borrow more money to bet on media and technology stocks. Eventually he was unable to meet margin calls. Hwang lost more than \$100 million, and several banks lost large amounts – for example, Credit Suisse lost \$5.5 billion. This is not the first time Hwang has been caught. In 2012, he pleaded guilty to criminal fraud involving another hedge fund, Tiger Asia. He settled for \$44 million, although he did not admit fault. The prosecutors pointed out the Archegos fraud was not the "temporary aberration of an otherwise virtuous man."

The sentencing hearing was filled with religion; the judge quoted a psalm, and Hwang's attorneys brought up his faith, describing the 450 organizations Grace & Mercy funds, and his devotion to his family. His friends and family, including many of his employees, sent more than 500 letters supporting him to the court. Lots of Christian leaders sent letters praising Hwang, including the retired president of Fuller Theological Seminary, and other members of the school's faculty. Hwang's pastor also wrote in, along with some Wall Street investors (!) and an Orthodox priest who met Hwang through one of his projects, the Public Reading of Scripture. There are many YouTube videos showing Hwang and others doing just that – reading Scripture out loud. Hwang read devotionals to himself during the hearing.

The prosecution noted that Hwang gave Grace & Mercy jobs to people who lost theirs with Archegos. The prosecutor pointed out — and the judge agreed — that those jobs might be a way of persuading his employees not to testify against him. The judge thought that Hwang's relationship with God was important to him, but so are relationships "man to fellow man." Hwang had victimized institutions, the went on, but "they were also fellow people." Apparently, there is still enough money to maintain his charities.

Religious Exemption

Israel continues to struggle with exemption of the ultra-Orthodox from military duty. The Times of Israel, timesofisrael.com, reports that as fighting continues, members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party are fighting a proposal from their own party that would enshrine the exemption in law. The article notes that Netanyahu fired Defense Minister Yoav Gallant at least in part because he opposed the military draft exemption. It is believed that the support of the ultra-Orthodox is needed to keep the Likud in power.

In June Israel's High Court ruled that the ultra-Orthodox must enlist, unless new legislation is passed. Other Likud members have been removed from legislative committees because of their opposition to an ultra-Orthodox draft. The ruling coalition whip was taken off two committees and barred from submitting bills because of his opposition. He recently opposed a bill that would circumvent a High Court ruling that would prevent state-funded daycare subsidies going to the families of men who refuse to be drafted.

As of now, the drafting of the ultra-Orthodox continues. The government has sent out 3,000 draft notices and plans to send out 7,000 more. Per CNN, cnn.com, the Israeli military has issued 1,126 arrest warrants for ultra-Orthodox men who have not answered draft notices. The military has announced they will call to remind conscripts of their draft status. Anyone who does not cooperate could be declared a draft dodger, which would result in their being banned from foreign travel, and possibly subject them to arrest. The army has warned that Israel needs soldiers, and that it may need more than 10,000 conscripts.



The ultra-Orthodox are largely unmoved. Fights have broken out between draft protestors and the police, with protestors holding signs that say, "It is better to die a religious Jew than to live as a secular Jew" and "Death rather than draft." One protestor claimed, "Our history is full of Jews who have given up their lives in order to remain religious. We will die. We will stay extended periods of time in jail but not go to the Israeli army, which means to become irreligious."

Many non-ultra-Orthodox Israelis resent the ultra-Orthodox, who often do not work, but spend their time studying in yeshivas (religious schools), which are partially subsidized by the government. Exemption of the ultra-orthodox from military service has been part of Israel since its founding, but the number of ultra-Orthodox has grown dramatically, causing the strain Israel feels today.

More Religion in Schools

Yet another state joins the movement to bring religious teaching into public schools. This time it's Texas. The Associate Press, apnews.com, reports that the Texas education board has voted to allow a Biblical-soaked optional curriculum in public elementary schools.



Opponents of the curriculum, which passed 8-7, point out that this law is proselytizing, and non-Christian students would feel left out. Supporters claim the Bible is a core part of American history, and its inclusion will only enrich classwork. Schools will be able to start using the curriculum from kindergarten through fifth grade next year.

Texas lieutenant governor Dan Patrick was happy about the vote; he has promised to pass legislation requiring Ten Commandment displays in classrooms. Gov. Greg Abbott said the vote was "a critical step forward to bring students back to the basics of education and provide the best education in the nation."

Schools are not required to use the curriculum, but the state will provide extra funding to schools that do. The AP provides samples of the material. For example, in the kindergarten text, there's a lesson about helping neighbors that refers back to the Golden Rule. Teachers are directed to explain the Bible is "a collection of ancient texts" and that its different parts are "the core books of the Jewish and Christian religions."

For third-graders, teachers are directed to explain that at the first Thanksgiving, the governor of Plymouth prayed, and gave a speech with "several passages from the Christian Bible in the book of Psalms." The book of Psalms is described as collection of "songs, poems and hymns" used by both Jews and Christians.

Some religious groups oppose this initiative. After the proposed lesson plans were released to the public, Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said "This curriculum is not age-appropriate or subject matter appropriate in the way that it presents these Bible stories." She worries that students "are simply too young to tell the difference between what is a faith claim and what is a matter of fact."

As was mentioned earlier, this is just the latest attempt to drag religion into classrooms. Of course, there's Louisiana's attempt to post the Ten Commandments, blocked so far by a Federal judge, and there's Oklahoma's effort to use the Bible in lesson plans, and to spend several million dollars to buy Bibles. So far 500 Bibles have been purchased – for Advanced Placement government classes.

Feelings

The Seattle *Times*, seattletimes.com, explains that a polling company, DHM Research conducted a survey of Washington state voters. One part of the survey was about "feelings." Respondents were asked to rate various groups by how they felt about them, on a "feeling thermometer." A 0 rating meant the respondent felt "as cold and negative" as possible, with a maximum warm rating of 100.

Rural Washingtonians were ranked most warmly, followed by police officers. "Environmentalists," "immigrants," "religious people" and "Democrats" were in the middle, and farther down are "transgender people" "gun owners." Near the bottom are, surprise, surprise, "atheists."

But the Seattle *Times* **was** surprised, because atheists weren't at rock bottom. The only group that ranked below 50, the midpoint, was Republicans. The article notes that more than a third of the participants gave Republicans the coldest ranking, and about half put them below 40 degrees. Why, the story announces breathlessly, atheists rated 5 degrees higher!



Restitution in Ireland

The horrible treatment of unwed mothers, and their children, in the homes run through the Catholic church for Ireland, is well-known. The Irish government has now instituted a reimbursement program for women and children who suffered at the facilities.

The Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme is being publicized online and in newspapers in many countries, at the website citizensinformation.ie. The program explains: "The scheme aims to acknowledge the suffering and improve the circumstances of former residents of mother and baby and county home institutions."

Eligible people can receive one of three types of benefits, a general payment, a work-related payment, or health supports. People who have already received a court settlement can't receive payments, but may be eligible for health supports. The mothers must have been at one of the homes for at least one night because of pregnancy, childbirth, or healthcare for the child. Children are eligible if they spent at least 180 days in one of the facilities. Payments will be about \$10,000 per claimant.

There are still some issues to be resolved – for example, will relatives of women who died be eligible for payments? And social media commentators bring up another point. Is the Catholic Church, under whose auspices these facilities were run, going to be responsible for any part of these payments? The church owns a lot of land in Ireland – couldn't the government seize it to provide for the survivors?

This situation is just one of many abuse scandals the Church has acknowledged. The Vatican has established a child protection commission which recently issued its first annual report. According to The Irish *Times*, irishtimes.com, the commission stated it is trying to establish standardized procedures for compensating victims. It promised to discuss reparations in more depth in next year's report. However, the report noted that this process is complicated by the Vatican's Disastery of the Doctrine of the Faith, which is responsible for abuse cases providing only "limited statistical information on its activities."

The Catholic Church is immersed in everyday Irish life to an extent that's hard for Americans to envision. Approximately 89% of all primary schools in Ireland are run by Catholic institutions. That's becoming problematic, according to the Catholic Herald, catholicherald.co.uk, a British newsletter, because the number of nuns and priests in Ireland has dropped dramatically. The article explains the Catholic view of this issue: "Due to the ubiquity of Catholic trusteeship of schools, and the fact that they are publicly funded and implicitly viewed as a public good, most in the general Irish population do not consider their schools to be explicitly Catholic. Catholic patronage seems primarily an issue for competing patronages, humanist/atheist interest groups, and antagonistic media and politicians. The majority of parents at local level express no desire for relinquishing patronage – or divestment, as it is colloquially named." Whether this represents the actual view of the Irish is, of course, open to question.

God Showed Up a Little Late

Remember Susan Smith? Back in 1994 she made national news when she told police her car, with her two little boys inside, had been hijacked by a black man. It turned out to be a lie, of course. Smith drove her car, with the children strapped in their car seats, into a South Carolina lake. Prosecutors argued that Smith killed 3-year-old Michael and 14-month-old Alex because she believed they were the reason the

wealthy son of the owner of the business where she worked broke off their affair. Her attorneys blamed her mental health.

PBS.com reports that she recently came up for parole, and guess what? God has forgiven her – or at least that's what she told the parole commission. "I'm sorry, I don't know, I know that's not enough; I know it's not," Smith said, adding that "God is a big part of my life." God has forgiven her, Smith said, and she asked the same of the board.

WSPA.com reports her former husband, and father of her sons, David Smith, mentioned God, too. "God gave us free choice. And she made a choice that night to end their life. It wasn't a tragic mistake, it wasn't something she didn't mean to do," he said. He noted that he's never seen any indication of remorse from her.

About 15 people, including her ex-husband and father of the boys, David Smith, his family members, prosecutors and law enforcement officials attended the hearing. Several of them wore pictures of the boys. The parole board unanimously rejected Susan Smith's request.

God became "angry" because they built a tower to "reach" the heavens. (Babel)



But now he has no problem with the international space station.



Tucker Carlson and Demons

Conservative commentator Tucker Carlson has a problem with demons. According to The Guardian, theguardian.com, demons are responsible for nuclear technology. Oh, and they attack him while he sleeps.

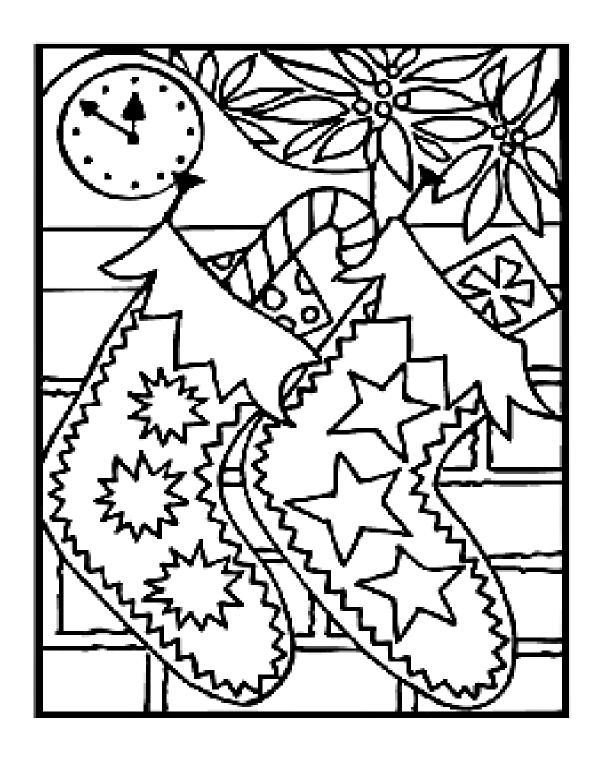
Carlson was a guest on Trump confidante Steve Bannon's podcast when nuclear weapons came up. "Nuclear weapons are demonic, there's no upside to them at all, and anyone who claims otherwise is either ignorant or doing the bidding of the forces that created nuclear technology in the first place, which were not human forces obviously," he explained to Bannon, as they discussed the role the weapons played in ending World War II.

A week or so before that conversation Carlson told his audience he had been "physically mauled" about 18 months ago. He and a guest, John Heers, founder of the non-profit First Things Foundation, were talking about a documentary, "Christianities?" which is described as a "journey to the heart of the faith". Heers asked Carlson if he thought "the presence of evil is kickstarting people to wonder about the good".

Carlson agreed. Heers asked if he was talking about journalism. No, Carlson said. "'No, in my bed at night. I got attacked while I was asleep with my wife and four dogs and mauled, physically mauled.' His assailant, Carlson added, was "a demon ... or something unseen that left claw marks on my side'. It was, he said, a "'transformative experience' that left him 'seized with this very intense desire to read the Bible'."

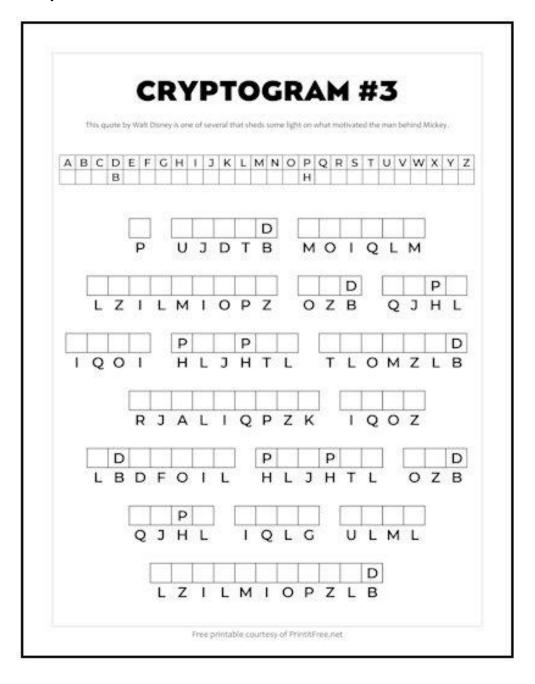
Explains a lot.

FUN!



Puzzle - solution at the end of PANViews.

This quote by Walt Disney is one of several that sheds some light on what motivated the man behind Mickey.



PAN News & Updates

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, China House

Cumberland/Mechanicsburg –Third Wednesday of the month, 7:15 PM, Ever Grain Brewing Co., 4444 Carlisle Pike, Camp Hill

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.

Because of the holidays, the December meeting will be held on December 18.

Lebanon - Third Thursday of the month, 6:00 PM, Infinito's Pizza buffet 1725 Quinton Reading – Third Thursdays at 7:15 PM, 3rd & Spruce Drafthaus, 238 S 3rd Ave, Reading, PA 19611

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

Nittany Freethought in State College

- Second Saturday every month (Nittany Freethought Skeptical Eating) (12:00 2:00 PM) at India Pavilion, 222 East Calder Way, State College, PA.
- Fourth Tuesday of every month (Nittany Freethought meeting) (5:30 7:30 PM) at Schlow Centre Region Library, 211 South Allen Street, State College, PA

The weekly SMART Recovery meetings will be held on Thursdays from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm, at 1975 York Haven Rd, Etters, PA 17319

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

Josh CruverKibi, President Colleen Dzwonczyk Elan Lift
Dietrich Dellinger, Vice-President
Brennan Hillyard, Secretary
Doug Ross, Treasurer
Colleen Dzwonczyk
Nick Consoli
Dietrich Dellinger
Carl Dreiblebis
Elan Lift
Cathryn Smith
Jim Waldie
Pam Zerba

Cryptogram solution: I would rather entertain and hope that people learned something than educate people and hope they were entertained.