



Humanist Society of New Mexico



May 2009

<http://humanistsocietyofnm.org/> fmarch@thinkwellassociates.com

Quotes of the Month

Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?

Abraham Lincoln

We have not passed that subtle line between childhood and adulthood until we move from the passive voice to the active voice -- that is, until we stop saying "It got lost," and say "I lost it."

Sidney J. Harris

Upcoming HSNM Meetings

Meetings are free and run from 10:00 to noon
(except where noted)

Saturday, May 9th

Informal Meeting

General Discussion

This Meeting is for Members Only or Special Invitation Only – For invitation please call Fred March - 323-6784

Refreshments: Shannon Vaughn

Summit Apartments, 3901 Indian School NE

Saturday, May 16th

Topical Discussion

TBA

Special Collections Library, 423 Central Ave. NE

Saturday, May 23rd

Speaker Meeting

The Psychology of Belief

Roy Ellis Moody

Refreshments: Leland Franks

UNM Law School, Room 2406, 1117 Stanford NE

HSNM Family Co-op

Alternative Children's Sunday School

Call 505-292-4375 for meeting times at the

College of Santa Fe

Albuquerque Campus

4501 Indian School Rd. NE

Santa Fe Humanists

Saturday, May 2nd, 10:30am

Mayday

Community Room, LaFarge Branch of the Santa Fe Public Library, 1730 Llano St.

For more information contact Bill Weihofen
(505) 988- 1343

Humanism is an ethical philosophy that derives its principles from science and reason rather than theology. It asserts the worth and dignity of every person, advocates personal liberty tempered by social and environmental responsibility, and promotes democracy, compassion, and justice. It sees human beings as natural organisms, whose values arise from culture and experience, and holds humanity responsible for its own affairs.

**The Humanist Society of New Mexico
(HSNM)**

A Membership chapter of the American
Humanist Association.

The purpose of HSNM is to promote ethical,
naturalistic, democratic Humanism among its
members and within its community.

Officers

Frederic March: President

Bill Little: Vice President/Programs

Jerry Wesner: Past President

John Waldrop: Treasurer

Carolyn Kaye: Secretary

Ron Herman: Director of Classes

Jeff Cornelius: Family Co-op

Randall Wall: Newsletter Editor

Janet Johnson: Book Club

Ted Cloak: Community Liaison

Phil Smith: Webmaster

Membership Director: Open

Social Coordinator: Open

Publicity Director: Open

Subscription to HSNM Newsletter, published
monthly, accompanies AHA/HSNM membership
or can be obtained by nonmembers for \$12
annually. Send subscription and membership
request to: Humanist Society of New Mexico,
P.O. Box 13675, Albuquerque, NM 87192.
Send Newsletter submissions to: Editor, Randall
Wall at Email paragon2012@comcast.net

The deadline for
Newsletter submissions is the third Saturday of
each month.

President's Message

By Frederic March

I recently watched *Religulous* on its DVD release. Given its warm reception in the atheist-humanist community I had the impression that many thought it was a great movie, not only because it ridicules the follies of the religious behaviors that it portrays, but because of Bill Maher's message at the end. Namely that religion is a pernicious social force that is antithetical to both reason and ethics, and needs to be eradicated.

If you have read my articles in "The Humanist" you know that I have argued the following positions: (1) That the enemy of humanism and society is not religion per se, but rather what Daniel Dennett has labeled "toxic religion;" (2) That religion, like language is not toxic per se, and in fact has historically provided the cultural matrix that shaped western ideas about reason and ethics. People use religion to ground their ethics – consider the contrast between the ethics and hence the religions of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi versus that of Taliban Leader Mullah Muhammad Omar and Christian-right leaders like James Dobson and Jerry Falwell.

Given these views, I found "Religulous" to be a very entertaining (as well as serious) spoof on the follies and dangers of "toxic religion." But I also felt that its value does not rise above mere entertainment and potentially harms the atheist-humanist cause. It harms our image because it makes no distinction between toxic and harmless religion. It thus confirms a common public stereotype – that atheists are dogmatically opposed to everything religious.

A few weeks ago I was invited to the First Presbyterian Church of Santa Fe to talk about atheism to its adult education students. I reviewed the handouts for two previous sessions on atheism and found them both philosophically informed and lacking in prejudice. And, since their leader is a retired physicist, I accepted.

I tried to establish rapport by asking for a show of hands from those who had friends or relatives who were atheists. About one-third raised hands, including a woman whose husband was an atheist. While making my own atheistic views clear, I focused on what I

believed were our common values, including an aversion to the toxic behaviors that Maher skewered, and there was no dissent. In the lively discussion that followed my talk, it was clear that my audience valued reason and ethics as much we humanists do. They were committed to separation of church and state, did not believe that atheists would burn in hell, or that there would be an apocalypse or rapture. We agreed to disagree on the reality of God as a philosophical issue – one as old as Plato and St. Augustine, but agreed that this should not be a source of political or social friction.

They had some concerns with anti religious books like “The God Delusion,” “Letter to a Christian Nation” and “God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.” They truly felt, rightly or wrongly, that such literature associates their faith with the depraved minds on display in “Religulous.”

I hope these views stimulate intelligent thought and reflection on how we humanists define ourselves, how our public messages can inspire public respect and trust, how we can build our local membership, and how we can benefit from progressive religious allies. Please share your thoughts with the editor, Randy, at our meetings as appropriate, and by sending me e-mails.

“Where Is the Humanity?” America's Use of Excessive Force Over *There*

By Donald Gutierrez

“Air bombardment is state terrorism, the terrorism of the rich. It has burned up and blasted apart more innocents in the past six decades than have all the antistate terrorists who ever lived”

C. Douglas Loomis, *The Nation* (Sept. 26, 1994)

“That is really not a matter I am terribly interested in.”

Colin Powell (on being questioned in 1991 about Iraqi casualties)

The Nation, (Feb. 2, 2002)

All Americans know that on September 11, 2001, thousands of Americans were killed by Mid-eastern suicide-terrorists. Further, the death of any American serviceman killed in action in Afghanistan is fully and prominently publicized in our media. All this publicity is understandable and deserved. What is not asked, though, is why Afghan civilian casualties are given little

attention here. Perhaps our leaders can “regret” the deaths of the enemy’s civilians, but then such “collateral damage” is, we are informed, inevitable in war. The Pentagon claims it does all it can to avoid collateral damage and that it mainly practices surgical bombing. But one expert claims such bombing is impossible. That claim is reinforced by evidence that the United States has dropped cluster bombs in Iraq (Clark 42), Yugoslavia, as well as in Afghanistan, a practice condemned by human-rights groups as “indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction” (Blum 100. s.a. Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism*, 26). Further, one American general admitted that American planes intentionally bombed *civilian* infrastructure in Kosovo in order to motivate civilians to rise against their rulers.

It is commonly accepted that a nation at war, especially its military, is not humanely concerned about the fate of the enemy, either military or civilian. That perspective, apparent in warring nations, nevertheless overlooks another one usually ignored, and of which more people should be aware: that international covenants exist which state that the commanders of opposing warring forces are responsible for achieving their military goals with as little harm to the *enemy* forces as possible, that the captured enemy should be treated humanely, and that the military leaders of the victorious side should be concerned about casualties on *both* sides. This last position not only contrasts sharply with Colin Powell’s statement in the epigraph above; it suggest as well a standard of warfare which, if it strikes us as quixotic, thus also measures our own alienation from humane standards of war conduct. Public attitudes towards war ethics are generally shaped by a nation’s leaders and the mass media. If these two agencies can whip up enough fear and hatred in the country towards the foe, such conditioning will make it fairly easy for the government to effect such war crimes as Ramsey Clark and others indicate occurred in the Gulf War: “...killing tens of thousands of essentially defenseless soldiers, soldiers withdrawing without weapons; burying soldiers alive; using illegal weapons; disrespect for the dead and many others. The combat death toll alone—125,000 Iraqis to 148 Americans—reveals the defenselessness of the Iraqis and the dimension of the war crime. This was certainly a violation of the Hague Convention requiring that *force used be proportional to a legitimate military objective*” (*The Fire This Time* 178). Clark asserts that these crimes violate not only the Hague Convention but also the Nuremberg Charter and the Geneva Conventions and Protocols. International treaties restricting military behavior in war are designated by the Geneva Conventions of 1864 and 1901 which, Clark states, “provided protection for soldiers wounded in

action. The Hague Convention of 1869, revised in 1907, was the first international codification of the laws of armed conflict” (170). The Hague Convention also prohibits the employment of excessive force.

The United States is obviously not the only major violator of those ethical international agreements concerning humane treatment of the other side in wartime. Many nations have brutally treated enemy forces and civilian populations. But the United States in recent decades has been extraordinarily destructive and imperious towards both. A 1998 headline in the Albuquerque Journal read “COHEN: ‘WE’LL POUND IRAQ!’” One assumes that Defense Secretary didn’t mean every square foot of that country, but the ubiquitousness of that threat suggests as much. Indeed, the United States might as well have bombed the entire nation as, according to Clark, it violated both the Hague Convention as well as the 1977 Addition to the Geneva Convention of 1949 by devastating the *civilian* infrastructure of Iraq. The United States, according to the Pentagon, flew 109,876 sorties, and up to 40,000 pounds of bombs were dropped during each carpet-bombing sortie by B-52s on military installations (40). (“In Indochina,” Michael Parenti claims, “the United States dropped several times more tons of bombs than were used in all of World War II” (Against Empire 126). This includes “schools, hospitals, bridges, cement plants, TV and radio stations, and railway depots, shops, restaurants and homes” (175). The 12-year sanction by the United States against Iraq clearly constitutes violations of civilian protection guaranteed by war-ethics conventions.

Further, the American use of weaponry like cluster bombs, and the carpet bombing and depleted-uranium shelling of Iraq, Yugoslavia and now Afghanistan constitute even more evidence of such violation. According to William Blum (Rogue State), President Clinton bombed the people of Yugoslavia for 78 days and nights,” taking the lives of many hundreds of civilians and producing one of the greatest ecological catastrophes in history...” (68). Blum also mentions Clinton’s “illegal and lethal bombings of Somalia, Bosnia, Sudan and Afghanistan” (69), all attacks obviously including civilians.

Citing remarks about, and excessive action against, the enemy made by key American military and civilian leaders is apropos here. Directing the NATO aerial attack on Yugoslavia, General Wesley Clark, banging his fist on a table, shouted, “I’ve got to get the maximum violence out of this campaign—now!” (Blum 69). General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander in Chief of United States Central Command, besides

continuing to slaughter Iraqis two days after the cease fire, is reputed to have said: “I want every Iraqi soldier bleeding from every orifice” (Clark xxvi). Henry (“Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac”) Kissinger was centrally if sometimes covertly involved in the misery and murder of millions of civilians through America’s interventions in Cambodia, Vietnam, Chile, Angola, East Timor, Iraq and Bangladesh. And of course American presidents like Lyndon Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, Bush Sr., Clinton and Bush Jr. have been centrally responsible for catastrophic actions of often undeclared war against sovereign states involving the deaths and maiming of millions and the devastation of their military and civilian infrastructure.

(concluded in next issue)

The Trouble with Advertising

By Harry Willson

I decided I needed to analyze my negative feelings about the advertising that bombards us all the time and everywhere, and surprised myself with the volume of what surfaced.

[1] Billboards. Ogden Nash told it well over fifty years ago.

"I think that I shall never see
A billboard lovely as a tree,
And if the billboards don't soon fall,
I'll never see a tree at all."

This problem seems slightly less bad now than when I first came to New Mexico in the 50s. At that time vast and gorgeous vistas of wide open space were nearly covered over with huge ugly signs. The worst of that is gone now, but we have a new thing -- electronic billboards with moving parts and sharply flashing changes of images, which are seriously distracting in city traffic.

2. The Fax Machine. The printer ribbon on the machine I once had cost ten cents for every page printed. Junk faxes were annoying, and then expensive. Unsolicited messages thirty pages long came in. I didn't believe the repeated message that said I could go to Cancún for \$39.00. One day a lightning bolt [really!] took the machine out of its misery, and I never replaced it.

3. Junk Mail. A huge proportion of what is delivered is stuff I don't want to read or even handle. I was startled and pleased when the recycle program in our neighborhood announced that we could recycle "junk mail." They even called it that. It's as if we can recycle almost anything, except "liquids, organic perishables, explosives..." The danger now is that

something important, like a credit card statement, can get thrown out when one is busy recycling all that other crap.

4. Spam. An even larger proportion of what is delivered by e-mail, even after the functioning of the impressive filter, is made up of messages I don't want. Easy money without working [always suspect], the size of somebody's genitalia, fortunes in Nigeria [send \$300 and they'll deposit \$1,800,000 into your bank account -- just give us your bank account number...] Again, an over-zealous use of the delete button can cause something important to disappear, if one gets carried away.

5. TV [and radio]. When I can't mute the ads, I get up and leave the room. The messages are poisonous; they spread the disease of greed. They lie outright and openly. Even the local TV news is not dependable. I used to be in the news, back in the old days. If the 1% of stories that I was party to are in error totally and every time, how can I trust the other 99% of what they say?

Lying is the problem, I'm thinking. Information is fine. Who has what, where? Disinformation is not fine. I can remember when "false advertising" was a crime.

But after all this, I'm left with this puzzle: How do I let people know about all these marvelous books we have for sale, without being the kind of pest I'm upset about?

Book Review

By Lois Reisz Kimbrell

Our Inner Ape, a Leading Primatologist Explains Why We Are Who We Are by Frans de Waal, Riverhead Books, New York, 2005.

"A remarkable journey of discovery to the heart of the profound question: What can we learn about the evolution of our own cultures by studying the behavior of our primate cousins? A deftly written, deeply reflective work." The New York Times Book Review

A certain primate is sensitive and peaceful, the bonobo, while a similar primate, the chimpanzee, is not sensitive and peaceful. The Zaire River divides them in central Africa. Bonobos live on the side of the river where the living is easy, while chimpanzees survive on the other side where the living is not easy. The two kinds of animals are different enough to be entirely distinct species within the same genus, Pan.

One cannot discuss bonobos without mentioning sex,

because bonobos engage in all possible kinds of sex frequently and casually. Having sex is social behavior for them, like pats on the back and high fives. No male bonobo is recognized as the father of any of his tribe's children. Who knows who fathered whom? However, male bonobos are very nice to all children as though they may be at least somewhat responsible for all of them.

Without fathers present, mothers must act as the heads of bonobo families. Right? Not quite. The young females leave their tribes when they are still adolescents, at around 13 or 14 years of age, never to return. They wander around in the forest for a while and then try to join other tribes by endearing themselves to female leaders, who may become their affectionate mentors. When accepted, they settle down and have offspring, about one birth every five or six years. They lose their daughters in the way they themselves were once lost, but keep their sons as long as they live. There is no family to speak of, just mothers and sons. If a male becomes a tribal leader, it's because his mother wants him to lead. Mothers form the core of bonobo society.

Aren't the males hunters and fighters? We don't know much about that. There's plenty of food, mostly fruits, in the lush habitat. True, other animals must threaten bonobos from time to time, and the males must be forced to fight. Rarely, though. Bonobos avoid conflict and reconcile differences with amazing skill, often using sex "to divert attention and to diffuse tension." (Quotation from Frans de Waal)

Actually, we don't know much about bonobos, because we thought they were sweet chimps until a German Anatomist, Ernst Schwarz, told us differently. That was in 1929. Humans have been hunting and fighting in central Africa, sometimes killing bonobos. The gentle primates have a slow rate of reproduction, and parts of their topical habitat are being destroyed. Consequently, their future looks dire.

Even so, they are fascinating animals. Primatologists, who are accustomed to studying chimpanzees, always remark on how sensitive and graceful bonobos are. Standing upright, about 40 percent of the time, bonobos look a little like us, and really do share more than 98 percent of our genetic profile. Bonobos are as close to us as a fox is to a dog.

DHS Report Provokes Lies, Slurs, From 'Mainstream' Pundits

By Sonia Scherr

Posted in Media Extremism, Southern Poverty Law Center, www.splcenter.org

From implying that undocumented immigrants were responsible for the mortgage crisis to promoting falsehoods about a brutal murder in Tennessee, syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin has never let the facts get in the way of her rants.

Now, in a column this week criticizing a U.S. Department of Homeland Security report on right-wing extremism, Malkin has made another utterly erroneous assertion: “The SPLC,” she wrote, “has designated the venerable American Legion a ‘hate group’ for its stance on immigration enforcement.” The claim rapidly spread to right-wing sites on the Internet and elsewhere.

In fact, the SPLC has never listed the legion as a “hate group” nor put it on any other kind of list. Intelligence Project Director Mark Potok on Thursday wrote Malkin and her syndicate to demand a retraction of the libelous statement. “Your assertion ... amounts to reckless disregard of the truth,” he stated in an E-mail sent early Thursday. As of Friday afternoon, however, the SPLC had received no response. Malkin’s columns appear in major newspapers nationwide and are also published online.

In addition to including the misinformation in her April 15 column titled “You Might Be a Radicalized Right-Wing Conservative if...,” Malkin also proclaims the same falsehood in an item she posted the previous day on her blog. In it, she links to another blog called “This ain’t hell,” which she appears to have relied on for her “facts” — never mind that the blog doesn’t even get the SPLC’s name right. “This ain’t hell,” in turn, links to an SPLC blog post that doesn’t come close to asserting that the legion is a hate group. Instead, the story points out numerous misstatements and myths in a legion report on immigration enforcement. The legion later issued an updated report from which the most egregious mistakes had been removed.

Malkin and other right-wing media pundits are in a tizzy about the DHS memo, which they say defames veterans and conservatives generally as potential terrorists. In fact, the report — which identifies several economic and political factors contributing to a surge in rightwing extremism — does no such thing. It merely states that the department “assesses that rightwing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans in order to exploit their skills and knowledge derived from military training and combat.” The SPLC separately investigated the issue and found that a significant number of white supremacists were joining the military to gain access to weapons and combat training.

It’s not only Malkin. Many on the far right reacted with white-hot fury to the DHS report and blamed SPLC (falsely) for its allegedly nefarious characterizations. On Wednesday, for instance, Michael Savage — a radio talk show host who has a weekly audience of more than 8 million people — attacked Potok with a viciousness that was remarkable even for him. Potok, Savage fulminated on his show, is “the hater of America,” a “communist slimebag” and “piece of garbage” who “target[s] patriotic Americans” and “comes from a communistic New York background.” The SPLC (“gangsters”) and Potok work for “Chairman Maobama,” Savage said, adding of “this piece of trash from New York, Mark Potok” that “I’d like spit in his face.” Savage’s furious rant set off a small avalanche of anonymous, threatening hate E-mail and telephone calls directed at Potok and the SPLC.

Friendly Philosophers

Monday, May 4th

Open Forum

Bring a Your Own Topic for General Discussion

Monday, May 18th

The Ideas of Liberty: Now More Than Ever

Paul Gessing, President, Rio Grande Foundation

Copper Canyon Restaurant, 5455 Gibson (opposite Lovelace Hospital) in conference dining room. Dinner at 5:30; talk follows.

Atheists/Freethinkers Meetup Group

<http://atheists.meetup.com/75>

Sunday, May 3rd, 9am

Albuquerque Center for Peace and Justice, 202 Harvard SE

Tuesday, May 19th

Social Meeting at 6:30pm at Mimi's Cafe, 4316 The 25 Way, Near Jefferson and I-25

New Mexicans for Science and Reason

Wednesday, May 20th, 7pm

Explosions in the Sky: How Dangerous are Asteroids?

Mark Boslough

UNM Law Building

1117 Stanford NE, Room 2402