



WASHline

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President's Message:

by Heather Hodges

Every 68 seconds in America, someone is sexually assaulted. Every 20 minutes, that someone is a child. Every minute, nearly 20 people in America are physically assaulted by their spouse or partner.* Sexual violence, whether in the form of child sex abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual harrasment or intimate partner violence, is all too common in our country—and the world. And unfortunately, America has long espoused a culture of silence and victim-blaming.

Victims are frequently pressured by society and/or the legal system to drop complaints or recant accusations. Accusations against someone famous or well known are particularly difficult, as most refuse to believe their favorite actor,

musician, politician or other celebrity could “do such a thing.” Even in our community! Victims of intimate partner violence are frequently misidentified by police as perpetrator, not victim: injuries of self defense (scratches, cuts, bites) show up instantly, whereas bruises take longer to appear. The process of undergoing a rape examination is traumatic in its own right, let alone the process of telling ones story repeatedly to various law enforcement – even more so if the victim is a child.

The past few months, the Frederick Secular Humanists (FRESH), Frederick, Maryland's WASH chapter, have been sponsoring a “Clothesline Project” which is on display at Hood College for the month of April. The Clothesline Project is an effort to raise public awareness about sexual and intimate partner violence. Started in 1990 with 31 shirts hung in Massachusetts, the project has been repeated across the country and the world. Survivors (or friends of survivors) of rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, incest and intimate partner violence share their stories on t-shirts hung in a public place to bear witness and educate the general public.

With the support of Heartly House, our local rape and intimate partner violence center, FRESH sponsored t-shirt making sessions throughout the months of February, March and April for the public to participate. 20 shirts were collected from survivors throughout the community to break the silence and bring awareness to this issue.

While the original Clothesline Project was focused on violence against women, this Project was open to persons of all genders and gender identity. I strongly believe sexual violence is connected to all gender-based violence, that is, violence that is rooted in ideas of traditional gender roles. For example, violence against transgender individuals comes from anger at individuals not only not following traditional

gender roles, but defying them. Sexual violence is based on ideas of power and control that stem from, again, traditional gender roles. Violence against women is violence that seeks to keep women “in their place.” And violence directed against effeminate gay men or masculine lesbian women is also rooted in those concepts of men and women following specified gender roles.

The right of each person to bodily autonomy is an essential human right, and an important Humanist value. This applies not only to a person’s right to have an abortion, get a tattoo, or wear body piercings, it also, most certainly, includes the right of all persons to be free of sexual violence. All persons, regardless of age, are entitled to consent or not consent to anything that is done to their body. All persons deserve healthy romantic relationships that do not involve abuse. All persons deserve the right to be free of violence based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender presentation. Humanists must speak out and support efforts to raise awareness and prevent sexual and intimate partner violence. Programs such as the Clothesline Project are a great place to start. We will never be able to prevent sexual and intimate partner violence unless we can break the silence!

*Rainn.org and nadv.org

Some notes on terminology:

Sexual Assault: Legally used to describe any unwanted sexual contact forced on a victim without consent. May or may not include use of drugs/alcohol, violence, threats of violence, or other types of duress and/or coercion.

Rape: Legally used to describe sexual assault that includes penetration. Survivors may describe their attack colloquially as rape even if penetration is not involved.

Child Sex Abuse: Used to describe any unwanted sexual contact forced on a child by an adult. Child rape is generally, if not always, used to describe unwanted sexual contact by a stranger. Child sex abuse is generally, if not always, used to describe unwanted sexual contact by someone the child knows.

Child Pornography vs. Child Sex Abuse Materials: When referring to sexual videos and other media featuring children, we use the term

child sex abuse materials. Pornography implies consent to participate in making sexual videos; children cannot provide consent.

Child Prostitutes vs. Human Trafficking: When describing prostituted individuals under 18, use the term human trafficking victim vs. child prostitute. Prostitution implies consent; children cannot provide consent.

Domestic Violence vs. Intimate Partner Violence: The term domestic violence was previously used to describe abuse between spouses. But as abuse can occur in any type of dating relationship, short or long-term, the term intimate partner violence addresses abuse in all types of relationships. Please note as well, intimate partner violence is a continuing pattern of abuse, not a “fight” or “dispute.”

If you have experienced sexual violence and are seeking help, please contact 800-656-4673. If you are in a romantic relationship that is abusive, please contact 800-799-7233.

Editor’s Corner

by Don Wharton

I am honored with the trust that so many people place in me, to synthesize the wisdom of some of the best secular thinkers in our region and share it with our wide WASH community. As usual Heatherly Hodges has outlined and clarified the issues around an extremely important societal issue. Heatherly, thank you so much for your fine work on violence directed toward intimate partners and children.

Many of you might have wondered what Fred Edwards would do after his brilliant cover article of the Winter issue of *The Humanist*. Well, you now know, because it is our lead article after our President’s Message. Fred’s knowledge of history allows him to tell an astonishing story of an imaginary King who changed the course of history. Fred has a long career in secularism, including as the Executive Director of the American Humanist Association and the Editor of its magazine. We are most grateful for his contribution to our relatively small regional newsletter.

Gary Berg-Cross has taken his Ph.D. level expertise in psychology and used it in his on-going deep dive into artificial intelligence. I most especially look forward to what happens with the point he makes in his last paragraph. I have my much more layperson attempts to grapple with AI in a separate article. Hopefully, people will appreciate my reporting on some elements that Gary did not get to with his treatment of AI.

Mike Reid does a wonderful job in covering the conventions he and Heatherly managed to attend. I have much gratitude for his excellent work in distilling and sharing this current information.

It is with a somewhat heavy heart that I felt compelled to include some awful news on the climate. My article on **World Temperature Records** tells that tale and a few of its implications.

Aiden Barnes has a team of secular people to lobby for humanist positions throughout the state of Virginia. He was recognized by American Atheists as the state Director of the year for 2024. For those living in Virginia, please read his essay and consider joining his awesome team.

Kevin Gawora is on the Board of Directors of Atheists Helping the Homeless, DC. He is the first person I thought about when a major issue on the homeless landed in the Supreme Court. As one might expect, he does an excellent job in covering this very important social and legal issue in his **City of Grants Pass v. Johnson** article.

The last essay by Mr. Heffron covers issues such as love and attachment in his ongoing series of articles on religious trauma. I deeply appreciate his thoughtful treatment of these very sensitive issues.

There are a number of changes to the WASH bylaws to be considered by paid members.

An Imaginary King of Kings Who Changed History

by Fred Edwards

The dire news sent shockwaves across the Muslim world. On September 9, 1141, Ahmad Sanjar, sultan of the mighty Seljuq Empire of the

Middle East, leading an army of 100,000, was soundly defeated at the Battle of Qatwan, just north of Samarqand, in what is today Uzbekistan. Barely escaping the carnage with just fifteen of his elite horsemen, Sanjar left behind his wife and remaining military commanders. The battle's victor was an alliance led by Yelü Dashi, a previously unknown intruder from what is now northeastern China, who had led a migration of the Qara-Khitai into Central Asia. This battle expanded not only Yelü Dashi's territory but his fame as the gurkhan (supreme ruler) of what became the dominant empire in the region for the next three-quarters of a century.

Notable in all this is that Sanjar was a Sunni Muslim and Yelü Dashi was a Buddhist. But among the latter's troops were Church of the East (Nestorian) Christians. So, as merchants along the Silk Road passed the battle story from person to person, these elements affected the transformation of the tale. By the time the news reached the Roman Catholic crusader states in the Middle East a year or two later, the title of gurkhan, mispronounced as YOEHahn, had become the personal name Joannes or John. And because the gurkhan's victory cast him as an enemy of Islam, rumor converted the man into a Christian priest-king named Presbyter Joannes or Prester John. Thus, the legend of a powerful Christian ruler in the East, capable of joining forces with crusaders in the West to eradicate Islam, was born. For the next five centuries, the legend of Prester John would powerfully influence Eurasian geopolitics.

The first instance of this was when word of Prester John's now wildly exaggerated victory reached Europe and the ears of Pope Eugenius III. This was at the time Muslim forces destroyed the crusader state of Edessa in 1144. Intelligence received on the two events played into the pope's decision in 1145 to call for the Second Crusade, although opinions differ as to whether the pope hoped for Prester John's participation or if he launched the crusade because he despaired of receiving it.

The legend got a boost around 1160 when Prester John allegedly sent a letter to Byzantine Emperor Manuel Komnenos in Constantinople. But since the priest-king didn't exist, he couldn't have sent it. And because there is no record of a diplomatic delegation delivering it to Manuel's palace, along with the customary gifts, it was

never received. Yet still we have its text, as circulated among monasteries and published in chapbooks. It became one of the most widely read documents of the Middle Ages.

That the letter is a forgery—along with its later expanded revisions, addressed to various other crowned heads of Europe who never received it—is made obvious by its failure as diplomatic correspondence. In it, Prester John glorifies himself and his power to an outrageous degree while insulting the intended recipient and questioning the correctness of Western Christianity. He even goes so far as to vaunt himself as a king of kings. The letter says, “I, Prester John, the Lord of Lords, surpass all under heaven in virtue, in riches, and in power; seventy-two kings pay us tribute. . . . Seven kings wait upon us monthly, in rotation.”

But its popularity among Medieval readers is best attributed to the descriptions it offers of such “wonders of the East” as rivers of milk, honey, and precious stones; an ocean of sand; clothing of salamander silk that is laundered in fire; and an absence of venomous animals, poor people, liars, and flatterers in the idyllic kingdom. Later versions of the letter add unicorns, griffins, giants, the lost tribes of Israel, and so much more.

During the Fifth Crusade, the expanding legend had a profound impact on military decision-making. European armies were gathered in Egypt, encamped on the Nile Delta, waiting for the best time to attack Cairo, which was the hub of Islamic military power at the time. In July 1221, a combination of prophecies and rumors convinced the leadership that Prester John’s grandson David was about to march on Jerusalem to take the Holy Land back from the Muslims while, at the same time, the Christian king of Ethiopia was getting ready to attack Mecca. Eager to participate in such a coordinated destruction of Islam, the crusaders launched their attack at the worst possible time, marching south against Cairo during the Nile’s flood season. This blunder played into the hands of Al-Kamil, the Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, who roundly defeated the Christian attackers, forcing their surrender in August. Meanwhile, no coordinated attacks came from Asia or Africa. This is because many of the rumors had resulted from a misunderstanding of the actual events then unfolding in Central Asia. It wasn’t the Christian army of Prester John but the Mongol forces of Genghis Khan that were advancing westward.

And these Mongols were aware of the Prester John legend. They even exploited it to their advantage in completing their incursion into the Kingdom of Georgia the very next year. It was in September, at the Battle of Khunan, that Genghis Khan’s vanguard posed as a friendly ally by parading crosses in its front rank and having spies spread rumors among the Georgians that the advancing force belonged to Prester John and included Christian wonder workers. This allowed the Mongols to get close enough to launch an effective initial attack, which was followed by a retreat that led the Georgians into an ambush where their 70,000-strong Orthodox army was destroyed.

In 1228 and 1229, the Sixth Crusade was carried out primarily with diplomacy. This led to Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II securing control of Jerusalem and becoming its king. It also led to popular stories about emissaries from Prester John bringing fabulous gifts to Frederick from the mysterious East, including a ring of invisibility and the philosopher’s stone.

By mid-century, with the expansion of the Mongol Empire, this spirit of diplomacy began to lead Europeans and Mongols alike to consider the benefits of joining forces against Islam. To foster this, the Mongols now played the Prester John card in a new way, presenting themselves as heirs to the great potentate’s legacy and on the verge of converting to Christianity. For example, Mongol and Church of the East negotiators claimed that the Christian wife of Hülegü Khan: Mongol lord of Iran, was a daughter of Prester John and that the khan, at her behest, had spared the Christians when he and Christian allies slaughtered all the Muslims in the sack of Baghdad in 1258. Such narratives continued for decades and were taken seriously, although no long-term alliance or joint crusade ever materialized.

Meanwhile, in 1236, King Bela IV of Hungary sent an investigator to Mongolia to better identify these invaders from the East and learn of any connection to Prester John. But European embassies to the Mongol court had an easier time after 1243 when the Mongols conquered Anatolia (modern Turkey) and ushered in the “Mongol Peace,” a time of safer travel and trade between Europe and Asia along the now more secure Silk Road. Hence in 1245, at the First Council of Lyons, Pope Innocent IV authorized four diplomatic missions to the East to “carefully

examine the whole and see everything,” particularly to learn who the Mongols really were and find Prester John. Likewise, King Louis IX of France sent emissaries with similar goals. Independent travelers took to the roads as well.

Through this process, educated Europeans, both Christian and Jewish, began visiting lands they had never seen before and reporting back what they found, enlightening Europe with new knowledge. By the end of the century, similar travelers from the East were venturing to the West. Marco Polo, who had traveled to China as a merchant in 1271, and then returned to Europe in 1295, published his travels in 1300. This led to a growth in the popularity of travelers’ tales, even though Polo’s claim was unpopular that Prester John had once been an ally of Genghis Khan but was killed after a falling out between the two.

Over time, travelers’ tales were eclipsed by travel romances, fictional works masquerading as genuine travel accounts. The most popular of these was the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (1366), which devotes four chapters to explorations of Prester John’s magical realm. Several other such works appeared in various European countries, continuing through the next century, often including stories of direct contact with the eastern monarch.

But how could this man still be alive after more than two centuries? His possession of a fountain of youth was one answer. But the more popular explanation was the one offered by Johannes of Hildesheim in his *History of the Three Kings* (1375). Allegedly, the three Magi, who saw the baby Jesus, later became associated with the Apostle Thomas as he evangelized India. And through their actions, Prester John was appointed temporal lord to serve after their deaths. In this conceptualization, “Prester John” wasn’t a man’s name but a hereditary title created in the first century. As this regal title’s use continued through the Middle Ages, the corpse of St. Thomas would, from time to time, rise to the occasion to choose each new successor to the Prester John throne.

In tandem with all this, map makers of this century and the next were indicating where they thought Prester John’s kingdom lay. Various little-known places in Asia were chosen until Asia became too familiar and Prester John’s realm was transferred to Africa.

With so much inclusion of Prester John in travelers’ accounts, travel romances, histories of faraway lands, and on maps, the search for him helped motivate the Age of Exploration, when Europeans took to the sea in their world travels. This influence exhibited itself most clearly in the early Spanish and Portuguese voyages.

Christopher Columbus was hopeful that he would meet both the Great Khan and Prester John when he journeyed across the Atlantic in 1492. And the Portuguese, after sailing around Africa to India in 1498, launched a side expedition into Ethiopia in 1520, meeting with Lebna Dengal, the Ethiopian ruler they regarded as Prester John. Later, in 1543, the Portuguese provided military aid to Emperor Gelawdewos of Ethiopia, who they regarded as the son of King David, a relative of Prester John. This helped the emperor defeat Muslim invaders. But it also helped the Portuguese realize that this ruler, unlike the fabled prester, wasn’t a rescuer of Christendom but one who needed rescuing.

Nonetheless, it was only in the next century that explorers and scholars began to state definitively that Prester John was a legendary figure who never existed. Even as late as 1693, however, English author Philippe Avril identified the Dali Lama in Tibet as the one who was and always had been Prester John.

So here we had an internationally famous figure who never existed. But unlike others in this category—such as King Arthur, Pope Joan, and Robin Hood—Prester John was one of the most geopolitically influential monarchs the world had ever known: a man who, across centuries, provoked disastrous military decisions, inspired travel and learning, motivated international diplomacy, and helped drive the Age of Exploration.

What does this tell us?

Well, let’s look at Jesus Christ, another internationally famous figure of the Common Era. Was he historical or just a legend? If we limit ourselves to the opinions of famous rationalist scholars, an interesting line of reasoning repeats itself.

James George Frazer, the Scottish social anthropologist and folklorist who wielded significant influence early in the modern studies of

mythology and comparative religion, wrote the following in the Third Edition of *The Golden Bough*:

The doubts which have been cast on the historical reality of Jesus are in my judgment unworthy of serious attention. Quite apart from the positive evidence of history and tradition, the origin of a great religious and moral reform is inexplicable without the personal existence of a great reformer.

Will Durant, one of the most popular twentieth-century historians and an avowed humanist, also accepted the historicity of Jesus, writing in *Caesar and Christ*:

That a few simple men should in one generation have invented so powerful and appealing a personality, so lofty an ethic and so inspiring a vision of human brotherhood, would be a miracle far more incredible than any recorded in the Gospels.

But this line of argument: that powerful social or moral impact constitutes undeniable evidence for the historical existence of the person to whom that impact is attributed, is refuted by the case of Prester John, a man universally recognized as fictional despite the power and reach of his influence for half a millennium. Moreover, secular scholars continue to cast doubt on the historical existence of older religious figures like Moses, Zoroaster, and Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha—all of whom have been credited with similarly great social and moral influence in their lifetimes and beyond.

Such is the common inconsistency. Pointing this out, of course, isn't a definitive critique of the historicity of Jesus. It's just one argument that can be added to others—a single contribution to the dialogue.

Therefore, we would do well to ask what our position on the matter should be as the debate continues. Philosopher Bertrand Russell may have offered the most practical answer in his essay, "Why I Am Not a Christian."

Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about Him, so that I

am not concerned with the historical question, which is a very difficult one.

With Prester John, historical questions are the primary ones that matter, since belief in him has vanished.

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Fred Edwords, a former editor of the *Humanist* magazine and former executive director of the American Humanist Association, now volunteers in his retirement as the AHA's historian.

AI Applications in Action Around Us:

Second of three articles on AI

by Gary Berg-Cross

This article provides concrete examples of how AI applications are affecting and even transforming our personal life with potential impacts in larger realms.

Background consulting groups like McKinsey claim that generative AI will have an impact across all economic sectors and estimate that it will add the equivalent of [2.6 to 4.4 trillion USD to the world economy](#). But even non-generative AI applications discussed in a previous article using fast processing, big data, smart search and most importantly optimization behind the scenes are quietly impacting our lives in many ways, often without us even realizing it. One way to spotlight ubiquitous AI applications that fly under the radar and provide "Behind-the-Scenes Efficiency" is to take a simple sample of ordinary life and see how some of what we do is affected by and may even rely on AI techniques and processes.

Let's consider starting a morning with some possible, concrete examples of how AI applications are affecting, and even transforming daily life. We may rise comfortably and safely surrounded by smart home devices. AI-powered thermostats may have learned our preferences and adjusted temperature automatically. A security system may have employed AI to analyze video footage to identify a package delivery rather than an overnight intruder needing an alert. And outside my door is a package reflecting the AI role in logistics by optimizing delivery routes and

predicting demand to ensure efficient and timely deliveries.

Over breakfast we check our sleep and health scores. Our health app uses AI to provide more personalized insights and tailored experiences as it draws on a dataset collected from the 64 million monthly active users of its health platform. We continue the day looking at email on a smartphone which includes many AI features like security and privacy via face or fingerprint recognition, battery management, image stabilization/improvement (enhances photos and videos, adjusting brightness, color, and noise reduction) & scene/object detection. In smart cameras AIs identify the type of objects or scenes, configurations like portrait, landscape, etc.- and automatically adjusts camera settings. Also familiar are predictive typing and various voice assistants. These include recognition using AI algorithms that can transcribe our voice into text, even in noisy environments. Natural Language Processing gives a rough sense of the meaning and intent behind ordinary spoken commands so devices can often respond effectively. If we are overseas and online we may get language translation.

A very important general AI service provides some type of machine learning. The recent innovations are large language models (LLMs) combining deep learning via neural net processing to facilitate dialog. Voice assistants provide personalization and enhance accuracy using recurrent neural networks, transformer models, and deep learning. The new AI technologies can learn some simple things like our vocalizations and deeper things like preferences, so over time, they adapt responses to provide personalized recommendations and information. I worked in this area in the 80s and early 90s when there wasn't much computer power or large stores of training data, but we could envision building very knowledgeable and intelligent associate technology systems. Simple ones providing calendar and shopping advice are now online. But as successful as deep & machine-based learning has been, the best learning systems are not yet very good at things like abstract reasoning or human intentions. For example when asking for things like the cheapest direct, round trip flights on particular days. They will frequently find options that are cheap but not on the days you want.

The current reality is that chatbots, based on LLMs and long training on text, lack common sense

reasoning abilities, real world knowledge and rich cognitive models that describe mental processes in detail. These capabilities seem needed to meaningfully track/understand dynamic environments and cooperate with humans. The current research direction is to architecturally combine deep learning with symbolic AI. This should provide sophisticated reasoning that explicitly uses symbols, logic, and rules to provide a symbolic foundation. Then as part of a hybrid system with some common sense knowledge built in the system can expand over time through interactions with humans and the world beyond text. While research is active, unless there is a lucky breakthrough and the cost of energy & computing is managed, I wouldn't expect usable hybrids assisting daily life for 5 to 10 years if then. And of course more knowledgeable hybrid systems will also raise a number of ethical and practical issues, some of which will be discussed in part 3 of this series.

Gary Berg-Cross is a WASH Board member, the Coordinator of the Maryland/DC Chapter of WASH and a long time expert in AI theory and practice.

Secular Conferences

In the Spring of 2024

By Mike Reid

American Atheists Convention AACon2024

American Atheists (AA), one of the major national secularist organizations and of which WASH is an affiliate, held their annual convention in Philadelphia at the Loews Philadelphia Hotel on March 28th-31st of 2024. WASH President Heatherly Hodges, Treasurer Matt DeGrave, former President Aiden Barnes, and other WASH members attended.

The convention began on the evening of Thursday, March 31st with the usual Charity Pub Quiz and Game Night. Like a lot of other people, Heatherly and I arrived that afternoon. We checked into the hotel and socialized with other attendees.

Events began Friday morning. It started with a plenary session consisting of a welcome speech and introduction titled "The Next 60 Years: Our Strategic Vision for American Atheists" by AA President Nick Fish and Board Chairperson

Jen Scott. Two additional plenaries filled out the morning, one titled “Religion Makes Me Sick! How Religion Impacts Our Health Outcomes” presented by Andrés Gonzalas and the other “Disobedient Women: How a Small Group of Faithful Women Exposed Abuse, Brought Down Powerful Pastors, and Ignited and Evangelical Reckoning” presented by Sara Stankorb. A set of workshops filled out the afternoon, including one titled “Back to Basics: Rediscovering the Fundamentals of Group Organizing” by AA’s National Field Director, former WASH President and current SMASH chapter coordinator Samantha McGuire.

The main event of Friday evening consisted of an Awards Dinner in which awards were handed out. I am delighted to report that the *American Atheists State Director of the Year Award* went to SEVASH chapter coordinator and former WASH president Aiden Barnes who is also AA’s State Director for Virginia! This award was much deserved. The awards were followed by a speech by Ellery Schempp, a plaintiff in the landmark 1963 United States Supreme Court decision of *Abington School District v. Schempp*, which declared that required public school sanctioned Bible readings were unconstitutional. The evening was rounded out by a dance party DJed by political columnist and author Amanda Marcotte.

Saturday was a day of plenaries. It began with a talk titled “Some Good News for a Change: Positive Policy Updates from the States” by attorney and AA’s Vice President for Legal and Policy, Alison Gill; then one titled “The Progressive Parent: Harnessing the Power of Science and Social Justice to Raise Awesome Kids” by Journalist Kavin Senapathy; “Why Are There So Many Atheist Jews?” by Executive Director of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, Paul Golin; “America Needs Atheists Now More Than Ever!” by Washington Post journalist and author Kate Cohen; “Amish and Mennonites: Hiding in Plain Sight” by Mary Byler and Randall Martin of *The Misfit Amish* and Jasper Hoffman of *The Plain People’s Podcast*. More plenaries filled the afternoon with talks titled “The Insidious Rise of ‘Tradwives’: How Online Activists Are Fighting Back” by Amanda Marcotte, “We Can Do More and Better: New Pact for Atheism in 21st Century” by Leo Igwe of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, and finally another by Nick Fish titled “Rising to the Moment: Our Role

in Stopping Religious Nationalism, Protecting Democracy, and Standing up for Human Rights Across the Globe.” There was a VIP Reception in the evening followed by a music and song performance.

Sunday morning began with the annual Member Meeting hosted by AA staff members Nick Fish, Samantha McGuire, and Alison Gill. They discussed the current state of the organization, its ongoing activities, plans for the near future, and took questions from the audience. This was followed by plenaries titled “Creating Change in America’s Military” by U.S. Army nurse Will Harrell, “Freedom Behind Bars: Securing Civil Liberties in West Virginia’s Prison System” by attorneys Lesley Nash and Lydia Milnes of Mountain State Justice and AA Litigation Counsel Geoffrey Blackwell. The last plenary of the convention was titled “Secular Horizons: Charting Global Concerns for Atheists and Humanists” by Leo Igwe; Debbie Goddard, AA’s Vice President of Programs; Gary McLelland, Executive Director of Humanists International; and Nick Fish. Nick provided closing remarks after that.

After the close of the convention, AA was not yet done. They performed their “Two Hand Working Service Project” charity event in which attendees joined together to package 25,000 meals for a local food bank.

Many national and local secularist organizations had tables at a hall in the hotel. There was also a merchandise store and book signings by attending authors.

Heatherly and I volunteered at the con as well, she at the merchandise table and I at the registration desk. I enjoyed the talks and workshops, but the best part of the convention was reconnecting with friends and acquaintances and making new ones. Overall, AACon2024 was a great success!

The Summit For for Religious Freedom

From Sunday, April 13th through Monday April 15th of 2024 Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) held their second annual Summit For Religious Freedom (SRF) at the Washington Plaza Hotel in Washington, DC. Multiple other organizations joined AU in sponsoring this event. Heatherly and

I attended this as well. A number of people whom we had seen at the American Atheists convention two weeks prior were there as too. It was nice to talk to friends again so soon.

The conference began Sunday morning with welcoming remarks from AU President and CEO Rachel Laser. These were followed by a keynote address focusing on the rise and threat of White Christian Nationalism by historian, author, and University of Pennsylvania professor Dr. Anthea Butler. She was then joined on the stage by Andrew Seidel of AU and Alison Gill of AA. Journalist Erin Reed who tracks LGBTQ+ issues for her newsletter *ErinInTheMorning* presented the afternoon keynote. There was a well-attended Welcome Reception held outside on the hotel's pool deck, which provided a great opportunity for socializing and networking.

Monday morning was devoted to break-out sessions and book signings. For me, the highlight of the convention took place Monday afternoon with a keynote presentation by Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD). Congressman Raskin co-chairs the Congressional Freethought Caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives. He discussed the threat to democracy posed by christian nationalists. He also discussed his book *Unthinkable: Trauma, Truth and the Trials of American Democracy* (2022) which was on sale at the conference. Raskin was greeted by raucous applause from the audience both when he first took to the podium and again when he finished. He was later joined by AU CEO Rachel Laser and author Wajahat Ali of the Western States Center, an organization that advocates for religious tolerance and inclusion.

In the evening, the conference held a screening of the movie *Bad Faith: Christian Nationalism's Unholy War on Democracy*. This documentary probes the disturbing activities of christian nationalists over the past decades as they have spread fear, anger, disinformation, and propaganda in order to impose their own narrow, religion-based vision of what America should be on unwilling others. The film reveals Christian Nationalism is an inherently undemocratic and authoritarian movement, which is very well funded, politically connected, and extremely dangerous. It further explores the uneasy and unnatural, but potent alliance between religious extremists and some libertarian-leaning plutocrats. One of the central themes of the film is the Christian Nationalists' framing of their activities

as a biblical struggle between good and evil with them being on the "good" side, of course. They follow the well-honed propaganda technique of projecting their own insidious actions onto their enemies, secularists and moderate and liberal Christians. Rob Boston of AU hosted a panel discussion after the screening. I found this film simultaneously engrossing and horrifying. As a long-time secular activist, the sinister activities of Christian Nationalists are not news to me, but the filmmakers really put the fanaticism, cynicism, power, and outright skulduggery of these people in front of our faces and show how the leaders of this movement are motivated more by power than by faith.

The conference concluded Monday evening, but SRF organized a "Hill Day" on Tuesday which was a day of lobbying on Capitol Hill. Those who chose to participate, visited the offices of their representatives in the House of Representatives and the Senate to meet with staff and advocate for "The Do No Harm Act" (HR 2725 & S 1206) legislation that would amend the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) of 1993 such that it cannot be misused for religious discrimination. Sadly, this legislation is unlikely to be brought up for a vote in this Congress, but the lobbying efforts lay the groundwork for action in a future Congress.

The SRF was a well-organized and well-executed event. We learned a lot and that it was a great success. Much of the conference was also streamed for remote participation. I look forward to attending again next year.

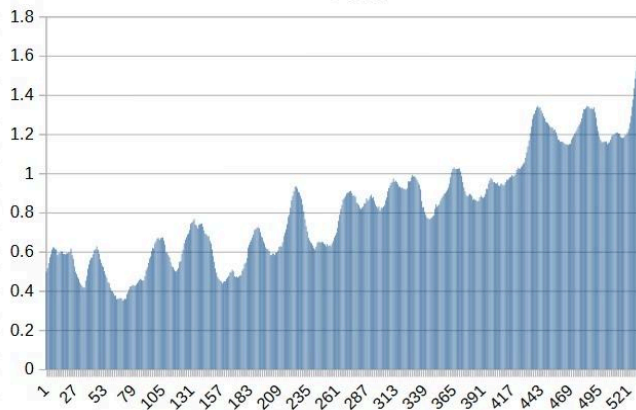
Mike Reid is a former President of WASH and American Atheists' Maryland State Director.

World Temperature Records

by Don Wharton

There are two new 12 month world average high temperature records set since our last WASHline, one for February and another for March. I am using the European [Copernicus Climate Change Service](#) for the data included in the graph below. The vertical axis is the 12 month average world temperature degrees Centigrade above the pre-industrial average. The horizontal axis is the month number starting from January 1980. This gives a view of the longer term trend.

The values for January, February and March are 1.52, 1.56 and 1.58. This reflects an El Nino event.



In theory the 12 month average should decline back below the 1.5 degree level after that event ceases. This series of records is a strong indication that El Ninos will have massively greater impact in the future. The raw heat is certain to move many of the documented climate effects to the nearer term future. The collapse of specific ecosystems is high on that list of impacts.

Most of the incremental heat is associated with ocean surface temperatures. So it should not be surprising that scientists are now documenting a major world-wide coral reef bleaching event. You can read the NOAA announcement [here](#). 30% of all ocean going species require coral reefs for their life cycle survival. This could be devastating for those species as well as the coral reefs themselves. Human societies get much nutrition and tourism activity from these reef systems. Many coastal regions are protected by these coral reefs.

More locally to our country, Florida reports that 98% of their coral reefs were killed by the 100° ocean temperatures of summer 2023. Given the value of these reefs, they are making massive investments in an innovative system to restore Florida reefs. Scientists select varieties that are more immune to warmer water. They can clone coral by slicing them very thin. Then to heal they would grow 30 to 40 times faster. When they get bigger, hundreds of cloned immature corals are mounted on underwater Christmas tree structures. When they get still bigger, they can be cemented to the ocean floor. This process is augmented by using nets to capture the sperm and eggs during an annual spawning event. This ensures that more of the eggs are fertilized. They have confirmed that newly hatched coral nymphs can follow healthy

sounds to a more promising ecosystem before they attach to the ocean floor. Thus they use undersea speakers to play such sounds where the scientists want the new hatchlings to adhere. This is all extremely labor intensive. If this coral reef science is to be used in more impoverished areas of the world, there will be need for substantial automation of these processes

It has often been said that tropical rain forests are the lungs of the world. Amazonia has experienced a [new record of drought](#). This Nature article deals in depth with water flow through the system. Quoting, “Due to climate change and deforestation this biome is moving towards a ‘tipping point’, especially in those regions affected by large-scale deforestation, forest fragmentation and degradation over the last decades. Particularly in those regions a warming trend, the lengthening of the dry season, and a decline of carbon sink are observed.” The Amazon rainforest historically has been one of the major mechanisms to uptake carbon dioxide and produce oxygen. [According to Copernicus](#), the Amazon has recently become a net source of carbon dioxide. It is hard for a rain forest to continue without rain. Another Nature article talks of the [Amazon turning into a savanna](#). This article cites “a mean annual rainfall reduction of 44% and a dry season length increase of 69%.”

We can hope that these ecosystem impacts are short term warnings showing what can happen if we do not act to hold climate change in check. In both of these cases the nearer term projection is that things will improve when the current El Nino ends. However, my view is that we have near zero chance of preventing much greater harm if we do not substantially increase our climate related efforts. 2023 had a new annual record of [37.4 billion tonnes](#) of carbon dioxide added to our atmosphere. The current 420 parts per million of CO2 is 50% higher than the 280 parts per million of pre-industrial times. China itself had a [12% increase between 2020 and 2023](#). The United States had a reduction in 2023, but the incremental requirement for AI related energy is likely to more than double electrical energy needed for computer servers alone in the very near future.

Climate scientists now predict that [we will need a new Cat 6 designation for tropical storms](#). Of the 197 tropical storms in the forty-two year period from 1980 to 2021, five of them exceeded the hypothetical category 6 wind speed of 190 mph. All of them occurred in the last nine years.

The heavy loading at the end of this forty-two year period is an indication of the increasing probability of such storms. Prior experience indicates that such storms can reach sustained winds of 210 mph. I think our scientists have correctly established their point that the Saffir–Simpson hurricane wind scale needs to add this category 6 to that scale.

Earth Day was April 22, 2024.

AA Atheists in Virginia

[**Aiden Barnes** is the American Atheists' State Director of Virginia. He is asking for action from other atheists. – Don Wharton]

AA VA State Director's call to action

Urge your state legislators to protect church-state separation - Join the VA Secular Advocacy Team!

Comrades! Virginia's legislature has already ended their 2024 session, except for some outlying budget stuff and other items that still need addressing, so we're setting our sights on the 2025 session. We had some big steps forwards this year, finally getting child marriage banned in Virginia and advancing Medical Aid In Dying bills further than previous years. We also suffered a lot of setbacks with many of the bills we supported getting vetoed by Governor Youngkin. Religious extremists and their lawmaker allies were also back to attacking church-state separation and trying to force all of us to live by their beliefs, but the wall held.

The VA Secular Advocacy Team monitors bills (both good and bad) that affect the rights of LGBTQ+ folks, the rights to abortion access, to public education, to true religious freedom and much more. In the 2024 legislative session, we defeated bills that would've:

— Unconstitutionally promote religion in public schools, including those that would allow school-sponsored prayer, require displays of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom, require students to take classes dedicated solely to the Bible and censor library books, classroom materials or curriculum based on religious beliefs.

— Send taxpayer dollars to fund private, mostly religious schools through private school voucher programs.

— Ban abortion and restrict access to critical reproductive health care, which imposes one narrow religious doctrine on everyone.

— Misuse religious freedom to license discrimination against people where they work, where they shop, or when they try to get health care they need, which especially harms LGBTQ+ people, religious minorities, women and nonreligious people.

But we're not done fighting back, and we need more help! If you're interested in joining the Secular Advocacy Team in Virginia, please contact our team's co-chair Matthew DeGrave (matthew.degrave@atheists.org) for more info.

Church-state separation enables us to live as ourselves and believe as we choose, as long as we don't harm others. And it frees us to come together as equals and build a stronger democracy. Don't take this freedom for granted, fight back against the legislators and their bills threatening this fundamental American principle!

[Ed. Note: A Secular Advocacy Team is also forming in Maryland. Contact AA's MD State Director Mike Reid at Mike.Reid@atheists.org if interested.]

Tweet by President Biden

No one should be jailed just for using or possessing marijuana. – 10:18 PM · Mar 7, 2024

AI News and Implications

By Don Wharton

I want to start my discussion of AI by noting my gratitude for Gary Berg-Cross as he shares his high end AI expertise with our WASH community. His sharing of his insights are included elsewhere in this and other WASHline editions. They are highly recommended. I share my experiences here because the news is exploding well beyond anything that we could have imagined even a few months ago.

AI will change everything. Will that change be good or bad? It is obvious how and why our species (along with our pets and livestock that feed us) now have 96% of the vertebrate mass on this planet. We are intelligent. We perceive things and share abstract theories about how to deal with them. Artificial systems have now evolved to a level that can now hack that intelligence and perhaps dominate it.

One major factor that few people even consider is the energy consumption of AI server systems. According to the [analysis](#), if current trends in AI capacity and adoption continue, NVIDIA is expected to ship 1.5 million AI servers by 2027. These 1.5 million servers running at full capacity would consume at least 85.4 terawatt-hours (TWh) of electricity annually. That would be 2% of the slightly over 4,000 TWh now used by our country and at least ten times the recent energy demand from current AI systems. Total energy demand from all classical server systems is likely between 1 and 1.5% of current national demand. The market value of NVIDIA went from \$100b in 2019 to about \$2 trillion now. Their chips and servers demand a premium price. There are a handful of competitors willing to commit billions to serve this same market. Those competitors might in aggregate equal delivered NVIDIA systems shortly because the demand will be normous enough to consume everything that can be delivered. Those competitors will have an easy time selling their products because in many cases they are the same companies now buying large numbers of AI server systems. [This New York Times article](#) reports that \$32 billion in capital investments were made by just three AI related companies, in just the first three months of this year.

Elon Musk is predicting that AI systems exceeding human intelligence will be here by next year. He is likely wrong, but, there is a rumor that ChatGPT5 will soon be able to call other AI systems. Given the now relative ease with which specialized AI systems can learn to outperform humans in specific areas, a superhuman AI system will simply be one that can integrate a very broad range of more specialized systems. Whether that happens or not, the incremental ability to add value will be enormous. It is not insane to see why some people are predicting that these systems will be consuming 25% of all electrical energy within ten years. It will be nearly impossible to add that much capacity at the same time that it is urgent to

get our economies off of fossil fuels.

Elon Musk went to China to announce his [FSD \(Full self driving\) cars](#). The technological target is a fully autonomous driverless autotaxi mode. There is an [agreement with Baidu](#), which already has over 4 million miles of trip experience with this mode of operation. The rumor is that later this year Musk will announce a new car for general consumers with this feature. This [Verge article](#) projects August 8th for this announcement. The owner might be able to release his property as an automated gig worker on a service such as Uber or Lyft. Thus our cars could do the work to create the income to pay for their own purchase. We could then just make sure our cars are programmed to cease doing gig work when we need them and return home. The net cost of ownership might then be very modest. Your car could also be earning a modest amount of money by allocating [1kw of AI web services](#) from the car's computer while it is sitting in your garage. Musk imagines 100 million such cars adding together to provide a web service function equal to Amazon's massive AWS server farms.

In the same article, Musk is also predicting that the [Tesla Optimus robotic division](#) will become more valuable than all other assets in his company. The current leader in robots is Boston Dynamics. Musk asserts that his efforts will have a massive advantage because he is forced to make his AI work in a car. A car of necessity must make decisions without talking to a massive central server. He thinks his robots will likewise be able to do most work independently. Musk expects some robots to be functioning in his factories later this year with more rolling out next year. This trend toward AI that works independently is a major subset of AI engineering. Most major AI engineering companies recognize that they have to find ways to put much of their functionality into the cell phones, computers or gaming systems that are local to remote sites.

[NVIDIA is radically reengineering](#) their approach to gaming based on an AI approach. A major focus is improving the user experience as they relate to non-player characters (NPCs) in a gaming system. The user will be able to talk to NPCs and there will be chat bot capabilities built in such that the player will have an experience of talking with a more nuanced personal presence. There is also a radical revamping of how video information is stored. It can be stored with lower

resolution and frame rates. The system will then use the advanced AI graphic chips to compute the higher resolution and in-between frames that are not directly stored in the gaming database. It is highly likely that this new approach to gaming systems will find its way into customer support, telemarketing and information flows within a company.

The Neuron is a free AI newsletter. Its April 25th issue reported on an agreement between Open AI and Moderna that has already put in place over 700 AI systems to assist in their internal operations. Each user in the company now averages 120 conversations per week with these ChatGPT systems. Quoting Neuron, “CEO Stephane Bancel said Moderna is looking to ‘redesign every business process’ with AI, allowing the 3,000-person team to perform like 100,000.” For most large AI engineering operations, a major focus is providing corporations, nonprofits and governments with the capability to design specialized apps to execute or streamline their existing operations. Of course, this is the first step in the AI takeover of our human interactions. In many cases people will be informed that their services are no longer needed. The AI is now doing their job. Radical increases in productivity logically implies a decrease in the workforce required.

In many cases there might not be a choice to retain someone in a job. This is especially true for non-profit volunteer based organizations which compensate their workers only with the joy of achieving what they achieve. Kevin Gawora is the Treasurer of [Atheists Helping the Homeless, DC](#). He wants to go back to graduate school and earn his Ph.D. I decided to ask some of the free large language models (LLMs) out there if they could help with his tasks. Many of them just said that they did not give tax advice or something similar. Copilot came back and said, “Certainly! I’d be happy to assist you with your non-profit organization’s financial reporting and tax forms.” To some extent the creation of an LLM app is just a process of asking them what they can do and then verifying that they can do what the organization needs to be done.

Will AI intelligence be allocated to providing the goods and services that humanity needs? I certainly do not have a need for a graphic artist to assist in my creation of a personal graphic novel describing my imagined travels throughout

the solar system and the wider galaxy. Of course, given that I now have much of that capability, my imagination is free to consider that and many other things that I never imagined doing. I can include my imagined interactions with the many exotic cultures and wildly imaginative living creatures that I might find around other star systems. There is increasingly interactive control that we can have on the images generated. We will have the tools to add and remove objects within each image, simply by asking for the desired revisions. The claim is that we will have Photoshop level control over the images we create. Perhaps we might ask that the scales on the quasi-reptilian alien species in our image be turned blue. I was astonished at the creativity of this purely AI music video creation, [C3PO x Childish Gambino - Gold Gang \(Official AI Music Video\) Star Wars](#).

I have been experimenting with many of the LLMs out there. Claude3 was asserted to be a brilliant new entry from Anthropic. I asked Claude if he could create an image for me. He said he could not do that, but he could interpret images supplied to him. After a bit more playing with Claude I asked him to be a high end political science scholar analyzing prospects in Florida concerning women’s reproductive rights given the current laws on the books and the finding of the Florida Supreme Court that those laws did not violate the Florida Constitution. That imagined scholar was celebrating the wins of the anti-abortion extremists. As is usual for a conservative, he got many facts wrong. President Biden’s team thinks that Florida might be in play because of the draconian ban on any abortions after 6 weeks of pregnancy. I revised my prompt to include those supporting facts. I am including this essay as an Addendum to this *WASHline*. I disown it as an expert in any way and it certainly is not the intellect of any WASH member. But it is sufficiently interesting that it could be read as an example of what one of the more respected LLMs can do. Claude made up a word “idiminatearily.”

Almost all non-AI software services will want to add AI related functionality. Gmail is rolling out the ability to ask for AI assistance in creating an email. There will also be more general agents. Someone will be able to allow an AI to do anything with a desktop. The AI could then run any and all software that you might have on your system. If it is a trustworthy assistant, people will be extremely happy to allocate that power to an AI system.

In my post for our Secular Zoom Community Chapter meeting for May, I shared how some malicious actors have used social media for scams or like QANON, the propagation of absurd conspiracy theories. Researchers have focused a lot on ensuring that AI is not an evil technology. However, there are evil and highly deluded people out there who will want to use AI for their not very good purposes. The AI will not be evil, but it will be logically impossible to preclude evil goal direction from the user of AI systems. Individual Russians have been very good at managing a couple hundred bot accounts with older technology. What if they or others could expand the scale and credibility of their bot accounts by an order of magnitude with AI? I feel nearly certain that many people are heavily engaged in doing precisely that right now.

I support the notion advanced by Gary in his article, that the major advance to be expected will integrate the LLMs of today with symbolic processing. That will remove the weaknesses cited by Gary in current LLM systems, lacking “common sense reasoning abilities, real world knowledge and rich cognitive models that describe mental processes in detail.” I noted before the rumor that ChatGPT5 will have the capability to call other AI systems. If that ability to call for a special level of expertise is combined with the context sensitivity to appropriately know when to make such calls, we will eventually achieve general intelligence transcending that which is possible by humanity. We can hope that the wisdom possible with such systems are applied to the common good.

City of Grants Pass v. Johnson

The Battle for Homeless Rights Enters the Supreme Court
by Kevin Gawora

Homelessness issues gained national attention on April 22nd when the Supreme Court heard arguments in the case of “[City of Grants Pass v. Johnson](#)”.¹ This case, with a ruling expected in June, will decide whether cities are allowed to punish homeless individuals from sleeping outside on public property, regardless of the shelter options available. The original court case, filed in 2018, determined it is cruel and

unusual punishment to arrest or ticket people for [sleeping outside when they have no place to go](#).² The ordinance imposes a \$295 fine for violations, [rising to \\$537.60 if not paid](#).³ After two citations, police in Grants Pass can issue an order that bans an individual from city property. If that is violated, the individual can be charged with criminal trespass, which carries penalties of up to 30 days in jail [and a \\$1250 fine](#).⁴ In an amicus brief filed by representatives of the homeless individuals affected by the policy, as well as concerned third parties, “the plan was to inflict fines and jail time on the City’s homeless residents until they were ‘uncomfortable enough’ [that they left Grants Pass](#).”⁵ The brief continues by mentioning that the supposed “offense” of “camping on public property”, the official charge that homeless individuals who sleep rough in Grants Pass receive, put differently, is akin to “the status (of homelessness being) defined by the very behavior being [singled out for punishment](#).”⁶ The circular reasoning behind the enforcement of the ordinance points to the unstable legal ground that the City finds itself on, as well as logical inconsistency of the application of the law to the City’s homeless population.

The causes of the homelessness issue in Grants Pass are multifaceted, but the lack of available and affordable housing is the primary culprit. The vacancy rate is one percent, and the stock of affordable housing has, according to one estimate, “[dwindled to almost zero](#)”.⁷ A 2019 point-in-time count of Grants Pass counted 602 homeless people and another 1,045 who were “[precariously housed](#)”.⁸ The local government has long had an anti-homeless policy, with participants in a 2013 meeting discussing strategies for “pushing homeless residents into neighboring jurisdictions and ‘leaving them there’”. Soon after, the City began its current policy of stricter enforcement of its no public camping law to move out homeless Grants Pass residents. Similar laws have been used in other cities nationwide to send a location’s homeless population somewhere else, as recent numbers of homeless individuals climb by double-digits, and as of 2023, there are more than 600,000 homeless individuals nationwide.⁹

Although it is unknown how the court will rule, one thing is clear, there is a moral imperative

to treat homeless people with decency and respect, which means not forcing them out of the only relatively safe and clean places they can sleep, public spaces. Organizations like Atheists Helping the Homeless, D.C. (AHHDC), a branch of the nationwide Atheists Helping the Homeless organization, stands firmly behind the homeless community in their fight for respect, housing, and success in daily life. AHHDC collects cash and gift cards to purchase essentials like toothbrushes, socks, backpacks, and flashlights, as well as in-kind donations of clothing, to distribute at monthly events in Silver Spring, Maryland. The organization is expanding, and hopes to start hosting bi-weekly events in the coming months. It also is working hard to spread the word about the Grants Pass v. Johnson case to raise awareness about homeless issues.

The Grants Pass v. Johnson case is crucial in determining homeless policy in large and small counties nationwide. Although the outcome of the case is ultimately in the hands of the Supreme Court, there is substantial legal precedent for a decision in favor of Johnson, who represents the homeless community and allied organizations. Hopefully, a verdict in favor of Johnson can begin to change how individuals struggling with homelessness are treated by communities and law enforcement to create a more equitable and just society.

Kevin Gawora is a Board Member and Treasurer of [Atheists Helping the Homeless, DC](#)

1 “Johnson v. Grants Pass: Overview.” *Johnson v. Grants Pass*, johnsonvgrantspass.com/.

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2 Ibid.

3 Howe, Amy. “Supreme Court to Hear Case on Criminal Penalties for Homelessness.” *SCOTUSblog*, 22 Apr. 2024,

www.scotusblog.com/2024/04/supreme-court-to-hear-case-on-criminal-penalties-for-homelessness/.

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5 Johnson, Edward, et al. “City of Grant’s Pass v. Johnson: Amicus Brief for Respondents.” *Supreme Court*, Supreme Court of the United States.

https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/23/23-175/30597/6/20240327111905322_No%2023-175%20Grants%20Pass%20v%20Johnson%20Respondents%20Brief%20For%20Filing.pdf.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 “2019 Point in Time Estimates of Homelessness in the U.S.” *HUD.Gov*, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 21 Dec. 2019, www.hud.gov/2019-point-in-time-estimates-of-homelessness-in-US.

9 Howe, Amy. “Supreme Court to Hear Case on Criminal Penalties for Homelessness.” *SCOTUSblog*, 22 Apr. 2024, www.scotusblog.com/2024/04/supreme-court-to-hear-case-on-criminal-penalties-for-homelessness/.

Understanding Religious Trauma

Part II

by P. Michael Heffron

In part two of Understanding Religious Trauma, we consider two things. The first is how Christianity operates like a Trojan horse. It does this by masking Munchausen syndrome in rhetoric about “mercy” and “forgiveness in order to replace unconditional love with conditional “love.” Second, we look at how such a replacement enables Christianity to use shame to coerce its adherents into making a false confession, which is based on an unquestionable assumption that we are guilty of offending a God (which is like claiming an ant has the power to offend the Sun), that separates us from both our own authenticity and, as a result, from accepting the authenticity in others.

Munchausen syndrome describes a condition where the caretaker of a child, most often a mother, either makes up fake symptoms or causes real symptoms to make it look like the child is sick. Packaging itself as an example of love and self-sacrifice, Christianity looks from the outside like a sacred ark of virtues that goes all the way back to Moses and Abraham. But that ark carries an insidious assumption within it that leads Christianity to operate like Munchausen syndrome. That assumption requires children to accept they are born suffering from the spiritual cancer of “original sin.” As a result, they are required to spend their whole life on after-life support, ingesting various “sacraments” offered by Christianity as a form of divine chemotherapy. Those “sacraments” never fully cure the patients of their spiritual cancer, of course, because everyone knows there is more money in treatments than in cures. And God ain’t no dummy.

On one hand, the idea of “original sin” is as

baseless as the claims that skin color reflected the degree of one's spiritual superiority and claims that all those burned at the stake were truly "witches" and "heretics," for it was those who believed the former who often felt morally obligated to do the latter. And they did so because they never dared to question whether they really suffered from the "stain" of original sin that they relied on to excuse everyone who committed evil in the name of their brand of religion. On the other hand, if every child is indeed born suffering from the defect of original sin, then the God who gives the "gift of life" to such defective souls does so out of a weird need to recruit "believers" like a Kardashian seeking Instagram followers.

Children raised in such emotional environments are conditioned to conflate artificial love, which clings and controls, with real love that accepts and lets go. One is conditional on your willingness to believe you need forgiveness for what you are, the other is unconditional and teaches you of the need to accept and love yourself the same way. The former fosters attachment to a religious brand of perception that promises to "save" those who subscribe to it from all those "damned sinners" who don't, while the latter cultivates authenticity which leads to the development of both healthy boundaries and healthy inter and intra personal connections (as well as healthier reasoning skills). Indeed, while the former cause's trauma, the latter is the only way to heal from such trauma.

Important to understand here is that both love and attachment are necessary for healthy emotional development. We need attachment just as much as we need love. The problem is that, while attachment is important for bonding with families, friends, and communities, authenticity is important for becoming uniquely ourselves. The two are often presented as if they are in conflict, as if loyalty and liberty are opposites, but they are not. Love that is unconditional cultivates the courage to find one's authenticity, and nothing forges loyalty more than being accepted for who we freely are and choose to be. Nothing forges loyalty, in other words, more than those who defend your freedom. Love that is conditional, on the other hand, not only forces us to pretend to be what others want us to be, but can so addict us to a need for attachment that it overrides our ability to ever find our own authenticity.

Frighteningly enough, with the right

combination of fear and insecurity, our need for attachment, which can become a matter of survival, can completely replace our need for authenticity, which at times of danger to life and limb becomes a luxury. In fact, some people even become convinced that their most authentic self is to seek pure attachment – especially to a God via the spiritual umbilical cord of a "divinely revealed" religion. All cults do this to addict their followers to in-group approval. And while the authenticity of the individual is seen as an eccentric luxury in times of peace, authenticity based on attachment to a group is praised as a form of sainthood or even martyrdom.

It is also important to note a tandem relationship between attachment and the release of dopamine in our brains. When our need for attachment surpasses our need for authenticity, "love" begins to feel more like a fear of rejection than of unconditional acceptance. Because fear triggers the release of oxytocin, which is the same neurotransmitter that love releases in our brain, it becomes difficult to ever fully separate a "love" of God from a "fear" of that same God. Fear, in this respect, can feel like love on steroids, with all of the jealousy and violence that comes with it being attempts to control and possess. And attachment being as necessary to us as authenticity, this is in part why the fear which conditional forms of love creates can feel indistinguishable from real love, especially for those who have never experienced unconditional love "unstained" by a need for the religious approval that they are "worthy" of being "saved" from an eternal garbage dump called hell. This is why love for some is experienced as the safety of unconditional acceptance, while for others, the ultimate "love" comes from God's final and incontestable judgment, of who is worthy or unworthy of eternal salvation.

Now consider how your brain reacts to getting approval. When a social media user gets a like or a retweet, the brain releases a flood of dopamine and sends it along reward pathways. It feels wonderful, but like any drug, it leads us to need a stronger dopamine hit the next time, driving us to do so by seeking more and more approval and validation from others, again and again and again. Also activated by drugs such as cocaine and nicotine, we're addicted less to love, as Robert Palmer says, and more to the dopamine rush we get from the approval we so often conflate with love.

The difference between unconditional love and approval-based “love” that depends on attachment is the difference between oxytocin and serotonin, which makes us feel safed and accepted and connected to other, and oxytocin mixed with dopamine, which makes us feel euphoric when we get “Likes” and fearful and rejected when we don’t. This is the same difference between yourself and your reflection in a mirror: they look the same, but are in fact opposites. And the thing that Christianity uses to transform our natural need for the former into a dopamine addiction to the latter is shame for being human masquerading as guilt for “original sin.”

Near Enemies

Buddhists have two concepts that capture the idea of things that look the same but are opposites, like reflections in a mirror. Called “far enemies” and “near enemies,” the former reflect polar opposites but the latter reflects mirrored opposites. While far enemies are the most obvious to us, like love and hate, near enemies are much sneakier and harder to spot because they look nearly identical. “Near enemies” appear similar to the desired one, the way water and kool-aid can look so similar to the color blind person, but in fact are counterfeits of the real thing. And because they look so similar, what is sometimes offered as a form of love is actually a form of attachment.

With roots in Buddhist psychology, “near enemy” refers to a mental state that mimics a positive emotion but in truth undermines it. Unlike its opposite, which is easy to spot, the “near enemy” of a positive emotion flies under the radar and damages us from within. Although as small as a butterfly in appearance, the difference between love and its’ near enemy can be as destructive as a hurricane in its long term emotional and psychological effects.

“Each of the qualities of the awakened heart,” explains psychologist Jack Kornfield, “such as love, joy and peace, have these ‘near enemies’”—aspects which mimic and limit them. While the “far enemy of love is hatred, the near enemy of love is attachment.” Attachment, which can occur when we require someone’s approval of us, masquerades as love. It says, “I will love this person (because I need something from them).” Or, “I’ll love you if you’ll love me back. I’ll love you, but only if you will be the way I want.”

“This isn’t the fullness of love,” however.

“Instead there is attachment—there is clinging and fear (of judgment and disapproval). True love allows, honors, and appreciates; attachment grasps, demands, needs, and aims to possess. If we examine our own attachment with compassion, we can see how it is constricted, fear-based and conditional; it offers love only to certain people in certain ways—it is exclusive. Then we can practice opening to love, in the sense of metta, used by the Buddha—a universal, heartfelt feeling of caring and connectedness” to everything, and everyone.

Guilt vs. Shame

As Brene Brown pointed out, in this way, the near enemy can drive separation, especially us from our authentic selves, resulting in personal insecurities. To compensate for those insecurities leads many to then seek the security that comes from “strength in numbers, trading liberty for the security of loyalty, and gaining group approval through conformity. And this process of separating a child from their authentic self – what I call ‘splitting the Adam’” – begins with a parent teaching a child to see themselves not as unblemished and perfect in every possible way, but as a born sinner, one that can only be saved from damnation through a willingness to conform to a brand of religious perspectives. For what is religion by the selling of brands of perception?

These two forms of “love” look the same, but are opposite. Only love that is unconditional can cultivate authenticity, which envelopes us with a radiance that acts like a force field against the stone-casting egos of others. Like bamboo, authenticity allows us to develop a sense of our true selves – to “know thyself” in the truest sense – that is strong, light, and extremely flexible. The inauthenticity that results from being nourished by the near-enemy of love, however, comes with conditions which separates a person from themselves, while making a person’s boundaries as jagged as thorns, as brittle as ice, and as porous as Swiss cheese.

The difference between these two types of love determine whether we learn to feel guilt or shame, which also operate like near enemies. As Brown points out, guilt is what we feel for something we’ve done, while shame is a feeling we have for something we are. In the former, we are born with souls as beautiful as swans that occasionally crash and break things while learning

to fly, while the latter tells us we are born sinners with souls of an ugly duckling that must seek forgiveness for our inability to ever fly right at all.

In part three, we will consider how teaching a child to believe they are born sinners can not only result in childhood trauma, but how and why childhood trauma is different from other traumas. And we will also look at the detrimental effects brands of conditional attachment-based love can have on children by looking at how the complete lack of real love can lead to severe deformities in both our emotional and physical development.

Mr. Heffron is a long term member of WASH DC Atheists discussion groups and a book author. His titles are *Escaping the Bondage of My Beliefs* and *Cracking Kubrick's Code*

Changes to WASH Bylaws

By Heatherly Hodges, *WASH President*

Members of WASH, please review the following bylaws changes. There are some minor changes regarding chapter coordinators, how meetings are run, and how Board Directors are governed, but the primary change is the definition of a WASH member. Previously, WASH members were defined by dues. WASH is moving away from a dues-paying model for multiple reasons, including not wanting to exclude members due to financial constraints, recognizing that some WASH chapters are primarily virtual, and noting that the dues-paying membership model is less effective than a donation-based model that is open to multiple types of members. If you are currently a dues-paying member of WASH, please review these changes. If you have objections or questions, please mail them to:

Washington Area Secular Humanists
P.O. Box 352
Frederick, Maryland 21705

Current by-laws are available here: <https://wash.org/wash-by-laws/>

Changes:
WASH BYLAWS: Revisions April 2024

Proposed deletions are marked with highlighting, and proposed additions with font color.

The **current** ~~previous~~ Bylaws of WASH were approved by the WASH Membership and became effective on 15 June 2010.

ARTICLE II Membership

Section 1. Membership. **A member of WASH is any person who subscribes to the principles and goals of WASH, has applied for WASH membership, and has paid the established dues. Persons who join as part of a Household/Family membership must be at least eighteen years of age, and must reside in the same household. The Board shall define who is a member of WASH and such definitions will be posted on WASH media and made available to WASH members.**

ARTICLE III Governing Body

Section 3. Tenure. Except as provided in Section 9, Directors shall serve terms of approximately two years. **The Directors shall be divided into two classes, divided by total number of Directors (ie: 5 and 6 if the total number is 11). The terms of the classes shall begin and end in alternate years.**

Section 4. Meetings. The Board shall meet at least once each calendar year. A meeting of the Board may be called by the President, either on the President's own volition or at the request of any three Directors. The Board will establish rules regarding adequate notification of Board meetings. The Board may decide, on a case by case basis, that a meeting or portion of a meeting should be closed. The minutes of closed meetings or portions of meetings will be recorded separately, and will be incorporated into published minutes by reference. **The Board shall, at its discretion, have the authority to remove any member of the Board of Directors from the Board if three consecutive meetings have occurred without participation from that member.**

Section 6. Quorum and Voting. A simple majority of Directors shall constitute a quorum, except that, if the Board consists of an even number of Directors, the quorum shall consist of one-half of the number of Directors. Unless otherwise specified in the WASH Bylaws, decisions of the Board shall be determined by simple majority vote of Directors

present and voting. Chapter coordinators who are present at the meeting may vote on decisions and be counted in the total number of Directors. They will not affect the quorum number.

Section 9. Vacancies. A vacancy on the Board shall be filled by the Board as soon as possible, and the replacement Director shall serve until the next annual membership meeting. If, because of the application of this Section, the number of vacancies to be filled by an annual election is greater than the size of the class whose terms expire that year in accordance with Section 3, the terms of the Directors elected to fill the excess vacancies shall be one year instead of two years to ensure an equal rotation of terms.

ARTICLE IV Officers

Section 5. Duties of the Secretary. The Secretary shall keep the minutes of Board meetings and WASH membership meetings or designate someone else to take minutes, and shall maintain a book historical record of minutes. The Secretary shall be custodian of the corporate records and of WASH's corporate seal and shall see that the corporate seal is affixed to documents as necessary. The Secretary shall perform such other duties as may be assigned by the President or the Board.

ARTICLE VII Chapters

Section 4. Chapter Procedures. Local Chapters will establish their own rules and procedures, including the method of choosing the Chapter Coordinator and the establishment of other Chapter officer positions. The Chapter Coordinator shall be responsible for ensuring that the Chapter's activities conform to these Bylaws and to other policies and procedures established by the Board. Whenever the Chapter Coordinator is replaced, the incoming Coordinator will inform the Secretary of his/her acceptance of the position.

Section 5. A Chapter may, at its discretion, appoint any member to be that Chapter's representative to the Board. If the appointee is not a Director, the Board shall invite him/her to attend all open Board meetings as a non-voting representative.

Section 6: Whenever a Chapter Coordinator is

replaced, the President will communicate with the new Coordinator to discuss WASH procedures and requirements for Chapters, including financial procedures. The President will coordinate updating WASH records and social media.

Section 7: A Chapter may become inactive if a Chapter Coordinator withdraws from the position and no new Coordinator is recognized. The President will inform the Board and will coordinate updating WASH records and social media. The Chapter may become active when a new Coordinator is recognized without submitting a new petition.

Chapter Reports

Baltimore Secular Humanists (BSH)

We have meetings at various times and places around Baltimore, Baltimore County, and Harford County. Watch the meetup site for the latest events: <https://www.meetup.com/bsh-wash/>

There are also several other meetup groups in the area, including Human Values Network Meetup and Baltimore Atheists, that hold monthly discussion groups. BSH also posts notices of university lectures that are held in person or on Zoom.

DC American Humanists (DC-AHA)

DC-Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics group (DC-AHA) currently meets for monthly happy hour the first Wednesday (6-8pm) of the month at Across the Pond in Dupont Circle. Our Zoom programs are hosted by the American Humanist Association.

Congressional Reason Reception: Virtual Livestream Wednesday, May 1, 6:30pm to 8pm on Zoom. The American Humanist Association, together with the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Secular Coalition for America, would like to invite you to join us virtually for the inaugural Congressional Reason Reception! Expect an evening of comedy and lots of fun, with a robust speaking agenda featuring Members of Congress and keynote speaker Kate Cohen! Representatives Jared Huffman and Jamie Raskin will be presenting first-ever awards, including one "honoring" this year's worst violator of separation

of church and state. RSVP at <https://americanhumanist.org/events/congressional-reason-reception-virtual-livestream>.

What Is Black Humanism? with Dr. Anthony Pinn Thursday, June 20, 6:30pm doors open, 7pm program and Zoom, 8pm book signing at Washington Ethical Society (7750 16th St. NW. Washington, DC 20012). Over the past several decades, there has been increased attention to disbelief within African American communities. The growth in the percentage of the African American population labeled “nones” made this attention unavoidable. However, while statistical information has made it easier to identify African American disbelief in general and African American humanism in particular, what is captured by the label African American humanism—or more popularly Black humanism—has received less attention. Is it a political movement? A social movement? Drawing on his new book—The Black Practice of Disbelief—Anthony Pinn explores what we might learn about the beliefs and practices of humanism in African American communities by examining it as a new religion. RSVP at <https://form.jotform.com/232769071113150>

Friday, June 21 is *World Humanist Day* [no event, just good to note in issue]

DC Region Atheists (DCRA)

May 2, 7pm – Secular Zoom Community

This meeting is planned to have an emphasis on the evolution of artificial intelligence. We will have time to explore the typical range of theocratic actions throughout the nation.

Thu. June 6, 7pm Secular Zoom Community

At this point we expect this one to be a regular Secular Zoom Community meeting. We nourish our connections with like-minded secular people and discuss a broad range of topics on religion, science and secularism. Please RSVP for a monthly meeting at: <https://www.meetup.com/dc-atheists>

Frederick Secular Humanists (FRESH)

FRESH update:

FRESH spent the majority of the past two months working on the Clothesline Project, more details are available in the President's message. This month FRESH will be meeting to share updates from the American Atheist and Summit for Religious Freedom conventions. We're making preparations for PRIDE month as well. We continue to have monthly meetings and a monthly social meetup at a local brewpub.

Please see FRESH's webpage (wash.org/fresh) with a link to its Meetup page to RSVP and for any updates.

Maryland-DC (MDC)

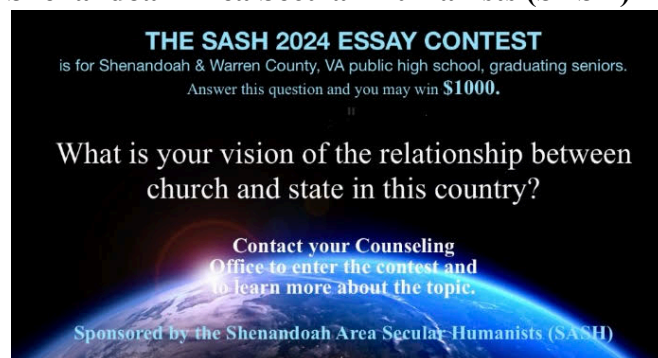
May 7, 7pm - Jay Gatsby, The Thrill Is Gone: a Blues Narrative of Racial Passing - On-line event.

We are planning an in-person meeting with a talk by Frederick Sellers on the topic of “God Versus Nature”. Over the summer we plan on our usual virtual book club meetings. The book for June will be Daniel Dennett’s “For Bacteria to Bach and Back”.

Events will be posted as details are determined. Check for them at: <https://www.meetup.com/wash-202>

All are welcomed. We appreciate secular and scout-minded people who like to discuss a broad range of topics including science, religion, democracy, psychology and secular philosophy. Scout-minded=inquisitive to see things as they are.

Shenandoah Area Secular Humanists (SASH)



SASH's annual Essay Contest for graduating high school seniors has been announced, and we're hoping for many worthy submissions. Winners were announced in April 2024. Our topic this year is: "What is your vision

of the relationship between church and state in this country?"

<https://www.meetup.com/sevash/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/sevash/>

Shenandoah Area Secular Humanists (SASH) is active in the northwestern area of Virginia and nearby West Virginia. Monthly gatherings of SASH members are usually done by Zoom, although we try to plan several in-person get-togethers every year. Our regular meetings are on the second Sunday morning of each month and are announced on MeetUp. We also have a book club, and we read a wide variety of books with humanist interpretations. The book club meets on the last Sunday morning of each month. More information: sash@wash.org.

Southeast Virginia Atheists, Skeptics & Humanists (SEVASH)

At the American Atheists conference in Philadelphia, SEVASH was awarded with a \$500 grant to be spent stocking and maintaining our Free Food Pantries in Norfolk and Newport News. SEVASH's chapter coordinator Aiden Barnes was also recognized as American Atheists's 2024 State Director of the year.

On April 25th, we hosted a dinner event at Codex in Norfolk for the annual Dining Out For Life fundraiser benefiting the LGBT Life Center.

Matt and Aiden have both been working diligently as part of American Atheist's Secular Advocacy Team in Virginia, tracking legislation (both good and bad bills), submitting testimony, and crafting action alerts for our SEVASH comrades to act on. A big highlight from this year's legislative session was the banning of child marriage in Virginia, HB 994, which goes into effect 1 July 2024.

We just celebrated the 3rd anniversary of the Hampton Roads Reproductive Justice League, a non-profit that got its start within SEVASH, and continues to be run by our members. We frequently promote their activities and encourage our folks to volunteer with HRRJL.

SEVASH has also continued to host our regular social events: team trivia, music bingo, dinners, brunches, movie nights, etc.

Secular Humanists of Roanoke (SHOR)

The secular humanists of Roanoke (SHOR) have been actively involved in various community service projects since August 2023. They have continued their partnership with the city of Roanoke to maintain a local park and a street. They have also supported Habitat for Humanity in the Roanoke valley by volunteering for their construction projects. In addition, they have collected around 100 lbs. of food for Feeding Southwest Virginia through a local Food Drive. SHOR has also participated in the 2023 Heart Walk to raise funds for the American Heart Association. The group has seen a growth in its membership in the recent months.

<http://wash.org/shor/>

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4. DC American Humanists (DC-AHA) Washington, DC

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We welcome articles and letters to the editor for WASHline. Please submit them to:

washline@wash.org

Please consider making a donation to WASH at:
<https://wash.org/donate/>

Addendum

by Don Wharton

I asked the Claude3 AI LLM to write an 800 word blog post on the implications of the recent Florida Supreme Court decisions on abortion. I wanted it written as if it was a high end political scientist predicting the next Presidential election. I asked it to correct some factual falsehoods. I am including it as an Addendum because Claude3 does not qualify as a WASH related author.

Florida's Abortion Turmoil

and the High Stakes for 2024

by Claude3

As a battleground state commanding 28 pivotal electoral votes, all eyes are on Florida heading into the 2024 presidential election cycle. The state has become the epicenter of America's raging abortion debate after a series of momentous and seemingly contradictory rulings from the Florida Supreme Court in recent months.

In January, the court dealt a major blow to abortion rights by upholding a 15-week abortion ban signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis in 2022. This made Florida one of the nation's most restrictive states in terms of access to the procedure.

However, the court then raised shockwaves in March by rejecting a proposed state constitutional amendment that would have permanently enshrined protections for abortion rights. At first glance, this double-whammy appeared to cement Florida as a solidly "anti-abortion" state moving forward.

But in a surprise move, the court also ruled that the issue of reproductive rights would be allowed to go to a voter referendum on the 2024 ballot. This opens the door for Floridians to directly contradict the legislature and judicial branch by amending the state constitution themselves to protect abortion access.

Adding another layer of complexity, the court upheld an even stricter 6-week abortion ban just days ago that will take effect in late April unless it is blocked by a federal appeal. Once enacted, this law would idiminatearly all abortion services in the state past the point where many women even realize they are pregnant.

The net result is a dizzying back-and-forth that has thrown Florida's abortion policies into a state of legal and political chaos mere months before it again assumes the role of a critical presidential battleground.

For Democrats fighting to protect reproductive

freedoms, the possibility of a successful 2024 ballot referendum legalizing abortion in Florida provides a potential lifeline. Losing such a consequential swing state would have dealt a devastating blow to the pro-choice movement's momentum nationally.

However, the introduction of a 6-week ban in the interim raises the stakes considerably. There could be a 6-month span or longer where abortion services grind to a halt before voters even have a say. This opens the door to a potential humanitarian crisis of Floridian women being denied critical reproductive care and forced to travel across state lines.

Democratic candidates will face intense pressure to marshal every available resource to boost turnout for the referendum while simultaneously railing against the 6-week ban they are powerless to stop in the short-term. The 2024 campaign may ultimately look like two parallel campaigns - one aimed at securing the presidency and Congress, and another aimed solely at winning reproductive freedom via direct democracy in Florida.

For Republicans solidifying their support among social conservatives, the 6-week ban marks a bold success toward their goal of nationwide abortion prohibition. They can claim a clear mandate from both the state legislature and judiciary in one of America's largest and most coveted battlegrounds.

However, the prospect of Florida voters potentially overturning these hard-won gains just months later looms as an existential threat to the movement. A defeat at the hands of a referendum after securing the ban through conventional lawmaking channels would not only cost them the ultimate policy prize, but deal a devastating blow to their credibility and political brand.

Republican candidates are thus likely to go scorched-earth in opposition, effectively mounting a campaign to save their new 6-week law from democracy itself. The symbolism and political stakes surrounding the vote could raise temperatures to unprecedented levels.

The ultimate fate of abortion policy in Florida now hinges on a high-stakes political gambit in 2024 where the outcomes of both the presidential election and the ballot referendum will reverberate nationwide. All of America will be watching whether this battleground state embraces reproductive rights or nearly eliminates the procedure altogether.

No matter which way it goes, Florida's turmoil has cemented abortion atop the nation's agenda heading into the most consequential election in a generation. The aftershocks are sure to reshape America's political landscape for years to come.