



# Rational Inquiry

Dare  
to  
think

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The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry Newsletter

FALL, 2007

The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry (SDARI) is dedicated to the encouragement of rational thought in all areas of human affairs. Composed of citizens from every walk of life, and with a variety of technical, scientific, legal, and humanistic backgrounds, the association strives to encourage rational discourse in the life of San Diego. For more information, see page seven.

## Editor Needed!

We are looking for a person who is willing to become editor. The position is presently vacant. The newsletter has been published quarterly in the past, and we would like to maintain this schedule.



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## Rational Atheism

An open letter to Messrs. Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens

By Michael Shermer

Due to Copyright issues, this article (pg.1-2) could not be used in this Web version of the newsletter.

The article was reprinted from *Scientific American*, September, 2007, pages 44-46.

## The Law and the Mt. Soledad Cross Attorney Jim McElroy to speak at SDARI

Just about a year ago one of SDARI's best known and most controversial members died. Nobody who knew Philip Paulson could forget him, especially those who attended SDARI meetings where Phil thought the speaker stepped over the line in matters theological or constitutional. But his fame (infamy?) spread far beyond SDARI. Phil took the abuse for many of us when he stood his ground in the face of an unrelenting assault for his victories in suing the city of San Diego to remove a sectarian symbol from public property.

Although he and Howard Kreisner initially filed and won

the lawsuit without legal representation, their victory and each subsequent victory were appealed. Kreisner moved out of town and Phil persevered. The ACLU helped. Then Phil got the lawyer he had to have. That lawyer will tell us of his adventures in representing the man who stuck his neck out for us and became the most hated man in San Diego.

Jim McElroy, November's speaker, and the man voted by his peers as San Diego's outstanding Attorney of the Year Award in 2004, has more awards than we have room for. Here, in no particular order are some: the San Diego Daily Transcript Top

Attorneys (2005), the National Civil Rights Award from the Anti-Defamation League, the Margaret Sanger Award for Distinguished Service in Protecting Women's Rights and the Womancare Health Center Award for Protecting the Legal Rights of Women. He has received Certificates of Appreciation for his work from the Attorney General of the State of California, the State Bar of California, the San Diego County Bar Association and the San Diego Superior Court.

Please try to make it to our **November 25** meeting (See pg. 6). It may be the blockbuster program of the year.

Keith Taylor, Program Chair

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## The Frustrations of the Program Chair

By Keith Taylor

Few jobs in SDARI can be more frustrating than that of program chair, not that it sounds all that tough. My primary task is to get a speaker up there every month. That is usually not a chore because of the dedication of others.

I don't keep tabs but I'd guess Heather Campbell leads the pack in digging up speakers, followed by Barbara Hemmingsen and Paul Wenger. In fact we have so many right now that I've turned down two. One was for a man who wanted to present evidence for flying saucers and the other had hot news about the 9/11 conspiracy – news hitherto unreported in the mainstream press.

Well then what makes it so tough? For me it's answering the phone and telling people how to get hold of the guy

who holds the key to the Joyce Beers Center. Officially the key keeper is head security dude, but he is also in charge of booking the place. Sometimes that has interesting results, like the time our Friday 13th party and an astrology group were booked at the same time. I always wondered why the astrology group didn't see it coming.

But, did you know that there is no listed phone for the JBC? And also do you know that there are several different posted addresses for the place? So where do folks go for information on it? Most do as all present day researchers do, they start with google.com.

I just tried it (August 26th) and the first hit from Google was to Yahoo. Yahoo had apparently asked volunteers to provide information on the Joyce Beers

Center. Here's what I found.

### **Best Answer - Chosen By Voters**

*Joyce Beers Community Center,  
1230 Cleveland St., Hillcrest,  
619-421-5844*

Now that's just dandy! Cleveland is a couple blocks from the JBC, and the phone number is mine. Of course it had been gleaned from my online announcements of SDARI meetings, and I always include my number for information. Search engines picked it up. Now it is semi-official. I am the Joyce Beers Center, although I look nothing like that picture of her hanging on the wall in the center.

I sometimes get a dozen calls per week from folks asking how they can get the room. It can be a pain. Just ask my wife, who dutifully has the numbers where the security guy can be reached. Her answers are short and sweet. Mine

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## Frustrations

*(Continued from page 2)*

are a bit long because I'm always happy to tout rational thought and SDARI's efforts to enhance it. I've actually have had some folks accept my invitation to come to meetings. I think one or two are now members, but that's me, a gregarious soul.

The directions to our meeting place ought to be easy to follow, but not always. A while back I received a call from a guy who wanted to know where the place was. He said he had tried to find 1230 Cleveland but it wasn't there.

I told him, "No it isn't there, honest. Here's what you do. Go to Vermont and University, then go two blocks north."

That didn't help this guy, "Vermont doesn't cross University," he insisted, "I've lived in Hillcrest seventeen years and know. The streets that cross University are numbered."

"Most are but several are named after states. Vermont is between tenth and eleventh. Farther east you'll find streets named Iowa and Mississippi.

Oh oh! He locked in or that. "Mississippi? Is the Joyce Beers Center near Mississippi Street?"

I finally and painfully got him back to Hillcrest and Vermont. He wanted to know where Vermont crossed Washington.

"It doesn't," I said.

"Yeah it has to," he insisted. "Remember I have lived here seventeen years."

This was going nowhere, but he was adamant. Finally I gave in, "Okay go north on Vermont, whiz right on by the Joyce Beers Center which will be on your right. You'll come to a high wire fence. Keep going, right through the fence and past a sign that says DON'T RUN THROUGH THIS FENCE. Dodge

a few trees and roll down the hill, sideways for all I care. When you stop rolling down the hill you'll be on Washington. But if you want the Joyce Beers Center stop at the sign which says Joyce Beers Center."

I suspect he thought I was being facetious, but he came up with something new and wonderful. He asked, "Is this place anyways near Trader Joes?"

Eureka! We had made intellectual contact. "YES YES YES. Go to Trader Joes, stand at the corner of Vermont and Vermont Way. Then pick up a rock. Throw the son of a bitch straight east. That window you hear breaking will be either the Joyce Beers Center or the Aladdin restaurant. If it's the Aladdin, the owner will make a falafel out of you."

"What's a falafel?"

"Sputter sputter!" ■

## Rational Musings by the President

Author Sam Harris has discussed how belief in certain supernatural entities is acceptable, while belief in others is not acceptable. For example, if the President of the United States announced that mighty Zeus is our ally in the fight against terrorism, it "would precipitate a national emergency", says Harris. In discussions about agnosticism, Harris points out that people have no problem stating that Poseidon or Thor do not exist, even though "nobody ever discovered that Thor doesn't exist, but that the biblical god really does." What is the difference between beliefs that are accepted and those that are not accepted?

From a skeptic's point of view, mermaids, ghosts, unicorns, Atlantis, and ESP are all things that have been shown not to exist. But among the general public, it's a different story. If someone at an office party were to tell their co-workers that they believe in mermaids and unicorns, they would be considered a nut or a flake. But if they instead told their co-

workers that they believe in ghosts and ESP, they would be considered completely rational, while someone who claimed ghosts and ESP do not exist would, in my experience, be seen as closed-minded and dogmatic. On what basis do most people believe that mermaids and unicorns are myths, but ghosts and ESP are real?

In my experience, the average person's opinions on mermaids and ghosts are not based on reason or evidence. They haven't examined the evidence and arguments for mermaids and ghosts and decided that one set is adequate and the other is not. Most people are completely ignorant of the evidence and the arguments, and yet they're certain that ghosts exist and mermaids do not. How did they do it?

Mark Twain called them "corn-pone opinions", and blamed our instinct to conform and seek the approval of others. My assertion is that people simply believe what is popular to believe, and disbelieve what is popular to disbelieve. People believe in ghosts and ESP because it is popular to believe in them, and unpopular to believe in mermaids and unicorns, most

people do not believe in them. I would add that the desire to avoid unpopular beliefs is stronger than the desire to possess popular beliefs, because it is easy to make yourself unpopular but difficult to make yourself popular. Holding popular beliefs will not make you popular, since you are simply agreeing with the majority, and don't stand out, but blend in. But holding unpopular beliefs will very likely make you unpopular, so avoiding unpopular beliefs is the stronger motivator.

If I am correct, then skeptics should focus their efforts on making false beliefs unpopular, since this is what truly motivates most people. It's a subtle difference, but since it's much easier to make something unpopular than to make something popular, perhaps it would be easier to make anti-science attitudes unpopular than it would be to make science popular. (Now that I think of it, don't many politicians expend more effort trying to make their opponent unpopular than on making themselves popular?) What do you think?

Paul Wenger

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## From the Editor's Desk

Science and religion operate within two very different spheres of thought, spheres which have no elements in common. They are diametrically opposite and totally incompatible in their foundations. One is concerned with the natural world where tangible phenomena can be observed, tested, measured and analyzed. The other deals with supernatural forces and intangible concepts and postulates that cannot be reliably observed or tested. Because of this complete separation, religion cannot in any way be used to alter, distort, change or influence the principles of science, and science cannot be used to validate or invalidate religious ideas. However, science does offer to believers in religion the tools for rational reasoning, should they wish to embrace them.

Whereas many religious people do not accept or heed this separation, scientists generally do, though with some exceptions. Many if not most scientists have no personal interest in religion. They may recognize it as a social phenomenon, but do not accept its tenets. This has been confirmed in many surveys, and it also has been my experience with colleagues and acquaintances who are scientists. They feel comfortable in the natural world with its beauty and complexity, which can be explained using rational concepts; they would abhor living their lives based on mysticism and ideas postulated without a shred of supporting evidence.

Religion thrives on three elements: the desire of humans for eternal life, the fear of the unknown, and the assumption that because knowledge about a phenomenon is missing or incomplete, there must be a higher power responsible for it. It is very likely that one or more of these elements will change in the future. Perhaps then we will have a more rational world. It is clear that we will make, in the next few centuries, enormous strides in understanding, for example, how the Universe formed, how life started, and how our brains function. By observing how much our knowledge has increased in just the last century, and the accelerating pace at which new discoveries are made in our present day, no other conclusion can be reached about pro-

gress in coming centuries—or millennia.

Ultimately, religion could become marginalized and superfluous, as often happens when populations become better educated. However, it appears that for a while, religion's power and influence will grow in this country. Increasingly, people in the executive, the legislative, and even the judicial branches of the national government, as well as in its huge bureaucracy, are telling us what is best for us and science, based primarily on religious beliefs.

How do we stem this inappropriate influence of religion? Should we confront people with religious beliefs openly and directly with arguments that would invalidate their beliefs, even ridiculing them, or should we try to persuade them to consider alternative options based on facts, deeper reasoning and logical arguments to which they potentially may be more receptive?

My view is that among the public, science has solid support because the benefits derived from it positively impacts our lives and are simply too numerous to be ignored or rejected for irrational reasons. Science is holding the high grounds on many issues that intersect the areas of both religion and science (e.g., *evolution* versus *intelligent design*) by having solid facts and other evidence, and it enjoys a high degree of trust. These advantages should not be wasted by confrontations that are unlikely to gain converts. Non-hostile communications are essential for delivering the messages that science can offer.

Michael Shermer has some thoughts on this subject in the lead article of this issue. He is a wise man and a prominent national spokesman for skepticism and rational thinking in all areas of human endeavor. SDARI shares many of the same goals with his organization, *The Skeptics Society*. We both are interested in finding the best means and approaches to disseminate our message about the importance of rational thinking. Therefore, Shermer's thoughts are pertinent to SDARI. From time to time, its diverse members have expressed many different opinions on how to be most effective in influencing the public about rational thinking.

We may also point out that the courts have not yet abandoned rational reasoning and the separation of church and

state so wisely embedded in our Constitution. Our speaker this month is Jim McElroy, the attorney for the late Philip Paulsen, who was successful in our courts regarding removal of the cross from a prominent piece of public land on the top of Mount Soledad. After the removal order was issued, the property with its cross was transferred from the city of San Diego to the Federal park service. Because this does not resolve the basic issue that was raised, the case likely will continue in the Federal courts. Mr. McElroy will give us some insight into where the case has been and where it might be heading.

It promises to become an interesting evening deserving your visit. Our newer members may not know that Phil was a member of SDARI. ■



## SDARI Election of Officers

The Bylaws of San Diego Association of Rational Inquiry requires that officers of the corporation be elected once a year. The elections will be held at the November 25, 2007, meeting. All of the current officers have expressed their willingness to serve another term. They have been nominated by the Board at large to serve for the year 2008.

Paul Wenger, President  
Walt Carver, Vice-President  
Keith Taylor, Secretary  
Barbara B. Hemmingsen, Treasurer

Nominations for different candidates will be accepted from the floor before the election is held.



### The SDARI Social Hour

Some of the active members of SDARI meet for conversation before our public lectures; often the evening's speaker joins us. We meet at 6:00 p.m. in our regular meeting room at the Joyce Beers Center. Please join us. Bring your own dinner or snacks.

Membership Application

I would like to join the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry. Enclosed is my annual membership fee of \$20 (\$12 for students, seniors, and disabled people, \$6 if younger than 18). Name: Address: City: State: Zip+4: Special interests: Expertise: Mail to: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry P. O. Box 623 La Jolla, CA 92038-0623 Phone: Email: For information contact contact Keith Taylor at 619-421-5844, or see our Website at sdari.org

We need your support! Please renew your membership. It costs to print and mail this newsletter and promotional fliers, award Science Fair prizes, and occasionally, to defray a small expense for the speaker. The membership gives moral support for our cause. SDARI has been granted federal tax exempt status. Donations are deductible under section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code.

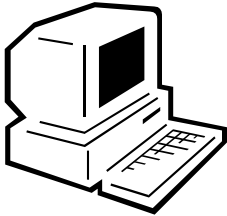
Lecture Schedule and Meeting Location

Public lectures are held at 7 p.m. on the fourth Sunday of the month (except December). The location of all meetings is the Joyce Beers Community Center, Vermont Street, 2 blocks north of University Ave., in the Hillcrest area. (The Center is near Ralphs and Trader Joe's markets in Uptown District Shopping Center. The parking is free, but please park underground).

The lectures are free, but a donation of \$5 is suggested.

Submission of Manuscripts Articles, essays book reviews and other written material may be submitted to Rational Inquiry. Pertinent announcements and clippings are welcome also. The submissions are subject to editing and abridgement. The approval of the author(s) will be sought for changes that materially affect the content. The Editorial Board, as appropriate, may evaluate each submitted work before publication for its suitability. Published material becomes the property of SDARI unless copyrighted by the author. Submitted articles that contain copyright material must have the permission from the copyright owners before publication. Such permission must be submitted to the editor in writing. Anonymous material will not be considered. Please send the material for publication (preferably on a medium compatible with Microsoft Windows) to: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry P. O. Box 623 La Jolla, CA 92038-0623

Visit the webpage of SDARI to get the latest information on lectures and other events sponsored by the Association. You also will find other interesting facts and links to other organizations with goals similar to, or related, to ours. The Webmaster is Harry Sutton. We are at sdari.org



**The San Diego Association  
for Rational Inquiry  
P. O. Box 623  
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***We are on the Web!***  
**sdari.org**

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**Up-coming events**

in the **Joyce Beers Community Center** (See page 5 for directions):

**Sunday November 25, 2007.**

**6 p.m.** Pre-meeting social hour.

**7 p.m. Lecture:** Attorney Jim McElroy, *The Cross, the Constitution and San Diego*. McElroy, who represented Phil Paulson in his successful lawsuit to have the cross removed from Mt. Soledad, will talk about the case.

***There is no meeting in December, 2007.***

**Sunday January 27, 2008.**

**6 p.m.** Pre-meeting social hour.

**7 p.m. Lecture:** Tory Christman will speak about her experiences as an scientologist before she left the church.

**Sunday February 24, 2008.**

**6 p.m.** Pre-meeting social hour.

**7 p.m. Lecture:** Speaker and subject to be announced later.

