

# THE FORT WORTH HUMANIST QUARTERLY

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## Briefs

### *Avaaz invites public to attend Global Climate March in Austin on November 29*

Avaaz, a global civic organization formed in 2007, has invited the public to support the international Global Climate March movement by attending a march scheduled at the Texas Capitol, 1100 Congress Avenue in Austin at 1 p.m., November 29.

Hosted by international activist Kerstin Johansson, the purpose of the event is to influence world leaders to support climate initiatives during their annual climate change negotiations and planning. The 2015 meeting of world leaders will be held in Paris on November 30.

Before this annual meeting, protesters often come out in force across the globe in an effort to influence actions and decisions made in international governmental gatherings and to demonstrate solidarity among global climate change activists worldwide.

The organization and other similar groups hope to meet or exceed 2014 participation levels. The 2014 march drew support from 1,700 other organizations in some 2,000 communities worldwide. In Manhattan, 400,000 climate change supporters marched, and large crowds participated in many countries.

Johansson said she is hosting the event in Austin because "I feel I need to. Enough is enough. We need world leaders to make concrete actions towards a sustainable future with 100% clean energy. Now is the time for action. I am excited to unite with people all over the world to join the largest climate change mobilization event. Together we can send a strong message and make a difference."

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### *Vice Chair interviewed on secular Bavarian radio show aired September 13*

## German humanists and HoFW find common bonds and values in informal meeting and discussions in August and September

By Wanda Foster

People in Regensburg, a city in Eastern Bavaria, at one point left Catholic and Protestant churches at the rate of 1,000 people each year, explained Erwin Schmid, chairman of the secular society Bund für Geistesfreiheit (BFG) (Federation for Spiritual Freedom), as we walked along the wide, flowing Danube River Saturday, August 26.

Regensburg, originally founded some 2,000 years ago, still has a Roman bridge. It was largely unscathed by World War II and today remains a vibrant and bustling cultural center of Eastern Bavaria. Its Old Town is a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. The city's population is about 140,000.

Schmid and I were en route to the regional studios of Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Broadcasting), a public-service radio and television station. The hike took 15 minutes and eventually led us to climb about eight flights

of stairs in an enclosed, unairconditioned building. We were there because I searched online for humanists in Bavaria for my vacation in Germany in Mittenwald, an Alpen village 2.5 hours south of Regensburg.

Schmid responded to my emails and turned out to be the chairman of one of the largest Bavarian communities of humanists. We shared emails and conversations, and ultimately he sent me a list of questions to answer for his radio show. In turn, I interviewed him and he prepared written answers to my questions about humanism and society in Germany.

With origins that go back to the German Revolution of 1848, BFG serves as an umbrella group for 12 communities and has some 4,800 secular members. As a charitable public corporation, the organization receives € per member from the government to support its work.

Once each six weeks, the group hosts a 15-minute interview with various

people on different humanist-related topics. The show airs in one of Germany's largest Bavarian markets, which has 40,000 to 60,000 listeners.

BFG describes itself as free of dogma and as humanistic, democratic, and nonpartisan. The organization's Web statement describes BFG this way:

"As an ideological community, we stand for a secular humanism that places the individual at the center of all action. We see our roots mentally and emotionally in the historical enlightenment that paved the way to overcome the immaturity of the people against the Church. We intend to consistently pursue this path."

BFG provides advocacy for atheists and agnostics and, despite nonpartisanship, acknowledges liberal leanings and alignment with labor unions. Opponents of militarism and fascism, BFG members also are deeply concerned about refugees. The problem is particularly poignant this year since

(continued on page 4)



*Much of life in Bavaria is rural and centers around local churches, shops, and sidewalk cafes. The population is socially and politically conservative and demographically similar to Texas, but the atheist population is growing. photo by Wanda Foster*

## Travel reveals stark differences in German and American quality of life

by Wanda Foster

My month in Mittenwald, Germany living in an apartment rather than as a tourist in a hotel room opened my thinking to the wonderful cultural collisions produced by international travel and the power of these collisions to give insights into different ways of working, thinking, and living to improve our planet.

The sudden joining of two separate worlds enables us to see ourselves, including our progress and our problems, in different lights. Without stepping out of our comfort zones into new worlds, people may find themselves living in a sort of robotic malaise or inertia, solving problems and living life one way according to the specifications and requirements they live in.

So as a traveler, I decided to bring home some of the observations I found most striking about the modes and quality of life in Germany and the U.S.

Most of my time was spent in Mittenwald, Germany, an Alpen village beneath the Karwendel mountain 2 hours south of Munich near the Austrian border. But I also did a good deal of driving to (continued on page 6)

## Book Review: *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins

by Morris Meador

The Humanist Book Club most recently read *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. While several members of the Club have previously read this popular, blockbuster book, the group wanted to have an opportunity to review it and discuss it as a group in our venue.

When the book was published in 2006, *The God Delusion* reached Number 4 on the New York Times Best Sellers List in the hardcover, nonfiction category only 9 weeks after its publication. In August 2007, the book also was the best seller in Amazon's religion and spirituality category. Clearly, the book made quite an impact that continues to reverberate today. Dawkins, along with Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, who collectively are known as the Four Horsemen of the New Atheism, have changed the game strategy for debating theism. Rather than taking a purely defensive posture, they have taken an offensive position.

This development has excited many humanists, a fact that was evident in our own book club.

A professor at the University of Oxford, Dawkins is an English ethologist, evolutionary biologist, and author. Before he wrote *The God Delusion*, his best-known books were *The Selfish Gene*, a work popularizing the gene-centered view of evolution, and his 1986 book, *The Blind Watchmaker*. In that book, Dawkins argues against the watchmaker analogy that suggests a supernatural creator. Instead, Dawkins describes an evolutionary process analogous to having a blind watchmaker.

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins argues that atheists can be "happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled." He said we can be proud of who we are and that many more people are atheists than people realize. Defending his use of the word delusion in the book's title, he quotes the author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert M. Pirsig, who said,

"when one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called religion."

Chapter 4 of *The God Delusion* makes the argument that natural selection is statistically more probable as an explanation for the origin of the universe than the story of a God-created universe burdened by the need to explain and prove the origins of a supernatural creator. Later in the book he criticizes religion as the source of much conflict in the world and as giving a justification for belief without reason. Dawkins sees blind faith as one of the great evils of the world. He also believes it is a travesty to indoctrinate children in religious beliefs and to identify them with a religion.

*The God Delusion* has generated a great deal of criticism as well as praise. Many critics do not think Dawkins, who has no theological training, appreciates the subtleties of theological arguments or the positive roles of religion in the world.



Philosopher Anthony Flew describes Dawkins as a secular bigot and as an obstinate or intolerant adherent of a point of view. Flew says Dawkins is guilty of knocking down straw men rather than arguing against the strongest forms of an opposing argument.

The debate concerning the origins of our cosmos, evolutionary understanding, and statistical analysis is multifaceted and not at all settled. That being said, there is no doubt that Richard Dawkins' book has been a singular achievement which has reinvigorated a vital debate regarding an issue of high interest to many people.

## Stage West Production of "Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play" underwhelms HoFW attendees

by Reed Bilz

Joy Counts and I attended the Stage West Production of "Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play" Friday, August 21.

We were looking forward to seeing the regional premier of the event, which was billed as one of the most invigorating plays to hit Dallas - Fort Worth stages this summer.

Written by Anne Washburn and performed off-Broadway originally, the Stage West production was directed by Garrett Storms. The cast was good, which I always find them to be.

Unfortunately, neither of us liked the play, even though it received numerous good reviews.

Act I was so dark the actors could not be clearly seen. Those of us who are hearing impaired fail to realize how much we read lips until we cannot do it. The scene was set "in the very near future" after some sort of apocalypse in which "the culture has died . . . and the way of life is lost."

The cast (survivors) comfort each other by remembering an episode of "The Simpsons" entitled "Cape Feare," first aired in 1993. Dressed like hobos,

they sit around a barrel with a fire in it for heat and light.

Key performers included survivors Ian Ferguson, Jessica Cavanagh, and Kelsey Leigh Ervi. Paul Taylor, who played Sam, sits in the dark and joins the conversation. Other shadowy figures loomed in the dark.

Act II has two parts and is set seven years after the first act. The characters are dressed as Simpsons-like people. The actor who plays Mr. Burns looked very evil. This scene has some redeeming qualities. The Simpsons look

-alikes are comical and the costumes creative.

The second part of Act 2 takes place 75 years after the second scene, and frankly I cannot remember what that one was about. I do remember that it failed to make much sense.

To quote the director, "This is a tale that follows a STORY through time, and shows us how a truth can evolve into a fiction and how a fiction can achieve truth."

Get it? I did not.

	October 2015	November 2015	December 2015
<b>Key HoFW Events</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular Meeting, Wednesday, October 14, 7 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX</li> <li>Regular Dinner Social, Thursday, October 22, to be announced at <a href="http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/events">http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/events</a></li> <li>HoFW Book Club, Saturday, October 24, 3 to 4:30 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX: <i>Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century</i> by William R. Murry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular Meeting, Wednesday, November 11, 7 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX</li> <li>Regular Dinner Social, Thursday, November 26, 6:30 p.m. to be announced <a href="http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/events">http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/events</a></li> <li>HoFW Book Club, Saturday, November 28, 3 to 4:30 p.m., 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>December Dinner Social to be announced at <a href="http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/events">http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/events</a></li> <li>No monthly educational meeting or Book Club meeting normally is scheduled in December to allow our members to enjoy their holidays with friends and family.</li> </ul>
<b>Other Events</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DFWSolarTour.org solar house and electric vehicle open house-style events on Saturday, October 3 across the area at a range of locations and times shown at the following Web site: <a href="http://www.dfwsolartour.org/locations.html">http://www.dfwsolartour.org/locations.html</a></li> <li>Examples include the solar, conservation-designed houses at 3000 Sieber Dr, Arlington, TX 76016 and at 115 Pack Saddle Trail, Weatherford, TX 76088. Both events are open between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. A Tesla electric vehicle also will be on display at the same times at 637 Highview Lane, Hurst, TX 76054 .</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lone Star Film Festival, Nov. 5-8 at the AMC Palace, Four Day Weekend Theater, and Sundance Square in downtown Fort Worth. Final schedule, including films, to be announced after October 1.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friday, December 4, Four-Day Weekend Improvisational Comedy, 7:30 p.m. and 10 p.m., 312 Houston Street, Downtown Fort Worth, TX</li> </ul>

### Letters to the Editor

All HoFW members and other readers who wish to write Letters to the Editor responding to articles that appear in this publication are invited to express their own views and provide feedback.

Our newsletter policy requires letters to reference a specific article that has appeared in one of the two most recent issues. We do not publish open letters or third-party letters.

Responders should limit their letters

to 150 or 175 words and provide the writer's email address. In addition, for those who require anonymity, please provide the name you would like published with the letter.

All letters should be exclusive to *The Fort Worth Humanist Quarterly* and should not be published in any other publication.

Anyone who would like to submit a letter can do so by e-

mailing the editor at the following address: [vicechair@hofw.org](mailto:vicechair@hofw.org).

Space is limited, so we make no guarantee that all letters will be published. Letters may be edited or shortened to fit the space.

We request that all content show a respectful tone, even when the viewpoints expressed differ from those of *The Fort Worth Humanist Quarterly* or any other party.

### THE FORT WORTH HUMANIST QUARTERLY

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## Opinion

### HoFW Humanist Perspectives

by Wanda Foster for Louanne

Most of us know Louanne as an outspoken humanist and activist with bountiful experience in politics, education, and labor unions. But she started life like many people, as a Catholic baptized into the church before she was old enough to remember.

“We were Catholic, Catholic, Catholic on both sides of the family,” she said.

From Day 1, her life was entrenched in the Catholic church. Louanne first attended a Catholic parochial school attached to St. James Catholic Church in Dallas. When she was 5 years old, her mother entered her into first grade. The class was crowded so first and second grades met in one room.

While the teacher taught second graders, first graders were supposed to read *See Spot Run*, “but you can only do that so many times, so I started listening to second graders,” she said.

She credits her parents with many positive things that happened in her life, including her education and her opportunities to succeed.

“This is not the religious side of it, yet it is,” she said. “In my youth, my father was a union baker with a fourth grade education. My mother graduated from Dallas High School, and she was a voracious reader. Both just happened to be Catholics. The ideas I want you to connect with are the times and how they were when my parents were born and lived.”

Both were hard-working. Louanne’s father came from a Czech background on a farm where little English was spoken. Her mother was of German-Irish descent. Her father decided to leave Ennis for new opportunities in Dallas, where he became a baker and joined the baker’s union. While he eventually changed careers, Louanne said he remained “an excellent, excellent cook almost until the day he died. It did not rub off on me. The baking didn’t. I never could bake a cake or make a pie dough. He was a talented man who could talk to anybody.”

Louanne’s mother worked for Southwestern Bell, and the family lived just down Bryan Street from the facility. Her mother, a member of the Communication Workers of America Union, volunteered for night shift because she made more money at night. Feeling like part of a labor union was just a part of life for Louanne. As early as 7 years old she remembers knowing what a union was.

During this era, telephone company personnel physically plugged and unplugged hard-wired telephones. Dallas was the long-distance hub connecting people from California to New York.

Eventually her father shifted to a job as a feed salesman, and they moved to West, a small Texas town with a large Czech community. Louanne attended St. Mary’s Catholic School, and her mother left the workforce and started volunteering to help mentally disabled children.

Louanne remembers getting a good general education from the nuns, but the curriculum was heavy on English and math, light on history, and devoid of science.

“I studied a lot on my own through the crappy little St. Mary’s library just by choosing the right books,” she said.

Her first questions about religion began emerging in grades 6 through 8.

“A lot of biblical stories seemed just really close to fantasy. There were no good explanations, but I really kept my mouth shut. When you are surrounded by all of the baby Jesus and holy days of obligation as a child, you just do it,” she said. “You were allowed no second thoughts. Back in those days you had to give something up for lent, and you did.”

She lived in West until she was 17, when she ran away from home for 3 or 4 years, got married, and had a baby, but her first husband died. Eventually her path led her back home to a growing family of relatives. She started working for Ford Motor Company in the Parts Department before the days of computers, and she was able to buy a home and pay a mortgage.

She found it interesting that her brothers, especially her brother in the seminary, and others visited her house because she had booze and cigarettes, and they could drink and smoke together all night. Eventually, she realized, however, that others her age were going to college and she was not.

At that time a nearby town, Hillsboro, started Hill College, so she and her cousin decided to go there. Louanne’s son was only 3 years old, but her parents helped her with him until she could complete her degrees. Her son, now 54 years old, lives in Baton Rouge, LA with his wife and two children. A journalism and speech major in college, he now helps universities write brochures, and he gives speeches encouraging mathematics and science majors to teach.

After Louanne graduated from college with history and English degrees, she taught at Mansfield High School for 12 years. She remembers the principal as a very nice guy, who eventually yielded to her special request to teach all five classes of world history, a fate he assured her most people try to avoid. She said not this Bohemian. So she taught all five world history classes until she stopped teaching more than a decade later.

“I know it sounds funny, but there were many days when I knew I had the children’s attention, and I knew they had never heard anything like this before,” she said. “I was often in trouble with the Baptist preacher in town and the Catholics, so I felt like I was doing a good job.”

Despite her misgivings about religion, she chose a second husband who was a devoted Episcopalian. Switching to Episcopalian “was easy,” she said. “All I had to do was show up. I read

everything. I read the bible. I decided that what’s his name—St. Paul—was a jerk because of what he said about women. I read the bible from cover to cover in my later years, and it just got worse. I never said much about thinking this is fantasy. I kept it to myself.”

Yet most people around her seemed to “gleefully eat it up,” she said. “If people read past all of the rhetoric, surely they can see that all religions are control mechanisms and how every cotton-picking time it is the rules. The hard rules always aim at women, and men get more freedom.”

The situation is even worse in Islam, she said, because women have to wear “beekeeper suits” [burqas] and headscarves and are forbidden to drive.

“It is the men who want the women to wear the beekeeper suits because to see her ankles might give them a hard on. I don’t know what is supposed to happen, but on the other hand, with a Catholic background, you realize temptation and all of that. If a man can’t handle looking at an ankle or a wrist or a piece of hair or something like that, he has the problem.

“I will add this,” she said. “The Catholic Church taught all of the rest how to control. They wrote the book. I guess that is what makes everyone grin from ear to ear with the current pope. I am not buying it, but he is definitely different, and he is saying some things that when you think about the wisdom of the ages it doesn’t have to have a label on it like Catholic or Protestant. It doesn’t have to be Buddhist. He offers a bunch of basic stuff there, and people don’t like that. They don’t like that be-good-to-your-neighbor and treat-people-like-you-want-to-be-treated stuff, so here comes a guy pointing this out, and people are very, very uncomfortable.”

She left teaching when her Episcopal husband was dying and later went to work for Alcon Laboratories, where she had a career in quality assurance dealing with Food and Drug Administration regulations. She retired from Alcon in 2000.

While Louanne theologically separated from the church long before her husband died, she totally separated herself from churches after his death.

“I didn’t have to go to church anymore to please anybody. Of course, I still know where the good events are. That would be Catholic weddings and funerals, and I am going to make all of those. They are fun. They have the best parties,” she added. “My grandmother’s funeral was a blast!”

Her gay brother in the seminary discussed her absence from church with her and shared his own loss of religious belief. Like Louanne, he had stayed in church quietly for a long time, reading, keeping his mouth shut, and seeking people of like mind.

Louanne found Westside through a retired Lutheran minister and his wife, who were part of Fort Worth Peace

#### From the Editor:

Most HoFW members favor science and rationalism over religion, magic, and dogma. Within that realm, we remain a very diverse group, however, with different thoughts, perspectives, and ways of arriving at our beliefs in a world often unfriendly to secular thought. This column presents our stories. Many of the names have been changed or limited to first names to protect the innocent.

Action. The minister put her on the Tarrant Area Council of Churches although he knew she was not religious. At a meeting of the Council, she sat next to a Unitarian, started a conversation, and later attended Forum. Through this connection, she also found the Humanists of Fort Worth, which she joined in 2003. Since then she has “never looked back.”

When she divorced religion, she also divorced the two-party political system and became politically active. As a card-carrying member of the Texas State Teacher’s Association, she had seen how religion hurts public education. She had been on the firing line of an Austin group known as the Pink Ladies, women who wore long pink dresses while working to censor textbooks and support prayer in schools. At one point during her teaching years, the Pink Ladies tried to sue her because she refused to dial back her education principles and support of separation of church and state.

Louanne became active in the Green Party and in the Downtown Dallas Occupy movement. Today she volunteers her time to the Bernie Sanders Campaign for President in 2016.

“I am old enough to remember when Eric Dirksen was Republican minority leader, and he didn’t talk like these Republican idiots today. The party has changed—terribly. I think Republicans are as weak as anyone can ever imagine. I mean, the Party of Lincoln?”

Louanne considers the Bernie Sanders campaign her swan song, given her physical problems at age 76. She still drives to political events in Dallas and Fort Worth and supports Sierra Club and Public Citizen legislation. She also is a member of Human Action, a nonprofit forming to defend and assist human trafficking victims. All of this work closely links to her broad definition of the role of humanists in society—people who do things for people rather than praying for them.

“Why do we need a god to tell us that for society to work properly for most people most of the time that the 1 percent cannot own everything or that \$5 per hour is not a living wage in any city anywhere, that education is the key to almost everything? Humanism is exactly that. It is about humans. There is hardly anything of importance to the human condition that shouldn’t be of importance to humanists. You don’t need anyone threatening you with fire and brimstone. People know what needs to be done.”

## German humanists support immigration, seek end of church tax and religion in schools

(continued from page 1)

some 800,000 Syrians are expected to resettle in Germany before year's end. This number of immigrants will far exceed the totals received by any other nation during the current Syrian crisis. In addition, they receive Afghans and Iraqis.

All refugees undergo free health screenings and treatment if necessary, receive temporary housing, have the right to work and settle there, and receive other assistance with language education, child education, and assimilation. All European countries, including Germany, have some friction about the level of immigration, but some of the surrounding countries have treated immigrants poorly, and human smugglers exploit many along the trail. While Austria has helped most of the migrants passing through, all of these countries have issues with human traffickers and smugglers. Seventy people of all ages died trapped in a trailer in Austria in late August. This might as well have been one of the many Texas people-smuggling news stories we have periodically.

BFG is affiliated with the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), which has an advisory vote at organizations such as the United Nations Organization, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe.

A tall, agile, salt-and-pepper, bearded man nearing retirement age, Schmid is unassuming and friendly and has a passion for building healthy, secular communities free from subordination to unhealthy religious values that stunt human emotional and mental growth and prevent open thought and action. A mild-mannered, soft-spoken person, he has many concerns about damage children suffer as a result of religious teaching in public and private schools.

He and his organization also view German tax policy toward churches as unfair to taxpayers. In Germany, churches collect a tax, known as the kirchensteuer, from the people to maintain religious institutions. A portion of the tax flows directly to the Vatican or central church, while other portions pay for hospitals and reli-

gious education required in public and private schools.

Students who oppose religion still must attend an ethics and moral education class presenting many of the same values as religious education.

Schmid said this is wrong, but that no one seems to listen to the many people who no longer accept that religion is worthwhile to the population. In exchange for receiving preferential tax treatment, the churches appear to give the public nothing of value, he said.

During our walk, I asked Schmid what Germans replace their religion with when they give it up. He said "freedom—freedom for themselves."

While Bavaria and Texas lie an ocean apart, both Schmid and I were struck by the similarities of our secular organizations and of Texas and Bavaria.

"It is interesting," said Schmid, "that our organizations grew up a world apart but have reached the same conclusions."

When I first started seeking humanist groups, finding them was difficult. It turned out that none were in the Mittenwald area where I stayed. In many ways Bavaria and Texas share a similar social, political, and religious conservatism.

Many Bavarians are not fond of Texas in that they consider it representative of the oil industry, religious and political conservatism, and excessive capitalism. Even religious people in Bavaria are hugely concerned about ecology and climate change, and Texas is not known as a haven for believers in climate change science. They were pleased to learn that Texas has humanists affiliated with the American Humanist Association.

"As the largest German state, Bavaria has many Catholic and Lutheran churches, and the center-right party, the Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern [Christian Social Union in Bavaria] (CSU), which is affiliated with a second party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). CSU primarily operates in Bavaria, and CDU operates in 15 other states, but they work together



*Erwin Schmid, chairman of BFG, and interpreter and humanist friend Waltraud Gebert, host an interview of Wanda Foster at the broadcasting station in Regensburg. They also took a written interview and interpreted it for other members of BFG, a secular organization aligned with the IHEU.*

and share similar values and goals, many of them based in Christianity. German Chancellor Angela Merkel came to power as a member of the CDU by brokering a coalition comprised of CDU, CSU, and a third party, the Social Democratic Party. Together, these parties dominate political thought in Bavaria.

Munich, Regensburg, and other large Bavarian urban areas, such as Nuremberg and Augsburg, tend to be a bit more liberal than their religiously conservative, rural counterparts, a setup very similar to the pockets of liberalism we have in Texas cities, cast against a large backdrop of rural areas, which tend to be conservative in terms of political and religious thought.

Much of Bavaria is comprised of small, rural towns. Bavaria itself was supposedly formed around 555 A.D. The town of Mittenwald, where I spent most of my time, still thrives as a trade, musical instrument manufacturing, wood-carving, and tourist town in the Karwendel Mountains. Houses and buildings throughout the town are embellished with Luftmahlerei, a type of façade art reflecting the occupations and religious icons associated with the family or business.

While the area has experienced many fires through the centuries, some of the old buildings, such as the Pilger Haus (Pilgrim House) constructed in 1495, remain intact. The Pilger Haus is located on Obermarkt, the street with the church shown in the photograph below. The church shown was built in the 1700s and is newer than the one most people attend regularly.

The town has some 7,000 inhabitants and true animal drives in which sheep, goats, and cows come down from the mountains annually, usually in August and September, to ensure they move home before the harsh winter.

These events are embellished by an occasional, musical parade of frontiersmen wearing green caps with feathers and playing little flutes, piccolos, and drums.

While tourists love these areas and their quaintness, many liberal, urban Bavarians and Germans from the north consider these rural towns and villages part of the problem rather than the solution to separating church and state.

Schmid and the BFG, a larger, older organization than ours, have some influence in Regensburg and surrounding areas. At one point, the organization had a member in the German Bundestag, the term for Germany's constitutional and legislative body. He said he feels the organization has contributed a great deal to his personal acceptance of himself and to his ability to build positive relationships in his life.

He and his family live in a suburb of Regensburg, Tegernheim, where previous generations of his family settled, so he has a large extended family in the area. Like many Germans, his house has been in the family for more than one generation and has been built up and not out because of restrictive building regulations, so the house has three floors connected by a multifloor stairwell.

A student of economics, business, and literature, Schmid graduated from the University of Regensburg with an economics degree, married his wife, Andrea Greiner-Schmid, a physicist, and worked with her to start a business. Today they have two businesses, one a manufacturing import/export operation that works with product developers, inventors, and manufacturers to produce new products for market. The second business is a hotel they own in another city and operate from their office, which is across the street from their home.

They have one teenager, Gustav, a bright, blond 17-year-old with a deep desire to visit America, and two older young adults, who were not present.

The Schmidts were perfect hosts, taking us out for curry, one of my favorite foods, at a nearby café. We were joined by our interpreter, Waltraud Gebert, shown in the photograph above at the radio studio.

After the interview we returned to Schmid's house to drink some homemade wine extracted from the grapes that grow along the front of his house. His son made the wine, as his grandfather made wine before him.

Page 5 contains Schmid's full written interview. My radio interview audio file can be obtained by emailing me at [wkfoster@sbcglobal.net](mailto:wkfoster@sbcglobal.net), and my full written interview is posted at <http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/files/> entitled "Positionen..."



*St. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, center, the church below my window in Mittenwald, Germany, like most German churches receives some funding from the German church tax. The town supports three churches. (photo by Wanda Foster)*

## Schmid writes down answers to questions about German religious and humanist life

Bund für Geistesfreiheit (BFG) Chairman Eric Schmid wrote the following answers to questions about religion and life in Germany. BFG is a secular humanist group based in Regensburg, Germany.

### 1. What is the religious makeup of Germany, particularly Bavaria?

Within the past 30 years the impact of religion on German people has decreased very strongly. Only about 60 percent of adults are members of a Christian church, including 29 percent Catholic and 31 percent Protestant, whereas about 35 percent are registered as having no denomination. These nondenominational mainly come from the ex-Deutsche Demokratische Republik [former state of East Germany]. There, until 1990, nearly 75 percent of the 17 million inhabitants had no denomination.

Forty million Germans are Christians officially, but as a maximum 10 percent of them or 4 million people are substantial Christians, those who attend church regularly and try to live according to Christian commandments. For most German Christians, churches and religions play no prominent role in their everyday lives.

Many Germans, especially those in villages and small towns, remain in church because they want to participate in traditional Christian celebrations, such as christening, first communion, confirmations, and weddings, which are filled with rituals of gifts.

The increased number of Germans without a religious affiliation is not equivalent to the number of atheists and agnostic people. Esoteric worldviews and nontheistic religions are increasing also, but a portion also is comprised of many people simply not very interested in or able to answer or consider religious or philosophical questions.

These facts are similar in Bavaria also, but with the difference that in Bavaria, other than in the capitol, Munich, the government and the Catholic church are more strongly aligned than in other German provinces. The main reason for this is that for the past 70 years, the Christian Socialist Union in Bavaria (CSU), a conservative Christian political party, has occupied all important political, cultural, and social positions. It makes sure that the Christian, conservative, reactionary awareness of the population's majority (Bavarian rednecks) will remain unchanged.

### 2. I have noticed some difficulties locally and throughout Europe with regard to immigration and asylum seekers. What impact is that having on the makeup of German religion and culture?

Many Germans are in accord with the government parties, including the Christian Democratic Union, the CSU, and the Social Democratic Party, against more immigration of people from poor countries or foreign cultures. This attitude and the deterrence policy are used by open, right-wing extremists to forceably push out refugees from Africa or the Middle East.

In contrast, Germany's Christian churches sell that they will accept refugees from war and poverty and provide them with "Christian charity." Some refugees who do not deserve asylum get illegal asylum from individual parishes.

### 3. What are your views about the best way to deal with immigration issues here? Are your views different than those of religious people?

Life is a human right. Immigration and emigration are human rights. Living in a religious state is not a human right. Anyone who wants to immigrate to Germany should accept that Germany is not a religious state and that any religion practice is a private matter. Many Christian Germans do not agree with this and prefer Christian immigrants.

### 4. How do public schools handle religion? Do they teach religion in the schools?

Christian education is a requirement in all public schools. The religious education teachers are trained, examined, and paid by the state. All baptized pupils have to attend religious education. Nonbaptized pupils are bound to attend ethics education.

### 5. Tell me about your early training in religion and your educational background.

I was born in the small village known as Tegernheim near Regensburg in Bavaria and grew up as a Catholic boy with the full program of religion infiltration into my brain, mainly by my mother and Catholic education in school.

### 6. When did you start to question that training?

My first questions started as an adolescent when I was about 15 years old. I wondered about restrictive Christian and Catholic laws about sexuality. I also wondered who created "God."

### 7. What sort of positive and negative effects did early religious training have on you?

I remember the negative effects of the restrictive sexual Christian Catholic laws which branded my sexual behavior as a sin. My sexual pleasure with myself and others was condemned as a sin and had to be confessed in a confession.

### 8. What sort of difficulties did you face in asking your questions about religion?

The greatest difficulties were to learn that I am okay, that my feelings and my sexuality are natural and okay.

### 9. How did you deal with these issues and overcome them?

My studies of social work in Regensburg were very helpful to help me overcome the Christian, dogmatic, antihuman laws and rules. But mainly my studies in Düsseldorf helped me. There I learned, for example, that all boys masturbate and it is totally natural.

Very important too was the fact that I have joined the secular society Bund für Geistesfreiheit. Here I have in-

creased my knowledge regarding philosophies of Epikur, Feuerbach, and Russell, and with this knowledge I have learned and constructed my personal life, relations with my wife, my five children, and my friendships with other human beings in work and society. [Note: The names refer to Greek philosopher Epicurus, German philosopher and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach, and British philosopher Bertrand Russell.]

### 10. Is religion dying in Germany or Europe?

Yes. In Germany—as in all other industrial countries of Europe—the capitalistic performance and consumer society dictates the lives of most people. In the everyday life of people, religion is obsolete. Active religious practice is considered antiquated and career-obstructive. The church tax is considered a rip-off. The traditional Christian celebrations—Christmas, Easter, christening, confirmation and others—are largely commercialized and stolen from their religious connotations.

### 11. What is replacing religion for those who give it up?

Many people who have dropped their religious beliefs or never had them are geared toward the main object of the consumer society, to get as much money as possible and to consume as much as possible. People involved in my organization have created a conscious distance from religion, replacing the religious value system with the humanistic value system on which human rights are based.

### 12. How are German attitudes about religion having an impact on the nonreligious? Are your ideas welcomed or challenged?

The humanistic philosophy and educational ideas are strongly established among the intellectual people of Germany. Even Catholic and Protestant church leaders misappropriate the humanistic idea of man and claim that the Charter of Human Rights is based on Christian natural justice.

### 13. What needs to change in Bavaria for the betterment of society?

In Bavaria, the political and social influence of the CSU has to be broken to stop submission to authority and to increase majority awareness and reactionism to develop to a higher intellectual level.

### 14. Tell me about your humanist organization, including the membership and its activities and goals.

BFG, a member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, has an advisory vote at organizations such as UNO, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe. The organization is nondogmatic, humanistic, and democratic, and operates actively above government party lines. The organization believes neither in a god, nor in an afterlife with paradise and hell. Faith in supernatural energy, in alien forces, or in destiny are all esoteric nonsense.

We orient our thinking and doing toward human rationality, sciences, and the ideal of a worldwide humanistic



Erwin and Andrea Schmid stand next to their wine grapevine.

society. We consider religions irrational, noneducational, and unnatural.

We consider organized religions, such as churches and religious groups, as power machines inside which many believers are patronized and ruled by a few chosen ones.

We consider the Christian occidental culture as a negative term, because the Christian culture is a culture of submission, repression, and exploitation of human beings and nature.

We feel connected intellectually to critical philosophers and scientists from all centuries, such as Thales of Milet and Epikur via Giordano Bruno, David Hume, Charles Darwin, Arthur Schopenhauer, Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, and Richard Dawkins.

We intend to apply our efforts and values to:

- Eliminate the state's preference for churches and religious groups over their religion-free citizens
- Recall all concordats with churches and the Vatican
- Abolish formation of priesthoods and theological groups at state universities
- Abolish military pastoral care
- Abolish government collections of church taxes
- Abolish religious education in public schools and replace it with integrated instruction in the arts of living, ethics, cultural sciences, and philosophy
- Remove crucifixes and other religious symbols from public schools and public institutions such as courtrooms and civil service buildings
- Ensure public labor laws rather than church rules count at church schools, kindergartens, hospitals, and rest homes
- Work toward abolishing provision of public services to religious-oriented companies

BFG meets regularly to exchange ideas. They invite scientists for lectures, participate in Internet discussions, provide information booths in public places, attend national and international events of religion-free organizations, and organize or attend activities to protect human rights. They also collect information about churches and provide it to interested people.

## *Germans seem to benefit from relaxed policing, high-quality, low-cost food, and ecological benefits*

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other areas, including Munich with 1.4 million people, Regensburg with about 140,000 people, and across Austria to Bolzano in northern Italy.

### **The Autobahn and Policing**

So I have always had a lead foot, but my pace on the autobahn is usually insufficient for the flow in the left lane. My speeds topped out at 165 kilometers per hour (kph), which is 103 miles per hour (mph). At those speeds, people have to understand the natural order of things: high speeds in the left lane, mid-level speeds in the middle lane, slow speeds in the right lane. As on any other freeways, however, changing to another lane is essential to exit or to pass someone else. In Germany, drivers have to stay constantly on guard, watching behind and in front of their vehicles to avoid getting run over by the person in the Porsche or the Maserati going 50 mph faster behind them or to avoid a slower vehicle passing in front.

The striking thing is that all of the orderliness of the speedy autobahn generally does not come from police. In fact, in all of the years I have traveled on the autobahn since 1992 I have never seen a police car on the freeway for any reason. If I did, it would probably be an omen for a crushing, multicar disaster, which they do quite occasionally have. While the U.S. considers policing roads and streets as a fundamental requirement, German Polizei are doing something completely different, while still enjoying lower accident and crime rates than the U.S. Perhaps they follow crime more than freeways.

This year I did see one police car twice in the little town of Mittenwald.



*This Polizei vehicle warns people attending sheep, goat, or cattle drives to prepare for arriving animals walking or running through the town.*

In the first case, it drove down a rainy pedestrian-only street to announce the arrival of the goats from the mountains, an occasion hundreds of spectators had patiently waited for in the rain. The same car arrived a week later announcing the arrival of the sheep.

### **Accessibility for the Disabled**

Hands-down, the U.S. is more accessible for people with physical problems than any other nation I have visited, including Germany. Public restrooms often are way downstairs or way upstairs, and most places lack elevators.

### **Honeybees and Chemical Bans**

Parks and cafes throughout Europe are covered with flowers and swarms of honeybees to top anything I have seen since I was 5 years old. While I am not a scientist, I can definitely observe that more bees were everywhere I traveled than I ever see in Fort Worth.

Germans and Europeans are largely galvanized both scientifically and in public opinion against genetically modified crops and a class of chemicals called neonicotinoids that act on the central nervous systems of insects, including honeybees. Neonicotinoids have been implicated in colony collapse disorder, a bee abnormality in which entire colonies of bees die, a fact that threatens the future of crop pollination and plants.

Scientists in Europe have increasingly declined to participate in genetic engineering work. The German Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety also has suspended registration for eight pesticide seed treatment products used in rapeseed oil and sweet corn, for example.

Partially as a result of these factors, one of the largest companies involved in genetic plant engineering, Bayer CropScience, left Germany and relocated its headquarters to North Carolina to continue their genetically modified organism (GMO) studies, such as producing seeds to be insect resistant.

### **Currency, Food Quality, and Price**

Traveling to Europe was essential for me this year given the fact that U.S. dollars and euros are so close to parity—more than at any other time in my traveling history. In the past, buying a



*While U.S. honeybees continue dying off, German parks and sidewalk cafes swarm with honeybees. Germany has banned many of the chemicals that cause hives to collapse, and they have banned insect-resistant GMOs. photo by Wanda Foster*

euro might cost me \$1.36, but this year even my local bank only charged about \$1.15. The cheapest interbank rates were \$1.11. This helped me see the cost of living as Germans view it, and it was very good.

Not only was the cost of food low, but the quality was high. My first trip to the very nice REWE supermarket in Mittenwald yielded an unexpected bounty of fresh, local cheeses, dairy products, meat, vegetables, and fruits. Whereas our food often travels long distances, much of their bread is local, and meats, dairy products, and vegetables come from German farms within a one-day driving area.

The eggs were yellow inside, not white and pale. These were like the eggs of my rural childhood. The milk also was different. The milk fat was 3.5 to 3.8 percent typically, and it had body unlike any I have experienced in a while. These are personal observations, so anyone's opinion might vary, but I enjoyed the freshness and taste of everything. One-half gallon of organic milk went for €1.59, which converted today is \$1.78. In the U.S., I pay \$3.50 to \$4 for a half gallon of organic milk.

Packaging was less convenient sometimes than in the U.S., but most foods carried Germany's official bio stamp, meaning that the food inside is certified organic, and much of it said non-GMO. Local beer often was also labeled bio, and sold for as little as €0.79 or about \$0.88 cents U.S.

Native olive oil (Italian) was €4.99

(\$5.59) for a large, liter bottle—the glass one, not the plastic. Of course, they do have the advantage of living next door to Italy. The same bottle in the U.S. would cost \$7 to \$14.

Fresh pork loin medallions (boneless) for schnitzel were €3.79 (\$4.25) for half a kilogram (1.1 pounds). Even low-cost, bone-in pork chops in the U.S. typically go for at least \$5 a pound. Hand-made, smoked landjaeger sausages went for €1.30 (\$1.45) for 4 pieces and handmade jaeger salami for €3.94 (\$4.41) for 0.2 kg or 0.4 of a U.S. pound. Cheese, the hand-made, fresh, semihard goat cheese usually expensive or not available at all in the U.S., went for €3.02 (\$3.38) for more than half a pound.

Bananas and local organic apples were cheap and unblemished, and they died at an appropriate time if unused. In Texas, green bananas I bring home may die within 1 day. I had to smile when my banana was still fresh and had no black marks after 3 days. I smiled even more when one apple actually died after a week. The one I bought in Texas in mid-August was miraculously somehow alive when I returned home in mid-September.

Dale Kormander, a German-speaking British friend from Düsseldorf, was admiring the bees with me in Kurpark when she explained that the quality and price of food in Germany have significantly improved since an influx of Polish immigrants after the Berlin Wall fell. Perhaps this view contributes to the positive reception of refugees in Germany.

## **Minutes of September 9 Meeting with Treasurer's Report**

Chair Sam Baker called the Humanists of Fort Worth meeting to order at 7:10 p.m., Wednesday, September 9.

### **Attendance**

Twenty three people attended.

### **Treasurer's Report**

The Treasurer's Report was presented, which shows a current balance of \$711.41. We have 35 paid members.

### **History of Humanism and Unitarian Universalists (UUs)**

Our guest speaker, Rev. Alex Holt, interim minister of Westside Unitarian Universalist Church, presented an

overview of the history of humanism and Unitarian Universalism.

He recounted the history of humanism in America starting with the transcendentalists, who studied Eastern religions, and the creators of the Humanist Manifesto I in 1933, which was prepared by a committee that included several Unitarian ministers.

Humanists represented a majority of Unitarian church members after World War II. Many of these churches formed fellowships in university communities, as they still do today.

Rev. Holt said he believes baby

boomers seek spirituality, and he added that this desire has led to a decision in some UU churches to add more religious language to their teaching than they did previously.

He emphasized six sources of Unitarian Universalism and the church's efforts to include something from all religions. He said a UU church that uses all six sources represents Unitarian Universalism at its best.

### **Question-and-Answer Session**

A Q&A session followed the presentation.

### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting is slated for 7 p.m., Wednesday, October 14, 2015 at Westside UU Church, 901 Page Avenue, Fort Worth, TX 76126.

The subject of the meeting will be preannounced on our Meetup Web site at <http://www.meetup.com/Humanists-of-Fort-Worth/events>

before the next meeting.

### **Adjournment**

There being no further business the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,  
Reed K. Bilz, Secretary