

Roy Speckhardt, Executive Director, American Humanist Association

Today a coalition of humanist, atheist, and freethought groups has formed here in Philadelphia to unite nontheists and build a community that is capable of moving society in a forward direction.

As a nontheist I'm embarrassed for our country when I see proclamations from our government that today is the National Day of Prayer. Doesn't our leadership know that this country was founded as a secular democracy in order to best protect the freedom of everyone to believe, or not believe, as they see best?

As a humanist I'm appalled by the blatant hypocrisy in George W. Bush saying he's a president of all Americans, yet declaring in his National Day of Prayer proclamation that "America trusts in the abiding power of prayer and asks for the wisdom to discern God's will." He goes on to say that "By surrendering our lives to our loving Father, we learn to serve His eternal purposes." I for one don't trust in prayer, which studies have proven ineffective, and I for one don't serve the purposes of a power higher than my greatest aspirations for humanity's progress.

As an American I'm outraged by the discrimination inherent in a government-sponsored National Day of Prayer. When our chief executive speaks out—not as a private citizen but from his public office—on how we are a nation beholden to one almighty God for our achievements, then he preaches rather than leads. When he and his administration endorse and participate in the National Day of Prayer, those of us who do not share his particular sectarian beliefs are excluded and feel the sharp sting of second-class citizenship. Government sanctioned sectarianism inherent in the National Day of Prayer is exclusionary and disregards our national motto "E Pluribus Unum" – out of many, one.

That's why, today, here in Philadelphia, the city of America's founding, we're joining groups from New York to Los Angeles celebrating the National Day of Reason instead of the National Day of Prayer. Because celebrating reason is universal. All religious and nonreligious people recognize the value of reason. And we're celebrating it a unique fashion; we're launching a billboard campaign that will reach out to the very people excluded by the National Day of Prayer. Traditional religious billboards have abounded in the past. Something nontraditional like this is therefore needed to stimulate thinking.

Now I'd like to turn the podium over to Sally J. Cramer, president of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia.

Sally Cramer, President, Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia

The Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) is a 501(c)(3) educational organization that advocates separation of church and state, freedom of expression, freedom from religious intrusion and freedom of choice.

As the second president since the organization was founded in 1993 by Margaret Downey, I seek to not only continue the excellent programming and fellowship that FSGP provides to freethinkers in the Greater Philadelphia region, but also to reach out to those who are not aware of the alternatives to theist religions, as well as educate those who discriminate against atheists, agnostics, skeptics, humanists and freethinkers.

Atheist and agnostic Americans have been made to feel marginalized. It's time to change that. We're here and we have a place at the table. That's why FSGP is delighted to collaborate with similar freethought groups in the region in the newly launched Greater Philadelphia Coalition of Reason (PhillyCOR).

For years I have seen countless religious, proselytizing billboards along roadsides, commanding me to accept Jesus as my savior, or the simple, "Let's Talk—God." For the first time in Philadelphia there is now a billboard that offers a nontheistic perspective and ways to get further involved. Once people have phoned or logged on, they can go further to learn more or just stop right there. No door-to-door evangelist will ever visit, and there are no pop-ups on the Web page. Our only aim is to reach those who really want to learn more.

According to recent estimates, the population of the Philadelphia metro area is 6 million. As you may know, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released the findings of their U.S. Religious Landscape Survey earlier this year, which found that 16.1 percent of Americans do not follow any particular religion. The study also shows the number of Americans who identify as atheist or agnostic has risen from 3.2 percent to 4 percent, while a "remarkably high" 44 percent have rejected the religion to which they were exposed or raised in childhood. From these numbers, we can estimate that there are about one million people in Philadelphia who are at least skeptical of the existence of a god.

Today is the National Day of Prayer, which skeptics and secularists have countered by founding the National Day of Reason. The billboard being installed today by PhillyCOR seeks to shine a light of reason upon Greater Philadelphia and to reach the million people who live and work in this region who do not believe in a god.

We seek to find those who are skeptical and questioning, those who feel marginalized, and those who may not be aware that there are alternatives to theist faith traditions, dogma and discrimination that so often confront us in the seemingly increasingly conservative U.S.

The diverse views within skepticism and the freethought movement are represented, in part, by the seven groups here today and which comprise PhillyCOR. Our common thread is that we do not believe in a god, that we do not discriminate, and that we are reaching out to those like us who are looking for comfort; those who are looking to meet like-minded individuals and who seek to be welcomed with open arms.

PhillyCOR invites freethinkers in the Greater Philadelphia/Delaware Valley region to visit our website, www.PhillyCOR.org and reach out to any or all of the organizations within the coalition and find out for yourself that you are far from being alone.

Margaret Downey, President, Atheist Alliance International

The Atheist Alliance International is thrilled to take part in the unveiling of the I-95 billboard located between Allegheny Avenue and the Betsy Ross Bridge/Aramingo Avenue exits.

The billboard is not just an advertisement sign. The billboard is much like a lighthouse-- spreading a beam of light to those who desire to find a safe harbor in which to openly declare that they do not believe in a God. The Greater Philadelphia Coalition of Reason is beckoning all persons of reason to gather together, meet, socialize and share ideas. The time to be rational is now. The place to be rational is here!

Happy National Day of Reason.

Joe Fox, President, Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia

I'm Joe Fox, president of the Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia or HAGP. We are thrilled to be part of this newly-formed coalition, the Greater Philadelphia Coalition of Reason, called "PhillyCoR" for short. HAGP was founded 48 years ago and has experienced tremendous growth in just the last couple of years. This is one of the reasons we feel that the timing is so right for this billboard. We're ready to handle the new members it will bring.

And it will bring new members because people in Philadelphia are ready to hear our message. Times are changing, people are changing, and the nation is changing. Unlike in past decades, an atheist book can become a best seller and a member of Congress, like Pete Stark, can acknowledge that he doesn't believe in a god. So there are no doubt thousands of people in the greater Philadelphia area who share outlooks similar to humanism.

As humanists, we in the Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia hold to the common moral decencies, doing so without a belief in a deity. We are committed to the idea that humanity can solve the problems that humanity has created. And we aren't willing to wait for cosmic rescue by depending on a supernatural being to solve our problems for us.

As humanists we are also staunch supporters of church-state separation. Our mission isn't to convert but rather to educate, because the more facts people have the more they are enabled to reach sensible conclusions on their own.

This billboard will be seen by many people who are questioning faith and are open to a positive, humanist outlook as an alternative. The point of the billboard is to make nontheistic people, such as atheists and agnostics, aware that they aren't alone. They no longer need to feel isolated.

But there's more. We want people to know there's a serious and meaningful alternative to the religious right that has been dominating American religious discussion. After all, a lot of people are frustrated with the power that traditional faiths have wielded, and they don't know where to turn to find others who share that frustration. Now they will.

On a personal note, ten years ago I was one of those people who felt isolated because of my lack of belief in a god. I knew I was a good person with moral values and ethics but wasn't aware of any groups or organizations that shared my nontheistic approach to honest living. Then, in 1998 while still living in New Jersey, I discovered a group called the New Jersey Humanist Network and became involved, eventually becoming vice president. In late 2005 I relocated to the Philadelphia area and became involved with HAGP. Now we are helping put up this billboard.

As a side note, HAGP is very excited to announce that Martha Knox has been hired as director of HAGP starting in June.

Each member of PhillyCoR has a link to its own website, and each group has its own mission statement and meeting events. So we urge people to visit phillycor.org to see which group with the coalition might pique their interest and help them find a home within the freethought community.