

# The Atheist

July 1998

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## **Gateway to Freethought**

The Atheist Alliance National Convention, "Gateway to Freethought", in St. Louis began on Friday, April 10th with the Board of Directors Meeting. The Alliance board consists of two representatives from each of the 16 member societies.

Richard

Russell, who served as chair, set a wonderful example for those of us who were interested in running orderly meetings.

The representatives of each group then introduced themselves and spoke about what their group was doing. Christos from the Atheists of Florida showed off a nicely done annual report and told how it helped their fundraising efforts, and also discussed a scholarship program they had instituted. Sandy Feroe from Atheists of Colorado came with two examples of atheist ads her son had done. Both ads, "You Are Not Alone" and "What Do These People Have in Common" were a big hit with the board. Sandy's group was also one of two present who were doing Adopt-a-Mile cleanups on a local highway. The other groups got to hear me brag briefly about the ACA, our Blood Drive, our parties and the other things we have been doing. They were particularly impressed with the idea of atheists doing an hour long, LIVE, TV show!

The Board was informed that the "Secular Nation" newsletter was making a profit and growing in readership. Jim Cox, AAI vice president and webmaster, agreed to keep the current newsletter's table of contents and sample articles posted on the web site. We then learned that ATVOP (Atheist Television Outreach Program) now has 76 titles and is rapidly growing. Board members were encouraged to get the tapes sponsored on their community access cable if they had not already done so.

After lunch, the board discussed how to handle the proposal for merging the major atheist groups which had been floated prior to the convention. A motion to authorize talks between AAI and American Atheists (should AA respond positively to the proposal) was soundly defeated. There was widespread agreement among board members that it would be sensible to work together with other groups as appropriate, but unwise to attempt a merger.

The board then discussed the future direction of the Alliance. Members expressed support for continued efforts to assist local groups in organizing and to penetrate more cable access markets with high quality atheist videotapes. Other ideas included possible lobbying and legal fights over separation issues. The next agenda item was the election of officers. Marie Castle was re-elected as president, Jim Cox was re-elected as vice president, and Shirley Moll was re-elected as treasurer.

In a discussion of financial issues, the board left dues the same as last year and voted to donate \$500 toward the construction of the Freethought Cenotaph, a monument to German atheists who immigrated to Central Texas in the middle of the last century. The board designated ACA member Don Rhoades to work out the details with Marie Castle for presenting the check to Ed Scharf, organizer of the Cenotaph effort.

When it came time to consider which society would host the 1999 convention, several possibilities arose. Atheists and Other Freethinkers in Sacramento felt they could do a better job in one more year because of some projects that are looming for them now. Ed Golly from Atheists of Florida suggested we try Las Vegas, as flights and rooms are cheap. Also, conventions there are easy to arrange, and we wouldn't really need a host group. However, the most popular location idea for 1999's convention was Austin. It was agreed that Don Rhoades propose to the ACA board that ACA host the 1999 convention of the Atheist Alliance. Furthermore, the board expressed a desire that, should ACA decide to do this, that the

announcement would coincide with the presentation of the check to Ed Scharf, and that we arrange pictures and whatever publicity we can.

After the board meeting adjourned, there was about an hour to socialize, and most of the convention attendees ended up in the "Dirtwater Fox", the hotel's nightclub. You could tell who all the atheists were because of our distinctive nametags, and I overheard one tourist complain that you couldn't get a seat in the bar because the "whole place was full of atheists!"

I spent Friday evening and Saturday morning with my wife and daughter, who had arrived on a later flight. We walked up and down the waterfront, shopped, took a riverboat ride, and went to the top of the Gateway Arch. Then I returned to the convention while Dottie and Lauren found the Riverboat McDonald's and did some more shopping.

Saturday afternoon, Annie Laurie Gaylor treated us to a fine presentation and slide show on "Women in Freethought". The women featured and their stories were taken from Annie's book, "Women Without Superstition". Ms. Gaylor is an engaging speaker, and I enjoyed her talk very much. Those of us who are members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation are familiar with the excellent work she has been doing for atheism.

Noted atheist author Dr. Michael Martin gave the keynote speech Saturday night on "The Education of an Atheist". While Dr. Martin is not exactly a captivating speaker, his considerable intellect and experience were evident in his talk. Every atheist, according to Dr. Martin, should be educated in some fundamental principles. Most "hard core" atheists are already pretty fluent in these areas, he pointed out, but to raise an atheist child or to mentor someone towards atheism, some gaps may need filling. An atheist should learn something about religion, including the arguments for Theism and how to refute them, as well as some factual history, both of religions and of Freethought. And, in addition to a broad general education, an atheist should have some training in science and the scientific

method. This leads to an understanding of how we can know what we do about invisible, infinitesimal, or very distant things, or in fact how we can say we know anything at all. And of course an atheist should have an understanding of biological evolution.

Far more difficult to master is the skill of skeptical thinking. Dr. Martin spoke of a pseudo-science class where he worked to cultivate this ability in his students by reviewing baseless popular notions and how skeptical thinking skills could have helped avoid them. He thought things were going well, especially when one of his students invited a proponent of divining rods to class. Dr. Martin sat back and watched, eager to see his class of critical thinkers tear the diviner apart. But no, it wasn't to be. The students failed to see the holes in the presentation; they simply bought into it. So most important, more than than the knowledge of religion and science, even more important than critical thinking ability is the willingness to actually think skeptically when the opportunity arises. While Dr. Martin would certainly agree that such a tendency might be difficult to teach, he suggests that we continue to try. After all, every now and then, someone gets it.

The final event of Saturday was "Mark Twain". While the actor who played the part did disappointingly little of Twain's religious humor, he was very good and quite funny. I almost hurt myself laughing at the story of the two drunks trying to get saved!

Sunday morning's activities included a panel discussion centered around the current state and direction of atheism. One comment that stuck with me was that atheism would grow a lot faster if atheists would just marry other atheists and have lots of little atheists!

I enjoyed "Gateway to Freethought" immensely. It gave me the opportunity to socialize, swap jokes, even have a couple of beers with religion-free folk from around the country. On top of that, I got to hear some of the best known atheist minds in the world speak on topics of interest and relevance to us. It felt

something like Sunday mornings at the bagelry, only on a larger scale; while I did not agree with everything that was said, I found it liberating and invigorating. I hope all atheists have the opportunity to attend a similar event.

Don Rhoades

Ed. note: ACA is a member of the Atheist Alliance through the donations of several members.

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## **Debate in Dallas**

A debate between Dr. Parsons and Dr. Craig was held at the Prestonwood Baptist church in Dallas. The statement to be debated was; "Why I am /am not a Christian". Dr. Parsons argued for the atheist view.

It was a hot, muggy evening and I left early to give myself plenty of time to find the church. Prestonwood Baptist must be the biggest baptist church on this earth. A very impressive building, it looms over the area like a giant monolith topped with a huge cross that points the way to the Christian heaven. I parked two blocks away and joined the throng hiking towards the church. When I arrived, I realized that I was in trouble already. A crowd of 2000 or more people were streaming in, elbow to elbow, to find seats in the magnificent sanctuary. I found one at the back, but was somewhat disappointed to see that for all the opulence, the pews were not padded. Oh well!

The debate started right on time with Dr. Craig making his presentation first. Dr. Craig's years of preaching had given him the tools and techniques to be a very effective speaker. I was impressed by his bearing and elegant dress. Dr. Parsons did not cut such a dashing figure. In a suit that appeared to fit him rather badly, and which was much too light for evening wear, he seemed to lack the public speaking skills of his opponent. Dr. Craig presented his ideas in an extemporaneous manner. Dr. Parsons, however, seemed to be reading material from loose leaf sheets of note book paper.

About the debate itself- the real meat of the issue? I can't really be objective, having already decided on these issues. Dr. Craig attempted to ally himself to science, claiming that the Big Bang implies that something came from nothing, which is impossible, so a god must be responsible. Dr. Craig then went into a logic loop which was supposed to prove that from the Big Bang one could deduce a personal god. I completely failed to follow his logic, and I dare say no one else did either. He went on to argue that a god was necessary, since without a god, there would be no moral basis for life, no hope, no meaning for life, no values in life etc. These were just the same tired old arguments I have heard for ever. Dr. Craig played to the audience, without seeming to be really interested in providing any actual proof for what he said. He simply made statements and often quoted other preachers that support his position .

In my opinion, he stumbled three times. He defended the old testament atrocities by stating that his god was all powerful, and if god wanted to kill someone he had every right to do so. His second stumble was his defense of hell. He claimed that a just god demands justice, and sin deserves eternal torment. I found both of these ideas to be repulsive. Another of Dr. Craig's points, to which I took offense, was his statement on the life of Bertrand Russell. According to Dr. Craig, Russell believed his life to be meaningless and in vain due to his atheism. Dr Craig quoted from "A Free Mans Worship" to support this statement.

This was misleading, and I think he knew better. Bertrand Russell certainly did not think his life was meaningless.

Overall, Dr. Parsons presentation was adequate. At one point, however, he went off on a tangent about an obscure mathematical proof for the idea that extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. This went right over everyones head, including mine.

I enjoyed the debate more for the spectacle and showmanship more than for any real substance. I had already made up my mind as to where the truth lies. I did get to shake Dr. Parsons

hand and thank him for standing up for "Berty".

Larry B

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### **Book Review:**

When writing these reviews, I try to pick books that I consider to be must-reads for every atheist. *Deadly Doctrine* by Wendell W. Watters, M.D. certainly fits the bill, as the author's point is that Christianity is hazardous to your health. "Simply put, Christian indoctrination is a form of mental and emotional abuse that can adversely affect bodily health in the same way a drug can." Before presenting his arguments, the author does make clear the limits of his book. "Some would argue that mine are merely theoretical assumptions derived from clinical experience, and in that sense they are correct. The views expressed here have not been subjected to rigorous scientific examination; and certainly they should be tested as rigorously as research methodology will allow." Of course our Christianized society is not about to allow the testing of the authors ideas. I do appreciate the authors honesty, as well as his thoroughly footnoted arguments.

In examining the basic doctrines of Christianity, Dr. Watters concludes that the religion inherently promotes bad mental health. After all, Christianity is based on the idea that people are born evil and so deserve to suffer for all eternity. The only way to escape this eternal suffering is to accept a belief system centered on the infantile idea that a god will reward a life time of suffering and groveling with eternal bliss. Dr. Watters draws attention to several strategies used by Christianity to promote the faith. For example, he does an excellent job of explaining how proselytization works. ". . . it depends on the proselytizer being "one up" on the proselytized, who is usually disadvantaged psychologically, socially, or economically, or else in a state of military subjugation, This process never takes place between equals; it is always a case of "get 'em when they're down."

To support his thesis that Christianity is unhealthy, Dr. Watters draws on the work of Edmund Cohen, and his book *The Mind of the Bible Believer*. Here it is shown how a Christian must eventually close off his mind to his own intelligence. This is because the believer cannot possibly reconcile the absurdities of Christian dogma with reality. According to Dr. Watters; “ At this point the believer has moved beyond a mere dissociated state into psychosis, in which genuine interaction between the individual and reality is impossible since the “real world” is perceived solely in terms of the Christian world view.” All of us who have ever tried to reason with a true believer know this to be true.

Dr. Watters goes on to examine the role of Christianity in the family, self-esteem, human relationships, pleasure, guilt, sexuality, gender roles and major psychiatric illnesses. In each case the author is able to point to examples of how religious thinking gets in the way of a healthy mental outlook. Christianity goes to great lengths to curtail human-to-human contact replacing it with human-to-god prayer. This results in an inability for many believers to relate to other human beings in any meaningful way. For example, Christian prayers often focus on putting trust and confidence in god rather than asking for the increased self-confidence needed to solve many problems. As Dr. Watters says; “It is much easier, after all, to talk to a God who doesn’t talk back than it is to carry on a dialogue with those human beings closest to us.” Without humans working together to solve their problems, many problems simply will not be solved.

An important point discussed by Dr. Watters is the Christian support for pronatalism. Pronatalist policies are pro-birth and encourage reproduction, even at the expense of personal liberties. As such, pronatalist policies are authoritarian in nature and so go hand in hand with the general patriarchal attitudes that prevail in the Christian religion. The ability of the Catholic church to demographically swamp a political region, through its refusal to allow birth control, is an example

of pronatalism. Dr. Watters also includes some specific examples from his clinical experiences that demonstrate the harm done by pronatalist dogma to families.

To me, this book was worth reading just to learn the truth about the early Christian martyrs. It seems that the early believers actually made a nuisance of themselves by throwing themselves to the lions in order to repay the suffering of Jesus at the crucifixion. Apparently, this interfered with the regularly scheduled gladiator games. The self abasing attitude towards suffering, displayed by the earliest Christian martyrs, still prevails in attitudes towards sex, and other forms of pleasure.

Since so much good mental health depends on happiness, the whole point of Dr. Watters book can probably best be summed up with two quotes he included:

“Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christs sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” Cor. 12:10

“Just as Christianity must destroy reason before it can introduce faith, so it must destroy happiness before it can introduce salvation.”  
George H. Smith

In short, Dr. Watter’s book just makes sense, although I would love to see more research done that would test the ideas presented. I highly recommend this book, especially to those who still cling to the idea that somehow the Christian religion is basically good for people.

John Koonz

Deadly Doctrine by Wendell W. Watters, M.D. published by Prometheus Books Amherst, NY 1992.

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## **Announcements:**

At the general membership meeting of 5-3-98, the following were elected:

For Co-chairs: Don Rhoades and Kellen Von Houser

For Treasurer: Ray Blevins

For Secretary: Ray Blevins

For board members: Keith Berka, Sue Osborne, Rodney Florence, Arlo Pignotti, Earle Beach, John Koonz, Arval Bohn, Ralph Shirley, Joe Zamecki.

The following bylaw was proposed and carried:

A Quorum of the Atheist Community of Austin board of directors may conduct any appropriate business. A quorum will be defined as at least 51%.

July 12th, 12:00 Board Meeting, location to be announced.

July 29th, 12:00 TV Committee Meeting at the bagelry.

Next Lecture:

August 2nd, Ed Scharf will speak about the Freethinker Monument to be

erected in Comfort, Texas on October 4th. Lecture will be held at Furr's

Cafeteria, Northcross Mall, 11:00.

August 9th 12:00 Board Meeting, location to be Announced.

August 16th 12:00 TV Committee Meeting at the bagelry

September 6th 11:00 Lecture Mosch Virshup will speak on "The Bible's Ethics and Other Atrocities" (or "If You Think There Must Be Some Good in It, Get Over It!")

Furr's Cafeteria, Northcross Mall, 11:00.

Organ donation:

Organ donation cards have been included in this issue of The Atheist. Please consider filling one out and carrying it in your wallet. Be sure to discuss your decision to donate organs with

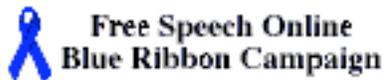
your family, as they will have some say in the donation process. Just remember, dead people don't need your organs, but many living people do.

#### 1999 Atheist Alliance National Convention:

The board of directors has voted to host the 1999 Atheist Alliance National convention here in Austin. This should be an exciting opportunity to meet atheists from all over the country. We will also be able to show off our city and our Atheist Community. If you are interested in helping, please contact Don Rhoades.

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