

The Atheist

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin a Nonprophet Organization P.O. Box 3798, Austin, Texas 78764 512-371-2911
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Freethought Month Proclamation Campaign

In past years, Catherine Fahringer has written a lone letter to the governor of Texas requesting that a Freethought Week in October be proclaimed. This year, we are giving Catherine a hand in her pursuit of a proclamation. During August, Texas Freethinkers have written approximately 50 letters to Governor Bush. The Atheist Community of Austin and The Texas Atheist are now swinging into action in hopes of sending 200 letters in. We hope to announce at the cenotaph dedication the total number of letters written to Bush. Although we don't expect the governor to change his mind about the proclamation, we are proud of this joint effort of freethinkers all over the state. This is an issue that might be used effectively during the fall election campaign to publicize the Freethought movement and certain politicians' bias against freethinkers. Governor Bush has given no reason for his rejection of the proposed proclamation.

~ Julie Fisher

Why don't we make it our goal to send a total of 200 letters to the governor? I'm sure he would proclaim an official Fire Ant Appreciation Month if he were pressed by the Theocratic Right! If you would like to participate in this project, send your letters, and demands for explanations of refusal, by September 30. By sending 200 letters to Governor Bush, we would accomplish some important goals:

1. We would demonstrate that Texas atheists/realists/agnostics/humanists and other freethinkers can work together.
2. We would make an impact politically.
3. We would have achieved a goal that we can be proud of, even if, as is likely, Bush ignores us.
4. Our letters will come from a wide geographic area. This will show that we are in communication with each other.

ACA members, if you write a letter, please e-mail me John Koonz (jknz@hotmail.com) or call and leave a message on our ACA voice mail. (371-2911). This way, we can keep track of our numbers. The following letter is a chimera of several letters written by Texas freethinkers, among them; Julie Fisher, Catherine Fahringer, and Tim Gorski.

Governor George W. Bush
Constituent Services
P. O. Box 12428
Austin, TX
78711

October is an important month in the Freethought movement. On October 12, 1692, Governor Phips of Massachusetts ended the Salem witch trials by issuing an edict that changed the rules of court evidence. He declared that no spectral evidence would be admissible in court. Evidence had to be observable by the ordinary senses. American courts have observed this rule ever since. Public recognition of sanity in the courts is something every citizen, freethinker or not, should embrace with enthusiasm.

The Freethought movement supports the application of reason to the problems of humanity. We value the scientific method as the most dependable means to find the truth. We work for the amelioration of human suffering, for justice, equality, and democracy.

Freethinkers of this country are joining together in their various locations across the country to celebrate this date and to gain recognition for it by requesting formal proclamations from their city and state elected leaders.

Therefore, I respectfully request such a proclamation to the effect that the month of October be designated "Freethought Month" in Texas for the purpose of recognizing and honoring the importance of reason and the separation of church and state, both of which are vital to a free

society.

Thank you for your consideration of this worthy proclamation.

Please do not mention the Cenotaph in your letter. Apparently, the Texas Historical Marker hasn't been finalized by the state as yet. We don't want to jeopardize that fantastic project.

Censorship of Atheists and Atheism

From the introduction of letterpress printing in the 15th century, there have been political attempts to censor the press. "The actions of the government of Venice were more largely, concerned with the supervision and regulation of the press for the safety of the interests of State and Church." (George H. Putnam, *Books and Their Makers During the Middle Ages*, II:352) Book banning was begun by the Church in 1491; trials under the Inquisition extended from 1547 to 1730. (op. cit., p.371)

In light of the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of freedom of speech and of the press, it may surprise some that book banning flourishes today in public libraries and high schools. Books about atheism or critical of religion have become a primary target. Here are a few of these targeted books, along with the reasons given for their challenge.

- 1) William Butler, *The Butterfly Revolution* - the book "suggested dislike of the Bible and belief in atheism."
- 2) Charles R. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* - promotes evolution.
- 3) Howard Fast, *Citizen Tom Paine* - totalitarian; withdrawn from USA libraries.
- 4) William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* - "the book questions the existence of God."
- 5) Louise Fitzhugh, *The Long Secret* - the book pokes fun at religion."
- 6) Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* - contradicts official church history.
- 7) Bette Greene, *I know You AI* - the book did not uphold the principles of the United States which were "established on the moral principles of the Bible."
- 8) Elizabeth Hall, *Possible Impossibilities* - the book "would lead children to believe ideas contrary to the teachings of the Bible."
- 9) Frank Herbert, *Soul Catcher* - the book "is a mockery of Christianity, and very much anti-God."
- 10) Morina Howe, *God, the Universe and Hot Fudge Sundaes* - the book "pushes several items of the humanist agenda: death education, anti-God, pro-evolution, anti-bible, anti-Christian, and logic over faith."
- 11) Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* - the book promotes "secular humanism".
- 12) Jerome Lawrence, *Inherit the Wind* - its "anti-religious nature."
- 13) A.M. Lighter, *Gods or Demons?* - the book "promotes a secular-humanistic belief in evolution and portrays the 'Bible as myth'."
- 14) Ross Lockridge, Jr., *Raintree Country* - "1066 pages of blasphemy and sacrilege inimical to faith and morals and within the prohibition of the Catholic Index."
- 15) Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* - promotes the use of reason.
- 16) Katherine Paterson, *The Great Gilly Hopkins* - "Christians are portrayed as being dumb and stupid."
- 17) Robert Peck, *A Day No Pigs Would Die* - the book "is bigoted against Baptists."
- 18) Bertrand Russell, *What I Believe* - a freethinker
- 19) Marion Starkey, *The Tall Man From Boston* - "would lead children to believe ideas contrary to the teaching of the Bible."
- 20) Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse Five* - the book was burned, banned, challenged and restricted, for this sentence among others: "The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of the fly of God Almighty."
- 21) Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* - the book "is of no benefit to anyone."

Source: American Library Association, *Banned Books* (1998)
~ David L. Kent

Ed note: There needs to be an atheist book available at every public library in Austin.

And the Survey Says:

This was in response to our ACA web site survey question; Why are you an Atheist?

I can't remember a time when I thought that religion made any sense at all. I've always been fascinated by religion because I think it is so weird that so many people are so easily misled into believing something that is so ridiculous. My grandparents are strict Mennonites, and as a teenager I got into a discussion with them about the famine in Ethiopia. My grandparents told me that the Ethiopians brought the famine on themselves by rejecting God, as only God can bring on floods and droughts. That moment was probably when I fully realized how idiotic religion really is. -Anon. And this was in response to our question; Is our government prejudiced against Christians?:

I can't answer this until I stop laughing...hang on a minute...no, I'm going to have to pass on this one... -Anon.

Can Scientific Pantheism be a Form of Atheism?

Recently, on an Atheist Community of Austin e-mail discussion group posting, Mike Dolph mentioned an interesting sounding web site. The site is the Scientific Pantheism site maintained by Paul Harrison of the United Kingdom, who also runs a 450-strong mailing list, with mostly

US members. I decided to take a look around the site and find out what a Scientific Pantheist is. The concept was so interesting that I decided to ask Paul Harrison if he would let me do an Interview with him for The Atheist.

In answering my questions, Paul included a note that I thought was quite revealing. He wrote: "If and when you do re-order everything, could I have a glance at it? These things are so sensitive, one wrong word can give the wrong impression." Obviously the Scientific Pantheist position has been carefully thought out. I think it deserves some attention as it involves a type of "positive atheism" we talk about, but often find difficult to define. ~John Koonz

The Atheist: What do you mean by Pantheism?

Paul: The dictionary defines pantheism as the belief that equates the Universe with God. But most of us rarely or never use the word God. We mean that we accept the existence of nature and the Universe as the ultimate reality, we feel a very deep reverence for them and sense of belonging, and we want to express that sense.

The Atheist: How is Pantheism different from atheism?

Paul: Actually our scientific type of pantheism shares many beliefs in common with atheism. Somebody once called it panatheism. Many or most of our members have gone through atheism before joining and many would still call themselves atheists in many ways. For example, we don't believe in any kind of supernatural beings, we don't believe there is any such thing as "the supernatural", we are usually skeptical about magic, reincarnation, ESP.

But atheism as such is just a negative. It says what you don't believe in, not what you do believe in. Most of us have very positive attitudes to nature and to bodily life on this earth, and we want to express these.

I think that with this addition atheism gains in strength and confidence when dealing with other religions. We're not just negative, we have our own positive set-up that brings all the non-imaginary benefits of most religions without any of the costs in intellectual integrity. Nobody can turn on us and say, you're just negative and pessimistic and bleak, how can you stand it? There's no real reason why any atheist cannot add this dimension to their atheism, they don't have to sacrifice one shred of their skepticism or rationality to gain it.

The Atheist: Are there any special days, such as the solstice, in the Pantheist year?

Paul: Of course the solstices and equinoxes are very important, not for mumbo jumbo, but as a time to remember in a more intense way our place in the solar system and how that affects life on earth. The anniversary of Giordano Bruno's martyrdom by the Vatican on February 17 1600 will probably also become important, as a symbol of religious oppression and courage in resisting it and speaking out against it. We also try to be outdoors when we get the big meteor showers, or at eclipses and so on. Hale-Bopp was a big thing for us. But it's all 100% scientific: we watch what's real, and we celebrate it. We have fun.

The Atheist: How have atheists reacted to the Pantheist movement?

Paul: As I say, many atheists who have deep feelings for nature or awe for the Universe have actually joined us. Many well known atheists have also been pantheists: Lucretius had a pantheistic love for nature, Shelley was a pantheist, Carl Sagan was probably a pantheist of our type. John Toland, who invented the word pantheist, was an atheist.

I was very pleased the other day to see that the American Humanist Association has added us to their list of related movements. Other atheists just see the word pantheism and don't bother to read any further. Others again read on, but have problems with the religious vocabulary. In fact in our belief statement there is only a single religious word in the whole thing, when we say the Universe's "overwhelming power and fundamental mystery establish it as the only real divinity." It took us weeks to get this compromise.

Personally I feel that if we use no religious vocabulary, we will never appeal to anyone but those who are already atheists, whereas if we do, we may attract disenchanted Christians, Jews, and so on, who still feel a need for what they see as religion. I think that with a judicious use of a very limited number of carefully chosen religious words, we can actually rescue more folk from theism than we could without such use. Then again, many of us never ever let a single religious word pass their lips, and that's okay too.

In the end I think we will have two versions of the belief statement, one with a bit of religious vocabulary, and the other with none at all. But they will both mean the same thing.

The Atheist: What reaction have you received from theists?

Paul: Theists perceive us as atheistic heathens, because we attack the theistic religions on my pages and many others of our group. I personally love dismantling theist positions, especially Christian ones. Even so, there are literally millions of doubting disaffected Christians out there who are just looking for some positive religious alternative.

The Atheist: History tells us that movements, including religions, do not always end up as their originators intended. Given that Pantheism uses some religious words, what assurance can you give prospective members that the movement won't be taken over by theists?

Paul: That's why we have a belief statement that makes it plain that we do not believe in separate spirits or souls or after lives and that we believe that only matter/energy exists. We urge people to read this before they join. We have a constitution that requires the directors to sign the belief statement, and if they are found later to disagree with it, they have to resign. The odd theist might join us by mistake, but they could never get into a position of leadership. We are not going to the great trouble of setting all this up only to leave it open to takeover by its opposite, all the directors are adamant about that. Anyway with the sort of things we say, I really don't think theists would have any interest at all in joining us. Would they join the American Humanist Association in order to shift its message? I doubt it. The odd one that leaks into our mailing list usually leaves fairly quickly. They only have to look around to see what kind of company they're in.

The Atheist: I asked about the "hostile take-over" because I know it has actually happened here in America. Some parent group, originally out to stand up to the theocratic right ended up being taken over from the inside. Is there a strong evangelical movement in England right now? How do they compare to our American made rednecks?

Paul: I don't know this case, but we are aware of the risk and we will do everything in our power to frustrate takeovers. In the UK we have a lunatic religious fringe, but they are very much quieter than in the USA because we are now essentially a non-religious society where religious enthusiasm is viewed generally as a joke. However, three quarters of our group's 450 members come from the US, so they do have rednecks to contend with and are very affected by that.

The Atheist: Much of Pantheist philosophy reminds me of the Green Party platform. What political opinions are held by Pantheists?

Paul: Our general principles include reverence for nature and other species and efforts to live in harmony with nature. But we don't specify details. So our members include vegetarians, but also meat-eaters and even hunters, because you can make out a pantheistic case for either of these.

We have back-to-nature folk, and we have folk who believe passionately in colonizing space. As for politics more generally, we don't have rednecks or Nazis, but short of that the spectrum is pretty broad.

The Atheist: What about New Agers? I can see how your respect for all of nature might appeal to them. Have any tried to join and swing things in a supernatural direction?

Paul: We do occasionally get the odd New Ager joining and talking about ESP and reincarnation and near-death experiences. These people join by mistake -they just haven't read the description of our beliefs carefully. They don't get expelled from the mailing list for mentioning these ideas - we are supposed to be open-minded and in theory it is always possible for scientific evidence of ESP to harden. But it hasn't hardened yet, and posts like that usually provoke a lot of responses from our skeptics. As for New Agers trying to shift our direction, no. They can see which way the wind blows in our list. Once we have membership subscriptions, they will probably think twice before joining.

The Atheist: How important is the battle for state/church separation to pantheists?

Paul: As important as it is to atheists and minority religions in general. We would be solidly together in any battle for religious freedom. It is unacceptable that religious symbols should be put up in public places, or that religious doctrines should be taught in schools except as part of comparative study. It is intolerable that people can be hounded out of their jobs or neighbourhoods for not being Christian.

The Atheist: Are you working on getting Pantheism recognized as a bona fide religion for the purposes of taxes, performing marriages and funerals and such.

Paul: Yes. The World Pantheist Movement is incorporated as a religious charity in the State of Colorado, so we are tax-exempt. We will set up some sort of scheme where people can get someone to perform a pantheistic wedding or burial, if they can't design a ceremony of their own. This aspect is quite important - if you're not careful you can end up being buried with a Christian ceremony that would make you turn in your grave.

The Atheist: Do most pantheists maintain a skeptical view of the claims of alternative medicine?

Paul: We respect the findings of science, and science is finding that certain forms of alternative medicine can be very effective - acupuncture for example, or vitamin therapy. Most modern medicines were derived from herbs, so many herbs are effective. We know that the mind affects the immune system: the placebo effect can cure 40% of symptoms, so even "quack" systems, if they give the patient confidence they will get better, can sometimes work. But that doesn't mean we would endorse quackery.

The Atheist: In the commentary you wrote for your web site, you wrote: "Scientific pantheism does not believe that science will necessarily be able to explain everything in the universe." Are you saying that there are other ways than science to know about the universe, or that some mysteries of the universe just won't ever get solved?

Paul: Science is the only way to get solid reliable knowledge about the universe, but obviously there are other ways to "experience" the universe, through aesthetic appreciation of the Hubble pics, feelings of oneness with it all, and so on. I wasn't suggesting here that there is anything that is supernatural. What I meant there was that there will probably always be fundamental unanswerable mysteries or givens, the main one being: why does anything exist at all? We will never be able to answer that. I believe it is a meaningless question, but that won't stop anyone including myself from going on asking it.

The Atheist: I ask that because one thing I get from Christians is that "Well, your science is just one way of knowing about the universe." It is as if they have some secret path to knowledge that is valid, but is not science. What answer would you give then if asked why anything exists at all?

Paul: Our standard answer is probably very similar to the atheist answer: It just is. The question "Why?" amounts to asking: has the Universe a cause or a purpose? By definition the Universe includes all time and all space and so it cannot have a cause or a purpose external or prior to itself. If we find a possible cause before the big bang, that will still be part of the Universe or Multiverse - though maybe not of our local universe. It is part of our human nature to look for causes, but I argue that it is logically impossible for something that includes everything to have a cause. Theists accept that at least one thing has no cause - God. We say: so why can't the universe have no cause?

The Atheist: I have found, much to my surprise, that a number of atheists do not accept the big bang model. It seems that some atheists see the entire theory as a theist plot to introduce the idea of a creator. Most of the non-big bang atheists seem to accept the plasma cosmology model. Does this subject come up much in Pantheist discussions? What are your thoughts on this?

Paul: I think it is risky to reject a scientific theory simply because you think it doesn't fit your theology - or anti-theology. After all, that is why the Vatican resisted Copernicus and Darwin for so long. In our group we keep an open mind as to which way theory will go in future. There is pretty good scientific evidence for the big bang theory - it predicts the temperature of the cosmic background radiation, the exact distribution of elements in the universe, and the recession of galaxies. I don't think the people who dreamed it up had any religious agenda in mind. It just fits the evidence better than the rival steady state theory.

One can see why the Big Bang appeals to the Pope and others. But it shouldn't. It contradicts the Bible flatly, and if you admit it you admit that Genesis is not literal - and that raises questions about Adam and Eve and the Fall, and therefore about Jesus and salvation. It threatens the whole structure of Christian belief, just as Darwin does. And it is a very risky way of starting off a universe that will end up producing intelligent or human life. If everything started off as a microscopic dot, you would have very little certainty about how it would turn out. If you were a God wanting to be sure to create an intelligent species, is that how you would start?

Personally I am attracted to the inflation theory of Alan Guth and Andrei Linde. Linde assumes that our local universe is just one bubble of an eternal and infinite set of universes that is continually throwing up new universes, and one or more of these are more or less bound to be suitable for life. Then there is Lee Smolin (The Life of the Cosmos) who believes that new universes bud off old ones through black holes. Then there would be a natural selection process which favoured universes producing black holes - and these would also be suitable for life.

The Atheist: Years ago, I read about the Gaia hypothesis; the idea that the earth can be thought of as a living organism. How does a Pantheist react to this idea?

Paul: Well some pantheists go all the way with this idea and build Gaia up into a living superorganism or a Goddess. Scientific pantheists, as always, try look at the science more carefully. To me the basics of the hypothesis are fairly clearly established: namely that living organisms evolve so as to regulate the earth's atmosphere, climate and so on so

they are generally hospitable to life. It's all done by normal processes of natural selection, there's no superorganism or supernatural involved. But there are limits: the Gaia mechanism can't fend off ice ages, it can't stop meteorites hitting us and wiping out 70% of species, and so on. I prefer to see Gaia as a community of living beings, more like a super-ecosystem than a super-organism. But that too has its religious aspect: it creates a closer feeling of mutual interdependence. Nature is not just something beautiful to look at: it keeps us alive, too.

The Atheist: I imagine that the internet is a part-of-the-universe send to the Scientific Pantheist cause. How widespread is the movement?

Paul: Without the Internet we could not have got going. Our current e-mail group has been going properly only since December and is 450 strong, with people in 30 countries, and growing by 50-70 people a month. We will shortly be opening for subscribing members. There is the smaller Universal Pantheist Society, with around 120 members. On top of that there are many rational pagans there who believe the same as us but are pagan for lack of an alternative. Taoists, many Zen Buddhists, perhaps a third to a half of Unitarian Universalists, deep ecologists, plus atheists and humanists with a deep feeling for nature or the night sky, all believe basically the same as us. I would guess that potential pantheists of our scientific type in the West would number into many millions, but of course they have yet to hear of it.

The Atheist: Are any Pantheists currently involved in any legal disputes over any aspect of Pantheism?

Paul: Not that I know of.

The Atheist: What are your hopes for the future of Pantheism?

Paul: My hope are specifically for the scientific type of pantheism, I don't have any hopes for pantheisms that believe in reincarnation, magic and so on. I hope that in a few hundred years it will be the second largest religion in the West. And hopefully not too long after that it will be the main religion in the West. It may happen sooner than that, as better education makes people more critical and less willing to accept dogma and scripture just because their parents did. I hope that the human race will have "come of age," grown up from its infantile fantasies, faced up to reality and accepted just how fantastic nature and the Universe are. Who needs more? Next to reality, any idea of a theist God is just a pale shadow.

The Atheist: What books, websites, or discussion groups are out there for those interested in learning more about Pantheism.

Paul: Books are very thin on the ground. There is Pantheism by Michael Levine if you can afford \$80 and want an academic text. I'm just writing a cheap pocket book "The Elements of Pantheism" for Element Books, which will cost about \$10. Then of course there are the classic authors, but only Spinoza is widely available and he is not much to my taste. There is the Universal Pantheist Society <http://users.aol.com/pansociety/index.html> but they are open to all types of pantheist including New Agers, reincarnationists, and even a few theists. My site on Scientific Pantheism (<http://members.aol.com/Heraklit1/index.htm>) is the biggest pantheist site on the Web, with a lot of history and theory and practice plus forms to join us.

The Atheist: Thank you for the interview. I think that it is important for non-theists of all types to learn from each other and cooperate whenever possible. I also agree that we shouldn't let theists get away with labeling us as negative, just because we cannot believe in their god. The universe really is an amazing place.

Paul: I have enjoyed this. I hope you will keep in touch!

Gott Mit Uns!

As a science teacher, I am very concerned by the amount of supernatural mumbo-jumbo that goes on in the public schools. At many junior highs, high schools and colleges, there is a chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Now this organization is over thirty years old, but it has taken on a new dimension since 1990. Every September, FCA groups help sponsor See You at the Pole rallies. During a SYATP rally, students gather around the flag pole to attempt to conjure up supernatural help for our country.

This may seem harmless enough, but I think it is important to look just a little closer. As Steve Majeski recently posted on our ACA e-mail discussion group, SYATP is backed by some real heavies in the theocratic right. Steve snipped this from an American Family Assoc. "Action Alert" update...

"More than 3 million teenagers are expected to pray on their campuses before school on September 16 observing the eighth annual See You at the Pole—National Day of Student Prayer. . . See You at the Pole is a student-initiated and student-led movement that began in Texas in 1990 with a single church youth group.

The visibility of See You at the Pole—with so many teenagers participating in the event—has led to a greater awareness among adults of the problems students face at their schools every day. In response, thousands of churches are expected to recognize and pray for Christian students and educators in their services, September 12-13, the weekend before See You at the Pole."

The policy book that school districts follow explicitly states that religious clubs may meet if the school is a limited public forum, and certain conditions are met. Included in this list of conditions; "Meetings must be voluntary and student initiated." Now, I work with kids every day, and for the life of me I can't see them organizing anything on a national scale without a lot of help from adults. SYATP and FCA are about as student initiated as the TAAS test.

These rallies are not about a bunch of Christian kids getting together to meet each other. The "recognition of Christian students" discussed by the AFA is really just another recruitment tool for the theocrats. Future Ralph Reeds can now be identified as early as the seventh grade. The SYATP web site (<http://www.syatp.com>) was certainly marked by the sign of the theocrats. Links to legal help include the American Center for Law and Justice, and the Rutherford Institute.

As for FCA itself, lets take a look at what they promote (<http://www.citynet.net/fcawv/index.html>) In their question and answer section, they encourage children to reject science, toleration and reason:

"Question: A good friend of mine has AIDS and I'm struggling with whether this is God's judgment or not. Can you help me?"

Answer: The Bible teaches there were no diseases in Eden. But when Adam and Eve sinned, part of God's judgment was to curse the ground. . . So, indeed, AIDS is a judgment of God against sinners. But so is every other form of illness! . . . Suffice it to say then that all illness is because we live in a sinful, abnormal world."

Question: How should I as a Christian regard a homosexual?

Answer: The Bible gives two very clear statements about homosexuality. 1. It is a sin. The old testament saw it as a sin demanding capital punishment. New Testament words say: "indecent..abandoning the natural function.. burning in desire..strange..depraved..not proper.." 2. Homosexuals can be converted from homosexuality.

Well, there you have it. While teachers try to promote critical thinking, tolerance, and an understanding of germ theory, evangelical Christians sabotage their efforts at every opportunity. ~John Koontz A Quote to put on your refrigerator

"Those to whom intellectual freedom is personally important may be a minority in the community, but among them are the men of most importance to the future. We have seen the importance of Copernicus, Galileo, and Darwin in the history of mankind, and it is not to be

supposed that the future will produce no more such men. If they are prevented from doing their work and having their due effect, the human race will stagnate, and a new Dark Age will succeed, as the earlier Dark Age succeeded the brilliant period of antiquity. New truth is often uncomfortable, especially to the holders of power; nevertheless, amid the long record of cruelty and bigotry, it is the most important achievement of our intelligent but wayward species."

Bertrand Russell

Book Review

I have finally discovered the perfect gift in case I am ever asked to a first communion or Bar Mitzvah. *All About Adam and Eve; How We Came to Believe in Gods, Demons, Miracles, & Magical Rites* by Robert J. Gillooly is the book that would go on educating long after the festivities are over. In it, Gillooly compares Christianity to the primitive religions from which it was derived. It's just not easy to take Christianity seriously when you understand how the religion came to be. The book is divided into chapters that examine ideas common to most religions. These ideas include; prophecy, priests, holy books magic, prayer, sacrifice, miracles, communion, baptism, circumcision, exorcism, asceticism, the soul, and, belief in an afterlife. Gillooly concludes with a survey comparing the beliefs of theologians with those of anthropologists.

In his chapter on priests, the history of a vocation is discussed: "At first the gods were controlled by magic. Humans believed that spells and charms could compel the gods to act in a certain way, but over the centuries it became apparent that the gods would not be intimidated, so humans changed their approach to entreaty, or religion. When magic turned into religion, the magicians turned into priests." And so, religion was born.

And what better way to start a life of religion than with a baptism? The only question is, which religion should one choose? As Gillooly points out, there are many choices, but little difference in substance. To illustrate his point he refers to two baptismal prayers developed by people in total isolation from one another:

A Christian prayer: "Almighty and everlasting God, who of thy great mercy didst save Noah and his family in the ark from perishing by water; and also didst safely lead the children of Israel thy people through the red Sea, figuring thereby the Holy baptism; and by the Baptism of thy well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ, in the river Jordan, didst, sanctify Water to the mystical washing away of sin; We beseech thee, for thine infinite mercies, that thou wilt mercifully look upon this Child; wash him and sanctify him with the Holy Ghost. . . ." Compare this from the book of common prayer to:

And an Aztec prayer: "Merciful Lady Chalchiuhtlicue, thy servant here present is come into the world . . . wash him and deliver him from impurities. . . . cleanse him of the contamination he hath received from his parents: let the water take away the soil and the stain, and let him be freed from all taint. May it please thee, O Goddess, that his heart and his sole be purified, that he may dwell in this world in peace and wisdom. May this water take away all ills . . . wash from him the evils which he beareth from before the beginning of the world."

It struck me that it would be possible to assemble a composite non-Christian religion that would still contain many familiar customs. For example; after being baptized by an Aztec, a devoutly religious person could then travel to the land down under. There, he could have his foreskin cut off, dipped in the fat of a wild dog and used to produce rain. As to which creation myth to believe, he might choose the 8th century BCE Greek report that "men in the most ancient times were 'a golden race' who lived like gods without care- but then came Pandora, the first woman, who opened a box bidden by divine command to remain closed, and let loose a torrent of troubles into the world." And when our imaginary person reaches the proper age to take his first communion, he may follow . . . "The Aryans of ancient India (who) believed in the conversion of bread into the flesh of a human being long before the spread of Christianity. In this case, the Brahmans believed that rice cakes could be offered in sacrifice and were real substitutes for human beings." And if our religious friend finds himself possessed by evil spirits, he may turn to some Taoist and Buddhist priests to beat drums, burn incense and spit streams of water in the four cardinal directions. Of course many modern religious people frown on the practice of exorcism, but as Gillooly reminds us: "The issue is larger than a single religious rite, of course, because it bears on a fundamental aspect of religion: a *raison d'être* of religion is the existence of evil spirits and the ability of the Church to control them. If evil spirits no longer have to be taken into account, then religion stands to lose much of its former value for men and women." Quite so.

This book is an excellent source to support the proposition that Christianity cannot be taken any more seriously than any other religion. If this book were required reading in public school, students would get much needed lessons in history and comparative religion. For atheists interested in learning something about world religions, this book would be a great introduction. For agnostics, and those theists harboring doubts about their religion, *All About Adam and Eve; is as dangerous a book, as can be found.*

~John koonz

All About Adam and Eve; How We Came to Believe in Gods, Demons, Miracles, & Magical Rites by Robert J. Gillooly was published by Prometheus Books. 1998.

Announcements

- The next ACA Board meeting will be on October 11 at 11:30 at the Bagelry. Board meetings are open to all members.

- Vic Farrow has taken over the role of Keeper of the ACA Library. Please contact him if you have a book or video already checked out as he is trying to account for everything.
- October 4 11:00 Lecture Series will be at Furr's Cafeteria, Northcross Mall, 11:00. Our guest speaker will be .Dr. Arthur F. Ide, author of Unholy Rollers: Televangelism and the Selling of Jesus, Unzipped: The Popes Bare All, Robertson!: The Pulpit and the Power, and Battered and Bruised: All the Women of the Old Testament.
- October 17 10:00 - 2:00 Blood Drive at the Central Texas Regional Blood Center at 4300 North Lamar. Local atheists will be able to draw from the ACA account for up to a year. At this point we only have 4 pints, so don't do anything dangerous. Please consider donating, especially if you have a rare blood type .
- ACA Advertisement Ray Blevins, our treasurer, is taking donations for an ad to be placed in the Austin American-Statesman. The cost for this ad will be about \$300. If you can help us reach this goal, send your check to ACA P.O. box 3798 Austin, TX 78764.
- Products Godless dollars will be available soon. Cost will be about \$1.50. See Sue Osborne for more information on this and other exciting atheist products.
- Randalls Donations Randalls will donate a percentage of the money you spend there to the Atheist Community of Austin. To take advantage of this offer, contact the customer service department of your nearest Randalls. The ACA number is 5158.
- Weekly Meetings Sunday Mornings at Hot Jumbo Bagelry, 307 West 5th Street at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings when lectures are not scheduled at Furr's Cafeteria.
- For more information about any of these coming events, call (512) 371-2911 or e-mail tankgirl@swbell.net

Your ACA board of directors:

Co-chairs: Don Rhoades Kellen Von Houser

Treasurer: Ray Blevins

Secretary: Ray Blevins

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

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION FOR THE ATHEIST COMMUNITY OF AUSTIN, INC.

Last name: _____

First name: _____

Companion's name (if family or couple membership)

Last name: _____

First name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Telephone : (____) _____

e-mail address: _____

This is to certify that I am a non-theist, that I have read the "Purpose" of the Atheist Community of Austin, Inc. as stated in the Constitution (below), and that I am in agreement with the principles stated herein. I understand that membership is open only to non-theists.

Purpose

The Atheist Community of Austin is organized as a nonprofit educational corporation to develop and support atheist community; to provide opportunities for socializing and friendship, to promote atheist viewpoints, to encourage positive atheist culture, to defend the First Amendment principle of state/church separation, to oppose discrimination against atheists, and to work with other organizations in pursuit of common goals. This organization shall operate in an open, democratic manner, without discrimination as to gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, nationality, or disability. The Bylaws to this Constitution are intended to further define and explain the operating procedure of this organization. Changes may be made to the Bylaws when necessary to improve the operation of this organization. Changes to the Bylaws shall not alter the purpose of this organization as set forth in its Constitution.

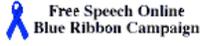
Check all that apply § I wish to become a member of the Atheist Community of Austin, Inc. Membership fees are \$24.00 per year, but our membership year does not begin until the 1st of March. My prorated membership fee, at \$2.00 per month until next March, is enclosed. § I wish to make a tax exempt donation to ACA . § I only wish to participate in the e-mail group. My e-mail address is above. No fee is required. § I wish to help ACA save money by receiving The Atheist by e-mail. No fee is required.

Signature: _____ Date: _____ Signature:

_____ Date: _____

Please return this form to: Atheist Community of Austin, Inc., P.O. Box 3798, Austin, Texas 78764

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