

# The Atheist

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization

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## **Memories of Madison, The 1998 Convention of the FFR**

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's annual convention was held this year in the organization's hometown of Madison, Wisconsin. After registering on Friday, October 16th, many freethinkers attended a mixer at Freethought Hall, the foundation's headquarters. Here we had the opportunity to see the group's offices and small but excellent library. Afterwards, many of us walked to Minona Center, a new convention facility which was designed over 40 years ago by Frank Lloyd Wright. Tours were available of the impressive structure which extends out over Lake Minona, and in which almost every surface except the floor is curved or circular. FFRF expects to host many conventions through the next century at this location.

Friday evening at the Edgewater Hotel, FFRF president Anne Nicole Gaylor presented awards to a number of people. The "Freethinker of the Year" award was shared by the victorious plaintiffs in the Foundation's successful lawsuit challenging Wisconsin's Good Friday law, which mandated that public servants be given time off on Good Friday for the purpose of worship! The new "Emperor Has No Clothes" Award went to Chuck Reinders for being a local plaintiff in a suit against a religious shrine in a public park. Winners of this award are presented with a statue of a jolly, rotund monarch wearing only a crown. The Dixie Jokensen Student Activist Award went to University of Alabama student Adam Butler. Butler impressed those present with his stories of what it's like to be a Freethinker in Alabama. The Freethought Heroine Award went to Mary Kait Durkee, the Glendale, California high school student who was forced to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance. Mary Kait is an atheist, and a clear favorite of the crowd, which rewarded her acceptance speech with a standing ovation. Friday night concluded with a Freethought concert by Dan Barker, who introduced some new tunes now available on cassette. A favorite of mine is "Benediction":

"Pride goeth, so the christians say, before a mighty fall. But me, I've never felt that way, I never stand so tall As when I say, I'm proud to be, an atheist, oh yes! It helps me stand for so much more, and fall for so much less!" Barker is a superb singer and pianist, and his concerts are a real treat. I brought home some of the Foundation' cassettes and thoroughly enjoy listening to them.

Saturday we heard from attorney Jeffrey Kassel, who spoke on religious school vouchers and the looming possibility that in the near future, public schools will be stripped of funds and resources in order to enrich private religious institutions. Dr. Stanley Kutler agreed. In a humorous and entertaining talk, then University of Wisconsin professor took a historical "big picture" look at state/church separation and the school voucher battle. Dr. Kutler saved some of his choicest barbs for Chief Justice William Rehnquist, whom he described as "a stunningly brilliant jurist, who is totally devoid of intellectual honesty." Attorney Rick Ganulin explained his lawsuit which is challenging Christmas' status as a federal holiday. A fair number of the atheists and other freethinkers present were not that supportive of his efforts. Catherine Fahringer of San Antonio gave everyone an update on the Comfort cenotaph struggle. She ended with an accapela version of "Rock of Sages", her tribute to the great stone and the ideals it represents.

Saturday night's keynote speaker was Dr. Edward Larson, author of the 1998 Pulitzer Prize winning book *Summer of the Gods; The Scopes Trial in History and Legend*. Dr. Larson compared what we saw in the movie "Inherit the

Wind" with the sometimes surprising true story of the trial and its participants. For example, Scopes was not the real biology teacher, but as a single man and newcomer, he had less to lose than the real one did. And the town fathers of Dayton, Tennessee, far from being outraged at the teaching of evolution, merely saw an opportunity to boost their town's future when they found the ACLU's newspaper ad seeking a test case against the new law.

In all, this was an excellent event in the scenic city between two lakes. The leaves were turning and the weather was delightful. Anne Nicole Gaylor, her daughter Annie Laurie, and Annie Laurie's husband Dan Barker are truly some of the nicest people you could ever want to meet, and they know how to throw a pretty good convention. I encourage all atheists and other freethinkers to attend FFRF's 1999 convention in San Antonio next November. But first, please plan to be in Austin Easter weekend for the 1999 Freethought Roundup!, the national convention of the Atheist Alliance. ~Don Rhoades "The Evidence For and Against the Existence of God."

The University Skeptical Society conducted this debate on November 20, from 7 to 9 pm followed by an hour of questions from the audience. The debate was conducted via formal debate rules and the audience was approximately 265.

Four students represented the University Skeptical Society in debating 'against the existence of god' and two students and one University Philosophy Professor, Associate Professor Robert Koons, were debating 'for the existence of ' their particular Christian God, as contrasted with other views, Hinduism, etc. The professor and his team used view graphs, reportedly from one of the professors classes. With a professional leading team, they were dramatically better prepared and rehearsed. From a "debate evaluation standard" they were the clear victors. If you consider the professional imbalance, the student skeptics did fairly well. Since you're already familiar with skeptical arguments, only the "pro-team" presentation is summarized below.

The first set of basic arguments were presented by the two "pro-team" students using the professor's classroom overhead viewgraphs. The basic Pro-team Arguments were:

1. The Cosmological or Contingent argument: all events have a cause, the big bang has a cause - that cause is God;
2. The Anthropic Design argument: life could not exist if the cosmological constants deviated from their existing values (i.e. the gravitational constant, the permittivity constant, the permeability constant, the speed of light, etc). If the various forces had different values organic molecules could not form, therefore, the physical constants have taken anthropic values. The counter argument of many parallel universes is intuitively and inherently flawed.
3. Reality and, hence, scientific realism is fundamentally based on a theistic BELIEF SYSTEM.
4. Reason and purpose come from outside of us and are not derived from the material world, but come, instead, from the supernatural. (Descartes' duality, counting numbers, thought, ethics, etc. are not based on the material world.)
5. "The most poignant reason of all": Jesus said so; and, that has significance and validity for numerous reasons. For example, he rose from the dead and this was witnessed by many including a group of some 500 as reported in an indisputable historical reference, the Bible. Pro-team Rebuttal: (the professor with some of his class room overheads) God operates in the infinite and we are finite. The operational meaning differs in their respective domains. Apart from Jesus, there is no compelling evidence of God's love. Opponents generally express the problem of evil in the following way:
  1. If God exists, he is wholly good.
  2. Then he would actualize the best world.
  3. Then he would maximize good.
  4. The optimal good implies no evil.
  5. An omnipotent God could actualize any kind of world.
  6. Evil exists.

7. Therefore, god doesn't.

Premises 2, 3, 4, and 5 are invalid; consequently, their conclusion is invalid. On the issue of Prayer, God has self imposed constraints. In addition to the soul, propositions, property concepts, numbers, etc, all beneficial biological attributes such as mouths, arms, plants, air, as well as the physical constants argue for supernatural design. Sixty percent of biologists believe evolution is God created. Reality is intelligible because of God.

Pro-team Closing Arguments: Prof. Koons: All events have causes including the Big Bang. There is no rebuttal to that. There is also no challenge to the anthropic design of the cosmological constants.

2nd pro-team student: The bible clearly is historic and the implication that Jesus is a myth is so irrational as to not warrant response. ~Reported by L Wigginton

No Universal Automaton for Us

Here's one criticism I have of the creationists' universe. Aside from the fact that it just ain't so, I mean. I tell people I don't accept the idea that there's anything supernatural, but there's also another dimension there. The created cosmos is ugly, poorly constructed and patched together, lacking in depth or size. It extends but a few thousand years past and future. Rather than brought into existence out of the very substance of the world, life is imposed by some external entity, forever foreign and out of place. The sufferings of creatures are meaningless to them and evil because they are imposed by a being who doesn't have to do that. Far from uplifting, since you aren't supposed to ask too much, the created universe is crass and materialistic, without subtlety or continuity, much like an automated amusement park in which turning your head at the wrong time shows the wires leading to the animals' feet and the wooden beams propping up the hollow rocks. Dead, false, dull. Unaesthetic.

David C Morrow.

### **Book Review**

In the decades since his death, many of Mark Twain's writings have been reorganized into common themes such as protests (The Damned Human Race, In Eruption, Weapons of Satire, and A Pen Warmed-Up In Hell), speeches, short stories and sketches, and full works of fiction in larger volumes. A recent welcome edition to these is *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, published in 1995 by Simon & Schuster under their Touchstone division, and edited by Howard G. Baetzhold and Joseph B. McCullough. It includes diaries of Adam, Eve, and other Old Testament characters, various speculations on what Heaven might be like (including Captain Stormfield's), some autobiographical dictation's, a few pieces that appear in print for the first time, and, of course, Letters From the Earth.

It also contains too many of the editor's notes that plague most of Twain's posthumous releases. Here, notes take up 50 of the book's first 260 pages (10 more are blank). Why do editors feel compelled to insert their version of Twain's autobiography before every entry? If they must share this information with readers, they can do so at the start or the end of the book, without interrupting Twain's far superior writing. Granted, some of the details are worth knowing: Twain read Paine's *Age of Reason* while piloting riverboats. This helped shape his views toward Christianity. But other statements are extremely irritating: "...we have omitted the five-and-a-half page attack on the concept of the virgin birth (mistakenly referred to as the immaculate conception) because that discussion is not closely related to the writings in this volume." Yes it is! Claims like this make me wonder what else is missing. The rest of Twain's writings on religion need a book of their own, WITHOUT the gratuitous editorial comments.

I'll let Twain have the last word:

"From the beginning of time, whenever a king has lain dangerously ill, the priesthood and some part of the nation have prayed in unison that the king be spared to his grieving and anxious people (in case they were grieving and anxious, which was not usually the rule) and in no instance was their prayer ever answered. When Mr. Garfield lay

near to death, the physicians and surgeons knew that nothing could save him, yet at an appointed signal all the pulpits in the United States broke forth with one simultaneous and supplicating appeal for the President's restoration to health. They did this with the same old innocent confidence with which the primeval savage had prayed to his imaginary devils to spare his perishing chief -- for that day will never come when facts and experience can teach a pulpit anything useful. Of course the President died, just the same."

~Reviewed by John Rush

### **Riverboat Ayatollahs**

When your eyes tire of reading or watching a computer screen and the boob tube beckons, just tune your TV to TNN (Austin Time-Warner channel sixty-six,) There, at the right time, you can find Paul and Jan Crouch. What an ridiculous pair of religious hucksters! Paul is a graying fellow in his fifties, plenty of hair or plenty of wig, I know not which. He is usually dressed in a style reminiscent of the late pianist, Liberace. Typically, he wears a jacket or sports shirt with a discreet sprinkling of spangles and sequins, open collar, no tie, in the manner of a 'rhinestone cowboy.' Jan, his wife, is a pretty woman of late middle age, with a long gray wig, or big hair, beautifully curled. Her voice is sweet, ultra feminine with the cadence and emphasis of a woman talking to a small child. Truly, a voice eminently suitable for reading fairy stories to four year olds. If he is the personification of a riverboat gambler in a film of the fifties, she could pass for a successful madam in an expensive brothel in films of the same genre. The set is pure New Orleans whorehouse as so depicted. Damask curtains, Louis XVI chairs, sofas, a crystal chandelier worthy of the palace at Versailles and an elaborate staircase complete the setting. If one could add a few scantily clad nubile wenches, but I digress.

There are accompanied by a succession of men and women of negligible charm and ample corpulence who preach and sing as required. Mercifully, there is precious little theology. Most of the discussion is on the inauguration of the most recent radio and television stations which they have opened in foreign lands. To hear them talk, their supporters are increasing to the point where they will soon outnumber the Chinese. They are sweet and peaceful now, but give them enough power and we will have some home grown ayatollahs! ~Harry Quinlan

And The Survey Says: Here's an answer given to one of our web site survey questions: Q. Where are morals derived from?:

A. I consider myself an ethical person. I derive my system of ethics from my experiences. I have a rational or practical reason for the values I choose to live by. For example, I choose not to drink alcohol. A religious person might base this decision the fact that their religion forbids the use of alcohol. My practical reasons are that there are alcoholics in my family and I don't wish to become one myself.

### **A Solstice Book Review**

Shortly after her marriage at 17, Helena Petrovna (Hahn) Blavatsky left her husband for a life of adventure. Ten years later medium Daniel Home taught her the secrets of spiritualism, which she attempted to practice in Russia and in Cairo, with little success. Hearing that seances were in vogue in America, she migrated in the 1870s, only to discover the fashion was passing. She then formed a new religion, which she called theosophy, based on the ancient wisdom of Tibet." She claimed guides aged 10,000 or so years old had harbored her there for seven years, disclosing secret underground libraries containing a million volumes, from one of which she was allowed to copy secret teachings. She enjoyed such great success that she released a barrage of revelatory letters transmitted instantaneously from her sages Morya and Hoot Koomi, who mysteriously affixed their spirit seals to each letter. At her death in 1891, her associate William Q. Judge carried on until his death in 1894, when a search of his desk revealed the rubber stamps used to imprint the mystical seals. At her peak, Madame Blavatsky developed a following of about 100,000, with such exciting revelations as that Jesus Christ had been the wife of Julius Caesar in a previous incarnation. The fraud became so obvious that by 1915 membership fell to about 70,000 and dwindled to about 5,000 worldwide in 1950.

Because of this embarrassment, however, today's Theosophical Society in America devotes its entire energy to

publishing reliable studies of “religion, philosophy, and science,” in an attempt to regain its credibility. Fresh off the press, theosophy’s Quest Books has published *The Winter Solstice*, a well-researched summary of the pagan origins of every aspect of the festive celebration now called Christmas. For example, we know whose birth was attended by shepherds, who took a last supper with his followers, who observed the return to his father with a communion of bread and wine, who was believed to have died but to have ascended to heaven, whence it was believed he would return to raise the dead for a final judgment. That person was Mithras, a Persian-Greek-Roman deity worshipped in this way centuries before the time of “Jesus Christ”. Or recall the image of the good shepherd with a sheep draped across his shoulders? The image was lifted from the earlier worship of Apollo. Christianity is plainly shown to have no original element to it, deriving from the age-old celebration of the Unconquerable Sun’s yearly victory over the forces of darkness which we know as the Winter Solstice. John Matthews reports various styles of celebrating this event in cultures from around the world, from 5000 years ago to the present, as solstitial revels are beginning to supplant the restrictions the Christian religion has tried to impose on it. The book is filled with suggestions for celebrating the season, from Mummers’ Plays, recipes, games, and other revelry intended to ring in the promise of life in the new year. The book is lavishly illustrated and easy to read, one I recommend for any atheist’s library. That such a fine study should have emanated from her scheme to fleece the suckers would leave that old chain-smoking dragon Madame Blavatsky at a loss for words.

John Matthews, *The Winter Solstice* (Wheaton, Illinois, and Chennai, India: Quest Books, 1998), pbk, 250 pp, \$19.95 from Quality Paperback Book club, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania ~Reviewed by David L. Kent

**Affiliation Vote**

In a special meeting, held at the Austin History center on December 6, the membership of the Atheist Community of Austin voted to not affiliate with American Atheists. It was also decided that we should send Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, a letter explaining some reasons given by members for voting against affiliation. Here is the letter:

Dear Ms. Johnson,

This afternoon, members of the Atheist Community of Austin voted against a proposal to affiliate with American Atheists. After the vote, we decided to communicate to you the results, describe some of the concerns raised during the discussion, and express our support of AA. There was also widespread agreement that ACA would be willing to reconsider the issue of affiliation at a later time.

During the discussion, some ACA members expressed concerns about AA's corporate structure, particularly the lack of membership democracy. Some members expressed uncertainty about AA's future direction, and therefore about the nature of the organization with which ACA would be affiliating. Also, we have created an identity for ACA as an independent, local organization that happens to be located in the same city as AAGHQ; and while AA is about to move, some members felt it was too soon to take an action that might be seen as blurring that distinction.

We appreciate the hard work AA has done and is doing on behalf of atheists. Many of ACA's members belong to AA as well, and we will continue to support AA's activities for the good of atheists everywhere.

Yours in atheism, Don W. Rhoades, Co-coordinator Atheist Community of Austin 4 1999 Freethought Roundup!

The 5th Annual Convention of the Atheist Alliance will be at the Downtown OMNI Hotel, Austin, Texas April 2-4, 1999. You wont want to miss this exciting event. Please fill out the following and return it as soon as possible.

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y/n I am interested in taking a chartered bus to Comfort, Texas on Sunday afternoon. (Comfort was settled by 19th century German Freethinkers, and is the current site of the Cenotaph controversy.)

\_\_\_ Registration(s) @ \$50 per person \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_ Saturday luncheon(s) @ \$25 per person \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_ Saturday night banquet @ \$35 per person \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
# \_\_\_ Vegetarian meals, please.  
\_\_\_ Friday night "Esther's Follies" @ \$16 per person \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Total \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please make checks payable to "ACA Roundup Committee".

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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 John Koonz Arval Bohn Ralph Shirley Joe Zamecki

### **Announcements**

- The Life of Brian party was a huge success. Thanks, Sue!
- ACA Board meetings Board meetings are open to all members. The next one is at 12:00 on January 10th. Earle Beech has resigned from the ACA board. On December 13, the ACA board selected Jim Hallamek to replace Earle. The membership will have an opportunity to approve (or disapprove) of his appointment at the meeting at Furr's on January 3rd. Jim is tentatively scheduled to be on The Atheist Experience that day defending evolution education against the dark forces of ignorance and superstition.
- Our Lecture Series continues on January 3 with a panel discussion on Atheist Parenting, or Rearing Atheist Children. Lectures are held at Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall, 11:00 am.
- Humanist & Freethought Conference on Saturday, January 23, 1999, in Arlington, Texas. If you are interested, contact Frank Prah (281) 479-6829; or Dick Nelson (972) 980-7706 Email [frankprahl@earthlink.net](mailto:frankprahl@earthlink.net)
- Our next Blood Drive is on Saturday January 23rd at the Texas Regional Blood Center, North Lamar. They're open 8am-2pm. Please consider donating, especially if you have a rare blood type .
- Products There are a few t-shirts left. Our ACA t-shirts come in two types. One lists a number of famous atheists, the other lists 10 reasons why beer is better than jeezuss. See Don Rhodes for more information. 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 [atheist@atheist-community.org](mailto:atheist@atheist-community.org)

**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