

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization

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Ask Not What Your Atheist Community Can Do For You . . .

The annual election for positions on the board of directors of the Atheist Community of Austin will be held at 11:00 AM on the 2nd of May at Furr's Cafeteria. A number of board members, including Kellen Von Houser and Don Rhoades, will be stepping down. ACA needs a few good atheists to take their places. In order to be on the board of directors, you must have been a member for six months prior to the election. If you would like to be nominated, or you would like to nominate someone else, please call the ACA voice mail at **371-2911**, or contact Kellen Von Houser at kellenvh@earthlink.net.

Wow!



Dr. Arthur Ide signs a book for an excited Catherine Fahringer

Photo by Rodney Florence

On April 2-4, ACA successfully hosted Freethought Roundup, the annual convention of the Atheist Alliance. Mary Sue Osbornes' plan for spending Friday evening at Esther Follies was brilliant. The comedians were hilarious, often making fun of various aspects of religion. A co-worker, who had been in the audience that night, later told me that "All those atheists looked so smart, like they all had PhDs or something."

Saturday's workshops covered topics from pseudoscience to the bible in the bedroom. I gave my "Teaching Evolution to a Hostile Audience" talk. Of course this group was far from hostile, and I was impressed by the intelligent questions that were asked.

I especially enjoyed the banquet which provided an opportunity for atheists from all over America to socialize. Having arrived late, I got to sit next to Dan Barker during the meal. Dan spoke to the group about his experiences and sang some of his Freethought songs. He really is as pleasant as he seems, and my only regret was that he did not have more time to talk.

The convention ended with a panel discussion on Positive Atheism. In some ways I found this to be the most important event. There was some debate over the role of "being nice" versus being outspoken. The general consensus seemed to be that there are many ways to further our cause in a positive way. For example, one group balanced their protest of the Boy Scouts with an offer to finance any troop that would like to continue activities without excluding atheists. Those groups with cable television shows stressed how successful they have been in attracting new members and educating the public. When the subject of protest marches came up, it was pointed out that our relatively small groups do much better when they join with others.



Dan Barker of the Freedom From Religion Foundation

Photo by Rodney Florence

Our convention was not without its controversy, however. While many atheists see some value in the church model proposed by the North Texas Church of Freethought, not everyone agrees. If you would like more information, John Rush has written a pamphlet titled: "Real Atheists Don't Attend Church". Send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to P. O. Box 4154, Austin, TX 78765 A fact-finding mission to the NTCOF is being organized for early June by Jeff Dee. Details will be announced in the next issue.



Vic Farrow accepts an award given to groups with cable access shows.

Don Rhoades and Atheist Alliance president Marie Alena Castle

Photos by Rodney Florence

The convention was made possible by the hard work of a number of volunteers including; Don Rhoades, Sue Osborne, Vic Farrow, Keith Berka, and many others. A special thank you to Mark Sadegi of Compu Signs (632 North Lamar) for donating both the ACA banner, and the Freethought Roundup banner. These were designed by Rodney Florence. 

~ John Koonz

Alliance Board Debates Dues

On Friday, April 2nd, the board of the Atheist Alliance, after much thought and an entire

afternoon of discussion, posturing, and deliberating, elected to eliminate the \$125 yearly dues which had been required of member organizations in the past. This was the result of a motion presented by Joe Zemel, the Alliance's webmaster and a member of Atheist Outreach. The motion was heavily supported by members of Atheist Outreach, as well as several members of the Alliance board. The representatives of Atheists United, Bobbie Kirkhart and Jon Nelson as well as some members of the Alliance comprised the opposition.

Reasons given for reducing the dues were:

- 1) Smaller groups which cannot afford \$125 per year are being excluded.
- 2) In the past, a reason given by groups for not joining was that the benefits from belonging to the Alliance were not worth \$125.
- 3) Dues have historically only contributed approximately \$1500 per year in revenue, not enough to warrant blocking small groups the opportunity to participate.
- 4) The Alliance is woefully undermanned. "New blood" is needed to help do the work, and to contribute new ideas.

Reasons given for maintaining the dues (or adopting a different dues structure) were:

- 1) Groups should make some commitment to the Alliance before being given a vote in the Alliance's affairs.
- 2) Cottage industries will join the Alliance only for the purpose of marketing their merchandise, and will contribute nothing to the organization.
- 3) Setting a no dues policy is a decision which, once made, cannot be reversed. Small groups which enter under the no dues policy would never vote to reinstate the dues, if needed, and would outnumber the organizations which are now in the Alliance.

A motion was made to rescind the no dues vote on Sunday, April 4th. It failed and the no dues policy stood. The dues policy is still under discussion among the board of the Alliance via e-mail, and is currently being challenged by a motion from Atheists United. 

~Kellen Von Houser

Rally Opposes School Vouchers

ACA member Ed Banz, and friend Barbara Pena of the Texas Freedom Network, attended the April.12th TFN sponsored rally at the state capital to oppose school voucher legislation. The Texas Freedom Network is a watchdog and advocacy organization that works to protect state/church separation and First Amendment liberties. After the rally, several hundred of the attendees visited the offices of the governor, the lieutenant governor, senators and representatives to lobby against school vouchers.

If you, as an atheist, are opposed to school voucher programs, please contact your elected officials and tell them what you think about Senate Bill 10 and House Bills 709 and 2118. SB10 is sponsored by Sen. Teel Bivins, R-Amarillo. HB 709 and 2118 are sponsored by Rep. Mike Krusee, R-Round Rock, and Rep. Kent Grusendorf, R-Arlington respectively. 



Ed Banz of ACA and Barbara Pena of TFN protest school vouchers

Photo by Rodney Florence

~ Rodney Florence

March For Our Families

About 20-25 ACA members participated in the Lesbian and Gay Rights Lobby March for our Families on March 21st in opposition to Religious Right sponsored legislation that would prohibit homosexuals from fostering or adopting children who are in state care. According to newspaper reports, there were several thousand people that marched. 

~ Rodney Florence



ACA members joined thousands in March for Our Families
Photo by Rodney Florence

Book Review

Although I am about four books behind in writing these reviews, I liked *The Dark Side of Christian History*, by Helen Ellerbe, so much that I decided to rush it to the front of the line. Ellerbe takes a very hard look at some of the damage done by Christianity. This is not the kind of history taught in our public schools, unfortunately. If it were, state/church separation would be a much easier goal to attain. Ellerbe includes extensive footnotes and a bibliography to back up a position that must seem like sheer blasphemy to a true believer. Many atheists will be familiar with much of the information, but are sure to be impressed by Ellerbes clear and concise style.

What Helen Ellerbe does not make clear is her personal belief about the nature of a deity. Early in the book she makes a distinction between what she calls "orthodox Christians", and those who hold more tolerant views. According to Ellerbe, intolerant, patriarchal and hierarchal Christianity came to dominate only when it succeeded in wiping out education, technology, science, medicine, history, art, commerce, and true spirituality. Her use of terms such as "divine" and "sacred" indicate that she has some belief in supernatural powers. This did not, however, distract from her most important points.

Ellerbe organized her book by breaking up the last two thousand years into smaller blocks of time and examining the changes that occurred. What is clear is that modern Christianity has a long history of abuse and tyranny. "Like many orthodox doctrines and ideas, belief in the devil removes responsibility from human beings - as well as the power that accompanies responsibility. For if one is responsible for something, one can do something about it. But if negativity comes from an external devil, one can do little but cower in fear or attack those who represent the devil. Like belief in the lack of human free will, the belief in the devil engenders a sense of powerless, making people easier to control."

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
Jim Hallamek
John Koonz
Arval Bohn
Arlo Pignotti
Vic Farrow
David Kent

The only part of the book I had to disagree with was Ellerbes discussion of the role of modern science. "It may not be an accident or the result of random chance that the earth has maintained an environment capable of supporting life. Rather, the earth's activities may be the result of self-regulating behavior, which suggests the existence of consciousness." This mistaking natural negative feedback loops for deities is all too common among people who extrapolate the findings of quantum mechanics to macroscopic levels. The author seems to have bought into the mistaken idea that science can only show us a cold, mechanistic and impersonal world. While the study of quarks or ocean waves may be impersonal, the study of primates certainly is not. Pair bonding, altruism and even warfare are very much a part of nature, and the way to understand nature is to use science.

Although I disagree with the author's views on science, I highly recommend this book to anyone who would like to fill in the gaps left by their formal education. *The Dark Side of Christian History* by Helen Ellerbe was published by Morningstar Books.

~Reviewed by John Koonz

A Tale of Two Letters; How Some Christians Have Deceived Me (Part 1)

Last January on our cable TV show I presented six Sunday School lessons I'd had as a child, taken from material in the first eight books of the Bible, and showed how my Sunday School teachers left out significant parts of the biblical accounts in each of these lessons, and how this led in most cases to a wrong conclusion. While I emphasized the necessity of knowing all relevant facts before being able to make the best decision, I would now like to point out another aspect of these scripturally short-changed Sunday School lessons: they were half-truths, and half-truths are lies. Not that my Sunday School teachers weren't well-intentioned. Two in particular I continue to have the utmost respect for. Having known them personally, both their values and something of the problems they faced in their lives, I can't help but empathize with them and respect them. Be that as it may, a half-truth is a type of lie.

Well, there is another way in which I have found myself repeatedly deceived by Christians and that is by their claims to knowledge that they don't really possess. Now I'm not just talking about the Big Claim here, our disagreement on that score is self-evident, but in more local and more specific ways as well, Christians have laid claim to me to their having knowledge that they just do not possess. Often it has to do with biblical knowledge or intimacy with some specific work of Christian apologetics. And I also note a tendency for Christians to fail to keep their promises to me when I read those books that they refer me to.

From that quote from Abraham Lincoln that has appeared in the last few issues of our newsletter, I see I have company feeling that way: "It is an established maxim and moral that he who makes an assertion without knowing whether it is true or false is guilty of falsehood, and the accidental truth of the assertion does not justify or excuse him."

A relative once suggested that I read Josh McDowell's "Evidence That Demands A Verdict." It would make me understand how all the errors and contradictions I "thought I saw" in the Bible weren't really errors and contradictions. I got the book and read it. I was utterly amazed at the level of reliance on logical fallacies in it. So much so that I bought some used logic primers and worked through them using McDowell's book as a bad examples workbook. The result was a 16-page letter to this relative detailing all that I had found wrong in the book. Later when I asked for her response to the letter, she told me that she had never read the book herself! She had just heard that this book would have that effect on me. She did not know it from personal experience after all. Well, since I had gone to the bother of reading the book and writing up that criticism for her, I figured it to only be fair that she do the same. She agreed to read the book herself and respond to my critique. But this was some years ago and I rather doubt that that promise will be kept.

After that experience, when a neighbor offered to loan me a big thick book on apologetics from the denomination that he'd recently converted to, again with the claim that it would explain away all the errors and contradictions that I "thought I saw" in the Bible, I had him promise up front that he would openly discuss what I found regardless of whether it was sufficient to sway my opinion or not. As it turned out, I got both lies out of the way right at the beginning. When I returned the book, all ready to talk to him about how its attempts to explain away the biblical contradictions were just as bad as the other efforts I'd been exposed to earlier, he wasn't willing to talk about them after all. "Later," he said. But later has not come, and he has long since moved away. "Soon," we will find out, means something quite different to a Christian talking religion than it does in everyday life. So perhaps "later" has a different meaning for them too.

I believe that a similar Christian deception occurred on this show the last time I was on. We had a caller who identified himself as a preacher and launched into the usual, memorized fool-calling, salvation plan presenting, and hell scaring preaching. You may recall that I challenged him on David's character and his response was to become equivocal as to the authorship of a psalm clearly marked as a psalm of David. Later on when he went from preaching salvation at us to threatening us with hell talk, I challenged him to name a single book of the New Testament that included in its pages both threat of hell and a salvation verse such as both he and I had memorized as part of our Christian indoctrinations. He immediately shot back with one of the epistles to the Thessalonians, which I don't remember. I then asked him where a salvation verse was in it. He ignored that request.

Well, I suppose I would have been entitled to take his non-response as an implicit admission of error. But his naming Thessalonians really grabbed my fancy. One of my favorite biblical instructions can be found in I Thessalonians. 5:21. It says to "Test everything, retain what is good." This along with the so-called Golden Rule and Paul's advice to never go to bed angry is pretty much all that I find of value in the Bible. (that last one, though, has cost more than a few all-nighters!). And since the two letters together are only about 5 and 1/3 pages, I read both of them. I found nothing that would qualify as a salvation plan memory verse. Nor did I find any threat of hell in either of them. But I did find a rather interesting relationship between the two letters. 

~Earle Beach

The conclusion of this article will appear in next months *The Atheist*.

And The Survey Says:

- Q. How have non-atheists reacted to your atheism?:
A. My aunt was upset and hit me. The other relatives didn't care.
- Q. As an atheist, have you ever experienced prejudice or discrimination?:
A. On the job harassment, friends would no longer associate with me, a my beloved girlfriend was required to dump me or face being disowned by her family.

Cartoon



From the Editor



John Koonz, Editor

I hope you all enjoyed the Atheist Alliance convention as much as I did. If you missed it, the next one will be in San Francisco, and should be a lot of fun. Here at ACA, we will be electing a new board of directors in May. We have come a long way in just a few short years. We managed to hammer out some board procedures and policies, produce an excellent cable access show, and host an interesting lecture series. What direction should we take next? Should we become more involved politically? Should we focus on having more social activities? What educational or community projects should we take on? If you think you have some good ideas, please consider running for a board position in May.

Although our financial situation is stable, we do need to raise money for certain big ticket items. This includes: \$300 for the producers licenses that keep our award winning show The Atheist Experience on the air, and another \$300 to keep our outstanding website up and running. Of course, our heart-stopping, mind-blowing, monthly newsletter also costs a lot to print and mail out.

~John Koonz, Editor jknz@hotmail.

A Quote to Put on Your Refrigerator

"I want nothing to do with religion concerned with keeping the masses satisfied to live in hunger, filth and ignorance. I want nothing to do with any order, religious or otherwise, which does not teach people that they are capable of becoming happier and more civilized, on this earth, capable of becoming true man, master of his fate and captain of his soul. To attain this, I would put priests to work, also, and turn the temples into schools."

~Jawaharlal Nehru

Announcements

- Safe Place's **Walk for Safe Families and Safe Streets** will be on April 18, and ACA will be participating. We will leave from the bagelry to register at 12:00 and march at 2:00. We will be carrying our ACA sign. The walk will be at Wooldridge Park.
- A **TV committee meeting** will follow the general bagelry meeting on the 18th of April.
- On June 6, our **Lecture Series** will continue with Paul Wilson. Lectures are held at Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall, 11:00 am. Susan (Born OK the First Time) Brown has offered to take over the scheduling of our lectures! .
- **ACA Board meetings** are on the second Sunday of the month at 12:00. Board meetings are open to all members.
- **Products** have been taken over by Michelle Gadush. 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. We also have Godless dollars, bumper stickers and buttons. See Michelle for more information on these 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.
- The Atheist is printed on somewhat **recycled** paper!

For more information about any of these coming events, call (512) 371-2911 or e-mail kellenvh@earthlink.net

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 u n t i l 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

Austin, TX 78764

P.O. Box 3798

