

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization

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An Expedition to the NTCOF

On June 6, the Miller family (Ken, Peggy, and their daughter Jenny), Maria Laudenslager, my wife and myself made the 3.5 hour drive up to Irving Texas to attend a service of the North Texas Church of Freethought. This trip had been in the planning stages for about two months, ever since Mike Sullivan and Tim Gorski appeared as guests on our own public access TV show, "The Atheist Experience". We wanted to see just what they had to offer that was attracting over 100 people to every service.

What I most expected to see at the NTCOF church service were all the little official greeting functions that I remember from theistic church: "greeters" at the door handing out programs, shaking your hand, welcoming you to the service, saying hello, getting your name if they didn't recognize you, giving you a name tag if you were new, and so on. NONE of these things happened! If anyone from their group was ill or hospitalized or in need of any help, they didn't mention it the way theistic churches do. They also didn't mention that they had six visitors all the way from Austin that morning, which sort of bugged me. No *theistic* church would ever have passed up that kind of opportunity to promote solidarity.

Tim Gorski and Deborah Boak took turns reading and commenting on historical accounts of the life and death of Thomas Paine. The gist of their presentation was that Paine, while he was a Deist and not an atheist, was a rationalist and was a mighty opponent of superstition and religious authority - and that he was badly mistreated by the religion he opposed. Deborah Boak concluded by reading how churchmen clustered around Paine's death-bed, trying to get him to convert: his last words to them were "I have no interest in believing on that subject". Ms. Boak became overcome with emotion after reading those words, and there was a long pause before she was able to continue. It was a beautiful, inspiring moment.

The purpose of this expedition was to see if there were any tricks the NTCOF were using that the ACA could benefit from. What surprised me was that the "tricks" I expected to see simply weren't there. So what's their secret? How come they get 100 people, and we get about 25? That was the subject that my wife, Maria and I discussed during the 3.5 hour drive back home. Here were the thoughts we came up with:

- They have *room* for 100 people. They're have a large meeting room all to themselves. If we ever have 100 people show up at the bagel shop, they won't all fit.
- They have planned, organized events. When somebody shows up for their freethought church service, they know that they're in for an hour and a half of prepared entertainment and an inspirational, educational message.
- They have a *variety* of events. Their freethought church service only happens once per month: the other weekends are taken up with other, equally planned activities: a social luncheon (sort of like our bagel shop meetings), a movie outing, and a singles luncheon. They also add events on top of the regularly scheduled ones, like this month's "summer solstice pot luck pool party" on the 20th, and the study group that meets at 9am before each church service.
- They're *organized*, with separate email lists for each activity, child care by way of freethought Sunday school, and so on.

I think the board of directors ought to consider enlisting volunteers to take responsibility for managing these kinds of varied events. How much effort could it take to pick one movie per month for a gang of us to go see together? How hard could it be to find a restaurant for a lunch group to meet once per month? Wouldn't it be nice if 2-3 people took it on themselves to guarantee that there would always be something fun for the kids to do whenever we meet? And we ought to start looking around for a larger, more private meeting place. These are not daunting tasks. We have a great group. There are those among us who may like it as small as it is. But if the general feeling is that it would be nice for the group to grow, then these are the sorts of things that we can learn from the success of the NTCOF.

~ Jeff Dee



A Tale of Two Letters; How Some Christians Have Deceived Me (Part 3)

It looks to me like someone at a later date added this twenty-first chapter with some ulterior motives, including covering up for the failed imminent Second Coming prophecies in the other three gospels, just like what we find in II Thessalonians and II Peter. There are later additions all of the gospels including that are known because they are not found in the oldest manuscripts. And since we do not know if we have the originals of any of these books, and probably will never know, I base this opinion on such things as the difference in style of this 21st chapter, its differences in purpose, and the appearance of a sign-off and goodbye at the end of the previous chapter, I conclude John 21 to be yet another biblical forgery that attempts to explain the away the failure of the expectation of the earliest Christian believers in an imminent Second Coming of Jesus.

This notion that one person must still be alive from that time persisted however and gave birth to the 'Wandering Jew' fables, which Shelley parodied so well in his epic poem 'Queen Mab.' The Atheist poet even gives this character a biblical name: Ahaseurus, Esther's king in the Protestant version of the Bible.

How Some Christians Today Try To Cover the Failure of the Imminent Second coming. Rev. Harvey G. Lainson, principal of Landmark Bible School International of Kitchener, Ontario, has an essay posted to the web called "When Did the Rapture Become 'Imminent'?", in which he attempts to explain away the previously cited "this generation shall not pass" language from the Mini-Apocalypse by writing: "In other words, there is coming a generation that is special, because they will not pass away (die) until all the prophesied events shall be fulfilled. It was not the generation to which Jesus spoke those words the disciples, for instance...but a COMING generation. Before that generation arrived on earth, the rapture was NOT imminent. "

So rather than 'generation' referring to something other than 'generation,' Lainson has 'this' refer to something other than 'this.' That reduces that part of the prophecy to something very trite: there will be a generation alive at the time of the Second Coming. So for this prophecy to fail, our race must be extinct, in which case no one will ever be able to know of its failure! In the meantime, we can look forward to not just the Baby Boomer generation but Generation X and perhaps even the Pepsi generation passing away before the This Generation finally comes along!

But Lainson has to leave something out of the biblical narrative as well to try to get that thing to fly. He ignores that this entire passage begins with Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple buildings in Jerusalem, the disciples asking him then to tell them "when will these things be?" (Matt. 24:3, Mark 13:4, Luke 21:7), and that Jesus' answer includes the "this generation" claim and goes on (for 63 more verses in Matthew, 7 more verses in Mark, and 4 more verses in Luke). In context, the imminent return doctrine is undeniable. The temple was in fact destroyed 1929 years ago, quite likely while the current generation at the time of the writing of these books was still alive.

David M. Williams, an Assembly Of God Minister in Australia, calls I Thessalonians 4:13-18 the main basis for the rapture doctrine. While he leaves out the hope-I-make-it-back-in-time statements of the two previous chapters, his citation includes the inclusive plural, "we," in talking about their heavenly liftoff. Maybe "we" doesn't mean "we" to him.

Pre-, mid-, and post-tribulation rapture disputes. Post-trib pages often link to Christian survivalist pages. Lainson claims (op cit) that only pre-tribbers could use the word "imminent." Pre-tribulation is what I was taught and was a prevalent notion among Fundamentalist in 1960s, as per the bumper sticker expressing this amazingly irresponsible sentiment:, "Warning: This car will have no driver when Jesus comes." It meant that us nonbelievers would be left behind to suffer through a very bad age but that Christians would avoid. Apparently not so many think that way anymore. This "Bible-based" dogma seems to be going through another metamorphosis. And the legend continues to grow with the telling.

What I Found of an Imminent 2nd Coming in Revelations: Despite the rather extreme methods undertaken to disown the imminent return doctrine in five of the six Bible books mentioned above, the Bible goes on to conclude with this very same failed prophecy. From the last chapter in the New Testament: Rev. 22:7a: "Behold, I am coming again soon." Rev. 22:16-20: "I, Jesus, sent my angel to give you this testimony... The one who gives this testimony says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" Quoting from Asimov's Guide to the Bible: "And with that assurance-- still unfulfilled nearly two thousand years later--the New Testament ends.

So at least seven of the New Testament's 27 books booked on an imminent Second Coming, with three others containing writings that try to gloss over that fact, with two of those having to resort to "what if" language. Something to bear in mind as we hear in more and more of "fringe" Christian groups predicting the Second Coming to coincide with the new millennia. What is fringe now was the first Christian orthodoxy. 

~Earle Beach

Book Review

First of all, I would like to say that this book is one that everyone interested in evolution *should* read. I would also like to point out that every male over the age of forty *should* get checked out for prostate cancer. And, all of us *should* call our mother on Mothers Day.. The fact is, I have struggled with this book review for over sixth months now, for this turned out to be a philosophy book more than a book about organic evolution. Finally, the other night, I realized that maybe Pol Pot was on to something when he made all the philosophers go out and work in the rice paddies. I decided to write this review pretty much the way it is, and if Prometheus refuses to send me any more books, then so be it!

This book is not for the beginner, as far as evolutionary biology goes. Ruse's book is a very detailed attempt to explain ethics and morality in terms of Darwinian natural selection. Although Ruse does start by reviewing the basics, you had better have a solid understanding before proceeding. His treatment of the problems of using Darwinism as a basis for morality was very thorough. Ruse certainly knows his stuff, but writes like a philosopher in an ivory tower. Like most philosophers, he delights in making counter-arguments to his own arguments, and staging preemptive strikes against the probable counter-counter arguments of his adversaries.

I, on the other hand, am a simple public school science teacher. I am sure that the author's many fine points of philosophy were wasted on me. However, I can assure you, that none of the irate creationist parents I deal with give a good goddamn about 'David Hume's program of neo-Darwinian epistemology.' I say this because other reviewers have written as if if this book would make a difference in the war against creationism. While the chapters on Human Evolution and Darwinian Ethics gave me something to think about, I was really hoping that this book would be a more readable account of the problems in sociobiology. I wanted a book that would relate evolution to ethics in an understandable way. Having written a high school level book, that covers the history of the universe from the Big Bang to the rise of modern man, I know it can be done.

If any reader wants to attempt a better review, I will be more than happy to Fed Ex this book to you. Write it, and I will print it!

Taking Darwin Seriously, A Naturalistic Approach to Philosophy was written by Michael Ruse and was published by Prometheus Books.

~Reviewed by John Koonz jknz@hotmail.com

And The Survey Says:

Q: What would you like to tell middle school kids about atheism?:

A: Well, I would tell them..that I am a very rational person whose mind works well with reason. The period of time where I was still trying to suppress this, and be a good Christian, was the hardest time for me. There is a very powerful fear-factor built into the Christian belief system. It takes a lot to over come that. Once I had though, I felt as if a huge weight had lifted. I actually felt smarter and more able to think clearly. I now firmly believe that faith-based religious belief systems severely retard ones mental ability.

A Quote to put on your refrigerator

"EACH nation has created a god, and the god has always resembled his creators. He hated and loved what they hated and loved, and he was invariably found on the side of those in power. Each god was intensely patriotic, and detested all nations but his own. All these gods demanded praise, flattery, and worship. Most of them were pleased with sacrifice, and the smell of innocent blood has ever been considered a divine perfume. All these gods have insisted upon having a vast number of priests, and the priests have always insisted upon being supported by the people, and the principal business of these priests has been to boast about their god, and to insist that he could easily vanquish all the other gods put together."

Robert G. Ingersoll, "The Gods", 1872

Notes From the June 13 Board Meeting

Committee Reports:

The Atheist Experience - Ray Blevins will be off in July and is considering stepping down as host of the show either in January or after 100 shows. We discussed methods, such as skits or flyers, for dealing with our "most popular questions". The need for another "science heavy" show was also discussed. The TV Committee will meet at the studio on the 3rd Sunday at 7:30 am.

Library - Vic Farrow will generate a list of titles that the library would like to have.

Products - Michelle Gadush has asked that we pass along any catalogs we may have of items we'd like to see as ACA products. ACA mouse pads were discussed (again). The products committee includes Keith Berka, Mary Sue Osborne, Ken Miller, and Michelle.

New business:

Survey - John Koonz brought a sample copy of the survey that was discussed in the "hand-off" board meeting. The board decided to send this survey out by mail separate from the newsletter to highlight its importance.

NTCOF Report - Jeff Dee reported on the North Texas Church of Freethought service that he and several other ACA members attended. He told us what he liked (variety of activities, organization, big place to meet) and what he didn't (newcomers not recognized, name tags for members only) and offered some suggestions on how ACA might learn from the NTCOF experience. The possibility that ACA might need to participate in some ceremonies (funerals, weddings, etc.) was discussed.

Purchase for Treasurer - Don Rhoades moved that ACA buy an updated version of Quicken for keeping ACA's books. The motion was passed unanimously. UPDATE: This motion was based on Earle's inability to access the check register that Don had emailed him. This problem has been resolved, so the purchase should not be necessary.

Action Items -

- ☑ Don to send Earle David Kent's address. (Done)
- ☑ Don to print address labels for newsletter and survey. (Done)
- ☑ Don to print mailing list for John. (Done)
- ☐ John will set up sample "welcome" packet.
- ☐ Jeff will author an ACA brochure by the next board meeting.

Your ACA board of directors:

Co-chairs:

Susan Brown

John Koonz

Treasurer:

Earle Beach

Secretary:

Don Rhoades

Board members:

Keith Berka

Sue Osborne

Michelle Gadush

Jim Hallamek

Ken Miller

Arval Bohn

Ray Blevins

Vic Farrow

Jeff Dee

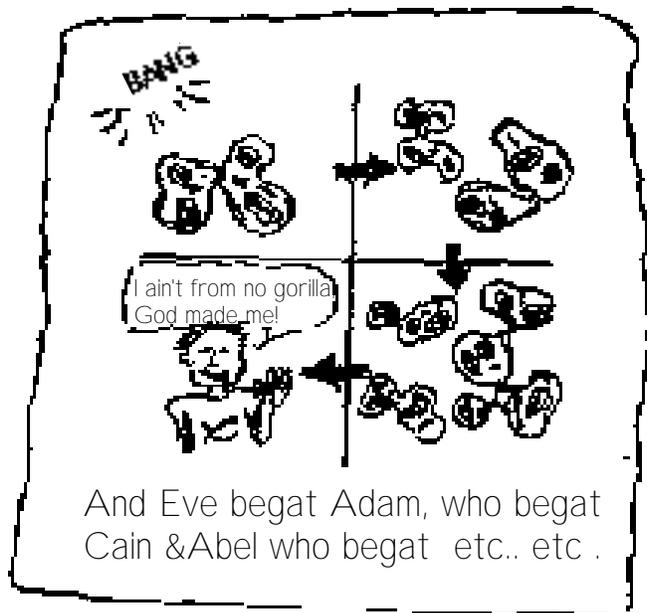
~Don Rhoades, Secretary

“Rejecting Religion” Essay Contest

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has announced their annual Rosamond M. Austin Memorial Awards for Austin area high school seniors. The first prize is \$1000, the second prize is \$500, and the third prize is \$250. Graduating college-bound Austin area (this includes districts surrounding Austin ISD) high school seniors are eligible.

The topic of this essay is “Rejecting Religion”. Students may write about what caused them to reject religion or make the case for non-theism. Anecdotal essays describing personal observations and experiences are welcome, or a student may wish to use a historical approach in dealing with this general theme. Essays should be 3-4 typed, double-spaced pages with standard margins and an original title. A paragraph long biography should include the high school attended and the college/university to be attended in Fall, 1999. Include major and other interests. Essay deadline is July 15, 1999. Winners will be announced in September 1999. All eligible contestants will receive a school-year subscription to *Freethought Today*, the Foundation's monthly newspaper. Winning essays will be printed in full or in part in *Freethought Today*. Send essay and biography postmarked no later than July 15, 1999 to:
Austin High School Essay Contest, FFRF, Inc., PO Box 750, Madison, WI 53701

Cartoon



Paul Koonz © 1999

From the Editor

I hope you are looking forward to the next year as much as I am. I look forward to seeing ACA grow in new and exciting ways. This is an exciting time to be an atheist. There are groups springing up all across America now. There are a lot of good things happening right here in our own state. One of the most important is the ACA survey being sent out to everyone on our mailing list. Please take the time to fill this out. The ACA board of directors will take the results of this survey into account as we plan activities for the next year. If you have an opinion, and we *know* you do, please speak up.

Also, consider getting involved in some of the work of running the Atheist Community of Austin. There are plenty of opportunities for 'positive atheism here, so join in the fun!

~John Koonz, Editor jknz@hotmail.com.

(I think this cartoon is supposed to be showing the stupidity of believing in a creator-god while at the same time acknowledging the reality of cell theory . . . although I could be wrong. These cartoons are drawn by my brother. He is the brew meister at Love Joys, and he name some of his beers after his dogs.) *John Koonz, editor*

Announcements

- **ACA Board meetings** are on the second Sunday of the month at 12:00. Board meetings are open to all members.
- The **TV Committee** will be meeting on the third Sunday of the month at 7:30 at the studio. If you are interested in helping with the The Atheist Experience, please see Don Rhoades (donrodz@swbell.net) for more information. Volunteers are always appreciated.
- Our **Lecture Series** will continue with Paul Wilson on July 4, and Bob Jensen on August 1st. Bob Jensen is on the faculty of the Journalism Dept. UT. He teaches courses on Ethics & the Media, Journalism & Politics, and First Amendment Issues. He's also involved in labor issues & writes (and edits?) for the Working Stiff, a local labor paper.. Lectures are held at Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall, 11:00 am. Susan Brown (Liatris@mail.utexas.edu) is in charge of scheduling our lectures.
- **Products** There are still t-shirts left. Our ACA t-shirts list a number of famous atheists. The "10 reasons why beer is better than jeezuss" are no longer available. Godless dollars are available now for \$1.50. See Michelle Gadush (gadush@mail.utexas.edu) 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!
- All photos are by Rodney Florence, unless otherwise stated.

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

