

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization

P.O. Box 3798, Austin, Texas 78764

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www.atheist-community.org

Day Month YearCE

Volume # No. #

A Real Humanist/Atheist Coalition?

On August 17, 1999, the following message from Herb Silverman was posted on the Atheist Alliance board of dsirectors list serve.

Dear Friends,

I am sending this letter to the following national freethought organizations:

American Atheists
American Humanist Association
Atheist Alliance
Council for Secular Humanism
Freedom From Religion Foundation
North American Committee for Humanism
Society for Humanistic Judaism

For some time a number of freethought friends and I have been concerned about the lack of a national united effort among our multiple organizations. Many people who have expressed this concern to me belong to several freethought organizations including your own, as I do. (I plan to become a member of all the above organizations I have not yet joined). The reality is that no one of our national organizations is large enough to make as significant an impact as we would like, but by working together, we would have a much better chance to effectively counter the constant political and social threats coming from the religious right. Therefore, I want to propose that two representatives from each of our groups meet to explore forming a Humanist-Atheist Coalition. As a new member of the Board of Directors of the American Humanist Association, my first proposal (which passed) was to get that Board's approval for my independent attempt to form a Coalition. I would like to see our organizations start to work actively on joint projects in order to achieve our common goals of maintaining constitutionally decreed church-state separation, and creating respect for our personal positions of unbelief. Rest assured that my intent is NOT TO MERGE ORGANIZATIONS, since I have high regard for the unique personality and contribution of each.

I am offering my proposal to you because your national organization has:

- A. A non-theistic foundation.
- B. A membership list.
- C. An annual conference.

I expect there may be a few more groups I don't know about who also meet these criteria.

I am not now offering this proposal to organizations that, however worthy their programs, do not espouse a non-theistic foundation (like Americans United for Separation of Church and State, People For the American Way, etc.) or have a mixed membership (like the Unitarian Church, with numerous members who consider themselves Christians or Pagans, etc.). This is because my goal is to improve the public perception of non-theistic groups and relate non-believers with positive activities. I hope that some of these other organizations will openly support our goals, maybe even furnish us with speakers at a major Conference. If the Coalition Board would, at some point, like to include additional organizations to the Coalition, that can easily be done.

To form such an Atheist-Humanist Coalition (name to be determined by the organizers), I propose the following plan:

1. After you have read this letter, let me know by email (silvermanh@cofc.edu) what you think about the idea of forming a freethought Coalition.
2. If you are interested in forming the Coalition, designate two alliance-minded people representing your organization to attend an initial Coalition meeting. Those delegates should feel positive about the idea of working as a Coalition (negative-minded delegates will sink the plan before it ever has a chance to work).
3. Have your delegates contact me by email regarding date and place of the initial Coalition meeting. I suggest, for starters, October 23-34, in Arlington, Virginia. (This

location has the advantage of being near politically significant Washington, D.C. Also, it is easy to fly into Washington, get to Arlington by subway, and meet at a reasonably priced hotel.) Each organization would subsidize their representatives for travel and hotel expenses and all would share the common meeting costs equally, although I do not anticipate much cost outside of a meeting room, which I will try to secure without fee.

At the meeting, I propose the following agenda:

1. Discuss benefits to be gained by having our organizations work together.

2. Brainstorm on how the organizations might work together. I suggest we find just one project to start with. For example, our organizations might agree to jointly promote birth control (too hot a subject for the government to promote!) through billboards, radio and TV public service announcements, newspaper features and ads, etc. Alternative projects might be to promote critical thinking or evolution, etc.

I would like to see Coalition representatives bring authority from their individual organizations to agree on one message all groups would work to promote for the next calendar year. The representatives should brainstorm about ways each organization and their affiliates could separately promote that idea at national and local levels. Then they should take the agreed-upon message back to individual organization Boards, who should create an action plan most suitable for their particular circumstances, and carry it out throughout the year.

We might also discuss jointly hiring an advertising agency to create marketing materials for this message. Better yet, we might find an agency or individuals who would do this gratis.

3. Explore other ideas on how our Coalition might work together.

For example, we might want to issue regular Coalition statements of protest, support or recommendations related to matters of common concern. The Coalition might want to discuss hiring a public relations firm for this work.

We might designate one or more people to do national media appearances as a spokesperson representing the Coalition.

We can discuss whether members of any of the organizations are willing to devote their expertise to facilitate the aims of the Coalition. We might find a volunteer to act as Webmaster for a Coalition Home Page, telling about Coalition activities and programs sponsored by constituent organizations. I think it would be a service for all Freethinkers to see a calendar of events posted. This could aid organizations and affiliates in planning their schedules

so as to avoid conflicts. We might list, for unaffiliated nonbelievers, where local atheist-humanist organizations can be found.

4. At our first meeting, I would like the Coalition to consider the idea of holding a joint conference in Washington, D.C. in two or three years with the goal of getting it broadcast on C-SPAN, much as the Christian Coalition's Road to Victory Campaign is currently broadcast on C-SPAN in its entirety. By pooling funds for a joint conference, we could afford to invite the most prominent and effective of international speakers for the freethought cause. I would also hope to enlist national politicians like Barney Frank, Jesse Ventura, Paul Wellstone (just as examples) to speak. Perhaps we could pool funds to hire a professional meeting planner to handle all the work of organizing this conference, with guidance from our Coalition representatives.

I recently met a freethought proponent named Manuel Manga, whose job it is to mediate at the United Nations, and he has volunteered to act as a Facilitator at the initial Coalition meeting in order to keep it on track and prevent its being identified as a project of any one organization. If he is free at the time we set for our first meeting, I will ask him to participate.

I hope to hear from you soon about this idea to deliver a more powerful message by uniting the voices of all major freethought organizations. After we have commitments from organizations and names of their Coalition representatives, we can then set up a common Coalition email list to exchange views and perhaps reach consensus on some items even prior to our first meeting.

The ideas mentioned above are listed so specifically in order to give us a beginning agenda for our proposed meeting. Of course, there will be room for other ideas, yours included, on our actual meeting agenda.

*Sincerely,
Herb Silverman
Acting Coalition Coordinator*

Feuding Commandments

The display of the ten commandments in public places has been discussed a lot lately. I don't know if it is well known but apparently the Catholic version of the ten commandments is not identical to the protestant one (at least as I saw it taught in Spain; we should check if that applies to American Catholics too). Particularly, the protestant second commandment "Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image" is missing in the Catholic version. Catholic churches are actually full of imagery. Then all commandments from the 3rd to the 9th one are shifted down by one, so the 3rd protestant commandment is the

2nd Catholic commandment, and so on - for instance "Thou shall not kill" is the sixth protestant commandment but it is the fifth one in the Catholic version. The tenth commandment is the same in both versions, but Catholics have a 9th commandment that is not in the protestant version. I do not know how they say it in English, but translated from the Spanish version it would be something like "Thou shall not have impure thoughts or wishes". The following is the more explicit English version: "Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's Wife". The 10th is: "Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor's Goods". So, Catholics divide the Protestant 10th commandment into two separate commandments.

Stressing the differences between the versions of the ten commandments may help to show that their display in public places implies to support a particular religion over the other. In particular the second commandment would be a direct attack against the Catholic Church! In order to "help" them you could give them a copy of the Catholic version (if the person is a Protestant, or the other way around otherwise). I wonder how long they would take to find out that they got the "wrong" version.

The web page I consulted is: <http://www.stjosephshillofhope.org/revs/197802.htm> A comparison of the Protestant, Catholic and Hebrew versions can be found in: <http://www.PositiveAtheism.org/hist/lewis/lewten02.htm#0E0>

~ Miguel A. Lerma

Atheists Help Support Religious Freedom

On Labor Day, a Lemon was handed to people who support equal rights. There was no real chance that preacher Harvey could succeed. Over 150 people stood together against religious tyranny. With less than three days notice, people came from far and wide across Texas. Corpus Christi had some representatives. Houston, Arlington, and Fort Worth were all represented. From near and far around Central Texas, bodies appeared with one goal, to stand up to a man who was leading a small group of his family church against the rights of others.

There were at least three atheists there (myself, Howard Thompson, and some one who's name I have forgotten. It was a hectic day). There was one Calvinist, five or six odd and sundry Christians, five or so assorted reverends, and a whole lot of mixed pagans. The support of the local community came from several church leaders in the local area. Several churches have had their membership divided over the issue, but none of them came out for Harvey and his crowd, but it was necessary to stand up and be counted. This kind of activity could only succeed if good

people stood idly by and said nothing.

Instead hundreds of people came and if nothing else, spent some money at Heidi's shop. While a small gesture, it spoke volumes. Especially, when the prime mover has been quoted as telling his followers to carry a pistol with them to keep the witches from eating his children.

While none of us wished him ill will, we had pity for the children. These children stood in a hot Texas sun for protests at the Killeen Mall and Heidis shop in Copperas Cove. They had a picnic in a public park and played softball. These are the same children that his church/school teaches 5 days a week. Then these children are subjected to being dragged to events like this.

I had fun, I was with some people who I enjoy calling friends. My face was plastered all over the local television with my ATHEIST hat on. The Religion and Ethics Weekly show is going to do a piece on this event. We hope that people of goodwill will realize that it is necessary to stand up and be counted. On this day the idea of Christian Theocracy and Political Domination was challenged. In our republic, no religion is at the head of the table. We have no desire to see Beirut, Northern Ireland, Iraq, or Afghanistan in this country.

~ David Bagley

FFRF Convention in November

As if lining up speakers such as Barbara Ehrenreich, Steve Benson, Dr. Richard Sloan, and Philip Appleman were not enough, the Freedom From Religion Foundation has topped itself by arranging for a presentation by internationally known Nobel Prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg at the November convention in San Antonio. So, do not put off registering for the annual Freedom From Religion Convention, to be held this year in San Antonio at the St. Anthony Hotel on November 5-7.

Barbara Ehrenreich, whose articles have been printed in Time, Ms., The Nation, and Atlantic Monthly, will speak on Friday night. You can read her article "U.S. Patriots: Without God on Their Side" in Women Without Superstition, that big purple book most of us own.

Nationally syndicated political cartoonist Steve Benson will discuss his leaving the Mormon Church.

Another speaker will be Dr. Richard Sloan who was the principal author of "Religion, Spirituality, and Medicine" which rebuts recent studies promoting religion and prayer as medicine.

Freethought poet Philip Appleman will present "An

Evening with Darwin." Professor Appleman is also the author of *The Silent Explosion* which is about overpopulation.

Convention registration is \$40 per member, or \$50 per non-member. Two group meals will be offered on Saturday, a non-prayer breakfast for \$15 and a banquet dinner for \$30.

The Foundation's address is P.O. Box 750, Madison, WI 53701. If you have questions, call (608) 256-8900 or (608) 256-5800 or email ffrf@mailbag.com.

To make your hotel reservations, call (210) 227-4392 and mention FFRF to get the special group rate of \$120 single or double per night, plus tax. You can also register using their website at www.stanthonyhotel.com

Book Review

The Sacred Depths of Nature by Ursula Goodenough was published by the Oxford University Press (www.oup-usa.org) in 1998.

This book was sent to me for review after I ran my interview with Paul Harrison, a leader in the Scientific Pantheist movement. (*The Atheist* 2-4 September 98) The author of this book, Ursula Goodenough, counts herself as a Religious Naturalist. She is also a Professor of Biology at Washington University. This book will almost certainly appeal to anyone with an interest in the Pantheist philosophy. On the other hand, this book may annoy those atheists who find religious language too unpleasant to read. Although I generally count myself in the latter category, this book was an unexpected pleasure to read.

In twelve easy to read chapters, Ursula Goodenough explains the origins of life, and the evolution of everything from love and sex to new species. Her explanations are concise yet accurate. Each chapter ends with a section titled 'Reflections'. In these parts, Goodenough discusses her feelings about the preceding section. After talking about the origins of the earth, she quotes Steven Weinberg - "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless." In defeating what she sees as nihilism, she has come to see the pointlessness of it all as the locus of Mystery. Here are her thoughts on cosmology: "For me, Deism doesn't work because I find I can only think of a creator in human terms, and the concept of a human-like creator of muons and neutrinos has no meaning for me. But more profoundly, Deism spoils my covenant with Mystery. To assign attributes to Mystery is to disenchant it, to take away its luminance." Later, after discussing the origins of life, Goodenough has this to say about the Anthropic Principle and Design: "The inherent circularity of Anthropic-Principle arguments leaves me, in the end, theologically unsatisfied.

And so I once again revert to my covenant with Mystery, and respond to the emergence of Life not with a search for Design or Purpose but instead with outrageous celebration that it occurred at all." 

Goodenough did an extremely good job simplifying the biochemistry of life's origins and the process of evolution. I was curious to see how Goodenough would tackle the subjects of consciousness and emotions. I have found that otherwise good science authors tend to fall apart when certain subjects come up. I was pleased to see that this author did not shirk from the reality of reductionism. On the question of the uniqueness of human emotions she had this to say: "Might there not be novel emotional centers, giving rise to specifically human feelings? Perhaps. Nothing is yet known. But given Nature's track record for conservative tinkering, it seems more likely that our feelings represent elaborate combinations and syntheses of ancient emotional circuits, experienced by us in new ways. Anguish and elation may be reconfigured versions of anger and lust, without in any way being the less compelling or important."

If you would like to learn more about our understanding of the origins and evolution of life, I highly recommend this book. I also recommend this book for anyone interested in the question of why scientists feel the need to use religious language in their descriptions of nature. While this book does not answer that question, it may provide some insight.

~Reviewed by John Koonz

And The Survey Says:

Q. Why are you an Atheist?:

A. I became an atheist at 19 because Christianity just didn't feel real to me. I prayed and felt like I was talking to the wall. My prayers weren't answered. The Christians I knew were hypocritical, judgmental, prejudiced people. The Old Testament was violent and frightening. I didn't want any part of it. Christianity told me I was broken and fallen and sinful and no good without Jesus- no wonder I struggled with anger, depression, and low self-esteem.

New Board Member Needed

Ken Miller and his family have moved away. We need to a replacement board member. If you would like to nominate yourself, or someone else, please contact John Koonz at jknz@hotmail.com

Board members must have been members for at least six months.

Notes From Sep. 12 Board Meeting

Treasure's Report:

We have about \$1700 in each of our two accounts. (Checking and building fund) The web charge has been paid for in advance for next year.

ACA Sales Tax liability:

Keith has checked into this and assures us that we are complying with the law on this.

New Member Packets:

John has ordered the pens and folders. The packets have been designed and should be ready within a few weeks.

Blood Drive:

It was decided to plan the next one for the 30th of October. After that, the blood drives will coincide with the change of seasons. Cooperating with similarly minded groups such as the Ethical Society was discussed.

TV Show:

The TV committee is always looking for volunteers on Sunday mornings. ACA TV Tapes are now available for \$20.00 each and will be offered over the web soon.

Newsletter:

We need a folding machine and have authorized a purchase of one for around \$35.00. Keith will shop.

Lecture Series:

John Koonz will discuss the implications of Kansas anti-evolution decisions at Furr's in October.

Library:

The library is growing and needs a place to live. If you want to check out a book, contact Vic Farrow so he can be sure to bring it to the bagelry.

Rapture Party:

John Koonz presented an idea for our annual solstice party. This would take place at Love Joys bar off sixth street on December 18. The owner has already been contacted and has approved.

Herb Silverman:

Discussion of Herb Silverman's letter concerning the formation of an atheist/humanist alliance. The board generally agrees to support this effort as well as efforts to meet with other Texas groups on an informal basis.

New signs:

Rodney Florence showed some designs he can get simply by trading Mark Sadegi of Compusigns for a couple of ACA t-shirts. Rodney was authorized to make the trade.

Sacramento:

Began discussion on sending a representative to the 2000 Atheist Alliance convention in California.

HSH Workshop Needs Speakers

Bob Finch is organizing a convention tentatively to take place between late January to February. We are considering "Artificial Intelligence" as a workshop topic and would be interested to hear if you or anyone you know of is knowledgeable and/or qualified to speak on the topic.

Any assistance you can offer would be appreciated.

Daniel Strain

(dts2000@flash.net)

Chair, Houstonians for Secular Humanism

A Quote to put on your refrigerator

"To live on the unpaid labor of others... that is blasphemy. To enslave your fellow-man, to put chains upon his body... that is blasphemy. To enslave the minds of men, to put manacles upon the brain, padlocks upon the lips... that is blasphemy. To deny what you believe to be true, to admit to be true what you believe to be a lie... that is blasphemy. To strike the weak and unprotected, in order that you may gain the applause of the ignorant and superstitious mob... that is blasphemy. To persecute the intelligent few, at the command of the ignorant many... that is blasphemy.

To pollute the souls of children with the dogma of eternal pain... That is blasphemy!"

Robert G. Ingersoll

Atheist Alliance Website Revamped

Please advertise the Atheist Alliance website in your next newsletter. As you will see, it's been completely revamped since the last convention. There is new content to be found on the web site at least once a week (and usually at least 2-3 times a week). It is the most full-featured Atheist web site on the net: <http://www.atheistalliance.org>

Rapture Party!

what: A party to celebrate the non-ending of the world.

where: LoveJoys bar off sixth street.

when: December 18th

how: Come dressed in your most outrageous millennial/rapture survival outfit. There will be a competition. More details to come . . .

From the Editor

As part of my critical thinking unit, my eighth graders have to write examples of logical fallacies and other important points of rational thought. While it is often said that teaching evolution destroys religion, I find that a well done unit on critical thinking can have an even greater effect. Of course, I do not mention gods or goddesses in class. I don't mention any religion or discuss any religious dogma at all. I don't have to. Amazing things happen when kids figure out how to think clearly. You can see it on some of their faces when it dawns on them that there are important implications that go far beyond the examples given in class.

I point out that it is the person making a claim - any claim - who is responsible for supplying the convincing evidence. I relate this as much to plate tectonics and natural selection as I did to Santa Clause. Here's the example from a girl who generally wears Christian t-shirts and has attempted to turn a number of assignments into bible tracts: "Many people believe that there's more than one God. If there was, then we need something that proves there's more than one God. We all weren't made by many different gods or ancestors that lived long ago." You see, she is almost there. One more axion needs to connect and she will be a bagel shop regular.

And now here's an example from a girl who's father wrote before the unit even started to thank me for teaching critical thinking skills. This example involves the logical fallacy known as 'poisoning the well': "Since Steven Weinberg does not believe in God, some people use that to attack his scientific work and claim that since he is an Atheist, all of his work must be unreliable without taking into account the validity of his work in fundamental physics. His belief in God has nothing to do with the quality of his work, but for religious fanatics, it seems like a good argument."

And there you have it. I think what we need is a kind of rationalist Peace Corps to go out into the blackboard jungles of America and bring enlightenment to the natives. We might even send volunteers into Alabama and Kansas, as a high risk assignment of course.

~John Koonz, Editor jknz@hotmail.com.

Cartoon

COSMOLOTAN

a magazine for physics, fashion, and sex

Amazing new diet
for an expanding
universe

putting the big
bang back in
the bedroom



a jesus h christ production by Paul Koonz 1999

Announcements

- ACA Board meetings are on the second Sunday of the month at 12:00. Board meetings are open to all members.
 - On October 3rd, 4th grade relay-race winning science teacher John Koonz will speak to us. 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 jeeezuss" 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.
- For more information about any of these coming events, call (512) 371-2911 or e-mail kellenvh@earthlink.net

The Atheist is printed on somewhat recycled paper!

On the reverse side you can see the new ACA brochure. Feel free to copy it and spread it around!

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.
- I wish to receive a hard copy of The Atheist in the mail. \$10 is enclosed.

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

