

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization
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ACA plans secular memorial for September 11

Nearly a year ago, the Atheist Community of Austin organized and conducted a secular memorial for those killed in the September 11 attacks. On Wednesday, September 11, 2002, the first anniversary of the attacks, we will present "Reflections on September 11 - A Secular Memorial", which is open to the public and will take place at Woolridge Square from 6:30 - 7:30 PM. The memorial will feature several speakers and musical performances. The following is the press release that Michelle Gadush sent out announcing the memorial.

The Atheist Community of Austin announced plans today to conduct a non-religious commemoration of the lives lost in last year's terrorist attacks. The public memorial gathering, scheduled from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday, September 11, will be held at Woolridge Square, 900 Guadalupe St., in downtown Austin.

In the wake of last year's attacks, we have seen a swelling of popular opinion aligning patriotism and religion. Atheists, humanist, freethinkers and the non-religious will not be relegated to the fringes of society. Hundreds of us were among those lost last September 11 and millions of us grieve, just like all Americans.

An estimated 500 people of those who died in the attacks considered themselves non-religious. However, most memorial services have failed to respect their most cherished convictions about the nature of the universe and their place in it. In Austin, as in the rest of our country, atheists, freethinkers, humanists and the non-religious were alienated last year when even government-sponsored memorial events assumed religiosity on the part of both victims and mourners. This year the ACA event, "Reflections on September 11- A Secular Memorial", will provide an opportunity for those in attendance to put the events of the past year in perspective without appeals to supernatural authority.

Godless Americans March on Washington

On Saturday, November 2, 2002, thousands of non-religious Americans will march on Washington. Along with a rally on the National Mall, a number of social/networking events will be held to build and strengthen alliances between non-believers across the country. Several ACA members are planning to attend this event - and carpools and/or caravans may be arranged if there is sufficient interest. Special rates have been arranged at the Hilton Garden Inn, as well as a "meet and greet" reception at the Hilton. Here is some additional information on this event from the Godless Americans organization. For more, visit www.godlessamericans.org.

The March On Washington...

- The event is currently scheduled for Saturday, November 2, 2002. We are in the process of finalizing arrangements with the National Park Service and other agencies that "control" the Mall in Washington. Earlier, we had hoped to secure a date in September, but that has changed.
- The event will be held on the National Mall, west side of the U.S. Capitol Building from approximately 11 AM to 2-3 PM. We are currently negotiating with the Service and other area agencies for a March down the mall (beginning on the east side of 14 St., Washington Monument area) to the rally location.
- The rally will include speeches from representatives of various Atheist, Freethought, Secular Humanist and other related national, regional and local organizations.
- We are hosting a special "Meet 'n Greet" Welcome Buffet Dinner at the Hilton Garden Inn on Friday night, November 1, 2002 beginning at 8 PM. Everyone participating in the Godless Americans March on Washington is welcome, from representatives of groups to individual participants. Rate for the buffet dinner is \$32 per person (includes all taxes, gratuities).
- Space is limited for this Welcome event, so mail in your reservations as soon as possible!

Regularly Scheduled ACA Events:

Bagel Shop Meetings: Every Sunday except the first Sunday of the month at 10:30 AM at the Hot Jumbo Bagelry, (307 W. Fifth Street)

Monthly Lecture Meetings: The first Sunday of every month at 11:00 AM, in the Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall.

"The Atheist Experience" Live Call-in TV Show: Sundays 4:30 - 6:00 PM, on Austin Access Channel 10. Now replayed Tuesdays 4:30 - 6:00 PM, also on Austin Access Channel 10.

Godless Gamers: Monday evenings at 7:00 at the home of Russell and Ginny Glasser. Contact Russell for details.

Atheist Happy Hour: Thursday evenings at 7:30 at Antonio's Tex-Mex restaurant near the intersection of IH 35 and 183.

"The Non-Prophets" Internet Radio Show: Saturday afternoons from 2:00-3:30 on www.atheistnetwork.com.

E-Mail Lists: <http://www.atheist-community.org/email.htm>

For more details on all of these events, see www.atheist-community.org.

AAI News: *Secular Nation* is new, inside and out

By Bobbie Kirkhart

Your next edition of *Secular Nation* will have a new editor, a new look and a new, larger audience.

The new editor is Lois Lyons, a professional journalist and a dedicated freethinker. Lois's journalistic experience includes extensive writing and editing of business publications; book editing (especially in scholarly books), and free-lance writing. Lois is an outspoken atheist and a long-time member of Atheists United.

At the March 2002 convention in Dallas, the AAI board voted two important changes pertaining to *Secular Nation*. The first is that the magazine will have a full-color, slick cover. Dave Faroe, who does our web graphics, will design the cover. Also at the convention, a committee headed by Joe Zemel was set up to get *Secular Nation* placed in libraries across the country. Individuals and organizations are needed to sponsor this endeavor.

The Atheist Community of Austin is a member of Atheist Alliance, Inc., an organization of independent religion-free groups and individuals in the United States and around the world. AAI provides us with periodic articles for publication to our membership. To find out more about Atheist Alliance, Inc., visit www.atheistalliance.org.

Secular Nation magazine is a benefit of individual membership in the Atheist Alliance and can also be found in some public libraries.

THE ATHEIST

A monthly publication of the
Atheist Community of Austin.

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Articles, reports, and letters to the
editor are always welcomed.

Please write to jillf@austin.rr.com.

Opinions expressed in *The Atheist* are those of
the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect
the views of the Atheist Community of Austin.

Loony Theist Website of the Month!

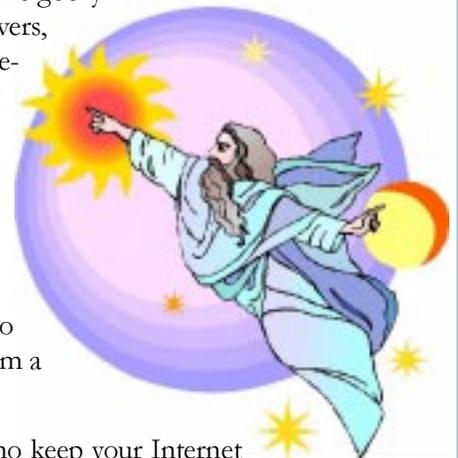
<http://www.raptureready.com/rr-left-behind.html>

by Jeff Jones

Feeling left out? How about left behind? This goofy site contains letters to all of us non-believers, sinners, wrong thinkers and heretics from theists who are going to disappear any moment now (really...any time now...seriously) when the Rapture comes. Wasn't it nice of these folks to provide us with instructions on how to survive the tribulations and make it to heaven after all.

Of course, the overall theme of this site is, to me, "I told you so, nyah, nyah, nyah!" but I'm a bit cynical.

This site assumes that all of those folks who keep your Internet service provider up and running will still be here. Should those people be offended, do you think?



Researching particle physics

By *Philippe Pouliot*

As a research physicist, my role is to make progress in our understanding of nature. The approach I am following is that of particle physics, which has been very successful historically. Over the course of the last century, it has unraveled that the world is made up of a zoo of tiny particles like quarks, positrons and photons, which interact according to very definite laws. The beautiful theory that results is called the Standard Model, and it earned itself an amazing agreement with experiments: for example, the theoretical prediction of a magnetic property of the electron called the dipole moment agrees with experiment to an astounding twelve decimal places, which is a few parts in a trillion.

The Standard Model is not perfect. It is not understood why there are so many particles, and why they all have very different masses. More importantly, the force of gravity does not fit in. Gravity predicts the existence of bizarre objects called black holes, now found at the center of many galaxies. The study of black holes leads to forceful contradictions between Einstein's theory of gravity, general relativity, and the theory at the core of the Standard Model, the relativistic quantum mechanics of fields.

Thus my role as a researcher is to resolve this very puzzling schism between gravity and particle physics. It is unclear how to make progress because we hear very little from the experimental side, with scant hope that the situation will improve in the foreseeable future. This makes the endeavor akin to a philosophical a priori pursuit where the only guide is consistency. The leading candidate for unifying gravity and the other forces is known as superstring theory, because early on it posited that perhaps particles were made of little wobbly loops of strings.

Yet superstring theory is a lot more than that: it is a complete and consistent theory of all the known forces and matter in nature (and much more). A serious problem is that it has so

much more than what is found in nature, such as more dimensions of space and many more kinds of weird objects and forces, so much that it looks unlikely to be the actual theory that describes the real world. Still, researchers like me continue to study it, because superstring theory allows us to ask quantitatively some very deep questions about the essence of space and time, of forces and matter, and about the origin and evolution of the Universe.

The ACA Files: Member Profile of the Month

Name: Michelle Gadush

ACA Member Since: 1998

ACA Activities: Co-Chair of ACA Board, Chair of Activities Committee, acting manager of product inventory.

Where From Originally: Born in Pittsburgh, PA; grew up in Houston; and spent a lot of time in Riverside, CA

Occupation: Research Associate at the University of Texas' Institute for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Protein Analysis and DNA Sequencing Core Facility.

Family: Michelle is Mom to Tom, 14 and Jenny, 9.

Hobbies: Gardening... and world domination!

Little-Known Facts: Michelle was an extra in two operas in Riverside, CA. She didn't sing but wore full Kabuki makeup in Turandot as a servant to Ping, Pang and Pong (the Emperor's three ministers). In Tosca, she helped along one of the lead actresses who was suffering from arthritis.



(Another) Update on Larry Mayfield

We have just learned that Larry is no longer in Capitol City Nursing Home and has returned home. More updates on his condition as they become available.

ACA Members: Don't let us overlook your announcements.

If you have something you'd like to announce in the newsletter, e-mail the editor at jillf@austin.rr.com

Where are the Raelians?

by Jeff Jones

jeffj@austin.rr.com

“The Cobb County School District acknowledges that some scientific accounts of the origin of human species as taught in public schools are inconsistent with the family teachings of a significant number of Cobb County citizens. Therefore, the instructional program and curriculum of the school system shall be planned and organized with respect for these family teachings.”

– Policy statement of the Cobb County, Georgia School District

Evolution is controversial. We know this because the media continually refers to it as such. In fact, evolution is so controversial that the states of Alabama, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and now, Cobb County, Georgia have all, currently or at one time in the very recent past, required teachers to tell students that it is “only a theory” with the implication that other “theories” of where we came from should hold equal value. Of course, we know how terribly the word is being misused by the “only a theory” crowd since we understand the difference between a scientific theory and the popular usage of the word. The fact that the average citizen does not speak volumes about the state of scientific knowledge and education in our country.

The above policy of the Cobb County School Board makes it plain that this body thinks that scientific truth is whatever the majority of people in an area say it is. Truth by popular decree has not been a very successful policy in the past (i.e. Galileo, Copernicus, etc.) but it just won't seem to go away.

The folks who push the view that alternatives to evolution should be presented to children in school claim that their concern is one of accuracy and not religious in nature. Even though the Christian view of creation (in whatever disguise it is wearing these days) is the only one being put forth we are led to believe by these noble, civic-minded people that they only wish our children be given all the “facts”. Many of us, believers and non-believers alike, are skeptical of this claim and with good reason. I have a very simple question for the proponents of “alternative theories”. Where are the Raelians?

When it comes to alternative theories of where man came from you don't get much more “alternative” than the Raelians. For those of you not familiar with them, the Raelians believe that man is the result of intervention by a super-intelligent race of aliens who, through the use of DNA, created the life form that was to become man. They then left, leaving humanity to progress on its own. There are thousands

of Raelians all over the world and they even have real scientists who are working on cloning humans, an act that they believe will somehow lead to the return of the alien race that created us.

Now it seems to me that the proponents of origin-choice should be knocking the Raelian door down to recruit this group into their cause. After all, they certainly have a theory of how we got here and they even back it up with science – well, at least as much science as the Intelligent Design and creation science crowd have on their side. This is a natural fit. There are a lot of Raelians, they are obsessively committed people, they have money and seem to be willing to spend it on semi-professional media campaigns if local cable access is any indication. Why the heck aren't the origin-choice folks talking to the Raelians?

We know of course. We know that “choice” doesn't mean choice at all. It means government sponsorship and promotion of a very specific religious dogma. It is simply a way of getting god in the classroom, and the classroom they want him in is science. Why? Science explains things. It tells children how things work and it does it without bias or prejudice. It is a collection of facts as we best understand them and it is, when taught correctly, immune to ridiculous claims and popular decree.

Theists desperately want their religion included in the science classroom because we as a society, whether many are willing to admit it or not, look to the scientific community to explain how things work. Every single aspect of our lives is touched by science on a daily basis including religious thought. Think of how many things that were once thought to be the province of the gods that we now accept as just the way the world works. Every major scientific discovery leads us further from reliance on the gods for explanation. If religion cannot take its place beside science in the minds of man then it will cease to exist.

My niece Amber is nine – and one of the smartest nine year-olds I know. She is fascinated by bugs, snakes, dinosaurs and virtually anything in the natural world that crawls, runs, slithers or flies. She has a sharp mind and a curious disposition. I believe she could have a future in the sciences if she is encouraged and challenged. To take the mystery out of the world, to replace “how does this work?” with “god did it” in the classroom is, in my view, a despicable act.

When I see people who attempt to insulate their children from true science in favor of superstition I pity those kids. What they are doing to their children is pathetic. But what they want to do to Amber, and every other child in this country, is infuriating. We must not stand for it.

How I became an atheist

By Michael C. Emmert

mikeemmert11@hotmail.com

Theist people often wonder how someone becomes an atheist. They think perhaps a person is exposed to a bad experience with religion, like a pedophile priest or with some cult. My road was a simpler one.

When I was five years old, my father, a military man, was stationed in Taiwan. I attended a bible class one day, and we were reciting various religious things, like “Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so...” Meanwhile, the Taiwanese students down the hall were reciting the same thing in Chinese. Then the teacher said something like, “If you don’t believe in Jesus, you will go to hell”.

So I raised my hand and asked, “What about the Chinese kids?” The teacher got really mad, and I was lucky I didn’t get paddled.

But this made me realize that there are many different kinds of people in the world, and not all of them were raised in the same way that I was. I knew, even at that young age, that most Chinese people had never heard of Christianity. So it was unfair for them to go to hell because of something they had never heard of.

When I was ten years old, I finished the bible early in the summer (a massive project) and then read an article in Analog science fiction magazine debunking one of the stories they had published. (You cannot go faster than the speed of light, I think it was.)

Later that summer, I was running through a field and tripped and went sprawling. I picked myself up, brushed myself off, and wondered what I had tripped over. Sitting on the ground, half-way dislodged from the depression it had been sitting in, was a fossil. It was about 10 or 12 centimeters in diameter, a shelled sea creature, and it was dead. I was in San Antonio, well above sea level, and came to the realization that it was impossible for this to have happened a mere 6,000 years ago; we were too far above sea level.

This caused me to think about what I had been reading. The stories I had read in the bible were clearly impossible. And

yet, the book was so convinced it was right. Science, on the other hand, knew that they could get things wrong, and then you had to change your thinking. I had heard preachers on the radio thundering, “If you believe in evolution, then you are an ATHEIST!” So I decided that I was an atheist. The fossil sat there in my hand. It was dead. It couldn’t preach to me or say anything to me. And yet, it spoke a powerful truth. I just simply couldn’t ignore the truth sitting there in my hand, or all those nice, decent Chinese kids who were so polite and were going to hell.

Years have passed and I have learned a lot of things; the fossil was a “brachiopod”, there is no record of Moses in Egyptian hieroglyphics, there is no evidence like potsherds or rubble of five cities supposedly built by David and Solomon, no Pontius Pilate or Jesus in Roman and Hebrew records of the day, but none so irrefutable or powerful as that poor, dead brachiopod. Atheism is about the truth, about examining real evidence, about thinking about what you read, what you see, and the rocks underneath your feet. And it is grander, larger, older, and more compelling than the weird stories made up by men who had no history, no science, and not the courage to admit it.

Editorial Cartoon

By Phil Amador



ACA Member Mark Loewe has been working for several years to get legislation introduced that will allow Texas students to keep their math and science textbooks. His efforts have paid off in the form of Texas House Bill 749. If you agree with Mark on this issue, you are encouraged to write to your legislators in support of House Bill 749.

American children need their textbooks, too!

by Mark Loewe, Ph.D. (Physics)

It is time to allow American children to permanently keep their math and science textbooks. This practice — which is followed in high achieving nations -- may be the simplest and least expensive way to improve American math and science achievement. Legislation similar to Texas House Bill 759 is needed to ensure that inexpensive math and science textbooks are made available.

The miserable performance of American children in math and science is well documented. In reports issued in 1996, 1997, and 1998, Dr. Pascal Forgione, Jr., Commissioner of Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education, states that “The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is the largest, most comprehensive, and most rigorous international study of schools and student achievement ever conducted.” According to the 12th-grade TIMSS report, the U.S. placed last out of 16 nations listed under “Average Physics Performance of Advanced Science Students” and placed 15th out of 16 nations listed under “Average Advanced Mathematics Performance of Advanced Mathematics Students”. The 12th-grade report did not include Singapore, Korea, or Japan — the three highest achieving nations out of over 40 nations listed in the 8th-grade report and the three highest achieving nations out of 26 nations listed in the 4th-grade report. Moreover, from 1996 to 2000, there were statistically significant declines in the average scores of American 12th-graders on the math and science parts of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

One reason for the poor performance is that math and science textbooks are removed from American children at the end of each year. This robs children of their familiar and reliable sources of knowledge and causes children to waste time searching for missing material. Review material, if found in subsequent textbooks, is divorced from the exercises that children originally solved and is again removed. Difficulties finding suitable review material impede learning and contribute to aggravation, boredom, and resignation. Textbook removal is additionally tragic for children who possess few, if any, other books. Rather than resent the study of textbooks that they know will be removed, children should have the opportunity to learn that there is value in keeping their well-studied textbooks.

Textbook removal denies authors and teachers reason to expect that children have a full range of review material at home. This results in time-consuming efforts to provide missing material. In the October 1999 issue of *Scientific American*, W. Wayt Gibbs and Douglas Fox state that “... American texts covered many more topics than the foreign books and covered them over and over and

over” and Dr. William H. Schmidt, U.S. National Research Coordinator for TIMSS, states that “American teachers are also more likely to repeat the same information from one grade to the next and to cover little or nothing in depth.”

In Singapore, Korea, Japan, and other high achieving nations, children get to keep their own textbooks and can review and write in their books whenever they need or wish. Authors and teachers expect children to have their books from previous years. Authors limit review material and focus on new material. Teachers limit review time and cover new material in greater depth. Teachers do not need to continually review material that children can easily review at home.

In Texas, the state contract price of the 17 most expensive textbooks listed on the “conforming list” as covering math for grades K-8 and science for grades 1-8 is \$602.89; if each book lasts through six children, then the cost is \$100.48 per child. In Singapore, the price of the most expensive set of books (20 textbooks, 4 coursebooks, 34 workbooks, and 3 sets of worksheets) listed as covering math and science through Grade 8 is 201.20 Singapore dollars or, at the exchange rate of one Singapore dollar to 56 US cents, only \$112.67. Textbooks that are made for children to keep are much less expensive because the needs for review material and durability are greatly reduced and because they are printed in larger number. Such books are smaller, softcovered, much easier to carry, do not get beaten-up or written-in by multiple children, and do not fall out-of-date due to years of being reissued.

Opponents might claim that allowing children to keep their math and science textbooks would cost huge amounts of money. Comparing \$100.48 to \$112.67 (instead of to \$602.89) suggests that the additional cost, if any, would be roughly \$12.19 per child through Grade 8; this is less than two dollars per child per year! Even if the additional cost were somewhat higher, it would still be tiny compared to the benefits of allowing children to permanently possess their familiar textbooks.

Legislation to ensure that inexpensive textbooks are made available was introduced during the 2001 session of the Texas Legislature by Garnet Coleman (D-Houston) and co-authored by Kent Grusendorf (R-Arlington). House Bill 759 provides that “For mathematics and science instruction in grades one through six, each textbook the State Board of Education adopts must have a cost that is low enough to permit a student to keep the book at the end of the school year, so that the student may review the core concepts of the essential knowledge and skills as necessary.”

The Constitution provides that “The Congress shall have Power ... To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries” As one of the few powers vested in Congress, this power stands as convincing evidence that the Framers considered the progress of science and useful arts to be of supreme national importance.

A fundamental way for parents, teachers, education officials, and legislators to promote both individual achievement and the progress of science and technology is to allow children to permanently keep their math and science textbooks.