

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization
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"Reflections on September 11 - A Secular Memorial"

On September 11, 2002, the Atheist Community of Austin held a memorial for those who lost their lives in the September 11 attacks a year earlier. The ACA membership felt that a specifically secular memorial was necessary because many other alternatives, including the official City of Austin event, were infused with religion and prayer. Approximately 50 people attended the event, which took place in Woolridge Square, in downtown Austin. The event was quite well received, despite the fact that we were forced to share the stage with another group due to being erroneously double-booked by the City.



Mary McManamee

Michelle Gadush introduced and led the observance. Jeff Jones, Russell Glasser and Don Lawrence also delivered original speeches. Mary McManamee gathered and read a series of touching biographical sketches and personal stories about some of the people who perished in the attacks. After the speakers, a flag ceremony was held to pay tribute to the 80 countries who lost citizens in the attacks. Michelle read the name of each country



Memorial participants in Woolridge Square

and participants placed each country's flag on a display. The memorial concluded by opening the stage to everyone else who wished to speak.



International flag display

Special recognition goes to all the organizers and speakers

including Rodney Florence, whose work on the flag display and flower arrangements made for a memorable observance. Tim Burnett and Mary McManamee also helped with the flag display. We also owe a debt of thanks to CompuSigns for supporting our organization for all these years and contributing to the cost of our banner, as well as to Wes Thompson who also contributed to the cost of the banner. As always, special recognition goes to Michelle Gadush for doing a lot of the legwork towards organizing this event and coordinating with the media, and to Steven Elliott, Russell Glasser and Martin Wagner who documented the event on film.

Following are some excerpts from speeches given at the memorial. More photos can also be found on page 6.

Russell Glasser:

"...we are, each one of us, about more than just our religion. We are not our set of beliefs. We are not the groups we join or the people we associate with. Each one of us is an individual, someone who is worthy of respect and appreciation for our unique qualities.

THE ATHEIST

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Atheist Community of Austin.

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

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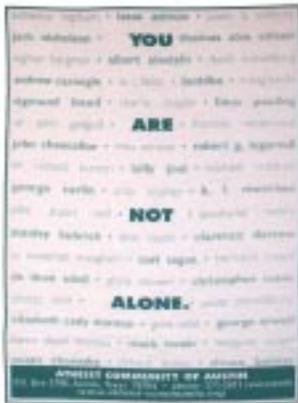
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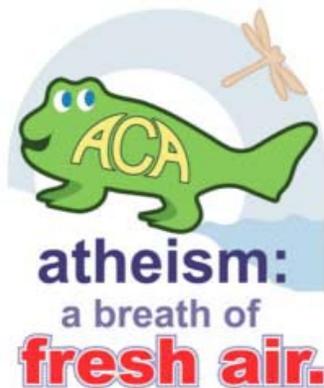
ACA "You Are Not Alone" t-shirts available again

A reminder from Michelle Gadush: She recently ordered a new batch of the "You Are Not Alone" t-shirts with the ACA logo on the front and a list of famous freethinkers on the back. These t-shirts are now available in sizes S - 3X. Get yours before we run out!

Also, Manda has created a t-shirt design which is available for download at the ACA website. Once downloaded, you can print it on iron-on transfer paper. It reads "Atheism: a breath of fresh air" and features a cute amphibious fish with legs. Get it at: <http://www.atheist-community.org/fishshirt/fishshirt.htm>



"You Are Not Alone" Design



'Manda's Design

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: AAI represented at duo of conferences in Europe

By Mynga Futrell

A Sept. 16-30 AAI tour led by AAI's international liaison, August Berkshire (Minnesota Atheists) includes attendance at a French-sponsored conference at the Sorbonne in Paris, celebrating the 200th anniversary year since Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists.

At the kind invitation of the IBKA (a German-based European freethought coalition), the trip includes participation in the IBKA's conference in Speyer, Germany, which has invited speakers from several countries as well.

Alliance president, Bobbie Kirkhart (Atheists United), presents an address regarding separation of religion and government in the United States. Mynga Futrell (Atheists and Other Freethinkers, Sacramento) introduces those attending to the general nature of the Alliance. Barbara Stocker (Rationalist Society of St. Louis) and August Berkshire participate in a multi-nation panel addressing future cooperative efforts.

It is important to note that AAI organized originally (1991) without much of an eye to the world at large. Founders then saw the alliance task to be one of addressing atheists' situation within the United States. For many years, the highly regarded Atheist Centre in India remained the sole non-U.S. society in the Alliance.

There has been a bit of recent movement toward a somewhat more international perspective. In 2000 Berkshire became AAI's international liaison, and now several more non-U.S. groups have joined our Alliance. Nine groups, including the large national organization, Humanists of Canada, are today counted among our 44 member societies.

While the AAI's main focus remains the United States (e.g., only U.S. groups qualify for the matching grant program), the AAI is establishing contacts within the global arena to address common goals.

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.

The ACA Files: Member Profile of the Month

Name: Janet Swisher

ACA Member Since: The beginning. Janet attended the informal bagel shop meetings that took place in 1996. The ACA was officially founded in 1997.

Where From Originally: Arlington, Virginia. Also spent several years in Chicago.

Occupation: Technical Writer

Hobbies: Practices Aikido, a style of Japanese martial arts. She also enjoys snowboarding.

Little-Known Facts: Janet went to high school with Sandra Bullock, where they were in the same drama class - although Sandra is older!



"...the revolution in which each of us could play our small, six-billionth part: once and for all we could refuse to allow priests, and the fictions on whose behalf they claim to speak, to be the policemen of our liberties and behavior... Imagine there's no heaven, my dear Six Billionth, and at once the sky's the limit."

- Salman Rushdie, in an open letter to the six billionth person born on Earth (1997)

ACA members testify at state textbook hearings

Michelle Gadush, Jeff Jones and Laura Sargent testified at the Texas State Board of Education's hearings on social studies textbooks on September 11, 2002. Charles Tabony also attended the hearings. They did this in cooperation with the Texas Freedom Network's campaign to provide a more balanced view in these proceedings, which are often dominated by members of far-right and conservative Christian groups seeking to censor and/or ban certain textbooks. Michelle, Jeff, and Laura spoke against censorship and in favor of keeping a variety of textbook choices available to Texas teachers.

Texas textbook hearings are nationally significant because Texas is the nation's second-largest purchaser of textbooks. Publishers write many textbooks with Texas in mind, and use them as a prototype for schools nationwide. Texas law states that the Board of Education may only reject textbooks because they contain factual errors, however, according to the Texas Freedom Network, last year the board rejected the only available environmental science textbook and made significant changes to several other books. These actions were taken not because of factual errors, but because these books were criticized in the hearings as being biased towards environmentalism, and against capitalism and Christianity.

For a firsthand account of his experience at the textbook hearings, see Jeff Jones' editorial on page 4.

ACA members march on Washington

Let's wish a safe and successful trip to Jeff Dee, Vic Farrow, Jeff Jones (and possibly a few others) who will travel to Washington D.C. next month for the Godless Americans March on Washington. This event will take place on November 2. For more information, see www.godlessamericans.org.

Loony Theist Website of the Month: The Tomatoes Cried God!

<http://www.einterface.net/gamini/miracleislam.html>

by Jeff Jones

Tired of the same old "Virgin Mary on a Donut" sightings? Ever wondered why only Christian icons seem to show up in melted ice cream?

Fear not friends! Allah himself has apparently been frantically spreading his name and messages over every surface he can find. Tomatoes, melons, eggs, beans... All bear witness to the glory of Allah.

One wonders why go to all this trouble when just one single actual appearance would suffice. Oh well. Allah works in subtle, and delicious, ways!



Miracle tomato!

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

Judy Strickland and the scourge of sociology

by Jeff Jones
jeffj@austin.rr.com

When I was a young man of 12 or so I became intensely interested in the politics and government of the United States. I suspect this had something to do with the fall from grace of President Richard Nixon, who had resigned that year in disgrace as a result of the Watergate investigation. This subject fascinated me and so I voraciously read everything I could get my hands on concerning Nixon and his rise to and fall from power. This naturally led me to his defeat at the hands of President Kennedy, which then guided me to the turbulent sixties and the political figures who would become my heroes. I learned about the courage, intelligence, honor and compassion of Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez and Barbara Jordan. These great Americans inspired me to take an active interest in the political process of the United States so I volunteered on my first political campaign at age 14.

As I grew older and more experienced in the ways of the world and the realities of American politics my youthful enthusiasm lessened but never disappeared completely. I still believed that politics was, as Churchill said, an honorable profession. I still believed that most politicians, no matter the party or philosophy, are good people who actually want to do what is right for their constituents and their country. That I continue to believe this even after my experience at the September 11, 2002 Texas State Board of Education textbook approval meeting is astonishing.

It is an unfortunate fact that the members of the State Board of Education are, for the most part, unknown to the average citizen of Texas. This allows them to operate under the political radar and it's a darn good thing for them. In the very long meeting Michelle Gadush, Laura Sargent and I sat through, the members of the board displayed a shocking lack of knowledge of their procedures and rules, twice asking Texas Education Commissioner Dr. Felipe Alanis to tell them what their very own rules were. Dr. Alanis seemed as astonished as we were about this, admonishing the board that "these are your rules, not mine". Of course, it soon became apparent that even had they known their rules they were completely prepared to ignore them.

By law the SBOE can only place a textbook on the non-approved list because of factual errors and for no other reason. When it was pointed out by a representative of the Texas Public Policy Foundation that the board was not allowed to consider content she was told that the board would "consider the whole book, content included". There is a very good reason why some on the board blatantly flaunt their disregard of the laws of the State of Texas. They answer to a "higher" law and they make no bones about it. The SBOE is currently controlled by a distinct philosophic faction that is most certainly right wing, absolutely Christian and totally fundamentalist. Such trivialities as the law cannot be allowed to get in the way of their holy mission - and the children of Texas and, because Texas is so important to the publishers, the rest of the country suffer for it.

A prime example of this disturbing prejudice occurred when a Ms. Ann Newman stood to testify about several sociology textbooks. She didn't like any of them but she had particular objections to a book

published by Wadsworth. She read a few passages from this book and talked about a couple of photographs that even I found questionable for use in high school classes. In a moment of weakness I even considered that some of these people might have a point about a few of these books, at least that particular one. But something didn't quite seem right and it soon became apparent why. Grace Shore, SBOE chairperson, thought something was odd as well and asked Ms. Newman what grade level the book in question was written for and Ms. Newman admitted that she didn't actually know. Chairperson Shore then asked if a representative for Wadsworth was in attendance and fortunately there happened to be one in the room. The representative then informed us that the book Ms. Newman was referring to was actually a college level book and would only be used by students in college credit classes. A very telling and frightening exchange occurred during this section of testimony that explains more than I ever could about the mindset and controlling philosophy of the SBOE. Ms. Judy Strickland, board member from Plainview, Texas and winner of the coveted Eagle Forum Full-Time Homemaker Award (whatever the heck that is) for 1987, arrogantly stated the prevailing attitude of this board.

MS. STRICKLAND: *My comment on these two books that I've looked at on sociology is that maybe next year when we talk about curriculum, that we eliminate sociology from K through 12 — pre-K 8 through 12. I just think these are totally inappropriate.*

MS. SORRELLS: *Who are the publishers?*

MS. NEWMAN: *There were three publishers, as I understand, of sociology, McGraw. I can't remember, maybe Holt. And then this one is Wadsworth. This one's Wadsworth.*

CHAIR SHORE: *I would like to ask the publisher: Is the Wadsworth book an Advance Placement book? Because it definitely is a much more complicated, extensive book than the other two. So can someone tell me if that's an advance placement book?*

FROM THE FLOOR: *That is a college level book.*

CHAIR SHORE: *It's a college book. Obviously, a college book. So it's supposed to be for Advance Placement class?*

FROM THE FLOOR: *There's another one submitted for Advance Placement.*

CHAIR SHORE: *Okay. Because I looked at the three books and that one is definitely much more sophisticated and extensive and more of a college book than the other two.*

FROM THE FLOOR: *Right.*

CHAIR SHORE: *That's what I wanted to know is was that an —*

MS. STRICKLAND: *Don't want my college students looking at it either. It's awful.*

It is obvious that Ms. Strickland believes that she not only knows best what your high school students should be taught but what adults in college should be able to access. Luckily, even a body as conservative as the Texas Legislature isn't about to give a group of religious reactionaries control over college classrooms. Well, I hope not at least.

I would like to point out that there are some very good members on the Texas Board of Education. Chairperson Shore often impressed

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The Commandos of God

By Michael C. Emmert
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Rappelling from the rooftops! Breaking boards! Tearing phone books in half! Coming to a public school near you - it's Commandos!USA!

Militarists throughout history have invoked the name of "God", whomever that may be, in whatever war was fought, to receive supernatural advantage over their enemies. We have seen this disturbing, frightening trend as near as the Pflugerville Independent School District. It's really funny - in nearly every instance of this, BOTH sides claim the deity is on their side. Often, it is the same deity! How can the same "God" be on the side of both the Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland? At the same time, even.

Archaeologists have been slowly unraveling the real history of the Bible (see [The Bible Unearthed](#), by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, and "What Archaeologists Really Say About the Bible" in Harper's magazine). As Moses was not mentioned in Egyptian Hieroglyphics and as there is no trace of the cities allegedly built by David and Solomon having been found, they have gotten a more accurate date for the actual publication of the bible. It turns out that this book was originally published in 603 B.C. by a King Josiah in response to Northern Israel being overrun by the Assyrians.

Having made numerous digs, archaeologists have found that the predominant religion of the region in the period just prior to this was polytheism - worship of many gods. The Greeks and Romans did this, as did the Egyptians and various Mesopotamian tribes. Josiah, seeing what the Assyrians had done, and needing some kind of powerful weapon to use against the superior numbers and iron swords of the Assyrians, claimed to have found a book containing the "Wisdom of the Ancients" in the ruins of an old temple (the Bible itself gives this account). Here's where Josiah made a crucial choice. The god he chose was that of the cult of Yahweh, who had AN ALPHABETIC WRITING SYSTEM. Everybody else with the possible exception of the faraway Greeks had a hieroglyphic system of writing which takes much of a lifetime to learn to read and write.

Here was Josiah's chance to unite the Israelites under one god! With the easy-to-learn alphabetic writing system, he could teach every adult, and, eventually more importantly, every kid how to read and write in a very short time. Josiah must have seen the military implications of this. Troops in the field would get orders directly from him without the garbling effects of transmitting them through 20 or 30 subordinates.

Conversely, he could receive reports directly from his soldiers in the field and know what was happening faster than the Assyrian king and know that it was much more accurate, once again not having been filtered through 20 or 30 self-serving sycophants who would modify the message to make themselves look good.

Josiah knew everything about the Assyrians; they knew nothing worth knowing about him. What a fantastic military weapon! Prior to this development, an elite class of priests had made writing difficult to learn on purpose; they could protect their tiny little circle of knowledgeable friends by keeping everyone else ignorant of the art of writing. Josiah was outnumbered. He needed every man able to write. So Josiah lined everybody up and had them make a copy of the Bible. This taught everybody how to read and write. Suddenly, he had a whole army of scribes whereas the Assyrians had only a few. Democratization ruled!

This might explain why Exodus is so brutal. Josiah gave the people of Israel a history of them being mighty warriors who destroyed walls with secret superweapons and killed huge numbers of enemies. This type of propaganda is widespread in modern armies (Nazi Supermen) and gives the men a feeling of power and invincibility. ("We whipped the Egyptians, why not the Assyrians?") The progression of the lesson plan was right to introduce that concept at the right time. And so the Israelites swept to victory. But I submit it was not some god but rather the fact that they knew the unvarnished facts that led them to oust the Assyrians. Information is the best weapon there is.

Editorial Cartoon

By Phil Amador



Judy Strickland and the scourge of sociology

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me with her efforts at fairness and accuracy. Joe Bernal, Mary Berlanga and Alma Allen are, for the most part, good guys. However, they are far outnumbered by the religious right and when it comes to a vote they have little hope of stemming the tide of censorship that is yearly being forced upon publishers and schoolchildren in our state.

On a more uplifting note, there is hope in sight. A publisher I spoke with told me that this was the first time in his memory that those speaking for textbook approval outnumbered those who were seeking to censor them. It is this sort of participation and political pressure that will empower publishers to stand up to the vocal religious minority and provide fair and accurate textbooks free from the influence of fundamentalist Christianity. For too long the only voices that have been heard are those who seek to revise history to fit their “if white, Christian America did it then it must have been right” philosophy. The good guys stood up and made our voices heard this time and the textbook publishers will, most likely, take notice. The Texas Freedom Network deserves kudos for their tireless efforts and organizational leadership in this cause.

Next year the SBOE will consider biology textbooks and the fight will be even more contentious than in 2002. Nothing we have seen will prepare us for what the fundamentalists will throw at us during the coming year. They know now that there is an organized effort to oppose them and they will get their people out to stand against science. We cannot allow Texas to become a huge Cobb County, Georgia. Write letters to the editor, give money to the cause, stand up and be counted and most importantly learn all you can about the members of the SBOE and their positions. Educate yourself and anyone who will listen and get out there and vote.

Judy Strickland thinks we should do away with teaching sociology in Texas schools. What do you think she will have to say about evolution?

Ten Commandments monument to remain on state capitol grounds

On Friday, October 4, U.S. District Senior Judge Harry Lee ruled that the Ten Commandments monument on the Texas State Capitol grounds does not violate the principle of separation of church and state and may remain where it is.

Thomas Van Orden, an Austin atheist, had sued to have the monument removed because he felt it constituted government endorsement of Judeo-Christian religion. The judge’s ruling stated that “no reasonable person” would consider the display a religious endorsement and cited the Ten Commandments’ historical role in forming the laws of the United States. It is not yet clear whether Van Orden will appeal the ruling.

Judge Lee justified his ruling partly on the statement that, before Van Orden’s lawsuit, nobody had complained about the monument in the 40 years since it was first placed. Whether this is true or not, it should convince each of us of the necessity of speaking out on the issues that are important to us.

Reflections on September 11

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Russell Glasser

“Let’s not join together in groups as a way of shutting out the rest of the world. If we do join groups, it should be because we want to feel close to each other and have friends. Study the examples of the Taliban and al Qaeda, and understand that they’re

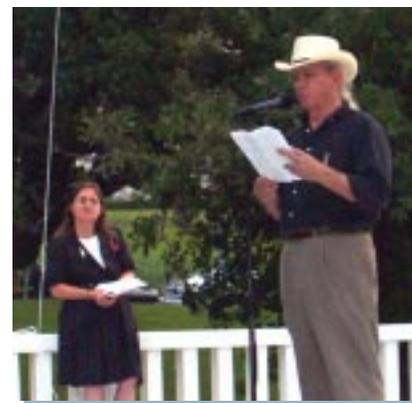
bad not because they practice Islam, and not because of their dark skin, but because they’ve come to a place where they can’t accept anyone having different beliefs than their own. And then let’s try not to follow their example.”

Don Lawrence:

“All across this land and around the world today there are families who would without question surrender all material possessions to have one more day, one more hour, even one more minute to declare to their face their love for those who perished. If they could walk among us again, what would they advise to prevent repetition of tragedy?”

I do not think they would advise extended philosophical or theological arguments. I do not think they would advise expensive, divisive, xenophobic infighting about various possible future versions of the Apocalypse.

I think they would give simple advice. Feed. Clothe. Educate. Learn. Explore. Heal. Smile. Hug. All things that every one of us here today can do. All things that our nation can do if it chooses. I propose that each of us can truly honor those who died by careful examination of our personal worldview and amending it where needed to act out simple – yet profound – daily compassion. We can refuse the circular and exclusionary views that threaten to spiral our society down into a modern dark age. We can instead exercise compassion and reason that will make fact of our mutual resolution: “Never again!”



Michelle Gadush and Don Lawrence