

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprofit Organization
P.O. Box 3798, Austin, Texas 78764 □ 512.371.2911 □ www.atheist-community.org

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Membership renewal time is here again!

by Michelle Gadush

ACA memberships expired at the end of February. Please take some time to renew your membership. This year, we would like everyone who renews to fill out a renewal form so that we can verify and update your information, if needed. **A renewal form is included inside this newsletter**, and you may also request a form by e-mail or pick one up at the bagel shop meetings.

This past year, the ACA has continued to develop into a true “community” for Austin-area atheists. On the first anniversary of the September 11 tragedy, we organized a secular memorial. The event was written up in the *Statesman* alongside religious events in the area. The reporter spoke of how we turn to each other in times of sorrow instead of a god. We also had time for some social activities. Godless Gamers, Movie Night, Happy Hour and our annual Solstice party have all offered opportunities for local atheists to make new friends and have a good time. The ACA has also been active in fighting the ever-present threat of fundamentalist Christianity. Several ACA members testified at the Social Studies textbook hearings and plans are already being made for us to participate in the Biology and Health textbook approval process this summer. I have also tried to keep the membership informed of legislation that affects church-state separation.

Hopefully, the upcoming year will see ACA in our own office! We have also been talking about archiving our community’s activities and publications at the Austin History Center. Someday, it would be nice to have our own center dedicated to the history of the freethinkers, agnostics and atheists in Texas.

There is so much that we could do. That’s where members come in. Volunteer! Find out

what you can do to make ACA even more successful. With only a few people doing all the work, there are serious limitations to what we can do and burnout becomes a major problem. If you can’t volunteer, consider making a donation to one of the ACA funds. Donations can also be earmarked for a particular ACA project.

Elections will be coming up in May. Anyone who has been a member for the six months prior to the election can run. Take an active role in ACA and run for office. I have been proud to be Co-Chair of the ACA for the past two years. There is a great deal of satisfaction in helping to further develop an organization that, I hope, will remain active for many years to come. ACA is continually changing. I hope you all will consider taking a more active role in that evolution.

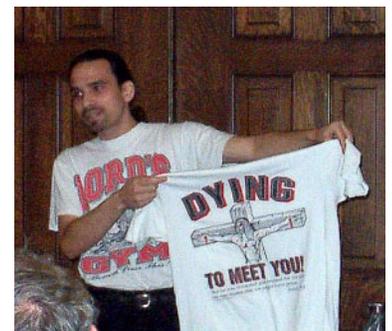
Lecture meeting news

Our scheduled speaker for **Sunday, April 6** is Matthew Uliana, Ph.D., whose topic will be “Geological Evidence for Biblical (and Other) Myths”.

On **Sunday, May 4**, ACA member Don Baker will speak on the implications of viewing Christianity as a meme. Don gave a fascinating lecture several months ago introducing the concept of memes.

Lecture meetings take place at 12:30 PM in the Mayor’s Room of the Austin History Center, located downtown at the intersection of Ninth and Guadalupe. Check www.atheist-community.org/calendar.htm for any changes to the lecture schedule.

ACA member Arlo Pignotti shows off a morbidly funny theist t-shirt during his “Holy Paraphernalia Mania” lecture at our February 1 meeting. For more of Arlo’s holy paraphernalia, see page 5.



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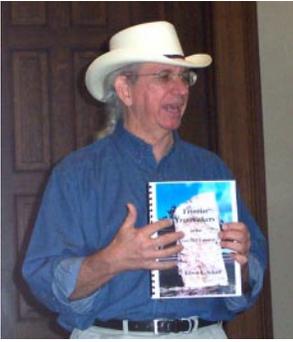
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Articles, reports, and letters to the
editor are always welcomed.

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.



Don Lawrence speaks at the ACA lecture meeting on March 2, 2003. Don spoke about the history of Freethinkers in Texas. The Freethinkers (German: Freidenkers) were German intellectuals, many of whom settled in the Texas Hill Country in the mid-1800's, most prominently in the Kendall County towns of Comfort and Sisterdale.

While not true atheists or agnostics in the modern sense, the Freethinkers considered the notion of Deity irrelevant and opposed clerics and churches. The Freethinkers were active in this region of Texas until the 1970's.

More information on the Freethinkers can be found in the Texas State Historical Association's *Handbook of Texas Online*.

Regularly Scheduled ACA Events:

Sundays:

Bagel Shop Meetings take place every Sunday except the first Sunday of the month at 10:30 AM at the Hot Jumbo Bagelry (307 W. 5th Street).

Monthly Lecture Meetings take place the first Sunday of every month at 12:30 PM in the Mayor's Room of the Austin History Center, which is located at 9th Street and Guadalupe. Watch your e-mail for announcements of pre- or post-lecture brunches at local restaurants.

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

Mondays: Godless Gamers takes place at 7:00 PM at the home of Russell and Ginny Glasser. Contact Russell (rglasser@apollowebworks.com) for directions.

Tuesdays: "The Atheist Experience" is replayed from 4:30 - 6:00 PM on Austin Access Channel 10.

Thursdays: Atheist Happy Hour takes place at 7:30 PM at Antonio's Tex-Mex restaurant near the intersection of IH 35 and US 183.

E-Mail Discussion/Announcement Lists: Lists include a general discussion list, an "ask an atheist" list, a gamers' list, a social announcements list, and a singles' list www.atheist-community.org/email.htm

Radio Show: "The Non-Prophets" Internet Radio Show is on hiatus. You can access the show's archives at www.atheist-community.org

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.

AAI vouches support for freethought education

by Mynga Futrell

Stimulated in part by last June's Supreme Court decision in support of the Cleveland OH voucher scheme, the Board of Directors of the Atheist Alliance recently voted to establish a special fund to be used exclusively for freethought or secular education, and to invite donors. To seed this religion-free education fund, AAI committed \$10,000 from the treasury. The organization set a goal of raising at least \$100,000 in the very near future. Interested donors can contact Bobbie Kirkhart, AAI President to indicate their interest.

The use of the initial \$100,000 accumulated in the freethought education fund will, for the coming five years, be limited to giving grants to U.S. freethought groups that are establishing schools in states where voucher money is available to private schools. Pointing out that local supporters will have to come up with most of the resources for such schools, Bobbie says, "Because many donations on the local level are in kind, land and labor, a relatively small amount of money is the ingredient which can make these schools happen."

In the AAI-adopted plan, proposed schools may apply for preliminary approval in advance of voucher approval in their state, with fund money released when vouchers come into effect. A committee of education experts has formed to set AAI's standards for grant recipients and to evaluate any specific requests.

Atheists in general support our system of secular public schools. They oppose vouchers. With the Cleveland decision, though, vouchers have become an option to the states. It is likely that proponents of government funding for religious schools are moving ahead at state levels. Emboldened by the Cleveland decision, some already have vowed to also push for voucher programs on the federal level (e.g., for the District of Columbia.).

Many states, having strict constitutional wording and/or strong loyalty to public education, will not pass voucher schemes. The public may benefit from awareness that, if it approves religious and nonsectarian voucher schools, it approves atheist voucher schools as well.

Federal appeals court will not rehear "Under God" case

On February 28, a federal appeals court in California rejected the Bush administration's request to rehear a ruling striking down recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools due to its religious content. This ruling means that the decision may now be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

President Bush and Congress immediately condemned the appeals court decision. Bush called the it "ridiculous," and the Senate voted unanimously for a resolution expressing support for the pledge.

The original ruling was made in June 2002 in response to a suit filed by Sacramento atheist Michael Newdow, who believed that his daughter should not be subjected to the religious language in the Pledge, which was added by Congress in 1954. The court ruled that the "Under God" phrase in the Pledge amounted to unconstitutional endorsement of religion.

In response to the February appeals court ruling, the Rev. Barry Lynn of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State said, "The phrase 'under God' may seem innocuous to many, but to those who object to it, nothing less than freedom of conscience is at stake."

Ousted Eagle Scout protests exclusionary policies

Darrell Lambert, the Eagle Scout who was recently forced out of scouting for being an atheist, has helped to found an organization opposing the Boy Scouts of America's policy of denying registration to atheist and homosexual youths and leaders. The Coalition for Inclusive Scouting (www.inclusivescouting.net) consists of grassroots organizations all around the US dedicated to fostering discussion and education about the current state of the scouting program in the United States.

On February 27, Lambert and others from the Coalition protested at the 24th annual Friends of Scouting Breakfast, a fundraiser attended by more than 2,000 guests, benefitting scouting's regional Chief Seattle Council. The group handed out leaflets which asked, "how long will you sit on the sidelines, implicitly endorse and support the organization's stance with your donations and silence?"

The protest brought a mixed reaction from the crowd, some supporting the coalition's position and others arguing that as a private organization, the Boy Scouts of America is within its rights to exclude potential members based on its own criteria. We are sure to hear much more on this debate in the future.

New HUD rules allow tax dollars for church construction and maintenance

The Bush administration has drafted plans to make federal housing funds available to religious groups for construction and repair of facilities used for both religious and social service activities. This new rule is part of the President's "Faith-Based Initiatives" plan and falls under the purview of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

According to Richard A. Hauser, HUD's general counsel, previous HUD rules prohibited religious entities from using tax dollars to build or refurbish houses of worship. The prohibition on using state funds to maintain religious buildings was established in the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Committee for Public Education and Religious Liberty v. Nyquist*.

During the period allotted for public comment (which ended March 7), Americans United for the Separation of Church and State issued a seven-page memorandum to HUD stating that the plan fails "to comply with constitutional requirements". The memo noted that the plan does not include provisions to prevent public funds from being spent to advance religion or to ensure that people seeking help would not be subjected to religious indoctrination through publicly funded programs.

Action Alert: Faith-Based Initiatives: American Atheists is sponsoring protests throughout the country to challenge the President's faith-based initiative. For more information, visit www.noreligiontax.org.

Action Alert: Lesbian Gay Rights Lobby Rally on March 16

Because discrimination against gays, lesbians, and bisexuals is often based on fundamentalist religious beliefs, we have included the following action alert from the Lesbian Gay Rights Lobby:

Three anti-gay initiatives are currently making their way through the Texas Legislature: HB 194, a bill banning gay, lesbian and bisexual people from becoming foster parents in Texas; HB 38, the Defense of Marriage Act, which would prohibit the State of Texas from recognizing same-sex marriages or civil unions; and HB 916, a bill banning same-sex couples from adopting children.

Those opposing these bills may write to their elected representatives or attend the LGRL's "Rally for Youth/Rally for Family" event on Sunday March 16, from 12:30 - 2:00 on the steps of the Capitol. For more information, visit www.lgri.org.

The art of recreational debating

With your guide, Russell Glasser
rglasser@apollowebworks.com

Maybe you've been watching *The Atheist Experience* and listened to them take on hostile callers, and thought to yourself, "Yikes, I could never do that!" Maybe you were listening to the radio, and heard some talk show host say something completely asinine, but you were too intimidated to call in. Or maybe you got just caught up in a good old religious flame war in a chat room, and you were embarrassed when they said something you couldn't answer. If any of these things have happened to you recently, then this column may be of some use to you.

I think everyone should learn how to debate, not only because it's fun, but also because it's necessary to really understand the beliefs that you hold dear. If you don't critically examine your own beliefs once in a while, open them up to attacks, and invite others to kick them around, then you never know if you might be wrong. Beliefs that are unexamined become dogma. As an atheist, I consider dogma to be an inherently bad thing.

What I'm suggesting is that you should treat your beliefs like a science. Modern science is based on a system of peer review. Suppose you're a scientist with a new hypothesis that you think will change the world. If you follow the proper scientific standards, you will think of tests that could verify or disprove your hypothesis. You run your idea through a battery of tests, and when you think it has been well confirmed, you send it to a journal for peer review. Once you reach this stage, other scientists will rake your idea over the coals. Any mistakes you made, or any points that you did not test completely rigorously, will be mercilessly picked apart.

To someone who isn't used to the scientific method, it can seem like the scientific community is unfair and hostile to new ideas. This is not what's happening at all. What happens is that all ideas get rigorously tested, the strong ones survive, and the weak ones are tossed aside into the dustbin of history. It's an evolutionary process, so to speak. Indeed, it is this insistence on rigor that gives science its credibility. Give up that process, and you aren't doing science anymore.

In large part this is what distinguishes real science from pseudo-science. When somebody comes along claiming that you can wear their special magnetic rings and live forever, or take their new miracle drug and never get sick, or harness the untapped powers of the human mind to perform extraordinary feats — those aren't automatically stupid and unscientific. But they become unscientific when the person making the claim stonewalls against testing and criticism. If they hide their supposed evidence from further study, if they whine and gripe about closed-minded skeptics whenever somebody argues with them, they might as well be flat out admitting, "I made this stuff up and it is not going to stand up to scrutiny." A person who has

a genuinely good idea should WELCOME scrutiny. It's the best way there is to prove that the idea really has merit.

I propose that you should treat all of your personal beliefs as if they were scientific theories. Whether they are religious, political, or philosophical in nature, you should get in the habit of understanding why you believe what you do, and putting it to the test of argument. Obviously I don't mean that you need to submit all your ideas to scientific journals or anything. But in the age of the Internet, we have a wonderful "poor man's" alternative to scientific publishing. Anyone can learn to write a web page, and it's even easier to find a message group or a newsgroup that covers a topic of interest. You can also call in to your local radio station or cable access show and argue with the host, although you may want to use caution with people who control the format of the discussion.

Even better, in the Atheist Community of Austin, we have a number of unique venues that will let you express yourself. Start with this very newsletter. In order to get this article published, all I had to do was send a message to Jeff Jones saying, "How soon can I get an article published and how long would it need to be?" We also have a weekly TV show that anyone at all can join as a guest just by asking Martin Wagner, Ashley Perrien, or Steve Elliott. Then there's our Internet audio show, "The Non-Prophets", currently on hiatus, but coming back sometime soon.

I've heard that the average person fears speaking in front of a crowd more than dying. I think that's a silly fear, and people should learn to get over it. It is my hope that reading this series of articles will inspire you to get more active in the atheist community, write to your editor, ask to be a guest on a show, and get involved in email debates.

But you don't even have to take that step yet if it's intimidating. You can also find smaller ways to challenge yourself. Read something you don't agree with. Listen to a show you don't like. Pay sincere attention to an opinion you think is wrong. Think about it carefully, and ask yourself what's wrong with it. You may learn something.

Next month, I'll be talking about every debater's best friend in the whole world: the Internet, and how you can make the best use of it.

Recommended Reading on science and competition:

Offline:

[The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark](#)
by Carl Sagan

Online:

"Cargo Cult Science" by Richard Feynmann

http://www.physics.brocku.ca/etc/cargo_cult_science.html

Holy Paraphernalia Mania

by Arlo Pignotti

In this edition of Holy Paraphernalia Mania I would like to share my experience in holy driving accessories. We all have seen Jesus fish car plaques of every kind: from the fish plaque with the cross over its eye (making the fish look dead), to the plaque of the Jesus fish biting the head off the Darwin fish, which I think should be offensive to naturalists and Christians alike.

Bumper stickers were originally placed on cars to provoke thought, but then came Christian bumper stickers. I think everyone has spotted the classic "WARNING: In case of Rapture, this car will be unmanned!" But there are countless other wacky bumper stickers floating around out there. I have spotted "WARNING: Exposure to the Son may prevent burning!", "All work and No PRAY makes Jack a dull boy!", "Don't steal my car. God will catch you RED - HANDED!" and even political Christian bumper stickers such as "IMPEACH the devil and elect JESUS CHRIST!" Obviously they put that on their car when Clinton was president, and now Bush is in office, but people are still too lazy to peel the stickers off.

Here is a bumper sticker appropriate for those guys who drag around full-size crosses.



Christian shops sell "Driver Under Construction" bumper stickers. I am not sure what that means, but it makes it sound like they shouldn't have a license.



Of course, there are Christian driver's licenses issued by the alleged "Embassy of Heaven" (in Stayton, Oregon). Their claim is "Christ's Kingdom of Heaven is the only authorized government upon the earth. All other governments are of the world and are in rebellion to God."

Below is a sample license. Notice that, rather than give date of birth, they give the date of baptism (also notice that this girl looks under driving age). Their explanation for this can be found in their "Licensed by Heaven" driving manual, which

states "We don't include birthdate because a physical birthdate means nothing to someone who has been born again into the Kingdom." I find it very suspicious that the license was issued the same day she was baptized.



They put as many 7's in the ID number as they can get away with and the license expires after... you guessed it, seven years.

The "Embassy of Heaven" also issues license plates...



So what do you say if you are pulled over? Here is what they suggest in their "Licensed by Heaven" manual:

"State that you are a citizen of Heaven traveling upon the highways in the Kingdom of Heaven, for the purpose of evangelizing, in obedience to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If they try to claim you are on the highways in the State, remind them that the highways are multi-jurisdictional. If you were using the highways in the State, you would need their permission in the form of a State license. But, since you are using the highways in the Kingdom of Heaven, you cannot be trespassing upon the State. They normally will try to have you acknowledge that you are in their State. Remember, there is no communion between light and darkness. Stay in the Kingdom of Heaven, regardless of their pressure."

In the "Rules of the Road" section they have managed to find a biblical verse to match virtually every road rule. One rule being "Follow local driving customs" for I Peter 2:13. If you

(continued on page 6)

Holy Paraphernalia Mania (continued from p. 5)

look it up you will find the commandment to "submit yourselves to every ordinance of man". Yeah, so follow your own scripture and register a real freakin' state driver's license!

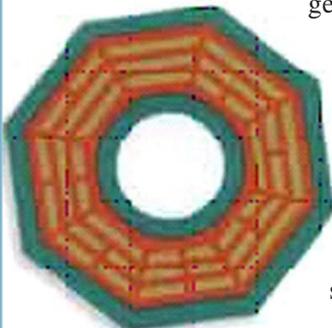
I almost ordered a license and set of plates for myself as a gag, but fortunately I read the fine print where I found that if you title your vehicle with the Embassy of Heaven Church "The Church owns the vehicle and you." I knew there would be a catch! No wonder one of their "Rules of the Road" is to "Allow yourself to be defrauded and forgive those who wrong you." So if the Church steals your car (even with you in it), forgive them!

Under "Accident procedures" they don't say anything about checking if anyone needs medical attention, or calling 911, but "Whoever is involved in an accident shall: Minister to the accident victims."

Many truck drivers express their love for Jesus by painting large murals on their vehicles. Several times I have come across truck murals that depict Jesus appearing in the middle of the road before a semi. Aaaaagh! Look out!!!! Screeeech!!!! Or second thought, don't put on the brakes. He wants to die for your sins.



There is even new age vehicle paraphernalia. Fung Shui fans can purchase a "Ba-Gua Car Sticker". Ba-Guas are mirrors for balancing Chi energy. The advertisement says, "Place one on the rear of your vehicle for road rage, increased traffic and general safety." So it creates road rage, increases traffic, and brings you safety at the same time? The road rage must be caused from the fact that it will blind drivers on sunny days. These things are also advertised for airplanes!



That's all for this edition. Drive safely. Drive RATIONALLY!

**The ACA Files:
Member Profile of the Month**

Name: Jeff Jones

ACA Member Since:
2000

ACA Activities: ACA board member, chair of the membership and building committees, and frequent newsletter contributor.

Where From Originally: Portales, New Mexico.

Has also lived in Dallas and San Antonio and went to college at Texas Tech in Lubbock.

Hobbies: Games, baseball, playing guitar, reading and politics.

Little-Known Facts: Played guitar in a mariachi band for a week. Dated Lee Harvey Oswald's daughter in high school. Has cooked approximately 450,000 steaks in his lifetime(!)



A truly healthy breakfast

by Phil Amador

