

THE ATHEIST

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

February 2004 - Volume 8.1/2



Membership renewal time!

All annual ACA memberships expire at the end of February - which is today! Please take some time to renew your membership by filling out the enclosed membership renewal form or signing up online (see details at bottom of renewal form).

Your membership gives you a voice in the direction of the ACA and helps to support our ongoing activities, such as “The Atheist Experience” live call-in TV show; “The Non-Prophets” Internet audio show; lobbying efforts on behalf of church-state separation; other activist and social events; and the website and newsletter.

ACA board elections will take place this May. Everyone who has been an ACA member for at least six months prior to the election may run for a place on the board. If interested, contact co-chairs Michelle Gadush or Jeff Jones for more details. Whether it’s serving on the board, volunteering on a committee, or coming up with new and unique ideas for the ACA, we urge our members to take an active role in the organization.

If you can’t volunteer, please consider making a donation to one of the ACA’s funds. Your donation can be earmarked for a specific purpose. Our building fund has grown over the past couple of years and, and we hope to eventually raise enough funds to secure a permanent meeting place.

Changes on “The Atheist Experience”

Martin Wagner’s final show as host of “The Atheist Experience” will air today. Martin has appeared on the show for four years now, beginning as Jeff Dee’s co-host in 2000 and later taking over as the primary host.

Ashley Perrien, who has served as Martin’s co-host since 2002, will now become the main host of the show. We will make an announcement soon as to who will be co-hosting. If you are interested in appearing on the show or volunteering to help in the studio, contact Ashley or one of the producers: Steve Elliott or Russell Glasser.

The ACA thanks Martin for his hard work, quick wit, and commitment to educating people about atheism. We also thank Ashley, the producers, and all the volunteers who work so hard to make “The Atheist Experience” one of the ACA’s most successful outreach efforts.

Statewide atheist/agnostic conference planned for this year

by Susan Brown

What: Texas Godfree Conference (although I think we should change the name — Texas Atheists and Agnostics Conference?)

This will be a meeting of atheists, agnostics and freethinkers from all over Texas to discuss and explore issues relevant to our lives and organizations. Proposed topics: church/state separation issues, how to apply for non-profit status, (how to get “non-prophet” status, lol!), producing a cable access television show, producing an internet radio show (we may even do a live broadcast from the conference Saturday afternoon), building an atheist law center in Texas, etc. Children are encouraged to attend, and we will have activities for them.

When: Friday, October 8 through Sunday, October 10, 2004

Where: Holiday Inn Town Lake, Austin

Be on the lookout for detailed information in a few months. If you have any ideas or suggestions for the conference, join the yahoo list: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/texasiconoclasts/> or call Susan Brown at 443-0689.



**Atheist Community of Austin
Membership Renewal Form**

Please print legibly and mail completed form to:
ACA, P.O. Box 3798, Austin, TX 78764

Membership year: 2004 – 2005

Name: _____

Mailing address (please include zip code):

E-mail address: _____
(most ACA notices are sent by e-mail)

Home phone: _____

Type of membership:

_____ Individual: \$24/year _____ Family: \$36/year _____ Student: \$12/year
_____ Senior: \$12/year _____ Lifetime: \$1,000 _____

Donations: ACA needs financial support from our members!

\$ _____	Gift for the Permanent Fund
\$ _____	Gift for the General Fund (no restrictions on use)
\$ _____	Gift for the Building Fund
\$ _____	Other (please specify) _____

Payment Method:

___ Check Amount: \$ _____ Check #: _____ Date: _____

___ PayPal: To fill out the membership form online and pay with PayPal, go to
http://www.atheist-community.org/sign_up_page.htm

To make a donation via PayPal, go to: <http://www.atheist-community.org/paypal.htm>

The end of an era... Hot Jumbo Bagel Shop closes

In late January, ACA members arrived at our regular meeting place, the Hot Jumbo Bagel Shop, and found it permanently closed. This development has left us meeting at a different location every week while searching for a permanent meeting place. Be sure to watch your e-mail or check <http://www.atheist-community.org/meetings.htm> for weekly meeting times and locations. We continue to hold monthly lectures at the Austin History Center on the third Sunday of every month.

Most of the ACA library materials from the bagel shop have been recovered and are in Linda Raymond's care until we find a permanent place for them. Many thanks to Linda, who has also been working on cataloguing the contents of the library.

ACA files amicus brief in Pledge of Allegiance case

The ACA, in cooperation with several other atheist organizations, has filed an amicus curae ("friend of the court") brief with the United States Supreme Court in the case of *Elk Grove Independent School District vs. Michael Newdow et al.* An amicus curae brief is a brief filed with a court by an organization that has an interest in a case before the court even though the organization is not directly involved in the case.

The case in question will decide whether requiring teachers to lead students in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, which includes the words "under God," violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. In October 2003, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case, and oral arguments will probably begin within the next few months.

'Manda and Jeff Dee each wrote sections of the brief, which were compiled with other organizations' sections by an attorney and then filed with the Court.

To read the text of this amicus brief and all court briefs in connection with this case, visit www.restoretheplege.org. Click on "Supreme Court Filings", then "Amicus Briefs". The brief that the ACA participated in is under the heading "Seattle Atheists et al".

ACA screens "Manufacturing Consent"

The ACA recently screened "Manufacturing Consent", a documentary about linguist, author and political activist Noam Chomsky, at MonkeyWrench Books. The event drew nearly 50 people, many of whom had never attended an ACA event. Thanks to Allan Campbell for spearheading the effort, to MonkeyWrench Books for allowing us to host the program in their store, and to all those who volunteered to make the event a success.

Regularly Scheduled ACA Events:

Saturdays:

"The Non-Prophets" Internet audio show airs every other week from 2:00 - 3:30 PM at www.atheistnetwork.com. Archives can be played at www.atheist-community.org.

Sundays:

Weekly Meetings take place every Sunday except the third Sunday of the month. Times and locations will vary until we find a permanent meeting place. Check <http://www.atheist-community.org/meetings.htm> for details.

Monthly Lecture Meetings take place the third 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.

"The Atheist Experience" Live Call-in TV Show: 4:30 - 6:00 PM, on Austin Access Channel 10. Volunteers always needed to screen calls, run cameras, etc. To volunteer, come to the ACAC studios at 1143 Northwestern Ave. between 3:30 and 4:00.

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

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

THE ATHEIST

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Editor: Jill Ford

Contributing Writers for This Issue:

Susan Brown, Mike Emmert,
Russell Glasser, Bobbie Kirkhart

Articles, announcements and letters to the editor are always welcomed at 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.

The Art of Recreational Debating: Recognizing Accurate Sources

With your guide, Russell Glasser
rglasser@apollowebworks.com

Regrettably, it's time for me to punch holes in one of YOUR favorite atheist quotes. Last month, I mentioned this quote from Thomas Jefferson.

“The Christian god can easily be pictured as virtually the same god as the many ancient gods of past civilizations. The Christian god is a three headed monster; cruel, vengeful and capricious. If one wishes to know more of this raging, three headed beast-like god, one only needs to look at the caliber of people who say they serve him. They are always of two classes: fools and hypocrites.”

I know this quote has been used many times on the TV show and countless times on various message boards. But as you may have suspected, I had an ulterior motive in using this quote. If you do research the way I do, you probably tried giving Google a search that looks something like this:

jefferson “three headed” “fools and hypocrites”

Did you find anything? Alert reader Stephen Miller obviously did, or perhaps I should say he did NOT, which is why he won this episode's “breakfast at the bagel shop” prize. (Next time I see you at the bagel shop, Stephen, be sure to claim your prize.)

If you did some hunting around for this quote, you probably would have found it quoted in many places. Somewhere, you might have even found it attributed to specific documents, like “letter to nephew Peter Carr”. But if you tried to track down the full text of the letter in question, you probably would have either come up empty, or found other letters that don't contain the quote.

You might also have come across this page, which provides some really good evidence that the quote is a fake.

<http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/jefferson.htm#PHONYJEFF>

According to that page, the original letter is nowhere to be found. Jefferson may have, and probably did, agree with the sentiments expressed in the letter; he may have even written the quote somewhere. But the point is, we can't be sure, because there's no source. And we owe it to ourselves, as skeptics, to avoid backing our argument with quotes that may well be false.

Now that I've shattered a cherished atheist quote, instead of beating up on Christian apologists like I usually do, some readers may be a little annoyed with me. You may even be saying “Yeah? Well aren't you just asking me to ‘have faith’ that this web page you find is accurate? Why should I trust them but not trust the quote?”

It's a fair question. Mike Emmert recently emailed me to ask, how can you tell a reliable source from a bogus one? How do you know which

sites contain accurate information and which can be safely ignored?

I wish there was an easy answer to this question, but there isn't. One of the principles in debating as well as in science is that there are no sacred cows. There is no single source you can rely on to give you accurate information 100% of the time. Snopes.com (the urban legend busting site) went out of their way to drive home this point, by planting a few fake articles in the midst of all their other well-researched ones. You can read their warning page, and see all the joke articles, at

<http://www.snopes.com/lost/false.htm>

The moral they offer is a valuable one: even when you're reading a trusted source, that's no excuse to follow up on their research.

If you are worried about the credibility of a source because you are trying to use it in a debate, a rule of thumb is that you should avoid posting links to heavily opinionated sites (such as an article in alt.atheism) and try to post links to non-opinion pieces from sites that at least attempt to be objective. For instance, if you read an article on infidels.org, claiming that they are discussing an article on CNN, you should find the original article and quote that instead of the opinion piece. And if that article refers to data from a polling company, see if you can find the original poll and post THAT instead. The further back you go, the more reliable it is. Of course, if the trail ends with a dead end or an opinion, you might think about abandoning the claim entirely.

You can also learn to recognize some sources as especially unreliable when going against an argument by quotation. For instance, the site www.answersingenesis.org is almost NEVER right about anything, and you can easily suspect that when they say, “Scientists claim...” it will be a bald faced lie. Another example would be the newspaper “The Washington Times”. Though masquerading as a real newspaper, it is in fact a far right wing mouthpiece that is owned by the cult leader Reverend Sun Myung Moon. (Reader exercise: don't take my word for it. Prove it to yourself.)

On the other hand, if you come across an opponent who believes that answersingenesis contains real science, you can go a long way toward making your case if you can find an article FROM answersingenesis that proves your point. For instance, here is an article where they deny that Darwin recanted on his deathbed.

<http://www.answersingenesis.org/docs/1315.asp>

Since this is a common claim made by creationists, who tend to trust that site, no further research would be necessary for you. In short, consider your target audience.

In general, you can't go wrong if you keep this thought in mind: “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” The more outrageous the claim someone is trying to support, the more impressive documentation they need to have. And conversely, the more impressive your own evidence is, the more bold claims YOU can get away with.

Students Ask Your Help in Attending the AAI Convention

by *Bobbie Kirkhart*

The Secular Student Alliance has a request to members of AAI and its organizations—“Send a student to the convention.” The AAI is providing the program free to students, but many students don’t have the resources to travel to the convention. SSA’s August Brunzman reports that a very positive response to the Humanists of Florida’s student travel grants has made the SSA a big proponent, and so he, through us, is asking our members to send a tax-deductible donation to P.O. Box 3246 Columbus, OH 43210 or donate through the web at <http://www.secularstudents.org/> support. One should write “travel grants” on the check memo, or if donating on line, send a corresponding email to August (august@secularstudents.org).

Your lucky recipients will see the same excellent program that we have been advertising: writer-comedienne, formerly of Saturday Night Live, Julia Sweeney; Cosmos Studio founder, author Ann Druyan; scientist-writer Massimo Pigliucci; educator-activist Ed Buckner, and radio personality, author of Colorado’s initiative to tax the churches, John Patrick Michael Murphy.

Additional speakers or performers include: Public Relations Director Clark Adams, Internet Infidels; Ethicist Dr. Carlos Bertha, United States Air Force; Activists August Brunzman and Robert Nekervis, Secular Student Alliance; Attorney **Larry Darby**, Atheist Law Center; Anthropologist Dr. David Eller, Metro State University; Activist Andrew Laska, Freethought Charitable Foundation; Activist Chris Lindstrom, Garrison-Martineau Project; Educators Dr. Paul Geisert and Dr. Mynga Futrell, The Brights Movement; Musician Dan Mayo, “The Canadian Dan Barker”; Authors **Linda Rosa** and **Larry Sarnier**, Advocates for Children in Therapy

It is a full program, and anyone who helps a student attend enriches the freethought community for decades to come.

The conference is April 9-11 at the Wyndham Hotel in Colorado Springs (rooms are \$59 per night if you register before March 7).

Don’t forget your own registration. You may register on line, at atheistalliance.org, or you may send your check for \$175 (\$185 after March 1), including all meals, to Atheist Alliance, PO Box 6261, Minneapolis MN 55406.

The Atheist Community of Austin is an affiliate of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), an organization of independent religion-free groups and individuals in the United States and around the world.

Ann Druyan Joins Stars of Freethought to Focus on the Real Family

By *Bobbie Kirkhart*

Author-producer Ann Druyan will receive the prestigious Richard Dawkins award as one of the world’s outstanding atheists at the AAI convention, April 9-11 in Colorado Springs. Druyan, perhaps best known for her collaboration with her late husband Carl Sagan in such works as the Cosmos television series and the movie Contact, is highly accomplished in her own right. She is the founder of Cosmos Studios, sole author of many articles and the novel Famous Broken Heart, director of the New York Children’s Health Fund, which provides mobile pediatric care to homeless and disadvantaged children, and vice chair of the board of directors for the National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Laws.

She joins on the program comedienne Julia Sweeney; biologist Massimo Pigliucci; activist Ed Buckner; founders of the Brights movement, Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert; Internet Infidels Public Relations Director, Clark Adams; and anthropologist David Eller. Likely to participate, but not confirmed at press time, are Bengali writer Taslima Nasrin and, to present the award to Ann Druyan, the world’s most renowned atheist, Richard Dawkins.

The theme, Focus on the Real Family, refers to one of many religious organizations based in Colorado Springs, Focus on the Family. In their version of family, homosexuals can be “cured,” “the rod and reproof give wisdom” to the difficult child, as the Old Testament explains, and bringing an unwanted child into the world is preferable to abortion. Though not every talk will concentrate on family issues, many will. In keeping with the theme, there are programs for all ages.

Cost for the weekend, including all five meals, is \$175 for registrations received before February 15. After that, it is \$185. Full-time students under 25 gain free admission to the program, with the option of meals at a cost of \$75. The hotel is offering single or double occupancy rooms for a special rate of \$59 per night. If this newsletter does not have a registration form, your local group should have one. You may register by credit card on line at atheistalliance.org.

National Geographic banned in Saudi Arabia

by Mike Emmert
yttria99@yahoo.com

I heard recently on the news programs the stunning news that the October 2003 issue of National Geographic magazine was banned in Saudi Arabia! This was pretty puzzling in view of the fact that National Geographic routinely publishes the official government line of those countries they visit. This might be to gain access by currying favor with the government or might simply be viewed as a fact you might want to know about a country, but this seems to be National Geographic's policy.

So why was this issue banned? Starting on page 2 and ending on page 41 is an article about Saudi Arabia: "Kingdom on Edge - Saudi Arabia" by Frank Viviano (<http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0310/feature1/index.html>). The magazine might have anticipated the ban, since they have an explanation, "How hard is it to cover Saudi Arabia?..."

On page 12, NG notes, "Estimates of unemployment among Saudis top 15 percent, and approach 30 percent among those between the ages 20 and 24".

The caption to the photograph on pages 6 and 7 states, "... these laborers are among more than six million guest workers - one quarter of Saudi Arabia's population - from Yemen, Pakistan, and beyond."

Many of the guest workers are highly educated; "The companies who come to us are looking for skilled workers, business grads, engineers, and technicians," said Nasser Salih al-Homoud, an employment agent.

The problem for al-Homoud's client Abdulrahman al-Ali, 25, is explained; "The problem is his schooling: Like many young Saudis, al-Ali has a bachelor's degree in Islamic philosophy."

They have learned this ignorance and it is of no use to them. It kind of reminds me of the ongoing debate on this list about weak vs. strong atheism. Actually, since "god" is DEFINED as being invisible, silent, odorless, tasteless, and nontactile, and not detectable by instruments, the whole argument is meaningless and pointless. That's a trap set by theists; one of the many theistic traps poor al-Ali has to negotiate in his search for a job.

Some Saudis are struggling against this. From pages 26 and 27, skipping the stunningly beautiful photographs that are NG's forte to page 32; "Wafa M. is a 26 year old science teacher so devoted to her profession that she makes a 200 mile round-trip five times a week from Jeddah to a rural high school near Medina that would have no biology department without her."

She is chauffeured, since the religious police won't let her drive, and must wear a veil. The NG crew was going to photograph her with no

veil, but she changed her mind; "Wafa tried to explain. 'It's not only a religious issue for me, and not even a civil liberties issue,' she said quietly. 'It's about our families, about what they'd say and think if someone saw me in your magazine. Things like that just aren't done.'"

Saudi Arabia's main business in the world was tourism - until "March 3, 1938, when American engineers unleashed the kingdom's first commercially viable oil gusher after 15 months of drilling." Up until that time, indeed even continuing today, the House of Saud has had a vested interest in ignorance. You MUST know fossils to successfully drill for oil, and the story they tell conflicts with the world chronology according to the Koran.

Page 16 describes some of the parallels between Texas and Saudi Arabia - "From the moment the oil concession was granted, "modern" in Saudi Arabia came to mean American modern - and more precisely, the outsize, mass-consumer version of modern that American oilmen carried with them from the U.S. Southwest, primarily Texas. Even apart from oil, the fit was in some ways natural. Like Texas, Saudi Arabia juxtaposes a long humid sea coast and a huge arid interior scorched by extreme desert temperatures. Between its 1600 miles of Red Sea and Persian Gulf beaches lie 865,000 square miles of flat desert plains and mountains, more than three times the size of Texas itself and two and a half times the combined size of Germany and France."

So Texas has a very solid, real connection to Saudi Arabia. In both places, there is a large segment of hardscrabble land peopled by nomads or people living in trailers where a living is a matter of luck - particularly in the oil business, which is a huge gamble and was even more so in the early days with its primitive or nonexistent seismic surveys. It is enormously tempting in such a circumstance to temper your luck by appealing to some god to change it, and if you strike it rich, you just might credit the god with your fortune. It's a recipe for fundamentalism.

As for why this issue of NG was banned from Saudi Arabia, I would recommend reading this article. The article was for outsiders to read as propaganda, to form an opinion about what the Saudi's religion is like and to assuage fears of the military arm of the theistic government; not the fighter jet-jockeys, but the secret agent-terrorists. It tells the story of Wafa M. and of the Saudi Shura (unelected parliament). The Saudi Shura is one of the most educated government assemblies ever to exist. "Of its 120 members, 77 hold doctorates or medical degrees; 87 are graduates of major Western universities. Remarkably for Saudi Arabia, only 12 hold degrees in religious studies."

So, the royal princes attend real universities while poor Abdulrahman al-Ali has to attend religious madrassah.

Saudi Arabia is a horror story about the pervasive influence of religious lunatics. This could happen in Texas. I feel that a lot of our Texas religious fanaticism was imported from Saudi Arabia along with the oil. But we do have an advantage here; at least Texas is not a major tourist trap for starry-eyed pilgrims from around the world. So if we overthrow our idiot preachers, might not the shock waves of that revolution reach out to that poor, misguided, hallucinatory land?