

A U S T I N

Atheist

April 2008 • Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin **ACA**

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Connecticut Valley Controversy

—by Tracie Harris (© 2008)

At the end of 2007, a small group of atheists in the Hartford, Connecticut, area gained notoriety for a holiday display erected on the front lawn of the Vernon Town Hall. A single sign, legally posted by the group, struck at the heart of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, which, in just one, short sentence, protects our most valued freedoms in the U.S., and creates the basis for the separation of church and state:

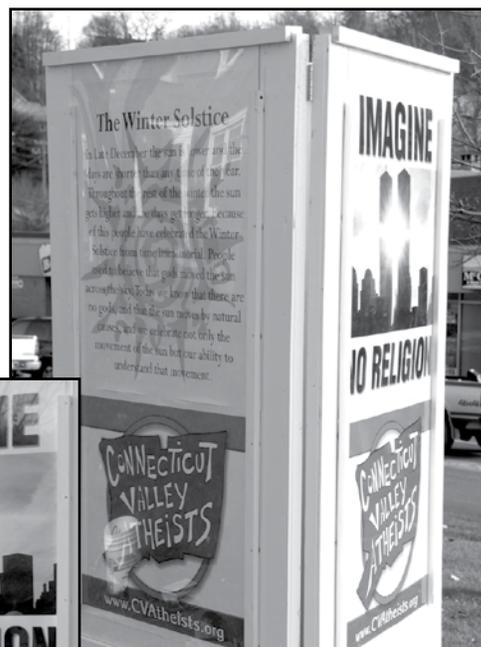
Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

On December 12, 2007, The *Journal Inquirer*, which bills itself as "North-Central Connecticut's Hometown Newspaper," commented that, "Ever since the sign

was installed Dec. 1 e-mails and letters from across the country have flooded into the *Journal Inquirer*, as well as Vernon Town Hall, with comments being split fairly evenly—people either love it or hate it."

If you aren't familiar with the story, here is what happened: Connecticut Valley Atheists (CVA) had been protesting a nativity display that, every December, without fail, graced the front lawn of the town hall. Just to be clear, nativities on private property—such as in front of a home or church or even in a storefront window—are not illegal or un-Constitutional, and are not contested by CVA in this case; but the First Amendment has been interpreted, historically, by U.S. courts to prohibit such displays on government land if they appear to promote particular religious views. So, CVA issued a grievance, expressing that when local government supports Christian-

Right and Below: The CVA holiday display in front of the town hall sports one message about the winter solstice and another showing the pre-9-11 World Trade Towers in New York City with the John Lennon quote, "Imagine No Religion."



To read feedback or to voice your opinion about the display to CVA, visit their online forum at: <http://www.cvatheists.org/forum/>

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only displays, it creates a breach of church-state separation and thereby disenfranchises citizens who may not observe the holidays, or who may celebrate in a nonreligious or different religious fashion. CVA prevailed upon the city to refrain from allowing any such displays. City officials responded, but rather than eliminate the displays, they opted to allow everyone equal opportunity to participate by

issuing permits for display spaces on the government lawn.

CVA ultimately decided that despite their conviction that government property should not be used in the promotion of religious opinions, they would apply for a permit in order to attempt to bring their grievances to light. CVA received their permit and mounted

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About ACA

ACA provides opportunities for socializing and friendship, promotes atheistic viewpoints, encourages positive atheist culture, defends the First Amendment principle of state/church separation, opposes discrimination against atheists, provides outreach to atheists in the greater Austin area, and works with other organizations in pursuit of common goals.

ACA produces a live cable access TV show and Internet radio show, presents a monthly lecture series, maintains a library of Freethought books, protests in support of civil liberties, and participates in various community service activities.

ACA operates in an open and democratic manner to provide a community of like-minded people for social interaction and support.

ACA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational corporation made up of volunteers. The membership is restricted to atheists, but does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, or disability.

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Submission Deadlines

Issue	Deadline
Jan. _____	Dec. 1
Feb. _____	Jan. 1
March _____	Feb. 1
April _____	March 1
May _____	April 1
June _____	May 1
July _____	June 1
Aug. _____	July 1
Sept. _____	Aug. 1
Oct. _____	Sept. 1
Nov. _____	Oct. 1
Dec. _____	Nov. 1

Controversy

—Continued from page 1

a modest display on the lawn. The tri-sided sign presented an explanation and history of the winter solstice on one side; but, it was the other two sides that attracted national media attention.

CVA Coordinator and Connecticut State Director for American Atheists Dennis Himes agreed to an interview and shared that, “the surprise was not in any single reaction, but in the total size of the aggregate reaction. We expected it to be controversial, but I did not expect the amount of publicity we got.” He explained CVA wasn’t “expecting it because we had no prior experience with this sort of thing. I think the amount of reaction was to the novelty of atheists being unapologetic about their views.” In fact, having any atheist message posted on government property, unapologetic or not, is a novelty in the U.S.

What caused the national reaction? A pre-9-11 image of the World Trade Towers, standing tall and proud, backlit by gleaming sunbeams, illustrating a short quote from a John Lennon song: “Imagine No Religion.”

Was criticism predictably split between atheist support and theist criticism? “Mostly.” But, Dennis goes on, “there was some theist support and atheist criticism.” Most of the criticism, he says, was aimed at the perception “that the display was anti-religious, and not simply celebratory.” Further, he says he “was disappointed at some of the atheists’ reactions, which seemed to ignore, or forget, that the placement of a nativity scene on government land is a political act.” It is considered a political act because, as mentioned earlier, U.S. courts have generally found government support of religion in this fashion to be a violation of the First Amendment. And, just as in the case of CVA’s town hall, government agencies try to avoid these types of

court battles because they are not optimistic about their chances of winning. Still, Dennis is happy with the publicity, and notes, “It made many people aware that there are atheists in the area who are committed to standing up for what they know is right.”

In reading through the criticisms posted at blog sites and newspaper comment sections—including a forum CVA has now begun at their Web site to handle the significant volume of public feedback—many posters were referring to the display, literally, as an “attack against” religion, god or even religious people. Critics appeared to be sincerely unaware that the photo and message on the sign were intended as a statement regarding what is potentially positive about lack of belief in god—about atheism. Many seemed too offended to consider the sign as offering an alternative to the mental and social schisms created by some religious perspectives, which—9-11 made clear—can sometimes lead to atrocities. “No religion” would produce a world where violence and prejudicial hatred would be reduced, since religion would be eliminated as one motivation for such feelings and actions. The sign’s message, asking people to imagine the benefits of a world without religion, was interpreted by many as hostility toward religious believers. Ironically, many of these same critics never included an explanation for why the inverse should not also be considered: Why wouldn’t religious messages, including the town’s standard nativity, asking people to consider religion, be just as reasonably interpreted as hostility aimed at nonreligious citizens?

Is there any message an atheist group could publicize to express the potentially positive impact atheism could bring to society, without some theists interpreting it as an attack against religious citizens? “Probably not. If atheism has a positive impact on society, then that impact is relative to society without atheism’s impact, which is by definition theist.” In

other words, to promote atheism as a positive choice necessitates promoting that not believing in god is a positive choice. But, again, to state that this should be considered an attack on religious citizens is no different than stating that promoting belief in god should be considered an attack on unbelieving citizens. Dennis admits, though, that CVA was “not attempting to minimize the negative response. Negative response is a price we were willing to pay to get our message out, especially since part of our message was to give the religious a taste of their own medicine. This display was a reaction to the traditional nativity scene, after all.”

At CVA’s Web site you will find a statement that includes, “Since we erected our holiday display in Vernon we have received several e-mails suggesting that the World Trade Center design was inappropriate.” If the intended message of the display includes that without religion some social tragedies would be averted—in the current world climate, what would have presented a more relevant symbol, than the World Trade Towers? It is internationally recognized as an icon of modern atrocity—tragedy on an unparalleled scale—and the attackers themselves expressed religious motivations. Still, what other ideas for visual imagery or slogans did CVA consider for their display?

“Often lost in this controversy is the fact that only two sides of the three-sided display had the ‘Imagine No Religion’ design. The other had a picture of the sun with the words, ‘The Winter Solstice: In late December the sun is lower and the days are shorter than any time of the year. Throughout the rest of the winter the sun gets higher and the days get longer. Because of this people have celebrated the Winter Solstice from time immemorial. People used to believe that gods moved the sun across the sky. Today we know that there are no gods, and that the sun moves by natural causes, and we celebrate not only the movement of the sun

but our ability to understand that movement.' We also considered a HumanLight display on one panel, but we weren't sure about trademark issues." HumanLight is a Humanist holiday celebrated on December 23, which focuses on the hope of a positive future for humankind, with reason and compassion as its guide.

Was any of the criticism CVA received constructive? Did any critics offer alternative symbols that would have been more effective or appropriate, or even less offensive, in pointing out how a lack of religious belief (atheism) could benefit the world?

The response is hardly surprising: "No, not really."

In trying to understand CVA's critics, Dennis offers that, "It's hard to speak for other people on matters like this, but I suspect that some of them at least didn't want to be reminded that the political struggles against Al Qaeda and related groups have an ideological basis, and that basis is the conflict between theocracy and secularism." But he is quick to add, "our display is a reaction to the desire by Christians in the town to have a nativity scene on town property, and our recommendation all along has been for no displays promoting worldviews at all. I've also asked several people who've complained how loudly they were complaining when there was only a nativity scene in the park. I haven't received any answers yet."

As if the erection of the CVA holiday display and the reactions it received weren't interesting enough, another significant chapter of this story began to unfold. When complaints began flooding town hall, the mayor decided it was time to add a few more holiday lawn decorations. More government holiday trees were erected—directly between the CVA display and public sidewalk view. CVA's local government, charged with upholding and defending the Constitutional rights of all its constituents—including their right to freedom of speech—appeared to

be trying to block CVA's message from public view.

"To be honest, I thought it was kind of funny, because it was such a transparently childish thing to do (and it didn't really block our display all that much). It also turned out to be a big tactical error for the mayor, because it made him look petty. The Fox TV news reporter, in fact, clearly thought the placement of the tree was a bush league thing to do, and if he didn't actually roll his eyes, he came close."

Considering the mayor's reaction to this year's display, how confident does Dennis feel about CVA's chances of obtaining a permit for future holiday displays?

"We have heard no official word from the town whatsoever since the display went up. What will happen in the future is uncertain. One thing to keep in mind is that this is a different mayor than the one who set the current policy. The old mayor, Ellen Marmer, was in favor of having no displays, but decided on the multi-display policy because she was tired of the Republicans in town accusing her of being anti-Christian. (She's a Jewish democrat.)"

If CVA does obtain a permit in 2008, what could they possibly erect that would create more public interest than this year's display? "I'm not sure. We'll undoubtedly be discussing that at our meetings."

In December 2007, a modest, tri-sided holiday display attracted national news agencies to Connecticut to highlight a small group of atheist citizens touting a brief, but powerful message. Public dialogue and debate were opened. Opinions and perspectives were aired and scrutinized. Freedom of speech and separation of church and state were vigorously examined and even criticized. It will be tough to top the 2007 display for generating public interest. But many people will be watching Hartford, Connecticut, to see if CVA can succeed in generating the same sort of fervor in 2008. ■

ACA Pub Crawl

—by Shilling Sythe



The ACA recently had its first annual Godless Pub Crawl. We had a turnout of about 23, including a few new to the group and a couple we hadn't seen in awhile. After some food and drink at the Dog & Duck, we headed out in matching T-shirts made for the event.

We hit six downtown places overall and had great response from the public. Not 20 minutes seemed to go by without a cheer or photo from passersby. We brought some ACA handouts and managed to run out halfway through. The businesses also treated us well, one going as far as waiving cover fees. The event garnered some great exposure for both the group and atheism in general.

The night was not completely without theistic interaction. There was some friendly conversation between a couple of our members and some Comfortesque street solicitors handing out counterfeit bills to prove their analogous deity. This and a couple of eye rolls rounded out the negative attention. All in all, I'd say that the pub crawl far exceeded expectations. It was a great combination of fun for participants and exposure for the organization. So, members, start thinking about places you'd like to hit next time. ■

Atheist Quotables... ”

"The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as His father, in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."
—Thomas Jefferson, Letter to John Adams, April 11, 1823

"The government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."
—John Adams, Treaty of Tripoli, article 11

"Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise."
—James Madison, April 1, 1774

“

Trip Report from the Public Access TV Hearing

—By Don Baker

Members of the ACA spoke to the Austin Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission public hearing at City Hall the evening of March 12, 2008. The hearing concerned the state of public access television in Austin. Input provided in the meeting will be used to make recommendations to the City Council on various public access TV issues. ACA members were involved because our show, *The Atheist Experience* relies on these city-provided services to advance atheism in Austin. Three ACA members spoke in the public hearing and two more came to lend their support.

There were a number of different groups and individuals airing their opinions on a handful of contentious issues. The major issue of concern was that of Time-Warner Cable being late in their payment to the city as part of their long-standing contract agreement. Many

there were concerned that Time-Warner might try to renege on their contract as Grande cable has done successfully in other markets. Such an action would dramatically set back cable access in Austin. Public Access Television Austin (PACT), also known as Channel Austin, a company under contract to manage the three cable access channels (10, 11, and 16), has done a poor job of maintaining equipment in the studios and has limited facility access and training. Not surprisingly, their response was that things would improve when the money flows again. A semi-formal group of public access television show producers, known as the Producers Council, extolled the virtues of public access television and railed at PACT management for equipment and other management problems. Other, less formal producers' groups expressed their frustration with the Producers Council for becoming "suits" (too much like PACT management) and

too focused on politics. A host of producers, supporters, and a few detractors also shared their often-passionate opinions about various aspects of cable access. Overall, about 80 people signed up to give short speeches, and the session went long into the night. The proceedings were broadcast live on cable channel 6.

ACA members who gave three-minute speeches at the hearing were:

- *Shelley Roberts* read a statement by a friend who implored the city to force Time-Warner Cable to honor its contract. The theme of her speech was echoed several times throughout the evening.
- *Dr. Mark Loewe* spoke about his personal experience with public access as an expert on topics related to science education. He praised public access television

for providing a public forum where the greater community can hear from such often-suppressed voices.

- *Don Baker* talked about how *The Atheist Experience* TV show exemplified the value of public television in that we use it to educate about church-state separation issues and defend the constitution. He made the point that *The Atheist Experience*, which allows the audience to interact with the show on issues of ultimate concern from a rational (not faith) perspective, is unique in the United States. Don made the point that through the Internet, the show is reaching an international audience and has become the *Austin City Limits* of atheism.

ACA members Keith Berka and Joe Rhodes were in the audience lending their moral support.

The hearing was an interesting window into the creative and energetic personalities that make cable access television run in Austin. A small but significant number of people resented being constrained by a shared public forum. One person held up signs for the cameras as a strategic backdrop during most speeches. A number of people railed against the issues of a last-minute agenda change and people being constrained to speak only on certain issues during certain agenda items. Fortunately, the commission heard from more sensible and polite voices as the event proceeded. Overall, most people were supportive of the potential of cable access, but many had concerns or complaints. A surprising number of minority groups said how their communities were greatly enriched by their locally produced shows. A number of other speakers seemed to be poster-children for the "Keep Austin Weird" slogan. One speaker,

ACA CALENDAR

THURSDAY, APRIL 3

- **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour* (Dog & Duck Pub)

SUNDAY, APRIL 6

- **12:15-1:45 p.m.:** *ACA Lecture Series* (Dr. Charles Jackson on what geology can tell us about global warming; Free & open to the public)

- **3-4:30 p.m.:** *Atheist Experience* (Channel 10)

- **5 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience* (El Arroyo)

THURSDAY, APRIL 10

- **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour* (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, APRIL 12

- **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show* (See Web site for details)

SUNDAY, APRIL 13

- **10-11 a.m.:** *Board Meeting* (Romeo's (outside))

- **11 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting* (Romeo's)

- **3-4:30 p.m.:** *Atheist Experience* (Channel 10)

- **5 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience* (El Arroyo)

THURSDAY, APRIL 17

- **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour* (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, APRIL 19

- **10 a.m.-?:** *Blood Drive* (Blood & Tissue Center)

- **11 a.m.-12 p.m.:** *Adopt-a-street Clean Up* (Jack-in-the-Box, Burnet Rd. & Anderson Ln.)

SUNDAY, APRIL 20

- **11 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting* (Romeo's)

- **3-4:30 p.m.:** *Atheist Experience* (Channel 10)

- **5 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience* (El Arroyo)

THURSDAY, APRIL 24

- **7 p.m.-?:** *Happy Hour* (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, APRIL 26

- **2-3:30 p.m.:** *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show* (See Web site for details)

SUNDAY, APRIL 27

- **11 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting* (Romeo's)

- **3-4:30 p.m.:** *Atheist Experience* (Channel 10)

- **5 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience* (El Arroyo)

REGULAR LOCATIONS:

- **Austin History Center**, 9th and Guadalupe. Building opens at noon. Lectures are free and open to the public.
- **Blood and Tissue Center of Central Texas**, 4300 North Lamar Boulevard, 512.206.1266.
- **Dog & Duck Pub**, North of the Capitol, 406 W. 17th at Guadalupe, 512.479.0598. Informal gathering; food available.
- **El Arroyo**, 1624 W. 5th near Mopac (look for the blue bus)
- **Romeo's**, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. South of Town Lake.

Unless otherwise indicated, events are open to all atheist and atheist friendly people, regardless of ACA membership status. Check the calendar on the Web site <www.atheist-community.org/calendar> for last minute changes.

for example, wore a cyborg costume and gushed on how his show had helped him reach the (closet) cyborg community in Austin.

It was interesting, too, to sit in the audience and listen for what people had to say about religion, atheists, and the Atheist Experience. Atheist programming on PACT came up a number of times as an example of diversity. One religious programmer went so far as to say that she was glad we were on the air along with her, but most seemed to think that atheism was yet another way of being weird. We were conspicuously absent from the Producers Council presentation on show success stories. Don, who was the only ACA speaker to mention atheism, got a number of encouraging comments from audience members after the presentation. On the topic of religion, a number of ministers were passionate about cable access as it

clearly allows them to grow their church, not to mention feeding and clothing them. One Hispanic man gave a talk about how praying along with a cable access TV show allowed his wife to be cured from anemia. He thought that was reason enough to keep cable access TV on the air.

With luck, the hearing will help Austin keep public access cable television alive and healthy for many years to come. The city's contract with Time-Warner cable expires in 2011 when a major funding shift will be required to keep this great community resource going. The Austin-American Statesman published an article about the event and the issue on Saturday, March 15, in case anyone would like to read more. As long as we can, the ACA will continue to be broadcasting with The Atheist Experience and possibly other shows. ■

Board Election May 4

ACA will have its board elections on May 4th, 2008 starting at 12:15pm at the Austin History Center, 9th and Guadalupe. The meeting will be in lieu of a lecture. The building opens at noon. You must be a currently paid member to vote in the election. Help save time at the election meeting by renewing your membership early. The renewal form appears below. We encourage all members to participate in the election.

If you are interested in running for the board, please contact one of the current board members and let them know of your intentions. The February 2008 issue of the Austin Atheist had an article about what the officers and board member responsibilities are. Consult that issue (available on the Web site) or a current board member for more information. We will publish a note about the election procedure in the next issue of the Austin Atheist.

Texas state law requires non profit organizations to make their membership list available to members a reasonable time prior to an election. This notice serves as the official announcement of the list's availability. ACA Treasurer Mike Swift has a list of current members for inspection by current members. The list may be viewed by appointment. Contact him at <mswift@austin.rr.com> or in person at an ACA meeting. ■

Renew your ACA Membership

Membership fees are \$24/year for individuals, \$12/year for students and retirees, and \$36/year for a family. Lifetime membership is \$1000. Our membership year begins on March 1st.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION for the ATHEIST COMMUNITY of AUSTIN, INC.

Please fill out the information below if your information has changed or make corrections to your mailing label, as necessary, on the opposite side of this form.

Last Name

First Name

Companion's Name (for family membership):

Last Name

First Name

Street

City/State/Zip

Phone

E-mail

Please make your check out to ACA in the amount above depending on your membership type. Any amount over the membership fee will be considered a tax deductible contribution to the ACA.

New members must complete the following membership affirmation:

This is to certify that I am a non-theist, that I have read the Purpose Statement of the Atheist Community of Austin, Inc. (appearing on Page 2), and that I am in agreement with the principles stated therein. I understand that membership is only open to non-theists.

Signature

Date

Signature (Companion)

Date

Please return this form and payment to: Atheist Community of Austin, Inc., P. O. Box 3798, Austin, TX 78764 or bring it to any ACA event and give it to an ACA board member.



Atheist Community of Austin
 P. O. Box 3798
 Austin, TX 78764
 www.atheist-community.org

ATHEIST EVE

CONCEPT BY DON BAKER — ILLUSTRATED BY TDESIGN ©2008

WHAT WAS JESUS' NATURE?

If Jesus was a god who still lives...

...then he neither died for your sins nor suffered on the cross. The crucifixion is just a gory performance art piece staged by a sadomasochistic trickster.



If Jesus was a god who died...

...better luck next time.



Please insert your tithe to play again...

If Jesus was a man...

...then regardless of how he died, what about the millions killed in his name? Fortunately for Christians, Jesus' substitutive sacrifice makes him responsible for the collective sin of all those murders.



THE CRUSADES



WITCH BURNINGS



THE HOLOCAUST

If Jesus is just a myth then Christianity is REALLY depraved.