

# A U S T I N Atheist

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## The Best Year Ever for the ACA —by Don Baker

For our first 2009 issue of the Austin Atheist, we'll take a look back at the 2008 achievements and activities of the Atheist Community of Austin. By any objective measure, 2008 was the best in its 11-year history. We hope to maintain this level of success in future years and continue to expand our reach, where we can.

### Membership & Infrastructure

The ACA has 120 members—a maximum for our group. Due to our visibility and impact outside of Austin, we have members from such diverse locations as California, Oregon, Mississippi, Maine, Washington, Arkansas, New Jersey, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Supporters from around the world are donating to the ACA, largely due to the popularity of our Television and Internet Radio shows. We have received about \$2000 in non-designated donations for the year. A small number of local supporters have made significant donations to our building fund, which will help ensure that the ACA will have a permanent home in the future.

Speaking of finding a home, the ACA created a subsidiary organi-

zation, The Atheist Community of Austin Library Corporation as a tax-exempt library corporation. It is this organization that will be the owner of our eventual building while the ACA proper will be guests in the building. This structure is necessary to ensure our building will not have property tax.

Largely invisible to the membership, Treasurer Mike Swift and Lisa Mais have reorganized the ACA's books to better track our money flow, improve our tax filing, and making setting up structures for future Treasurers.

### Affiliations

The ACA has inspired the creation of two local atheist groups. The Society of Edmonton Atheists got its start during 2008, thanks largely to the efforts of ACA member Michael Vester. The Canadian group borrowed many ideas from the ACA and adapted them for their city. The group is featured in the July 2008 Austin Atheist. The Atheist Community of Topeka (Kansas) also got its start with a little inspiration from the ACA. Founder Lee Tibbetts visited our group this summer and filled us in on atheist life in Kansas. Recall that Topeka is also home to the infamous pastor Fred Phelps. We

expect great things from these two groups and we hope to inspire and help other groups get established in the coming years. Our community spirit is going national.

The Atheist Longhorns at the University of Texas had a very active 2007-2008 school year. They were successful in bringing both Richard Dawkins and Dan Barker to Austin for well-attended public lectures with help from Center for Inquiry and the Freedom from Religion Foundation, respectively. The Atheist Longhorns gives non-religious students an outlet for camaraderie and a voice among the student body. ACA member and former ACA Board member Sandra Jaramillo has led the group. We look forward to continued collaboration with the Atheist Longhorns and the Center for Inquiry Austin affiliate, the third major non-theist group in the Austin area. The ACA is continuing its affiliation with the national groups American Atheists, the Atheist Alliance, American Humanists, and the Council for Secular Humanism.

Atheist groups from around Texas organized the Texas Freethought Convention in October, which was organized by American Atheists and other Texas-based groups. While ACA President Matt Dilahunty spoke at the convention, it was not as well attended by ACA members as it could be. We hope to promote the effort and participate more in future years.

ACA member Tracie Harris has written a number of articles for the

Austin Atheist in 2008 as part of a conscious effort to build bridges with other groups and raise awareness of their efforts. Toward that end, she has featured the efforts of Austin Cline, the lead contributor of <atheism.about.com>, the controversial holiday sign put up in 2007 by the Connecticut Valley Atheists, the flap over the Philadelphia-based PhillyCOR's uncontroversial billboard, and India's growing skeptic movement. These quality articles have been published in other online journals.

### Education

The ACA is organized as an educational organization and several of our flagship efforts have a strong educational slant, including *The Atheist Experience* TV show, the *Non-Prophets* Internet radio show, and the ACA Lecture Series.

*The Atheist Experience* TV show had a stellar 2008. While the audio and video content of *The Atheist Experience* has been available on the Web for a number of years now, 2008 marked the year when fans of the show began making short video clips of interesting segments of the show and re-posting them to YouTube. These clips have acted as free advertising that have reached thousands of potential viewers. Recent fan e-mail has been dominated by people saying that they discovered the show on YouTube. As a nod of gratitude to our YouTube posting fans, *The Atheist Experience* created a fan appreciation web page listing all of the available clips and other

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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.

## ACA Board of Directors

### President

Matt Dillahunt

### Vice President

Don Rhoades

### Treasurer

Michael Swift

### Secretary

Don Baker

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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

# Best Year

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tributes to *The Atheist Experience*. As of this writing there are over 400 such contributions. One of these clips has been licensed for use in an independent film, which unfortunately was not distributed to a wide audience. Product sales of CD/DVD's of past shows have brought in over \$1000 to the ACA in 2008.

*The Atheist Experience* moved to cable channel 16 in the fall in an effort to reach a wider local audience. In November, *The Atheist Experience* began a live video stream on ustream.tv. The live stream, with its interactive chat feature, was an immediate hit with our non-local fans. Most of our callers are now from outside Austin and many are from outside the country. Because the non-local callers tend to be atheists, the theist calls that were the main feature of the show are now less frequent. We are hoping that this change does not negatively impact our popularity. *The Atheist Experience* is unique in the world for being a live show where atheists can interact with the public at large.

*The Atheist Experience* wouldn't be possible without the efforts of the dedicated volunteers who contributed hours of their time every week to its production. Joe Rhodes, Frank Paschal, Steven Elliott, Shelley Roberts, and John Iacoletti made the 49 episodes happen for 2008. Thanks, also to Shilling Cadena and Mark Loewe. In front of the camera were host Matt Dillahunt, Russell Glasser, Don Baker, Tracie Harris, Jen Peeples, Martin Wagner, and Ashley Perrien. All of these people are polished voices of atheism who are reaching tens of thousands of people worldwide every week. Jeff Dee will return as a regular co-host of *The Atheist Experience* during 2009.

*The Non-Prophets* produced 24 episodes in 2008 and continues to have a loyal following. The show features the irreverent personalities

of Denis Loubet, Russell Glasser, Matt Dillahunt, Shilling Cadena, and Thad Engling. Denis's themed introductions have become a fun feature of the show and the guys have great thought-provoking debates on current topics. *The Non-Prophets* have benefited by a new audio mixer that has not only improved the audio quality of the show, but has enabled the show to include call-in participants. *The Non-Prophets* has had two big-name guests during 2008: Pharyngula blogger and biology professor P. Z. Myers and Guy P. Harrison, author of "50 reasons people give for believing in a god." *The Non-Prophets* looks forward to having its founder, Jeff Dee back on in 2009 after his break.

The ACA Lecture Series also had a good year under the supervision of Don Rhoades. The ten lectures of 2009 included speakers State Representative Donna Howard, Classicist Dr. James Dee, UT Professors Dr. Rory Coker and Charles Jackson, Retired Colonel Oak Deberg, and public defender Dicky Grigg. ACA members Don Rhoades, Matt Dillahunt, and Russell Glasser also spoke from the podium. Lecture topics included Habeas Corpus as applied to the Guantanamo prison, climate change, the shenanigans of the Texas legislature, evangelizing atheism, early freethought in Texas, belief, and Christmas mythology. We have been fortunate to have the historic Austin History Center as our lecture venue and we have always made our lectures free and open to the public.

## Activism

Our flagship activism effort for 2008 was the production of the first ACA Texas Voter's Guide. This project gave voting atheists some information about where candidates stand on issues we find relevant and lent us a presence to those running, reminding them that we are out there among their constituencies. The Voters Guide was based on a survey sent to 482 candidates in federal and state races in which Texans vote. The survey focused on the Constitutional separation of church and

state, freedom of conscience, rational decision-making, science advocacy, equality, and other important issues that conventional sources often do not satisfactorily address. We received a far better response rate than anyone would have expected (50 responses), making this project a resounding success and a point of pride for our organization. The next election year should see an increased presence in Texas politics for the ACA, so we can remind those in office that they represent all Texans, regardless of religion.

The ACA held a rally at the Texas State Capitol for the National Day of Reason on May 1st. This event helped to draw attention to church-state separation in our state. We also had a booth at the Pride Festival on June 14th as part of our outreach to the larger community. In addition, the ACA monitored a number of Texas church-state separation issues including the changes to the Texas State pledge of allegiance, the firing of Science Director Chris Comer from the Texas Education Agency, and the Texas State Board of Education science curriculum standards. These topics were covered well on *The Atheist Experience*, *Non-Prophets*, and Austin Atheist newsletter. *The Atheist Experience* blog, run by Martin Wagner also expounded on these and other issues in the news.

ACA activism also included community service activities in 2008. We continued our Keep Austin Beautiful street cleanup at our North location on Burnet Road near Anderson and added a South location at the end of the year on Lamar near Manchaca. These two adopted streets have been kept clean by dedicated volunteers led by Shelley Roberts. Other dedicated ACA members participate in a blood drive every 8 weeks as they have for a number of years now. At the end of 2008, the ACA also began an ongoing canned food drive for local food banks. It is hoped that these efforts will provide local atheists a way to give to the larger community under the banner of atheism.

## Social Activities

The ACA has had a great year for social activities with several successful special events. The Godless Pub Crawl, an ACA garage sale, a trip to the San Antonio Zoo, and a miniature golf night, were all new events in 2008. We are hoping to continue these events in 2009. Our yearly Bat Cruise on September 20th had about 50 participants, many from out of town. We are hoping to expand this event in future years to be an outreach event to encourage more out-of-town friends to come to Austin and have fun with us. Mike Swift and Lisa Mais hosted both Summer Solstice and Winter Solstice parties that help members and friends mingle and interact in

a social setting. We thank them for their hospitality. A number of ACA members made an outing to the Hell House in Cedar Hill Texas on October 25th. Unfortunately, the church-sponsored morality plays were disappointingly bland.

We are one of the most socially active atheist groups in the United States with three regular events per week. Our regular Sunday meeting is held at a local restaurant with an average of 15 people attending. Our weekly happy hour event regularly draws about 20 people as does our dinner after *The Atheist Experience* TV show. ■

# Darwin's Controversy

—by Don Baker

This February 12 marks the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth. Darwin proposed a simple explanation for the diversity, complexity, and the shared lineage of all life on our planet in his theory of evolution. This great achievement has been a subject of religious controversy since the publication of his "On the Origin of Species" in 1859. Unfortunately, his great achievement has been unfairly tarnished by those whose theistic beliefs come in conflict with a naturalistic explanation for the "miracle" of life. Darwin has been falsely associated with the evils of Nazi Germany, for example. Even today, "Darwinist" has become a term of derision applied to scientific-minded people who allegedly worship him as some sort of authority as theists worship their god.

The strong emotional reaction of believers to the theory of evolution demands some explanation. While it is nothing more than a scientific explanation of the natural world, it also threatens some beliefs of Christianity and other Abrahamic religions. The most obvious conflict is that evolution makes clear that the creation story in the Book of Genesis is fictional. God did not create the animal kingdom from whole cloth in an epic workweek. As science explains more and more, God's role has been waning. He no longer controls the weather, earthquakes, the motions of the stars, etc. But, the controversy behind evolution is bigger than just another former "gap" now stolen from compelling religious explanation.

The real source of the controversy behind evolution is that it renders the story of Adam and Eve to be nothing more than parable. There was no first pair of humans in the sense that the Bible would have us believe. Specifically, there could have been no pair of actors who caused the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. The theory of evolution thus sabotages the religious concept of original sin. Without original sin, there is no guilt to feel for having been born, no karmic debt to pay, and no real reason to look to God for moral guidance. More importantly, without original sin the whole reason for Jesus existence, his teachings, and his sacrifice are rendered moot. The crucifixion becomes little more than a gory sado-masochistic performance art piece staged by God to perhaps confuse or entertain.

Without trying, the theory of evolution cuts at the very heart of Christianity and other Abrahamic religions. This is only because they are founded on claims that are incompatible with our understanding of the natural world. It's as if God created a universe for which He had precluded His very existence. There seems to be two theistic camps responding to this contradiction. Both are anxious to revise reality (or our understanding of it) in such a way as to recreate a place for the God character. The Intelligent Design movement wants to tear down evolution and find a scientific role for God, even at the expense of science. The "theistic evolutionists" would instead place God in the driver's seat of evolution—a vehicle that needs no driver. The former group is hell-bent on sabotaging science education in our country to make room for their Designer. The latter group seems not to realize that they worship a murderer and/or sexual manipulator, as those are the mechanisms by which evolution might be readily controlled. The irony is that so many of the actions of the Christian church are quite compatible with such a god. Neither side, however, seems to have come up with a satisfying way to save their religious belief from this threat.

This February 12th, we can celebrate Darwin as not only a great scientist, but also someone who unwittingly threw Jesus and his Father in front of the train of reality. As atheists, we have two great reasons to celebrate. For more on the Darwin Day celebration and events around the world, visit <[www.darwinday.org](http://www.darwinday.org)>. ■

## ACA CALENDAR

### SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 1

• **12:15-1:45 p.m.:** *ACA Lecture Series (Austin History Center) Matt Dillahunt on "How to fool the mind"; Free*

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)*

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)*

### SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 7

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

### SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

• **12:30-1:30 p.m.:** *Board Meeting (Romeo's (outside))*

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)*

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)*

### WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11

• **7-8:30 p.m.:** *CFI Austin Food for Thought Lecture (Old Quarry Branch Library, 7051 Village Center Dr.) Steve Bratteng on "Coevolution: How Plants and Animals Adapt to One Another"; Free*

### THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 12

• **Darwin Day** (<http://www.darwinday.org/>)

### SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 15

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)*

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)*

### SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21

• **11 a.m.-12 p.m.:** *Adopt-a-street Clean Up (South Location: Old Alligator Grill, 3003 S. Lamar Blvd)*

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

### SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** *The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)*

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** *Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)*

### REGULAR LOCATIONS:

• **Austin History Center**, 9th and Guadalupe. Building opens at noon. Lectures are free and open to the public.

• **Dog & Duck Pub**, North of the Capitol, 406 W. 17th at Guadalupe, 512.479.0598. Informal gathering; food available.

• **Romeo's**, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. South of Town Lake.

• **Threadgill's**, 301 West Riverside Drive (at Barton Springs Rd.)

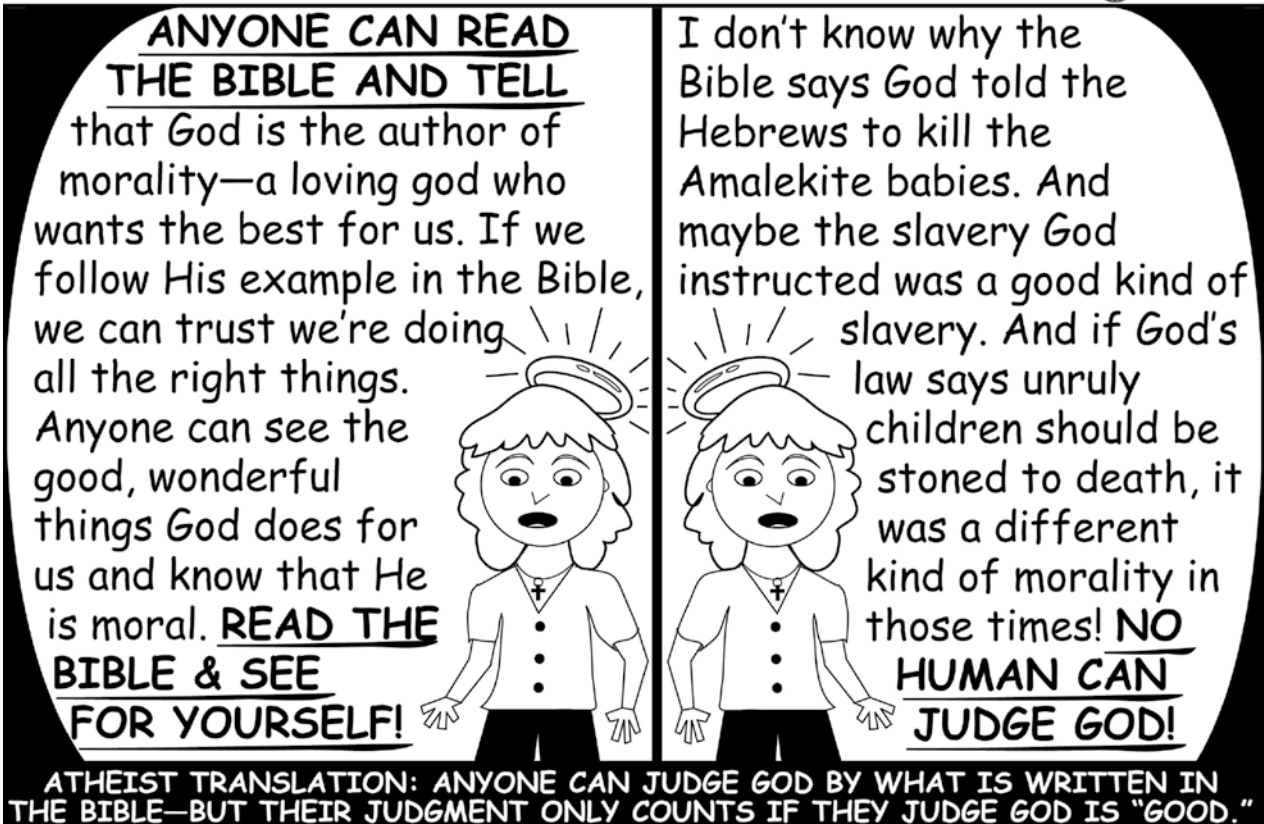
Unless otherwise indicated, events are open to all atheist and atheist friendly people, regardless of ACA membership status. Check the calendar on the Web site <[www.atheist-community.org/calendar](http://www.atheist-community.org/calendar)> for last minute changes.



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ATHEIST EVE

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