

The Atheist

December 1997

The Atheist

A few weeks ago, we decided it was time to make some changes to our newsletter. After some discussion, a few of the Sunday bagelry regulars helped us decide on our new name, masthead, and paper stock. I hope you all like the new look of The Atheist as much as I do.

I would like to try and get The Atheist out on a more regular basis. Although I could simply pull articles off the internet, I would rather include stories relevant to the Atheist Community of Austin. I also want to avoid having The Atheist become dominated by just a few members.

To accomplish these goals, I need contributions from as many people as possible. If you have an atheist-related story, book review, or opinion that you would like to see included in The Atheist, please send it to: John Koonz 104 West Croslin Austin, TX 78752 (e-mail: koonz@tenet.edu)

ACA Live!

On October 17, the Atheist Community of Austin made its debut on local TV with a live call-in show on channel 10. With Rodney Florence on the camera and host Ray Blevins and no call-screener, our series made a smooth but exciting start. While minor bugs of lighting and feedback were being worked out on-air, religious hecklers provided a simultaneous display of profanity, blasphemy, and obscenity: free expression at its best. There were intelligent calls, too, and more basic information about atheism was aired. The various versions of the ten commandments were discussed by David Kent, and Joe Zamecki described the atheist picket he attended in Washington D.C. confronting the Promise Keepers. "The Atheist Experience" invites you to take a part in this series. —David L. Kent

State/Church Separation Pretends to Come to Austin

Recently, Kellen Von Houser contacted the mayor's office requesting that a proclamation be made to recognize Atheist Awareness Week. This was to have coincided with the December 15 anniversary of the ratification of the Bill of Rights. Kellen was told by staff member Jill George that the mayor is no longer making proclamations with religious connotations. (We would appreciate it if those of you who follow the weekly City Council meetings could help us monitor this.)

Kellen then asked about the "unofficial" invocation that immediately precedes every City Council session. Ms. George replied that the mayor's office was not responsible for this activity. Invocation readers are, however, actively solicited by an employee of the city manager's office, and only those organizations listed in the "Praying Hands" directory are contacted. This exclusively Judeo-Christian directory was assembled by a local religious group and is sold by the Austin Chamber of Commerce.

Kellen then asked Ms. George whether the mayor and the council members could eliminate the prayer if they wished. Ms. George inquired about the history of the prayer in the City Council chambers and whether our organization had done anything previously to bring our objections to the council. She then said she would look into it and call back. She has not returned the call at this time.

Meanwhile, members of ACA are actively petitioning local alternative religious organizations to add their names to the "prayer list" in the hope that their participation will demonstrate to the council how out of place such a ritual is in a business meeting. June Ahrens, of the city manager's office, schedules the prayers and keeps the list. Her direct number is (512) 499-2195. At this time, Scientologists, Hindus, the Eckankar church, and the Reformed Church of the Goddess have actually given the invocation. — Kellen Von Hauser

Religion and Child Abuse

Child abuse by the devout is endemic in our society. The psychological tormenting of young children is a generally unrecognized form of child abuse. I am greatly disturbed by the inhumane treatment of children by those professing a belief in God. Hellfire and damnation are rather appalling concepts for a six- or seven-year-old child. I was raised as a Catholic and worried endlessly about my Protestant playmates. According to the teaching of the times, they were to be eternally damned since they had not been baptized as Catholics. The psychological abuse of children goes on and on. The biblical accounts of divine wrath, for example, God's order to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, must horrify children.

Religion-inspired physical abuse of the young is also close to home. Every few months one hears that a child of Christian Scientists is denied medical attention as a consequence of parental belief. Occasionally the child dies, and if the evil is exposed by the press, the parents may go to jail. Surely, it would be better to hang such parents as murderers.

Jehovah's Witnesses would be better termed Jehovah's Witless, since their beliefs forbid surgery and blood transfusions. As with deviant sex, there is no problem with what goes on between consenting adults. Inflicting their practices on defenseless children is another matter. Distraught medical personnel often have to go to court to obtain routine treatment for such children.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, it was the practice of the Italian Catholic clergy to castrate boys who showed great vocal promise. These young eunuchs were thus able to continue as powerful male sopranos since they were forever prepubescent. Sex, marriage, and offspring were thus denied them, but the music was great!

Consider this: infant circumcision is the religious duty of an observant Jew or Muslim parent. Competent medical authorities now assert that circumcision has no medical value except in rare cases. Ritual circumcision occurs in the first two weeks of life. It is a most painful ceremony, performed without anesthesia, on one who is too young to understand its purported aim. This ritual genital mutilation belies the often conventional religious belief that man was created in the image of God. If they so believe, are they not vandalizing the Divine artistry by this heartless mutilation?

However dreadful this religious rite is, it is as nothing compared to female genital mutilation, performed on prepubescent girls, which is the practice of many African and Middle Eastern Muslims. This horrible ritual involves the surgical removal of the inner labia and the clitoris. It is ordinarily performed without anesthesia and with instruments that are not sterile. Among some tribes, the vulva is packed with camel dung and the outer labia sewn together. At the time of marriage the stitches are removed, leaving the victim incapable of sexual pleasure, and often with a lifetime of genital pain. —Harry Quinlan

Atheist Supercult

We had just reviewed closely a recent piece by CNN on a Texas "Church of Freethought," when a blinding celestial epiphany broke upon us. "Eschew mealy-mouthed tergiversation," it began. We reached for the remote control. The Revelation abruptly changed its tone, continuing, "Screw these halfway measures: go the whole hog!" Our duty at once stood plain before us, so we immediately formed the Church of the Unbelieving Christ.

Heading up the new atheist supercult is Rev. Rod ("He's tight with God!") Florence, along with Rev. Davey ("Send us gravy") Kent and Rev. Joe ("Send some mo") Zamecki. Outreach is projected in all dimensions, and funds are pouring in from sales of Holier Than Thou water. Our dogma task force has just completed an exhaustive study of religion worldwide, from which we have abstracted and adopted the essence: Peace on earth, Good will toward men, To hell with women.

But no church is any good without its confessional, so we hereby confess that the above is nothing more than a frenzied, media-induced fantasy: and give it as our firm opinion that any attempt to synthesize atheism and religion will prove a disaster for both. That person who is so unsure of the value of atheism that he must pretend to be a camp follower of religion is not worthy of the name of atheist. —David L. Kent

Legal Puzzler

If you lack the Religion or Belief gene, are you entitled to claim federal benefits under the Americans with Disabilities Act; or would that violate the separation of state and church interpretation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment, as improperly advancing the interest of nonreligion over that of religion?

Book Review

Some atheists feel that it is pointless to study Christianity. I disagree. The Making of the Messiah, by Robert Sheaffer, supports my view that understanding the evolution of Christianity provides useful insights into the development of other belief systems.

Sheaffer accepts that Jesus actually existed 2000 years ago, but that his story is more accurately related in the Toldoth, an ancient Jewish book, than in the Bible. It is Sheaffer's basic thesis that Christianity evolved from a sense of resentment present within the Roman Empire's lower classes. The New Testament accounts were really just clumsy attempts by early Christian leaders to focus this resentment against the rich and powerful.

A good argument can be made that Jesus was not crucified at all, but was stoned to death for heresy by his fellow Jews. Changing this story to a Roman crucifixion made it easier for early church leaders to whip up anti-Roman sentiment amongst the Empire's non-Jewish peasants and slaves. In fact, all of Jesus' diatribes against wealth, success, and happiness served to fuel the flames of envy and resentment that smoldered within the ignorant have-nots of the Roman world. This section of Sheaffer's book reminded me of the reaction some black people had to the O. J. Simpson verdict. While many African-Americans realized O. J. had "dunnit,"

some still wanted to see the big bad LA police force get egg on its white face.

The later Gospel stories had been radically revised in response to objections raised by educated Greeks and Romans. By examining what was changed, and, more importantly, what was left unchanged, the author was able to write a very interesting and compelling Gospel of his own. Sheaffer's Jesus of Nazareth, bastard son of Panthera, more closely resembles Brian of Monty Python than the guy I learned about in Catechism class. The author suggests reading the books of the New Testament in the order in which they were written: Epistles of Paul, Acts of the Apostles, Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and then Revelation. Finish with Timothy, Titus, Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Hebrews, as these represent a later, more polished, theology.

Finally, the author suggests that humanist/atheist efforts to fight superstition are generally wasted. Until we all learn to control our envy and resentment, monotheistic religions will always have a ready source of energy to use against intelligent and successful individuals and institutions. The focus of secular, rational efforts must be, therefore, on drawing attention to the harm and inappropriateness of envious behavior.

As to the applicability of studying the history of Christianity, we need search no farther than the nearest UFO sighting. While researching UFOs for my Science versus Pseudoscience course, I discovered that the flying saucer idea actually came about because of a reporter's mistake. In 1947 Kenneth Arnold told a reporter that he had seen objects that "behave erratic, like a saucer if you skip it across the water." Many people that have claimed to see such things since then have described the alien spacecraft as a flying saucer. The many distortions and revisions in the New Testament writers have worked their way into common belief in much the same way. Considering the hype surrounding aliens, is it possible that we are witnessing the birth of a new religion?

Sheaffer included an appropriate quote from Nietzsche that sums up Christianity: "credo quia absurdus sum" ("I believe it because I am absurd"). —John Koonz

The Making of the Messiah by Robert Sheaffer (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991)

Announcements Our TV show, "The Atheist Experience," is almost officially scheduled to begin on Sunday, January 11, from 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. on either cable channel 10 or 16 (yet to be decided). A live show hosted by Ray Blevins will air on alternate Sundays and taped replays will be shown on the Sundays in between. Anyone interested in participating, or who has an idea for a topic, should contact ACA. Topics must be atheist-related. Membership in ACA is not necessary to be a participant in the show.

Don Rhoades and David Kent are kicking off our Oral History project in conjunction with the TV committee. Our goal is to tape as many histories of individual atheists as we are able. Tapes may be used on the TV show and copies will be stored in the library for members to check out. All atheists are eligible to participate. Contact Don Rhoades.

Our November garage sale was a success, bringing in \$230.50! The sale was organized by Sharon Summers and held at Leroy Rudder's house. A big thank-you to all those who helped out.

Proof that Barney is Satan

Given: Barney = CUTE PURPLE DINOSAUR (S R)

CUTE PURPLE DINOSAUR (Given)

CVTE PVRPLE DINOSAVR (Write in Latin)

C V V L D I V (Roman Numerals)

100 5 5 50 500 1 5 (Arabic Numerals)

100+5+5+50+500+1+5 (Add)

666 (Total)

666 = SATAN (Given)

BARNEY = SATAN (Proven)

There, that proves it—Barney is Satan. It's a big conspiracy to get the young generation to worship Satan in a plot to destroy the world!!!!