

The Atheist

March 1998

Religious Freedom Amendment

The so-called "Religious Freedom" Amendment poses a serious threat to the liberties of religious minorities such as us. Anyone want to tell Rep. Istook how they feel about it? If so, go to <http://religiousfreedom.house.gov/survey.htm> and take Rep. Istook's survey on the Religious Freedom Amendment. It is very important that they hear opposing views, because the word is that this amendment is on the fast track in Congress and they expect a vote early in March. The survey contains only six questions to which you answer "agree" or "disagree." Space for your comments is also provided.

Here is more information on how to reach your Congressional representatives:

House of Representatives switchboard: (202) 224-3121

House of Representatives web site: www.house.gov (contains links to Representatives' web pages and email)

Newt's office: phone: (202) 225-0600; fax: (202) 225-4656; email: georgia6@mail.house.gov

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt's office: phone: (202) 225-0100; fax: (202) 225-7452; email: gephardt@mail.house.gov

—Don Rhoades

Horseman, Pass By

In the second ACA lecture, John Koonz presented "Evolution and Cosmology: Teaching the Story of our Origins" on March 1. Focusing on the role of randomness in cumulative natural selection, John drove the point home with a couple of experiments he uses with his students, an excellent handout with a current reading list, including web sites, and handouts on ethics and creationism from the National Center for Science Education.

The moment John opened the Q&A segment, however, it became apparent that a part of the large group were fundamentalist creationists itching for combat. Fortunately, John and a guest from Beaumont were well prepared for that, and the standard creationist arguments made no headway. A minister then announced that the prominent atheist Dr. Stein had failed to overcome the latest religious proof of the existence of "god." On questioning him, I found he referred to the "argument from transcendence," which he summarized as a position holding that since the rules of logic are "immaterial," they transcend material reality and therefore demonstrate the possibility of the existence of an entity outside the physical universe. If it proves anything, this argument proves how desperate the position of religion has become. If the late Gordon Stein had confronted this argument in a debate, I would guess he would have recoiled from its sheer silliness. At this point someone in the room—Jeff Dee, perhaps—pointed out that the laws of logic and similar abstractions, such as god, the tooth fairy, and Santa Claus, are products of the human brain, and that their existence as ideas does not prove that they have any corresponding external reality. Our minister guest then asserted that atheists denied the existence of god, so that he could draw us into the favorite Christian game of arguing that point. I mentioned that atheists largely reject that exercise and subscribe to the classical definition of atheism given by the earliest known, and perhaps best atheist Lucretius, whose material realism simply rejects supernatural notions. *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) denounces religious belief as the one great source of human wickedness and misery. Religion is rejected as a concept, completely forestalling any argument for or against the existence of this or that god. Our minister lost his cool at this point, and Keith Berka stepped in to make the point clear: "Look, a god may exist, or a god may not exist. It makes absolutely no difference to me either way. Know what I mean?" Finally, the preacher got the point. The atheist Stanley Marcus, chairman emeritus of Neiman-Marcus, put it a little more elegantly: "Religion has never held any fascination for me." And that, Virginia, is what atheism is—a decision stemming not from resignation, but from conscious choice. I noticed that a couple of the younger members of the religious group were paying very close attention to John's points and seemed to agree with them. Perhaps the numbers of that religious group will diminish thanks to John Koonz's excellent presentation.

The third ACA lecture will be presented by Jay Jacobsen, director of the Texas Civil Liberties Union, on March 29, at Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall at 11 a.m. His subject will be developments in state/church separation issues in the Texas legislature, and how atheists can be involved in a practical way. —David L. Kent

(The guest from Beaumont is a Deist. He is currently looking for a job teaching science. Dale spent an hour or so visiting my school the following Monday, and I was able to give him some more advice and class handouts. I wish him good fortune in his war on ignorance.—Ed.)

International Sobriety Group To Add New Austin Chapter Secular Organizations for Sobriety, an International support organization for people recovering from alcohol and drug abuse, has added a new Austin, Texas group. Meetings will be held every Monday night, beginning March 2, 1998 at 7:30 p.m. in Room 11 at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin at 4700 Grover Avenue in the Hyde Park area of Austin.

SOS, also known as "Save Our Selves," was founded by Jim Christopher in 1986 in North Hollywood, California. It is a friendly alternative to organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which have a religious/spiritual basis to their recovery programs. SOS takes a secular approach, emphasizing that each individual must draw upon his or her own resources to deal with the problems of addiction—hence the name, "Save Our Selves." SOS chapters are autonomous, non-profit organizations that meet throughout the United States and abroad, and should not be confused with Rational Recovery or SMART Recovery.

Atheism Defined, Part Two

Discussing what atheism is and means is one of the more important intellectual activities atheists can work on. The choice of atheism is not the last step in an intellectual process. Our personal choice of atheism is really the first step in developing a more accurate way of thinking about ourselves, our lives, and our relationships with others.

Until we can agree on broad concepts, whatever word labels we each choose, we will remain unable to respond when people ask us what we "believe," other than to quibble about the concept of "belief" not applying to atheists. That means we always argue from the "not so" position and offer nada to oppose magic. We can't beat something (theism) with nothing (atheism). The Monty Python sketch on argument versus mere contradiction comes to mind.

It has taken me years to get my personal expression of belief worked down to a long slogan that captures the important points: "I accept a material reality of consistent physical laws as all that exists. I reject the idea that supernatural beings can violate those consistent physical laws by an act of will." Thousands of words of exposition follow that. A key point is that my materialism (I like the label "Realism" in order to put theists in the posture of unreality) subsumes atheism, which is limited to non-belief in deities. My nonbelief encompasses everything mystical, magical, transcendent, etc. I'm intellectually humbled by the fact that I had to work backwards from what I disbelieved in order to define what I believed. That re-engineering taught me a lot about how fried even atheist brains are with the dominant Christian culture of magical delusion. My beliefs had been defined by those whose beliefs I rejected.

For those discomfited by my comfort with the term "belief," let me explain. I do not have complete and perfect knowledge of the universe. My brain could not hold all the information and I'd never be able to perfectly comprehend all of it. Hence, as an evolved organic creature with limited CPU design and capacity, I will always lack the ability to have absolute proof or disproof for anything. I will always be faced with unknowns and lack of knowledge. Therefore, I do in fact accept some things as a "belief," defined as what I think is an accurate truth as opposed to absolute proof.

Now, as a practical matter, my "belief" in a material reality of consistent physical laws is supported by all the best evidence and scientific research while the supernaturalism I reject has, in my experience, not a shred of valid evidence to support the idea that the universe is not material. While I "believe" in materialism, it certainly isn't a belief based on "faith" since my "belief" is 100% congruent with the evidence.

I don't know how each of you would express the personal model of reality you have in your brain. I can tell you that the personal effort of thinking about your beliefs and writing them down is a valuable experience. It won't be as easy as you think, and if it feels that way let me impudently scoff that you either already did this or aren't really thinking things through. If you really put the effort in, you'll be surprised at where your analysis takes you. The result is worth it because you will better understand what you accept as real and reject as unreal, and why. The confidence and self-realization that come from that are tangible rewards that will shape the rest of your life.

End of soap boxing; enjoy reality. —Howard Thompson

(If you do take Howard's advice and write down your thoughts, please send them to me (koonz@tenet.edu) so I can include them in The Atheist.—Ed.)

Book Review

As an atheist, I have always found the supernatural thrillers of Stephen King, and others, to be an absurd waste of time. I'll admit it, I have a negative attitude about the entire horror genre. My recent penchant for books exposing the religious right has caused me to rethink this position, however. Frederick Clarkson's terrifyingly blunt book *Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy* certainly kept me up at night. The title of this outstanding book comes from the words engraved on the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. Thomas Jefferson said: "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." How ironic that Jefferson is often misquoted by Christian revisionists to support their dream of a Christian Nation. The god referred to by Jefferson was actually a deistic god more interested in reason and nature than in peering into people's bedrooms.

Clarkson begins with an extensively documented rundown of the major players in the theocratic right. (I have come to prefer this term to "religious right.") I couldn't help but notice that there are more multi-million dollar theocratic-right groups than there are dollar bills in the Styrofoam donation cup at an ordinary Atheist Community of Austin meeting.

Lest any of us doubt that the theocratic right leaders really do want to establish a Christian theocracy here in America, Clarkson describes this chilling scene: The place was Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 1994. The conference was called "Reclaiming America." In attendance were many theocratic right leaders, including Dan Quayle, Gary Bauer, Beverly LaHaye, and Bob Simonds. Just before Dan Quayle's speech, the audience pledged its allegiance to the Christian flag. This flag featured a gold cross on a blue field. The pledge read as follows: "I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag, and to the Savior, for whose Kingdom it stands. One Savior, crucified, risen and coming again, with life liberty for all who believe" (p. 37).

An important point, thoroughly discussed by Clarkson, is that the theocratic right has accomplished much because it has established the framework for public policy debate in America. This relates to my choice of the term "theocratic right." I think it is time to start reclaiming that debate. The Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family do not represent the values of most Americans. They are organizations entirely devoted to installing a theocracy at the expense of individual liberties. Christian right leaders have used their religious nature to claim a kind of moral high ground. They have cried persecution when they were merely being prevented from forcing their views on the rest of us. Too many people, liberals and conservatives alike, have been hesitant to level criticism at anything that calls itself religious. The media, careful to provide little more than entertainment with a gloss of information, has proved ill equipped to challenge the basic assumptions of the theocratic religious right. Until the real goals of Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and others, are laid bare, we are all at peril.

An interesting aspect of evangelical Christianity, that I had not been aware of, is the difference of opinion between two major factions concerning eschatology (end-time theology). The pre-millennialist faction, which includes most evangelicals, believes that the world will end soon enough, but that the 1000 years of Jesus' reign on earth will not occur until after the "second coming." Reconstructionists, on the other hand, believe it is their Christian duty to hasten the second coming by producing the Kingdom of God on earth. Needless to say, this kingdom has not been designed to maximize the personal liberties of atheists. What is important is that both camps have been able to put aside many of their differences, and have been presenting a united front.

Clarkson also sheds some light on the Promise Keepers. This group, whose parent organization is none other than Focus on the Family, serves as a front for the theocratic right. By avoiding political controversy, it has drawn many people into the ranks of the larger movement. James Ryle, Promise Keeper director and pastor to PK organizer Bill McCartney, explains what the organization has to offer. He believes that Promise Keepers is "the fulfillment of a biblically prophesied end-times army which will destroy sinners and unbelievers." That would be you.

I first learned about this book from a review by Marie Alena Castle in *Secular Nation* (January–March 1998). Castle described *Eternal Hostility* as one

of the two most important books available for understanding the theocratic right. The other was *The Life and Death of NSSM 200* by Stephen Mumford. I heartily agree. —John Koonz

(Clarkson, Frederick. *Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between Theocracy and Democracy*. Common Courage Press, 1997.)

The government of the United States is in no sense founded on the Christian religion. —George Washington

Announcements

Blood Drive The first annual First Sunday after the First Full Moon after the Spring Equinox Atheist Blood Drive will be held from 10 a.m.–2 p.m. on Saturday, April 11, at the Central Texas Regional Blood Center at 4300 N. Lamar. Local atheists will be able to draw from this ACA account for up to a year. Please consider donating, especially if you have a rare blood type such as O negative.

Lecture Series We are hosting a guest speaker on the last (formerly the first) Sunday of every month. Lectures will be held at the Furr's Cafeteria in Northcross Mall at 11 a.m. A question and answer session will follow. Admission is free, however, the management at Furr's requests that we go through the line. On March 29 Jay Jacobson from the ACLU will be our guest speaker (no, really this time!). He is going to tell us about the new oath for jurors and witnesses that does not include an acknowledgement of a higher power. That's right. We actually won one. He will also be talking to us about other separationist issues in the state of Texas. Find out how the Christians are conspiring to deprive us of our first amendment rights now! On April 26th Steve Bratteng, a local science teacher, will give his slide presentation, "The Adventures of a Naturalist on Noah's Ark," a humorous look at creationism versus evolution with some serious science thrown in. A big hit in San Antonio, we are fortunate to have it here!

Weekly Meetings Sunday mornings at Hot Jumbo Bagel, 307 West 5th Street at 10:30 a.m. on the Sundays when lectures are not scheduled at Furr's Cafeteria.

Happy Hour Let's get together on the third Friday of the month. Details to come.

Movie Night March 30 at 7 p.m.: Let's meet at the Alamo Drafthouse for a movie. Admission is \$1; dinner and drinks are available for purchase. Good reality-based company and conversation, no extra charge!

Round Table Discussion At the last board meeting, Kellen pointed out that many non-theists show up at our Bagelry meetings "starved" for intelligent rational discussion. Let's consider having some informal discussions on topics that interest atheists, such as, the raising of clear-thinking children in a crazy world.

Randalls Donations Randalls will donate a percentage of the money you spend there to the Atheist Community of Austin. To take advantage of this offer, contact the customer service department of your nearest Randalls. The ACA number is 5158.

ACA Board Meeting At the March 1 board meeting, it was resolved that John M. Dolph would be nominated for the office of Secretary for approval by the membership at a general meeting. Rodney Florence has been afforded a budget of \$70 to procure signs for the Atheist Community of Austin. Agenda for the March 29 meeting: The Board will make an inspection of the rules of incorporation and the issue of precedence, and how changes are provided for in the Atheist Community of Austin bylaws. This meeting has been scheduled for 9:30 a.m. at Furr's. Future board meetings will convene at 9:30 a.m. on the last Sunday of the month at Furr's, immediately preceding the lecture series.

For more information about any of these coming events, call (512) 371-2911 or e-mail atheist@atheist-community.org

Non-ACA Texas Atheist Happenings

Freethinker Cenotaph The Heart of Texas (HOT) Freethinkers are in the process of erecting a monument dedicated to Texas Freethinkers. This 8' x 4' monolith, topped with an eagle, will be placed in Comfort City Park at a site already approved by the Comfort Chamber of Commerce. They are hoping to complete this project by October, which is Freethinking Month. Send donations to: Comfort Heritage Foundation, Attn: Eugene Konde, Treasurer, P.O. Box 433, Comfort, Texas 78013. Checks should be made out to the Comfort Heritage Foundation and noted on the bottom: "Freethinker monument." For more information about this project, contact: Ed Scharf, P.O. Box 305, Helotes, Texas 78023 (e-mail: edscharf@hotmail.com).

Dallas Debate A debate on the topic: "Why I Am/Why I Am Not A Christian" will be held at the Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas on Monday, June 15 from 7–9 p.m. The debaters will be William Lane Craig and Keith Parsons. The debate is free, although donations to cover costs will be appreciated. The organizers expect between four and I've thousand people to attend, and it is one of their main goals to get as close a split (50/50) between Christians and non-Christians as possible. There is a confirmed radio broadcast time on 94.9 FM. For more details, contact Walter Nusbaum (email: walter@thechoicenet.com).