

THE ATHEIST

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

June 2003 - Volume 7.6



Best of Austin 2003

The Austin Chronicle's annual "Best of Austin" poll is now underway and ballots will be accepted through **July 3**. This is a great opportunity to vote for your favorite **local nonprofit** group and favorite **public access TV show** (hint, hint!). You can vote by mail by picking up an issue of the *Chronicle* or vote online at: www.austinchronicle.com/feedback/bestof/

Regularly Scheduled ACA Events:

Saturdays:

"The Non-Prophets" Internet radio show airs biweekly from 2:00 - 3:30 PM at www.atheistnetwork.com. The next episode will air July 5. Archives can be played at www.atheist-community.org.

Sundays:

Bagel Shop Meetings take place every Sunday except the first Sunday of the month at 10:30 AM at the Hot Jumbo Bagelry (307 W. 5th Street).

Monthly Lecture Meetings take place the first 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. Watch your e-mail for announcements of pre- or post-lecture get-togethers at local restaurants.

"The Atheist Experience" Live Call-in TV Show: 4:30 - 6:00 PM, on Austin Access Channel 10.

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

Tuesdays: "The Atheist Experience" is replayed from 4:30 - 6:00 PM on Austin Access Channel 10.

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

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Upcoming ACA Lecture Meetings

ACA member and housing programs compliance monitor **Melinda Badgley** will be giving our **Sunday, July 6** lecture. The title of her talk is "**The Faith Based and Community Initiatives: Can They Meet Their Goals?**"

Melinda would like to prepare for some questions about her subject in advance. If you have any concerns or questions about Faith Based Programs, please email her at mab632001@yahoo.com

Dr. Klaus Linse will present the **August 3** lecture on the subject of **Anti-Aging Research**. Dr. Linse is a scientist from the University of Texas Institute for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Protein Analysis and DNA Sequencing Core Facility.

For lecture meeting time and location, see "Regularly Scheduled ACA Events" at left.

New board email address

If you have any concerns or ideas that you would like to make known to the ACA Board of Directors, you can now send an email to board@atheist-community.org and your message will be sent to all board members.

**The ACA Files:
Member Profile of the Month**

Name:
Glenda S. McKinney

ACA Member Since:
March 2003

ACA Activities:
Game Night, Happy Hour

Where From Originally: born in Newport News, Virginia; moved to southeast Houston at age 4; moved to Austin in 1979.

Occupation: Hebrew School teacher and technical writer

Hobbies/Interests: Translating Torah, volunteering, "Googling", playing darts, sewing, looking for work...

Little-Known Facts: Glenda was the youngest member ever of the Policy Council of the Texas Women's Political Caucus at age 14.

She helped found the only local charter school that has an exemplary rating.

Glenda moved to Austin to work in the state legislature, and ended up earning a degree in Computer Science at UT Austin.



New "Freethought Directory" Has CD-ROM Option

by Constance Edwards

The Freethought Directory 2003 edition was released April 18, 2003 at the Atheist Alliance International Convention. This year's edition introduces the electronic Freethought Directory, a CD-ROM with the complete .PDF for use on any computer with the free Adobe Acrobat Reader. Also included on the disk are two versions of software that will allow the user to upload the .PDF to a Palm device.

The 2003 Freethought Directory is the most complete directory AAI has ever presented. With 30 new US listings and more than a dozen new international listings, this year's edition is the culmination of many years of work by AAI volunteers. The 2003 Freethought Directory has been set in an easy-read typeface and is perfect bound. At 8 inches by 5 inches, it is highly portable. The Directory is available from the Atheist Alliance International website, at www.atheistalliance.org/directory, or by mail to:

Atheist Alliance International
P.O. Box 6261
Minneapolis, MN 55406

The print version of the 2003 Freethought Directory costs \$18.00, and the CD-ROM version costs \$12.00. Both versions include shipping and handling, nationally and internationally.

The Atheist Community of Austin is a member of Atheist Alliance, International., an organization of independent religion-free groups and individuals in the United States and around the world. www.atheistalliance.org

THE ATHEIST

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Editor:
Jill Ford

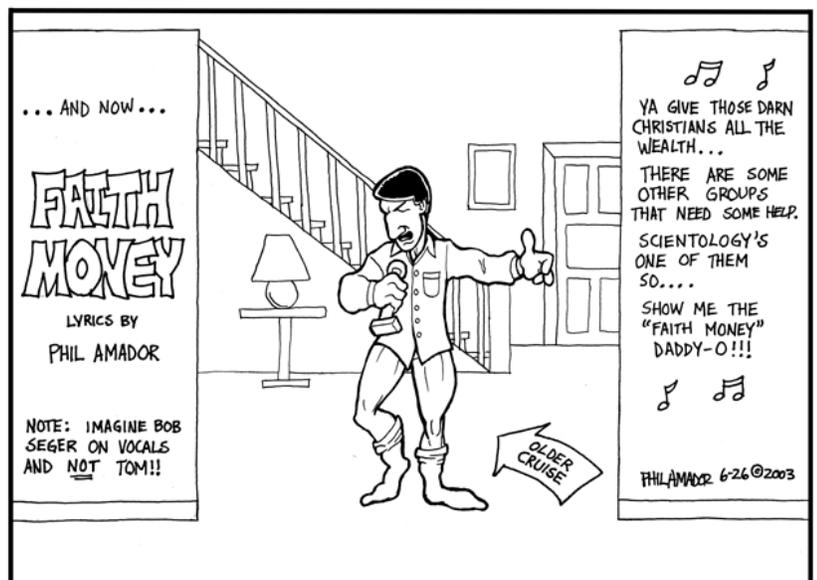
Contributing Writers for This Issue:
Constance Edwards, Russell Glasser,
Jeff Jones, Arlo Pignotti

Cartoonist:
Phil Amador

Articles, reports, and letters to the
editor are always welcomed.
Please write to 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.

Cartoon by Phil Amador



Lawrence v. Texas - A victory for atheism

by Jeff Jones

This week the Supreme Court of the United States finally struck down an archaic Texas law banning consensual sex between members of the same sex. It is my opinion that we should join in the celebration of this ruling for the sake of those atheists out there who happen to be gay. It is also my opinion that we should be very supportive of this ruling because it further establishes a constitutional right to privacy which is important to us for obvious reasons. But there is another, more subtle reason that atheists and humanists all over the country should be thrilled about this ruling. For the first time in my memory the United States Supreme Court has decided that not only do morals change but that they are a product of the minds of men and do not derive from god.

When the USSC decided in March to hear Lawrence v. Texas (the Texas case where two gay men were arrested by police officers in Houston who busted down their door to investigate a complaint of a "weapon disturbance" that later turned out to be false) it was generally felt by most pundits that the Texas law would be struck down but on a very narrow basis, most likely because the law applied only to homosexuals and not to sodomy practiced by heterosexual citizens. What actually occurred is that the Supreme Court sliced up the law not with the surgical precision of a scalpel but rather with a meat cleaver.

The law was struck down for two main reasons. The first was because a majority of the court found the law to be a gross invasion of the right to privacy which is enough in and of itself in the minds of most people. It is this argument that was presented by the attorney for Mr. Lawrence and it convinced six members of the court that it was valid. But it is the added comments of the majority which are of the greatest interest.

Justice Kennedy, speaking for the majority, added that it was no longer enough for a state to restrict the actions of its citizens because said actions were deemed "immoral" by lawmakers. In fact, it was necessary for the state to be able to show why the action did indeed harm the state or its citizens. This pretty much destroys the traditional religious argument that it is god-given morality which should decide what is allowed and not allowed in the lives (private or not) of Americans. This should be enough to make us leap for joy but wait, there is more.

"Liberty presumes an autonomy of self that includes freedom of thought, belief, expression, and certain intimate conduct."

Justice Anthony Kennedy writing for the majority opinion which struck down the Texas Sodomy law.

The majority also clearly pointed out that actions that one generation deems to be appropriate may very well be considered oppressive in later generations. Isn't this what atheists, secular humanists and freethinkers have been saying all along? That the "morals" of a society are in almost constant flux is a truism that is so obvious to us that we cannot imagine why it is so controversial and yet the noisy religionists spit out terms like "moral relativism" like they are some sort of vulgarity.

Well, for once, the most powerful legal force in the country agrees with us and this is one cat that won't go back in the bag.

Yes I know that we must remain vigilant and should be very concerned with what sort of justices this administration might appoint, but this

wasn't a standard 5-4 decision. It was 6-3. All but Thomas (and he does whatever Scalia tells him to do), Chief Justice Rehnquist and Scalia (of course) felt this law was unconstitutional and that is something to be happy about. The good guys won big in this ruling.

State Board of Education textbook hearings

The time has come again for Texas State Board of Education textbook hearings. Subjects under review in 2003 will include biology and health science - of special interest to church-state separation advocates due to the treatment of evolution and sex education.

In 2002, several ACA members reviewed social studies textbooks in cooperation with the Texas Freedom Network and testified before the Board.

The first hearing of 2003 will take place on **July 9**. The deadline to sign up to speak at this hearing has already passed, but the public is invited to observe the proceedings. The second hearing will take place on **September 10**. If you are interested in speaking at this hearing or submitting written comments, you must register in advance with the Texas Education Agency (see link below for details). To view a review copy of the proposed textbooks, contact the Texas Freedom Network or the Texas Education Agency.

Links:

More details on 2003 textbook hearings: www.tea.state.tx.us/textbooks/announcements/publichearing7-03.html

To join the Texas Freedom Network's Textbook Censorship Action Team, email heather@tfn.org.

The Art of Recreational Debating: Beating the Argument From Authority

With your guide, *Russell Glasser*
rklasser@apollowebworks.com

It's the bane of debates on evolution. Your creationist opponent fires off a post that catches you completely off guard. It says:

“The well known evolutionist Francis Hitching wrote: ‘If we find fossils, and if Darwin’s theory was right, we can predict what the rock should contain; finely graduated fossils leading from one group of creatures to another group of creatures at a higher level of complexity. ...But this is hardly ever the case. In fact, the opposite holds true, as Darwin himself complained.’”

Say hello to the “Argumentum ad Verecundiam”, or argument from authority. Of all the known logical fallacies, this is one of the most common ones you’ll see in online debates, and especially debates with Christians.

Why are appeals to authority so popular on the Internet? I would say it’s partly because they are a cheap and fast way to bolster your opinions, and they’re very easy to find. Ideas spread through web sites and emails like viruses. If you see a quote that sounds authoritative, it’s very easy to pass it along without checking to see if the quote can be verified or not.

The short answer to all arguments from authority is: just because somebody says something doesn’t make it true. But that’s not quite the whole story. You yourself probably aren’t an expert in evolution, so it’s natural that you generally listen to experts on biology to inform yourself of how things really are. Someone who studies a particular field his whole life, and is familiar with the scientific method, is likely to know what he’s talking about.

So it is sometimes appropriate to use authorities to inform your opinions. To know when it is and isn’t appropriate, let me suggest six questions, which you should get in the habit of always asking whenever you encounter an authority argument that you think might be flawed.

1. Did the source REALLY say what the quote said? Believe it or not, some debaters lie when quoting people. (Shock and awe!) More often, they do not mean to lie, but they pass on a quote that they heard somewhere else and don’t bother to verify it. Always try to locate the source of the original quotation, not a secondhand copy.

2. Is the quote out of context? In the above quotation, notice how the “ellipses”, or “...” break up the sentence. In formal literature, those three dots mean “There is more written here in the original source, but it is either too long to quote or it is irrelevant.” In less formal debates, it frequently means, “I skipped some words because they are inconvenient to my argument.”

Once you track down the original quote and piece it back together, often you will find something useful to your argument. The same goes for words appearing in brackets, as in the statement: “I believe that evolution is [not] a good theory.” In some cases, the original text may have something really lengthy replaced by the brackets; but in other cases, the word “[not]” might be gone entirely, which would change the whole meaning of the sentence.

3. If you take the quote in context, is the source actually making the opposite argument from what it appears? In my first article in this series, I said that being scientific means that you seek out positions contrary to your own beliefs, and meet your critics head on. In this spirit, it’s not uncommon for a scientist to say “Arguments x, y, and z APPEAR TO disprove my theory, BUT, if you look at additional evidence, you’ll see that this is not the case.” Stating something this way is intellectually honest; it proves that you are trying to take counterarguments into consideration instead of ignoring them. However, frequently you will see debaters quote such a sentence and omit the word “BUT” and everything that follows. This is misleading, and it makes it appear as if the speaker actually believes his own theory is wrong. Watch out for sentences that don’t end in periods. The original source may have a lot tacked on after the quotation stops.

4. Is the source an authority? If Albert Einstein is talking, the quote may carry some weight. If Bob the Janitor is talking, it may not.

5. Is the source an authority on the subject he or she is talking about? Even if it is Albert Einstein talking, he may not be the best person to consult about what is the best brand of hair gel. Be wary when you see mathematicians quoted on biology. Also watch out for quotes from people who lived a long time ago and didn’t know about modern discoveries. Isaac Newton can’t be expected to know anything about computers or general relativity.

6. Is the source expressing a generally accepted fact, or an opinion? Even the most well-respected scientists have been known to come up with wild fantasies that are not based on the current state of scientific information. It’s fine to disagree with one’s colleagues — in fact, the scientific method depends on it. But one person’s opinion, even a well-informed opinion, doesn’t immediately negate an established base of knowledge, if 99.9% of scholars in the same field hold the opposite opinion.

I’ve offered six reasons why an argument from authority can fail, but I still haven’t responded to the quote at the beginning of the article. Does one of the six questions above actually help us decide what to make of Francis Hitching’s expert opinion?

Well, you have a month to figure it out, because I’m going to leave it as an exercise for the reader. Brush up on my past three articles, use the web to track down this quote, and then come back next month and we’ll talk about the answer. Email me at rklasser@apollowebworks.com if you think you know the answer.

Holy Handouts

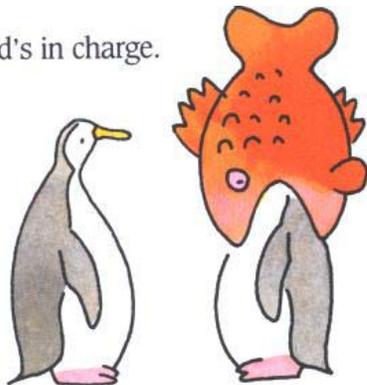
by Arlo J. Pignotti

This is my fourth article to show-and-tell some of the silliest religious products on the market. In case some of you out there have started collecting, why not take a break from giving money to the nutballs who make all this ridiculous crap and keep in mind that some of the best holy paraphernalia is free. It may depend on how far south you live, but many cities I have visited have their fair share of holy rollers pushing tracts and pamphlets free of charge. It is their attempt to get you hooked. I have collected hundreds of handouts worthy of sharing. This being my first issue on handouts, I will start with more simple items and work my way up in future articles. For example, little one-liner cards are handed out by evangelical Christians to tempt you to read the Bible. Here's one handed to me by an ET (Evangelical Terrestrial)...



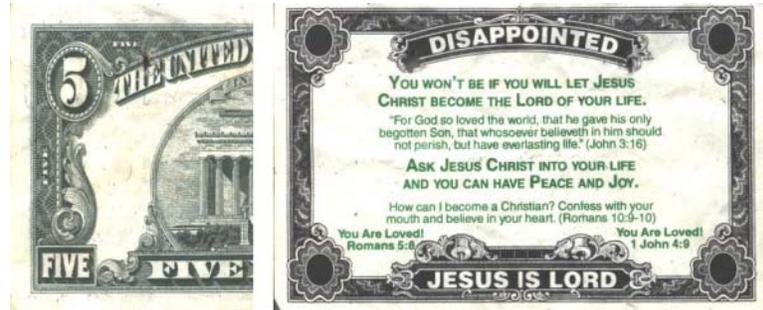
And there is a whole series of cards illustrating bad things happening to animals to make the point that God is in control...

Relax, God's in charge.



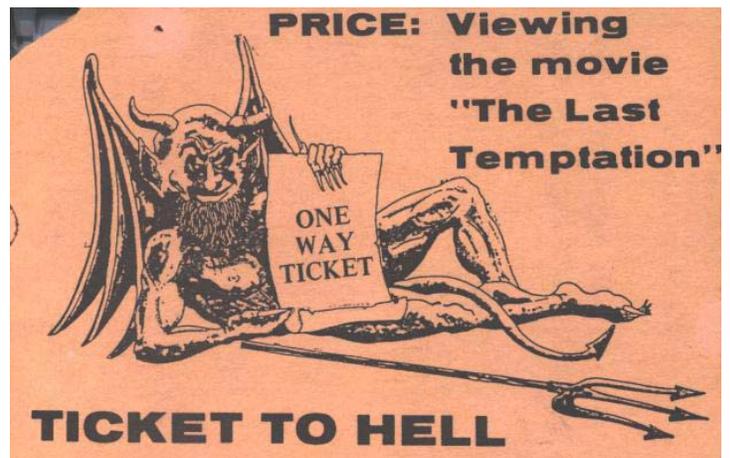
Nothing says God is in charge more than the sight of a penguin having its head devoured by a fish!

Some proselytizing methods are very cruel. I used to park cars at a strip club, where fundamentalist Christians would enter, get a lap dance and then give what looks like folded money to the strippers. But later when unfolded, they find it is not money at all. It is counterfeit cash on one side and the other side says, "Disappointed[?] You won't be if you let Jesus Christ become the Lord of your life." They come in twenties (for the dancers) and five-dollar bills (for tipping waitresses and valets).



You can imagine how pissed the strippers were at the end of the day. One after another, the dancers were tearing them up and throwing them on the ground as they stormed out of the club at the end of the night. Why the hell would anyone want to join a religion whose members are deadbeats that try to convert through disappointment? Even the Christian strippers took offense.

Here is a favorite of mine. Back in 1988 when people were waiting in line to see *The Last Temptations of Christ*, Baptist protesters were handing out this...



It's a ticket to Hell! Price of admission... your soul! Mwahahaha! But have no fear. You can always purchase tickets to heaven!

- continued on Page 6 -

Holy Handouts

(continued from p. 5)



It's a good thing these tickets cost only 15 cents at Christian stores. I can scalp them in front of churches for a huge profit! Apparently God really can see the future. It says right on the tickets that John will lose 3 to 16!

It's not just the Christians giving out tickets to passersby. The Scientologists are at it too. I was handed a free admission to *Orientation* which was playing at the

Scientology theatre across the street from the University of Texas. I was going to include a picture of the ticket, until I reminded myself that the Church of Scientology and it's legion of well-paid lawyers would sue me for simply reminiscing what the ticket looked like, much less reproduce it in this article.

I was the only one who showed up in their theatre that day. The Scientologists sat me down in their huge empty theatre to watch a film of John Travolta and Kirstie Alley bawling through the whole thing trying to convince me I should become a Scientologist. It was just a real creepy infomercial, but I must say it was more entertaining than L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth* (as any infomercial would be). By the end of the film the narrator of *Orientation* says, "You are on the threshold of your next trillion years as a being, do you want to live it in shivering, agonizing, darkness... or come with us into the Church of Scientology... You can leave and never come back to Scientology after this film, although that would be stupid! You could also dive off of a bridge or blow your brains out!!!" He says this as he walks closer and closer to the camera speaking more and more aggressively. I was edging my way more and more towards the fire exit. By the Scientologist's reaction when I walked out, it was as if I was the first person ever to escape their brainwash tactics.

Call me crazy for going, but I have often enjoyed some of my adventures in accepting church invitations. Not too long ago a gentleman asked if I wanted to sell all my belongings along with him to accompany a couple of cults known as the "Galactic Federation" and the "Angelic Hierarchy" to witness Christ landing in Egypt after a long journey in on his spaceship through the galaxy. But no thank you. I do draw a line sometimes at just how far I will go for a hoot.

Cartoon by Phil Amador

THE
TOP 15
 ways to
DEBATE
 AN
EVOLUTIONIST
 (A Creationist's Guide)
 #14
 THE
GRAND CANYON
DATING
 PROBLEM

