Howdy! What a year 2005 was! And 2006 is headed in that direction as well!

Besides the re-birth of our newsletter, we now meet in a different weekly location. A fine Italian restaurant called Romeo’s. It’s in South Austin, and now our meeting room is more secluded than ever. We may not meet there much longer, but who knows? We might after all. I like it.

Recently we’ve learned that Julia Sweeney is coming to the Paramount Theater! That’ll be in May, and we’ll keep you up to date on that. Since the George Carlin Comedy Night Out was on December 30, we’ll have to report on that in the February issue.

We have more updated information about the 2006 American Atheists National Convention to be held in San Antonio, Texas in April of this year. Marla and I plan to go. I’ll also try to interview some other Atheist activists there, and we’ll be sure to bring back some quality photos.

In this issue we talk about several news stories like wacky Christians acting up in public, and in private.

We also feature info about some of our products for sale on our website, and another blast from the past in the ACA photo history files.

As usual, we’re always looking for submissions. I’d especially like to print letters to the editor. I’m at joezamecki@hotmail.com

Thanks and enjoy! :o)
The Atheist Community of Austin is a local non-profit educational 501(c)3 organization founded in 1996, and is affiliated with American Atheists Inc., the American Humanist Association, and the Council for Secular Humanism, and is a member group of the Atheist Alliance Intl.

The ACA is a democratically run organization. Board Meetings are held every second Sunday of the month, and all members are welcome to attend, but only board members may vote. Board elections are held every year in May.

Regular membership in the ACA costs just $24. per year, and the membership year begins in March. You can join anytime though. We also offer student, family, senior and life memberships.

The ACA hosts a monthly lecture at the Austin History Center at the corner of 9th St. and Guadalupe St. This is a community service, and a means of disseminating information and ideas of interest to Atheists and the greater Austin community. Lecture topics usually focus on core areas of Atheist interest such as science, skepticism, the impact of religion, philosophy, church-state separation and community activism. Lectures are scheduled on the 3rd Sunday of every month starting at 12:30 pm in the “Reception Room.” Admission is always free.

However, for our January 2006 lecture, we’re going to try to have a group outing to MY place of employment, Inner Space Cavern, in Georgetown, TX. I’d like to give the lecture myself, in the form of my tour. I’m a tour guide there. As you can imagine, this is a very unusual kind of monthly lecture, and yes this cave is relevant to Atheism. If you need info anytime, call me at (512)382-9283, or check with the ACA website or our voicemail for that.

atheist-community.org (512)371-2911
Editorial...

Oh those Wacky Christians! ...again!

For years, I had to pray to God. I prayed for lots of things, but sometimes I prayed for surprising things. I prayed to God for help in life, and he did not help. I prayed to God for help with the people who were forcing me to pray to him. He did not help. I asked God to show himself, and he did not. So I stopped praying, and he did not object. Now I’m much happier, and guess what? He still does not object. So what’s the problem, right?

On ABC’s Wife Swap, Reginald Finley Sr. And his family took part, with Reggie’s wife, Amber moving in with the Stonerock family. That’s Pastor Stonerock...’nuff said. Well most Atheists who watched that episode of Wife Swap probably agree with me that the show was a bit dishonest and slanted in its portrayal of the Finley family. Not just a bit, a lot. I thought that the entire Finley family did great under the circumstances, and I’m very thankful to them for getting the word “Atheism” into so many living rooms across America in a positive way. We really need that.

Now the FX Network has a show called 30 Days, and the producers of that show are looking for an Atheist to live with a Christian family for 30 days. Their deadline passed in December, so they probably already have someone picked. When I find out who, I’ll talk it up, for sure.

I asked Reggie Finley for a direct quote about his opinion of this offer from 30 Days. Here it is.

“I think the offer by 30 days over at FX Network (Not Fox) should be one that any able atheist should jump on. Even though my experience with ‘Reality-Based TV’ wasn’t the best. It still put a flesh and bones face on atheism. I don't think this is an opportunity we should pass up.”

Reggie, I couldn’t agree more.

Also I routinely come across news reports about really wacky Christians doing what wacky Christians do. Sometimes I just can’t resist talking about them, and I’d like to start re-printing them here too. For example, in this issue, we feature a report about two young Christian women involved in unlawful floor-praying. Sometimes public prayer can be illegal!

That’s something light. I’d like to talk up wacky Christian stories that are at least funny, and not too morbid. As we all know, the most disgusting and disturbing news reports often revolve around the behavior of the most devoutly religious people in society. To keep this newsletter some-what positive, I’ll try to limit talk about really ugly and depressing topics. With that being said...

According to the Los Angeles Times, dozens of Eskimos in Alaska are reporting having been sexually abused by a single volunteer Catholic missionary who arrived in their village in 1968. The late Joseph “Deacon Joe” Ludowski apparently abused almost all of the boys in the towns of St. Michael, and Stebbins, Alaska. Recently twenty-eight of them, now grown men, decided to break their silence after seeing reports of clergy sex abuse on satellite tv.

Eskimos in Alaska! Eskimos, people!

You show me a far off land that few people in the outside world think about, and I’ll show you damage done there by religion. Grrrr!

Anyway, locally, I like Romeo’s Restaurant. It has a nice slightly secluded party room in the front of the place that seems to fit our group well. We just can’t expand much there, and that’s not good. I’m sure we’ll have regular meetings there for a while, and we’ll let you know when and if that changes. Check our website too.

Also I’d like to give the January lecture at my place of employment, Inner Space Cavern. I’m a tour guide there. It’s a great place to visit with the family, and it’s like no other place on the surface.

It’s also got a bit of religion in it. I don’t mean in the gift shop, where we sell lots of jewelry, including crosses of several different kinds. I mean inside the cave. Now we haven’t found anything religious in the cave. The only way something religious can get into the cave is if a human brings it into there. And that’s just what’s been happening. As of press time, I don’t know if this will be an issue when we have our lecture/tour. But they’re planning on bringing back a light and sound show for our favorite cave formation. It was used in the 60’s and beyond, but discontinued several years ago due to tourist complaints about it.

They complained about the light and sound show because it packed some rather blatant religion in it. A loud voice read a few lines from Genesis chapter one, and claimed that the cave was the work of “Him.” ie: God. Tourists complained about that, and after several years of being a part of the tour, it was discontinued. Well now it’s being brought back. I’ve only heard it once, and it was enough to put me off my breakfast.

If that light and sound show is up and running when our lecture/tour happens there, it’ll sure be interesting. Either way, the cave is a fascinating place, and I’m sure you won’t forget it. By the way, ignore the tour guide tracks in the deep cave mud. We fished out the corpse years ago! JZ :o)
Atheist Community of Austin Social Calendar for January

Sunday Jan 1  11:30 a.m.   A weekly social gathering - for now, Romeo’s Italian Restaurant, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. just West of South Lamar. We meet in the front room in the big window by the sidewalk.

4:30 - 6:00 p.m.   Atheist Experience TV Show, Host: Matt Dillahunty, Co-host: Don Baker, Topic: Is belief a virtue?

Monday Jan 2  7:00 p.m.   Godless Gamers

Thursday Jan 5  7:30 p.m.   Happy Hour at Antonio’s Tex Mex  on I-35 Northbound just north of 183.

Sunday Jan 8  10:00 - 11:30 a.m.   Board Meeting Begin at 10am. Check weekly meetings for place. Usually board meetings are held at Schlotzky’s at the corner of Toomey St. And South Lamar, just South of the river.

11:30 a.m.   A weekly social gathering - Romeo’s on Barton Springs Rd. just West of South Lamar

4:30 - 6:00 p.m.   Atheist Experience TV Show, Host: Russell Glasser, Co-host: Matt Dillahunty, Topic: The Golden Rule

Monday Jan 9  7:00 p.m.   Godless Gamers

Thursday Jan 12  7:30 p.m.   Happy Hour at Antonio’s Tex Mex

Sunday Jan 15  12:30pm   Lecture  - Inner Space Cavern, Georgetown, TX, 20 miles North of Austin on IH-35, exit 259, turn left at the stop sign, and go under the freeway, then immediately turn right and you’re there!

4:30 - 6:00 p.m.   Atheist Experience TV Show, Host: Russell Glasser, Co-host: Jeff Dee

Monday Jan 16  7:00 p.m.   Godless Gamers

Thursday Jan 19  7:30 p.m.   Happy Hour at Antonio’s Tex Mex

Sunday Jan 22  11:30 a.m.   A weekly social gathering - Romeo’s on Barton Springs Rd. just West of South Lamar

4:30 - 6:00 p.m.   Atheist Experience TV Show, Host: Russell Glasser, Co-host: Keryn Glasser, Topic: God Center of the Brain and Co-dependence

Monday Jan 23  7:00 p.m.   Godless Gamers

Thursday Jan 26  7:30 p.m.   Happy Hour at Antonio’s Tex Mex

Sunday Jan 29  11:30 a.m.   A weekly social gathering - Romeo’s

4:30 - 6:00 p.m.   Atheist Experience TV Show, Host: Matt Dillahunty, Co-host: Don Baker

Monday Jan 30  7:00 p.m.   Godless Gamers

The Atheist Community of Austin  PO Box 3798  Austin TX 78764  Voicemail: (512)371-2911
Website: www.atheist-community.org
...and now an announcement about a national Atheist group convention in Texas!  
Re-printed with permission, of course.

The American Atheists National Convention comes to San Antonio, Texas for a weekend of exciting and informative events including a blockbuster line-up of speakers, social activities, panels, workshops and much more!

This year’s convention takes place at the premier destination hotel in historic San Antonio – the elegant Marriott Rivercenter in the heart of the city’s famed “River Walk” area. The Rivercenter features excellent service, rooms (at a special tourist rate!) with spectacular views of the skyline, the full complement of amenities, and much more. And you’re just a step away from historic sites like the Alamo and San Antonio’s famed River Walk with its many restaurants, shops and other attractions. We’ve arranged special rates for conventioneers allowing you to arrive early, leave late and take advantage of the AA room rate. Rates Are: $120/day Single, $120 day Double, $140/day Triple, $160/day Quad

This incredible rate includes an early “shoulder date” beginning on April 12. You, friends and family can take advantage of this special price for the area’s premier luxury hotel to visit the many attractions in and around San Antonio! You must contact the Marriott Rivercenter directly to arrange for your lodging – and remember to mention that you are with the “American Atheist Convention” to qualify. Make your reservations through 1-210-223-1000. A shuttle is available to and from the major airports for approximately $14 per person.

• Along with the roster of exciting speakers, panels and workshops are the two important social events that are tradition at the American Atheists convention. On Friday evening, April 14, 2006 we host the Annual Members’ Dinner that includes not only a spectacular buffet-style dinner, but the awards ceremony where American Atheists recognizes the contributions of important members and activists to our cause. This includes the presentation of the American Atheist of the Year award and other recognition. We will also salute our new Life Members!

• On Saturday, April 15, 2006 we will hold the Annual Life Member & Legacy Member Dinner at the famous RioRio Cantina, just minutes from the hotel! (“Mexican food so good they named it twice!” declared one restaurant reviewer.) This event is open to all American Atheist Life Members and those in the Legacy Program (those with ten years or more of membership with American Atheists), as well as all State Directors of American Atheists, Officers, and Board Members.

A Blockbuster Line-Up of Speakers Like

• JAMILA BEY is a stand up comedienne who is also an “out and proud” Atheist. A Muslim father plus a Southern Baptist, Catholic convert mother, equals one confused child. Throw a Jewish husband into the mix, and you have a walking punch line. Jamila Bey is a stand up comedienne who is also an “out and proud” atheist. Based in the nation’s capitol, Jamila has launched a faithless crusade using her comedic expertise to spread the gospel of reason and logic. She’s substantiated proof that you can indeed have joy without Jesus. Jamila brings to the stage a lethal dose of estrogen and a sharp and cynical style guaranteed to make you laugh!

• DAVE FITZGERALD is one of the leading First Amendment activists in the Bay Area, and is on the Steering Committee of San Francisco Atheists. He is Director of Student Outreach for the Garrison-Martineau Project, a community-building non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging dialogue between believers and nonbelievers. Mr. Fitzgerald also works closely with groups like the National Center for Science Education, the Ask-A-Scientist lecture series, and the Secular Student Alliance. Mr. Fitzgerald is the author of the forthcoming book, “The 10,000 Christs and the Evaporating Jesus,” and will speak on the historicity of the Christian “god-man.”
ACA Event Details

-----Lecture Series We hold our monthly lectures at the Austin History Center, at the corner of 9th St. and Guadalupe St. We hold them on the third Sunday of each month and they start at 12:30pm in the "Reception Room." Admission is always free, and it’s open to the public.

-----Board Meetings We hold our board meetings on the second Sunday of the month, and lately we’ve held them at the very large Schlotzky’s at the corner of South Lamar and Toomey St., just South of Town Lake. That starts at 10:00am and usually lasts till 11:30am. All members are welcome, but only board members may vote at those board meetings.

-----Happy Hour! We meet for Happy Hour at Antonio’s Tex Mex on Thursdays, at 7:30pm. That’s on I-35 Southbound side, just South of Research/183 and just North of St. Johns.

-----Regular Weekly Meetings As of press time, we’re not sure yet exactly where we’ll be having regular Sunday meetings. Crescent City Beignets closed its doors for the last time, so we’re working on it.

-----TV Show The Atheist Experience is our tv show. It airs on Time-Warner Cable, public access channel 10, from 4:30pm - 6:00pm every Sunday. It’s a live call-in talkshow, so feel free to call in with comments and questions for the show and their audience. Members of the ACA are also invited to visit the tv studio during the show, as live studio audience members. This show is also repeated, taped, on Tuesdays at 4:30pm on Channel 10. We also need volunteer help on the show from time to time, so if you’re interested in helping out, or if you think you’d like to be a guest on the show, please e-mail: tv@atheist-community.org

-----Online Radio Show “The Non-Prophets” is a regular live internet radio show on the Freethought Radio Network. It airs on alternate Saturdays from 2 PM to 3:30 PM (3-4:30 PM Eastern time) at www.freethoughtradio.com. Just click on "Listen". The show is hosted by Jeff Dee, co-hosted by Denis Loubet and produced by Russell Glasser.

-----Public Demonstrations Once in a while, we grab picket signs and cameras and hit the pavement in public on issues of importance to us. Usually these can’t be scheduled far in advance, so announcements about demonstrations will likely only be heard at regular membership meetings. The last demonstration we held was at the Texas State Capitol Building on 11th at Congress Ave. We picketed the National Day of Prayer ritual/rally/bad concert held on the steps of the Capitol Building. Around 20 Atheists picketed. It was fun!

-----Godless Gamers is held at Russell Glasser’s house, email rglasser@apollowebworks.com for address and directions. We play all sorts of games. Strategy games, board games, card games, role playing games, party games. It just depends on what people bring. Some recent favorites: Siege of Avalon: a board game where all the players work together to fight back the forces of darkness, find the holy grail, and fill the round table with good knights. The interesting part is that there is sometimes a traitor who works against the others. Apples to Apples: A subjective word association game, where players vote on each other's use of random objects to match a description. For instance, "scary" is matched with "Michael Jackson"; "enormous" with "black holes", and so on.

"Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient.
There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning."

Bill Gates, Time Magazine, January 13, 1996. Time Magazine just named Bill Gates one of the three Persons of the Year for 2005. The other two were his wife, Melinda, and Bono! From U2!
The 2006 national convention for the Atheist Alliance will be at the Airport Marriott in Kansas City, where their special room rate for one to four people is $65 a night. Julia Sweeney will be there to accept the Richard Dawkins award. The first freethought lobbyist in Washington, DC, Lori Lipman Brown will speak, and author-activist Fred Whitehead will talk. Atheist Alliance 1-866-HERETIC or try this: http://atheistalliance.org/conventions/2006/index.html

The 2006 American Atheists national convention will be held in San Antonio, Texas at the Marriott Rivercenter in the heart of the Riverwalk District. Among their speakers will be Michael Shermer. Further into this newsletter, we feature more info on that, and for more info from American Atheists: (908)276-7300 and www.atheists.org

The American Humanist Association’s next national event will be the 2006 AHA CONFERENCE: “The Wave of Reason.” It’ll be the 65th annual Conference of the AHA, and will be held May 11-14, 2006 at the lovely Tampa Airport Marriott in Tampa, Florida at the Tampa International Airport Phone: 1-813-879-5151, Toll-Free: 1-800-564-3440. Make sure to mention the American Humanist Association to take advantage of the $99 special guest room rate (single/double.) Reservations must be made before April 18 for this rate to apply. Speakers will include Lori Lipman Brown, Margaret Downey, and Michael Newdow. The American Humanist Association’s Washington DC office has more info: (800) 837-3792 or: Conference@AmericanHumanist.org

The Council for Secular Humanism just celebrated its 25th anniversary with a World Congress last month in New York state. As of press time, their website doesn’t list another upcoming national event. But they publish a fine magazine called Free Inquiry, and we strongly suggest that all Freethinkers check it out. For more info: 1-800-834-1610
• **ANDREA MOORE-EMMETT** is an award winning journalist, feminist and author of God’s Brothel, a chilling indictment of contemporary Mormon and Christian fundamentalist polygamy.

Her writings have appeared in numerous publications including the Salt Lake City Weekly. She is a founder of Tapestry Against Polygamy, an organization working to build awareness of how this oppressive practice enslaves women of all ages. Ms. Moore-Emmett’s best-selling book examines the lives of 18 women who escape from institutionalized polygamy; their touching stories include accounts of rape, incest and violence. Far from being a voluntary, “alternative” lifestyle, polygamy is often, in fact, a form of sexual slavery that is still overlooked in many parts of the country. Although outlawed by the Mormon Church in the late nineteenth century (a move politically motivated since it allowed Utah to gain statehood), the practice still flourishes in growing enclaves.

Ms. Moore-Emmett was researcher for the documentary “Inside Polygamy” which aired on A&E and the BBC, and is the recipient of five Utah Excellence in Journalism awards from the Society of Professional Journalists. She won a First Place Don Baker Investigative Reporting Award and a Leading Changes Award from the Utah Professional Chapter of Women in Communications. There will be a book signing for Moore-Emmett following her address at the Convention.

• **MICHAEL SHERMER** is a leading historian of science, writer, and founder of the popular Skeptic Magazine. Dr. Shermer received his B.S. in psychology from Pepperdine University, a Master’s Degree in experimental psychology from California State University, and his Ph.D. in the history of science from Claremont Graduate University. He is the author of numerous publications and books including Science Fiction: Where the Known meets the unknown, The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Share Care and Follow the Golden Rule, and a biography of Alfred Russel Wallace. He also wrote The Borderlands of Science which examines the fuzzy land between science and pseudoscience, and Denying History which examines Holocaust denial and other forms of pseudohistory.

Dr. Shermer has appeared on such news programs as 20/20, Dateline, Charlie Rose, Larry King, and has been interviewed for documentaries aired on PBS, A&E, Discovery Channel, the History Channel and the Learning Channel. He speaks on “WHY DARWIN MATTERS: Evolution, Design and the Battle for Science and Religion.”

We’ll feature more information about this convention as it becomes known to us. Obviously there are other national conventions taking place this year, but this one will be held in Texas. Marla and I are going, and we’d like to take other ACA members. The Riverwalk is amazing and very romantic.

For more info:  
www.atheists.org or:  
(908)276-7300

Here’s me at last year’s American Atheists National Convention in Philadelphia, PA, receiving the American Atheists Meritorious Service Award for 2005. In Appreciation for many years of dedicated employment with American Atheists Presenting the award is Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, and my friend and former boss. Yess!
On the left, we have three of the godless stickers we have available in the Products section of our website: atheist-community.org

Below is a photo of some of our ACA members marching in the Godless Americans March on Washington DC, which took place on November 2, 2002. Around 2,300 godless Americans attended that march and rally, just across the street from the US Capitol building. It’s fun to get out into the public eye with proud Atheist attitudes and shiny signs and banners. We met a great many fellow Atheists from all over the nation and beyond.

In the early 80’s, American Atheists organized an Atheist Pride March in Austin. It was a great success. Maybe we could do that again someday. If you have pics of that event, please e-mail us.

Below is a photo of the ACA in action, in the late 90’s. Some of us took part in a fundraising evening for KLRU, the public television station in Austin. We volunteered to answer phones on one of their pledge nights. We were well received, and even the callers seemed to appreciate us being there. We got our ACA logo out on tv, and started a good reputation with that tv station.

We also sell godless greeting cards!

In our next issue...

---Darwin Day! Feb. 12!
---Interview with an Atheist Air Force Pilot in Iraq
---The Atheist Agenda UTSA
For as far back as I can remember, I was taken to church Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. I even recall going to Vacation Bible school some summers. My mother's religion was the Church of Christ--just right of Baptist.

My father never attended church with us and mostly had the odd conflicting habits of vehemently and passionately defending Biblical fidelity, while mockingly criticizing the Bible and pointing out it's many errors and fallacies. Dad was an enigma.

I was an excellent Sunday School student. Every Sunday I memorized my Bible verse. And I was always the kid with my hand in the air and the ready answer. While still in elementary school, I was able to very adeptly read from my King James Bible. I wasn't just going to church, I was really learning the Bible from the Church of Christ doctrinal perspective. I was the model of the soon-to-be brainwashed Christian Soldier.

However, something odd happened. As I got older, and learned about the Bible more and more, it seemed always to stop short of "learning." I prayed to god daily, and certainly believed in "something." I even ended every prayer "in Jesus' name." But for some reason I was unable to commit to baptism--unable to commit to the Church.

All of this changed around age 15, when I realized my mother enforced mandatory church attendance--hoping for my baptism. But I no longer wanted to attend church. I understood the teachings. I could quote scripture. But I wasn't able to take the dive into the baptismal.

I presented my mother with the following argument: While I was forced to go to church, that was a clear indication that her estimation was that I was not competent to decide _against_ becoming a Christian--I was not mature enough to make that decision for myself--in her mind. But, if I was not competent enough to decide AGAINST becoming a Christian--I certainly could not be considered competent enough to decide TO become a Christian. So, I resolved, as long as I was forced to attend church, I would not consider myself competent to consider baptism.

My argument worked, and my mother allowed me to stop attending, but it was some time before the Sunday mornings in our home were tension-free. It definitely put a strain on our relationship. But I had to live by conscience, not by guilt or a need to please my mother. I had to live with myself every day. I had to look in the mirror. I had to feel right about what I did and said. And no amount of disapproval was going to make me promise to be something I was unsure I could commit to.

It was several years later that my older brother, someone my adolescent brain revered as a smart and logical person, dropped out of college, got baptized, and became a Church of Christ preacher--seemingly out of the blue and overnight. This stunned me. And I asked him what changed his mind. He had been in contact with a very religious (and NOT very logical, I later found out) cousin, and his reply was simply, "I was wrong." I had always looked up to my brother and wondered if there was something I had missed--some evidence I had overlooked. In my Christian upbringing, thinking and reasoning for myself was never fostered--only memorizing dogma. And so, I still doubted my ability to discern what was right for myself. I began praying hard for some sign, some opportunity to "know"--not just to wonder "if"--there was a god. And, coincidentally, I got a call from the preacher at my old church, who told me he had a course on evidences scheduled, and asking if I would like to attend. Wondering if this could be that sign I was waiting for, I agreed.
Book Review

The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason
by Sam Harris


Reviewed by David L. Kent

Despite its title, this is a book of political strategy. Harris attacks dogmatic religion, for which he would like to substitute spirituality as a more acceptable support for American military adventures. It is certainly disconcerting to see the beauty, complexity, and mystery of the physical world characterized as spirituality and used to support militarism.

A few quotes: "It may be necessary to kill people for believing unacceptable propositions" (p. 52); "We are at war with Islam" (p. 109); Harris endorses 'collateral damage' and advocates the torture of Iraqis (p. 198); "Benevolent despotism may be a necessary stage in the political development of many societies. Those Muslim countries which have been occupied by foreign powers are in many ways much better off" (p. 230); "We should subjugate any epidemiologically backward society in which SARS, for instance, might arise" (p. 233); his chapter 4 is an unrelenting rant against Islam.

But we must not suppose Harris is a testosterone-fueled warmonger, as he began writing the book the day after 9/11 "in the spirit of a prayer" (p.49) and refers to "hard-wired spiritual needs" (p. 16), the "sacred dimension" (p. 40), and devotes pp. 205 to 221 to demonstrating that "spiritual experience is necessary for human happiness." He attempts to buttress his thesis by devoting a third of the book to end-notes, but his thesis and notes are simply too thin to bear scrutiny. An example: As evidence of spirituality, he writes (p. 41): "There also seems to be a body of data attesting to the reality of psychic phenomena, much of which has been ignored by mainstream science. There may even be some credible evidence for reincarnation," citing Ian Stevenson's books. He seems entirely unaware of Abraham Kovoov's series in the Indian Skeptic in 1998 and 1999, thoroughly debunking the reincarnation cases on which Stevenson relies; see especially Dec. 1998 pp. 32-38, Jan. 1999 pp. 34-36, and Feb. 1999 pp. 4-8, for a discussion of H. N. Banerji, the collector of these stories. Harris also missed "A Case of Reincarnation - Reexamined," Skeptical Briefs (Mar. 1998), by Joe Nickell, CSICOP's senior research fellow, debunking Jenny Cockell's Across Time and Death (1993), the best-known reincarnation claim since Bridget Murphy's case in the 1950s.

The book's market is certainly not atheists. It may be of interest to theologians in search of material to continue their beloved "religious dialogue"--one of the cover blurbs is from the president of Union Theological Seminary--but to few others. Do I recommend the end of faith? Yes. Do I recommend this book? Don't ask.

--David L. Kent
philosophical diversity that exists in our beautiful city, Austin, Texas.

As the editor, I can think of few things you could hold in your hand that made up about 14% of the population, and the religious Americans make up a large enough minority group in America, that it deserves to be heard. So now you hold in your hand an example of the Atheist non-believers. We include a real existence of freedom FROM religion. Non-believers advocate a rational and necessary separation between government and religion, and a free and open level of religious beliefs. The Atheist Community of Austin is a non-profit educational and social organization, founded in 1996 to help Atheists meet other Atheists in the Austin area, and to help the public understand us better.
Yes! I’m a tour guide at Inner Space Cavern, and I’d like to give the January lecture in the cave! We tour guides take a lot of pride in our impressive presentation of something so beautiful, and if we get 20 people to go, we can get a good discount. We’re going to try to book this for **Sunday, January 15, at 1:00pm**. It’s good to get there at least 15 minutes early.

As a proud Atheist, it gives me a great thrill to help educate people about the cave, every work day. I especially enjoy talking about how some of the formations in the cave, have been growing there for around 400,000 years. I also get to talk about the ecology underground, and I stress the need for responsible disposal of waste products. But one of my favorite things to discuss in the cave is the bats we have! Eastern Pipistrille bats, one of the smallest species of bats in North America. We have around four and a half dozen living in our cave, and right around now, most of them are hibernating. This means we can see a few of them up close. I also get to stress the importance of being tolerant and understanding of bats in general. They’re still misunderstood by a lot of people around the world. We really should appreciate bats, as they help us humans in a variety of impressive ways. Eating mosquitoes is enough, but there’s so much more!

On the right, we see the Flowing Stone of Time. It’s one of our favorite formations. It’s in the Discovery Room, and it’s one of the first formations that anyone ever saw in the cave.

On the left, we have a great photo of an Eastern Pipistrille bat in flight. They grow no larger than your thumb. Instead of migrating South, like the Mexican Freetail bats that live in the Congress Ave. Bridge, our Eastern Pipistrille bats hibernate in our cave.
The course was Josh McDowell's "Evidence for Your Faith." I was not logical, I was never taught to "think" critically, and as a result, the misinformation presented in that course turned me into a rabid, dogmatic, young conversion machine for The All Mighty. I brought Church guests from my college, from local bars and clubs, from other churches. I was very persuasive. But also very wrong, I would painfully come to find. Luckily, though, somewhere deep behind my need to be the best warrior for Jesus I could be, was an even stronger drive to always seek the truth. And the Christianity I learned was built on faulty information, distortions, and outright lies. And in the course of faithful study, it was only a matter of time until this would become apparent.

I began to take issue with several Church of Christ doctrines that I felt strongly conflicted with Biblical authoritative teachings. I found other Churches of Christ that agreed with me. I brought these concerns up in classes, after sermons, to other members congregating in the foyer after services. I wouldn't let it rest; how could we go on teaching "error"? But my Church defended it's doctrines: And all of the arguments they gave in defense of their actions seemed to conflict with why other churches were "wrong" for very similar actions. They used a very different line of reasoning when it came to scrutinizing their own actions as opposed to the actions of others. I saw later that intellectual dishonesty and inconsistent reasoning are common tactics in religious argumentation.

In the end, I found myself in bed one night thinking: "How can I go to that church and sit in a pew on Sunday morning? If I know these people are hypocrites, I should not be there among them."

It was, coincidentally, during that same time that my preacher-brother, now in another town, was studying himself into his own quandary. He was eventually kicked out of the church for the same thing I was doing--trying to tell the people that what they were practicing was NOT consistent with what was in the Bible. Allegiance to their doctrine--far less than to God.

There was no hearing for my brother. There was no public debate. He was quietly asked to leave his post, by his church, because they could not suffer the shame of disfellowship from the neighboring churches--even if they, admittedly, agreed with his interpretation of the Bible. So, no one in any of the churches outside of his own (except for a few politically connected members) ever knew there was a real question about the authority of their doctrines. And many members of those politically connected few from other congregations condemned him without every hearing his ideas. Later I came to find that this is par for the course in historic (and current) Christianity.

During this time, I also found a friend in a young man who was a Krishna. He made some claims that were hard for me to believe. I felt that if what he was saying was true, certainly nobody would be a Christian or believe the Bible; and surely if, for example, Biblical authorship was in question; or if the books of the Bible had been altered; or if there were apostolic writings that were excluded from the Bible by the early Church powers for spurious reasons--this would be BIG news in a Christian nation. Surely it would make headlines?

I spent the next few years in the basement of the UCF library reading everything I could get my hands on about the history of the Christian church and the production of the Bible. And my Krishna friend proved to be honest and correct on every count. I had been taught error, historic inaccuracy, and badly distorted facts from the very start. The solid foundation claims of Josh McDowell amounted to nothing but smoke, mirrors, and what can only have been intentional half-truths and deceit. The facts in this case did not represent a difference of interpretation or opinion. It wasn't a case of "how one looks at it." It was a case of distorting evidence in order to take advantage of facts and historic data that most people aren't familiar enough with to argue intelligently. Claim that Josephus wrote about Jesus--and how many people on the street will feel secure enough in their knowledge of the writings of Josephus to dispute you? As a rabid fundy, when someone DID dispute me, my real ignorance was excruciatingly humiliating. I only knew what
Finally, I was properly and officially "disfellowshipped" by the Altamonte Springs Church of Christ in a suburb of Orlando, FL, sometime during college, after I refused to return. I agreed to a few classes with the preacher there, though, before I left. They ended when he told me he could not show me that the books in the Bible were the inspired Word of God. So what did he think he was preaching? One good-hearted member had even tried to tell me that all the books were written by apostles--which they clearly are not. I was told there were no inconsistencies--but as I read deeper, there clearly were. On and on it went--falling like dominoes or a house of cards.

Still, somehow, I remained faithful to god, but I lost my faith in men and religion.

I read Buddhism (which my preacher chastised me for during my last classes--although he admitted he'd never read any himself; now there's a testament to valuing truth--condemning something you have no knowledge of!) I had been told the Buddhists worship Buddha; but reading it myself, I found this was a lie. I read the Bhagavad-Gita and the Upanishads. I had been told the Hindus worshipped many ridiculous gods--but the writings were clearly poetry and metaphor, and indicated outright that not just the gods, but also the people, animals, and objects were symbols--of things like "time" and "human passions." I read Moslem mystic poetry, and again saw the symbolism of god representative of "the self" and "the unknown" and "the universe." I continued reading histories of the major religions of the world--and some minor ones. I read commentaries on the Koran. I read Taoist writers--Lao Tzu and Chuang Tse. I read and read--and read some more. And I paid attention to the work of well-regarded commentators on mythology and history and the human mind, such as Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung. I began to take an interest in natural sciences--at a layman's level, admittedly. I read about as much Hawking, Einstein, and Heisenberg as I was able to understand. I felt that if there was a god, surely he was to be found within his own creation. If god made the universe, then he was in there--somewhere. He was everywhere, everything--all mind, all power, all being.

And then one day it clicked: All conscious knowledge, all of the forces that exist, all material existence--everwhere. That's how I would define "god." And how was that different than the universe itself? In one short commute home one night from a long day at the office, I realized that to me, god has always been my symbolic interpretation of "everything." God is me. God is matter. God is you. God is mind. God is good. God is evil. God is night and day and neither night and day. God is a beautiful and powerful symbol that has meant many things to many people and cultures since man first began to question all the things he cannot understand or explain. To me it was a symbol for the universe itself and all that it contains--and even all that it does not contain.

So, I guess it could be said that I still believe in "god." I believe in god in the same way I believe in "freedom," or "fairness," or "hope," or "happiness." God is one of the strongest self-defined symbols. God is as much as it means to me, or to you, or to anyone. The problem seems to arise, though, that religion would promote a literal, corporeal god--that can impact matter, time, energy, humanity. Religion wants to have the cake and eat it too. The religion I see in my country wants to make a symbol into a corporeal being--and then say that treating it as a corporeal being--trying to measure it or find it in some material way--is not plausible. The symbol "god" is no more the thing it symbolizes than a flag is a nation.

Ironically, I would be quite comfortable saying "I believe in god," but for the "god" of this nation's Christianity--which necessitates long clarification of that statement, and will result in any Christian I have ever met calling me "atheist" in the end. So, when asked by a Christian whether or not I believe in god, and knowing what the fundamentalist Christian means by "god," I can honestly answer "No, I do not believe in god. I am an atheist." Tracie Harris

If you’d like to see your Atheist testimonial here, please e-mail it to us at joezamecki@hotmail.com or mail it to:

The Atheist Community of Austin
PO Box 3798, Austin TX 78764
Another Book Review

Da Vinci Code Decoded

by Martin Lunn

182 pp., paperback, $9.95, Disinformation Company (2004)

Reviewed by David L. Kent

The author has a diverting credential: he claims to be Grand Master of the Dragon Society founded in 1408. The book purports to be an analysis of Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code (2003), but both books are a restatement or summary of Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln's Holy Blood, Holy Grail (1982). But in Lunn's own words: "Some of us think that there has been a 'softening up' process over the last couple of decades to lead mankind towards some kind of spiritual revelation. This has been done through science fiction films like The Matrix trilogy and popular interest in and debate on esoteric phenomena as diverse as UFOs and crop circles. This revelation could even take the form of excavation at Rennes-le-Chateau, resulting in recognition of the Grail families. Dan Brown's subversive novel has contributed much to the change the world is going through."

The motive of these writers seems to be to stir up interest in or vitalize the dying Roman Catholic church. But any reader who has spent time surveying the history of that church will find little new here. Forgeries such as the infamous Donation of Constantine and corruption such as the Vatican-CIA alliance to subvert European governments display well enough how the church self-destructed. But if you have an interest in Catholic trivia, this could be a fascinating read. Computers reveal that Da Vinci painted himself in drag to create the Mona Lisa?(p. 14) Who knew? The evil Baphomet is really the Greek 'sophia'? (pp. 121ff, 159f) Historical oddities abound: Templarism, Bilderberg, Nostradamus, Shroud of Turin, Trilateral Commission, Tarot, Opus Dei, Isaac Newton and Marilyn Manson. A bizarre banquet. Unfortunately for the main thesis of these books, the blood-line from Jesus Christ was expertly and thoroughly debunked in Neil D. Thompson's journal The Genealogist soon after Holy Blood, Holy Grail was published in the U.S. While a descent from Childeric I, 5th century founder of the Merovingian dynasty, can be documented to the present through 58 generations, the name of that king's father Merovech is a tribal name, so the line stops there and unreliable legend takes over.

And alas, Grand Master Lunn has allowed himself to be net-fooled here and there. For instance, he claims that many researchers have noted that aloe vera is native only to the Americas(p. 147). But aloe barbadensis Miller (its botanical name) was known 4100 years ago in Nippur, south of Baghdad, and was naturalized to America only in the 16th century by Jesuits and Franciscans. But to Lunn's credit, he discovered that Random House, the publisher of The Da Vinci Code, created a fake website to establish the existence of the non-existent Depository Bank of Zurich on which the book's plot depends(p. 139). Disinformation indeed.

--David L. Kent

And on a recent episode of the Atheist Experience TV, an issue was raised by a caller, but for some reason, the issue didn't covered completely, so David wants to discuss it here.

The religious wrong has recently been claiming that 'god' and 'good' derive from the same root, implying that atheism represents something other than good. According to Walter Wm Skeat, An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, 'god' derives from the Teutonic root 'guthom' and perhaps ultimately from the Sanskrit 'huta', denoting 'one to whom sacrifice is offered'; and 'good' derives from the Teutonic root 'godoz', meaning 'fit, suitable'. Skeat remarks that 'god' is "in no way allied to 'good.'" The Oxford English Dictionary contains more detail, but agrees with Skeat.

--David L. Kent
Praying women jailed for blocking courthouse

A day earlier, pair ticketed for obstructing Washington Township business

From the Macomb Daily, a newspaper in Mount Clemens, Michigan, just North of Detroit

PUBLISHED: December 8, 2005 - Re-printed here with permission, of course.

By Frank DeFrank Macomb Daily Staff Writer

The Bible teaches there's a time and place for everything.

But two women learned this week lying face down in the vestibule of a courthouse is not the place to pray, and the time is not minutes after they were admonished for blocking the entrance to a business in the same manner.

Brittany Lee Jordan, 25, of Washington Township, and Rachael Sue Jacob, 27, remain jailed Wednesday in lieu of $5,000 bond after they defied an order from 41A District Court Magistrate Michael Osaer to refrain from blocking access to public buildings.

The women told the magistrate they were praying.

"You can pray all you want," the judge said. "You just can't do it in a place -- where you are impeding other people."

The story began Sunday when employees of a BP gas station/McDonald's restaurant near 26 Mile Road and Van Dyke called police to complain that two women were lying in front of the door to the business blocking access by customers.

Jordan and Jacob were ticketed as disorderly persons and told to appear in court the next day. During a hearing Monday morning, the women told Osaer they didn't intend to violate any laws, but dropped to the ground and sprawled face down because God told them to pray.

"I don't harm anybody or mean to cause any harm," Jacob told the magistrate. "It is just something I felt God had laid it on my heart."

At one point during the hearing, both women dropped to the courtroom floor and began praying.

Osaer set bond at $1,000 and instructed the women to refrain from blocking access to public buildings. Jordan and Jacob were held for a short while, then released after they paid $100, the required 10 percent of the bond.

But as they left the courthouse, the women dropped to the floor in the vestibule and refused pleas from court workers to move. Police were summoned and Jordan and Jacob again found themselves before Osaer, this time in handcuffs.

The magistrate scolded the women for defying his instructions, but Jordan and Jacob said they meant no disrespect.

"I feel it's very important to do what God asked me to do," Jordan said. "I am willing to pay a price for my actions."

Osaer then asked the women: "Does God ever tell you to go pray in some place that doesn't block a door?"

Jordan responded: "Being in a public place is a recent thing." "I know it seems strange that God would ask me to do something that goes against the law," she continued. "But he's never asked me to do anything harmful to anybody else." Osaer then increased the bond on the women to $5,000, which they apparently couldn't post. They were then ordered jailed.

Jordan and Jacob are due back in court Jan. 13 on the disorderly person charges.

Shelby Township police Chief Robert Leman said the women offered little explanation for their actions when initially ticketed by officers.

"They just said they were praying," the chief said.

http://www.macombdaily.com/stories/120805/loc_pray001.shtml
We can get a discount on tickets to the cave easily. If we get 20 people, it goes from $14.95 for adults down to $9.00. Not bad. Please e-mail me if you’re interested:

joezamecki@hotmail.com

The Lake of the Moon

In 1963, when Inner Space Cavern was discovered, we hadn’t yet sent people to the moon. That wasn’t until 1969 of course, and before then, a lot of people thought the moon would look like this. This room is the lowest point on the tour, at 69 feet below the surface. On the surface above it, a cactus patch and a parking lot.

Cave Drapery

Before water droplets fall from the ceiling, they often run along the bottom of a rock that has an inclined surface on its underside. Each droplet deposits a tiny amount of calcite wherever it goes. As the drops follow the contours of the bottom of the rock, they add calcite, and where the rock’s surface flattens out or stops, the drops fall to the floor of the cave. After thousands of years of this process, and billions of water droplets later, “cave drapery” is formed. Trace amounts of iron in the calcite create reddish-brown stripes, making it look like bacon. So we also call it cave bacon.