Howdy! **Happy Spring Equinox!** What a beautiful time of year it is! We hope your days are filled with the sights, sounds, and smells of Spring re-growth. This year’s Spring Equinox will occur on March 20, at precisely 7:07 P.M. Central Time.

An equinox in astronomy is the event when the Sun can be observed to be directly above the equator. The event occurs twice a year, around March 20 and September 22. According to FactMonster.com: Translated literally, equinox means “equal night.” Because the sun is positioned above the equator, day and night are about equal in length all over the world during the equinoxes. A second equinox occurs each year on September 22 or 23; in 2007, it will be on September 23 at 5:51 A.M. EDT (09:51 UT).

When compared to modern holidays based upon mythology, the ability to nail down the exact time this real event happens makes it that much more appealing to fans of nature, reality, and our place in the universe.

We had a great ACA Birthday Meeting on February 11 at Ventana Del Soul. There was cake complete with the ACA logo on it in bright blue. There was champagne. There was a fascinating panel discussion with some old-school members who go way back in the life of the group, like your editor. There were decorations, ACA products on display, and a nice turnout. I counted 36, and we got two brand new memberships signed up, as well as several membership renewals and donations.

ACA President Matt Dillahunty gave his first State of the ACA Address, and it was inspiring to hear about our accomplishments in 2006. We also got to do a very nice poetic toast to the ACA. No birthday spankings though. :o)

After the birthday meeting, we had our February board meeting, during which we passed a resolution that the ACA is officially opposed to the recent Texas State House and Senate resolutions to have the State Preservation Board place the words “In God We Trust” at four locations in the Capitol building. In this issue, we discuss this idea, also called the “Patrick Resolution,” and what it means to us Atheists.

On page seven of this issue, you’ll find the ACA membership application, because March is the first month of the membership year for us. We goofed on that a bit though, since the membership year begins on March 1. We should’ve put the application in the February issue, so we live and learn. We hope all members will take some time and fill this out again, and renew their support for this fine group, and the Atheist movement in general. Membership is growing steadily, but we know there are lots of Atheists in Austin who aren’t joiners. There are plenty of other ways to help with the cause, but we really need to find the other Atheists in Austin, some of whom we know are isolated socially in their Atheism.

Recently a rather unpleasant Paula Zahn Show featured three anti-Atheists, and the topic was discrimination against Atheists! We got some justice though, in the form of Ellen Johnson getting a short guest spot on the same show a week later. You can watch both episodes now at www.youtube.com. Just enter “Paula Zahn, Atheists” into the search box.

Recently, your Atheist Community News editor was a guest, or rather co-host, on the Atheist Experience TV Show. It was my extreme pleasure to return to that show, even if for just one episode.

I got to talk about an issue that’s near and dear to my heart, Atheist activism. We took some great calls, and got to educate the public a bit.

You can listen to that entire episode online at: atheist-experience.org/archive/index.php?full=0

I am very grateful to Matt Dillahunty, Don Baker and everyone on the TV show staff. I’m also proud to continue promoting that show in this newsletter.

I’d like to share with you all an e-mail the TV Committee received about that episode. The writer gave us her express permission to reprint it all, including her name. She’s proud to be an Atheist - out of the proverbial closet to the world! And we’re darn proud of our TV show.

“Hello everyone,

I just moved from Louisville, KY to Washington DC. After listening to your podcast from two weeks ago (Atheist Activism), I decided to join the Beltway Atheist group here in Washington. You are a constant source of inspiration (every pun intended) for me, and I feel great about my decision to become more active in my new community. If only it were Austin... Anyway, thanks so much!

Ciao, Meagen L. Manning, Washington DC.”

Thanks Meagen, and everybody, if you can, check out www.beltwayatheists.org. The Beltway Atheists is a pretty active group, with a Meetup and a MySpace site, and even more, they have Bowling Night at a brand new bowling alley. How’s that for activism?

We’re making a few changes to the newsletter here and there, and we hope you like what you see. We’d really like your ideas and input, and yes, your constructive criticisms. Like everything else, this newsletter is evolving, and we’ve come a long way already. Thanks for reading!

“I’m sick to death of Jesus. I feel that Jesus and Paris Hilton are both overexposed. I’ve seen enough of both of them. And I think I’m getting more atheist because of the way the country is getting more into Bible-thumping.” - Actress Kathy Griffin (“Suddenly Susan”) to Sacramento’s gay Outword Magazine, Dec. 23 [2004].
Atheist Community of Austin Social Calendar for March

Thursday Mar 1  7:30 p.m.                Happy Hour at Ninfas in North Austin. Research/183 northbound frontage road, just north of I-35.
Sunday Mar 4  12:15 - 1:45 p.m.          Lecture: Texas Archaeological Society -  Three members of the Travis County Archaeological
Society - Three mini-lectures covering human history in Texas and the practice of archeology.
4:30 - 6:00 p.m.  Atheist Experience TV Show, Time Warner Cable Ch 10, Host: Matt Dillahunty, Co-host: Russell Glasser
Thursday Mar 8  7:30 p.m. 
Saturday Mar 10 12pm - 1pm Adopt-A-Street Cleanup, Burnet Rd. From West Anderson Ln. To Ohlen Rd.
2:00 - 3:30 p.m.  Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show  Past episodes can be heard via Podcast.
Sunday Mar 11  11:30 a.m.                Regular Sunday Meeting at Ventana Del Soul
1:30 - 3:00 p.m.  Board Meeting Immediately follows the regular meeting. Check weekly meetings for place.
4:30 - 6:00 p.m.  Atheist Experience TV Show, Host: Matt Dillahunty, Co-host: Jeff Dee
Thursday Mar 15  7:30 p.m. 
Saturday Mar 17  10:00 - 11:00 a.m.      ACA Blood Drive Roll up your sleeves for community service.
Sunday Mar 18  11:30 a.m.                Regular Sunday Meeting at Ventana Del Soul
4:30 - 6:00 p.m.  Atheist Experience TV Show, Host: Matt Dillahunty, Co-host: Tracie Harris
Thursday Mar 22  7:30 p.m.               Happy Hour at Ninfas in North Austin
Saturday Mar 24  2:00 - 3:30 p.m.       Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show
Sunday Mar 25  11:30 a.m.                Regular Sunday Meeting at Ventana Del Soul
4:30 - 6:00 p.m.  Atheist Experience TV Show, Host: Matt Dillahunty, Co-host: Don Baker
Thursday Mar 29  7:30 p.m. 

ACA Event Details

---Adopt-A-Street Cleanup  About once per month, we go out to our adopted half mile of Burnet Road between West Anderson Lane and Ohlen Road, and pick up trash on the sidewalk along the side of the road as part of our Adopt-a-Street project with Keep Austin Beautiful. We’re community minded folks afterall, but we also get a nice perk, our group’s name on a Keep Austin Beautiful sign, at the beginning of our stretch of adopted road. We usually meet at the Jack in the Box on the northeast corner of the intersection of Burnet Road and West Anderson Lane, and park there. It takes about an hour to do the clean up, and KAB provides us everything we need. We appreciate our volunteers’ efforts, and we also thank the ACA Board of Directors for approving this new project in January, by a unanimous vote.

---Board Meetings  This month’s ACA Board meeting will be held at Ventana Del Soul 1834 East Oltorf right after the regular meeting. That usually means the board meeting starts around 1:30pm. All ACA members are welcome to attend, and we invite you also to speak up about issues of concern to you, but only board members may vote at board meetings. Current board issues include

---Happy Hour! We meet for Happy Hour at Ninfas on E. Anderson/183, which is just west of I-35 by about a block. It’s on the Northbound side of 183. If you’re coming north on I-35, be sure to take the 183/St. Johns exit, go through St. Johns, and then left onto 183 Northbound, under the overpass. Ninfas is famous for their Tex Mex and Margaritas, aka Ninfaritas, but spending money there is not required.

---Lecture Series We hold our monthly lectures at the Austin History Center, at the corner of 9th St. and Guadalupe St. They start at 12:30pm in the “Reception Room.” Admission is always free, and it’s open to the public. Our March lecture will be given by

---Online Radio Show  The Non-Prophets is our online radio show. It airs live every other Saturday. please feel free to tune in live at http://nonprophets.gotdns.org and visit our archive to hear recent episodes.

---Outings We like to go places as a group, and see some wonderful things, like a field trip. Recently, we took a cruise on Town Lake together. We like to have Winter Solstice parties, and maybe a bar-b-que for this year’s Summer Solstice. If you have an idea for an outing, please let us know. There are many wonderful things in Austin for a happy group like ours to go see. We are fun loving people!

---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. Our one regularly scheduled annual picket is our protest of the National Day of Prayer ritual ceremonies which happen yearly at the State Capitol, in May

---Regular Weekly Meetings  Sundays at 11:30am at Ventana Del Soul at 1834 East Oltorf, in the room upstairs.

---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. The website for the show is www.atheist-experience.org You can now listen to the latest episodes there easily, using a number of different formats. We’re also really happy to say that our TV show now also has a blog: atheistexperience.blogspot.com

The Atheist Community of Austin
PO Box 3798  Austin TX 78764  Voicemail: (512)371-2911
Website: www.atheist-community.org Our TV Show can also be seen here: video.google.com Just enter “Atheist Experience TV” and you can watch lots of past episodes at our archive site: www.atheist-experience.org/archive/index.php?full=0

The Atheist Community of Austin is affiliated with four national freethought groups. This entitles our group and our individual members to certain benefits from each national group. Some benefits include reduced membership rates with those groups, reduced prices for products from those groups, and reduced national convention registration rates.
The American Humanist Association, and the Council for Secular Humanism, and is a member group of the Atheist Alliance International. 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 at board meetings. 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.

Your Newsletter Staff: Editor - Joe Zamecki, editor@atheist-community.org, Co-Editor - Marla Repka, co-editor@atheist-community.org. Your ACA Board of Directors: President: Matt Dillahunty, Vice-President: Don Baker, Treasurer: Joe Rhodes, Secretary: Steve Elliott, Directors: Don Baker, Keith Berka, Charles Clark, Matt Dillahunty, Steve Elliott, Mark Loewe, Don Rhodes, Joe Rhodes & Joe Zamecki

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A New Atheist’s Reply to Christian AfterLife Questions

Recently a Christian e-mailed American Atheists through their website, www.Atheists.org, with a few questions for us Atheists. That e-mail was passed around to a few hundred Atheists all over America, including your editor. Many replies have been sent, but I found this reply to be especially remarkable, coming from a young Atheist, who’s also a new Atheist. Here at ACN, we find this response to be very inspirational, so we’re reprinting it here. The author was very happy to share it.

The e-mailed questions: Isn’t it sad believing that when you die, that’s it, and that you’ll never live again? What about other people? What do you believe will happen to them when they die? Will they just die too?

I want to address your last question first as it seems to be the easiest to answer. Yes, I believe that believers die just like I do. If I believed that Atheists merely died but believers lived forever with the invisible man in the sky, I would most certainly not be an Atheist. You do not go to whatever destiny you think you go to. That’s not how it works. I can think I don’t have to pay taxes, but I still have to pay them. I can think I don’t have to die, but I still have to do it sometime.

As for your other question, I was a Christian until late last year, and I wondered the same thing. I thought to be an Atheist was to be lonely and depressed. But as soon as I realized I wasn’t gullible enough to stay a Christian for much longer, I have lived a happier life than I can ever remember. This is the only chance you have. That’s why I’m happier now. A Christian can be depressed all he wants to because he knows he’ll be happy in Heaven. I have to be happy now because this is my one shot at joy, success, friendship, and life in general. I have achieved more in the past few months than ever before. My grades are improving, my friendships are stronger, I no longer have to go to a psychologist, and I feel genuinely happy for the first time since I was 6. (I can remember the exact moment that I lost my genuine happiness for 11 years, but that’s a story for another time.) As an Atheist, I care more about the Earth. I know that there is only one shot at life, and so I want to make sure everyone has a good and healthy go at it for millions of years to come. In a way, it gives my life more purpose than Christianity ever gave it.

I also see more beauty in the world. Christianity tries to use the beauty of nature to pander their religion, but science thrusts nature into a beauty that Jesus can’t even comprehend. To look at a tree or a star and think, “Oh, God made that,” is simplistic garbage that mars the beauty of nature while proclaiming a warped “beauty” of its own. When you take what is proven about evolution and science, you look at the tree and you are made to think back billions of years to the first carbon isotope and the eventual first strand of primitive DNA and the billions of years it took to become not only the tree, but every speck of life on the planet... you look at the star and think about the hundreds of billions of years since the Big Bang and how the constant fission of hydrogen atoms inside the star can produce a light strong enough to shine billions of light years away... and the apathetic statement, “Oh, God made that,” becomes an awe-inspiring feeling of deep humility. THAT is true beauty.

In the words of Emily Dickinson, “That it will never come again/Is what makes life so sweet.”

- Reed Braden, 17
Roanoke, Virginia

An Atheist’s Letter to the Editor on “In God We Trust”

One of our own ACA members got a letter to the Editor printed in the Austin American-Statesman recently, regarding a subject we discuss more in this issue. Our Texas State Legislature has voted overwhelmingly to have the State Preservation Board put the words “In God We Trust” onto the wall over the entrances to the Senate and House chambers, as well as over their lecterns inside the chambers. You should be able to find that letter online here: tinyurl.com/3yechp or if it’s no longer there, it may be in their archives, which you’ll have to look around for here: www.statesman.com

"Supreme misuse of time, money

Re: Jan. 31 item in the Capitol Roundup: "Permanent 'In God We Trust' is approved."

Apparently our state Legislature has nothing better to do than to spend its time and taxpayer dollars passing resolutions seeing to it that divisive religious messages are on display in its chambers. I'm more grateful than ever that our esteemed legislators are in session only every two years.

By the way, freshman state Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, who authored the resolution, apparently needs a history lesson. He claims that the U.S. Congress adopted ‘In God We Trust” as the nation’s official motto in 1864. It actually happened in 1956, during the height of McCarthyism.

John Iacolletti"

A Response from a Well Known Texas State Senator

Your editor sent a comment to his State Senator, and this is the reply:

Thank you for your e-mail regarding the Senate resolution directing that the State Preservation Board display the motto “In God We Trust” in the Senate chamber.

Although we may not agree on this issue, I do respect your opinion and am glad we live in a country in which we can express differing beliefs. I welcome and respect the views of everyone and hope you will continue to share yours with me. Thanks again for your e-mail. Please do not hesitate to call on me if I can be of any assistance in the future.

Sincerely, Kirk Watson

The Atheist Community of Austin is a local non-profit educational 501( c )3 organization founded in 1996 and registered as a non-profit organization on February 10, 1997, and is affiliated with American Atheists Incorporated, the American Humanist Association, and the Council for Secular Humanism, and is a member group of the Atheist Alliance International. 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 at board meetings. 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.

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Newsbits!

Austin American-Statesman Wed, Jan 31
Permanent "In God We Trust" is approved

This legislative session's "In God We Trust" sentiment swept into the Texas Senate on Tuesday. The Senate unanimously approved displaying the four words on its message board at the front of the chamber, to underscore members' faith in a greater power.

But the Senate went further than the House did with its similar resolution last week. Senators asked the State Preservation Board, which oversees the statehouse, to install the words in gold letters on the frieze above the lectern by Sept. 1.

"The purpose of this is that it sends a message to everyone who comes in here," said state Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, who authored the resolution to install the motto.

Patrick said senators "can look at the words, and (they) can get us through those rough times" when the Senate faces difficult decisions.

The Atheist Community News did some research and discovered the names of the ONLY three State Representatives who voted against the House version of the "In God We Trust" proposal. They are Rep. Donna Howard of Travis Count: Capitol Office, Room EXT E2.812, P.O. Box 2910, Austin, TX 78768, (512) 463-0631, (512) 463-0901 Fax, Garnet Coleman, Capitol Office, Room CAP GW.17, P.O. Box 2910, Austin, TX 78768 (512) 463-0524, (512) 463-1260 Fax and: Rep. Lon Burnam of Ft. Worth, Capitol Office Room CAP GW.8, P.O. Box 2910, Austin, TX 78768, (512) 463-0740, (512) 463-1075 Fax.

We encourage everyone to communicate with our state legislators.

Putting "In God We Trust" over the entrances to the State House and Senate chambers is the intellectual equivalent of putting up a sign that says "Whites Only," and making that sign permanent. It's the same thing for us non-religious Americans. It says that only religious people can work there, only religious people will be represented there, and the issues of non-religious people will be totally ignored there. It says to us nonreligious people, "We don't want your kind here."

Something else, it also acts as a sort of religious test for public office. Now stay with me on this... There are really only four possible courses of action for the legislators and anyone else who chooses or needs to enter those particular rooms. 1. They go in, agreeing with the message, "In God We Trust," or 2. They go in, without complaining about that message, tacitly agreeing with the message, or 3. They go in and complain about the message because they don't agree with it being there for some reason, or 4. They don't go in. I believe that most of our state legislators fall into the second category of action, in this situation anyway. I don't hold my breath for the third or fourth categories coming to fruition. The first two are the result of their decisions to accept a blanket statement about their religious beliefs. No proud Atheist would ever pass that litmus test. It's a test for all who enter. Maybe we can't defend these things in court, but so many other state/church separation sentiments also can't be defended effectively or at all in court. (Well it's their court. Courts have their own state/church separation violations anyway.) This is coming just a year or so after Thomas Van Orden's case against the Ten Commandments monument on the northwest side of the Capitol grounds. Even though Van Orden didn't win that case, it showed clearly that our state government doesn't have total support for it's efforts to evangelize, especially right there at the Capitol Building.

I'm sure that the recent wave of renewed popular focus on Atheism in America is being ignored by our legislators. Like the churches, the government plays catch-up while society evolves and becomes more and more diverse. Now it sure would help things if we'd call our legislators and at least let them know how we feel about government religion.

Concerning the Patrick Resolution (SR141)

On January 30th, 2007, the Texas State Senate unanimously passed the "Patrick Resolution" (SR141) which directs the State Preservation Board to place "In God We Trust" permanently in the Senate chamber. The phrase was immediately added to the reader board and must be permanently affixed on the portico over the Lt. Governor's podium by September 1, 2007. One week prior to this decision, the Texas House passed a similar resolution 141-3.

In a press release following the vote, Senator Patrick said, "The purpose of this is that it sends a message to everyone who comes in here that this Senate stands for Judeo-Christian values." The press release concluded with a note stating that "On April 22, 1864, the United States Congress adopted In God We Trust as their official motto."

The final statement in Senator Patrick's press release is factually incorrect. On April 22, 1864, Congress passed the coinage act which allowed "In God We Trust" to be added to coins, in addition to several other mottos. This did not establish the phrase as the official motto of Congress or The United States. The motto was adopted as the national motto (replacing E Pluribus Unum) in 1956 and added to all U.S. currency in 1957. This action, which continues to be challenged, was a McCarthy era reaction to communism which completely disregards the U.S. Constitution under the guise of patriotism. It is every bit as divisive as the Patrick Resolution, while the coinage act is far less controversial or problematic.

Misrepresenting the coinage act of 1864 as an action similar to, or as justification for, this bill is a demonstration of either Senator Patrick's ignorance or dishonesty. It is yet another example of the misinformation littering our society in order to prop up the myth that the United States is, or should be, a Judeo-Christian nation. It's understandable that the Senator would try to tie his bill to the coinage act rather than admitting that this is simply an extension of McCarthy-era misperceptions. Appealing to the coinage act allows the Senator to compound the error committed in 1956 and further his own career at the expense of the Constitution.

Setting aside that factual misrepresentation, each member of the State Senate should be ashamed of their support for this bill. These individuals have been elected to public office to represent the people and carry on the essential work of the legislative branch. Wasting time and resources to redecorate the Senate chamber in order to pay homage to a deity is a flagrant misuse of the limited time that the legislature is in session.

This bill violates the spirit, if not the letter of the Texas State Constitution, Article 1, Section 6, which states:

No human authority ought, in any case whatever, to control or interfere with the rights of conscience in matters of religion, and no preference shall ever be given by law to any religious society or mode of worship. But it shall be the duty of the Legislature to pass such laws as may be necessary to protect equally every religious denomination in the peaceable enjoyment of its own mode of public worship.

The Patrick bill is not necessary; it doesn't protect every religious denomination equally and represents a clear violation of the principles of church-state separation by showing a preference for a particular type of religious belief. While the U.S. Supreme Court has made clear that preference should not exist for one religion over another or religion over irreligion, the Texas legislature has failed to grasp this simple concept. This motto excludes polytheists, atheists, deists and any number of religionists whose theological views are in conflict with the existence of, deference to, or trusting in a deity.

The Patrick Resolution serves no secular purpose, and its author makes this point clear. Senator Patrick, in addition to appealing to "Judeo-Christian" values, states that this bit of legislation serves to "forever recognize our creator" and serve as a constant reminder which will offer them "guidance in these rough times" when the Senate faces difficult decisions.

The Patrick Resolution is controversial or problematic. It disregards the U.S. Constitution under the guise of patriotism. It is every bit as divisive as the Patrick Resolution, while the coinage act is far less controversial or problematic.

This divisive act should not be the position of any representative of the public.
Continued from page 4. Do they only represent Christians and Jews? Is Senator Patrick correct, does the Senate really stand for the values of 2 religions while marginalizing other beliefs? Is it the responsibility of the Senate to "forever recognize our creator"? Is their faith so weak that it needs a constant reminder on property that belongs to everyone, including those who don't share the beliefs of Senator Patrick?

If Senator Patrick and the Texas State legislature feel that they need to be reminded of their religious beliefs, perhaps they could buy a bracelet that reads "In God I Trust" or find some other method that keeps their religion a private and personal matter instead of something they feel compelled to broadcast, as official state action, by defacing property that belongs to all citizens of this great state. Perhaps in the spirit of the State Constitution, they could consider how their actions are viewed by those who don't share their beliefs and recognize that the legislature's duty with respect to religion is to enact laws that protect the rights of all religious beliefs instead of passing divisive bills that are, in reality, statements of faith.

The Atheist Community of Austin joins all rational, freethinking persons who support the principles of church-state separation in admonishing Senator Patrick and the 80th Texas legislature for their support of this bill.

The Atheist Community of Austin is organized as a nonprofit educational corporation to develop and support the atheist community, to provide opportunities for socializing and friendship, to promote secular viewpoints, to encourage positive atheist culture, to defend the first amendment principle of state-church separation, to oppose discrimination against atheists and to work with other organizations in pursuit of common goals. For more information about the Atheist Community of Austin, or to read our position on the National Day of Prayer, see our web site at http://www.atheist-community.org or call 512-371-2911 (voice mail)

Molly Ivins 1945 - 2007

Molly Ivins died on Wednesday, January 31, in her home in hospice care, after a long battle with breast cancer. She was a beacon of liberal rationalism and bold free speech. We are a better state for having her among us these many years.

Her listing at www.celebatheists.com included the following:

In her November 24, 1999 syndicated column, Ivins discusses Wendy Kaminer's new book Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety. Ivins talks about the book, mentioning pseudoscience, the recovered memory movement, criticizing religious leaders who seem to be above reprove, ritual satanic abuse, etc.

Ivins then says: "I do think it would help if we had a public voice attacking the excesses of religion equivalent to the great 19th-century atheist Robert Ingersoll (who was once the Republican vice presidential candidate; try to think of a prominent atheist politician today)."

From www.atheistalliance.org Atheist Alliance International Convention - Crystal City, Virginia September 27-30, 2007. Speakers include Eddie Tabash, Pastor Deacon Fred, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. www.atheistalliance.org or: 1-866-HERETIC or for more information contact: Margaret Downey, Atheist Alliance International President, P. O. Box 242, Pocopson, Pennsylvania 19366, Phone: (610) 793-2737 • Fax: (610) 793-2569 • Email: downey1@downey1.cnc.net

From: www.atheists.org/convention  AACON XXXIII The 33rd Annual National Convention of AMERICAN ATHEISTS April 6-8, 2007, Seattle, Washington For more info: (908)276-7300

Three Texas State Legislators Support Religious Liberty Out of both the State Senate and House, only three Texas state legislators voted against the recent "In God We Trust" and we spoke on the phone with one of them, Rep. Garnet Coleman of the 147th District, the Third Ward in Houston.

I asked Rep. Coleman why he voted against the "In God We Trust" resolution. He said "I'm a firm believer in the US Constitution. It was developed to be clear, having no state religion. Because of religious persecution, people fled Europe and came to America, where people can worship as they choose, or not worship at all. When we push an entity from a religion onto the people, we're imposing religion on the state. In this case, 'God' is the Christian God for sure, and I was a political science major, and this doesn't jibe with the Constitution. As our country embraces more people, it's important that there be no government interference in religion, to protect choice. Religious beliefs are protected today the way we protect people in regards to race issues. But religion is by choice. The government still shouldn't get involved. 'In God We Trust' in this resolution is inappropriate. I believe there is a push to turn America into a theocracy. For all these reasons, I voted against the 'In God We Trust' resolution."

Rep Coleman said he is an Episcopalian and his family is Catholic. We at ACN are very glad that many Christians support state/church separation.

A Press Release from the Secular Coalition for America

Noted Journalist Christopher Hitchens Joins the Advisory Board of the Secular Coalition for America

Washington, DC 1/30/2007 - The Secular Coalition for America (www.secular.org) is pleased to announce the addition of Christopher Hitchens to its Advisory Board. Hitchens adds his intellectual firepower to that of scientist, Richard Dawkins; author, Wendy Kaminer; lawyer, Michael Newdow; intellectual, Stephen Pinker; and entertainer, Julia Sweeney on the Advisory Board of the Secular Coalition for America, an organization lobbying for the rights of atheists, humanists, freethinkers, and other nontheists in the nation's capital.


Although his political ideas and positions may have changed through his career, he has steadfastly remained a believer in the Enlightenment values of secularism, humanism and reason. Today Hitchens is focused on protecting our secular democracy against efforts -- both foreign and domestic -- to impose what he calls "theocratic fascism."

Lori Lipman Brown, the Director of the Secular Coalition for America, stated that the new Congress has taken an important step in promoting reason and secular values when the House voted to expand stem cell research. However, there are many more policies enacted by the previous Republican-controlled Congress, under pressure from the religious right, which have corrupted our secular government and need to be repealed. These include: vouchers for religious schools in the District of Columbia, the funneling of federal tax dollars to churches through the president's faith-based initiatives, and privileging certain religious sects over the rest of society in zoning and prison policies through the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA). The Secular Coalition for America again thanks Mr. Hitchens for joining its Advisory Board and looks forward to his assistance in removing these and other theocratic intrusions from our secular democracy.

For more information contact Lori Lipman Brown, Director, Secular Coalition for America at 202-299-1091 or staff@secular.org.
Here is an article that appeared in the January 2007 issue of the American Atheist Magazine, reprinted here with permission from Ellen Johnson.

Philip K. Paulson, 1947 - 2006
by Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists

I never met Phil Paulson, but I’ll never forget him. Phil died on October 25, 2006 from liver cancer.

I’ll bet you never met him either. Maybe you’ve never even heard of him. That's understandable because Phil was one of those quiet, unassuming heroes of our movement, one who quietly plants a seed for change that will someday bear fruit that future generations will be able to enjoy. Phil planted such a seed seventeen years ago on May 30, 1989, when he filed a lawsuit to have an unconstitutional religious symbol - a twenty-nine foot cross or “Christian torture device” as Phil called it - removed from Mt. Soledad in San Diego, California.

He was born in Clayton, Wisconsin, and was the grandson of a Lutheran minister. He said that he lost faith in religion following two bloody tours of duty during the Vietnam War. “I fought in Vietnam and I thought I fought to maintain freedom and yet the cross-savers in this city would have us believe all of the veterans’ sacrifices were in vain, that the Constitution is something to be spit upon,” he added.

When Phil first filed the suit he did so without any attorney, doing his own legal research and writing. It wasn’t until 1991, when the case went into federal court, that he concluded that he was in over his head, and so he enlisted the help of attorney James McElroy.

Phil stayed out of the limelight, letting his attorney speak to the press so as not to say anything that could be used against them in court. That was okay with Phil because the important thing was to make the state of San Diego come into compliance with the state constitution. He didn’t want the case to be about him. It was about doing the right thing.

Phil believe in a higher authority - the authority of the laws of the land, which are higher than anyone’s personal beliefs. How many people would pursue a case for seventeen years on principle?

He never gave up. He matched the Theists point by point, fight by fight, issue by issue. He gave no quarter. The courts sided with Phil every step of the way in declaring that the cross was unconstitutional. Finally, when the courts were able to fine the recalcitrant city of San Diego for not removing the cross, President Bush made another one of his ignorant decisions and signed legislation transferring the land beneath the cross to the federal government’s Department of Defense, ostensibly in order to manage the monument.

The case has a new plaintiff now and Mr. McElroy has already filed a complaint in federal court in San Diego against both the city and the federal government, asking a judge to void the land transfer as a violation of both the state and federal constitutions. We support them 100% and will do anything we can to help.

It’s unfortunate that lengthy legal maneuvering by the government prevented Phil from seeing this wrong made right. Unlike the politicians and particularly President Bush, Phil maintained his dignity, even in the face of death - but then again - he was an Atheist.

On June 5 he wrote to me that:

“...I have refrained from accepting any congratulatory accolades until the cross is removed. Moreover, I have kept Atheism alive before the news media in San Diego for seventeen long years. Yes, I am the most hated man in San Diego by the cross-saving Christian zealots who shudder in horrifying hell-fire when they recognize my name Philip as the disciple of JC and Paul(son) as an Apostle of JC. I am hated by the slack-jawed, zombie-eyed Christian zealots, in the same way that the ‘Dixie Chicks’ are hated by the southern rednecks because they have the name ‘Dixie’ in front of ‘Chicks.’”

And so, as we Atheists continue our fights in the courts of the land, I’ll think of Phil with much respect and admiration. And when this case is finally won and that odious Christian symbol is removed from public property, it won’t just be the Atheists who will remember the name Phil Paulson.

Fugitive Las Vegas Priest Arrested
According to an Associated Press report on February 2, 2007, a Roman Catholic Priest from the Las Vegas, Nevada Diocese has been captured and arrested, and has been charged with attempted murder, sexual assault, kidnapping and battery with a deadly weapon.

The Rev. George Chaanine, 52, was a fugitive since the alleged assault took place on January 26, 2007 inside the office of the Our Lady of Las Vegas. A felony warrant was issued after the incident, and Chaanine was finally found in Apache Junction, which is east of Phoenix, Arizona, without incident.

The victim of the assault is a woman who works in the parish office who says that when she was sitting at her desk, Chaanine broke a full bottle of wine over her head, grabbed her hair and dragged her down a hall toward his office. She fought back and lost consciousness and then woke with Chaanine groping her breasts and genitals, police say. She fought him more, until he straddled her and grabbed her throat, police said. She then began to pray for her life before her attacker suddenly stopped. He then said he was going to kill himself, told her to wait 15 minutes, saying he would call an ambulance, and then he left the parish office.

The diocese said that Chaanine is a native of Lebanon who was ordained in 1996 and worked at churches in Detroit, Michigan; Youngstown, Ohio; El Paso, Texas; and Wheeling, West Virginia, before beginning work at Our Lady of Las Vegas in 2004.

A note about reporting on “Black Collar Crimes”
Some religionists repeatedly try to link Atheism to immorality while holding that all morality and goodness comes from their religion. While we don’t assert that this individual’s immoral acts are a result of his religious belief, it’s certainly evidence that his belief didn’t make him more moral.

The Humanist Video Challenge
There’s the Blasphemy Challenge, started by Rational Response, and that’s picked up a lot of attention in the media, and now there’s the Humanist Video Challenge.

Humanists are invited to create short web video presentations of their positive vision of Humanism, and upload them to YouTube.com by the contest deadline of Thursday, May 3, 2007, the National Day of Reason in the United States. They ask that the Happy Humanist logo be included in the video at some point. A diverse team of judges will then determine the best video of all qualified entries. The winner will receive a prize of $500. And have her or his video displayed on the website of the American Humanist Association. The video will also be shown at the AHA National conference in Portland, Oregon, June 7-10, 2007. The second place winner will receive a prize of $300.; the third winner, $100.

Kansas Board of Ed Repeals Anti-Evolution Guidelines
Feb 13 - Topeka, Kansas - The Kansas state Board of Education has repealed science “guidelines” questioning evolution that had made the state the focus of criticism from educators, scientists, and others. The new guidelines are consistent with mainstream science in regards to evolution. This came with perfect timing, since February 12 was Darwin Day.
Muslim call to prayer irks some residents - Mosque loudspeaker disturbs peace and quiet in the neighborhood

By Lesley Grimm, 2-9-07, appearing in the Park Slope Courier at: www.parkslopecourier.com/site/tab7.cfm Reprinted with permission.

It is precisely 2:45pm Friday afternoon, and an evocative male voice penetrates the cold winter air. “Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar,” the man sings in simple and repetitive musical notes. The message is in Arabic, and translates to, “God is the greatest.” The Islamic call to prayer, or Adhan, summons Muslims for ritual prayers five times each day.

In Kensington, the call to prayer is amplified by a loud speaker perched atop the Masjid Nur Al-Islam mosque at 21 Church Avenue. The broadcast continues for about to minutes, resonating through a part-commercial, part-residential section of the neighborhood.

The Adhan can be heard from blocks away, and that is no accident. Imam Abuismail Tahoor Ahmed explains this is an important aspect of the tradition. “It reaches out to the masses,” said Ahmed. “It reminds them of their obligation.”

But this tradition is the focus of a delicate community controversy. The debate weighs two “rights” citizens cherish: religious freedom and good ol’ fashioned peace and quiet.

At a recent Dahill Neighborhood Association meeting, Captain Peter DeBlasio was met with a chorus of complaints. DeBlasio, commanding officer of the 66th Precinct, was invited to the forum to update community members on local policing initiatives, but much of the conversation focused on noise emanating from the Church Avenue facility.

“It’s a sensitive issue that’s going to be addressed,” DeBlasio assured frustrated residents. When it starts to affect residents in the area, we need to find a compromise,”

Marina Mouromoustakos, who lives three blocks away from the Church Avenue mosque, said she can hear the call to prayer even with her windows closed. “They need to respect other people’s rights,” she said. “I’m not telling them not to practice their religion. I just don’t want to listen to it five times a day.”

Ivan Selzer, co-president of the Dahill Neighborhood Association described the debate as a “quality of life issue.” “The noise seems to be above acceptable levels,” Selzer said.

Leaders from Masjid Nur Al-Islam were absent from the neighborhood gathering, saying they did not receive an invitation. But Imam Abuismail Tahoor Ahmed expressed a willingness to meet with concerned residents and community leaders. “If there’s anything we can do to ease tension in the community, we are willing to do that at any cost - provided it does not compromise our religion,” said Ahmed.

Ahmed said that in response to earlier complaints, the mosque had already made adjustments. He said one of two loudspeakers was removed and the direction of the remaining speaker was adjusted. He said the mosque also refrains from broadcasting an early-morning call to prayer to “give respect to neighbors.”

The 66th Precinct plans on addressing the issue at an upcoming closed-door meeting, where representatives from Masjid Nur Al-Islam will be invited to meet with community representatives. Ehran Yildirim, the NYPD’s new Muslim community liason, is expected to participate.

Your editor comments: I sympathize with the neighbors who don’t want really loud religious advertisements to disturb their otherwise peaceful neighborhoods. I just wish Christian churches had to respect their neighbors by not doing the very same thing, using a slightly different form of music, bells. I believe there’s also a good bit of fear that accompanies their frustration, since “Allahu Akbar” is also often, and proudly said by terrorists.
Atheist Community News

The Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin

PO Box 3798, Austin TX  78764

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. We advocate a rational and necessary separation between government and religion, and a free and open level of religious liberty - to include a real existence of freedom FROM religion. Non-religious Americans make up about 14% of the population, and that’s 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 side of things. You can thank the very valuable cultural and philosophical diversity that exists in our beautiful city, Austin, Texas.

"I do not believe in the divinity of Christ, and there are many other of the postulates of the orthodox creed to which I cannot subscribe." - William Howard Taft, U.S. President