

A U S T I N

Atheist

September 2007 • Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin **ACA**

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Ongoing Social Events

—by Mike Swift

The Atheist Community of Austin has recently added four new monthly events. Since I was the one who got these events started, I was asked to write something up about them. Please be aware that more details are available on the ACA Web site.

The first event is on the first Wednesday of the month. The Center for Inquiry hosts a game night every Wednesday night, and they were gracious enough to let us join them on the first Wednesday of each month. The event occurs in the back room of a comic and games store called “Thor’s Hammer.” It is located near the corner of 183 and Spicewood Springs Road, and the games begin at 7 p.m. I was amazed at the atmosphere there. They really encourage people to try out and play the games before they buy. They even allow people to just bring their own games and hang out. We have a small room in the back so we are isolated from the rest of the store. The games that we play vary considerably, but most of

them are modern games. They are not your standard chess, checkers, and backgammon fare! The game we played last time was called “Tichu.” I had never heard of it before, but after playing it, I look forward to playing it again!

The second event is on the second Wednesday of the month. It has been the most successful event so far, and, in my opinion, the most fun of the four. It is a bowling night at 300 Austin, located at Rundberg and I-35, at 7 p.m. 300 Austin is a very nice place to bowl, the prices for the games and shoes are very reasonable. They also have a very nice system to get your ball and shoes to you very quickly. They have a great atmosphere. They are constantly playing decent music videos on screens that hang down between lanes. You would think that it would be distracting but you never really notice it unless you’re going out of your way to look. They also have a nice scoring system that pretty much does everything for you once you have the players

entered in. Don’t worry if you can’t bowl very well, most of us aren’t going to be going on the pro tour anytime soon! It’s just fine to bowl, chat, and have a few beers. To top it all off they have a comprehensive food menu! I highly suggest that if you can only make one event, this is the one you should attend.

The third event is billiards at “Side Pocket” which is on North Lamar between Braker and Rundberg at 8 p.m. Out of the four events this one has had the least participation. One of the reasons I have heard for the lack of interest are that people are concerned that they aren’t good enough at pool to play. I say, “don’t worry about it!” None of us that play are very good (well, Matt D. isn’t too bad!), and we are mostly there for the camaraderie. Another good reason to come is that the event is pretty much free if you just play for an hour or so. Matt knows the owner of the establishment, and the owner was kind enough to work out a special deal for us. I’m afraid that if we don’t have more members taking advantage of it, we may lose it. So please consider coming to play some pool!

Last but definitely not least is the fourth event of the month. Just when you started to sense a pattern going on here, I’m going to throw you a curve. The fourth event is the week after billiards but it’s on a Friday night instead of Wednesday night. This



event is our movie night, and it’s being held at my home, at 7p.m. (Directions and contact information are available in the members’ area of our Web site). Last month we showed the movie “Deliver us From Evil,” an excellent documentary about a catholic preacher who was convicted of child molestation. If you haven’t seen it I highly recommend it. Sometimes we’ll show more than one movie if the movies are short. We may also show one movie and then maybe a couple of short videos on various topics. Please keep in mind that I only have room for about 10–2 people so let me know if you plan on coming.

This wraps up the new events that we have going on with ACA. I am always eager to hear feedback from our members on what they want out of the ACA. If you would like to see other events added or some of the ones above replaced with something else, please let me know. You can reach me at membership@atheist-community.org.

We look forward to seeing you at these new events! ■

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About ACA

ACA provides opportunities for socializing and friendship, promotes atheistic viewpoints, encourages positive atheist culture, defends the First Amendment principle of state/church separation, opposes discrimination against atheists, provides outreach to atheists in the greater Austin area, and works with other organizations in pursuit of common goals.

ACA produces a live cable access TV show and Internet radio show, presents a monthly lecture series, maintains a library of Freethought books, protests in support of civil liberties, and participates in various community service activities.

ACA operates in an open and democratic manner to provide a community of like-minded people for social interaction and support.

ACA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational corporation made up of volunteers. The membership is restricted to atheists, but does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, or disability.

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Sept. _____	Aug. 1
Oct. _____	Sept. 1
Nov. _____	Oct. 1
Dec. _____	Nov. 1

INSIDE THE ACA

Connecting to the Community

—by Don Baker

One of the purposes of the ACA is to build a community of atheists. Community building among atheists is an essential step in encouraging atheists to go out into the larger community and make a positive impact. Toward this end, the ACA provides a number of forums for atheists to meet other atheists, debate, try out ideas, share information, and provide mentoring. After developing some level of confidence, many atheists are more likely to express their views among friends and the greater community—in venues where the audience may be less receptive to the message. This has certainly been the case for me, and many other ACA members who have been energized by the group to put ourselves out there. Even if you aren't ready to apply the war paint and sharpen your spear for battle in the sometimes hostile world, interacting with other atheists can be fun.

Without a doubt, the best method of interaction with other atheists is to come to one of our socially-oriented meetings, such as the regu-

lar Sunday meeting or the Happy Hour. Such events may seem like frivolous activities, but they do provide an ample opportunity for everyone to participate and share in some serious discussion. Bring a topic that concerns you, and try it out.

For those with Internet access, there are many online forums where atheists can interact. I'd like to mention a couple of them that have close relations to the ACA. Our own Web site provides message boards where anybody, atheist or not, can participate in discussions. From the navigation bar on the left side of any of our Web pages, click on "Interact Online." This forum has a low cost for entry for everyone and gives the beginner an idea of what to expect from an online interaction.

ACA runs a handful of online forums where Yahoo provides the mechanics of interaction. Their mechanism provides for participation via e-mail or by Web browsing. There are three Yahoo groups that are of particular interest. The

"atheist-list" is an international group of about 300 people who discuss atheist topics. To join this group, you must aver that you are an atheist. Many of the members joined via their involvement in the ACA, so there is an Austin bias to the forum. The "aca_member-only" forum is for ACA members to discuss topics of interest only to ACA members. Finally, the "ask-an-atheist" forum is for atheists and theists to interact. Instructions on participating in these and other forums can be found by clicking on "Interact Online," then "Yahoo Groups" on the ACA Web site.

Once you feel you're ready for taking on the greater world, consider writing letters to the editor in the Statesman or Austin Chronicle, creating your own blog, participating in one of the blogs of ACA members, or writing an article for the ACA Web site. We have a few members who are at various stages of writing a book. Regardless of where you are, think about taking the next step. You can change the world. ■

MAIL BAG

"Where did all this stuff come from?"

—by Matt Dillahunt

Appearing on both of our programs (*The Atheist Experience* and *The Non-Prophets*) ensures I get a lot of mail. Most of it, thankfully, is electronic, but we've had folks send us books, letters, DVDs and Bible studies via U.S. mail or other delivery services. The books and media get added to the ACA library and the rest of it is mine to sort through, answer or ignore. Despite the fact my sanity may be in danger, I generally choose to answer the vast majority of letters. Here's an e-mail I received last night, addressed to President@

atheist-community.org:

"I am always bombarded with all the religious falts of the millenium for this question. Hope you can give me an intelligent response to the QUESTION: How can so many intelligent people not ask this to themselves?—Where did the billions of megatons the blew up to create the (big bang theory) come from? I think there is such a thing as the big bang and also I believe in evolution. The difference is I believe God directed it. I don't think evolution is such a big argument. OK, I'll give you that. But where did all that

stuff (matter) come from that blew up to create the universe? Did it just appear? Energy cannot come from non energy. SOMETHING made that multi billion megaton mass that blew up to create our universe. Please tell me you believe it just appeared so I can put this message up on your website. Give me an answer without talking about all the pain religion has caused over the centuries." [sic]

How do you answer this? I'm able to ignore spelling and grammar and focus on the actual questions and issues the person is

trying to address, but I'm immediately wary that the individual simply isn't capable of wrestling with a topic this big. Essentially, he's asking: "Where did the universe come from?" and "What caused the Big Bang?" He wants me to deliver the answer to the toughest question, and if I'm not able to, he's going to continue to accept the non-answer: "God did it." That's a tall order.

He starts by claiming that he's constantly hearing about all the evils attributed to religion and ends with the request that I not mention these problems when answering his question about the origins of the universe. I wouldn't dream of it, and I'm baffled as to why anyone else would, so I quickly agreed to answer his questions without any sort of attack on the merits of religion.

I explained that most intelligent people have probably asked themselves some version of his primary question, and that the answer seems to be "we don't know"—though we can analyze various hypotheses and develop models of the universe and theories that provide us with reasonable explanations. I also explained that his dissatisfaction with an answer like "we don't know" is understandable and laudable. That dissatisfaction is what drives us to discover the real answers (and many scientists are looking for these answers), but it shouldn't be used as an excuse to accept any proposed answer—especially when that answer prevents us from continuing to address the question.

His reasoning seems to be:

1. There must be an explanation.
2. He can't think of any good explanation.
3. Therefore, it must have been God.

Richard Dawkins has referred to this particular version of the "argument from ignorance" fallacy as the "argument from personal incredulity." The individual doesn't understand the available

explanations, or feels that they are incomplete or inadequate, and then, because of his personal discomfort with not having a satisfactory answer, he makes a leap to some outlandish panacea which, as it turns out, is really a non-answer.

The god-concept has no explanatory power. It isn't fundamentally different from saying "it's a mystery" or "it's magic" or "that's just the way it is." In fact, when we press a theist for details about the "how" and "why" of god, we often hear these same three appeals in a variety of forms; God works in mysterious ways; God's abilities are beyond our ken; God can do anything; it's God's will, it's all part of God's plan.

I went on to explain that while I'm also uncomfortable with not knowing the answer, I have become comfortable with admitting that I don't know the answer. He may be right; there may be

a God that is responsible for the creation of the universe—but this is something that must be demonstrated and not simply asserted. In the absence of a certainty about a particular answer, we must consider the merits of the available answers.

David Hume (1711-1776) offered a rule of thumb for this task: *Reject the greater miracle.* Is it more miraculous that a physical universe exists and we simply don't have a proper explanation for its origins, or that a transcendent intelligence capable of creating this universe exists—and we don't have a proper explanation for its origins? Hume's application of Occam's Razor leads us to the clear conclusion that the greater miracle is that of the intelligent creator, and we are justified in rejecting this claim—until sufficient evidence exists to make this explanation the lesser miracle.

There are, of course, many problems with the sort of first cause argument that this viewer is advocating, and I didn't want to address all of them in my response to him, or in this article (as if I could). In my closing to this viewer, I touched on the potential arrogance of presuming that we can, should and do have the correct answer to the ultimate question of origins, and then pointed out that arguments identical to his have been used since the dawn of time to explain nearly every unknown.

Where does the lightning come from? Well, it must come from the gods. When the god-answer has been questioned and the truth has been discovered—the god-answer has never been correct. In all other cases, the only correct answer is:

I don't know. ■

ACA CALENDAR

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2

• 11 a.m.–1 p.m.: *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2

• 3–4:30 p.m.: *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 6

• 7 p.m.–?: *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 7

• 10–11 a.m.: *ACA Blood Drive (Blood & Tissue Center)*

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 7

• 7:30–10 p.m.: *Movie Night (Mike Swift's House)*

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 8

• 2–3:30 p.m.: *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show (See Web site for details)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 9

• 10–11 a.m.: *Board Meeting (Schlotzsky's Deli, 218 S. Lamar [at Toomey])*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 9

• 12:15–1:45 p.m.: *Lecture: Mark Loewe—"Low cost textbooks, progressive vouchers (school choice), and incorrect TAKS scores" (Austin History Center)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 9

• 3–4:30 p.m.: *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12

• 7–11:30 p.m.: *Game Night with CFI Austin (Thor's Hammer)*

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13

• 7 p.m.–?: *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 15

• 11 a.m.–12 p.m.: *Adopt-a-street Clean Up (Jack-in-the-Box, Burnet Rd. & Anderson Ln.)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16

• 11 a.m.–1 p.m.: *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16

• 3–4:30 p.m.: *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19

• 7 p.m.–?: *Bowling Night (300 Austin Lanes)*

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 20

• 7 p.m.–?: *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 22

• 2–3:30 p.m.: *Non-Prophets Internet Radio Show (See Web site for details)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23

• 11 a.m.–1 p.m.: *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23

• 3–4:30 p.m.: *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26

• 8 p.m.–?: *Billiards Night (Side Pocket Billiards)*

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27

• 7 p.m.–?: *Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30

• 11 a.m.–1 p.m.: *Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)*

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30

• 3–4:30 p.m.: *Atheist Experience (Channel 10)*

REGULAR LOCATIONS:

- **300 Austin Lanes**, 9504 N IH 35, Southbound feeder, just North of Rundberg, 512.834.7733.
- **Austin History Center**, 9th and Guadalupe. Building opens at noon. Lectures are free and open to the public.
- **Blood and Tissue Center of Central Texas**, 4300 North Lamar Boulevard, 512.206.1266.
- **Dog & Duck Pub**, North of the Capitol, 406 W. 17th at Guadalupe, 512.479.0598. Informal gathering; food available.
- **Mike Swift's house**, log in to the ACA Web site for details.
- **Romeo's**, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. South of Town Lake.
- **Side Pocket Billiards**, 10701 N Lamar Blvd., between Rundberg and Braker, 512.834.2742.
- **Thor's Hammer**, 8650 Spicewood Springs #114 (at 183), 512.326.4332.

Unless otherwise indicated, events are open to all atheist and atheist friendly people, regardless of ACA membership status. Check the calendar on the Web site <<http://www.atheist-community.org/calendar>> for last minute changes.



Atheist Community of Austin

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We're moving our regular Sunday meeting back to Romeo's for September. See calendar for details!

ATHEIST EVE

DESIGN ©2007

"In the United States, her [J.K. Rowling's] book tours have attracted thousands of screaming children, but also death threats. Some Christians have called for the books to be banned, claiming they promote witchcraft."
—USA Today (07/19/2007)

"A Cypress man charged in the death of a Southwest Airlines flight attendant said Saturday that he was doing God's work when he went to a Montrose-area bar last month, hunting for a gay man to kill."
—Houston Chronicle (07/15/2007)

"Three protesters disrupted a prayer by a Hindu chaplain on Thursday at the opening of a U.S. Senate hearing, calling it an abomination and shouting slogans about Jesus Christ."
—Reuters.com (07/12/2007)

"There were no overt threats to anybody specifically by name,' Wiesley said. 'It basically said anybody who doesn't believe in our religious belief is wrong and should be taken care of."
—Denver Post (07/10/2007)

"...stream of threatening ...anonymous phone calls, plus e-mails...Callers...made statements such as 'We're going to get you'...a local reporter traced some of the signed e-mails to congregants of a Baptist church..."
—School Library Journal (06/20/2007)

"[Atheists] are...INTOLERANT against Christians...They are on the attack...they do need to shut up...This is a Christian country...That's the one reason our country has not become like Europe because we have STRONG Christians...And I think that's a good thing."
—Debbie Schlusell (Paula Zahn Now, 01/31/2007)