

Atheist

The 2008 Texas Freethought Convention

—by Joe Zamecki, Texas Freethought Convention event co-organizer

Texas has had several state-church separation demonstrations over the years, including one of the three Atheist Pride marches. The other two took place in Sacramento, CA, and Denver, CO. Several hundred atheists and other nonreligious Americans took to the streets of those towns on three different dates, and got a lot of exposure for the movement. That was back in the late '80s and early '90s.

Then in 2000, Metroplex Atheists put together the Respect our Constitution Rally on the steps of the Texas State Capitol here in Austin. That received a small turnout, but was fun anyway. The Atheist Community of Austin also took part in several state-church separation demonstrations, including three pickets of the annual National Day of Prayer.

In October 2004, ACA hosted The Texas Atheist and Agnostics Convention in Austin. The keynote speaker was Dr. Michael Newdow. Another famous speak-

er was Thomas Van Orden. Both had taken state-church separation challenges to the Supreme Court.

This year another state-wide Freethought event is being planned, with the same intentions as the other atheist demonstrations and other events I mention here. The 2008 Texas Freethought Convention will be on Sunday, October 26, 2008, from noon till 10 p.m., and will involve more than a dozen local, regional, state and national Freethought groups.

Unlike most Freethought conventions, this one isn't being put on by only one or two groups. This will be a multi-group effort, with all groups involved getting equal billing. A family-friendly event, with some free food, and lots of free literature from Freethought groups. It's a fact that even with the seemingly huge Freethought presence on the Internet, lots of Texans still don't know about the various Freethought groups that exist and operate right now, in

the Lone Star State. Events like this one aim to change that.

With so many aggravating violations of state-church separation going on in Texas these days, more and more people are finding it necessary to speak out in support of that important separation between government and religion. Now, more than ever, our state government is working hard to incorporate organized religion into some of the most vital government agencies that exist—among them, public schools.

Last year, our Texas Legislature passed five religious state laws, or five laws "respecting an establishment of religion." How is this possible, you may ask? Well, our state legislators are overwhelmingly religious, as is our current governor, Rick Perry; and, recently we discovered the depth of religiosity in our State Supreme Court.

A civil lawsuit filed by a Texas woman who was injured by members of her church a few years ago, recently made its way to the Texas Supreme Court. She was 17 years old and a member of that church when the incident occurred. She was exorcised, brutally, for hours. She experienced mental and physical injuries from that, which haunt her to this day.

The Texas Supreme Court declared that a church could not be held liable for injuries its members inflict on anyone, anytime, if it was in



the act of expressing their religious beliefs. Even if they seriously hurt someone, mentally, physically or otherwise, all religious groups are protected from prosecution or, really, any kind of legal consequences, by laws that have been passed which are designed to protect "religious expression." The only such law I can think of is the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, passed in 2000, which is a blanket protection law that covers nearly all religious activities. The "institutionalized persons" part refers to religious inmates in prisons. It's amazing how far an unjust special privilege will follow a person, when religion is the sacred cow that cannot be interrupted.

Texas taxpayers are being forced to finance the government promotion of religion, again. There is no option for us, and there is no option for school districts all over Texas. Since the state board of education hasn't seen fit to release or even establish any kinds of guidelines for these Bible "classes," I and many others predict that there will be problems which lead to lawsuits, which will clog our courts and cost taxpayers even more money. All the while, churches

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

An Atheist Voters' Guide —by Don Baker

In this election year, the ACA has finally decided to enter the political fray. While our 501(c)3 organizational status does not allow us to support any particular party or political candidate, we can raise our issues in the political arena. And there are plenty of issues that atheists care about that are largely missing from the nation's political dialog. Church-state separation

ers' guide for issues that concern atheists.

The voters' guide will be published on the ACA Web site in October with as much fanfare as we can muster. The guide will be based on the results of a survey of candidates running for offices voted on by Texans in the 2008 general election that were mailed in Sep-

candidate for each race is given the same opportunity to respond, the voters' guide will allow voters to make an informed choice on the issues behind the questions. Here are two of my favorite questions:

3. I would sooner resign from office than allow a religious consideration to cause me to break my oath of office to support our nation's Constitution.

6. It is appropriate to teach alternatives to established and accepted scientific theories in public school science classes, regardless of supporting scientific evidence.

The complete list of questions can be found on the ACA's Web site. Results will be published prior to the start of early voting, October 22.

We are hoping that the survey gets some publicity and raises awareness for our issues. We do not expect large numbers of the surveys to be returned to us. Even so, the survey will have an educational impact on the candidates and the community at large. Each candidate's lack of participation will be publicly recorded alongside other candidates' participation. We are committed to a scrupulously fair administration of the survey, and we hope to provide valuable information to the wider community in the election process.

We feel the voters' guide is a great initiative that advances our mission and provides a public service. We are doing our part to improve our nation by helping to elect highly qualified candidates regardless of party. Thanks to the many people who have contributed to this important project. If you support this effort, consider making a donation to the ACA to defray costs. See you at the voting booth! ■



would be a major one, but we also care about fair treatment, promotion of science, and other topics. As an active atheist group in the Capitol city of the second largest state, the ACA is well positioned to make a big impact. To do that, we have decided to create a vot-

tember. A total of 481 candidates received a questionnaire consisting of 23 statements concerning issues of interest to atheists. Candidates were allowed to state their level of acceptance or disagreement with each statement. Because every

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are tax-exempt—they get official government promotion—while city governments, like Austin's, have to look for ways to trim their budgets because of problems like tax revenue shortfalls.

There are a great many more freethinkers in Texas than our state politicians think, and we deserve representation in government. We're working on it! Having a statewide convention where we get folks from all over the state to chime in and brainstorm about these issues will help. We're in the "Bible Belt," so we have an even more urgent reason to speak out in support of state-church separation. We've got state-church violations out the wazoo!

Please consider attending the 2008 Texas Freethought Convention in Austin, October 26, starting at noon, at Scholz Garten, 1607 San Jacinto. Thank reality we're able to safely meet for this reason, but we still have a lot of work to do.

For more information, visit www.texasfreethoughtconvention.com, or call (512) 927-6863. ■

ACA at the Conference

—by Matt Dillahunty, ACA President

Organizing atheists may be a bit like stacking marbles or herding cats, but we're still social animals with some common interests and goals. Sometimes that's more than enough. As most of you are aware, the Texas Freethought Convention is taking place this month and it hopes to serve as a fine example of this concept. Many different secular organizations have worked together to promote this event, and I've been asked to be one of the many speakers at the event. To be honest, I'm not sure exactly what I'll be speaking about (and I wouldn't ruin it by posting it here in advance), but there are a number of possibilities.

I'll probably spend a few moments talking about the ACA, our social activities, media outreach efforts, and the overwhelming positive response and support we've received from atheists around the world. While no organization is perfect and we've had difficulty gaining traction with some of our goals, we have a lot to be proud of and our work has encouraged many others to take up similar efforts in their hometowns. Some have started organizations modeled after the ACA, others have started podcasts, blogs or meet-up groups. Many people write to us in the hopes that we know of a group like ours in their area, and this is an area where we (the entire collection of atheist organizations) need to improve our communication and networking abilities.

Our outreach efforts have been effective, but there's plenty of room for improvement and increased participation. Most of us don't like feeling isolated and alone. We want to share time with interesting, like-minded people. The Texas Freethought Convention is one opportunity to address this desire both as individuals and as organizations. I hope you'll join us there, and I hope we use this as an opportunity to enjoy time shared with friends and establish better methods of adding new friends. ■

First ACA Garage Sale

—by Mike Swift

The first ever ACA garage sale was held at ACA board member Lisa Mais' house, September 6, at 7:30 a.m. Mike Swift helped setup, and Shilling came early to assist with the actual sale. We had donations from about five ACA members, with Don Baker and Shelley Roberts donating the majority of items. Of course, we would be remiss not to mention our esteemed president, Matt Dillahunty, and members Laura Sargent and Lee Denham for their donations as well. We can't thank them enough for their generosity!

Buyers started to show up before we were ready, but that is typical for a garage sale! Early traffic was relatively heavy, but tapered off as the morning wore on. Interesting items that were donated included a washing machine motor, a computer monitor paper holder(!), and some toys, for which we had no idea of their functions. We also had a lot of computer parts, especially computer monitors. We joked that we could put the discount computer guys out of business.

Most things went for a couple dollars to \$15. Unfortunately, we didn't get what we wanted for most items as it was a garage sale, and people aren't there to spend a lot of money. The sale went strong until about 12:30 p.m., and when we had no traffic for about 30 minutes we decided to wrap it up.

Once it was all done, we had sold about 1/3 of the items. We then loaded everything up in vehicles to take to Goodwill. The final take was \$154 for the ACA, not a lot, but everything helps!

I believe we will try another garage sale next spring, when we'd like as many people as possible to participate. Let's see if we can break \$200 next time! Thanks again to all who donated and helped out. ■

ACA CALENDAR

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2

• **7-9 p.m.:** CFI Austin Food for Thought Lecture (Old Quarry Branch Library, 7051 Village Center Dr.) Dr. Chris Kirk: "The Evolution of the Eye"; Free.

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

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 4

• **10 a.m.-?:** Blood Drive (Blood and Tissue Center)

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

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5

• **12:15-1:45 p.m.:** ACA Lecture Series (Austin History Center) Russell Glasser — "How atheists can be effective evangelists"; Free.

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** Atheist Experience (Channel 16)

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 9

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

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 12

• **10:30-11:30 a.m.:** Board Meeting (Romeo's (outside))

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** Atheist Experience (Channel 16)

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16

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

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18

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

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

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** Atheist Experience (Channel 16)

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 23

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

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 26

• **11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.:** Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo's)

• **12-10 p.m.:** Texas Freethought Convention (Saengerrunde Hall, 1607 San Jacinto) See the article in this issue.

• **4:30-6 p.m.:** Atheist Experience (Channel 16)

• **6:30 p.m.-?:** Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill's)

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30

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

REGULAR LOCATIONS:

• **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.

• **Romeo's**, 1500 Barton Springs Rd. South of Town Lake.

• **Threadgill's**, 301 West Riverside Drive (at Barton Springs Rd.)

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 <www.atheist-community.org/calendar> for last minute changes.

Starting with the October 5 episode, The Atheist Experience will air 4:30 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. and switch to channel 16. The after-the-show dinner will shift to 6:30 p.m.



Atheist Community of Austin



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ATHEIST EVE

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 <p>You're distorting the Bible! NOWHERE did God ever "COMMAND" anyone to make slaves out of people! You know NOTHING about the Bible!</p>	<p>I realize that all of god's laws telling the Hebrews how to conduct their slave trade don't convince you, but how about what the Lord "commanded" in Numbers 31?</p> 	<p>"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying...take a count of the booty that was captured, both of man and of animal; and divide the booty between the warriors...and all the congregation...And Moses...did just as the Lord commanded." —Numbers 31:25-31</p>
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 <p>It never calls the captives "SLAVES"! It doesn't say God said to "KEEP" the people. AND, slaves were treated better then!</p>	<p>You're not a Christian! You don't know HOW to read the Bible!</p>  <p>I'm beginning to learn, though. It seems you think reading it properly has something to do with ignoring what it actually says!</p>
<p>Keeping people as spoils isn't 'slavery' because the word "SLAVE" isn't used? And you think the Hebrews divided them up, but didn't "KEEP" them? And slavery is fine with you, if you're not physically abusing your slaves too much?</p>	