AustinCoR Launched

—by Don Rhoades

The Atheist Community of Austin, in conjunction with five other local area Freethought groups, formed the Austin Coalition of Reason (AustinCoR) at a kickoff meeting on January 2nd of this year. This loose affiliation is sponsored by the United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR.org), which is providing a website and a fully funded ad campaign for us. The local groups in AustinCoR are...

• The Atheist Community of Austin
• Center for Inquiry, Austin
• The Austin Ethical Society
• Atheist Longhorns (Secular Students Society)
• Austin Atheists Meetup Group
• Atheists and Freethinkers of Austin Meetup Group

The ad campaign will kick off with a press release on or about this June 21, which will coincide with the appearance of a billboard ad with one of the messages displayed in the images with this article.

The final decision on which ad to use will be made at the AustinCoR meeting on May 22. The physical billboard will be located facing the northbound side of I-35 a quarter mile north of Hwy 183. The AustinCoR ad will remain there until July 19.

The website for the coalition is currently under construction at AustinCoR.org.

The national group United Coalition of Reason was incorporated in early 2009 to foster growth of local groups in the community of reason, as well as cooperation between them. UnitedCoR functions like a foundation, and rather than competing with other national or local organizations, UnitedCoR works to create awareness of nontheist groups by funding ad campaigns and encouraging the coalitions to make good use of any resulting controversy.

So-called “atheist billboards” started in October 2007 with a billboard in Madison, Wisconsin, reading “Beware of Dogma” <http://ffrf.org/news/2007/billboard.php>. The full-color, 18-foot billboard was placed by the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and went on to win a 2008 “Addy” Silver Award from the American Advertising Federation for its design. (A smaller billboard was also erected in the area, displaying the “Imagine No Religion” slogan on one side and “Imagine No Religion” on the other.)

The following month, FFRF put up another billboard near Chambersburg, PA, displaying the “Imagine No Religion” slogan. And in December, FFRF repeated the “Imagine No Religion” slogan on a billboard near Atlanta, GA, through a coalition partnership with the Atlanta Freethought Society.

FFRF’s billboard campaign continues and at least for a while considered placing a billboard in Austin.

Among the first people who conceived the idea of freethought billboards, and talked that idea up in the freethought community, are Jan Meshon and Joseph McDaniel Stewart. They formed FreeThoughtAction, an entity that went on to put up a billboard in early January 2008 on the New Jersey Turnpike outside of New York City and featured a simple yet provocative message: “Don’t believe in God? You are not alone” against a background of blue sky and fluffy clouds. Reaction to the billboard was overwhelmingly positive and financial contributions came in to continue the work.

Then a computer components businessman in Philadelphia not only funded a billboard that went up May 1, 2008, the National Day of Reason, in his city, but kept it up for three months instead of just one. Moreover, the billboard was cosponsored by and benefited a number of humanist and freethought organizations, both local and national, that came together as PhillyCoR, the Philadelphia Coalition of Reason. This was the prototype CoR that tested the concept. It got a lot of publicity and PhillyCoR continues to thrive as a result.

UnitedCoR in its current form grew out of the PhillyCoR concept and has to date established and supported Coalitions of Reason in 20 cities around the country. A number of other groups are coming together in California, Georgia, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas. ■
Welcome the New ACA Board

—by Don Baker

On May 2nd, ACA members elected the 2010-2011 ACA Board of Directors. Matt Dillahunty and Jen Peeples were both re-elected to the president and vice president roles, respectively. Seven at-large board seats were also filled:

Don Baker  
Keith Berka  
Chuck Clark  
John Iacoletti  
Don Rhoades  
Shelley Roberts  
David Tyler

The offices of treasurer and secretary will be filled from the at-large seats during the June 13 board meeting. The 2009-2010 treasurer and secretary, John Iacoletti and Don Baker, have both indicated their willingness to continue serving.

Please congratulate the board members when you see them.

ACA CALENDAR

THURSDAY, JUNE 3
• 7 p.m.-?: Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, JUNE 5
• 10 a.m.-6 p.m.: Pride Festival (West Lawn of the Long Center; $10)

SUNDAY, JUNE 6
• 10 a.m.-?: Pre-lecture brunch meetup (Hickory Street)
• 12:15-1:45 p.m.: ACA Lecture Series (Austin History Center; Author, Doyle Duke on “A Critical Analysis of Christianity”; free)
• 4:30-6 p.m.: The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)
• 6:30 p.m.-?: Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill’s)

THURSDAY, JUNE 10
• 7 p.m.-?: Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, JUNE 12
• 10 a.m.-?: Blood Drive (Blood & Tissue Center)

SUNDAY, JUNE 13
• 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.: Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo’s)
• 12:30-1:30 p.m.: Board Meeting (Romeo’s; outside)
• 4:30-6 p.m.: The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)
• 6:30 p.m.-?: Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill’s)

THURSDAY, JUNE 17
• 7 p.m.-?: Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)

SATURDAY, JUNE 19
• 11 a.m.-12 p.m.: Adopt-a-street Clean Up (South Location: Lamar at Manchaca)

SUNDAY, JUNE 20
• 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.: Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo’s)
• 4:30-6 p.m.: The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)
• 6:30 p.m.-?: Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill’s)

THURSDAY, JUNE 24
• 7 p.m.-?: Happy Hour (Dog & Duck Pub)

SUNDAY, JUNE 27
• 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m.: Regular Sunday Meeting (Romeo’s)
• 4:30-6 p.m.: The Atheist Experience (Channel 16)
• 6:30 p.m.-?: Meet-up after The Atheist Experience (Threadgill’s)

REGULAR LOCATIONS:
• Austin History Center, 9th and Guadalupe. Building opens at noon. Lectures are free and open to the public.
• Dog & Duck Pub, North of the Capitol, 406 W. 17th at Guadalupe. Lectures are free and open to the public.
• Hickory Street, 8th and Congress
• 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.
Growing up Normal

—by David Tyler

I have been in Texas and going to ACA events for some time now. One thing that comes up continually is the question of how people came to atheism. The most common story we hear is from people who were brought up theist and, over a period of time, had questions about their beliefs. Pursuing these questions has led to a loss of noncritical belief. The other extreme are people who grew up in a specifically atheist family. My background is a bit in between, and I call it growing up normal. Of course, normal for me was specific to a time and place. That included being white, middle-class, in the Northeast, during the ‘50s.

My parents both had Christian upbringing, my mother Catholic, and my father a Congregationalist minister’s son. Both had so much of it that they reacted by rejecting religious observation. As adults, the religious traditions of their childhoods had little presence in their lives. My father never mentioned religion but my mother had vivid memories of being lied to. She trained as a nurse in a Catholic hospital with a program run by nuns. She had been told that on their deathbeds, sinners would be crying out for a priest to confess to and be forgiven. In real life, she never saw this.

They did continue as cultural Christians but without any religious overtones. We had Christmas, but that was all about gifts from Santa, trees, colored lights. We had trips to 5th Avenue to see the lights. Easter was dying eggs, bunnies, and baskets of candy. The pagans gave us these rituals long before the Christians took them over. The holidays were not substantially different from Thanksgiving, New Year’s, and the Fourth of July.

Knowledge of the presence of religion and particularly Christianity was inevitable. I have memories of my younger brother and me being baptized by my grandfather when I was in first or second grade. I remember us wearing matching Hawaiian shirts and having my cuticles pushed back by my grandmother. Anything about the ceremony or its meaning was completely lost to me. I had no proper instruction in Christianity and as a result would sometimes find myself in awkward situations where I was uncertain of how to respond. I remember on the school bus being asked if I was Catholic or Protestant and responding that I was neither. The other kids then said that I must be Jewish. I had no idea what it meant to be Jewish, but there was definitely something vaguely negative about it, so I definitely did not want to be that. I stated that I was not Jewish but refused to commit to either of the other choices. In our “kid world” there seemed to be no concept of atheism.

Being part of a culture without being affiliated with a religion does lead to feeling out of place. My best friend in fifth and sixth grade went to a Sunday school and I was invited to go along. They were, however, Unitarians. The Unitarian church is a way to have the form of a Christian church service without having a heavy investment in supernatural beliefs. The sermons were generally more like lectures and there were often nonreligious guest speakers. It gave a sense of community and that is why it was supported by the membership.

In spite of the experiences with the Unitarians, that were not that regular, there was some anxiety about religious behavior. I found the changing of the Pledge of Allegiance that took place when I was in grade school upsetting to the point I stopped saying the pledge.

At the time, it was not a political statement but a result of being made to feel like an outsider for no good reason.

There was some inconsistency about what felt abnormal and what did not. In the ‘50s when I was in grade school, the Supreme Court had not made their ruling removing organized prayer from the classrooms of public schools. I remember that the Lord’s Prayer was part of the beginning of the day. In later years, I went to private school I remember the Christmas story being part of the December activities before Christmas break. I don’t really remember what I believed at that time. These activities seemed normal and since I was not brought up Jewish or specifically as an atheist, but a cultural Christian, I never gave them much thought. It occurs to me now that this sort of thing would have been offensive to non-Christians.

In spite of all the theism in culture of the community without any active indoctrination the supernatural beliefs do not really stick. It was probably the nonpractice of religion by my parents that was the greatest influence. I did not use the term atheist, which is not really my label but something created by theists to define people different from themselves in a derogatory way. I am just a normal person.

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National Day of Talking to Yourself:
Some Observations about the Austin Service

—by David C. Tyler

Chuck Clark and I were at the Texas State Capitol building for the National Day of Prayer service in Austin on May 6. In addition to two atheists, there were about 200–250 of the seriously deluded in attendance. A PA system with a podium was in place and a soundboard to bring the audience the sounds of the singers and musicians from the Bethany United Methodist Church. A little after noon the ceremonies began. For something with apparent government sponsorship, much was offensive and certainly noninclusive to outsiders.

Things started with opening Christian music an invocation by Rev. Richard Curlee with a call prayer and some reading from scripture. There were then a series of seven prayers interspersed music and singing to keep the mood upbeat.

The first the official prayer for the nation was written by Franklin Graham, chairman of the NDP. It was delivered by local NDP leader Evelyn Davison. There was a reminder of the religious traditions of our forefathers. Then, a call forgiveness and restoration of this great nation. There was a later repetition of this theme referenced to Abraham Lincoln’s proclamation to set apart a day “to confess our sins and transgressions in sorrow.” The nation is going to hell and we need god to forgive us and restore the utopia of past glory, seemed to be the central message.

This was followed by president Obama’s NDP proclamation. This was a message that called for a day of reflection and was worded to include people of all faiths and non-believers. Not to worry, this message was not allowed to stand alone. It was delivered by Pastor Mark Collins who was decked out in his George Washington uniform. He made sure that the president’s secular message was heavily bracketed by Christian right rhetoric. He stated that religion is one of the irreplaceable pillars on which this nation was built and that people should not be neutral the place of religion in government.

The refocused proclamation from the president was followed by the proclamation from Gov. Perry delivered by Greg Davidson. This message was that God’s guidance is needed in formulating all decisions made by government officials elected and not.

Then followed five prayers in specific areas. The first was a prayer for government from Pastor Tom Deviney. Once again, there was the assertion that we need God’s (the Christian right one) guidance in making all our decisions. This was followed by a prayer for our troops delivered by Col. Russell Malesky of the Texas Air National Guard. While the service and its political message was that God’s guidance is needed in formulating all decisions made by government officials elected and not.

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Then came a call for obedience. Children were called on to obey and respect their parents. Wives are to respect and obey their husbands and men are to obey God. There was no mention of any requirement for mutual respect just obedience to authority. To an outsider this seemed like a formula for abuse from the top down, not something to be applauded.

Then came a prayer to the media to be fair and not to persecute poor Christians. I suppose all media must adopt the Fox worldview. There was also a call for entertainers to conduct themselves in a responsible manner. No more George Carlin’s thank you very much. Finally came a prayer for the church asking God to grant wisdom and vision for the healing and revival of America. As objectionable as the ideas expressed may have been to outsiders, the participants have every right to express their views. The government, however, should have no role in promoting the views of any one religious group.

Chuck Clark put together a possible position statement about religious beliefs and government:

“We believe that regardless of what religious beliefs they are, it is NOT the role of government to officially call us to prayer. If the religion being promoted happens to be yours, it does not make it right. Only by keeping government and religion separate can we preserve, and protect the religious liberties of all Americans, equally represented.”

The clear noninclusiveness of the NDP event makes the government proclamations all the more intolerable.
On Sunday, May 16th, over 200 people came to the Texas State Capitol for a “Texans for Truthful Textbook Rally” in protest of the recent ideological- and religious-based curriculum changes proposed by the Texas State Board of Education. The Board has been promoting a fundamentalist religious agenda at the expense of historical and scientific accuracy. If adopted, these guidelines could lead to Creationism being taught in public schools, erosion of scientific information about evolution, and a biased revision of American history.

The Texas State Board of Education has proposed a large number of controversial curriculum changes including:

- Removal of Thomas Jefferson from a World History standard about Enlightenment thinkers who have influenced political revolutions around the world, replacing him with John Calvin, Thomas Aquinas, and William Blackstone.

- Rejecting a proposed requirement that students learn why the nation’s founders banned government from promoting one religion over others.

- Changing standards to suggest that the anti-communism “witch hunts” led by Joseph McCarthy were justified.

- Changing date references from BCE (Before Common Era) to BC (Before Christ).

The rally was sponsored by American Atheists and organized primarily by Kathleen Johnson. Many atheist and freethinker groups from Texas were well represented among the participants. Speakers included Kathleen Johnson of AA and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers; Mr. Brian Loundan; Founder of SHAAHTA; Ms. Aime Parsons, Director of Camp Quest, Texas and School Board Candidate; Dr. Ed Buckner, President of American Atheists; Mr. Robert Butler, Executive Director of the Libertarian Party of Texas; and David Smalley (Editor, American Atheists magazine). Joe Broome provided music between speakers. Author and outspoken atheist Christopher Hitchens was unable to attend due to a conflict, but he wrote a special essay for the event, which was read by Dr. Ed Buckner.

The majority of the participants were atheists from around Texas, with many Texas atheist groups coming en masse for the event. The crowd was enthusiastic with many holding signs in support of unbiased history. Many wore two-dollar bills in support of Thomas Jefferson’s many contributions to the United States.

After the rally, the ACA hosted a meetup at the Dog & Duck pub where over 60 atheists from around Texas gathered to network. Amie Parsons, director of Camp Quest Texas was a special guest on the Atheist Experience, which was shown at the meetup. Thanks to Jen Peeples for organizing this part of a successful day.

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ACA to Have Booth at the 2010 Pride Festival

On Saturday, June 5, representatives of the ACA will staff a booth at the 2010 Austin Gay and Lesbian Pride Festival <www.austinpride2010.org>. Over the years, the Austin Parade and Festival have grown to include many other ancillary events and garner both corporate and city support. The goals for ACA participation are to promote the ACA and atheism, gather new members, and build bridges with the larger community. We have participated in the festival for a number of years and find it a fun event and a great opportunity to socialize with other Austinites. We will likely need a few volunteers for the booth. Contact Don Baker for more information. We also encourage ACA members to attend the festival. Tickets to the event are $10. We are also seeking donations to the ACA to help defray our costs.

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Dr. Ed Buckner, President of American Atheists reads a special statement from Christopher Hitchens.
Q: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A “GOOD” GOD AND AN “EVIL” GOD?

Would a “good” god endorse brutal slavery...?

Deuteronomy 13:6-9: If your very own brother...entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods”...Your hand must be the first in putting him to death...

Exodus 21:20-21: If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod...he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property.

Would a “good” god say to execute unbelievers...?

1 Samuel 15:2-3: This is what the LORD Almighty says: “...Now go, attack the Amalekites...put to death men and women, children and infants...”

Would a “good” god command infanticide...?

Deuteronomy 22:28-29: If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her...He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.

Would a “good” god require a rape victim marry her rapist?

A: ONLY THE ADHERENT’S EAGERNESS TO CALL ANY ATROCITY OR INJUSTICE “GOOD” IN THE NAME OF HIS/HER GOD.