

FACT
P.O. Box
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FACT

is an association of atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, secular humanists, rationalists, skeptics, and other non-theists serving the purpose of preserving the separation of church and state and promoting Freethought through education.

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A Matter of *FACT* & *The Voice*

August 2008

Happy Birthday, Robert Ingersoll

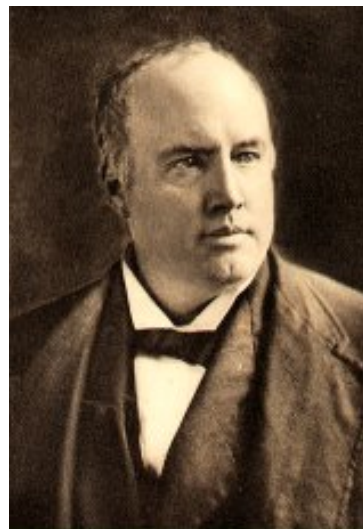
August 11th will be the 165th anniversary of the birth of Robert Green Ingersoll. To honor the memory of the Immortal Infidel, the FACT General Meeting on August 16th will be given over to a video and discussion of his life and works.

Robert Ingersoll (1833 – 1899) was, in turn, an educator, trial lawyer and politician, but he is best known as a public orator. Despite being the best known agnostic of the Victorian Era, he drew huge crowds of believers who were enraptured by his speaking style and his message. At his death, he was heavily memorialized in newspapers across the country, and mourned by people of faith as well as freethinkers. Although he was largely forgotten after the social upheaval of World War One, there has been a revival of interest since the mid-1950s, and most of his extensive writings and texts of his speeches are readily available on the internet.

To liven up the anniversary celebration, we will even have a birthday cake, although, in consideration of the fire code, it will not hold 168 candles.

So, join us this month to discuss and learn about this great icon of Freethinkers!

General Meeting, Saturday, August 16th @ 1pm
Community Unitarian Universalist Church
4818 E. Beverly Mae



“This is my creed: Happiness is the only good, reason the only torch, justice the only worship, humanity the only religion, and love the only priest.”

Robert G. Ingersoll

Who Came First: Horus or Jesus?

Elected Positions:

President, Nick Lee
 Vice President, Jane Tuck
 Secretary, Jim Evans
 Treasurer, Cathy Howard
 Publicity, OPEN

Appointed Positions:

Newsletter

Publisher/Editor, Marc Janssens
 Webmaster, Jim Evans
 Discussion Group Host, OPEN
 Librarian, Jimmie Barnes

Texas Hill Country

Freethinkers

(No Officers)

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FACT MEMBERS:

FACT wants your participation in communicating through our newsletter. Please contribute letters, articles, book reviews, highlights and comments on church/state separation, quotes, drawings, cartoons, etc. Please send contributions to FACT.newsletter@FreethinkersACT.org.

All submissions are subject to editorial revisions at the discretion of the publisher.

At the July meeting of FACT, members and guest took part in a vigorous discussion of the Christ myth and the remarkable parallels between Egyptian, Babylonian, and Greek myths that preceded the Jesus of the Bible by thousands of years. The basis for the discussion was a section of a film "Zeitgeist" that laid out the common astrological basis for all these myths.

The video contended that numerous predecessors to Jesus all shared common features: son of a God; born of a virgin on December 25th ; visited by three kings; who followed a star in the east; was a child prodigy; had unrecorded middle years; began ministry at age 30; was crucified; and was resurrected after three days. Further, all these events were based on allegorical interpretations of astronomical events.

Sort of takes the starch out of the Biblical account, doesn't it?

While the video had an historical basis, in the discussion that followed, many viewers felt it was too glib and free with its own interpretations. Nevertheless, it served as a starting point for a well-informed rational debate, and all left the meeting with a greater understanding.

(The movie "Zeitgeist" is available for download at <http://www.zeitgeistmovie.com/>)

Jane Tuck

Devil's Dictionary Definitions

Here are some definitions from Ambrose Bierce's book "The Devil's Dictionary", published in 1906:

Christian, n. One who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbor. One who follows the teachings of Christ insofar as they are not inconsistent with a life of sin.

Evangelist, n. A bearer of good tidings, particularly (in a religious sense) such as assure us of our own salvation and the damnation of our neighbors.

Faith, n. Belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.

Infidel, n. In New York, one who does not believe in the Christian religion; in Constantinople, one who does.

Pray. v. To ask that the laws of the universe be annulled in behalf of a single petitioner, confessedly unworthy.

Religion, n. A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable.

Reverence, n. The spiritual attitude of a man to a god and a dog to a man.

Saint, n. A dead sinner revised and edited.

Every Monday at 12:30 and 8:30 PM

Time Warner Digital Cable Channel 20

FREETHOUGHT FORUM

Hosted by Hugh Henry

Houston Church Plans to Build Two Giant Crosses

by Lisa Gray

Cities marked by the cross

Grace Community Church is raising money to build two enormous crosses that its pastor says will mark the entrances to Houston on Interstate 45. The crosses will likely rank among the largest in the world. Counting their bases, the crosses would reach up to 200 feet. Each would dwarf I-45's current symbol of Texas largeness. "Big Sam" Houston, the colossal statue in Huntsville, stands 77 feet tall with its base. The symbols of Christianity would tower over Grace's freeway-hugging campuses: the south campus at Dixie Farm Road, and the new north campus just south of The Woodlands. Combined, they serve 12,000 members. Part building, part sculpture, each cross would include a "prayer center" 40 feet off the ground — a "Space Needle-type place," Pastor Steve Riggle said — where Christians from all over Houston could come to pray for the city's well-being.

An openwork globe 60 feet in diameter, with latitude and longitude lines crisscrossing the continents, would top the prayer center. The bottom of the cross would be visible through the globe. Riggle sees the crosses as a symbolic stand against moral decay. "The freeways are littered with sexually oriented businesses," he said. "I'd rather see something that stands for hope, life and faith." He hopes that other churches follow Grace's lead. "What if there was one of these at every entrance to the city?" he asks on a YouTube video. "You talk about marking our city for God!"

"Marking Our City" billboards show a giant cross looming over the Houston skyline, and promise a 150-foot cross is "coming soon." But the pastor hopes both structures will be 200 feet tall, roughly the height of a 20-story building. The Federal Aviation Administration, he said, may limit the south campus's cross to 150 feet because it's near Ellington Field. The final designs also depend on the success of Grace's "Make Your Mark" fundraising campaign. Riggle declined to say what the crosses would cost, or to give a construction timeline. The drive also is raising funds for an American heritage museum on the north campus and for charitable initiatives.

Large crosses seem to be proliferating, said Doug Kirby, whose RoadsideAmerica.com lists giant crosses among many other offbeat tourist attractions. "If we start to see a lot of 200-footers, there's bound to be a 300-footer soon," he said.

'Getting bigger and bigger'

Bruce Webb, a professor at the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture, said an enormous cross makes sense at the edge of a freeway, where car lots, fast food and sex clubs vie with churches for drivers' attention. "If you want to play in that arena, that's how you compete," Webb said. "Everything keeps getting bigger and bigger."

The cross on Grace's billboards bears a striking likeness to one often hailed as the world's largest: the "Cross at the Crossroads" in Effingham, Ill. Completed in 2001, the white metal structure is 198 feet tall and measures 113 feet at its crossbar. It cost \$1 million. Florida has at least two contenders for the title of world's largest: At 208 feet, the cross at St. Augustine Mission, in St. Augustine, is taller than the cross in Illinois, but much thinner. In Orlando, First Baptist Church of Central Florida recently unveiled a 199-foot cross.

Whether the two Houston crosses would be the world's biggest depends on how their size is determined. None of the other crosses has a base, and it's not clear whether aficionados would include it in the height. Some definitions of "largest" include the width of the cross's arm, or the structure's weight.

Inspiration, or intimidation?

Michael Lindsay, a Rice sociology professor who studies the evangelical movement, said the enormous crosses fit another trend. "There's a desire to reclaim the profound Christian ethos that once punctuated America. It's like staking a flag in the ground." The plan has its critics. The Rev. Matt Tittle, who leads Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church, headlined a recent blog posting at HoustonBelief.com, "City of giant crosses? No thanks!" "Not everybody feels honored, or even safe, in a city fortified by crosses," Tittle elaborated on the phone. "The crosses don't offend me. But they're a symbol of intimidation to some. And Christians don't need a monstrosity to seal their faith."

Leaders of other religious groups did not object

"In the Hindu scriptures, there is something called sanatan dharma, it means all religions are related to truth," said Girishkumar Naik, president of Hindus of Greater Houston. "So if you see a form of a religious structure, treat it as a structure of God and move ahead with it." Rodwan Saleh, president of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston, said the United States "is a land that promotes marketing of ideas. Muslims have the right to put billboards up that say 'Call 1-800-Why-Islam?' I have seen that in other cities. If Muslims can do that, Christians can put up a large cross, too." Grace has the "right to do anything they want" on its property, said Elliot Gershenson, the leader of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston. "I would question, however, whether in the times of scarcity that we are in, there aren't better ways to express the way each of us, in our own way, walk in God's path," said Gershenson, president and CEO of Interfaith Ministries.

Source: Houston Chronicle

Texas Freethought Convention

Austin, TX, October 26, 2008

Plans are well underway for the major event of the year: the first-ever statewide meeting of atheist, agnostic, freethinker, and secular humanists from all over Texas! This will be held in the Saenggerrunde Hall beside Scholz Garten in Austin, from Noon to 10 p.m.

In addition to FACT, participating groups include American Atheists, Corpus Christi Atheists, Freethinkers at UT Arlington, Atheist Community of Austin, North Texas Church of Freethought, and the Metroplex Atheists of Dallas/Fort Worth. FACT will set up an information booth and sell our T-shirts.

The keynote speaker is still unannounced, but other speakers will include Blair Scott, from American Atheists; Clare Wuellner, from CFI-Austin; Anna deLuna, the "Chicana Atheist"; Kathleen Johnson, the founder of Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers; and Dr. Zachary Moore of the North Texas Church of Freethought. There will be live music from three different groups.

We are planning several fun events:

- A formal "De-Baptism Ceremony" to wash away any residual holy water you may have acquired in your youth;
- Face-painting for children and the young at heart;
- A video booth will be set up to record oral histories of the atheist experience; and
- The Bloodmobile will be set up in the parking lot, as a community outreach project.

In addition, two professional film-makers from Houston will be shooting there as part of their documentary on Atheism. More detailed information will be available as plans firm up and will be passed on as quickly as possible. In the meantime, log on to the official TFC website at www.texasfreethoughtconvention.com for the updated agenda.

Some FACT members have already expressed their intent to stay overnight, and many are interested in car-pooling to Austin. It may make economic sense to rent a van, if enough people can coordinate their schedules and lodging. If you interested in participating in such an arrangement, call Nick Lee at 767-0769 and I will serve as a matchmaker. Also, if you have any suggestions for affordable lodging, let me know and I will pass it on to the group. The Convention web site recommends the Motel 6 on I-35.

The registration fee is only \$15. per person, \$10 for Seniors, and the organizers ask you to pre-register on the web site. In addition, please let me know you are planning to go, so I know how many FACT members are committed to this event. Those of you who do not have a Pay-Pal account established may give their checks to the FACT Treasurer, and we will make a mass deposit. Registration will also be available at the door, but we would like to keep that to a minimum.

This promises to be an exciting event, bringing together non-believers from all across the spectrum and from all across the State. I hope FACT members will show up en masse to show our support for this inaugural event, which we hope will lead to an annual occurrence and to increased cooperation and coordination among atheist and freethinker groups on social and political issues in the State of Texas.

See you there!

Nick Lee

LA CHICANA IS COMING!

Be sure to mark your calendars now for a special treat in conjunction with the FACT General Meeting on September 20! Local actress and activist Anna De Luna will present her one-woman show ¿Chicana Atheist? This performance, which has been presented in several venues around the city for the past three years, explores with humor deLuna's struggle with her traditional deeply religious Hispanic culture and family. To cover the costs there will be a \$10 requested donation for this presentation.

Published in Express News, June 23, 2008.

Re. Keep it reasonable

Faith is faith, and reason is reason, but that doesn't mean that faith needs to be un-reasonable.

Mainstream Christian groups have accepted evolution as a reasonable explanation for what we see in the natural world, and have adjusted their interpretation of scriptures accordingly. Even the Vatican is cool with the concept of evolution. No non-Christian religions have any problem with scientific explanations.

So we are left with a small, hard-core group of fundamentalists who insist on a literal translation of the Bible (although they do so on a very selective basis to avoid its internal inconsistencies). These extremists have hijacked the political discourse over religion and science, and have cleverly used the political system to leverage their power.

Creationism begat "intelligent design" begat "teaching the weaknesses," and the Texas State Board of Education is poised to foist its articles of faith on a whole generation of Texas students. The "gaps" in our understanding of evolution are not weaknesses but areas of discovery, and they are getting smaller with every passing year. On the other hand, the theory of creationism has been stagnant for thousands of years, with no peer-reviewed science to back it up. But the fundamentalist members of the SBOE will not be swayed by reasonable arguments any more than they were recently by expert testimony in the case of language education. Fortunately, there are several members on the guard who are fighting against this trend, although they are in the minority.

Editorials and letters to the editor may have little influence in this battle. Every Texas resident needs to rise up in "righteous indignation" and confront the members of the SBOE directly.

You must do it whether or not you have kids currently in the public school system, because the effects of poorly educated children will come back to bite us all.

Nick Lee, San Antonio, TX

At the end of June a student at the University of Central Florida (UCF) while attending Catholic Mass in the Student Union Building walked off with a communion wafer. It is not clear what the student's motivations were, but the 'despicable act' of desecrating a communion wafer (Catholics believe that the priest's blessing transforms the host into the body of Christ) got him into a lot of trouble. PZ Myers, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Minnesota Morris and well-known atheist, defended the student on his web site, Pharyngula. In response to Myers' 'disrespectful' statements, Bill Donohue of the Catholic League launched a campaign to have him fired. Richard Dawkins then asked that the readers of his web site write a letter of support for Myers to the President of the University. More details can be found on Dawkins' web site (www.richarddawkins.net). Here is a letter of support that a FACT member wrote to President Bruininks.

Dear Dr. Bruininks,

I am writing to ask for your support and protection of Professor Meyers against the vicious attacks by Mr. William Donohue at the Catholic League and a few other fanatics in response to Dr. Meyers' recent article "It's a Goddamned Cracker".

It is evident to me that consecration of the Host does not literally turn it into the body of Christ and that consecration of the chalice does not literally turn wine into His blood. If this were the case, people whose digestive system cannot tolerate gluten would have no problem receiving the consecrated Host. Those who have an issue with alcohol would not object to drinking consecrated wine. Consecration of the Host is purely symbolic and has no meaning beyond the Eucharist. A consecrated Host taken outside the church becomes a "cracker" like any other cracker. This is the point Professor Meyers was making.

Donohue, who obviously only speaks for a small minority of the 60 million Catholics in the United States, calls for Dr. Meyers' dismissal from his post at the University. Some fanatics even went as far as sending Dr. Meyers a death threat. The proposed "punishments" are obviously uncalled for, given the fact that the "crime" was simply the use of free speech. I hope that you will side with common sense and the defendant in this case. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Marc L. Janssens, Ph.D.
San Antonio, TX

HEY, LETTER WRITERS!

We're looking for well-crafted letters having to do with the separation of church and state, atheism, or any other relevant topic. Members are encouraged to forward published letters, or ones which were rejected by the mainstream media, for publication with the date that they were submitted.

Send them to: FACT.newsletter@FreethinkersACT.org or PO Box 160881, San Antonio, TX 78280

The Unbearable Grayness of Morality

by Nick Lee

An overriding concern of non-believers as well as moderate Christians and adherents of most other faiths, is the maintenance of the separation of Church and State. The challenge is to strike a balance between civil concerns and personal beliefs. This is a concept that has only existed since the Enlightenment, but it has become the world-wide norm, except for pockets of fundamental Christians and Muslims. While Freethinkers tend to interpret this concept to mean total separation, shielding us from religious interference, there is another, more nuanced side to the issue.

We are accustomed to defending our secular lives against the imposition of religious views, but there is also a case to be made from the opposite perspective. The recent dust-up involving the State of Texas and the Fundamentalist LDS Church illustrates the dilemma of the interface between religious practices and the concerns of society as a whole. What justification does a Society have to interfere in the free exercise of religious beliefs? Are there some fundamental laws that we should insist all citizens abide by, regardless of their personal beliefs? Or is it just a matter of OUR cultural norms versus THEIR cultural norms? There are sometimes conflicts between the definition of human rights versus the interpretation of religious law. Here are some troubling examples that have no easy answers:

Polygamy – Do we have the right to tell three or more consenting adults that they cannot form a more perfect union? What is the harm to society in this practice (setting aside the issue of child abuse and forced marriages)?

Education – Does the general Society have the right to tell parents how their children should be educated and what they should be taught? Is there a compelling reason for establishing standards of education that all children must achieve, even if it conflicts with religious views?

Drug Use – On what basis can Society tell a religious group that they may not use hallucinogenic drugs in the course of their worship? What is it we are trying to control, and is it worth the cost of their religious freedom?

Child Care – Does Society have the right to impose standards of child care on people of faith, even when contrary to that faith? Who gets to decide on what is proper upbringing? Should that include requiring medical treatment in lieu of prayer?

Child or Spouse Abuse – What is Society's compelling interest in controlling behaviors that are contrary to societal norms? In the case of Gender inequality, when is it a violation of human rights, and when is it adherence to religious law? In the case of child discipline, at what point does parental control become physical abuse, requiring Society to step in to protect the children? Many religions practice genital mutilation (male or female) as a deeply-held tenet of their faith. What would be a justification for interference from civil Society?

You and I can form our own opinion regarding each of these issues, and we will probably agree, based on what feels right to us. The question is, can we impose our opinions on others, in the name of the "greater good"? Are there universal standards of behavior that should be enforced? Are there absolutely unambiguous rules for social living that must be imposed on all members of society? The answer is, society's interest in morality and social behavior must be balanced against an individual's right to live his life to the fullest. There's a lot of gray area there!

"You may have noticed that, in the media, UFO believers are usually referred to as *buffs*, a term used to diminish and marginalize them by relegating them to the ranks of hobbyists and mere enthusiasts. They are made to seem like kooks and quaint dingbats who have the nerve to believe that, in an observable universe of trillions upon trillions of stars, and most likely many hundreds of billions of potentially inhabitable planets, some of those planets may have produced life-forms capable of doing things that we can't do.

On the other hand those who believe in an eternal, all-powerful being, a being who demands to be loved and adored unconditionally and who punishes and rewards according to his whims are thought to be worthy, upright, credible people. This, in spite of the large numbers of believers who are clearly close-minded fanatics."

Excerpt from "When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?", George Carlin (1937-2008)

“Philosophers Who Believe” by Kelly J. Clark, Ed. (Part I)

Book Review by Richard Schoenig

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1993

In some ways “Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of 11 Leading Thinkers” may be of greater interest to secular humanists than to Christians. After all, secular humanists are generally convinced that if religious believers were to carefully consider the arguments concerning the existence of God and the coherency of religious denominational beliefs, the ranks of humanism would swell commensurably. Such is the humanistic conviction in the liberating potential of reason. However, quite at odds with this conviction is the status of a group of people who have been professionally trained to think rationally about fundamental questions like religion, and who have nonetheless embraced denominational Christianity. Humanists should be curious about these deviations from their expectations. I certainly was.

“Philosophers Who Believe” is a collection of essays/autobiographies by eleven prominent, practicing Christian philosophers: Basil Mitchell, Alvin Plantinga, John Rist, Stephen T. Davis, Nicholas Rescher, Frederick Suppe, Richard Swinburne, Mortimer J. Adler, Terence Penelhum, Linda Trinkhaus Zagzebski, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. The book aims to “demonstrate and exemplify the importance of basic Christian faith...in the lives and work of several leading philosophers.” The well-written and informative selections are primarily personal, focusing on the religious and philosophic developments of the philosophers in question. Although no philosopher was to present a philosophic treatise, Swinburne and Plantinga, characteristically, come awfully close. In fact, Swinburne’s contribution reveals less about him personally, and more about the contours of his voluminous and tireless attempts to defend Christian theism. In contrast, Suppe’s essay is a fascinating journey of self-discovery which rambles from abusive childhood, through sybaritic youth and middle age, to a somewhat unorthodox and uneasy embrace (twice) of Roman Catholicism, with stops at agnosticism and atheism along the way. I found it by far the most captivating of the autobiographies.

While editor Clark’s introduction was generally helpful, I found his claims about the success of Christian philosophers in establishing the philosophic plausibility of Christian theism inflated. For example, it is hardly “virtually universally acknowledged...by theist and nontheist alike” that Plantinga’s “free will defense” satisfactorily explains the Problem of Evil, i.e., why, if God exists, bad things happen to good people. Also, Clark’s descriptions of disapproving academic attitudes toward Christian philosophers in this century suggest some sort of conspiratorial prejudice rooted in a pigheaded refusal to see the merit in Christian philosophy. A more realistic interpretation is that in this century most philosophers in non-religious universities have concluded that the arguments for theism, let alone for Christianity, are unsound. But that hardly equates to hostility or prejudice against Christian philosophers as Clark intimates.

So how then do such distinguished minds try to justify their embrace of Christian theism? Basically, their evidence (such as it is) involves certain unique posits of Christianity, such as the Incarnation, Original Sin, Redemption, Resurrection, eschatology, as well as certain putative self-certifying personal experiences. However, none of these are compelling to one not already so inclined, especially since, for the most part, they are simply asserted without justification. One gets the impression that the contributors felt they were addressing a largely sympathetic audience. Where there was attempt at justification, it fell short of the mark. Plantinga, for example, claims that one advantage of Christianity is that it uniquely holds that God suffers with us. Exactly why this should be considered an advantage is not clear. Moreover, Plantinga’s anthropomorphic view is quite at odds with the traditional notion of God as the most perfect being possible. Rist attempts to justify Christianity historically, in part, by advancing the almost universally rejected claim that the Gospel of Matthew is not dependent on that of Mark. Whereas in fact, of Mark’s 661 verses, 606 appear in Matthew, either word for word or with deliberately introduced changes.

Continued on the next page ...

READ A GOOD BOOK LATELY? TELL US ABOUT IT.

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Or P.O. Box 160881, San Antonio, TX 78280

“Philosophers Who Believe” Book Review (Part II)

With regard to denominational justification, so far as I could determine, only Rist, Rescher and Suppe made any attempts, and those were far from probative. For instance, Rist asserts with no explanation or justification that of the various Christian denominations Roman Catholicism is the “most coherent both philosophically and historically.” I would imagine that Calvinist Plantinga and Anglican Swinburne, the two reigning apologetic pit bulls of Christianity, would not be amused.

Rescher, speaking of his decision to embrace Catholicism, says:

Perhaps, ideally, the conversion of an intellectual to a form of religious commitment ought itself to be an intellectual product--a matter of secured conviction in theses and principles. But it certainly was not so in my case. Here it was primarily a matter of sentiment, loyalties and feelings of allegiance and kinship.[130]

Whatever uses “sentiment, loyalties and feelings of allegiance and kinship” may have, proving the truth of anything is not one of them.

Suppe, for his part, reports that he was drawn back to the Catholic Church on the occasion of attending a Mass at Notre Dame.

I was very much taken by the Mass that day, very moved and caught up in it. It was an unbelievable high...Then, as everybody--except me, it seemed--went up to take communion, I experienced the most profound feeling of alienation and emptiness I ever experienced in my life...God was calling me back to the Church![166]

That a prominent philosopher accepts that this sort of aesthetic/psychological experience is a sufficient reason to radically alter his life is, I would say, remarkably uncritical. One cannot, of course, discount the possibility that Rist, Rescher and Suppe have other reasons for embracing their denominations, yet they mention no others. Nor do any of the other contributors mention why they have chosen their particular denominations. Given that choice of denomination is far from a trivial matter for most Christians, I consider their silence on this matter a serious and inexplicable omission from their reports of their spiritual journeys.

However, the most serious problem about trying to justify Christian faith is that, even if it could be accomplished, which two thousand years of vain attempts seem to belie, it would undermine the very faith one is attempting to defend in the first place. In the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and especially the Protestant tradition, faith, that is, belief in the absence of adequate evidence, is a necessary condition for salvation. Thus, if Christian philosophers are to be saved, which I take to be the main goal of their Christian endeavors, then at some point they must accept at least some important beliefs for which there is inadequate evidence. If so, then it is ultimately Quixotic for Christian philosophers, like Swinburne and Plantinga, to expend such vast energy trying to demonstrate the rationality of the Christian faith. By definition it cannot be completed. No amount of erudition, cleverness, and effort can philosophically square the circle of faith.

Richard Schoenig is Professor of Philosophy, San Antonio College, San Antonio, Texas

"He reflected, as others were doing, on religion: 'I have a respect for life--in any form. I believe in nature, in the birds, the sea, the sky, in everything I can see or that there is real evidence for. If these things are what you mean by God, then I believe in God. But I don't believe in a personal God to whom I look for comfort or for a natural on the next roll of the dice.....I'm not unmindful of man's seeming need for faith; I'm for anything that gets you through the night, be it prayer, tranquilizers, or a bottle of Jack Daniels. But to me religion is a deeply personal thing in which man and God go it alone together without the witch doctor in the middle. The witch doctor tries to convince us that we have to ask God for help, to spell out to him what we need, even to bribe him with prayer or cash on the line. Well, I believe that God knows what each of us wants and needs. It's not necessary for him to make it to church on Sunday to reach him. You can find Him anywhere.'"

Excerpt from "Frank Sinatra, My Father" by Nancy Sinatra

Texas State Board of (Religious) Education

Well, the SBOE is at it again!

You may recall that in March of this year, the conservative Board, led by Dentist Don McLeroy, rejected a study by professional educators that was three years in the making, and substituted their own standards for the teaching of language arts in Texas public schools.

More recently, in July, the SBOE ignored the directive of the Texas Legislature to develop specific standards for the teaching of the influence of the Bible in Western Civilization in terms of history and literature. Although many people raised the alarm that a lack of specific guidance would allow individual school districts to develop Bible classes that would veer into Christian ministry, the Board deliberately left the curriculum standards vague, leaving it up to the 1,269 separate Texas school districts to negotiate the Constitutional minefield.

The fear is that, without clear guidance, schools and particularly individual overly-zealous teachers, will use the class time to push their personal vision of religion. Several districts, notably in Odessa, TX, have already stepped in doo-doo, and were brought up short by unfavorable court decisions. Others, now contemplating instituting an elective course on the Bible as literature, will have to take up the task of designing a politically-correct class outline. Undoubtedly, many will be lead astray by local religious fervor, and will be vulnerable to legal attacks and unbudgeted court costs.

From their past record, the SBOE has revealed its conservative agenda, and signaled its intent to forge ahead despite widespread opposition. The next item on its agenda, in its meetings this Fall, is consideration of the science textbooks to be used in Texas public schools for the next ten years. If the Board majority has its way, science teachers will be required to present the "strengths and weaknesses" of evolution and to suggest "alternate explanations" (wink, wink).

These initiatives must not go unchallenged. All concerned Texans must make themselves visible and heard on these issues. In the case of the design of Bible studies classes, the SBOE has already spoken, but there is still something you can do. Contact your local school board and find out what their plans are for developing class materials for this course. Of equal concern is the qualification standards for the teacher of this course; ideally, it should be someone who is a trained educator, not an enthusiastic evangelist.

In the case of the impending debate over the science curriculum, you can still influence the SBOE by direct contact with the Board member who represents your area. Bexar County is represented by two members:

District 3
 Rick Agosto
 205 N. Presa, Suite B-200
 San Antonio, TX 78205
 Phone 210-226-7106

District 5
 Ken Mercer
 P.O. Box 781301
 San Antonio, TX
 Phone 512-463-9007

Both can also be reached by e-mail in care of sboesupport@tea.state.tx.us. Readers outside Bexar County can find their representative at that same web site.

Let them know of your concern for the direction science education is taking, and insist that school curriculums stick to the hard facts. We should be preparing students for the 21st Century, with knowledge of generally accepted scientific discoveries. This includes the principle of evolution which is the fundamental basis for understanding of biology. Point out that many people of faith see no conflict between the idea of evolution and their beliefs, and that religious instruction should be left to family and churches. If we water down science education, Texas children will not be able to compete for careers with peers in the rest of the Nation, let alone with science-oriented students from the rest of the world.

You should make these calls or write these letters whether or not you have children currently in the Texas public school system, because the future of this state, and of this Nation, are at stake.



FACT T-Shirts for Sale (Grey w/Black Logo)

Small-XLarge.....\$12.00	3X.....\$15.00
2X.....\$14.00	Vests (Red).....\$17.00

To order or for further information, contact Sally Chizek
Sally.Chizek@FreethinkersACT.org (210) 656-3796

“Can I Have Your Car, Pastor Hagee?”

by Nick Lee

Here's your chance to really clean up after all them pesky fundamental Christians have vacated the premises. Just tell your believing friends to remember you in their will! A new web-site (YouveBeenLeftBehind.com) has been set up for Christians to leave messages for those who will be left behind after “The Rapture”.

For just \$40 a year, believers can arrange for up to 62 people to get a final message exactly six days after the Rapture, that day when—according to Christian end times dogma—Christians will be swept up to heaven, while doubters are left behind to suffer seven years of Tribulation under a global government headed by the Antichrist. The survivors will be sent e-mails that presumably will contain “I told you so!”, but could also pass on instructions for the disposition of earthly possessions.

So, here's my idea: call up all your Christian friends (You do have some, don't you?) and tell them to log on to the web site and leave a post-dated e-mail to be sent to you with instructions for accessing their bank accounts and transferring title to their personal property. I mean, what's it to them, then?

I'm just saying, you could ask.

The End!

by Nick Lee

I admit it! I often read the obituaries in the newspaper.

Not so much the ones from famous or notorious people, but the ones commemorating the lives of “the little people”, who lived, loved, sang, and died on a small stage. And, it is not so much that I am looking for my own name, with a sigh of relief when I don't see it there. It is just interesting to see what part of the deceased life was worthy of mention – sometimes it is military service, sometimes it is good works in the community, and sometimes just that “she was well known for her baked goods.”

One little quirk I have noticed in these obituaries is the many euphemisms for the word “death. In fact very few of them make the simple statement that the person “died”. Oh, no! They have to dance around that clinical fact. The most common euphemism is “passed away”, or its variants “passed over” or “passed on”. Those are strange turns of phrase that can be confusing: quarterbacks “pass away” to avoid a sack, people who don't get promoted are “passed over”, and estates get “passed on.”

But, the euphemisms that amuse me the most are those with a religious reference, such as “went to be with the Lord”, or “entered into eternal rest”, or “passed into his/her Lord's hands”, or “went home to the Lord”, or “went to join her husband in Heaven”, or “passed through the gates of Heaven”, or my personal favorite: “began the next chapter of her life with God.”

What these candy-coated phrases have in common is the supposition that there is a life after death, a happy hunting ground, where people are reunited with all the generations of their ancestors, and in the words of the folk song “there is no sickness, toil, or trouble in that fair land to which I go”. There is, of course, no evidence for such a shadow-land, and many of the popular images of this afterlife are post-Biblical encrustations. But they reflect a desire to have a second bite at life, to avoid the daily drudgery, and to enjoy an eternal, ethereal theme park. (“You must be THIS good to go on this ride!”)

This self-delusion is puzzling to unbelievers. If the world is such a “vale of tears”, and Heaven is such a lovely place, why isn't the suicide rate higher among Christians? (“Act now, before this offer ends!”) If your God loves us so much, why does he make your life on earth such hell, and withhold the joys of Heaven for an average of 76 years? For that matter, who would want to spend the rest of eternity with the likes of Jerry Falwell?

What it is, really, is the denial of the finality of death; the refusal to accept the fact that “this is all there is, there ain't no more”. It is one of those inconsistencies of religious faith that refuses to accept the reality of what their God has created.

C'mon folks! Death is a fact of life! Or, as we used to say in the '60's: “It's the living end!” Get over it!! .

August Events

August 16th – The Lunch Bunch

11:30 am: Join the “Lunch Bunch” for good food and great conversation before the General Meeting

Sarika’s Thai Restaurant
4319 Medical Dr, Near Fredericksburg Rd

August 16th – FACT General Meeting

1:00 pm: General meetings occur on the 3rd Saturday of every month (unless otherwise announced)

Title of Presentation: “Happy Birthday, Robert Ingersoll” (video and discussion)

After-break Speaker: Nick Lee

Topic: TBD

Community Unitarian Universalist Church
4818 Beverly Mae East (off Babcock)

August 30th – FACT Discussion Brunch

9:00 am - Join us for a brunch and discussion the last Saturday of every month.

Host: Jane Tuck

Topic: “Resolved: Religion Makes People Behave Better”

DENNY'S Back Room
4510 Fredericksburg Road
(South of Crossroads Mall)

NOTE TIME CHANGE!!

September Events

September 2nd—THCF First Tuesday Lunch

September 10th—THCF Lunch in the Northwest

September 20th—General Meeting

September 27th—FACT Discussion Brunch

August 2008						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

September 2008						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

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FACT MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Name: _____

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City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Tel: (____) _____ Cell: (____) _____ E-mail: _____

Return this form to : FACT, P.O. Box 160881, San Antonio, TX 78280-3081

ANNUAL DUES (Jan-Dec)

A.	Individual Paying Member	\$30
B.	Family (2 or more members)	\$42
C.	Active Duty Military/Full-time Student (non-voting)	\$18

- Membership dues are due in January.
- Dues are non-refundable.
- New members who join after the 1st month of the year will pay a prorated amount for the remainder of the year.
- Members who paid dues the previous year, but who are paying late, will be liable for the entire year.
- Donations in addition to dues are always welcome.