

FACT
P.O. Box
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San Antonio,
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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

December 2008 / January 2009

Catherine Fahringer Critically III

Catherine Fahringer, the co-founder of the Freethinkers Association of Central Texas and Area Vice President of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and is resting at home. Visitors report that she is as feisty as ever.

Well-known in the Freethinkers community, both locally and nationally, Catherine has a reputation as a fighter. A recent incident illustrates this trait. While visiting her doctor, she complained about her persistent rheumatoid pain, and commented in passing that if he couldn't alleviate the pain she was going to kill herself.

The doctor overreacted to this jest, and called two SAPD Officers to take her into protective custody. Catherine was able to convince the Officers that she only made the comment in jest and that she wasn't a really crazy old woman.

An overview of Catherine's impressive accomplishments in support of atheism, separation of church and state and freethought can be found on page 4.

"Cat" is no longer using her computer, but if you wish to send her a card of support or a note of appreciation, her address is: 162 Lorenz Road, San Antonio, TX 78209.



Celebrate the Winter Solstice

Members and Friends of FACT will celebrate the Winter Solstice on December 13th, at noon, at the Pompeii Italian Grill on Nacogdoches Road. We are looking forward to a hearty celebration, astronomical observations, and camaraderie. The guest speaker will be Professor Kimberly Bilica regarding the science curriculum in Texas public schools.

The room is filling up fast, so don't delay. The cost is only \$18 per person, so bring your family, friends and enemies, too! Drop a note to Jim Evans at FACT.Secretary@FreethinkersACT.org with a number of attendees. You can pay at the door.

This is the December/January edition of the FACT Newsletter, so we are covering events in both months. In view of the Winter Solstice Party on December 13th, there will not be a General Meeting in December, and due to all the over-eating late in the month, we will not meet for our Discussion Brunch at Denny's.

November Meeting Review

Elected Positions:

President, Nick Lee
 Vice President, Jane Tuck
 Secretary, Jim Evans
 Treasurer, Cathy Howard
 Public Relations, Jim Barrott

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 November General Meeting of FACT, Jim Evans gave a brief overview of the scientific method. This was a preview of a larger work Jim is working on, which he described as an effort to enlighten Theists in the rigors of rational thinking.

He noted that the intent of the scientific method was to determine the fact or truth of a matter through observation and logic. This contrasts with other ways of determining the truth, such as by tradition, superstition, or personal experience. Since the hard fact of the matter can only be established through proof or replicable observation, none of these other ways can meet the requirements of the scientific method.

Jim laid out the rules of reason, logic and evidence, and noted that, while the current set of facts determined by the scientific method are not permanent and are subject to revision as new evidence is gathered, superstition and knowledge based on dogma can not be verified or sustained in the bright light of reason.

Also at the November FACT Meeting, an election of Officers was conducted. Cathy Howard was re-elected as Treasurer, and Jim Barrott was elected to the post of Public Relations Officers. Formal installation of these new officers will be a part of the Winter Solstice celebration on December 13th. Congratulations to both winners!

Submitted by Nick Lee

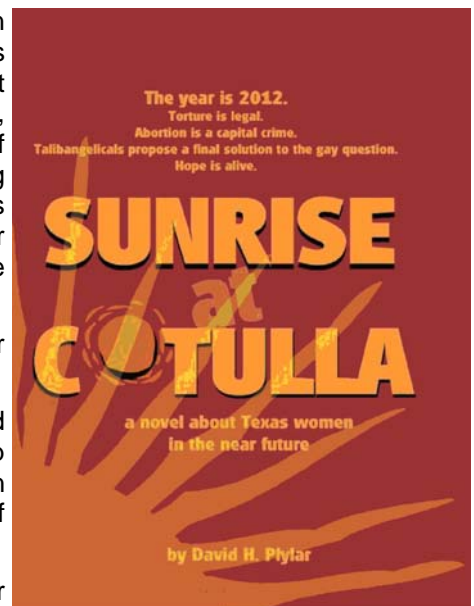
Plylar to Speak

During the January General Meeting, San Antonio author David Plylar will discuss his "alternative/historical/future" novel "Sunrise at Cotulla." The story, set in the year 2012, explores the 'what-if' of the political success of the religious right, and posits the resulting backlash to take back the country. Plylar says the novel is "about Texas women in the near future", and he also calls it "a coming-of-age story for a 40-year old woman."

That brief description should pique your interest in this interesting book.

Plylar will discuss the basis for the novel and why he chose a future fiction format to develop his theme. He will also offer his thoughts on the probability of such a scenario in view of recent political events.

The author is a retired teacher and former Air Force officer, and is already at work on his next epic novel. He will be available to autograph copies of his book.



Every Monday at 12:30 and 8:30 PM

Time Warner Digital Cable Channel 20

FREETHOUGHT FORUM

Hosted by Hugh Henry

FFRF Billboard Taken Down

A billboard asking viewers to "imagine no religion" in Rancho Cucamonga, a city east of Los Angeles, CA was taken down this week after residents and the city complained about its message. The Freedom From Religion Foundation advertisement was first installed last week causing local conversation and complaints. The pressure quickly built up and the General Outdoor sign company took it down.

The foundation's co-president Annie Laurie Gaylor was not so happy, as expressed in a statement they sent out: "Are religionists so thin-skinned they must squelch free debate? One small freethought billboard in the immense state of California is such a threat to insecure religious egos that it must be censored? With local freethinkers' help, the Freedom From Religion Foundation would love to plaster the valley with our message. Let's fight back!"

Source: <http://laist.com/>

Atheists United Action Alert

In response to the violation of First Amendment rights by the city of Rancho Cucamonga (see above) Atheists United issued an Action Alert. Here are three things you can do to right now to express your opinion this violation:

HELP FFRF'S LEGAL CASE

If you are an attorney or know an attorney in the Los Angeles Area who has experience filing in Federal Court and can file on behalf of the Freedom For Religion Foundation in the Southern District, please contact Annie Laurie Gaylor, Co-President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation as soon as possible at algaylor@ffrf.org, 608/256-8900. Please include all your contact information.

SPEAK OUT

You can speak out directly to the city of Rancho Cucamonga using the "Automatic Message Generator" provided by Atheists United.

<http://atheistsunited.org/about-atheists-united/programs/147-automatic-message-generator>

SPREAD THE WORD

Forward this message to all your friends or use our on-line tool to spread the word.

http://atheistsunited.org/index.php?option=com_rsform&formId=10

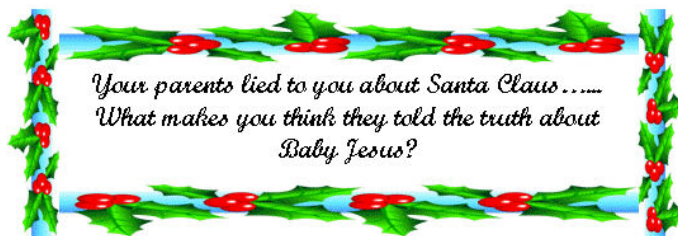
Source: Brian Parra, Director of Communications and Membership at Atheists United

Vatican Forgives John Lennon for Jesus Quip

The Vatican' has finally forgiven John Lennon for declaring that the Beatles were more famous than Jesus Christ, calling the remark a "boast" by a young man grappling with sudden fame. The comment by Lennon to a London newspaper in 1966 infuriated Christians, particularly in the United States, some of whom burned Beatles' albums in huge pyres. But time apparently heals all wounds.

Source: Reuters

Ed. Ironically the posthumous pardon was announced around the same time when the city of Rancho Cucamonga banned a billboard with the rock legend's famous words "Imagine No Religion" from his 1971 signature song



The Four Musketeers by Sally Chizek

We (Catherine Fahringer, Julie Fisher, Ruth Lett and myself, Sally Chizek), called ourselves, the four Musketeers because we did so many things together. Sunday, October 26, at our first Texas Freethought Convention in Austin, Texas, one of the Musketeers was missing. That was our Catherine Fahringer.

At the convention, Mark Simons, asked me if Catherine was there, and I answered that she had not come because of illness. He asked if I would give her a note from him. I believe what he wrote is something that all of us have felt about Catherine. He wrote as follows:

"Catherine, my name is Mark Simons and 10 years ago I moved to Texas and was inspired by you in what you were doing. I am appreciative for my journey in part to your outspokenness."

I know I speak for all of us at FACT, and her many friends, we love you, Catherine. She has many admirers for being intelligent, a good and generous person, for always keeping in touch with so many people in all walks of life, and for working so hard for the "cause." To know Catherine Fahringer is to love her.

Ed. Here is brief biography of Catherine from the Freedom From Religion Foundation September 18, 2008 "Freethought of the Day"

Catherine Fahringer was born in 1922 in Utah to a military family. After living in various places in the United States and abroad, her family settled in San Antonio, Texas, when Catherine was 12.

Raised as an Episcopalian, she was urged by family members to introduce her children to religion. While living in England, where her husband was stationed, Catherine dutifully purchased "The Golden Book of Bible Stories." Perusing it before she read the stories to her children, Catherine had an epiphany: "I said to my husband, 'I can't teach this stuff to my kids. I'm nicer than God'" (San Antonio Express News, March 24, 1991).

Catherine found a venue for activism when she hooked up with the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 1987. She created and hosted "Freethought Forum," a regular cable TV show that is still airing in San Antonio under other producership. Catherine has become a well-known public figure in San Antonio, monitoring and challenging numerous, egregious state/church violations there. An officer with the national Foundation, she serves on its governing council.

With wit and aplomb, Catherine has protested city prayer breakfasts, the presence of religious symbols on public property, and kept freethought in focus with numerous op-eds, letters to the editor and educational letters to government officials and media. In the 1990s, she even managed to persuade then-Gov. Ann Richards and city officials to make proclamations commemorating freethought.

Catherine's media appearances include being featured on TV's Sally Jessy Raphael Show, where she quipped about rejecting the idea of a "Big Spook in the Sky."

Catherine's Freethought is reprinted below.

"We would be 1,500 years ahead if it hadn't been for the church dragging science back by its coattails and burning our best minds at the stake."

Interview, Portrait of an Atheist by Craig Phelon, March 24, 1991 San Antonio Express News.

For more about Catherine Fahringer, see Women Without Superstition (<http://www.ffrf.org/books/wws/>)

Sent to the city of Rancho Cucamonga through the automatic message generator provided by Atheists United (see p. 3).

Posted on Richard Dawkins web site <http://www.richarddawkins.net/>

Re. FFRF "Imagine No Religion" Billboard.

I was saddened to read of your city's action in pressuring for the removal of the "Imagine No Religion" billboard, placed by the Freedom From Religion Foundation. There could scarcely be a more inoffensive way of inviting people to consider the worth of religious beliefs. Yet even these three words (from one of the world's favourite songs) were apparently regarded as too threatening by those of insecure faith in Rancho Cucamonga.

Your action does more to discredit religion than the billboard itself ever could. The First Amendment of the US Constitution and the guarantee of freedom of expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, instruments you should be proud to uphold, appear to have been disregarded in order to protect the weak-minded sensibilities of the religious townsfolk.

I am not a citizen of California, nor even of the USA; I live thousands of miles away in the UK. This should indicate how much damage you do to the reputation of your city by such a squalid response to a legitimate and overdue exercise of free speech. I hope you will find the grace and good sense to apologise for this mistake and arrange to have the billboard reinstated. .

J. Mills

Re. FFRF "Imagine No Religion" Billboard.

I am alarmed about the fact that the City of Cucamonga forced General Outdoor to remove a Freedom From Religion Foundation advertisement within a week of its installation. Based on the First Amendment to the Constitution, the Foundation clearly has the right to express its views as, to my knowledge, the message does not violate any Federal, State or Local laws.

Having a billboard taken down simply because the unpopularity of its message is an abuse of power that has no place in a democratic society. I urge the City to issue an apology to all Americans for violating the separation of church and state and allow the billboard to be reinstated immediately. .

Marc Janssens, San Antonio, TX

Letter sent by Dutch member of the European Parliament Sophie in 't Veld to the EC Commissioner for Enlargement

Re. Turkey's blocking of Professor Richard Dawkins' web site

Dear Commissioner Rehn,

I am writing to express my concern at reports of a Turkish court compromising freedom of expression in the context of Turkey's application to join the EU.

I would like you to investigate the specific example given below and attempt to see if it forms (as we fear) part of a wider picture of concern, and take the matter up with the Turkish authorities.

The example we cite relates to the blocking of the website of Professor Richard Dawkins, the world-famous evolutionary biologist. A criminal court in Istanbul reportedly banned the site in September 2008 on the grounds that it "violated" Adnan Oktar's personality after Professor Dawkins criticised Oktar creationist book 'Atlas of Creation', which is being distributed in Europe in large numbers.

The basis of our complaint is the web/press reports shown in Appendix 1, which were drawn to my attention by the UK's National Secular Society of which I am a Honorary Associate. I am also writing as the Chair of the EU Working Group for the Separation of Religion and Politics.

Such blockings are in stark contrast to the progress you have been calling for as one of the conditions for Turkey's accession to the EU. What is happening is worse than Turkish authorities not standing up for freedom of expression; it appears that the state's mechanism itself is enforcing the restriction on freedom of expression.

Our concern about the banning does not rest in principle on Professor Dawkins' eminence; however the court's decision is all the more worrying, given it is difficult to think of anyone more qualified than him to speak on science matters, being the Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. <http://www.simonyi.ox.ac.uk/index.shtml> .

We believe it essential that the EU remains committed to insisting that countries are not permitted to accede until they conform to fundamental rights. We admire your work in this area and note in Appendix 2 below a number of references you have made to requiring Turkey to improve freedom of expression, for the benefit of others who read this letter, which we regard as an open one.

I look forward to receiving confirmation that you intend to investigate the matter, and subsequently what action you intend to take, including making references to renewed concerns in your reports about the progress being made by candidate states in the vital areas of fundamental rights.

Sophie in 't Veld, MEP

Atheism, a Positive Pillar (Part I)

by Tom Krattenmaker

Being an atheist is not easy in this age of great public religiosity in America. Not when the overwhelming majority of Americans profess some form of belief in God. Not when many believers equate non-belief with immorality. Not when more people would automatically disqualify an atheist for the presidency (53%, according to a USA TODAY/Gallup Poll) than a gay candidate (43%), for example, or a Mormon (24%).

Anti-atheism might have found its ugliest public expression during an episode in the Illinois Legislature this spring. As atheist activist Rob Sherman attempted to testify against a \$1 million state grant to a church, Rep. Monique Davis railed, "This is the Land of Lincoln where people believe in God, where people believe in protecting their children. ... It's dangerous for our children to even know that your philosophy exists! ... You have no right to be here! We believe in something. You believe in destroying!"

Lest we dismiss the legislator's harangue as an anomaly, consider the organizations that bar atheists from membership — the Boy Scouts of America and American Legion, to name two, as well as some local posts of the Veterans of Foreign Wars — and the conspicuous absence of openly atheist politicians on the national stage.

Mindful of atheism's reviled reputation, a new current in non-belief is intent on showing the public what atheists are for. You might be surprised by what's on their short list. Because, save for the belief-in-a-deity part, it sounds a lot like what most Americans value. Care for one's community and fellow human beings, love of country and cherished American principles, the pursuit and expansion of knowledge — these are the elements of the new "positive atheism."

A new face

The reputation of atheists has not been well-served by the surly attacks on religion by some of atheism's highest-profile torch carriers. From the best-selling atheist manifestos of recent years to Bill Maher's new *Religulous* movie, the loudest voices of non-belief have exhibited much of the same stridency and flair for polemics as the religious fundamentalists they excoriate.

But if Margaret Downey keeps making progress with her campaign to show a different face of atheism, it's possible to imagine the day when avowing one's non-belief will not be political suicide. (It seems to be just that today, given that only one member of Congress, Rep. Pete Stark of California, has revealed that he does not believe in a deity; in view of polling data suggesting that some 5% to 15% of Americans are atheists and agnostics, it seems certain there are at least a few more non-believing senators and representatives in the halls — and closets — of Congress.)

Downey, having recently finished a stint as president of the Atheist Alliance International, is now organizing a non-believers' unity convention to take place in 2011. She is the poster person for positive atheism, a term she uses for a new face of atheism that emphasizes the good things in which non-believers do believe.

Downey does not move in the ways of the late atheist spokesperson Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who was known for her caustic mockery of religion and its followers. And despite Downey's friendship with the outspoken atheist author Richard Dawkins, of *The God Delusion* fame (who likens the religious indoctrination of kids to child abuse), Downey is more interested in building bridges than walls.

Continued on the next page ...



FACT T-Shirts for Sale (Grey w/Black Logo)
 Available Sizes: Small, Medium, Large, XLarge, 2X and 3X
 Also Available: One Size Fits All Vests (Red)
 Price for All T-Shirts and Vests: \$15.00
 To order or for further information, contact Sally Chizek
 Sally.Chizek@FreethinkersACT.org or (210) 656-3796

Atheism, a Positive Pillar (Part II)

by Tom Krattenmaker

In an episode earlier this year in the Philadelphia area, where Downey lives, the stage appeared set for an atheist-vs.-Christian billboards shouting match: Downey and colleagues had posted a billboard on Interstate 95 saying, "Don't believe in God? You're not alone," prompting a local Christian congregation to erect signs with a counter-message promoting God. Instead of escalating the billboard battle, Downey and company asked those who put up the pro-belief sign to join forces and volunteer with them for a Philadelphia charity. The people from the Light Houses of Oxford Valley congregation accepted the offer and teamed up with the atheists to spend a half-day sorting and packaging food for the needy.

"My goal is to teach by example that we believe in the importance of helping improve the human condition," Downey says. "We atheists simply add one more 'o' to our belief system — we believe in good."

The spirit of positive atheism infused this fall's convention of the Atheist Alliance, which comprises nearly 60 U.S. atheist groups with combined membership of about 5,000. Attendees gave blood and had their hair shorn for use in cancer patients' wigs. At last year's convention, Downey presided over a baby-naming ceremony, where parents and their supporters exalted wisdom, love, honesty and the beauty of nature, and the newborns were given not godparents, but "guideparents."

The leader of positive atheism certainly is not above going to court to protect the rights of non-believers. But in a holiday-season episode last year, Downey and her free-thinking allies responded to a crèche and menorah in front of the Chester County Courthouse outside Philadelphia not with a lawsuit, but a display of their own — a "Tree of Knowledge." The 22-foot-high evergreen was decorated with color copies of book covers, the titles included the Bible, the Quran and numerous other works on religion, atheism and evolution.

When it comes down to it, the positive atheists aren't inventing something new so much as highlighting something that has long been true about atheists. Namely, that non-believers have always stood shoulder to shoulder with fellow citizens doing the things Americans generally do: working hard, obeying the laws, helping the needy and doing what they can to improve their communities.

Let's recall that invective from the Illinois legislator who could not tolerate the malevolent presence of — gasp! — an atheist in "the Land of Lincoln." Monique Davis' reference to the revered 16th president is instructive, although not in the way she intended. Lincoln's own story teaches a cautionary lesson to those who would exclude and condemn some Americans on the basis of their religion, or lack thereof.

Honest Abe's example

Davis might be surprised to learn that Lincoln himself was frequently attacked by politically active pastors in his time. As the author Susan Jacoby documents in *Freethinkers*, her 2004 book on the history of American secularism, presidential candidate Lincoln rued the opposition he faced from 20 of the 23 Protestant ministers in his hometown of Springfield, Ill. Earlier in his career, Lincoln complained about opposition from religious figures who warned Christian voters against him on the grounds, Lincoln wrote, that "I belonged to no church (and) was suspected of being a deist."

Lincoln — the man accused of insufficient piety in his time — is appropriately lionized today for his unswerving courage and moral clarity. Honest Abe's example strongly suggests that we all think twice before asserting that our religious camp has a monopoly on truth and virtue. And that we acknowledge that non-believers — who can be found all across the landscape engaging in acts of decency and battles for justice — are worthy citizens in a country whose Constitution imposes no religious test and whose tradition cherishes freedom of choice in all matters religious.

Yes, there is a place for atheists in the Land of Lincoln. Especially in the Land of Lincoln.

Source: USA Today, November 17, 2008

READ A GOOD BOOK LATELY? TELL US ABOUT IT.

Send your book reviews, recommendations, critiques, or top 10 list to:

FACT.newsletter@FreethinkersACT.org

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

Evolution, Creationism and Public Schools (Part I)

The debate over curriculum standards for science education at the Texas State Board of Education in 2008-09 is the latest front in a running battle over evolution in this country. Creationism and intelligent design advocates have made clear that Texas is a focal point in their attempt to undermine the mainstream scientific consensus on evolution. The Texas Freedom Network Education Fund surveyed those who are best qualified to evaluate the claims of evolution opponents - scientists at Texas' colleges and universities.

In late fall 2007 and early spring of 2008, a lengthy survey (59 questions some open-ended) was sent to 1,019 individual biology and biological anthropology faculty members from all 35 public universities plus the 15 largest private institutions in Texas. In the end 464 survey recipients submitted completed questionnaires. This represents better than a 45% response rate almost unheard of for the remote return of a lengthy questionnaire of this type. The diversity of the response was also robust, with respondents participating from 49 different institutions. All responses were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Dr. Raymond Eve, professor of sociology and program director for sociology at the University of Texas at Arlington, designed and administered the survey and served as principal author of the report.

The recently released report detailing the results of this survey reveals that the Texas science community strongly rejects intelligent design and the so-called "weaknesses" of evolution. Further, a majority of Texas science faculty worry that dumbing down science curriculum is harmful to students' future prospects for college and 21st-century jobs. The survey findings can be grouped into five broad categories.

Texas Scientists Overwhelmingly Reject Intelligent Design as Valid Science

Proponents of intelligent design regularly assert that a vigorous controversy over the validity of evolution exists among scientists who study human origins. However, the responses to this survey unequivocally establish that nearly all qualified scientists in Texas colleges and universities firmly support the current mainstream consensus on the validity of evolutionary processes and reject intelligent design as representing a scientifically credible alternative. Only about 2% of Texas science faculty can be said to express any degree of sympathy for creationism or intelligent design. Further, not a single scientist in the subsample of those supporting intelligent design reported teaching graduate students about human evolution within the past five years. Support for intelligent design vanishes to essentially zero when looking at established Texas biology and biological anthropology faculty who teach at the graduate level.

Texas Science Faculty Insist That Neither ID Nor Creationism Be Taught in Science Classes

The "teach both sides" or "teach the controversy" argument, appealing to the public's sense of fairness, has been a key political and public relations talking point for intelligent design supporters. But this argument is soundly rejected by Texas scientists. About 92% agreed that the Texas State Board of Education should not allow intelligent design to be presented in public school science classrooms as scientifically credible. Additionally, a solid 95% of respondents said that they would prefer to teach "just evolution as a valid account of origins," leaving a mere 5% who believed that both evolution and intelligent design should be taught. This should prove discouraging to the promoters of intelligent design because it exposes the "controversy" as a political fiction. The "controversy" is strictly a creation of intelligent design backers. There is, in fact, essentially no controversy in the mainstream science community.

Scientists Reject Teaching the So-Called 'Weaknesses' of Evolution

Opponents of evolution have targeted the Texas science curriculum standards as a test case for their newest strategy forcing public school students to learn about so-called "weaknesses" of evolutionary theory. This survey of Texas scientists roundly rejects this strategy: 94% of Texas scientists indicated that claimed "weaknesses" are not valid scientific objections to evolution (with 87% saying that they "strongly disagree" that such weaknesses should be considered valid). Clearly, the latest shift in strategy from promoting intelligent design to pushing "weaknesses" of evolution has not made any significant inroads into the science community. Just as with intelligent design, the vast majority of relevant university and college faculty in Texas do not buy into the "teach the weaknesses" concept now favored by supporters of creationism.

Continued on the next page ...

Evolution, Creationism and Public Schools (Part II)

Texas Science Faculty Believe that Emphasizing 'Weaknesses' of Evolution Would Substantially Harm Students' College Readiness and Prospects for 21st-Century Jobs

Science faculty at institutions of higher education are uniquely positioned to fairly assess students' readiness for college, and the results of our survey indicate a significant concern among Texas scientists about how changes to the science curriculum standards will affect prospects for their students. Nearly 80% of the respondents either agreed that presentation of presumed "weaknesses" of evolution in a high school classroom will impair students' readiness for college. Additionally, 72% of respondents said they agreed that teaching high school students about presumed "weaknesses" will impair their ability to compete for 21st century jobs. Parents who care about prospects for their children's education and professional future might wish to take note of this concern among Texas scientists.

Texas Scientists Strongly Believe that Support for Evolution Is Compatible with Religious Faith

Many anti-evolution commentators argue that science is somehow intrinsically hostile to faith. Some opponents of evolution go even further and argue that scientists are committed to an agenda intended to destroy faith. However, the results of this survey make clear that Texas science faculty members do not fit this stereotype. When asked if it is "possible for someone who accepts evolutionary biology to have religious faith," 74.4% strongly agreed, and 16.6% agreed somewhat, for a total of 91%. Although Americans have been repeatedly subjected to the claim that "you can't be a Christian and believe in evolution," this statement is soundly rejected by all but a very small number of the Texas scientists surveyed.

Source: <http://www.tfn.org/>

Obama Asked to Protect Atheists in Foxholes

Americans serving in the military who are atheist, agnostic, or practice no religion might beg to differ with Colson's assertion that Christianity is under siege. [Ed. [Chuck Colson is the founder of Prison Fellowship, a Christian outreach ministry to the prison population of this country, as well as to ex-prisoners and crime victims.](#)] In light of service members' stories of aggressive evangelizing, the ostracizing of nonbelievers, and the failure of the military to investigate complaints by non-theists of discrimination, the Secular Coalition of America (SCA) and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF) are asking the incoming Obama administration to consider changes to military regulations to protect their rights and ensure the implementation of procedures for investigating complaints.

Although a military directive prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion and affirms the right of service members to practice a religion, the it is "silent on how to handle nonreligious Americans who make up 21 percent of the armed forces," said SCA Executive Director Lori Lipman Brown. "Non-theists have no recourse when religion is forced upon them in both formal and informal settings affecting their daily work and their careers and, in some cases, their safety."

According to Jason Torpy, president of the MAAF, most people who contact his organization "fear reprisals and don't speak up publicly." Prayer, he added, "bookends nearly every military ceremony ... and exhortations to find faith and attend church are common."

"We need an overhaul and it needs to come from the top down," said former Army 1st Lt. Wayne Adkins, who served as a public affairs officer in Iraq and witnessed disparagement of nonbelievers by chaplains and officers to members of the press. "Atheists don't ask for much. ... What we do ask is that our leaders refrain from publicly disparaging us, from calling us liars, cowards, lesser soldiers, simply because we don't share their belief in the supernatural."

Source: <http://www.prospect.org/>

November Texas State Board of Education Hearing by Marc Janssens

The Texas State Board of Education had its most recent hearing in Austin on November 19, 2008. Item 7 on the agenda is of particular interest to Texans who want a 21st century science education for their kids. The main issue was new draft science curriculum standards that would undermine teaching about evolution, e.g. by requiring that students learn “strengths and limitations” of scientific theories. Close to 100 people registered to give a 3 minute testimony before the board. Dr. Joe Bernal, strong supporter of good science education and former SBOE member from San Antonio was the first to address the board close to 4 p.m. The last testimony was given roughly eight hours later.

Dr. Steven Schafersman of Texas Citizens for Science (TCS) published a nice summary of the day’s events on his Evo.Sphere blog. A link to the blog can be found on the TCS web site (<http://www.texscience.org/>). According to Dr. Schafersman’s blog, board member Cynthia Dunbar (R-Richmond) at one point stated that she only advocates academic freedom, and that having students learn about both sides of scientific controversies and any problems about scientific explanations faced by scientists is all that she and her colleagues want.

Who is Cynthia Dunbar? In a column posted on the Christian Worldview Network web site on November 2, Dunbar wrote that a terrorist attack on America during the first six months of an Obama administration “will be a planned effort by those with whom Obama truly sympathizes to take down the America that is [a] threat to tyranny.” She also suggested Obama would seek to expand his power by declaring martial law throughout the country. Dunbar earned her law degree from Pat Robertson’s Regent University Law School, which seeks to “fully integrate the study of law with biblical principles.” She home-schooled her own children.

The concept of “academic freedom” applies primarily to university professors (and up to some extent their students) who are involved in potentially controversial research. It allows them to express their views and present the results of their research without fear from institutional censorship or discipline. The purpose of a secondary science education is to provide students with a solid and broad basis in mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc. The subjects that are taught in middle and high school are fundamental in nature and there are no controversies at this level. Before students can explore alternative theories, they must have a good understanding of the fundamentals. Students are generally not ready to explore alternative “unproven” theories until they have reached the graduate level. This does not mean that high school students should not be encouraged to engage in critical thinking. Quite the contrary! But this activity should help student better understand the fundamental concepts that are being taught, not open the door to bad or pseudo-science.

The SBOE consists of elected officials who, first and foremost, represent their constituency. They are not required to have a degree in science or engineering, and most don’t. So, a board member representing an ignorant and anti-science constituency is bound to make decisions that are bad for science and for our kids.

Atheist Bus Slogan Rejected!

The bus slogan campaign proposed by the Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) with the thought provoking sentiment, “Atheism – Celebrate reason!” has been refused for display by ‘APN Outdoors’, the company responsible for Public Metropolitan Transport Advertising. Various other phrases also deemed unacceptable.

Following the lead of Humanists in London and Washington in the USA, with their intended bus signs, an International program by Humanists and Atheists was to commence on the 20 January 09 using buses to express the secular viewpoint. Richard Dawkins in supporting the London bus signs has stated that such a campaign “Will make people think”.

AFA President David Nicholls said: “I am flabbergasted. This is extremely disappointing and a severe blow to freedom of expression in Australia. We are witnessing the result of seemingly paranoid executives interfering with pertinent social comment. This action has thwarted the right to state peacefully and openly a legitimate and timely message without violence.

Australia is going to look provincial and narrow in outlook to the rest of the world because of this decision. The planet is moving to a more enlightened era but apparently, public transport advertising agents in Australia have missed the bus. Isn’t that ironic” .

Source: <http://www.atheistfoundation.org.au> .

December Events

December 2nd - THCF First Tuesday Lunch

1:00 pm: Meet other Freethinkers at the Texas Hill Country

Freethinkers' First Tuesday Lunch (held monthly)

Host: Julie Fisher

Topic: "Ralph Nader's New Deal for America"

Contact Julie at zoezappa@gmail.com for a copy of

Ralph Nader's article

El Rio

**Bandera Road and South Main Street Corner
in Boerne**

December 13th - Winter Solstice Party

12:00-3:30 pm: Come and join other FACT members and friends in celebrating the Winter Solstice

Speaker: Dr. Kimberly Bilica, Assistant Professor of Curriculum Development at UTSA

Topic: "Science Curriculum in Texas Public Schools"

**Pompeii Italian Grill
16109 Nacogdoches Road**

January Events

January 6th — THCF First Tuesday Lunch

January 14th — THCF Northwest Lunch

January 17th — General Meeting

January 31st — FACT Discussion Brunch

December 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			

January 2009						
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

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FACT MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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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.