

FACT
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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*

March 2009

Faith-Based Initiative

"We want to fund programs that save Americans one soul at a time."

President George W. Bush, January, 2004, in a speech in New Orleans

The religious right reached a political pinnacle when President Bush, as one of his first actions as President, established the "White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives." By 2004, that Office was able to announce that \$40 billion were available to fund a wide range of religion-based social services.

The hazards to this policy are two-fold: religious groups are given preferential treatment over other well-established social service non-profit organizations, and yet they are held exempt from discriminatory hiring practices. Further, since the accountability is sloppy, there is no way to separate funds spent on social services from those used to proselytize religious converts.

Those who saw this as a breach in the wall of separation railed against this policy for eight years. A suit filed by the Freedom From Religion was rejected by the Supreme Court (*Hein v. FFRF*, 2006) on the grounds that taxpayers had no standing to challenge this expenditure of funds by the President. Many hoped that the faith-based initiative would fade away with the change in administration in 2008. But they were dismayed when President Obama announced that he would continue the initiative. It is unclear what safeguards will be implemented to overcome the recognized hazards.

At the next General Meeting of FACT, on March 21st, Dr. Stephen Amberg will speak on "Faith-based Initiatives". Dr. Amberg is an Associate Professor of Political Science at UTSA. The author of numerous research and conference papers, he teaches graduate courses in American Government and American Political Developments.

General Meeting, Saturday, March 21st @ 1pm

Community Unitarian Universalist Church

4818 E. Beverly Mae

Is This Your Last Issue?

Annual membership dues for the Freethinkers Association of Central Texas, are due by March 31st. If you have not already sent in your payment, we hope it is only because it has slipped your mind. Dues are only \$30 for individuals, \$42 for families.

You can mail us a check at the address on the masthead, but better yet, why don't you deliver it in person when you come to the General Meeting on March 21st to hear Dr. Amberg?

"I think it's perfectly consistent to say that I want my government to be operating for all faiths and all peoples, including atheists and agnostics, while also insisting that there are values that inform my politics that are appropriate to talk about."

State Senator Barack Obama, Chicago Sun-Times, March 27, 2004

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)
 For Information contact
 Julie Fisher:
 zoezappa@hughes.net

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.

A Rousing Concert

On February 14th, FACT sponsored a free concert, open to the community, featuring singer-songwriter Roy Zimmerman. A crowd of 60 folks gathered at the First Unitarian Church in San Antonio to hear this nationally-known entertainer, who was on a whirlwind tour of Texas.

Zimmerman's riotous riffs on politics, religion, and other foibles of American life were spot on. His selections came from among his six CDs, all original words and music. Although he has found ample targets for his satire among political conservatives and the religious right during the past eight years, Zimmerman commented that he anticipated there would be plenty of pomposity for puncturing in the future.

For those of you who were unfortunate to miss the concert, Roy's CDs are available at <http://www.royzimmerman.com/>.

Nick Lee

Court Rules in Religious Marker Case

The Supreme Court has ruled unanimously that a small religious group cannot force a city in Utah to place a granite marker in a local park that already is home to a Ten Commandments display.

In a case involving the Salt Lake City-based Summum, the court said Wednesday that governments can decide what to display in a public park without running afoul of the First Amendment.

Pleasant Grove City, Utah, rejected the group's marker, prompting a federal lawsuit that argued that a city can't allow some private donations of displays in its public park and reject others. The federal appeals court in Denver agreed.

In his opinion for the court, Justice Samuel Alito distinguished the Summum's case from efforts to prevent groups from speaking in public parks, which ordinarily would violate the First Amendment's free speech guarantee.

Alito said "the display of a permanent monument in a public park" requires a different analysis. Because monuments in public parks help define a city's identity, "cities and other jurisdictions take some care in accepting donated monuments," he said.

Source: The Associated Press, Wednesday, February 25, 2009

Will Alito's logic be used to keep atheist displays from public display because they don't represent the "identity" of the place?

Author Sarah Trachtenberg is currently writing **Not My God: Personal Stories of Atheists in America**, to be published soon. She is looking to hear from atheists and humanists willing to share their personal stories. To learn more about her book, and to submit your story, visit her website at www.sarahtrachtenberg.com.

Every Monday at 12:30 and 8:30 PM

Time Warner Digital Cable Channel 20

FREETHOUGHT FORUM

Hosted by Hugh Henry

Atheist Revival in Arkansas

by David Waters

Hard to say what was more remarkable about the resolution that was read into the record and referred to committee Wednesday by a member of the 87th Arkansas General Assembly. The resolution itself: HJR 1009: AMENDING THE ARKANSAS CONSTITUTION TO REPEAL THE PROHIBITION AGAINST AN ATHEIST HOLDING ANY OFFICE IN THE CIVIL DEPARTMENTS OF THE STATE OF ARKANSAS OR TESTIFYING AS A WITNESS IN ANY COURT. Or the fact that it was submitted by the Green Party's highest-ranking elected official in America, state Rep. Richard Carroll of North Little Rock, who was elected in November winning more than 80 percent of the vote in his district.

Arkansas is one of half a dozen states that still exclude non-believers from public office. Article 19 Section 1 of the 1874 Arkansas Constitution states that "No person who denies the being of a God shall hold any office in the civil departments of this State, nor be competent to testify as a witness in any court."

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled all such state provisions unconstitutional and unenforceable in a 1961 ruling in a Maryland case: "We repeat and again reaffirm that neither a State nor the Federal Government can constitutionally force a person 'to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion.'"

Carroll is merely trying to do some symbolic constitutional housecleaning, but it won't be easy. In 2005, state Rep. Buddy Blair filed a resolution to affirm Arkansas' support for the separation of church and state. The resolution lost 39-44 in the House.

And last month, Rep. Lindsley Smith offered a resolution to declare Jan. 29 at Thomas Paine Day in Arkansas. "I consider myself a very religious person," Smith told the committee considering her bill to designate Jan. 29 as Thomas Paine Day in Arkansas. Paine, the colonial patriot who wrote "Common Sense," a pamphlet that built support for the American Revolution. Paine also was a Deist who believed in God but not religion. The proposal died in committee, even after Smith assured her colleagues that she was not an atheist. Which they would have known if they'd read the state constitution.

Meanwhile, in a related story, the Arkansas House passed a bill Wednesday allowing people to bring their guns to church. "Due to many shootings that have happened in our churches across our nation, it is time we changed our concealed handgun law to allow law-abiding citizens of the state of Arkansas the right to defend themselves and others should a situation happen in one of our churches," said state Rep. Beverly Pyle. The bill doesn't say whether atheists can bring guns to church.

Source: http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2009/02/an_advocate_for_atheists_in_ar.html

New Brunch Format

The most recent FACT brunch on February 28 attracted a full house. Instead of a pre-determined topic for discussion, we adopted the techniques of Socrates Café. Len Wheeler was our guide. Here are the basic principles governing the discussion (learning is first, opinions are second, teaching is out):

- Listen well without thinking about what you want to say.
- Accept graciously all opinions; show a high level of respect.
- Crosstalking or one-on-one debate (side comments) prevents others from participating and hearing.
- Attempt to let everyone talk who wishes without dominating the conversation (keep it short).
- Leave your expressions open to further questioning as though you are always questioning your own opinion.
- Openmindedness is necessary especially for us amateur philosophers.
- Opinions, not agendas to fulfill or proselytizing, are welcome (no preaching or advice).
- Telling others what they need, should or have to do or expressing that something is for sure is sometimes intimidating to members (keeping it in the "I think" or "My opinion is" helps).

Most importantly, bring your questions that are open ended; do not set up an agenda followed with a question. Just ask the question in a philosophic way, don't put your name on the paper you turn in to the moderator, and wait for a while after the question is asked to allow others their opinion because they are having to think off the top of their heads and you have already had time to think about it.

We can end with asking if there is something we as an organization or individuals can do about this and discuss another 15 or so minutes. Will you join us next time, on March 28th? (See page 11 for time and place.)

Good Atheists Go To Heaven(?)

by Nick Lee

There are continuing indications that the raucous right does not speak for all Christendom, nor even for all Evangelicals. Polls continue to show that the extremists are out of step with the rank-and-file.

Early last year, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a survey in which 70 percent of Americans said that they believed religions other than theirs could lead to eternal life. That runs counter to the fundamentalist holding that only the selected few can get through the Pearly Gates. Evangelical leaders cried foul, and insisted that the questions had been badly worded or that the respondents had misunderstood.

So Pew repeated the survey in August, and 65 percent of respondents repeated their belief that all other religions could lead to eternal life, and they allowed as how even Atheists would be welcome there. The basis for this way of thinking seemed to be that most Christians accepted a fundamental doctrine of fairness—that God would reward good people and not consign them to Hell, no matter what their religion, or lack thereof.

On a similar note, the same survey indicated that less than 40% of Christians believe that the bible is the literal word of God, 18% accept that it is just a book written by men and not the word of God at all.

Now, most atheists I know are good people, and therefore bound for Glory. But presumably when they reach the Gates, they will be given the option of whether they want to spend eternity with the likes of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson!

Legislative Salvation for the ICR?

House Bill 2800, introduced in the Texas House of Representatives on March 9, 2009, would, if enacted, in effect exempt institutions such as the Institute for Creation Research's (ICR) graduate school from Texas's regulations governing degree-granting institutions. The bill's sole sponsor is Leo Berman (R-District 6), a member of the House Higher Education Committee. A member of National Center for Science Education (NCSE) called Berman's office to ask whether the bill would apply to the ICR's graduate school; a staffer answered that he thought that it would, adding that he believed that the bill's objective was to aid institutions that want to teach creation science or intelligent design. Berman himself seems not to have offered any public statement about HB 2800 so far.

As NCSE's Glenn Branch recounted in Reports of the NCSE, "When the Institute for Creation Research moved its headquarters from Santee, California, to Dallas, Texas, in June 2007, it expected to be able to continue offering a master's degree in science education from its graduate school. ... But the state's scientific and educational leaders voiced their opposition, and at its April 24, 2008, meeting, the Texas Higher Education Coordination Board (THECB) unanimously voted to deny the ICR's request for a state certificate of authority to offer the degree." Following the THECB's decision, the ICR appealed the decision, while also taking its case to the court of public opinion with a series of press releases and advertisements in Texas newspapers.

Now, however, it seems that HB 2800 would take the matter out of the board's hands altogether. Subchapter G of Chapter 61 of Texas's Education Code serves to regulate "the use of academic terminology in naming or otherwise designating educational institutions, the advertising, solicitation or representation by educational institutions or their agents, and the maintenance and preservation of essential academic records"; it provides, inter alia, "A person may not grant or award a degree or offer to grant or award a degree on behalf of a private postsecondary educational institution unless the institution has been issued a certificate of authority to grant the degree by the board [that is, the Texas Higher Education Coordination Board] in accordance with the provisions of this subchapter."

HB 2800 would amend subchapter G by providing, "The provisions of this subchapter do not apply to a private educational institution, including a separate degree-granting program, unit, or school operated by the institution, that: (1) does not accept state funding of any kind to support its educational programs; (2) does not accept state-administered federal funding to support its educational programs; (3) was formed as or is affiliated with or controlled by a nonprofit corporation or nonprofit unincorporated organization; and (4) offers bona fide degree programs that require students to complete substantive course work in order to receive a degree from the institution." Presumably the ICR would argue that its graduate school satisfies all four requirements.

Source: <http://ncseweb.org/news/2009/03/legislative-salvation-icr-004644>

Creationist Board Chair Profiled

As the final vote on the proposed revision of the Texas state science standards approaches, the Austin American-Statesman (March 8, 2009) offers a profile of the chair of the Texas state board of education, avowed creationist Don McLeroy. Describing his conversion to fundamentalism as a dental student, the profile explained, "He is now a young earth creationist, meaning that he believes God created Earth between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago," quoting him as saying, "When I became a Christian, it was whole-hearted ... I was totally convinced the biblical principles were right, and I was totally convinced that it could be accurate scientifically." Particularly important to McLeroy is the biblical tenet that humans were created in the image of God — although Sid Hall, a Methodist pastor in Austin, told the newspaper, "I would never want to discount those works, but to take [the passage that humans were made in the image of God] to mean something about how the universe is created is a stretch to me ... That's code to me for 'I'm going to take my particular myth of creationism and make it part of the science curriculum.' That's scary to me."

At the board's January 21-23, 2009, meeting, McLeroy successfully proposed a revision to section 7 of the draft of the high school biology standards to require that students "analyze and evaluate the sufficiency or insufficiency of common ancestry to explain the sudden appearance, stasis and sequential nature of groups in the fossil record." As NCSE explains in its call to Texas scientists, the requirement is not only unworkable and confusing, but also evidently intended to promote the idea that living things were specially created in their current forms. Moreover, a detailed analysis by the Stand Up for Real Science blog strongly suggests that the documentation that McLeroy provided in support of his revision at the January meeting was in fact taken wholesale from creationist sources. Undaunted, McLeroy told the American-Statesman that at the board's March 25-27, 2009, meeting, he plans to "pitch another idea that he says should be taught in public schools: the insufficiency of natural selection to explain the complexity of cells" — apparently a reference to the "intelligent design" notion of "irreducible complexity" due to Michael Behe.

David Hillis of the University of Texas, Austin, told the newspaper, "McLeroy's amendments are not even intelligible. I wonder if perhaps he wants the standards to be confusing so that he can open the door to attacking mainstream biology textbooks and arguing for the addition of creationist and other religious literature into the science classroom." He added, "If Chairman McLeroy is successful in adding his amendments, it will be a huge embarrassment to Texas, a setback for science education and a terrible precedent for the state boards overriding academic experts in order to further their personal religious or political agendas. The victims will be the schoolchildren of Texas, who represent the future of our state." Hillis is also a member of the Advisory Committee of the 21st Century Science Coalition, which has recruited over 1400 Texas scientists to endorse its call for the Texas state board of education to adopt state science standards that "acknowledge that instruction on evolution is vital to understanding all the biological sciences" and omit "all references to 'strengths and weaknesses,' which politicians have used to introduce supernatural explanations into science courses."

Preparing for the March 25-27 board meeting at which the final vote on the standards is expected, McLeroy is arming himself with "a large binder that is adorned on the front with a picture of Albert Einstein" and contains "numerous passages from books — such as [Kenneth R.] Miller's and others on evolutionary theory — and articles that he plans to use as ammunition in the fight this month over what should be in the state's science standards." One page from his binder, the American-Statesman reports, shows a diagram of the fossil record from a book by Miller, with McLeroy's gloss, "What do we see?" 'Sudden appearance' of species." Miller — a professor of biology at Brown University and a Supporter of NCSE, who recently received the Award for Public Understanding of Science and Technology by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in recognition of "his sustained efforts and excellence in communicating evolutionary science" — told the newspaper, "That diagram shows evolution. If he thinks it says evolution does not occur, he is dead wrong. It's really quite the opposite."

Source: <http://ncseweb.org/news/2009/03/creationist-board-chair-profiled-004643>



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	

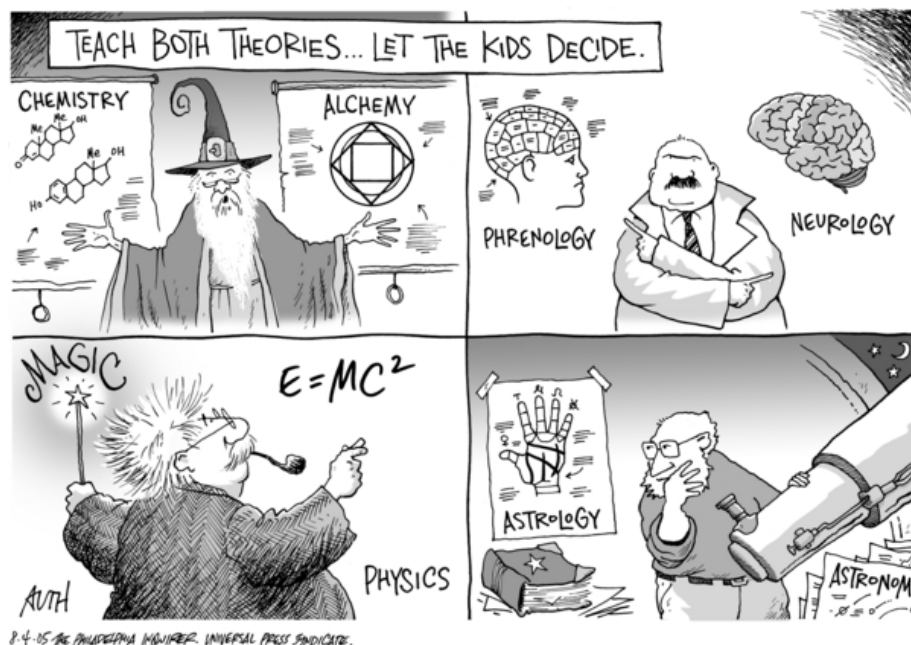
Antievolution Resolutions Introduced in Oklahoma

Two bills in the Oklahoma House of Representatives — House Resolution 1014 and House Resolution 1015, introduced on March 3, 2009 — attack Richard Dawkins's visit to the University of Oklahoma. The sole sponsor of both bills is Todd Thomsen (R-District 25), a member of the House Education Committee and the chair of the House Higher Education and Career Tech Committee. Both measures, if adopted, would express the strong opposition of the Oklahoma House of Representatives to "the invitation to speak on the campus of the University of Oklahoma to Richard Dawkins of Oxford University, whose published statements on the theory of evolution and opinion about those who do not believe in the theory are contrary and offensive to the views and opinions of most citizens of Oklahoma."

While HR 1015 ends with a plea for civility — "the Oklahoma House of Representatives encourages the University of Oklahoma to engage in an open, dignified, and fair discussion of the Darwinian theory of evolution and all other scientific theories which is the approach that a public institution should be engaged in and which represents the desire and interest of the citizens of Oklahoma" — HR 1014 attacks the University of Oklahoma's Department of Zoology for "framing the Darwinian theory of evolution as doctrinal dogmatism rather than a hypothetical construction within the disciplines of the sciences" and engaging in "one-sided indoctrination of an unproven and unpopular theory" while branding "all thinking in dissent of this theory as anti-intellectual and backward rather than nurturing such free thinking and allowing a free discussion of all ideas which is the primary purpose of a university." The text of both bills can be found on the National Center for Science Education web site (see source below).

Despite Thomsen's attempts to ban Dawkins, he did speak at the University of Oklahoma on March 6, 2009, as part of the university's celebrations of the Darwin anniversary. At the beginning of his talk, which was repeatedly interrupted by cheers and applause, Dawkins opened by saying, "I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but it isn't everybody who's the subject of legislation ..." Quoting HR 1014's complaint of his alleged "intolerance for cultural diversity and diversity of thinking," he presented the stork theory of human reproduction — illustrated with a parody of the creationist propaganda film *Expelled* — as a view comparable to creationism. "They've lost in the courts of law; they've long ago lost in the halls of science; and they continue to lose with every new piece of evidence in support of evolution. Taking offense is all they've got left. And the one thing you can be sure of is that they don't actually know anything about what it is that they reject," he added. He also announced that the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science would be donating \$5000 to Oklahomans for Excellence in Science Education, which fights against attempts to undermine evolution education in Oklahoma.

Source: <http://ncseweb.org/news/2009/03/antievolution-resolutions-introduced-oklahoma-004637>



“Jesus, Interrupted” by Bart Ehrman

Book Review by John W. Loftus (from www.amazon.com)

According to Ehrman this book is about how "certain kinds of faith--particularly the faith in the Bible as the historical inerrant and inspired word of God--cannot be sustained in light of what we as historians know about the Bible." (p. 18). He begins by describing the difference between a vertical reading of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) with a horizontal reading of them. A vertical reading is simply taking one Gospel at a time and reading through it. A horizontal reading, however, is where we place the gospels side by side and read them together to see the differences in the accounts. When we read the Gospels horizontally we find discrepancies, irresolvable differences, and even contradictions, not only in the small details, but also when it comes to major ideas presented by the authors.

Some of the minor discrepancies are as follows: Mark differs with John on which day Jesus died (of this Ehrman writes, "I do not think this is a difference that can be reconciled." p. 27); there are significant differences between Matthew and Luke concerning various aspects of the birth of Jesus, as well as the irreconcilable genealogies found in their stories. Other discrepancies concern things like what the voice from heaven said at Jesus' baptism, what Jesus did the day after his baptism, whether or not Jarius' daughter was already dead when her father approached Jesus; who is for and against Jesus; how long Jesus' ministry lasted; why Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus along with how he died, and irreconcilable differences in Jesus' resurrection accounts.

Ehrman also asks us to read Paul's writings horizontally with the book of Acts to compare them. When we do there are even more problems: after Paul's conversion did Paul go directly to Jerusalem?; Did the churches in Judea know Paul?; Did Paul go to Athens alone?; How many trips did Paul make to Jerusalem?; Were the congregations Paul established made up of both Jews and gentiles?

There are major discrepancies as well, like the depictions of Jesus' death in Mark, where Jesus dies in agony and despair, from Luke where Jesus seems oddly in control of the situation. There are differences in the Gospel of John from the other Gospels with regard to Jesus' teaching content (long discourses versus proverbs and parables), emphasis, eschatology (which is emphasized in Mark but deemphasized in John) and the purpose of miracles (which in contrast to the other Gospels in John they're meant to convince people who don't believe).

Ehrman informs us there are also key differences between the apostle Paul and the Gospel writers: concerning the purpose of the Law; why Jesus died; when Jesus became the Son of God; whether God overlooked the ignorance of idolaters; and whether the Roman state is a force of good or evil.

To keep this review of mine short let me briefly summarize the rest of the chapters. In chapter four Ehrman tells us scholars really do not know who wrote the New Testament, except a few letters from Paul for the most part. In chapter five Ehrman discusses what we can actually know about the real Jesus and what he may have said, which isn't much given the criteria historians use to figure out such things. At best Ehrman argues that Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet. And he thinks that as a historian he cannot conclude Jesus arose from the dead because such a conclusion is beyond what tools the historian has at his disposal. Chapter six discusses how we got the Bible. It was a lengthy process from oral tradition to translations, to texts, to canonization among wildly divergent early Christianities all vying to be considered the inheritors of the original Jesus movement. Who invented Christianity then, which is the subject of chapter seven? Christians did, based upon misinterpretations of such texts as the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. Christianity subsequently moved in the direction of a distinct anti-Jewish movement in the hands of Gentile Christians.

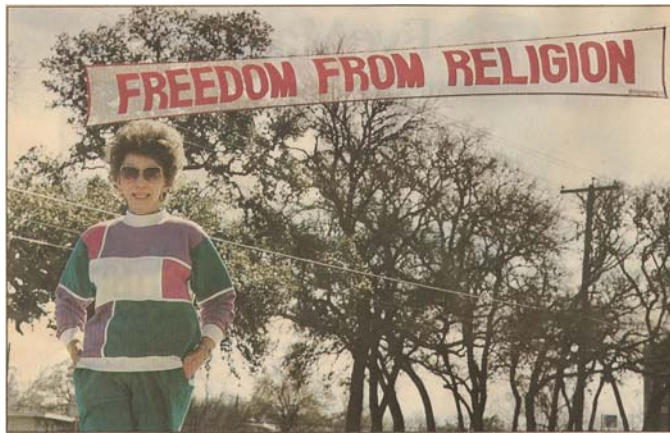
In the final chapter Ehrman disarms the believer, which I think is a very helpful thing to do. He thinks it's still possible to believe despite the problems in the New Testament. And he's right. Although he says that what he's learned about the Bible makes it look like nothing more than a human, not a divine book, and that Christianity is a human, not a divine religion.

Ehrman concludes his book with these words: "It would be impossible...to argue that the Bible is a unified whole, inerrant in all its parts, inspired by God in every way. It can't be that. There are too many divergences, discrepancies, contradictions; too many alternative ways of looking at the same issue, alternatives that often are at odds. The Bible is not a unity, it is a massive plurality. God did not write the Bible, people did." (p. 279).

While this conclusion of his will be disputed, what Ehrman has written must be taken seriously by all Christian believers. The arguments are now out in an easily accessible book. As such, the people in the pew can now understand what Biblical scholars in most seminaries already know but are too timid to teach it in the churches or preach it from the pulpits.

Portrait of an Atheist (Part II)

by Craig Phelon (from 1991 San Antonio Express News Interview)



Mike Simpson, general sales manager at KENS, says he wants to reserve comment on the proposed Freethought commercial until he has investigated the situation further. Simpson is responsible for accepting or rejecting ads for broadcast.

The Freethought Forum and Secular Humanist Association of San Antonio combined have about 100 members. That's obviously small compared to the number of San Antonians who attend churches and synagogues. However, Fahringer says if the organization included all those San Antonians who don't have any particular religious faith, the membership would be substantial.

Freethinkers aren't joiners, she says.

"A freethinker just doesn't want to be boxed in. They just aren't great for belonging and they're not great on action, either."

Fahringer and others who are activists in the name of secular humanism feel they're playing an important role in preserving the American way of life by fending off religion's attempts to control society.

They argue that if the principle of separation of church and state had not been inserted into the U.S. Constitution, America would be a Christian version of Iran or Iraq.

That is, we would be a society in which all behavior is strictly controlled by religious doctrine, minority religions or philosophies are persecuted as heresy, and freedoms of speech and intellectual pursuits are curtailed.

Evidence of increasing attempts by religion, especially fundamentalist Christians, to control the rest of society can be seen regularly in newspaper headlines, she says.

The Religious Right is the major force behind the anti-abortion movement, she says, as well as attempts to curtail National Endowment for the Arts funding for artists who may criticize religion or explore sexual themes.

Religion affects the way our culture views life in many subtle ways, she says. Religions typically involve some sort of suppression of sexuality, which has led to many psychological problems — as natural feelings often conflict with religious teachings.

Religious teachings have been used to justify slavery, suppress women and promote violence and child abuse, she says.

"I lay practically every ill of our society at the foot of the Bible," she says.

"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."

Fahringer answers to any number of different titles for her point of view — atheist, agnostic, secular humanist, etc. — but the title is less important than the fact that she simply doesn't subscribe to a particular religious dogma.

"I've always had a problem with titles or names or categories," she says. "I like the word freethinker the best."

Fahringer has a mountain of paperwork supporting freethinking.

The information arrives at the Magazine in an avalanche of letters, brochures and documents. There's even a cassette titled "Our Thoughts Are Free," containing freethinker songs.

"I bet I've gained 10 pounds today licking stamps," she says. "I just read where they have a tenth of a calorie."

'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.'

— Catherine Fahringer

Judging from the materials, secular humanism covers a wide spectrum of personal opinions. It includes large numbers of people who are simply indifferent to religion, as well as those who believe all organized religions, including Christianity, are based on nothing more than myths.

Continued on the next page ...

Secular humanists take the position that nobody really knows for sure what's out there, Fahringer says.

While there are many religions in the world, there is no universally accepted concrete historical or scientific proof that any one of them is correct, she says.

"Nobody knows anything, really. The big question is still out there."

Adopting a belief system and wishing it were true with all your heart doesn't make it true no matter how many people believe it with you, says Fahringer.

What's more, forcing the mind to adopt a rigid belief system may interfere with an individual's power to reason, she adds.

Religions create intellectual limits, Fahringer says. "They (believers) just have a cutoff point beyond which they cannot go, they cannot think."

Some secular humanists may feel, or think they feel, the presence of some external force, says Fahringer. But if there were such a force existing in nature, why worship it? That's like worshiping gravity — or fire.

"I've felt it, too — a sort of belongingness to nature," she says.

"We (atheists) have our thrilling moments. But we don't get them on our knees in some stuffy old building."

Critics of secular humanism frequently view this philosophy as simply another religion that happens to substitute mankind for a god figure. They say the various issues concerning separation of church and state involve substituting secular-humanist values for religious values.

Fahringer disputes this assertion. Secular humanists don't worship anything or require a belief in anything.

In fact, it is the neutral secular "umbrella" provided by the First Amendment that allows the practice of various religions in our multicultural society, she says.

She believes that both freethinking and freedom of religion are endangered when government representatives stray from secular neutrality. When presidents, mayors and schools call upon citizens to pray, they are promoting religion.

It may seem harmless, but the underlying message is: Your government thinks you ought to believe in a deity — and preferably a Christian one, because that's what the rest of us believe. That's not far from establishing a state religion, she says.

Some of the key issues Fahringer's group and other Freethought organizations work with involve fending off what they see as threats to freedom of thought:

THE MOVEMENT TO REVIVE ORGANIZED SCHOOL PRAYER — "That's another thing that's so misunderstood," she says.

"Everybody thinks prayer was taken out. It was only organized prayer. Anybody who wants to pray at any time is free to do so."

Individual students may pray whenever they want, she says. But a principal, teacher or coach leading students in prayer or telling them it's time to pray or suggesting they ought to pray amounts to state-promoted religion.

When a high-school football coach gathers his players for a moment of prayer before a game, he probably feels he's promoting good moral character in his boys, she says. But he is violating the Constitution, according to current law.

The praying principal or coach is also violating the students' constitutional rights by using his position of authority to impose his religion on a captive audience, she says. The additional message given is that it's OK to ignore the law if you don't agree with it.

From a secular-humanist point of view, the praying coach (or other school authority) sets a bad example in two ways: He violates the Constitution; he tells the students they ought to believe in a myth instead of logic and reason.

"This area is primed and ready and trembling on the brink for some good lawsuit to come along," Fahringer says.

PRISON MINISTRIES — "It's hard to understand how religion got such a hammerlock on patriotism and goodness," Fahringer says.

"These people go to prison and they find Jesus and right away they're going to let them out on parole. I'm really sorry about that, but I don't think that's a reason to let them out to rape or do whatever they did again."

"They're a captive audience in prison, too. They have these ministries that go around, and it looks good on your record (if you go along with them). A prisoner might go along with them because he's afraid if he doesn't, it will look bad to the parole board."

COURTROOM OATHS — O'Hair's organization already has taken the issue of courtroom oaths to the U.S. Supreme Court — and lost.

However, the standard oath that requires jurors and witnesses to say, "so help me God," still rankles atheists. So does the traditional swearing-in ceremony for judges and other public officials.

Fahringer sees a sad irony when judges swear to defend the Constitution as they violate the principle of separation of church and state with their hands on Bibles, pledging oaths to God.

"If that isn't oxymoronic, I'll eat my hat," she says. "He trashes the Constitution as he swears to uphold it. He ought to be impeached right then and there."

[Continued on the next page ...](#)

TAX-SUPPORTED PREACHING — Fahringer says many religious-based charities get money from federal and state governments to manage various programs. But the recipients of this tax-supported aid often must sit through sermons and prayers to get the help they need.

BOY SCOUTS — The Boy Scouts of America faces two lawsuits because the organization requires prospective scout leaders and members to express belief in and show reverence to and serve a higher being.

Caytie Daniell, Dallas-based national spokeswoman for the Boy Scouts, says the BSA, as a private organization, has the right to set its own standards.

“The requirement is very, very broad and virtually every religion is in scouting,” she says. “The BSA does not define God and does not require a specific religious interpretation.”

However, that still presents a problem for the non-religious, especially those who believe all religions are based on myths or superstitions. If they want to join the Boy Scouts, they not only must admit to a belief in a superstition, but also pledge to honor and serve it.

“They have a right to their point of view, but the BSA doesn’t see it that way,” Daniell says.

Fahringer disputes a common assumption that religious people are more moral than the non-religious. In her view, the non-religious are more moral because they take responsibility for their actions rather than depend on someone to tell them what’s right.

“Our standards are such that people who embrace all those idiotic things like talking snakes are saved and pure and those who don’t believe in them, like me, are rotten,” she says.

These and similar issues may seem nit-picking to many, but Fahringer echoes the sentiments of other activists — whether their special concerns are racial discrimination, women’s liberation or gun control: Most freedoms are not suddenly eliminated, but gradually eroded with seemingly harmless policies.

“Every time something happens and nobody makes a fuss, it goes on and sets a precedent,” she says. “Two of the worst things that happened for freethinkers were inserting ‘under God’ in the Pledge of Allegiance and ‘In God we trust’ on our money.”

That happened in the mid-1950s. Now they are brought out- as justification for further violations of the separation of church and state, she says.

Fahringer says her evolution as a freethinker activist took several years and was not based on any faith-shattering incident.

They always say, ‘Oh, you must have had a terrible experience. It turned you against something.’ You can’t turn against something that isn’t there.”

She was born in Utah to a military family and lived in various cities before her family came to San Antonio when she was 12.

She was raised an Episcopalian and remained one — at least in name — until adulthood. She began to question her religion when she became a mother.

She was living in England with her husband, who was in the military and stationed there. Family members said it was her duty to provide religious teaching.

“I was busy coping with how to keep warm. It was plenty cold there,” she says, adding it was also difficult to get to a Sunday school.

“So I went out and got ‘The Golden Book of Bible Stories.’ I thought, ‘Let me refresh my memory as to what the Bible stories are about.’”

“I started reading these stories. And — these are for kids — and I didn’t like what I was reading. I said to my husband, I can’t teach this stuff to my kids.’ I said, ‘I’m nicer than God.’”

“I mean it was, ‘Get out there and punish somebody if they don’t do that or they don’t do this.’ Mean! So that was the end of Sunday school.”

However, Fahringer didn’t become an activist until 1987, after she attended a Freedom From Religion convention in St. Louis. “It seemed so terribly dull when I got back to San Antonio,” she says. “No one was doing anything here (in defense of separation of church and state).”

“So I figured, why not me?”

Fahringer says she realizes her opinions upset a lot of people, but she says it’s not unusual for freethinkers to be in the minority.

She adds that most of civilization’s progress has been due to freethinkers who took a stand against the majority point of view.

She mentions a long list of freethinkers who made major contributions to mankind.

It includes Italian astronomer and physicist Galileo, who was imprisoned by the Inquisition; Thomas Alva Edison; Albert Einstein; Thomas Jefferson; James Madison; Mark Twain; Robert Burns; Bertrand Russell; horticulturist Luther Burbank; American Red Cross founder Clara’ Barton; women’s suffrage leader Elizabeth Cady Stanton; economist John Stuart Mill; and many others.

“Sometimes I feel like Alice looking into the looking glass and everything is not the way it ought to be. It’s all backwards,” Fahringer says.

Of course, the debate will continue over who represents the reality and who represents the mirror’s distorted image until mankind’s big question is finally answered to everyone’s satisfaction.

Meanwhile, Fahringer wants to make sure the great debate includes a few words from freethinkers.

March Events

March 3rd – THCF First Tuesday Lunch

1:00 pm: Meet other Freethinkers at the Texas Hill Country Freethinkers' First Tuesday Lunch (held monthly)

Host: Julie Fisher

No Discussion: "What are some new ways to live greener?"

Yummi Japanese Restaurant
24165 W IH 10 # 221
(by HEB in Leon Springs)

March 11th – THCF Northwest Lunch

1:00 pm - Meet other Freethinkers at the Texas Hill Country Freethinkers' Lunch (held monthly)

Host: Julie Fisher

Discussion Topic: "Reagan: Hero or Horror"

La Fonda Oakhills, 350 Northaven St
(Just off Fredericksburg Rd, north of 410)

March 21st – The Lunch Bunch

11:30 am: Join us for good food before the Meeting

Sarika's Thai Restaurant
4319 Medical Dr (Near Fredericksburg Rd)

March 21st – FACT General Meeting

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

Speaker: Steven Amberg

Associate Professor of Political Science at UTSA

Title of Presentation: "Faith-Based Initiatives"

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

March 28th – FACT Discussion Brunch

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

Host: Jane Tuck

Topic: TBD

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

April Events

April 7th—THCF First Tuesday Lunch

April 15th—THCF Lunch in the Northwest

April 18th—General Meeting

April 25th—FACT Discussion Brunch

March 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				

April 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		

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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.