

THE ATHEIST VOICE

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE METROPLEX ATHEISTS
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MA protests Dallas' NDOP

AMERICAN ATHEISTS

In the past, the chief executive, along with numerous governors, mayors and other public officials have signed proclamations supporting the event which calls for a day of "prayer and humiliation."

"This is an insult to millions of Americans who are Atheists, Freethinkers or other nonbelievers," said Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists. "If people want to pray on their own, that is their right, but government should not be telling people that they ought to pray, or how and when they should do it."

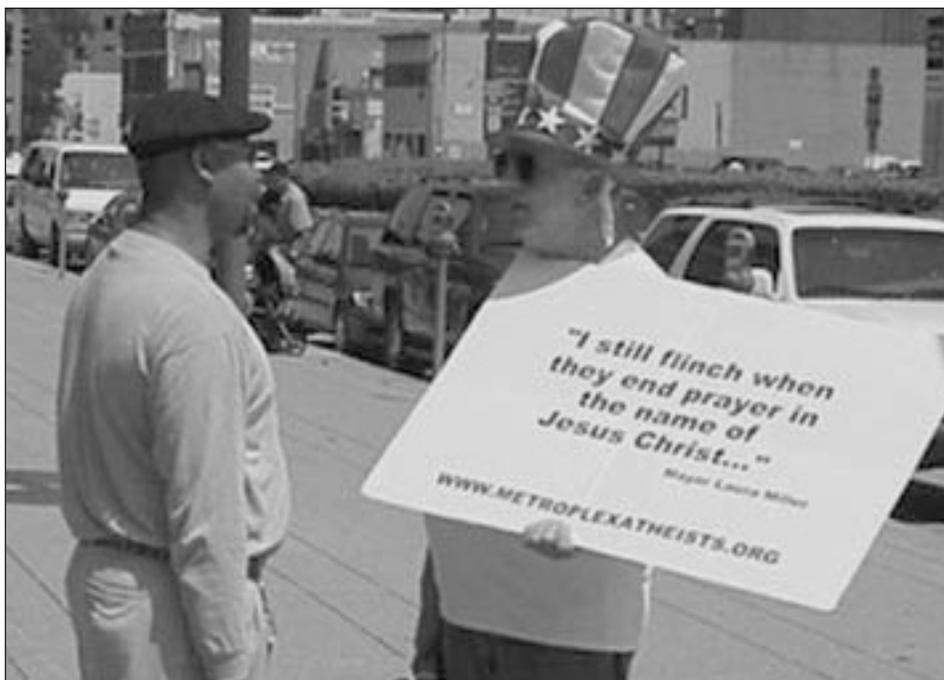


Photo By John Hattan

Our favorite protester Randy Gorman (above and right), along with several Metroplex Atheists Members, attended this year's NDOP at Dallas City Hall. Randy was approached by many attendees questioning his quote from Dallas' mayor.

Johnson said that government endorsement of the National Day of Prayer clearly violates the constitution and puts the state in position of promoting religion. She noted that the NDOP Task Force is headed by Shirley Dobson, wife of right-wing evangelist James Dobson of Focus on the Family.

"This is a divisive fundamentalist movement that assumes that prayer, religiosity and being a good, patriotic American are somehow connected," said Johnson. "It marginalizes anyone who does not wish to pray or express public 'humiliation.'"

Ron Barrier, Communications Director for American Atheists, charged that Mr. Bush and other elected officials who endorse the Day of Prayer have no business issuing government proclamations to promote the event.

"Public resources shouldn't be used to publicize or encourage prayer," said Barrier. "Our President should remember the words attributed to Jesus Christ in the Book of Matthew; 6:5-6:

"And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are; for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets that they may be seen of men But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret..."

"It sounds like this quote could also cover the Oval Office and the steps of the local City Hall," said Mr. Barrier.

Philosophical Tour of Atheism: Part II - Proving a negative and "God"



David Penn
METROPLEX ATHEISTS

"You can't prove a negative" (YCPN) is a familiar challenge to atheists in discussions about whether god exists.

Let's get right to the point: YCPN means that any atheist is an arrogant, a dogmatic believer on the same level as the

lowest fundamentalist, or an untrue statement that god can not be proven to not exist. Not to be unfair myself, I have even heard atheists make the assertion. YCPN is a myth that is easy to buy on the surface. It is a charge that any reasonable person must admit that there might be evidence - as yet undiscovered - that implies the existence of god. As the notion goes, one would have to possess absolute knowledge of the entire universe, including all events in all cultures of the past, or perhaps survey the entire universe to justifiably arrive at the atheist position. YCPN separates the atheists from the agnostics.

Agnostics and religious believers alike will use YCPN to affirm their position: agnostics because they believe that the existence of god cannot be proved one way or another and religious believers because they want to say "you can't prove me wrong." This is a very popular argument, but it falls apart on many different levels, upon analysis. The atheist must consider whether the interlocutor is a believer or an agnostic.

We are really talking about prejudice. YCPN means "you can't prove there is no god." This means there is a burden on the atheist to prove the agnostic or theist wrong, to prove god does not exist. (I will revisit the important issue of the burden of proof later.) It might also mean that there is something about a logical "negative" that is impossible to prove.

Let's check it out proving stuff before we explore the negative thing.

First, YCPN either confuses the difference between deductive and inductive reasoning, or incorrectly assumes that we only "prove" things by deductive reasoning. So, allow me to briefly distinguish these two forms of human reason.

In deductive reasoning, you usually start off with a statement or two, called a premise, and a rule of inference that leads to a conclusion. If the premise(s) is/are true, the conclusion **MUST** be true, if the rule of inference is valid.

Here is where you get your absolute proofs. For example, if the premise "If there is a ball in that box, you can see it" is true, and you in fact can not see the ball, then you must conclude there is no ball in the box, by virtue of a rule called *modus tollens*.

It seems proving a negative is easy: if you can't prove a negative, you can't prove anything. *Modus tollens* is not in dispute, even though it proves a negative. The real-life problem with deductive reasoning is establishing the truth of the premise, which is done by inductive reasoning or confirmation.

If the box belonged to a stage magician trying to trick you, the ball might be hidden in a false bottom, and you might question the truth of the premise. "If there is a ball in the box, you can see it." This would make the conclusion unsound. Advocates of YCPN seem to think that the universe is like a very large container, and god, or evidence of the same, is like something hiding inside. So he is going to punish us later by hiding from us now? Although it looks like there is no god, there might be one in there somewhere, right? Maybe we overlooked this very important being. Not.

Inductive reasoning, when useful, works from particulars to generalizations. The statement "all crows are black" is an example of a conclusion based on inductive reasoning. You define what a crow is, then confirm crow #1 is black, confirm

crow #2 is black, etc. At some point, enough crows are confirmed to be black for some reason, and the conclusion that "all crows - examined or not - are black" becomes justifiable and accepted as "knowing about crows." This is a simplified example for illustration. Of course, there are probably albino crows, but we need only exclude them from the definition of a proper crow as a genetic aberration. Or else, define the number of albino crows. Either way, we could know all about crows, how many are black, and how many are albino. The more crows we examine, the more we know about crows.

Thus we say that we know that all regular crows are black. And we say this without examining all crows in the universe, throughout all of time. Inductive reasoning is science, it is powerful knowledge. It differs from deductive proofs the same way "2 + 2 = 4" differs from engineers building bridges. In a similar way, we don't have to explore the entire universe to find an omnipotent being. Show me an unsprayed day-glow crow, and I'll reconsider god.

Secondly, YCPN incorrectly asserts that atheism presupposes omniscience (having all knowledge). This is a classic argumentative foul called the "straw-man fallacy." Agnostics or believers misrepresent the atheist position; the offender invents a weak resemblance to our atheist position, and easily attacks the straw man. The real concept of atheism is never attacked, but the audience is swayed against us.

As the fallacy goes, knowledge is never absolute (true), and since atheism asserts that there is no god in the entire universe (true, but only positive atheism asserts this, not negative atheism), atheism necessarily and unjustifiably supposes absolute knowledge (untrue). No brand of atheism requires absolute knowledge. Although all atheists believe that absolute knowledge would settle the issue, every atheist believes absolute knowledge is not necessary to not believe in god. This is what sep-

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NOW I SIT ME DOWN IN SCHOOL

Now I sit me down in school
Where praying is against the rule,
For this great nation under God,
Finds public mention of him odd.

Any prayer a class recites
Now violates the Bill of Rights.
Any time my head I bow
Becomes a federal matter now.

Teach us of stars, of pole, and equator
But make no mention of their Creator;
Tell us of exports in Denmark and Sweden
But not a word of what Eve did in Eden.

The law is specific, the law is precise:
Praying out loud is no longer nice;
Praying aloud in a public hall
Upsets believers in nothing at all.

In silence alone can we meditate
And if God gets the credit....great!
This rule, however, has a gimmick in it:
You've got to be finished in less than a minute.

So all I ask is a minute of quiet
If I feel like praying, then maybe I'll try it;
If not, oh Lord, this plea I make,
If I die in school, my soul you'll take!

-Author unknown

Kids, please pause for Muslim Rebecca
who'd like to kneel and pray to Mecca.
Now be quiet while Hare Krishna Jay
intones his mantra in class today.

Let us give time to Mormon Rod
who's ready to become a god.
Catholic kids around the nation
will get their transubstantiation.

Please pause while little Buddhist Kate
takes some time to meditate.
Whoops, looks like our own Shinto Lester
wants to worship his ancestor.

And our little Hindu Ivana
thanks Ganesh for her Nirvana.
And a Scientologist named Peter
would like some time on his E-meter.

OK, kids. You've given voice
to the gods all of your choice.
For the lesson today, I'm going to tell
about long divis. . .oops, there's the bell.

Indeed the parents would object
from kids' prayers that are not "correct".
Because Christian kids will be liable
to find ideas not in the Bible.

Then we'd see the sour grapes
of those theocratic apes
who want to loudly voice the prayers
of any religion, as long as it's theirs.

-John Hattan

Do you know of any Church/State separation violations?

Some things to look for are the posting of the ten commandment in public (government) buildings including public school buildings, city parks, municipal buildings, and libraries.

To voice your concerns, please email the Metroplex Atheist Director:
director@metroplexatheists.org

Journey to Chicago convention filled with adventure

David Penn

METROPLEX ATHEISTS

Indian Lakes Resort, where the convention was held, was in a newly developed area in a suburb called Bloomingdale, about 30 minutes from downtown Chicago. The building was designed as a tribute to Frank Lloyd Wright by one of his students. I don't think there was a single square angle in it, as the design was based on a hexagon. This made navigation a bit of a challenge, especially after spending time at the Cave Bar or the disco downstairs. Another major feature was the two adjacent 18-hole golf courses designed by a top architect.

Linda Sharlow and I took a few days to drive my SUV up through a scenic route through Mississippi in order to visit the home towns of Samuel Clemens and Laura Ingalls Wilder.

We arrived in downtown Chicago Monday around sunset after driving all day. After the initial "ooh and ahh" impression of the skyscrapers, we decided to head out to the suburbs for cheaper lodging, as the reservations at the more expensive resort were not until Thursday. We got on Grand Street and headed out of the central district. I was amazed at the distance we had to travel to get out of town. Chicago is huge! After you get out of the central district, the buildings get old. You see buildings that you would expect to get soon demolished around DFW, but someone keeps these old jewels maintained in Chicago.

Over the next few days, before the convention started, we did all the museums, ate the ethnic food, and attended the play Tony 'N Tina's Wedding. This is a farcical play about the marriage between an overbearing Italian bride and a philandering mafia groom. The play was different in that the audience participated in the play. As the play starts, we were lead into a realistic chapel. Linda and I were on the second row, right behind the mother of the bride, she kept turning around and complaining in a gossipy way about how much of a slut this or that bride's maid is. The audience eventually goes to actually eat in a simulated reception. Even the caterer was an act. The actors get in food fights, ask to dance with the audience members, the priest gets drunk and



Photo By Dave Penn

Larry Darby, Attorney and State Director of Alabama, (background) enjoys the view with fellow atheists aboard a river yacht cruise. Darby was awarded the "Atheist of the Year" for his activism opposing Judge Moore's promotion of the ten-commandments monument on public property.

stumbles around with broken champagne cups under his shirt to make fake breasts.

Then the convention started, and things really got fun. I was lucky to have Linda there. She knew everyone, at least all the cool folks. We checked in late Thursday, and things got underway Friday morning. I won't go into who lectured on what. Lecture content will be published soon in American Atheist magazine.

I would say that the best part of attending a convention is meeting the people that you have heard and seen in the atheist news, and even those that you have not. For a short few days, you are surrounded by folks that do not alienate you for your atheist beliefs. Everyone has something to share and learn. Even the resort employees have to respect you. It was interesting to see golfers, who had just to come to play a few holes, do a double-take at a "Welcome American Atheists" sign – and not really care.

Saturday night, my roommate Keith McCaffety and I attended a 2 hour presentation of videos of various videos of talk shows featuring Madalyn Murray O'Hair as their guest. Keith has recently initiated an American Atheist affiliate group called

Godless Houston.

Phil Donahue had Ms. O'Hair as a guest on his premiere episode, and invited her back. The interviews showed the well spoken, calm brainiac that she was. As Donahue went to the audience for reactions, we viewed a twenty something version of the current American Atheist president Ellen Johnson, backing up Madalyn. Quite a surprise! At that point, I saw the continuity and tradition of American Atheists: the vast difference in time, personalities, and style. Yet the fight goes on. I was proud.

Sunday (Easter) morning, the resort hosted a church group. Folks were carrying bibles around, but I saw no social ugliness.

Later that afternoon, there was a shuttle to a yacht cruise from the Navy Pier, where the Chicago River empties into Lake Michigan. The weather and food were great. Dick Hogan mockingly beat up a silly Easter Bunny costume clown as nearby 4-year old children chuckled. Hobnobbing with American Atheist luminaries like Ellen Johnson and so many others was great, but it was all over. Linda and I took the interstates all the way home at high speeds.

Tampa atheists host electrifying convention

By Mynga Futrell

The Atheist Alliance annual conventions just get better and better. Never before has there been such a sterling lineup of speakers as came to Tampa for the 9th annual meeting, hosted by Atheists of Florida. One particular highlight was Richard Dawkins' honoring of James Randi ("The Amazing Randi") with an award for lifetime contributions to public understanding of science, followed by Randi's own vivacious presentation.

Aided to a high degree by the advanced technology support offered by the host group, this year's meeting seemed to me to generate an overall level of exuberance unmatched by prior yearly gatherings. It was a convention of high "electricity." Many of the speakers not only listened attentively to others' presentations but also mingled informally with attendees. This level of interaction added immensely to the

exhilaration of those who had traveled to Tampa, since they could savor the camaraderie and the dynamism of exchanging ideas with people at the forefront of atheist activism and science.

Behind the scenes of the convention, the Alliance Board of Directors met long hours to make the most of its annual face-to-face opportunity to give direction to the organization. Dedicated directors from member societies as far away as Germany traveled to Tampa to participate in the business of the Alliance. Although 9 p.m. committee meetings were not out of the ordinary, a record was set for the earliest board meeting ever - 6 a.m.!

Since the Alliance has grown rapidly, the Board pursued some organizational restructuring to improve overall efficiency, and it made several key decisions related to AAI's mission. Steps were taken to better reflect a commitment to constructive atheist service worldwide, evident not only

in the newly adopted Alliance tag line (AAI-A Positive Voice for Atheism), but also with the Board's actions to address international concerns. For example, the Board is setting up an International Aid fund to assist positive atheist efforts in countries that confront issues of poverty and health (details to follow in a subsequent report). The Alliance also will contribute regularly to help sustain a stellar example of positive atheist service to humanity (the Atheist Centre of India).

The 2003 Atheist Alliance convention was (according to comments I heard over and over again) a reinvigorating experience for attendees, who will be returning to their locales with new ideas, energy and commitment. People are eager to attend again next year. Although the location remains unconfirmed, the date is a sure thing: "Easter weekend," 2004-surely something to consider putting on your own calendar!

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METROPLEX ATHEISTS

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arates atheists from agnostics. As a matter of fact, there are many atheistic arguments, and omniscience is not a part of any one of them. Atheistic arguments are numerous and complete without supposing omnipotence. Omnipotence is an invention of religious believers, and they can't seem to believe that anyone can live without it. Atheistic arguments should be judged for their own merits, not disqualified by an arbitrary requirement of omniscience.

As a matter of method, the requirement that one must know everything before one can know something is a headlong dive into a radical skepticism that precludes any knowledge whatsoever, including knowledge of god, or even knowledge of oneself.

This is philosophical suicide. Requiring it is impractical. We don't have absolute certainty that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow, because a meteor might strike the earth, but we all set our alarm clocks. It is possible but irrelevant.

Only fools believe something because the opposite can't be proved wrong. Along this same vein, it can't be proven without absolute knowledge that Bugs Bunny doesn't actually exist on some remote car-

toon planet. Do we therefore believe that the Looney Tunes cartoon productions from the last century are the revealed word of god, that only the religious can recognize the hidden truth?

Of course not. No god I could possibly imagine could blame me for not believing in its invisible being. If Bugs Bunny exists, I think he (it?) would reward me for believing in myself, or maybe punish me for believing in a stupid-ass Jesus... it just seems right.

Third, YCPN neglects the classic theistic conceptions of god. We don't usually speak of something which exists without that thing having certain attributes or qualities, and the theistic god is no exception. The god thing is supposed to be so huge, so everywhere, so IN everything, why can't we just see it? Why does the atheist have to prove that this big important thing does not exist?

This seems to support the notion that one needs only check the immediate area instead of the entire universe. God is supposed to make a difference here and now. God's attributes, such as holiness, omnipotence, etc. are the very reason the god is deemed worthy of worship. But if the investigator cannot find this being here on

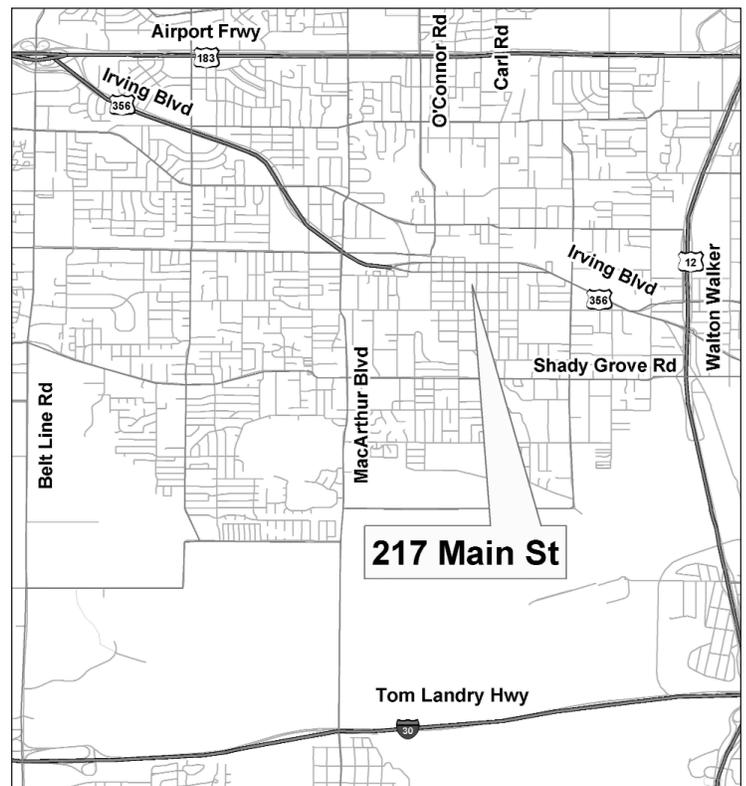
earth when the very definition defines that being as necessarily being here on earth, there seems no reason to look further. A realistic view of the world shows that there is no omnipotent being protecting us from evil or causing good. If the attributes of god are not realized, then the god which supposedly has the attributes does not exist.

Fourth, consider the meaninglessness of the word "god." There is no reason whatsoever to "prove a negative." Civilized humankind has had tens of thousands of years to prove that god exists, yet none is forthcoming. Instead of providing definitions or proofs, religious leaders just dress up in priestly consumes or put on diva shows at funerals, marriages, or wars. Definitions of the elusive god-being are so vague and equivocal, that verification of existence or falsification of nonexistence is impossible. In fact, an examination of the world religions reveals an insurmountable disagreement about the nature of god. No one can prove that there is no "prime mover" or "ground of all being" because the language is meaningless, not because of atheist impotence. The atheist does not need to prove a negative; the theist needs to prove a positive.

METROPLEX ATHEISTS

COME
JOIN
US

EVERY THIRD SUNDAY
1:00 PM – 3:00 PM



UPCOMING EVENTS

REGULAR MEETINGS

J. Gilligans:

What: "My dinner with Atheists," social time with a bunch of heathens.

Date: Every Wednesday

Time: 6:30 PM - 9:00 PM

Place: J. Gilligans Bar & Grill
400 E. Abram Street
Arlington, TX 76010

Regular Monthly Meeting:

What: Meeting to decide general business of the group and to discuss current events.

Date: Third Sunday of the month

Time: 1:00 PM - 3:00 PM

Place: Heritage Park

217 Main St. at Second St.
Irving, TX 75060

MARG:

What: The Metroplex Atheists Reading Group discusses selected books. To find the latest book, visit: www.metroplexatheists.org/read/

Date: Third Sunday of the month

Time: After the regular meeting

Place: Heritage Park
217 Main St. at Second St.
Irving, TX 75060

SPECIAL EVENTS

Infidels Bash:

What: Wild party that takes place of this

month's regular meeting.

Date: June 14

Time: TBA

Place: Dick Hogan's Party Barn
Weatherford, TX

Atheists Meetup Day:

What: Meet with other local Atheists to talk about your beliefs.

Date: May 20

Third Tuesday of the month

Time: 7:00 PM

Place: Scooters Planet
3427 Trinity Mills
Dallas, TX 75287

Do you have a special event?

Submit it to: editor@metroplexatheists.org

May 2003						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
27	28	29	30 J. Gilligan's	1	2	3
4	5	6	7 J. Gilligan's	8	9	10
11	12	13	14 J. Gilligan's	15	16	17
18 Reg. Meeting & MARG	19	20 Atheist Meetup	21 J. Gilligan's	22	23	24
25	26	27	28 J. Gilligan's	29	30	31

June 2003						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4 J. Gilligan's	5	6	7
8	9	10	11 J. Gilligan's	12	13	14 Infidel Bash
15	16	17	18 J. Gilligan's	19	20	21
22	23	24	25 J. Gilligan's	26	27	28
29	30	1	2 J. Gilligan's	3	4	5

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For more information, please visit our website: www.metroplexatheists.org

To submit an article or letter to the editor, please email *The Atheist Voice* Editor: editor@metroplexatheists.org

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Deliver to:

"Because we must. Because we have the call. Because it is nobler to fight for rationality without winning than to give up in the face of continued defeats. Because whatever true progress humanity makes is through the rationality of the occasional individual and because any one individual we may win for the cause may do more for humanity than a hundred thousand who hug superstition to their breasts."

— Isaac Asimov, when asked why he fights religion with no hope for victory

WHY DO WE FIGHT?