

THE ATHEIST VOICE

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TEN COMMANDMENTS

Disputes present Justices with opportunity to clarify law

AMERICANS UNITED

The Supreme Court announced that it will hear two cases dealing with government display of the Ten Commandments, one is from Austin, Texas.

The high court should use the cases to clarify the law and say unequivocally that the state has no business promoting religion, says Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

"Religious symbols belong in houses of worship, not courthouses, city halls and public schools," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United.

Continued Lynn, "If government officials are eager to post something that deals with the foundation of American law, they need look no further than the U.S. Constitution."

The Texas case (*Van Orden v. Perry*) chal-

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ACA

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear the case dealing with the display of the stone Ten-Commandments monument (above) on the Texas State Capitol lawn that was donated to the people of Texas by the Fraternal Order of Eagles.

EDUCATION

FL Appeals Court says vouchers are unconstitutional

AMERICANS UNITED

A state appeals court has struck down Florida's voucher program, holding that it clearly violates a provision of the Florida Constitution by funneling tax money to religious schools.

The 1st District Court of Appeal, sitting as a full panel en banc, ruled Nov. 12 that Gov. Jeb Bush's Florida Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) fails to pass constitutional muster.

"This is the third straight defeat for vouchers in Florida," said Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "Giving tax money to religious schools clearly violates the state constitution, and

court after court has ruled that way. I hope Gov. Bush and state legislators get the message that you can't force Florida taxpayers to support religion."

Americans United is among the organizations supporting the lawsuit challenging the state voucher law. The groups contend that the program violates Article I, Section 3 of the Florida Constitution, often called the "no-aid provision," which bars direct or indirect diversion of tax aid to "any sectarian institution."

The Florida court agreed, declaring that to uphold the program it would have to "ignore both the clear meaning and intent of the text and the unambiguous history of the no-aid provision."

Observed the court, "There is no dispute in this case that state funds are paid to sectarian schools through the OSP vouchers. Thus, we hold the OSP unconstitutional under the no-aid provision to the extent that the OSP authorizes state funds to be paid to sectarian schools."

The court also rejected arguments that the U.S. Constitution's religious freedom provisions mean that the state must provide vouchers. It noted that the U.S. Supreme Court rejected this argument in a ruling earlier this year in the *Locke v. Davey* case.

Florida legislators passed the voucher

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TEN COMMANDMENTS

Does God even have hands?

Deanne Dice

METROPLEX ATHEISTS

The long-standing debate over whether display of the Ten Commandments violates a church/state separation edict has recently moved to the forefront of America's consciousness.

With several cases pending in the Supreme Court - and the political craziness of pre-election pushing and shoving - it seems that everyone has an opinion about the Ten Commandments' place in our public forums. Austin, Texas, is the site of one of the latest debates concerning the legality of displaying the Commandments on public property.

The main point of debate seems to be this: Do the Commandments represent the basis of America's legal system, or are they simply a religious endorsement? Some believe that the Commandments simply represent the basis for our laws, while others see their display as blatant promotion of a popular religion.

In 1971, the courts designed the "Lemon Law" (based on a ruling in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*), which is now used to check the church/state separation validity when questionable items are presented. The Law requires state actions to contain a clearly secular purpose. Applying the "Lemon Law" to the court house in Austin's display of the Ten Commandments helps make their religious purpose obvious:

1. I am the Lord, thy God. You shall not put any other god before me. (Clearly religious.)
2. You shall not take the name of God in vain. (Clearly religious.)
3. You shall not make any graven images of God. (Clearly religious.)
4. You shall not break the Sabbath. (Clearly religious.)

5. You shall not dishonor your parents. (Finally! One that is the basis for a law! Wait a minute... what law says one must respect one's parents?)
6. You shall not murder. (Clearly the basis for a law. Except in wartime. Except in self-defense. Except...)
7. You shall not commit adultery. (Clearly the basis for the law against adultery. The law with which all televangelists and presidents who stray are prosecuted. Or not.)
8. You shall not steal. (All right! One Commandment that is certainly the basis for a law. Too bad it is way down the list at number eight.)
9. You shall not commit perjury. (Of course this is a law. Everyone in Austin who lies is imprisoned using this law. Or not.)
10. You shall not covet. (What law is it again that says we're not allowed to wish we had what our neighbors have?)

So four of the ten are clearly religious; five of the ten are ambiguously legal; one of the ten is clearly the basis for a law. The "Lemon Law" would, then, allow display of Commandments six, eight, and nine. The rest are out.

But, opponents argue, the "laws" of the Commandments were written in God's own hand! In the days of lawlessness and Israelite confusion, apparently God thought that a clearly-written list of rules (as clear as one can write on rocks) would help bring order to the land. The Holy Chisel (pencils probably wouldn't have written well on stone) directly ordered followers to adhere to these rules.

FOLLOWERS. Not everyone. Not everyone in the state of Texas. Not everyone in the United States. Not everyone in the world. The Ten Commandments are for

those who believe in God and those who need direction (or shall we say, who lack the common sense to figure out on their own that stealing and lying and killing are no-no's).

Unless the Supreme Court is ready to state emphatically (and prove) that everyone in Texas is a follower of God, the Commandments do not apply to the entire public.

Apparently agreeing with the Commandments' failure to pass the "Lemon Law," Thomas Van Orden, a former criminal defense lawyer and a current citizen of Austin, brought suit against the state of Texas (specifically against Governor Rich Perry).

Two years ago the courts ruled against him, but Van Orden refused to concede. After the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against him, Van Orden asked the Supreme Court to consider the case. The Court accepted the challenge. Early next year, the justices will attempt to tackle the question of whether the Ten Commandments' display on the Capitol grounds is a religious endorsement or a secular statement of the basis of today's laws.

Let's hope that the Supreme Court objectively considers the Commandments and their place in history. In the history of religion, that is. After all, if the believers' God wrote the Commandments himself - assuming that he actually HAS hands - he can clap in delight that his followers, unable to use their own minds, will continue to look to the Commandments for instruction.

As far as the rest of the citizens of Texas, we'll stick to the REAL laws ... those of simple human decency, logic, and the common sense required to live in a free society.

Deanne Dice is an educator and parent in the metroplex, and she is a new contributor to The Atheist Voice.

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

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EDUCATION

Federal court deals blow to school vouchers

AMERICANS UNITED

A federal appeals court has rejected arguments that a Maine education law must be expanded to include funding for private religious schools.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State had filed a friend-of-the-court-brief with the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, urging it to reject arguments that the U.S. Constitution requires Maine to fund private religious schools in the same manner it funds secular schools.

“This is another blow to voucher advocates who argue that the government is constitutionally required to fund religious schools,” said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. “The courts have consistently rejected these backdoor voucher schemes.”

The Maine law under challenge provides tuition for students to attend any school in districts that do not have their own public

schools. But the law bars school districts from paying tuition to any private religious school. Parents in Minot County who chose to send their children to a Catholic school sued the state, arguing the law unconstitutionally discriminated against them because of their religious beliefs.

The 1st Circuit ruled Oct. 22 in *Eulitt v. Maine* that the state had legitimate “interests in concentrating limited state funds on its goal of providing secular education, avoiding entanglement, and allaying concerns about accountability that undoubtedly would accompany state oversight of parochial schools’ curricula and policies.”

The appeals court cited in its decision a 2004 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, which affirmed that state government may refuse to provide funding to religious schools to protect church-state separation.

In that decision, *Locke v. Davey*, the justices ruled that states couldn’t be required to extend scholarship aid to college students training to become members of the clergy.

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HAPPY HOLLY DAYS

Thanksgiving Traditions

Mister Thorne
GUEST COLUMNIST

Yanks across the U.S. (and many scattered about the world) celebrated the uniquely Yankee tradition of Thanksgiving.

Those who attended public school before under God was added to the Pledge of Allegiance were taught that Thanksgiving was started by the Pilgrims: those people who took the Mayflower to Massachusetts in search of religious freedom.

Textbooks used to tell the story of how the Pilgrims were literally starving to death during their first Winter in their New World. In the Spring, the friendly Indians came along and showed them how to grow enough food to survive the next Winter.

To thank the Indians for their help, the Pilgrims invited them to a feast in the Fall.

Before under God was added to the Pledge, school children were taught that the Pilgrims were good people. They were Protestants, and they were being persecuted by Catholics back in England, and so they set off for the New World to escape the evils of the Old One. They arrived in the dead of Winter, after a hard journey.

In the Spring, they came to realize that one more Winter in this place, and they'd all be dead if they didn't figure out how to farm this land. They'd be out of food. As they were building their settlement at Plymouth, as they were thinking hard about food, the Pilgrims were amazed to see one of the natives – a fellow named Samoset – walk right into the settlement and greet them in English!

He'd learned English from explorers and traders he'd met along the coast over the past so many years. But his English wasn't all that good, and so Samoset went to fetch another native who could speak it much better. That was a fellow named Squanto.

Squanto turned out to be the Pilgrims' Saviour. They'd been so worried about how they were going to grow enough food just to survive the fair season, much less stock up for the Winter. Squanto taught them what they needed to know: how to tap maple trees; how to grow corn; how to



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use fish for fertilizer. He showed them around this unfamiliar New World.

Fantastic! When the next winter was well on its way, the Pilgrims had plenty of food. In fact, they had more than they could store.

They asked Squanto to invite his friends to come and celebrate with them. That was the first Thanksgiving celebration, and that's why we celebrate Thanksgiving to this day: to give thanks for having food to spare. That's what those old textbooks said.

Ever since under God was added to the Pledge, Thanksgiving has been under attack. There are those who claim those old textbooks had it all wrong. The Pilgrims didn't thank the Indians for their help, they slaughtered them.

"Wait a minute!" say some, some who learned from those old textbooks. "Fact is, Squanto's real name was Tisquantum, and some Old World sailors came along and snatched him up, the way you snatch a leaf from a tree. They took him back to their world and sold him as a slave, and then some Catholic priests did this forced-religious-conversion thing to the poor guy. After that, some explorer took him back to his world, but only so he could be an interpreter.

"Yes, that explorer freed Tisquantum, but everyone else in his tribe was dead by then. They all died of smallpox imported from Europe.

So, poor Tisquantum, he had to go live with this other tribe: Samoset's tribe. And those Pilgrims would certainly have not made it were it not for Tisquantum and his willingness to help them, to help them despite how he'd been mistreated by folks who looked an awful lot like these Pilgrims.

"And did you know that the very first official Thanksgiving Day proclamation honored the massacre of a whole tribe of Indians? And if that's what happened, then that's what should be in the history books in our schools. There's no need to white-wash how the U.S. got its start."

Of course, both the old textbooks and the new ones discuss the reasons the Pilgrims came here to begin with: to escape religious persecution. But the new textbooks say that as soon as the Pilgrims got here, they implemented their own system of religious persecution: burning witches and such.

The old textbooks didn't talk about that too much. They were meant to help instill patriotism, and an abiding belief in the Postulate of the Puritans: Holy Scripture is the foundation of church and nation. This was a nation under God, and there are many who would like to see it become that again.

Mister Thorne is a writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. For information about him, visit www.misterthorne.org.

TEN COMMANDMENTS

"Roy's Rock" hits bottom

Jeremy Leaming

AMERICANS UNITED

After months of traveling around the country on the back of a flat-bed truck, former Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore's Ten Commandments monument finally reached its ultimate destination: a rally on the National Mall in the heart of Washington, D.C.

The event, which reportedly cost more than \$1 million to stage, was organized by Bishop John Gimenez, a longtime associate of Pat Robertson, and a group calling itself American Veterans for Domestic Defense.

Starting at 6 a.m., supporters gathered around an enormous stage to pray and fast (although event vendors were selling food) in the hopes of stopping the "severe moral decline" tearing apart America.

Organizers had expected 40,000 to 50,000 attendees, but by 9 this morning it appeared that only a few hundred to a thousand had appeared. Web sites and materials promoting the event had heavily played up the appearance of Moore's two-and-a-half ton monument.

Moore and his rock were the center of the Religious Right universe throughout much of 2003, when he stubbornly resisted an order from a federal judge to remove the religious display from state property. Moore's defiance resulted in his removal from the state high court.

Those who turned out to gaze at the monument had to work hard to find it. Event staff seemed unaware that the rock was even there.



Americans United

The former Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore's once famous rock bearing an inscription of the Ten-Commandments is shown resting on a flatbed trailer near the portable restrooms during a recent rally in Washington, D.C.

Finally, a man staffing a press tent pointed to the back of the crowd, off to the far-side of Mall, past a row of portable toilets and declared, "It's over there."

Sure enough, this monument, the source of strong debate and fiery rhetoric, had found its way to the periphery of the rally. As families and small groups posed for a photograph next to the monument, a litany of speeches from the stage far behind demanded that fundamentalist Christianity serve as the basis for U.S. public policy.

Once a focus of passion, "Roy's rock" now rested, largely neglected, a sideshow to an extreme Religious Right gathering.



TEMPTED?
www.metroplexatheists.org

ASK-AN-ATHEIST

How can Atheists be ethical without God?

The assumption that one needs a God to be ethical is based on the belief that human beings are innately “sinful” and predisposed to destruction, and therefore we need a God to keep us in line, doling out rewards for good behavior and punishments for bad behavior. This belief is based on some faulty justifications.

Are “good” things good only because God says they are? Are “bad” things bad only because God says they are? Or does God have reasons for calling things good and bad? If he doesn't have reasons, then all God is doing is handing out commands to be followed blindly, and his judgments as to what's good or bad are entirely arbitrary. God could just as easily say that it's moral to blow up buildings, and believers would be obliged to accept that. Can one really base a sound system of ethics on nothing but blind obedience to rules?

On the other hand, if God does have reasons for why he calls things good or bad, then any apologist defending the notion of “no morality without God” must demonstrate that it would be impossible for anyone BUT God to discern those reasons. (Which seems to me impossible.) If the reasons for things being good or bad are comprehensible to anyone of a rational mind, who knows how to evaluate the circumstances he finds himself in, then one can conclude that God is not necessary for the rational person's understanding of ethical behavior.

I have often heard Christians say things like, “If there's no God, what's to stop me from just going out and killing people right now?” That they utterly fail to comprehend the practical consequences to the real world, their own lives, and the lives of the people around them, of such actions, should be sufficient to demonstrate that such Christians are, ethically speaking, in a state of arrested development. They resemble a child, not caring about the consequences of their

actions to others unless they have divine parental punishment to fear. If that punishment isn't there to be feared, they see no reason to act in a mature manner. Thus a system of morals that is founded on nothing but the placation of an invisible “parent” is shown to be damaging to individual development and maturation. Secular ethics, rooted in reason, is demonstrably superior.

–M.W.

Why do you need god to be ethical?

Maybe we just want what's best for humanity.

–D.W.

Very simply, it's evolved into us. Since long before recorded history, the evolutionary survival-vector strongly favored interdependence on other humans. People who can't get along with others don't fare as well as those who do. It's the case today, and it was the case even more strongly in the past.

In other words, the reason that I find unethical behavior repugnant is because I'm the end-result of a few thousand generations of tribes and societies that got along..

–J.H.

Long after fish first crawled out of the sea, and men and woman stood upright for the first time, people have been good and evil. They don't need a god to install their hearts with morals.

A woman I used to work with once told me that I was one of the most moral people she ever knew. Not bad, considering she was a devout Catholic and she knew I was atheist!

I tell people that we atheists are more moral than Christians. We are good because it is the right thing to do, not because we fear a loving god who will send us into the fires of hell for all eternity

just because we didn't get down on our knees and worship it.

Where do atheists find a standard of ethics? I believe the laws of our society are a good place to start. Sympathy for others is a good guide. And finally, Confucius' Silver Rule makes sense -- “Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you.” He said that more than 500 years before the biblical Jesus was allegedly born.

–WILLIAM MCEWEN

The same way everyone else does. Since there are no gods, everyone's moral and ethical guidelines come from the same place: societal standards and their own judgment about equality and fair play..

–R.C.

For any given set of rules, each rule either has valid, real-world reasons behind it, or it doesn't. For rules with valid reasons, these reasons alone are sufficient to justify the rule, by definition. For those with no valid reasons, the rule is arbitrary and unnecessary. Robust rule sets are bound to contain a few self-contradictions, in which case the rules must be supplemented by rational deliberation, anyway. Thinking and behaving rationally is always superior to following any particular set of ethical rules, independent of who or what codifies those rules. Reason-based ethical systems leave plenty of room for sometimes-necessary civil disobedience, whereas authority-based systems inherently do not.

Our cognitive and social evolution has provided us with the capacity to recognize self-awareness in others, but the mechanism is not yet particularly well-refined. We anthropomorphize with wild abandon in our everyday thoughts and speech patterns, tending to

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Are you searching for Atheists in the metroplex?

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SPECIAL REVIEW

Saving souls or milking wallets? A Report from Hell (House)

William McEwen
METROPLEX ATHEISTS

I visited HellHouse in October. It's an annual Halloween event put on by Trinity Church of Cedar Hill, and it's an impressive moneymaker. According to the church's Web site, HellHouse attracts more than 10,000 visitors every year, which equals more than \$90,000 income for the church.

I arrive on a Saturday just after 7 p.m. There's a long line to purchase tickets. The church group in front of me starts yelling and making noise. A Cedar Hill police officer walks over. "Quiet down, quiet down," he tells them.

I'm curious about the need for cops at such a holy roller event. "I'm surprised to see a police officer here," I tell him. "How bad can it get?"

He doesn't answer immediately. He looks away then says, "Oh, they can get pretty loud." I sense he has much more to tell.

I finally reach the box office, pay nine bucks, and go to the next line. I look at my ticket. A warning on the ticket says:

YOU have been to a haunted house, but YOU have never been to HELL

WARNING! By voluntarily going through HellHouse, you will see...

Live gunfire, suicide, blood, strobes, drug use, death and HELL

Anyone afraid of dark, or enclosed areas should notify the tour guide BEFORE the tour ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK

On the other side of the ticket, ooh! A coupon for a free "snack pack" at Chicken Express (with purchase of snack pack).

I wish I'd brought more to read. My wait in line will be very long. During that time, surrounded by servants of the almighty, I observe a lot.

The majority of the thousands in line are teens in church groups. LOUD teens. One girl behind me yells, "CHRISTY, BUY ME A GLOW STICK!" I have no idea where Christy is, and I think she doesn't either. My ears eventually stop ringing.

Two teen couples are in line a little ahead of me. One girl yells "LEATHER PANTS!" and then both girls scream. They keep doing this. I have no idea why.



William McEwen

Trinity Ministries has produced fourteen years of spiritual scare tactics known as *Hellhouse*, where inside a young actress eagerly sacrifices herself to Satan. The house is used a ministry tool for the unchurched.

There are only a handful of adults present. A few teens use the unsupervised time away from home as an opportunity to make out. And only one teen - Allison, a brunette wearing a sweater, a white skirt, and saddle shoes - is smoking. She looks about 15. Her boyfriend is annoying, and unfortunately, in line behind me the entire time. He never stops yakking, and his nervous laugh punctuates every inane comment. He is a clean-cut kid, with a large tattoo on his right arm of a woman holding a sword. I wonder if he's read Leviticus 19:28: "Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print or tattoo any marks upon you. I am the Lord!"

After a couple of hours, I think, enough! I don't want to wait anymore. I seriously consider walking back to my car and driving home without experiencing HellHouse. Then I see the kids.

The first is a happy girl, riding on her father's shoulders. She's about four years old. She has dark hair and a sweet, precious face. She takes her glow-necklace from her neck, and swings it around above

her head. Then she puts it around her neck again. She is happy. Laughing.

Then I see a young mom holding a boy, about a year old. Alongside her is her daughter, about six years old.

Oh, man, I think. These kids are going to tour HellHouse. I decide to stay and see HellHouse for myself. Because if it is what I expect, these kids have no business being here. Out of the thousands of Christians waiting to get in, and in spite of all the religious adults in charge of HellHouse, there is only one person present who cares about these kids. Me.

Finally, I reach the front of the line. It's been three and a half hours. A bunch of us hop onto a wagon and ride through the woods to HellHouse. A couple of the young women in our group are already screaming. We finally arrive at HellHouse, which is actually a big trailer. There we stand in another line.

After another 20 minutes, we enter. I'm at the end of the line, which is a disadvantage.

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Hell – From page 7

tage. I can't see much. First we stand in a hallway and watch a video of a man dressed as a cop welcoming us.

Then we go into the next room and watch another video. It shows a lot of violent images, including homemade stuff that is childishly amateurish.

Then, into room three, which is a live action short play by the worst actors imaginable. The scene is a classroom where kids are being held hostage. An out of control teen, dressed in camouflage, is swinging a gun around and yelling. He's done his best to grow facial hair for the role. I'm not sure which is worse: the script or the acting.

I want to tell the gunman to turn his performance down 25 clicks, and to switch to a non-sugar breakfast cereal. The performance is so over the top and awful that I have to suppress my laughter. The good lord bestowed none of them with even a whit of acting talent.

I still can't see much, because I'm at the back and our group is too large for everyone to fit into the room. In fact, I'm still in the TV room, and the next group is filing in. "Please, can I get in?" I ask the people ahead of me. A tall blond teen just looks at me. No one moves.

After a lot of yelling and crying by the actors, the lights go out. Guns fire. A strobe light flickers. Show's over. Into room three we go.

Another live performance, starring a blond girl who worships the devil. She climbs on top of a table and lies down to sacrifice herself to Satan. My lack of a good view is beginning to anger me. Behind me is a short ghoul, a girl who works there.

"I can't see anything," I plead. "There are too many people in here."

She yells at the group, very loudly: "KNEEL DOWN IN FRONT! PEOPLE IN FRONT GET DOWN!"

"Wow, you're the scariest person here!" I tell her, echoes of her shrill voice still piercing my eardrum.

"SHUT UP!" she yells at me in her squeaky voice.

"What?" I ask, incredulously.

"I said shut up!"

"What's your name?" I ask.

She says something like: "Bhdenpkjion."

"Bernice?" I say.

"No! Bfrmjuirhhp!" she says.

"I still didn't get it."

Then she spells it out. I think she said "B-e-r-n-e-a," but I'm probably wrong.

"Do you have a speech impediment?"

"No, I just can't talk through this mask."

"Anyway I just want to know who to complain about."

She bursts into tears and starts wailing.

The group leaves for the next room, but one of the spectators stays behind to comfort Bjdejnemn.

We settle into room four. A man approaches me and says, "I need to talk with you a second."

We walk down the hall.

"I've had a complaint that you are smoking a cigarette and being rude to our staff."

I explain I've never smoked in my life, and that his employee told me to shut up.

"It's been a tough day for them," he offers. "A lot of people have been giving them a bad time tonight."

Small wonder! I feel like saying, guy, this is so lame you should expect it! Instead, I say, "I'd like to leave. I haven't been able to see a thing because you're letting too many people in at a time. This has been a waste. I want to leave now, and I want my money back."

I learn his name is George, pronounced hor-hay, and he takes me to another trailer. He is polite but powerless. He goes into the trailer, and sends out a man named Bill. I explain why I want my money back. Bill says no way.

"If you choose not to go through the house, then that's your decision. We won't refund your money."

"I absolutely chose to go through," I insist. "I paid nine dollars and waited in line more than three hours. But I was unable to see anything, because I was at the back of the group. You're letting too many people in at a time."

Bill is firm. Tough luck, guy, no refunds. That's the way it's done around here. Trinity Church of Cedar Hill didn't get where it is today - a bunch of buildings, a private school, and HellHouse - by giving people their money back.

"OK, just point me to the parking lot, and I'll go home."

(You're driven to HellHouse, but you have to walk back to where you started.)

"It's straight back where those lights are."

I walk off after saying, "You'll be hearing from me!"

I walk up to the ticket counter. Six or seven sympathetic women are there. I repeat my story and ask who I should contact to complain and try to get my money back. They agree it's a guy named Greg Liles. Then one of the women opens a box and hands me nine bucks. Finally, some Christian compassion!

Driving home, I begin writing this article in my head. It's always fun to meet the Christian god's servants up close. It's rarely a disappointment. I'm chomping at the bit to get home and put it all down on paper.

But I'm struggling to figure out the point of HellHouse. The Trinity Church's Web site says:

This presentation is a bold, no-nonsense approach to presenting the Gospel (sic) to a Gospel (sic) hardened, obstinate generation of self-righteous, arrogant hypocrites. You will only receive salvation in confessing your sins, repenting of them and trusting Christ as your LORD and SAVIOR! Do it now before its (sic) too late!

Oh? So the 10,000 people who visit HellHouse every year are obstinate, self-righteous, arrogant hypocrites?

HellHouse is a fundraiser. It's about making money, not saving souls. HellHouse is a business that appeals to teens' appetite for gratuitous entertainment. The church is going for the Southpark crowd, which is a sound business decision. No one ever went broke providing titillating entertainment for teens. But will the church leadership admit - or here's a better word, confess - that HellHouse has no more merit than, say, Baywatch or a Russ Meyer film? Who, exactly, are the hypocrites here?

I can't shake the image of those sweet children, and the nightmares they will be having over the next few weeks.

I saw only a portion of HellHouse, but it was clearly adult entertainment. Trinity Church of Cedar Hill is given a clear pass - and indeed, a pat on the back - because the disturbed people behind it all act under the guise of Christianity and spreading their god's love. And church members are busy counting the money, grinning ear to ear.

William McEwen is a photographer and writer, and he is a contributor to The Atheist Voice.

Nuts in the news

Rushville, OH

A High School junior and his mother are upset over the student receiving an in-school-suspension for saying Jesus during school. The superintendent said a student can be disciplined for using the word Jesus during school because the word can be deemed "disruptive."

James Boring said he was talking with a friend during study hall. James said his friend mentioned how many times she attends church throughout the week. That's when James said he replied, "Jesus," meaning "wow or whoa that's a lot." He said the teacher heard the comment and told him he couldn't say anything like that in her class. "Anytime you say (Jesus), the teacher gets mad about it," James said.

Amsterdam, Holland

Theo van Gogh, descendant of the famed 19th century painter, was shot and stabbed to death. Mr. van Gogh had received death threats after the broadcast of his TV film, "Submission.". Mr. van Gogh has criticized the conservative Muslim clergy for perpetuating views that are anti-women and anti-homosexual. The 10-minute film presented the stories of four women who, while saying their prayers, describe to God the abuse they have suffered at the hands of the men in their lives. The actresses have Koranic verses dealing with women written on their bare skin, and some have traces of lashings painted on their bodies. Mr. van Gogh also published a book titled "Allah Knows Better," a scathing critique of Islamic militants and clergy.

Orange County, CA

When Bishop Tod D. Brown became the head of Orange County's 1.2 million Catholics in 1998, he abandoned the Church's millennia-old practice of housing priests in rectories on parish grounds and began housing in bungalows, beach side

mansions and other high-class abodes featuring three-car garages, walk-in closets and in-ground spas. This is the same diocese currently pleading poverty in explaining why it can't reach a settlement with sex-abuse victims.

Dansoman, Accra

Hundreds of people have made a pilgrimage to the Margaret Mary Catholic Church to catch a glimpse of the image of Jesus Christ. The image was said to have suddenly appeared on the rocks at the church's Grotto (the sacred place of worship).

Due to the large crowd that arrived, the church authorities had to call in the police to ensure order. Some tried to touch the image but police would not allow them. Others dropped money in front of the statue of Mother Mary, which is mounted at the entrance.

Taylor, MI

A 49-year-old man said he'd just blasted a man with a revolver and a shotgun because the man said he didn't believe in God. The dispatcher said the alleged shooter told him he'd just shot "the devil himself" and was still armed and standing over the body of the 62-year-old victim "in case he moved."

"I want to make sure he's gone," the alleged shooter told the dispatcher. The dispatcher asked how many times he shot the victim. "Hopefully enough," was the suspect's reply.

At the police station, the suspect commented that he believed there is a God.

Then, looking at the floor, he seemed to have second thoughts: "Maybe there's not," he said.

Taipei, Taiwan

A man leaped into a lion's den at a Taipei Zoo to try to convert lions to Christianity. "Jesus will save you!" the man shouted at two African lions.

One large male with a shaggy mane bit the man in his right leg before zoo workers drove it off with water hoses and tranquilizer guns. Newspapers said that the lions had been fed earlier; otherwise the man might have been more seriously injured. "He took this dangerous action today because he imagined he heard voices," psychiatrist Teng Hui-wen said.



Chucandiro, Mexico

Churchgoers in a central Mexican town have been enraged by the sacking of their Roman Catholic priest, known for tucking a shiny pistol under his robe.

They chained shut the church to demand the reinstatement of Father Alfredo Gallejos, who has earned the nickname "Padre Pistolas". "We have closed the church with chains and that's how it will stay until Father Alfredo comes back," a protester, Gilberto Moron was quoting as saying.

"He has united us as a people," said Mr Moron, adding locals would accept no other priest. They say he has helped the marginalized and raised money for roads and hospital projects.

Are you searching for Atheists on the internet?

Join in the discussions at the DFW Atheist Talk group.
groups.yahoo.com/group/DFWatheistTalk/

RATIONALLY SPEAKING

Abortion, a philosophical approach

I have often remarked in this column that philosophy gets an unfair bad wrap on the ground that it doesn't solve problems. Indeed, the point of philosophy is more to clarify concepts, ideas, and their consequences, then to solve practical issues.

It would seem that clarifying things isn't much of a goal if in turn it doesn't help us make some progress. So, let us consider one particularly sensitive debate - the one about the very idea of abortion - where philosophy, by clarifying our thoughts, can help reasonable people come to a compromise (philosophy can do nothing for unreasonable people, so if

you are among those who scream "murder!" at the thought of someone masturbating, get a life, and while you're at it, make a point of watching Monty Python's *Meaning of Life*).

Much of the debate on abortion hinges upon what seems to be a scientific question: when does a fertilized egg become a human being? Of course, the answer cannot be entirely scientific, since it depends in part on objective facts about the biology of human development, and in part on what we mean by "human being."

Which is where philosophy comes into play. Does a fetus become a human being when the heart starts beating? When there is a recognizable central nervous system? When it can react to external stimuli? When it can feel pain? Any of those answers would put the boundary between unacceptable and acceptable abortion practices at different times during pregnancy, but it seems rather arbitrary to pick one of these developmental milestones and use it as a universal yardstick for moral decisions.

After all, many other animals have a nervous system, a heartbeat, respond to external stimuli, and can feel pain, but most of us (vegetarians excluded - but most abortion opponents included) don't

seem to have too many qualms about killing such animals.

No, the crucial point must focus on something else that characterizes human beings.



Dr. Massimo
Pigliucci
ATHEIST ALLIANCE

Plenty of philosophers, for example Julian Baggini (in his excellent collection *Making Sense: Philosophy Behind the Headlines*) have suggested that the important facts in the debate on abortion (and the parallel one on euthanasia) are not found in the biology of humans, but rather in our (philosophical) concept of personhood. In other words, some of us think a fetus should be protected because it is becoming a person, i.e. an entity that can eventually feel not just pain, but suffering; that can

have not just the urge to have sex and reproduce, but may fall in love; a being that could one day write a sonnet, a song, or a philosophical essay.

If the problem is actual or potential personhood, not the developmental biology of our particular species of primates, then we have moved from biology to philosophy, a much more tricky terrain to navigate. Being a person is tightly linked to having the ability to lay down and recover memories (which make up our "identity" as a person), as well as to experience emotions (like love and suffering) and not just feelings (like sexual urge and pain).

These characteristics are in turn dependent on being a member of a society, interacting with others, communicating one's thoughts and receiving and understanding information about other people's thoughts and emotions. Yes, all of this is also a matter of biology (after all, these things are made possible only by the presence of certain biological essentials, like a functional body, and especially a complex brain), but taken together they mean that personhood is most of all a question of psychology and sociology.

The problem is that there are plenty of

circumstances in which a human being is not, in fact, a person. Fetuses are not persons, and neither are people who survive in a vegetative state induced by a coma. Other cases are more difficult to determine, but one can make a reasonable argument that very young children are only on their way to become persons, while patients affected by advanced stages of some mental diseases like Alzheimer are well on their way out of full personhood. So, while there is very little question that by performing an abortion we are in fact killing a biological being that belongs to the human species, it is an entirely different - and much more difficult to defend - proposition to say that we are killing a person.

Abortion opponents may shrug all of this philosophical quibbling as irrelevant on the ground that the procedure - at whatever stage it is practiced - kills a potential person. But this is a rather odd argument, with far reaching consequences that should be seriously considered by whoever proposes it. For example, the mass of cells in question will become a person only if many conditions other than biological development are fulfilled, including being raised in a proper physical, psychological and social environment.

It is ironic, therefore, that we spend so much energy debating abortion while most of us are much less passionate about more apparently mundane issues such as, say, health care and education for all those non-aborted fetuses.

Even more radically, if a fertilized egg is a potential person, so is every single unfertilized one, and every sperm as well. After all, the egg or sperm only needs a gamete of the opposite type to begin the developmental process that will lead to the generation of another person. I suppose that is why the most rabid religious fundamentalists (including the current Pope) are against masturbation or sex that doesn't have the goal of reproduction. But it is hard to see

Continued on page 12

Disputes – From page 1

lenges the display of a six-foot-tall Ten Commandments monument on the state capitol grounds in Austin. The monument was donated by the Fraternal Order of the Eagles and has been standing since 1961. It is displayed in an area that includes other monuments.

The Kentucky case (*McCreary County v. ACLU*) deals with much more recent Ten Commandments displays at courthouses in McCreary and Pulaski Counties. In those counties, officials erected framed copies of the Ten Commandments and later added other documents only after federal courts declared the commandments posting unconstitutional. The new displays were also struck down.

Lynn said the Ten Commandments is an important religious code to many but denied that it is the basis of U.S. law, as Religious Right groups frequently claim.

“Many of the commandments address religious and moral decrees, not legal mandates,” he noted. “For example, it’s not illegal to worship false gods or fail to honor the Sabbath. The government operates under the Constitution, not religious law.”



Metroplex Atheist

Members of Metroplex Atheist visited Austin in a show of solidarity in the fight to remove monuments such as the one erected on the Texas State Capital Mall. (From left to right) Shelly Hattan, John Hattan, Rodney Florence, and Randy Gorman are taking part in the Respect our Constitution Rally.

Iraq:
 Brian McIntosh (Ret), USMC
 Shawn Ruzek, USMC

WWII & Korea:
 James Hardwick (Ret), Navy

To the “Atheists in foxholes”
 proudly serving the United States:

Thank you for your unselfish
 sacrifice so that we may
 all live in a safer world.

Abortion – From page 10

what these people could do to avoid the natural “waste” of unutilized human eggs. Should we explant them from every woman and fertilize them artificially? If your intuitive answer was “no,” and yet you are against all types of abortion, you may want to consider the consistency of your philosophy.

Do I have a better and clearer solution to offer that can help us settle the abortion debate once and for all? No, as I acknowledged at the beginning, that isn't the point of a philosophical discussion.

Quite the opposite, I hope that people reading this column will feel a bit less sure of their own positions because they have understood that the issue is much more complex and difficult to settle than a simple slogan, or even an introductory course on human developmental biology, allow. And please do check out that Monty Python movie I mentioned in the beginning.

Dr. Pigliucci is an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, where he teaches ecology and evolutionary biology. For more information visit: www.rationallyspeaking.org.

NEWS

Robertson roils Israel

Jeremy Leaming
AMERICANS UNITED

Not content with mucking up American politics, TV evangelist Pat Robertson has created a stir in Israel. On his 40th visit to the country, Robertson used a 40-minute speech to encourage Jews to accept Jesus as their messiah.

Robertson declared that Jews need to begin to cry out for their messiah. "I've met wonderful Jews in Siberia, Brazil, the United States, here in Jerusalem, who are all saying 'Yes, Jesus, you are our messiah,'" he said.

The speech stole the spotlight from a march organized by Christian Zionist groups to express their support for Israel. In recent years, the Religious Right has reached out to Israel in support of its policies. His speech reinforces fears in the Jewish

community that fundamentalist Christian support for Israel is merely an evangelistic effort to convert Jews.

Although Robertson denies sharing his controversial views with Israeli politicians, his public declaration offended both Israeli and American Jewry. Shortly after the tirade, several Israeli lawmakers expressed their dismay at Robertson's remarks.

The Forward reported that the co-chair of the Knesset Christian Allies Caucus, Yuri Shtern of the right-wing National Union Party, said he was "very upset" with Robertson. "I had hoped a leader of [Robertson's] standing accepted the continuing existence of the Jewish people as part of God's plan," said Shtern, who appeared with Robertson at a different speech.

ATHEIST TEXTBOOK COVERS ARE HERE!

Atheism may be defined as the mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a lifestyle and ethical outlook verifiable by experience and the scientific method, independent of all arbitrary assumptions of authority and creeds.

Murray O'Hair

The study of theology, as it stands in the Christian church, is the study of nothing. It is founded on nothing, it rests on no principles; it proceeds by no authority; it has no data; it can do outside no thing; and it admits of no conclusion.

Thomas Paine, American Patriot

In those parts of the world where learning and science have prevailed, miracles have ceased, but in those parts of it as are barbarous and ignorant, miracles are still in vogue.

Elhanan Allen, American Patriot

American Atheists, Inc.
www.atheists.org

Co-located at Metroplex Atheists
www.metroplexatheists.org

An honest god is the noblest work of man.

Reverend August 18th Century Orator

No man conceives otherwise than that He, the infinite Father, expects or requires no worship or praise from us, but that He is even infinitely above it.

Benjamin Franklin, Founding Father

I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end... where every man has the same right to attend or not attend the church of his choice.

John F. Kennedy, U.S. President, 1961 - 1963

The Bible is not my Book and Christianity is not my religion. I could never give assent to the long complicated statements of Christian dogma.

Abraham Lincoln, U.S. President, 1861 - 1865

We cannot permit any inquisition either within or without the law or apply any religious test to the holding of office. The mind of America must be forever free.

Calvin Coolidge, U.S. President, 1923 - 1933

The United States has weaved around upon a great and noble experiment, which is believed to be the noblest in the annals of all previous ages... that of the separation of church and state... religion established by law is a bitter scourge to us. The conscience is left free from all restraints and is permitted to worship him as well as his own judgments... Such is the great experiment which we tried, our system of free government would be in vain without it.

John Tyler, U.S. President

Shake off all the fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion. O with boldness even the existence of a God, because, if he be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.

Thomas Jefferson, U.S. President

As I understand the Christian religion, it was, and is, a revelation. But how has it happened that in these religious, have been divided with both Jewish and Christian religions that the most bloody religion that ever existed?

John Adams, U.S. President

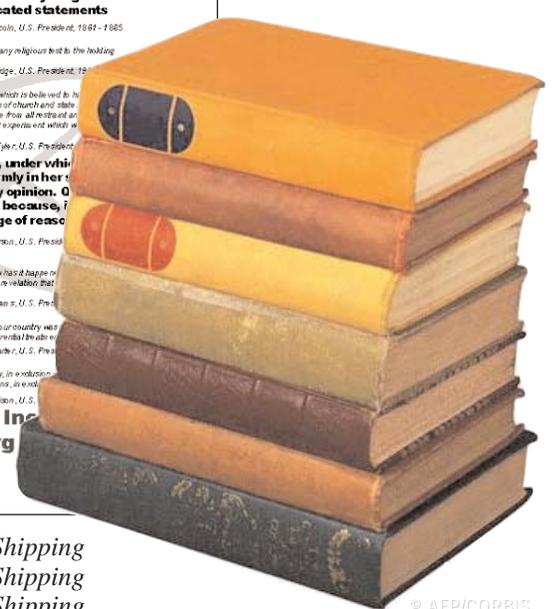
It is not in favor of the government and a long prayer is asked because our country was not that no particular religious faith would have ascendancy over or preference to all others.

James Madison, U.S. President

Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all others?

James Madison, U.S. President

American Atheists, Inc.
www.atheists.org



To order visit:
www.metroplexatheists.org/cover-order.htm

10 for \$10 + Shipping
20 for \$15 + Shipping
30 for \$20 + Shipping

Ask – From page 6

ascribe self-awareness and complex planning abilities to cars, computers, animated cartoons, stuffed animals, or natural phenomena. This tendency probably plays several major roles in theistic belief, but it also gives us a capacity for genuine empathy; our mental model of others includes mapping their pain or discomfort onto ourselves. Empathy is both necessary and wholly sufficient to support the Golden Rule, from which most other ethical positions may be derived.

We can even expand our empathy to include large groups, by recognizing that morality has a strong cultural component that also evolves over time, and can vary widely from region to region. In effect, the “morality” of any given culture is defined as a set of behavioral patterns which are expected to provide the maximal benefit to society as a whole.

–S.R.

We have evolved to be ethical in order to propagate our genetic code. A mother sacrifices herself for her child in a supreme act of altruism because this is what her selfish genes command to ensure their own survival.

–DAVID WALLACE CROFT

Letters to the Editor

Bible Belt Butthole

Love the fact that there are more free-thinkers in the butthole of the Bible Belt besides me.

Long Live Atheism and Agnosticism!
CRIS HICKS

Proof

JESUS AND GOD SO EXIST! If ya'll don't believe in Him, you guys are going to regret it when you die, because if you don't accept Him in your heart, you are going to go to hell. That's not good! I don't want that to happen to anyone! PLEASE turn from Atheism! Buy a Bible! ITS TRUE! not fake! 100 percent true! Read John 3:16!!! PLEASE turn from Atheism! GOD DOES EXIST!

J. J.

Promise Keepers

I like the site. I'm an Atheist myself and was very amused by the Promise Keepers Protest. Keep up the good work!

RANDALL JOY

Religious “Right”

What really gets me about the religious right is that they make it seem like they invented morality or something. As an atheist I have very strong morals. And what's best about my morals is that they're my

morals. That they weren't handed down by a supposed god makes them of the highest personal importance to me. You simply don't need a god to tell you what's right or wrong. And not doing so allows you to revise your convictions every once in a while. Otherwise you might be tempted to go on a crusade or something.

GREG M.

We are loved

I am genuinely saddened that you can't see God or His love for you. Please know that in spite of your denial of Him, He still loves each of you.

CHRIS C.

Nice Job

I am so pleased to see an active Atheist community in DFW. Having grown up as an Atheist in DFW, I know your work is cut out for you. Keep up the good work!

ADRIENNE MOWERY

LETTERS POLICY:

All submissions become exclusive property of The Atheist Voice. By e-mailing to the editor, you acknowledge & agree that any message you send may be made public. All letters may be edited for length or clarity. Please submit letters to: editor@metroplexatheists.org



Attention DFW area Atheists and Agnostics!

The Humanist Church of North Texas HAS MOVED

Scheduled services are now held every third
Saturday at 11:30 a.m. within the
Religious Education Building
of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Oak Cliff

3839 W Kiest Blvd
Dallas, TX 75233

www.humanistchurch.org/

Voucher – From page 1

program in 1999, with strong backing from Gov. Bush. It provides vouchers for parents in public schools deemed “failing.” More than half of the program's participants are attending religious schools.

Religious schools taking part in the program may require students to attend religious instruction classes but cannot compel them to pray or take part in other forms of religious worship.

The ruling in the Bush v. Holmes case was 8-5, with an additional justice partially agreeing with both the majority and the dissent. Due to Florida law, the ruling will be automatically appealed to the Florida Supreme Court.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Business Meeting

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

400 E. Abram Street
Arlington, TX

HUMANIST CHURCH OF N. TX:

What: All the things you want in a church, without the gods

Date: Third Saturday of the month

Time: 11:30 a.m.

Place: Unitarian Universalist Church of
Oak Cliff
3839 W. Kiest Blvd,
Dallas, TX

Date: December 19

Time: TBA

Place: The Hattan's Place
Southlake, TX

DALLAS BRIGHTS:

What: For those with a naturalistic world view

Date: Fourth Monday of the month

Time: 6:00 p.m.

Place: TBA, for location visit:
DallasBrights.org

Social Meetings

ATHEIST MEETUP DAY:

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

Date: Third Tuesday of the month

Time: 7:00 PM

Place: TBA; For locations near you visit: *atheists.meetup.com*

J. GILLIGAN'S:

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

Date: Every Wednesday

Time: 6:30 PM – 9:00 PM

Place: J. Gilligan's Bar & Grill (Meet on the grill side)

MA READING GROUP:

What: The Metroplex Atheists Reading Group discusses selected books. Come join in, even if you didn't read the selection. For 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
Irving, TX

INFIDELS BASH:

What: Celebration of the Winter Solstice with a sacrilegious slant

Media

ATHEIST NETWORK:

What: Atheist internet radio. To listen visit: *www.atheistnetwork.com*

Date: TBA

Time: TBA

Place: Wherever you have access to broadband internet

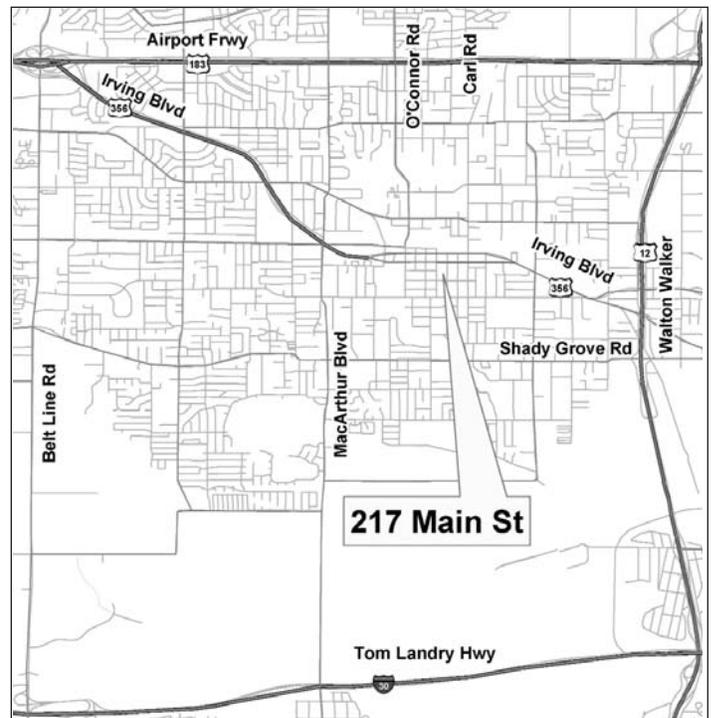
To have your events listed email:

*The Atheist Voice Editor at
editor@metroplexatheists.org*

METROPLEX ATHEISTS

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US

EVERY THIRD SUNDAY
1:00 PM – 3:00 PM



November 2004

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

December 2004

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			1 J. Gilligan's	2	3	4
5	6	7	8 J. Gilligan's	9	10	11
12	13	14	15 J. Gilligan's	16	17	18 Humanist
19 Infidels Bash	20	21 Atheist Meetup	22	23	24	25 <i>Christmas</i>
26	27 Dallas Brights	28	29	30	31 <i>New Years Eve</i>	1 <i>New Years Day</i>

January 2004

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
2	3	4	5 J. Gilligan's	6	7	8
9	10	11	12 J. Gilligan's	13	14	15 Humanist
16 Reg. Meeting MARG	17 <i>M. L. K.</i>	18 Atheist Meetup	19 J. Gilligan's	20 <i>Inauguration</i>	21	22
23	24 Dallas Brights	25	26 J. Gilligan's	27	28	29
30	31	1	2 J. Gilligan's <i>Groundhog</i>	3	4	5

***THE ATHEIST VOICE* is a bi-monthly publication of Metroplex Atheists.**

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

To submit an article or letter to the editor, please email us.

The Atheist Voice Editor: editor@metroplexatheists.org

THE ATHEIST VOICE
c/o Metroplex Atheists
3333 Southlake Park Rd.
Southlake, TX 76092

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?