

THE ATHEIST VOICE

BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE METROPLEX ATHEISTS
JULY 2005, VOLUME 3, NUMBER 4

SOCAS

Supreme Court Rules on 'Ten Commandments'

AMERICANS UNITED

WASHINGTON, D.C., June 27, 2005 – Americans United for Separation of Church and State says this Supreme Court decision on display of religious symbols by government reaffirms the important principle that the state may not promote religion.

"This is a mixed verdict, but on balance it's a win for separation of religion and government," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, Americans United executive director. "The court rejected calls by Religious Right legal groups to give government an unfettered right to display religious symbols. The justices wisely refused to jettison long-standing church-state safeguards."

Added Lynn, "Public buildings belong to everyone. America is a diverse country and our government should not send the message that some faiths are preferred over others. Public buildings should display the Bill of Rights, not the Ten Commandments."

The high court by 5-4 struck down the dis-



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The supreme court has recently released a mixed verdict regarding the constitutionality or the ten-commandments.

play of the Ten Commandments by officials in McCreary County, Ky., noting the religious intent behind the display. But the court, also on a 5-4 vote, upheld a Ten Com-

mandments monument on the grounds of the Texas state capitol, calling it historical and

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SOCAS

Ten commandments "off limits" amendment proposed

AMERICAN ATHEIST

An Atheist civil rights group charged that Rep. John Hostettler (R-Ind.) violated his oath of office and should resign after proposing legislation to withhold federal funding to remove unconstitutional Ten Commandments displays.

The measure would prohibit such funds from being used to enforce a federal district court ruling that found a Commandments monument on the lawn of the Gibson County Courthouse to violate the separation of church and state. Judge Richard Young directed that the display be removed. He stayed that order in

March pending an appeal

Rep. Hostettler announced that the decision in the case (*Russelburg v. Gibson County*) was "inconsistent with both the clear intent of the framers and the Christian heritage of the United States."

"Congressman Hostettler took an oath of office when entering the U.S. Congress to defend and uphold the constitution of the United States," said Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists. "His legislation is an effort to mock and defy orders that come from lawfully constituted courts."

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SOCAS

KY judge urged to drop religion over treatment

AMERICAN ATHEIST

American Atheists called upon Kentucky District Judge Michael Caperton to stop offering those sentenced on drug charges the "option" of attending church services as alternative to jail or rehab treatment, saying that the policy discriminates and runs afoul of the First Amendment separation church and state.

Caperton was described as a "devout Christian" in the May 31, 2005 edition of the *Courier-Journal* newspaper ("Judge lets some defendants attend worship as sentencing option.") The story quoted the judge as saying "I don't think there's a state-church

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IDOL SIGHTINGS

Worshipping a stain: The Ft. Worth Jesus window

William McEwen
METROPLEX ATHEISTS

In May, a vision of Jesus showed up on an apartment window in Fort Worth. A stain, to be more precise, forming a roundish shape that could be described as the outline of a head, as much as anything else.

The faithful came in droves. Praise Jesus for this miracle! Bless this stain! And the wild claims began immediately.

A woman told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram that her arthritis pain had eased after touching the window.

Father Marcus Woodle told KXAS Channel 5 News reporter Crystal Valletta that his bishop brought a woman who hadn't walked in five years to the site. She touched the window and could immediately walk again.

As usual, the reporters glowed and gushed and were proud to file such heart-warming stories.

I was angered that these claims of miracles went unchecked. Once again, the media gave the religionists a free ride. What happened to verifying through additional sources?

I e-mailed Channel 5's Crystal Valletta, and asked how she verified the miracle she reported. She responded very quickly, pointing out, "I did not state it as fact. I said people came hoping for medical miracles, then had a direct quote from Woodle."

An admission of slippery, sloppy journalism and a willingness to dance around the truth. (However, I give Valletta credit for accurately describing the stain as a "rainbow colored outline" in her news report. I just wish she'd pointed out that it's nothing more than that.)

Channel 5 also interviewed Mary Castillo. Ms. Castillo claimed that she had been blind for many years. Touching the Jesus window restored her sight. I find this incredulous, and am disappointed that the reporter didn't ask Ms. Castillo about her eyeglasses. If moments ago, she was blind, then why did she own prescription eyeglasses? And why did she need to wear them now?

The reporters view these religionists as simpletons and don't ask for proof of the



William McEwen

The Fort Worth Jesus Window, surrounded by objects brought by believers.

miracles. They should be ashamed for exploiting delusional people to fill time during a newscast. They know it's all untrue. But they're too timid to say so, fearing repercussions from a religious audience, and, I might add, fearing the testing of their own faith. Religion crumbles under the weight of obvious, simple questions.

The reporters would dig for the truth if the claimants were public figures. Let's say Dallas mayor Laura Miller announced that she spilled an expensive Starbucks latte on

the floor of her Mercedes while driving to The Mansion on Turtle Creek, and the stain looks just like Moses. She tells Paul Adrian of Fox 4 News that a woman with a ballooning pancreas touched the Moses stain, and now her pancreas is just fine. Would Fox 4 investigate? Of course, and Miller would be ridiculed.

I visited the Fort Worth Jesus window on June 1 after it had been reported in the

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Religion – From page 1

issue, because it is not mandatory and I say worship services instead of church.” He added that “any denomination is acceptable.”

Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists said that Caperton is letting his personal religious beliefs spill over into the courtroom. “He is still promoting religion and religious belief even if he masks this policy by claiming it is 'not mandatory,' or talks about 'worship' instead of what it going to church.”

Edwin Kagin, an attorney and Kentucky State Director for American Atheists said that Caperton is not only

violating the Constitution but misleading the public as well.

“There is nothing voluntary about this,” said Kagin. “It amounts to a bribe on behalf of the court to get defendants to attend religious services.”

Kagin said that Judge is clearly promoting religion, and putting it on an equal footing with drug rehabilitation. “He is forcing his religion into the courtroom where it does not belong.”

American Atheists is a nationwide movement which defends the civil rights of nonbelievers, works for the separation of church and state, and addresses

Limits – From page 1

Johnson added that Hostettler's proposal “creates special 'carve-outs' for illegal government endorsement of religious symbols and practices.”

“The congressman's first allegiance seems to be to his church and not the Constitution.”

The amendment proposed by the Indiana Representative passed the U.S. House of Representatives by a vote of 242-182, and heads for the Senate.

Dave Silverman, Communications

Director for American Atheists said that the measure “is part of a growing movement throughout the country to restrict the courts in upholding the First Amendment separation of church and state.”

He added that the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to rule shortly in two cases involving public display of the Ten Commandments. “If the justices strike down some or all examples of such practices, Rep. Hostettler's bill would make it difficult, if not impossible, for legitimate court orders to be enforced.”

CHUCKY D IS HERE!

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www.metroplexatheists.org/shop/index.htm

Window – From page 2

press for a week. The window is atop a small hill. There used to be grass outside the window, but it had become slippery mud from all the foot traffic.

I stopped sliding and stood before the Jesus window. Hmm. Maybe the stain had worn a little from the morning's rains and from Christians touching the thing. Saying this stain looked ANYTHING like Jesus is a tremendous leap of faith and damned silly as well.

It had to be viewed from just the right angle; otherwise, it was only a clear window.

The spectators were silent. A small CD player bellowed prayers in Spanish. Almost everyone there was Hispanic, mostly adults with their small children in tow. A young woman on crutches leaned against a metal fence, staring at the window. There was no sign of "healing" of her or anyone else while I was there.

I felt sorry for the people who were experiencing a religious event. A colossal waste of their time. People can fool themselves into believing anything.

A friendly woman walked over and asked if I spoke Spanish. It was Clara Martinez, who lives in the Jesus window apartment. "No," I told her.

"Mi casa, mi casa," she said, proudly pointing to the window.

I nodded.

"Take photos?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

That was the extent of our conversation. She was enthusiastic and clearly hadn't tired of the stream of visitors.

Only one spectator realized the Fort Worth Jesus window was a big fat nothing. "Can you see it through your camera?" she

asked me, hoping she hadn't just wasted a trip to a rundown apartment complex.

"Sorry," I said, "It's no better through the camera."

As I left, I walked past Ms. Martinez, who was surveying the grounds.

"Gracias," I said.



KXAS/William McEwen

Crystal Valletta reports from the scene for KXAS Channel 5 News, citing, but not verifying, miracles.

She smiled and said something friendly in Spanish, but I don't know what it was.

On the way to my car, I passed more believers en route to the Jesus window. I couldn't help noticing a woman with her teen daughter; the girl was wearing a T-shirt that said "Slightly Manic." Mania. Insanity. Now that makes sense.

Why do these "signs" from Heaven always take such an arbitrary form? Why did Jesus appear as a stain? Why did the Virgin Mary appear, as she did this spring, as a stain on a Chicago freeway? Why doesn't the good lord get serious and show up here in the flesh and hold a live press conference on ABC, NBC, CBS, C-SPAN, MSNBC, CNBC, FOX NEWS, BBC, etc. etc., for all the world to see?

Because there's no real Jesus, and no real Virgin Mary, of course. The faithful will have to be satisfied with stains.

So what exactly is the Fort Worth Jesus stain?

Last year, magician and debunker James Randi investigated a similar aberration on a window, this time of the Virgin Mary, in Clearwater, Florida. There was a simple explanation. "It's the result of ground-water being sprayed up onto the windows from the sprinkler system, depositing a layer of metallic oxides there, and by thin-film reflection effects showing a fuzzy rainbow-like pattern on the glass," Randi wrote. Sprinkler action, not divine action, made it happen.

Randi also later pointed out that the Florida stain looked more like a Shmoo, a creature from the Li'l Abner comic strip, and not so much the Virgin Mary.

Whatever or wherever the aberration – Shmoo, Virgin Mary, German Shepard dancing the cha-cha – there is a simple explanation. It's a simulacrum, a "Rorschach Icon," as described in detail in the November/December 2004 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine.

None of the Jesus window news reports made any attempt to determine what put the image there. The article you are reading now is the only one that bothered to explain it.

On June 13, the holy window was removed and taken to St. Augustine Catholic Church. The window cracked in the process, and a second crack appeared after it had been sitting out in the sun. For now it rests as a grand shrine, and church officials say they might build a new church around the window.

Christians, rejoice! In the magic world of make believe, a stain can be anything you want it to be.

"In that direction," the cat said, waving its right paw round, "lives a hatter; and in that direction," waving the other paw, "lives a March hare. Visit either you like; they're both mad."

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the cat. "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

–Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

EDUCATION

Will we find extrasolar planets like Earth?

UNIVERSETODAY.COM

Over the past decade, astronomers using a planet-hunting technique that measures small changes in a star's speed relative to Earth, have discovered more than 130 extrasolar planets. The first such planets were gas giants, the mass of Jupiter or larger. After several years, the scientists began to detect Saturn-mass planets. And last August, they announced the discovery of a handful of Neptune-mass planets. Could these be super-Earths?

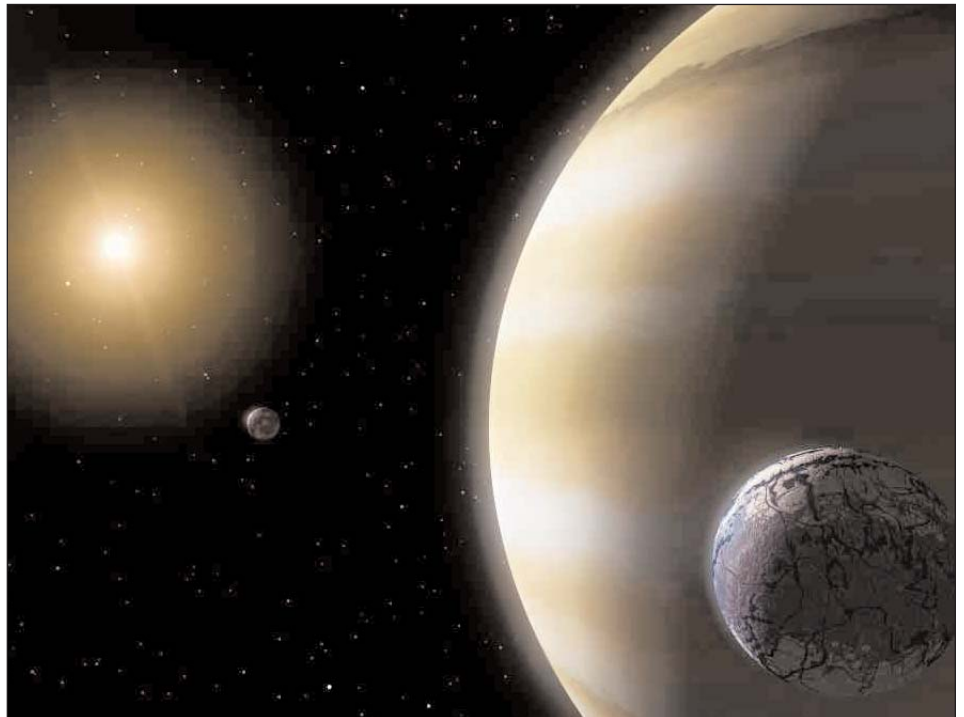
In a recent talk at a symposium on extrasolar planets, Carnegie Institution of Washington astronomer Alan Boss explained the possibilities.

Radial-velocity planet-hunting techniques recently have pushed our discovery capability below the Saturn-mass limit down into what we would call the ice-giant limit.

So we are now able to find planets, close to their host stars, with masses comparable to that of Uranus and Neptune (14 to 17 times the mass of Earth).

In large part this is due to Michel Mayor and his colleagues having a new spectrometer in La Silla, which has unprecedented spectral resolution down to about 1 meter per second or so. And I think Geoff Marcy and Paul Butler's group are quite close behind that as well.

The interesting question, though, is: What are these things? Are they ice giants that formed several AUs out and migrated in, or are they something else? Unfortunately, we don't know exactly what their masses are. Even more importantly, we don't really know what their density is. So they could be 15-Earth-mass rocks, or they could be 15-Earth-mass ice giants.



NASA/IPAC/R. Hurt.

An extrasolar planet with hypothetical (possible but unproven) water-bearing moons.

What we really need to do is to have folks go out and discover another 7 or so. We've got 3 so far. If we had 10 altogether, then we'll have enough that 1 of them, at least, should transit its star and then we'll be able to get some idea of what its density is.

I think, though, that there's a good chance that these might actually be a new class of planet altogether: super-Earths. The reason I would argue that is that, at least in 2 of the systems where they've been found, these "hot Neptunes" are accompanied by a larger Jupiter-mass planet with a longer-period orbit.

If the lower-mass planets are ice giants that formed far from their stars, unless you

have some highly contrived scenario, you wouldn't imagine them to end up migrating inward, past the larger guys. These systems look more like our own solar system, where you have the low-mass fellows inside of the gas giants.

The planets in a system like our system presumably did not undergo very much migration. So I would claim that perhaps these guys are objects which formed inside the gas giants and only migrated in a little bit, ending up where we can detect them with the short-period spectroscopy surveys.

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Are you searching for Atheists in your solar system?

Join in the discussions at the DFW Atheist Talk group.

groups.yahoo.com/group/DFWatheistTalk/

GUEST COLUMN

Intelligent Faith: A Skeptic goes to an Exorcism

The day after the Skeptics Society Caltech conference on “Brain, Mind, and Consciousness” on May 14, I took them up on their suggestion to attend the open house of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) to see the facilities where most of the unmanned spacecraft have been built over the past half century. The bus driver I asked on Colorado Boulevard said he would drop me off nearby, so I stepped into his vehicle, paid my fare, and kept an eye out for a JPL sign. “I'll bring you closer, sir,” was what the driver had said. I really had no idea where I was going but I thought, Americans are good at sign posting. After about 40 minutes the bus changed drivers and I realized that the first bus driver must have forgotten me along the way. Somewhere in the north of L.A., roughly between Pasadena and Hollywood, I realized that the afternoon at JPL was retreating from possibility. I resigned myself to Hollywood instead.

It was hot and the sun was burning relentlessly. After a brief stroll I decided that I would hop on the next bus heading for Pasadena (who knows when the buses run?), flagged a bus, paid the fare, and took a seat next to a woman, whom I supposed was in her 20s. We had barely gone one stop down Hollywood Blvd. when she struck up a conversation and asked me whether I thought the summer had finally arrived. Not being from those parts (I live in Germany) I couldn't give much of an answer, but I attempted a civil reply. She guessed my accent fairly soon and wanted to know why I was in L.A. I told her about the conference at Caltech and in the ensuing conversation during the ride across town we exchanged all kinds of informa-

tion. I found her to be thoughtful, intelligent, articulate and curious.

Although she was a college dropout without a job, still she knew some things I didn't, like Antony Flew's conversion to theism. As we neared Eagle Rock I started thinking about how to move the conversation off the bus. Where was she going, what was she doing? Well, she said, it sounded perhaps a bit strange – something she'd seen on an infomercial and they seemed like really nice people – she was going to an exorcism. Would I like to come?

Well, it's not every day that you get invited to an exorcism – this was not a chance to be missed. This woman's intellectual curiosity – her background seemed to be atheist-Jewish – had led her to a strange place indeed, I thought. As my companion attempted to explain what might be in store for us, we arrived at the bus stop she said was our destination. She asked, “Are you with me?” We exited the bus together. I was committed.

By now we were in a city called Eagle Rock (there is a big boulder on the side of a hill overlooking the 134 freeway that supposedly looks like an eagle), and we were heading toward a theatre on the corner of Yosemite where the exorcism was to take place. I was thinking (hell, was I thinking!): “If I don't do this story, the Skeptic office staff won't let me come visit tomorrow.” (Actually, I recalled an investigation of a haunted house in Germany, and I remembered the spookiest thing was actually getting past the crowd of onlookers gathered in front of the house. The investigation itself was then pretty straightforward.) My companion noticed my silence and commented. I apologized.

She suggested that we get some water to drink from a store on the way, which we did. At some point I mentioned that I sometimes write for a magazine, and just as we were crossing the road to the theatre she asked me which magazine it was. “Tell you later,” I replied.

There were few people standing in the lobby, who politely greeted us, although they seemed to know my companion. We moved without delay into the theatre, up to the third row: she indicated that she liked to sit up front. There were about 25 people present, roughly half Hispanic, the majority female, one or two couples. On stage left hung a hollow cross more than two meters high, over which a piece of purple cloth was draped; on the right there was a menorah on which one candle had been completely burned down. Then an elegantly dressed man (40ish, in a freshly ironed shirt and tie) identifying himself only as a “Christian pastor” announced we would begin.

The service, the first of a series of seven prayer meetings entitled “Seven Spiritual Mysteries,” consisted of cycles of alternating sitting and approaching the altar with eyes closed and hands on hearts to hear a prayer. Apart from this, there was little apparent structure to the ceremony, although the process did intensify in dramatic tension toward a climax, after which there was a certain denouement that led to the profane matter of a collection at the end.

The pastor commenced by handing out some envelopes instructing us not to open them yet. Before we had much time to wonder about the contents – the envelopes were not sealed – he rebuked an acolyte (of which there were three or four), “Next time we hand out the envelopes when the people come in.” And then apparently to the same person, “Next time we seal the

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Lee Traynor
ESKEPTIC

Are you searching for Atheists on the internet?

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SOCAS

Judge allows graduation ceremonies at church, but lawsuit proceeds

AMERICANS UNITED

A federal judge's decision to allow several Florida public high schools to conduct commencement ceremonies in a church will not end the legal battle over the constitutionality of such events, says Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

This afternoon, Judge Gregory A. Presnell of the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Florida turned away Americans United's request to order Brevard County school officials to move this year's high school graduation ceremonies from the Calvary Chapel in Melbourne to a neutral site. Presnell said there was too little time to find alternative venues.

But the judge did indicate that he agreed with Americans United's assertion that Brevard County officials should have scheduled commencements at a neutral location. The judge also ruled that the case, *Musgrove v. School Board of Brevard County*, would proceed to determine whether the future public high school commencements would be allowed in religious settings.

Calvary Chapel, where the graduation ceremonies will take place, is dominated by a large Christian cross that looms over the sanctuary.

"We are disappointed that graduating students will have to attend church to receive their diplomas," said the Rev. Barry W.

Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "Nonetheless, the judge did side with us on the key constitutional issues involved and said this case will go forward.

"We must ensure that next year's graduation ceremonies will not be held in a church sanctuary beneath a huge cross," Lynn continued. "These are public school events that should not be conducted in a place where some families feel unwelcome."

Americans United is representing two families with students at Palm Bay High School, one of four Brevard County schools with commencements scheduled at Calvary Chapel.

Ten Commandments – From page 6

educational in nature. (The Texas monument is displayed among other monuments.)

The decisions, Lynn said, should end efforts by politicians to post the Commandments in public schools and block new courthouse displays.

"The rulings make it clear that government may not display the Ten Commandments for religious purposes," Lynn said. "Politicians like former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore will find it legally impossible to put up divisive Command-

ments displays in public buildings. That's very important in a country as diverse as ours. Promoting religious codes and symbols is a job for our churches, synagogues, temples and mosques."

Americans United had filed friend-of-the-court briefs in both cases arguing that all the displays amounted to government promotion of religion in violation of the First Amendment principle of church-state separation.

Americans United, which along with

allied groups successfully challenged former Chief Justice Moore's display of a 2.5-ton Commandments monument in the Alabama Judicial Building, is currently involved in legal disputes over Commandments displays in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Washington State.

Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.



Attention DFW area Atheists and Agnostics!

The Humanist Fellowship of North Texas HAS MOVED

Scheduled services are now held every third
Sunday, July 17th from 11:00 am to 12:00 pm
414 N. Main Street, Suite 13
Grapevine, TX 76051

www.dfwfellowship.org

The Humanist Fellowship of North Texas invites you to attend our first platform located in our new leased space. It's small, but it's a beginning!

Topic: "What the Heck is an Ethical Society" presented by Shelly Hattan.

The HFNT has sent a letter of inquiry to the American Ethical Union (AEU) asking to affiliate our organization as an Ethical Society. The AEU is a recognized religion by the IRS and has been around for over 100 years. Shelly will be speaking about what an Ethical Society is and how it will impact the HFNT.

Sunday School available: John Hattan will be prepared with a Sunday school lesson based on an Aesop's Fable and a suitable craft. If you can, please email John to give him an idea of how many kids to expect (john@thecodezone.com) or give us a call at (817) 329-1441.

Please join us!

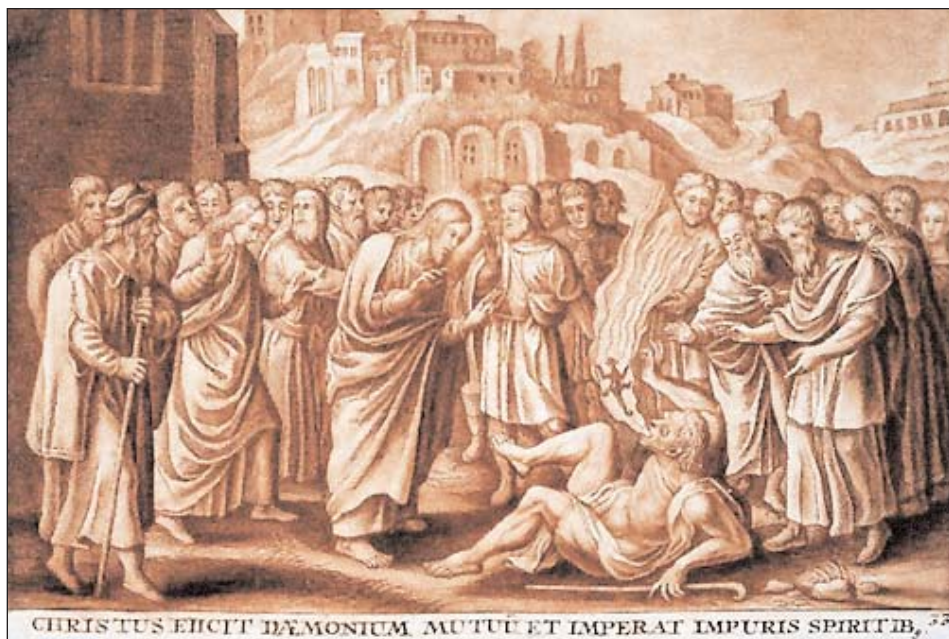
Exorcism – From page 6

envelopes otherwise people are going to open them and look inside.” (This was hardly evidence of much forethought, and I thought he might want to try the magician’s billet reading routine, but no such luck.)

Not much suspense and not much time later we were told to take the sheet of paper out of the envelope and read what was on it. It was the first spiritual mystery: “All spirits are looking for a body to live in.” From this and the accompanying sermon we learned that there are only two kinds of spirits: gods and evil ones. We could also determine when an (evil) spirit has taken possession of a person, how they enter a body, and what makes people susceptible to spirit possession. In a monologue characterized by idiosyncratic grammar (“D’you understand?”) interrupted by occasional loss of continuity (but in a voice that revealed some practice at speaking without the aid of an amplifier) the pastor proceeded to expand on these topics, indicating that we could make notes on the sheet of paper if we wished.

At around 40 minutes into the service, and by now well versed in what to expect from the evil spirits, we were given another altar call. This time things took a more dramatic turn compared to the introductory payer. I heard some other voices from behind us. I peeked around (we were meant to be praying with eyes closed) and saw the acolytes, or “pray-ers,” were standing next to members of the congregation whispering prayers into their ears. I certainly found this to be both uncomfortable and unsettling, and I can imagine it could freak some people out. This effect is probably based on a number of factors. First you cannot really understand the whispered prayers but you can hear that multiple whispering is going on from different spatial sources, which, with your eyes closed, leads to an eerie effect. Second, the pray-ers move about randomly and pick out individual members of the congregation.

I also had the feeling that the pray-ers were trying to move things along in the service. While a pray-er was praying into someone’s ear, he would hold the forehead of that person with his right hand, with fin-



eSkeptic

Circa 17th century depiction of Christ driving a demon out of mute man.

gers and thumbs on opposite temples. The left hand was placed on the person’s back below the neck. I got the treatment as well. The grip was quite firm, if not menacing, and I realized that they were “body-reading” any reactions, such as teeth grinding or shoulder tensing, that might indicate that a person was reacting to the prayers being recited. I just relaxed and did my best to keep the situation under control. The prayer invoked evil spirits, demanding that if they were present they were to give a sign. Suddenly a woman screamed.

Now my eyes were wide open. A young Hispanic woman (I’ll call her Y) was bending over. Or was she being bent over? With the grip that the pray-ers employed, they could easily force a person to take up any posture they wanted. Screaming at the top of her lungs, vomiting two or three times, it appeared that the evil spirit had manifested itself in this woman. She screamed several times more, apparently in great anguish. Looking around, I now saw several other people bending forward, and it looked like they too would be emotionally overcome.

At that moment the pastor asked us to take our seats, leaving him and Y in front of the stage. One acolyte proceeded to mop up the vomit with paper towels, another procured a steady cam from backstage. Y stood there with her face down, her

medium length dark hair covering her features. The pastor stood alongside, holding her in the pray-ers’ “brace” with a microphone in the other hand. “In the name of God, I command the evil spirit to speak!”

Well, the lord God may be almighty (for he was repeatedly thus invoked over the next half hour) but he must have encountered some unforeseen difficulties with this particular spirit. “Are you the greatest one?” the pastor asked Y, addressing the spirit possessing her. Y was silently sobbing and sweating profusely.

What was obviously intended at this point was that Y – speaking with the voice of the evil spirit – would answer a number of questions that would enable the pastor to identify and then banish the spirit. But let’s be clear on one point: Y wouldn’t actually have to say anything except to affirm the pastor’s questions. Of course she would have to lose control over herself, “hit me or pull my tie” (the pastor’s words), scream and stamp her feet, and generally misbehave, but all she was required to answer repeatedly was, “Yes.”

Alas, it did not come to pass. Despite repeated invocation of the Almighty, Y managed to calm herself down and the pastor’s futile attempts at getting the spirit to speak up turned increasingly pathetic. However, it was possible to glean an inkling or two from the pastor’s comments

and his other questions directed to Y.

Y is married and has a child. Her problem is – in her own words – that she has “fallen out of love” with her husband. We were told that her husband is a “good man,” the presumption being that there is no reason to leave him. That, in turn, suggests that Y has considered leaving or intends to leave her husband, but since he does not deserve such treatment something else must be provoking Y to take such irrational action. Evil spirits?

A more likely explanation is that Y has fallen in love with someone else. Since she is Hispanic and probably therefore Catholic, her environment probably opposes divorce and remarriage. She is probably feeling guilty about her love affair, which is why she has rejected taking marriage counseling with her husband, where she would have to admit her indiscretion. But what to do? Trying to extract herself from one nightmare, she plunges into the next.

During his cajoling of the evil spirit we learned from the pastor that Y had also given a “manifestation” – a far more energetic one – the previous week. The current manifestation had come and gone without much ado – although Y was repeatedly warned by the minister that her only salvation was to manifest the evil spirit.

Finally, it dawned on the pastor that he wasn't getting anywhere. But he had no exit strategy! Invoke as he might, nary an evil spirit was willing to appear. Then it occurred to him to send Y out of the room with his wife for “counseling.” Whatever went on in that woman-to-woman chat is anyone's guess. The pastor's next homily was a little more revealing. Over the two hours of intermittent prayer and homily, I managed to glean the following theology of the first of these seven spiritual mysteries.

The world contains evil spirits and the spirit of God. The evil spirits are not disembodied spirits (souls) of deceased human beings, because souls pass to either heaven or hell. And that was where any semblance with mainstream Christianity ended. The rest was a bizarre mixture of pop theology, psychology, and urban legend pressed into the service of demonization. Evil spirits want to take possession of human bodies. Evil spirits

often pass from one generation to the next in a family. Evil spirits have the appearance of an angel of light. Evil spirits enter you when you are addicted to something, such as shopping or eating. (You bought shoes because they looked new and nice and exciting; but after a few days the shoes were ordinary and so you had to go out and buy a new pair to sustain the thrill.) Evil spirits enter you when you follow your heart rather than your mind. This was probably a comment on Y's predicament. Perhaps an evil spirit had entered her when she had become bored with her husband or had fallen in love with another man. Apart from addiction, evil spirits can enter a person when they are angry, hateful, tempted, or unforgiving.

We must be strong and ignore the yearnings of our heart, the pastor continued. We have to be logical. A human being consists of a body, a soul, and a spirit which, in the best case, would be the spirit of God. There is no room for a weakness of the heart, which allows in evil spirits. This, according to the pastor, is intelligent faith.

“Another five minutes,” he muttered. That not only sounded like, but in fact was the commencement of the sting. “What is it that feeds us? What principle feeds us? It is multiplication! You take a seed and grow it into a plant with 50 seeds.” What in the world was he talking about? “And so now brothers and sisters. I am opening a Bible, which I will leave open for you to plant your seed that it may grow into a healthy plant and yield a harvest!” My companion indicated to me to remain seated while she made our “contribution.” I had been in a bit of a quandary because I needed the last dollar bill I had for the bus ride home. Saved again.

With the money in the bag it was time for leave-taking. But no, there were two more points. Everyone would come up and receive a red ribbon, which the pastor would tie around their right wrist as a sign that we had received the first mystery. And then, we were told, God would perform something supernatural this week.

Well, I cannot convey just how thrilling all this was. You go to L.A. for a skeptics conference and you get the offer to experience a real supernatural event into the bargain! But then – as every now and then in

the exposition of his theology – the pastor suddenly mistook the supernatural for the vague and banal. The supernatural event would have something to do with our work – that's about as detailed as King Lear's threats.

During the ribbon ceremony I asked the pastor whether I might take his photo, to which he graciously consented. Then my companion and I left for the bus stop. She had not forgotten about her earlier question. “So, what magazine do you write for?” she asked, as soon as we were out on the street.

“Uh, um, er, Skeptic.”

“I think my dad gets that magazine. Are you going to write about this?”

“Well why not? It was public and advertised. Anyone could go. And besides,” I said taking up eye contact with her, “you were recording the whole thing on cassette in any case.” She blushed. During the service she'd had a bit of a coughing fit, during which she left the room, leaving her handbag open on the floor. It hadn't taken much more than a quick glimpse to reveal a cassette recorder whose red light was blinking as it was recording. That's why we were in the third row, and why she had left the room during the coughing bout: she hadn't wanted to ruin the recording. With my companion's objections safely quashed and her anonymity assured, she headed back down to the theatre to hang out with her friends. And I returned to the bus stop.

Shortly before my bus arrived, I noticed one of the acolytes perhaps also just going home on the bus and decided just to keep my thoughts in my head until I reached my hotel, where I filled several pages with notes and kept myself out of any more trouble.

Lee Traynor teaches English for Science at the University of Hanover (Germany). He is currently preparing a doctoral thesis on solutions to conceptual problems of teaching evolution effectively.

eSkeptic is published (almost) weekly by the Skeptics Society. Subscribe to eSkeptic by sending an email to joinskeptics@lyris.net. Contact us at skepticmag@aol.com. Contents are Copyright © 2005 Michael Shermer and the Skeptics Society.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Humanist Hall is now open in Grapevine

DALLAS, June 27, 2005 – The Humanist Fellowship of North Texas is proud to announce the opening of Humanist Hall, a permanent facility dedicated to providing a central meeting place for groups in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

“My hope is that this will become a central meeting-place for superstition-free activities in the D/FW area.” said Shelly Hattan, president of the Humanist Fellowship. “It’s a small facility, but it’s the first of its kind in the area. We hope to get enough interest to eventually expand the concept, but until then this is a great central location for any local atheist and humanist-oriented groups to meet.”

The facility is housed in an office building on North Main Street in Grapevine, Texas. The location was chosen for its reasonably central location in the D/FW Metroplex along with its close proximity to local restaurants and parks.

Said Cynthia Keaton, Humanist

Fellowship librarian, “Maintaining a collection of books isn’t an easy proposition without a permanent facility. Humanist Hall will allow us to develop a first rate library so that local people can have access to works that you won’t find in your local bookstore.” Ms. Keaton also intends to put together a monthly gaming group in Humanist Hall.

The schedule for the facility is currently being finalized, but the intent is to open for business in early July. The Fellowship will hold weekly activities including meetings on the first and third Sundays each month at 11:00 AM. Children’s play groups and kid friendly group outings are also scheduled.

Humanist Fellowship of North Texas is a Dallas/Fort Worth based group dedicated to fellowship and education in a superstition-free environment. It has pending affiliation with the American Ethical Union.

www.dfwfellowship.org

Planets – From page 5

In support of this idea, there’s some theoretical work from Carnegie’s George Wetherill from almost 10 years ago, now, where he had done some calculations of the accumulation process of rocky planets. He often found there was quite a spread in the masses of what you got out, because accumulation’s a very stochastic process. For the typical parameters he used, at the end of 100 million years or so, he would not only get objects of 1 Earth mass, but also objects ranging up to 3 Earth masses.

Well, at the time, he assumed for his calculations a fairly low surface density at 1 AU, where these planets were forming. Given what we know now, if you want to be able to make a Jupiter at 5 AU using the core-accretion model of planetary formation, you have to crank up the density in the protoplanetary disk by a factor of 7 or so over what Wetherill assumed.

That scales directly with the mass of the planets you’d expect to find as a result. So if you did these calculations over again, assuming this higher initial density, the upper limit on the mass of the inner planets would go from 3 Earth masses, which is what Wetherill got, up to say 21 Earth masses. That is in the range of what we are estimating for these newly discovered hot Neptune-mass objects.

So perhaps what we really are seeing is a new class of objects, super-Earths, rather than ice giants.



TEMPTED?
www.metroplexatheists.org

SOCAS

Atheists voice displeasure with Texas Governor

METROPLEX ATHEISTS

DALLAS, June 6, 2005 – Metroplex Atheists is calling for a public apology from Governor Rick Perry to the citizens of Texas after an appearance in Fort Worth where the Governor insulted and mischaracterized Americans devoted to the separation of church and state.

Gov. Perry appeared at Calvary Christian Academy in Fort Worth on Sunday, June 5 to sign the Parental Consent bill into law, and also to ceremoniously sign a marriage definition amendment that will go to Texas voters in November. During the appearance, Christian hymns were sung, and Rev.

Rod Parsley of Columbus and Rev. Don Wildmon of Tupelo, Miss. spoke prior to Gov. Perry's speech.

Hundreds of protesters appeared at the church to voice their opposition.

After the rally, Gov. Perry told the press: "Those people would be complaining, it didn't make any difference where we signed this piece of legislation. As I said in my remarks, if we'd been in a Wal-Mart parking lot, they'd still be gripin' about it."

Metroplex Atheists points out that the location is the issue, and that there would have been no objection to Gov. Perry's appearance if he had chosen a Wal-Mart or

any other non-religious location.

"Signing legislation in a church is a clear violation of the separation of church and state," said John Hattan, secretary of Metroplex Atheists. "Gov. Perry downplayed citizen concerns about his violation of this important policy, and we believe he owes the citizens of Texas a public apology."

"Separation of church and state was important to our founding fathers, and it should be important to Gov. Perry, too," Hattan said. "We find it interesting that Gov. Perry's own press release about the event, issued this morning, makes no mention of the location."

WWII & Korea:

James Hardwick (Ret), Navy

Korea:

Chris Gregory, Air Force

Iraq:

Brian McIntosh (Ret), Marines

Shawn Ruzek, Marines

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.

Join us on Veterans Day, Friday Nov. 11, 2005

on the Mall in Washington, DC as we salute and celebrate

ATHEISTS IN FOXHOLES

www.atheistfoxholes.org

SOCAS

In wake of ruling, confusion and renewed bluster over “judicial activism”

Flashline

AMERICAN ATHEIST

Controversy continues over two key decisions handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court pertaining to the display of the Ten Commandments on government property.

The justices split on a pair of rulings which many hoped would give more guidance in determining when and if such displays pass constitutional muster.

In a case from Texas (*VAN ORDEN v. PERRY*), the court affirmed the legality of a granite monument of the Commandments placed on the grounds of the state Capitol Building in Austin. Justices took a dimmer view, though, of framed copies of the Decalogue posted in courthouses in Kentucky (*MC CREARY COUNTY v. ACLU*), where public officials attempted to “secularize” the display with numerous historic documents.

Bottom line from the Supreme Court: the duration of displays, along with “context” and the intent of those placing them in the public square remain key elements in determining whether or not such presentations are constitutional, or instead violate the establishment clause prohibition of melding church and state.

It is, argue critics on both sides of this legal divide, a confusing and at times contradictory set of standards that serve to muddy the constitutional waters.

“It seems as though they tried to have it both ways,” grumbled Micah Clark of the American Family Association. His group has argued that displays of the Commandments serve a public good and reflect the nation's legal and religious heritage.

“It was never clear ... what you could and could not do with regard to the Ten Commandments, and it is still not clear,” complained Francis Manion, counsel at the

American Center for Law and Justice. ACLJ, a religious legal advocacy firm founded by televangelist Pat Robertson had supported the displays in Texas and Kentucky, and maintained that the Commandments are the foundation of the western legal canon.

The rulings leave many cases unresolved, and dozens - if not hundreds - of similar Ten Commandments displays throughout the country in legal limbo.

Monday's rulings likely do not resolve the dispute over a Commandments “seal” for the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, Ca. The logo depicts a woman dubbed “The Majesty of the Law” holding a large book, with a stone tablet at her feet with 10 unreadable lines on it. According to the Sacramento Union newspaper, it has been the court's official symbol for several decades.

Mark Rosenbaum of the ACLU for Southern California told reporters that the legal challenge to the seal is “a no-brainer.”

“It's an unmistakable endorsement of religion and says the 9th Circuit's law is God's law,” he argued.

But looking at the same seal, even in light of the SCOTUS rulings, attorney Jordan Lorence of the Alliance Defense Fund sees an entirely different message.

“I think essentially the Supreme Court is saying that the Ten Commandments are OK if it's in a context that has secular themes or secular messages, and it's acceptable if they are not overt statements of religious purpose by government officials.”

Within hours of the Commandments rulings, a display of the Ten Commandments was removed from the Richland County Courthouse in Olney, Ohio.

The presentation was donated by a local resident in 2004, and consists of a framed

poster depicting firefighters, soldiers, the Pentagon, President Abraham Lincoln and the World Trade Center with the Ten Commandments located in the center. Slogans like “God Bless America” and “In God We Trust” pepper the display, which is hung on the first floor of the courthouse near the county treasurer's office.

Richland County Board Chairman Dottie DiCiro ordered the poster removed, but said that the court should have permitted wider display of the Ten Commandments. “That's what our country is based on,” she told the Olney Daily Mail newspaper.

“If we can't display the Ten Commandments in our courthouses, how come the Supreme Court boasts a plaster relief frieze depicting the evolution of law that includes rendering of Hammurabi, the scales of Justice and two numbered Commandments tablets?”

The Richland display, however, may be too weighted in favor of religion according to the latest SCOTUS decisions. When the poster was presented to the county, the donor insisted that it was dedicated to the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks but added that American freedoms were penned by our forefathers “who asked for God's guidance in forming the foundations of this mighty nation...”

All of this has legal observers confused, and some outraged that the court avoided (or fumbled) an opportunity to finally put the contentious issues of public religious display to rest once and for all.

“My interpretation is that, unfortunately, the Supreme Court has once again muddled and side-stepped the issue,” said Dave Silverman, Communications Director for American Atheists.

While he praised the Kentucky decision (*MC CREARY COUNTY v. ACLU*) calling it a “good verdict,” Mr. Silverman pointed out that “the Texas case conflicts

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

with that and the court has not clarified this conflict. They have allowed one thing that is blatantly religious in nature and they have disallowed almost the exact same thing because it was too blatantly religious in nature."

IF REHNQUIST STEPS DOWN: FROM BAD TO WORSE?

There is also the predictable speculation regarding new appointees to the high court which currently has several justices of advanced age.

At Monday's Supreme Court session when the Commandments decisions were announced, the small army of news reporters assembled at the front steps was buzzing over the possibility of a same-day resignation by Chief Justice William Rehnquist, who is battling cancer. His resignation would create a vacancy allowing President Bush to place another justice in the high court's most influential position. Leading the pack according to court watchers is Justice Antonin Scalia who is often described as brooding, provocative and sometimes petulant.

"He has mockingly read aloud the opinions of fellow justices," noted AP court watcher and reporter Nancy Benac. "He's penned sneering dissents that excoriate colleagues for 'feeble' lines of argument. He has badgered quaking lawyers."

Worse yet, Scalia has staunchly opposed any rulings that support a robust separation of government and religion, and is the court's leading proponent of religious "accommodation." He is also an ardent Roman Catholic, and has even been linked

to the semi-secret Opus Dei movement.

The common wisdom is that if and when Rehnquist is replaced, a conservative filling the seat of Chief Justice would produce little change and simply maintain the status quo.

No so, however, says George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley in an opinion piece published earlier this week in USA Today. Such thinking, he points out, ignores the fact that Rehnquist - generally no friend of civil libertarianism and separation - did occasionally cross the ideological divide and join court liberals on decisions which parted ways with his support for states' rights.

As a result, with Rehnquist gone and replaced by an even more strident conservative, many 5-4 decisions could be jeopardized. Turley notes, "an unprecedented number of fundamental doctrines are dangling by a single vote," shifting even more profoundly the court's ideological center of gravity.

On abortion, for instance, a single vote would "flip" partial birth abortion.

"If President Bush replaced just two (justices)," Turley wrote, "he could deliver the holy grail of conservative politics for at least four decades: the overturning of ROE."

Speaking of the First Amendment, he added: "A loss of any of the three (justices) would likely shift the balance in religion cases, allowing greater entanglement of church and state."

The list of potentially cataclysmic issues and rulings goes, everything from gay rights and disability to federalism and the

whole brouhaha over "states' rights."

Although none of the justices has resigned, the salvos over Supreme Court appointments are already sounding inside the DC beltway.

A group calling itself Progress for America has emerged with an \$18 million war chest and battery of advertisements warning radio listeners that Democrats wary of Mr. Bush will "attack anyone the president nominates."

The idea of such ads appearing even before a SCOTUS vacancy is announced is, says political science professor Richard Davis, "unprecedented."

Televangelist Jerry Falwell is mobilizing his network of supporters for fights over Supreme Court vacancies as well. Democrats and others, he says, "are frantically calling on President Bush to consult with them regarding his replacement (on SCOTUS) and other judicial nominees."

"Do these senators forget that President Bush won the November elections with a stated platform that he would choose conservative jurists who do not legislate from the bench? The American people elected President Bush with the clear comprehension that he would nominate to the court those men and women who reflect his values," he wrote in a newsletter.

Despite confusing, even contradictory rulings, a shift by even one or two votes on the Supreme Court could profoundly affect the status of church-state separation in America well beyond Mr. Bush's presidency. All sides in the debate over the First Amendment know this. It is, simply, the lull before the storm.

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.

An honest god is the noblest work of man.

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

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. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.

There is no God. The universe is a vast, cold, and indifferent machine. The only purpose of life is to enjoy the pleasures of the senses and to avoid pain.

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www.atheists.org



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www.metroplexatheists.org/cover-order.htm

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 FELLOWSHIP OF NORTH TEXAS:
What: All the things you want in a church, without the gods
Date: First and third Sunday of the month. For information visit: www.dfwfellowship.com
Time: 11:00 PM – 12:00 PM
Place: Humanist Hall
 414 N. Main St.,
 Grapevine, TX

Solstice with a sacrilegious slant

Date: December (TBA)
Time: TBA
Place: TBA

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

DALLAS / PLANO ATHEIST MEETUP DAY:

What: Meet with other local Atheists to talk about your beliefs
Date: Every Tuesday
Time: 7:00 PM
Place: TBA; For locations near you visit: atheists.meetup.com

METROPLEX ATHEISTS 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

Media

ATHEIST NETWORK:

What: Atheist internet radio. To listen visit: www.atheistnetwork.com
Date: Check the listings
Time: Check the listings
Place: Wherever you have access to broadband internet

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)

INFIDELS BASH:

What: Celebration of the Winter

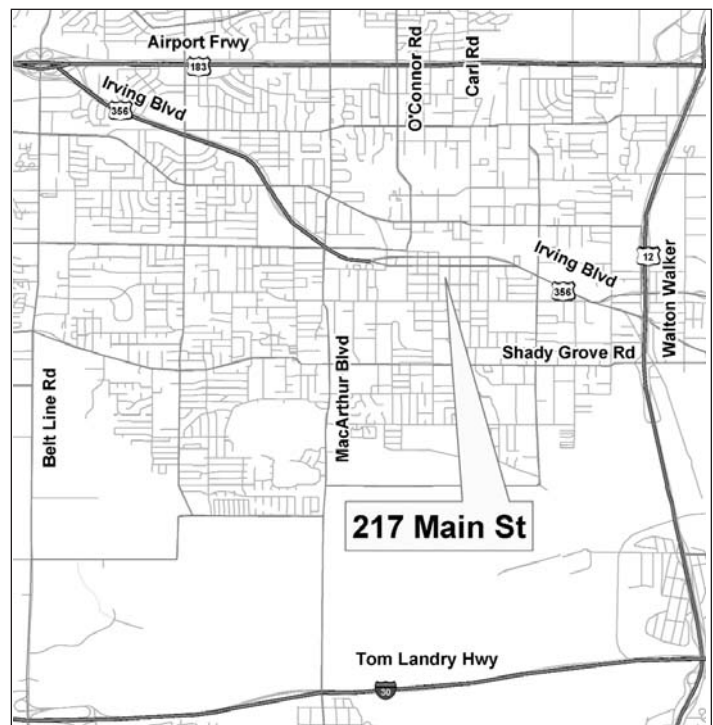
To have your events listed email:

The Atheist Voice Editor at
editor@metroplexatheists.org

METROPLEX ATHEISTS

COME
 JOIN
 US

EVERY THIRD SUNDAY
 1:00 PM – 3:00 PM



July 2005

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2
3 HFNT	4 <i>Independence Day</i>	5 D/P AMD	6 J. Gilligan's	7	8	9
10	11	12 D/P AMD	13 J. Gilligan's	14	15	16
17 RM & MARG HFNT	18	19 Atheist Meetup	20 J. Gilligan's	21	22	23
24 Brights	25	26 D/P AMD	27 J. Gilligan's	28	29	30

August 2005

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

September 2005

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

***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?