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## Twist of Faith

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Political ties in the group run the gamut, including Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians and Greens. It's not a group you would immediately picture sitting down for lunch together. But their bond goes beyond fashion, musical tastes, age or sexual preference.

There are about six to seven core organizers in Inland Empire Atheists and Agnostics. They organize lunches, brunches, pub crawls, host guest speakers and discussions. A typical outing's conversation can flitter about from lofty subjects like justice, separation of church and state and God-given rights vs. human rights, to normal stuff like where to find amazing vegan food.

The group fills some of the sense of community that churches often provide, like charity endeavors and the socialization that comes along with the congregation. The group raised money for a diabetes walk last year, protested against a Nazi skinhead rally and Proposition 8, organized a food drive and is currently planning to raise funds for Smile Train, an organization that raises money to pay for surgeries for children born with cleft lips and palates.

"We want to help people as much as any religious people do," group member Charlene Powell says. "When there is no deity, we have an even bigger responsibility to take care of one another."

### **Freethinkers Unite**

Atheism can feel more like an accusation than a conviction for many nonbelievers.

The idea that someone doesn't believe in anything—no God, nothing supernatural, the comfort of justice in the afterlife, not even a vague reference to *something* spiritual—is often inconceivable for some.

And talking about atheism to believers can prove exhausting, says Bruce Flamm, co-creator of Inland Empire Atheists and Agnostics.

Sometimes atheists need a break from articulating what they don't believe in. They're not picking on God; they just don't give him credence. And they don't necessarily want to spend all their time picking him apart either. They want to meet for coffee and discuss current events, explore critical thinking and create a sense of community among non-theists.

On Sunday, Feb. 21, the group is doing everything from meeting for a morning hike to eating breakfast together at a Mexican restaurant to chowing down prior to a lecture by scientist/author Victor Stenger about whether there is evidence of an afterlife. The group's social calendar stays full.

### **Not Blinded By Science**

"I love that Darwin necklace," says Charlene Powell to Carol Cross as they greet one another on a Sunday afternoon at a Chinese restaurant in Rancho Cucamonga. The group gathered includes retired teachers, journalists, scientists, doctors, students and more, with various slogan T-shirts that boast witty slants on atheism like "*Teach Science Not Superstition.*"

The group started in 2006 with about 20 people calling themselves the Inland Empire Freethinkers, which turned out to be a bit too vague of a moniker. Rechristened (pun definitely *not* intended) as the Inland Empire Atheists and Agnostics, the group grew into a 300-members strong entity.

Prior to starting the group, founders Flamm and his wife Jan Goings struggled to find like-minded people to do things with as simple as go out for Chinese food. Flamm and Goings craved open, intelligent conversations about Plato, ethics, metaphysics, Voltaire and current issues without the threat of being saved.

### **Why Make a Fuss?**

Part of the atheist isolation comes from the idea that non-theists are considered a bigger threat by some Americans than Muslims and terrorists, says Goings with audible amazement. Where do you go from there, especially if you're a quiet, unassuming atheist not interested in broadcasting your views? Not believing is way easier to not feel passionate about, says the former Southern Baptist.

There is no God, so why make a fuss about it is the general feeling of members of the group. But after 9/11, Flamm felt compelled to discuss it more openly. The World Trade Center and Pentagon terrorist attacks brought to the forefront the idea of good vs. evil, and religion was intrinsically tied to those discussions.

"I didn't care that much before that time," says Flamm. "I didn't feel it was that important to come out of the closet. But after that, it was important to acknowledge the destruction religion can do."

Flamm often struggled while having lofty conversations with co-workers, fellow scientists, says Flamm, who is a medical doctor of Jewish descent. "Then you talk about creation of the Earth and if you ask them how old the Earth is and they answer, "About 6,000 years," which is ludicrous, that sort of ruins it."

### **Rational Thought**

Martin Cross, a former newspaper editor originally from England who now lives in Sun City, identifies himself not so much as an atheist as he does a pragmatic person who relies on logic. "Empirical argument is the basis for rational argument," Cross says.

"Most Christians haven't even read the Bible," Cross says with contempt. Martin lives with his wife, Carol, in a community made up primarily of senior citizens, many of who retain strong church ties.

"The pathway to church is well traveled," Carol says with a wry smile. "The people fear losing their ties and that stops them from questioning their beliefs," Martin says. "It's far easier to go with their ties."

"I was introduced to someone new one time and she asked what church I went to," Carol recounts. "When I said I was atheist, she stepped back like it was contagious."

But strangely, Carol couldn't shake the new acquaintance, who bombarded her with questions each time they crossed paths. "She was drawn to me like a moth to a flame."

### **Losing Their Religion**

Andrea Moore, formerly of Salt Lake City, Utah, left the Mormon state to search for a more progressive community, but didn't immediately find one in her new home of Rancho Cucamonga. "I was shocked at how conservative, how close-minded redneck the area was," Moore says. "I had to find atheists. I couldn't have survived."

Moore is similar to many atheists who after leaving religion are ostracized by their family and friends. "My relatives tell me I have re-crucified Jesus Christ," she says. "My family won't have anything to do with me."

The group serves as a support group for people losing their religion. "A lot of people have had tremendous pain and suffering when they walk away," Goings says. "We try to be there for them . . . It's talk therapy more than anything . . . Having to give up the afterlife can be scary," Goings says.

"We've had some members who have been through hell," Flamm says. "It's probably very similar to what homosexuals experience when they come out."

### **Something To Believe In**

Gayle Myrna, a self-described recovering Jew who lives in Riverside, describes her evolution to atheism as gradual. She always yearned to question things as a kid. "I grew up learning about all the nasty things Christians did for 2,000 years," she says, "but then Jesus is love?" She had a hard time reconciling religion and morality in light of the destruction attributed to the adherence of certain doctrines.

"I see the Inland Empire as having a huge fundamentalist tradition," Myrna says. "So it's amazing to see how many people were willing to come out and admit it." Now, as a member of the group she has found the sense of community that she had lost with leaving her temple.

Maureen Newlin, a mild-mannered, conservatively dressed 60-something former Seventh Day Adventist, lost her religion when she lost her love. The San Bernardino City resident stopped attending church after her divorce.

"When I stopped going, I realized I didn't miss it," Newlin says. "Then I realized I didn't really believe . . . There are so many facets of religion that really trouble me that I just thought, I can just do without it completely."

Some of Newlin's friends are perplexed by her 360, but so far no zealots are bent on saving her soul. And her kids? "They are very disoriented by the fact that I'm atheist," she says. "My daughter doesn't want to talk to me about it. She's not particularly religious, but she needs something to believe in."

### **Crucified in Victorville?**

Chris Campbell, a Victorville school district employee, drives around with a bumper sticker that says "Don't believe in God? You're not alone." But he's a little less brave when it comes to wearing his beliefs on his sleeve, or in some instances his chest.

"When I wear my shirt, people stop and ask me," Campbell says about one of his many atheist T-shirts. "But I don't wear it in Victorville. I would be afraid of being crucified."

Campbell attended church as a kid, but it never had much impact on him. "I didn't come to some great, analytical moment," Campbell says. "I just didn't believe it anymore. I lacked the gene to believe it."

Plus, Campbell struggled to wrap his head around some of the contradictions in the Bible. "All the things you aren't supposed to do, God does," Campbell says, referring to floods, locusts, fires and more. "But then it's always OK to do it to nonbelievers," he says sarcastically.

Still, Campbell's not looking to convert Christians. "My problem is I don't want to keep religion away from people, I just want it kept away from me," Campbell says. "I've learned more about church coming here than I ever did at church."

### **"No Horns On My Head"**

Goings, a midwife by trade, is the driving force behind the T-shirts. "It's important to me, putting on a T-shirt and walking around for people to see that I'm a normal person," Goings says, "for them to see that there are no horns on my head. Some people picture atheists as just a person in prison or something. But the real picture of an atheist is just an average, nice person who doesn't believe certain things."

The T-shirts also inadvertently help with recruitment. "We get a lot of our members that way," Flamm says. "But we also get a few F-yous." But between the extremes, they also get a few inquisitive Christians with whom they are willing to talk with depending on the sincerity. "If someone comes up and says that I am going to burn in hell, then no."

Unlike churches, Inland Empire Atheists rarely lose members, Goings and Flamm say. "Some have left because we aren't activist enough," Flamm says. "But it was not because they found Allah or Jesus. That never has happened."

**For more information about Inland Empire Atheists and Agnostics or to see the group's activities calendar, visit [www.meetup.com/inlandempireatheists](http://www.meetup.com/inlandempireatheists).**