

Rationalists of East Tennessee
62-1769554

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Rationalists of East Tennessee
2123 Stonybrook Road
Louisville, TN 37777

Date: 10/15/2001

Internal Revenue Service
TE/GE T:EO:E:MA - Group 7925
P.O. Box 13163, Room 1400
Baltimore, MD 21203

Please accept the following additional information into the Application for Recognition of Exemption for the Rationalists of East Tennessee. Enclosed is a copy of your letter requesting this information.

Describe your place of worship, giving the following information:

1. The address of the property
2. The name of the owner; and
3. A description of the property

If you have no regular place of worship, please state where your services are held, and how the site is selected.

We don't call it worship, since devotion to a supernatural entity is not part of our system of belief. We meet in facilities that offer space for public meetings for free. Sites are selected based on the quality of access (prominent or convenient location, adequate parking) and the quality of the meeting space (not too noisy, adequate space and seating, podium and projection equipment available if applicable).

- Location for the first Sunday meeting: The Candy Factory, which is a facility owned by the City of Knoxville, TN. 1060 World's Fair Park Drive, Knoxville, TN 37916. Description: a six-story building containing galleries, shops, craft schools and meeting rooms available free to the public.
- Location for the second Sunday meetings is at Border's Books and Music, 202 Morrell Road, Knoxville, TN 37919. Owner: Borders. Description: a large bookstore in a shopping center.
- Location for the third Sunday meeting has varied, but now is the Candy Factory (see above). Other locations have included the Carolyn P. Brown University Center or the Hodges Library auditorium of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 37916. Owner: University of Tennessee, State of Tennessee. Description: Large buildings with meeting rooms.

Describe in detail the requirements for membership in your organization and show the number of active members.

Anyone is eligible for membership who supports or wishes to explore our statement of purpose:

- To foster an environment suitable to free speech and exchange of ideas,
- To promote free inquiry into the nature of the universe and of human societies,
- To encourage critical thinking on all aspects of human life,
- To emphasize the importance of the scientific method,
- To explore ethical and intellectual alternatives to supernatural beliefs,
- To provide a fellowship for people who share these purposes.

Any such person may become a member by payment of dues. There are 71 active members.

Do you perform or plan to perform sacerdotal functions such as baptisms, funerals, and weddings for your congregation?

Yes, we do plan to perform funerals. We cannot officially conduct weddings until we receive a 501(c)(3) status from the IRS as a church. We have conducted an unofficial "wedding celebration." We do not baptize, as this is not part of our system of belief. However, we will provide alternative rites of passage including the welcoming of newborns of our members into our community of fellowship.

When (show days and times) are our services conducted?

We don't call them services, since we do not serve any supernatural power by virtue of meeting together. We meet together on the first and third Sunday of every month from 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM, on the second Sunday of the month from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM, and at various times during the month for additional fellowship.

Describe the character and nature of a typical service.

At a typical meeting, one person serves as the leader for the purpose of guiding the meeting according to our principles of free expression in a democratic manner. This person, whom we call the "chair," may or may not also be the discussion leader. The discussion leader is someone who has prepared to present an idea, a question, or information for discussion. After a fellowship period with refreshments, welcoming and introductory remarks for newcomers, and announcements, the discussion leader presents the topic. The attendees are seated so that everyone can see everyone else as easily as possible, and after the presentation of the topic by the discussion leader, the chair moderates the discussion by calling on those present in turn as they indicate a desire to speak. The chair keeps the discussion on topic and respectful in tone. When the discussion is ended (after two hours), another period of fellowship follows, sometimes including a meal together.

Anyone may volunteer to lead a discussion, but the schedule of topics is decided cooperatively through a combination of member feedback (such as voting) and selection by the chair. There is no dogma. However, the group has an expectation that topics will relate to our stated purposes, and that critical thinking and a reliance on evidence will be the foundation of every discussion. We believe that in exploring our opinions and sharing our individual knowledge through discussion, challenging each other to think clearly and express ourselves well, we grow individually and collectively both intellectually and emotionally, and we improve the larger community in which we live.

Typical of the topics we discuss are these (actual discussions of the past):

- Reactions to the September 11 terrorist attacks
- Nietzsche: nihilism and the death of God
- Youth and the “age of responsibility” in modern culture
- The morality and legal philosophy of the death penalty, abortion, etc.
- The evolution of altruism, moral behavior
- “Why should I be moral? What does it mean to be moral?”
- The problem of free will
- Science, ethics and politics
- Aristotle’s moral philosophy
- Einstein on God
- “Why should I be tolerant? What does it mean to be tolerant?”
- The human population problem
- History as a science
- Naturalistic religion, the “numinous” as experienced through science
- “Is belief in the supernatural a form of insanity?”
- State/church separation; the tension between the “free exercise” and the “free speech” clauses of the First Amendment

Since a key element of RET is to develop an enlightened understanding of humanity and our place in the universe through critical thinking, empirical evidence and core human values, the group interaction is an important element of the meetings. Therefore, similar to Quaker services, all attendees may equally participate and there is not a position of “Minister.”

Please indicate who conducts your services. Include names and the church or religious order under which they were ordained. Describe the religious training of your deacons, minister(s), or pastor(s). Etc.

A volunteer conducts each meeting. Just as many congregational Christian churches use lay preachers (such as the Church of Christ), we utilize those who feel “called upon” to serve the group. Since we are anti-authoritarian, we do not have a dogma to train in or anointed leaders to follow. We follow the logical and empirical validity of the ideas presented. We do not blindly and unquestioningly follow the authority of any person, tradition or set of books.

The members who lead and present at meetings do not have to meet any ordination requirements. We are in the process of establishing training on how to conduct rites of passage services utilizing models from various religious and secular groups, but the only requirements are that the governing board of RET and the membership in general accepts the individual as adequately prepared. Leaders are expected to have a reasonable understanding of the natural world processes (as understood by science) and ethical principles of modern society. The members of the board would be called “deacons” in other churches; they are elected by the vote of the membership just as deacons of United Church of Christ congregations are elected from among laypersons.

State whether you regularly provide formal religious instruction. If so, describe the training and indicate the age group(s) to which it is provided. For example, do you have Sunday/Sabbath school or similar sessions for the religious instruction of children and youth?

We do not provide instruction for youth at this time, as our numbers are too low for the youth demographic to be represented regularly at our meetings. However, we are planning an annual summer youth camp to begin in 2002, and are looking to develop programs for children on a regular basis. As our membership base grows, we will have more children in our church to make such programs feasible. We are hoping with the summer camp to attract more parents with children into our fellowship, and we have members with teaching experience who have materials and expertise to offer as soon as children begin to join us.

Furnish copies of certificates and/or charters, if applicable.

Furnish an explanation of any additional facts, information, or documentation to support or clarify your position that you are a formal church rather than a religious organization. Please cite precedents which you believe will bear on the case.

RET recognizes that churches can play an important role in society. We wish to establish as much of the support for our members and the community that is typically associated with the dominant denominations found in America. We wish to provide moral and ethical guidance, rites of passage (weddings and funerals), personal assistance, community involvement, education and counseling for adults and children on how to live happy and productive lives.

We do not often use the word "church" among ourselves, but we are functionally the same as a church. Jews and Muslims, just to name two, use other terms to describe their groups and meeting places. We consider ourselves a fellowship. The word "church" conveys an authoritarian structure which is incompatible with our belief in the intellectual and moral responsibility of individuals within a democratically operated community of like-minded others. Nonetheless, in our mission we function as a church in the common use of the word. We provide a fellowship of people united in our rejection of belief in the supernatural and in our embracing of fundamental humanist values. We educate ourselves, each other and the public in these matters and provide support. The essential difference between our goals and current activities and those of established denominations is that we believe in a naturalistic universe rather than one ruled by supernatural forces. Therefore, we focus on helping others and ourselves in this life rather than looking forward to a life beyond death, and we work together as equals towards improving life in this world through knowledge and understanding and the elimination of illusion. That is why our activities are dominated by inquiry and discussion, and why we do not elevate any person to a position of delivering wisdom to the rest of us. These beliefs are firmly and sincerely held, and our activities are not illegal. Therefore, we meet the IRS definition of a church.

As for precedent, we are most similar to the American Ethical Union. The AEU has a corporate structure with bylaws and elected governors and admits individual members by payment of membership dues.

Our emphasis on non-supernaturalist analyses of ethical issues is very much in sympathy with that organization. Our scope is somewhat larger, however, as we also examine claims of supernatural knowledge or power, scientific advances and their implications for human life, and broader social issues beyond just ethics. The North Texas Church of Freethought is similar to us in their goals and philosophy. Their service lasts one hour once a month, to our two-hour meetings three times a month. The Universal Pantheist Society is another non-theistic church governed by an elected board with bylaws and membership dues. The Humanist Society of Friends is another church with a secular humanist philosophy. While Rationalists of East Tennessee could have affiliated with one of several such organizations, we chose to remain independent and autonomous, intellectually and organizationally free to define ourselves solely by our own conscience.

Please provide a complete, detailed description of your educational programs and/or workshops. Include information pertaining to qualification and compensation of instructors or speakers, topics covered, copies of educational literature used, a schedule of representative charges and fees, how and to whom the programs are publicized, who may attend, etc.

All of our meetings are free and open to the public. If by “educational programs” you mean our meetings, they are described above. On occasion we have held a lecture instead of discussions. In those cases, the speakers were either invited from the University of Tennessee Speaker’s Bureau, or they were visiting freethinkers from other organizations similar to ours. For example, two lectures have been presented by Ed Buckner, former history faculty of Georgia Tech and presently Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism. His topics were “Documents of Early American History Supporting the Separation of State and Church” and “Why I am not a Christian.” Other speakers have included Dan Barker of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (presenting a program of inspirational freethought music), and Herb Silverman, a math professor at the College of Charleston and member of the Low Country Atheists, speaking on his run for Governor of South Carolina to challenge the religious test law (“The Candidate Without A Prayer”). Our policy is to compensate speakers from outside the greater Knoxville area with a \$50 honorarium plus approved expenses. Speakers from the Knoxville area are invited to dine with us at our expense as their only compensation. No educational literature is used, no fees are charged. The lectures are publicized through our newsletter, Web site, e-mail lists, fliers posted on public bulletin boards, press releases, and sometimes by a paid advertisement in a local newspaper.

Please describe how your publishing activities further your exempt purpose. How are your publishing activities distinguishable from those of a for-profit enterprise? Is your published literature distributed free of charge? If not, what basis is used in determining the sales price?

The publication Reality Check, samples of which were included in our filing, is distributed free of charge. No contributors are paid for their articles, and the publication has carried a paid advertisement only one time, for a fee that was far less than the cost of producing that issue. The publication is essentially an evangelism tool, a way for us to get the word out about our beliefs and establish some recognition of our name in the community. The publication is distributed in bookstores, coffee shops, libraries, the literature rack of the student center on the campus of the University of Tennessee, and other high-traffic areas of intelligent people.

All title or ownership of any books or other educational materials purchased with Rationalists of East Tennessee funds will be held by Rationalists of East Tennessee.

All titles, copyrights, royalties or similar interests in the tape recordings, books or other material prepared for the activities of Rationalists of East Tennessee will be held by the organization and in its name.

Thank you for your consideration of the application.

Sincerely yours,

Melissa J. Brenneman
President, Rationalists of East Tennessee