

# December 1996

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## Book Review

by **Betty Simonsma**

Joseph Gaer's book, *What the Great Religions Believe*, is a compilation of the histories, dogmas, and summaries of the sacred writings of 11 different religions. At the end of his book he has a short chapter titled, "A New Image of reality" in which he quotes Max Miller, "There never was a false god, nor was there really ever a failed religion, unless you call a child a false man."

Trying to figure what he meant by that statement was not easy. Perhaps Miller meant that a man thinks of his religious ideas as a child would; therefore, he could not have started a "false god." For a child, it was the best he could do. As I read about the beginnings of many of the religions it was apparent that many were started out of ignorance.

Then Gaer states that "men are seeking to discover a fresh, untired and unifying approach in their faith that life has purpose." My conclusion after reading the book was that the only "untired and unifying approach that men have of their faith" seems to be that each is fighting to prove that they have the "truth." And this is not "fresh." This fight has been going on since religions began. Today it is still a growing problem with new religions being created or spinning off from the old. For me, that is the new reality and it worries me because the gullible can be reached more easily and in more sophisticated ways.

In dismay, I closed the book thinking that neither statement would be made by rational human beings.

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## **Talk Shows Feature AOF Members**

On November 20th AOF members Hank Kocol and Karen Abbe were interviewed on a talk show on Community Access Channel 17 in Sacramento. The live program, appropriately called LIVEWIRE, featured an intimate interview format with host, Jeff Howitt.

Mr. Howitt did not reveal the scope or content of the questions he posed to Hank or Karen before the beginning of the show, preferring unrehearsed unstructured answers from guests. Ironically, the host's questions were quite structured, and didn't leave room for any freewheeling discussions about AOF.

The 30 minute program progressed quickly with most of the questions focusing on atheistic perspectives. Hank responded beautifully to historical and philosophical questions. Karen responded to Howitt's suggestion that atheists must be "anarchists" by stating that if anything, we're more likely to be peace loving people who don't start holy wars in the name of god!

On a cable access program called Vet House Voice, AOF member Dave Flanders was interviewed by host, David Mana-ay. Dave's performance was so well received, he was asked to stay on for a second show.

Vet House Voice features local veterans and their lives after serving their country. Host Mana-ay focused on Dave Flanders' atheistic perspectives.

The two Vet House Voice shows were taped for future broadcast on Channel 17. Three cheers for these AOF members speaking out.

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## **President's Desk**

**by Karen Abbe**

This time, a personal story. People who know me know that I'm an atheist. They know that I am forever skeptical of anything that smells like religion, and take great joy in poking fun at absurd belief systems. Then how could it be that I was recently involved with an organization that had many church-like qualities and required "faith" in principles for which there is no scientific proof? I did it because I was looking for answers and believed the ideas to be sound at the time.

This "religion" I lost is the philosophy espoused by A. Justin Sterling, founder of the Sterling Institute in the bay area. The Institute's stated purpose is to "transform the quality of people's relationships by defining the differences between men and women." Sterling's philosophy focuses primarily on the subordination of women to men and the necessity of women to defer to men on every possible occasion. Apparently there will be peace in the world if we all follow this doctrine.

I am only disclosing information about this "religion" that has already been published countless times in newspapers across the country lest I be sued for breach of confidentiality. Though we supposedly have freedom of speech, that didn't stop the group's founder (Sterling) from filing suit against a woman that spoke publicly about her experiences in the cult (ahem, group) during an interview on Canadian television. There are tens of thousands of men and women who have joined Sterling's Mens Division and (its counterpart) Family of Women of which I was a member.

How does this relate to religion? The Sterling "community" is a religion and cult of sorts. As members of the women's group, we were asked to attend meetings for which no information would be disclosed to us prior to the event. We were repeatedly told to have trust and faith in the leaders at any cost and not to question, only to "support." During the initial "weekend" event, we were deprived of sleep, our freedom was restricted, and we were asked to remain silent for hours at a time -- apparently to help we "womenfolk" practice being peaceful and taking direction from others. These practices promoted Sterling's philosophy that women should be selfless and egoless in relationships, and men should be aggressive combative egotists. Initial weekend events for the men warned that they may engage in acts of violence or the threat of violence -- apparently to help the men develop their aggressive combative nature. Graduation from the women's weekend included a tearful candlelight procession and ceremony -- men's weekends involved naked (I'm not kidding) rights of passage into manhood.

Any questions we had about the content or nature of Sterling events were met with the same request, that is, that we should trust the leadership to take us to a place where we wanted to be. Resistance to these practices demonstrated a lack of faith and commitment to Sterling. Losing faith in the group meant losing faith in men and women and there were heavy heavy emotional recruiting techniques that were part of every meeting. Needless to say, I turned out to be a Sterling "dropout" and was eventually kicked out of the group for asking too many questions. I have since been in contact with Sterling graduates, and I still respect these men and women who are sincerely trying to find answers to life's questions, but I can no longer support the ideas and practices.

People are not bad, but ideas can be bad -- just like religion, a bad idea that keeps on going. Apparently Sterling's wife could no longer champion her husband's belief system (or bad ideas) either as she filed for divorce in 1994.

When AOF member Dave Flanders spoke at our August meeting, he told us what it felt like when he was losing his religion. He described the experience akin to losing a lover. I understand this analogy because when you embrace a philosophy or religion and later must reject it to maintain your intellectual integrity, you go through a grieving process. Ultimately you are liberated, freer than you ever were before, but still you may be alone looking for answers yet again. Why haven't we been hearing more about these groups in the news? Because people are afraid to speak out about their faith. Or they are questioning their belief systems and it may even be embarrassing to them to admit they put their faith in the wrong thing. It's taken more than two years for me to reconcile my feelings about this group. That's the kind of hold that this (somewhat archaic) belief system had on me.

After this experience I've concluded that for a myriad of reasons, faith does serve the needs of people who are still looking for answers. When a seemingly logical "answer" arrives, the answer does meet our needs, at least temporarily. We bask in the satisfaction of having found the answer. But later when we investigate, dissect, and critique the answer, we (sadly) find enough holes in the theory to cause rejection of the idea altogether. So here I am again looking for answers to life's problems, but now I keep my intellectual integrity with me at all times.

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## Letters to the Editor

Dear AOF,

I truly enjoyed News and Views of November, particularly "Celebrity Atheists"!! It brought to my mind a few more.

1. Steve Allen, comedian, pianist, writer. He spoke at the Atheists United convention on the Queen Mary 2 years ago.
2. Katherine Hepburn. She was quoted in the Ladies' Home Journal of October, 1991, saying "I'm an atheist, and that's it. I believe there's nothing we can know except that we should be kind to each other and do what we can for other people."
3. Dana Andrews, actor (deceased). He belonged to American Atheists for many years and made some great videos for them.
4. Burt Lancaster (also deceased). He voiced his atheist outlook on many different occasions.

**Ed Coleman, Shasta Lake City**

## Freethought Quote

"A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."  
**William James**

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## Having Our Say

by **Betty Simonsma**

It has been some time since this column last appeared, but it is time to revive it. New questions for this column will be handed out at future meetings. This month's question: What is your position on euthanasia? Why?

**Merle Jan Simonsma/Sasaki**

I'm in favor of euthanasia, particularly if it is a choice that I have made for myself! However, I do recognize that abuses could occur and each situation must be carefully considered and compassionately handled.

**Eleanor Bernstein**

I'm against it. Our country at present has too little compassion and too much hate and greed to provide ourselves with yet another opportunity to be selfish and mean.

**Hank Kocol**

Voluntary euthanasia for terminally ill and those in unremitting pain should be allowed with the aid of a physician. Many controls are necessary to prevent abuse.

**Ken Nahigian**

In a sense we are all terminally ill. People simply differ in their ability to deal with it. Society should relax its attitude toward suicide/euthanasia. No one except the individual is entitled to make such an intensely personal choice (though we may certainly advise, guide, educate).

Even one of the most respected men in Christendom, Dr. Henry Pitney Van Dusen, president of the prestigious Union Seminary in New York, committed suicide with his wife when their health declined in 1984. "Suicide" is not condemned or even mentioned by name in the Bible; it records five suicides without one word of adverse or critical comment. The first church father, Tertullian, regarded the death of Jesus as a suicide. Origen also wrote that Jesus had "voluntarily killed himself." Modern Christian opposition to suicide and euthanasia is fairly recent.

But libertarian that I am, I am uncomfortable with the idea of state-run euthanasia programs; only slightly less comfortable leaving the decision to friends or relatives. Only the individual may make that final life/death decision. What do we do when a patient cannot communicate?

That's a quandary. But let us not leave the decision to the government or to financial heirs. That leaves too much room for abuse. When in doubt, I prefer to err on the side of life.

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## **October Highway Clean-up**

**by Hank Kocol**

AOF had another highway clean-up on Saturday, October 26, at 8:30 a.m. We had a cool but windy day, making for the possibility of parasailing with the trash bags. Luckily, no one lost footing, although several helmets were blown off. Probably because of the winds, only eight AOFers appeared for the project.

Because of the winds and the limited staff, we were unable to complete the northern one mile on either side of the highway. After the clean-up, seven of us spent a delightful hour, out of the wind, at Lyon's Restaurant at Richards Boulevard for lunch and visiting.

Because of the coming holidays, we must fit the next clean-up day within any available time. Thus, the next clean-up will be SATURDAY DECEMBER 14. Now that winter weather is approaching, we need to consider possible foggy and rainy conditions. Since we do not pray for appropriate weather, we must increase our odds in other ways. Therefore, we will begin at NOON, hoping that any morning fog will have blown away by that time. The date and time will also be announced at the AOF meetings and on the AOF Voice Mail.

If you are interested in more information, have questions concerning a weather cancellation on the appointed day, or want to volunteer, please contact me through the AOF Information Line, 916-920-7834.

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## **Campus Freethought Alliance (CFA) formed**

A nationwide umbrella organization to promote skeptical, secular, and freethinking groups on college campuses was formed in August at the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York. Where there are religious organizations on every campus (e.g., Campus Crusade, Newman Centers, Hillel), until now there were no comparable organizations to support rational viewpoints.

Representatives of the Council for Secular Humanism and the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) met with 19 students representing 15 colleges and universities to form the Campus Freethought Alliance.

The CFA has several potential benefits. One is stability. Students are a transitory lot, and campus organizations have high membership turnover rates. Outside support might be able to keep a campus organization alive even as key people leave.

Another is the provision of a world view that students may not have had previously. It is in college that many students break away from their childhood religious training, as they have the opportunity to see different possibilities and decide which makes the most sense to them.

The CFA has established an Internet mailing list and home page on the World Wide Web. It will develop materials for students who want to start groups on their own campuses, and with the Institute for Inquiry, it plans to sponsor speaking tours by distinguished freethinkers and skeptics.

Sources: Secular Humanist Bulletin, Winter 1996-7, and Washline, Newsletter of the Washington Area Secular Humanists, November 1996.

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## **Christian Coalition has problems**

The Christian Coalition is facing a suit by the Federal Election Commission which charges that at least some of the group's communication activities were really illegal contributions to Republican candidates. Also, Americans United for Separation of Church and State has revealed that while the Coalition claims 1.7 million members, its membership magazine went to just 310,296 people in September 1995. Further, that number seems to be dropping, and IRS figures show that 1995 giving was below the 1994 level.

*Source: Secular Humanist Bulletin, Winter 1996-7.*

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### **AOF Board**

President:	Karen Abbe
Vice-President:	Cleo Kocol
Secretary:	Kay Dickey
Treasurer:	Ed McConnell
Directors-at-Large:	Don Massy, Edgar Brichta, Roland Roberge, Kay Stinson, and Betty Simonsma

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## **New Newsletter Freebie Policy**

We'll send one free newsletter to any individual upon request, but after that time, please subscribe to AOF's newsletter for only \$8 per year. Or become a member and get your newsletter free as part of your membership.

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## December Meeting Speaker

AOF's December 8th general membership meeting will feature a presentation from LeRue Grim, Humanist University. LeRue stated that his topic will be: lifestyles of atheists. That should be interesting. = He will also speak about his "university" in the bay area. Join AOFers on December 8th for an intriguing discussion about atheistic/humanist perspectives.

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### AOF Committees

[Atheist Alliance](#) liaison: Cleo Kocol  
Dinners-for-the-needy: Kay Stinson  
Highway cleanup project: Hank Kocol  
Internet website: Pat Kelley  
Meeting facility: Betty Simonsma  
Speaker scheduling: Karen Abbe  
Newsletter editor: (opening available)  
Newsletter publishing: Karen Abbe  
Voicemail system: Karen Abbe  
Membership database: Betty Simonsma

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## Calendar of Events

Sunday December 8th noon to 2:00 pm    General meeting (topic: Lifestyles of atheists)  
Saturday December 14th noon to 2:00 pm    Highway Cleanup Project  
Sunday December 15                                Newsletter committee meeting  
Friday January 24th 4:30 pm                      Dinner for the needy (Details in January newsletter)