

## January 1997

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### November Speaker: Alfred Bifarelli

by Kay Dickey

Alfred Bifarelli spoke at AOF's general membership meeting on November 10th. Mr. Bifarelli is the president of the Objectivist Society of Sacramento and he initiated a private tutoring program in the Sacramento area two and one half years ago.

The goal of his program is to reestablish into the culture the moral and intellectual foundation for excellence in education. He sees America in a virtual dark age, morally and intellectually.

He identified some contrasts between current educational practices and what he sees as the necessary practices to emerge from these dark ages. Among the issues:

1. Cognitive vs. Social orientation. Cognitive training is conclusionary and fact based. Social orientation is driven by opinion and sentiment. He feels that we are giving the intellectual process over to feelings and sentiments, and that we must adopt a cognitive strategy, purging the system of psychological and sociological factors.
2. Teaching children to think. Thinking is the concise, sequential identification and integration of facts and is a specific process. Children must be taught how to think. Memory and daydreaming are not examples of thinking.
3. Information versus knowledge based curriculum. He believes that the K-12 grades and universities do not make a distinction between information and knowledge. Information is the "what." Knowledge is the "why." Knowledge is the bridge. The schools teach information instead, because it's easier.

4. Computers in the classroom. America is spending billions on computerizing classrooms. It's a myth to think that computers will revolutionize thinking. Computers will not enhance literacy; they simply calculate precoded information. Can a computer tell you the ideological differences between literary characters?

Bifarelli noted that our school system has been in a perpetual state of reform for the past 35 years, and is still in a state of confusion. The proper foundation for teaching is the two greatest technologies ever developed: the alphabet and the number. If education is to move forward, it must be grounded in those two technologies.

All great societies and civilizations look outward for their information. What we see in the 20th century is a great march inward.

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## **The Soul: Whence and When?**

**By Charles Manning**

(The following letter appeared in the November 1996 Mensa Bulletin. It is reprinted with the permission of the author who lives in Beeville, Texas.)

The pro-life movement says that life begins at conception. This theory asserts that at conception, God infuses the human zygote with a soul, envisioned as the nonmaterial essence of a person .... which makes abortion at any stage of pregnancy the moral equivalent of murder.

Despite the purely religious origins of the pro-life theory, no sacred writings state the theory or forbid abortion. Ironically, it was science that helped the pro-life theory gain a foothold by showing graphically how the fetus develops. However, science hasn't detected souls, or even found it necessary to suppose the existence of souls to explain natural phenomena. Therefore, science says nothing about when a soul might join a body.

Bowing to pressure from pro-life groups, nearly all states had totally outlawed abortion by 1973. That year, in *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court rejected the pro-life claim that fetuses are legally "persons." This means fetuses don't enjoy the 14th Amendment's protection against depriving persons of life without due process of law. However, by allowing states to forbid third trimester abortions, *Roe* effectively gave viable fetuses a status approaching that of a person.

*Roe*'s legal reasoning is often criticized. The decision fails to clearly state popular explanations of when a fetus becomes a person, such as when brain waves can be detected, or the brain becomes capable of rudimentary thought. Yet the *Roe* holding enjoys wide acceptance because of humanitarian considerations (avoiding the birth of hopelessly deformed babies, preventing back-alley abortions, etc.). These considerations mean nothing to pro-lifers, because the pro-life theory overrides everything else.

The common-sense justifications for allowing early abortions put a burden on pro-lifers. They should establish -- other than by religious faith -- that the soul joins the body, or is created in it, at the moment of conception.

Religious freedom means not only freedom to practice your religion, but also freedom from being forced to practice someone else's. The pro-life movement shouldn't presume to make its religious prohibition legally mandatory until it can prove that the pro-life theory is more than an article of faith.

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## President's Desk

by **Karen Abbe**

January marks another new year ready and waiting to unfold. Another chance to make new year's resolutions, then break them. I'm swearing to give up Haggendaaz ice cream. Let's see how long I last.

Another new year also reminds me we don't have much time left to make our mark. After all, many of us have only another 30, 40, maybe 50 years left on the planet to do our part to keep the voice of reason alive. Not much time considering 50 years is only a split second compared to the billions of years it took for us to get here in the first place. So I'd like to see us get cracking, particularly in the area of outreach and education.

As you know by now, AOFers have been sticking their freethought necks on the line by appearing on local radio and community television stations. No easy task being in the spotlight either and having everyone and their brother looking at you. Jane Fonda was quoted saying, "going on stage is a little like volunteering to go to hell." That sounds about right to me with regard to public speaking.

But if we don't speak out, the silence becomes our statement. And silence gives the appearance that we think everything's O.K. Well everything is not O.K. If you're not angry about subsidizing religion with your tax dollars, ongoing holy wars, teaching creation in the public schools, and a thousand other injustices relating to the belief in supernatural powers and the dumbing of America, then you don't understand the problem.

We've got to be out in public making noise about all this, which brings me back to the education and outreach issue.

Just by joining AOF and supporting your fellow freethinkers at meetings, you're doing a lot. And by the way, thank you. Writing letters to the editor helps too.

But if you want to take it another step, I have a suggestion which would make a big difference in the understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community: support the Access Sacramento cable show project which is being produced by various humanist, skeptic, and freethought

Sacramentans. The show will include a variety of segments all designed to be thought provoking, educational, or just plain amusing. You can support the show by helping to produce these small segments (1-10 minutes each).

You can write and/or perform short skits relating to religion or belief in supernatural powers.

Peggy Lucas and Ed McConnell wrote and performed a hilarious skit involving a gullible male victim succumbing to the majestic powers of a lady psychic.

So funny, too bad it's so true that people really buy into all that. Peggy, Ed, and I have also worked on public service announcements promoting AOF to be aired on Channels 17 and 18. Paul Storey has been working on short segments addressing evolution. Dave Flanders has been working on pieces relating to structure and development of the brain. And Dave Henderson has helped out by working behind the cameras.

Think about a short segment you'd like to produce or perform in for the show. Maybe you have a topic that you want to talk about for 3-4 minutes, and you have some graphics or photos to show while you speak. You could take a video camera to an event and serve as a roving reporter on a freethought issue.

Maybe you have a personal story to share, or even a joke (clean!) about religion. Let your imagination run wild while the religious right runs amok. The sky's the limit, within the bounds of good taste, of course.

We all have ideas about various segments and skits, but the real work is in writing the scripts, getting props together, and actually performing in front of the cameras. But we're getting past the talking stages, and are on to the "doing" stages. Bob Wilson, Access Sacramento Programming Coordinator and AOF member, will be scheduling another studio time for us this month. If you have any questions about the cable project, Bob will be happy to help you get your segment completed. You can also take producing, editing, and studio classes at Access Sacramento by calling (916) 456-8600 so if you're camera shy, you can work behind the camera.

Next thing you know, you'll be surfing through the channels on the tube and come across a public service announcement or show you worked on -- it's happened to me several times already since I've been volunteering on Sacramento Soapbox, a public affairs program on Channel 17. While working on the show on November 25th, a guest did not show up and so they stuck me in front of the cameras and interviewed me!

I talked about AOF for half an hour, and it turned out really well.

I'm convinced that somebody else must be watching these community access shows other than just me. Think of all the freethinkers out there that need us. If only they knew we were here. So get your freethought feet wet in the big wide world of show business by developing an idea for cable access related to your atheistic perspectives. Then we'll see you on the tube in your academy award-winning performance.

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## Letters to the Editor

**Dear Editor,**

Just a note to say thank you for being here in the Sacramento Area. We need you. Hope you stay around forever. Going to have any more debates? I hope you do. It is nice to know someone cares.

**Thanks, A Freethinker**

**The Editor,** With reference to Betty Simonsma's column "Having Our Say" (December 1996), I really find those people who are opposed to voluntary euthanasia on the grounds that it could be abused absolutely incomprehensible. They might as well tell me they are opposed to motor cars because they could be abused -- they are! Or that they are opposed to marriage because it could be abused -- it is! I don't know of any human activity that can't be abused -- do you? I suspect their real opposition is deeply ingrained religious opposition which is even worse.

To those who oppose voluntary euthanasia, I suggest they spend some time in an old people's nursing home -- look into their anguished eyes, see their tortured bodies with the humiliation of bladder and bowel functions all shot; watch them being fed like babies, having their diapers changed like babies, and crawling along the corridors howling 'God take me!

Take me God!' Anyone who wants to keep them alive against their wishes is just plain cruel and sadistic -- what I have learned to expect from the warped minds of Christians, and if that's what their God wants, then he's just plain cruel and sadistic too -- which he is. Bertrand Russell had it right -- "cruel men have cruel Gods."

**Sincerely, Eric T. Pengelley**

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## Having Our Say

**by Betty Simonsma**

Our latest question generated more answers than usual. Since theists believe they have an answer to WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE?

Freethinkers have their answers as well, as follows:

LKP: To evolve, but because of modern technology and human interference, the human race is at a static level of evolution. I believe our purpose of life is to live out its normal course of evolution and simply to exist and survive as other creatures on this earth.

Bob Wilson: Best I can say right now is, life is its own justification. Creatures live for the purpose of living and no more. Thus, we should strive to make life as pleasant to live as possible, not just for ourselves but for all living things because we all interact and all influence each others lives.

AG? (signature illegible): The purpose in life is to make it a better place (the world) for me and anyone.

- No name: Survival. Adapting to changes in the environment.
- Steve Knapp: Life does not have a purpose; rather, life is.
- No name:
  1. To get the individual's gene into the future.
  2. Anything not in great conflict with #1.
- Hank Kocol:
  1. Help others
  2. Contribute to society.
  3. Learn, do, see and hear as much of the world as possible.
- Bob: Homeostasis and self-perpetuation (DNA induced).
- M.S. To learn, to grow, to have fun, to take care of yourself and others.
- Paul Wolf: Life is a physical process in nature like gravity, electromagnetism, chemical reactions, thermodynamics, etc. Life is the third law of thermodynamics which has been recognized by science and physics but NOT by religion, for obvious reasons.

Religion teaches that God created life. Life is a physical and chemical process whereby entropy or the degree of randomness is decreased. It does this by taking energy from our sun, and putting together living organisms, using basic building block chemicals and water. Animals grow and live on plants and animals who produce the energy necessary for metabolism.

Therefore, life is an energy consuming process in nature, nothing more--nothing less.

- Albert Bifarelli: The search for teleological justification for life, outside the very context of life, advocates the reconciliation of fact with fiction. The Laws of Nature are intransigent. Subsequently, there exists no manifold logic of science, mathematics, or cognition that will compel man to a realm of certainty and knowledge; that resides in contradiction to the very facts he must exercise in order to satisfy his inquiry.
- The purpose of life -- is life!

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## Religious Reference at A Professional Conference

**by Hank Kocol**

In July, 1996, the Annual Meeting of the Health Physics Society (HPS) was held in Seattle, with Cleo and I attending. At the awards banquet, the highest award from the Society was presented to Dr. Michael Stabin who had done some excellent research work in the field of health physics. As part of his acceptance speech, Dr. Stabin thanked the important people in his life -- his teachers, his mentors, his wife. However, at the end of that list he added "Jesus Christ."

Cleo and I were shocked.... I wrote a letter to Dr. Stabin expressing my concern that he would separate himself so from his peers who come from various religious, philosophic, and political backgrounds. After exchanging letters and e-mail, I had thought that we had come to an understanding.

However, the October issue of the HPS Newsletter printed his remarks in total, including the religious reference. I then wrote a letter to the editor of the newsletter about the inappropriateness of the remark....

The editor was very supportive of having the letter printed.

The letter, as printed in the December 1996 HPS Newsletter, follows:

#### Appropriateness of Religious References at HPS functions

At the awards luncheon at the HPS meeting in July, I was surprised by the explicit religious reference made by the Elda E. Anderson Awardee, Dr. Michael Stabin. I noticed that other members of the audience also had similar thoughts about Dr. Stabin's religious reference. I have written to Dr. Stabin about my concerns with his making such a strong religious reference in his acceptance speech.

The HPS is made up of individuals of varied philosophic and religious persuasions. We meet primarily in order to communicate knowledge of our profession, not to convert others to our own personal beliefs. Therefore, I ask whether other members of the Society consider such religious reference out of place at HPS meetings.

The introduction to Dr. Stabin did refer to his church activities, perfectly proper since the audience wished to know the extent of community and personal involvement of the awardee; that statement should have been sufficient to indicate his religious activity.

I do not suggest that the Health Physics Society censor awardee remarks. I do, however, request that future speakers be cognizant of the diverse population in the membership of the HPS.

Hank Kocol Roseville, CA

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**Freethought Quotes**

- "The day that this country ceases to be free for irreligion, it will cease to be free for religion except for the sect that can win political power." Justice Robert H. Jackson, 1952
- "The time has come to knock off this religion business in American politics. There's no end to the mischief that can occur. It is like putting nitroglycerine in a Waring blender." Lowell Weicker, U.S. Senator (and later Governor) of Connecticut, 1984
- "How ignorant a man can become on a diet of managed history." Frank Herbert
- "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." H.G. Wells
- "If god doesn't like the way I live, let him tell me, not you." Thomas Paine
- "If atheism is a religion, then health is a disease!" Clark Adams
- "It will yet be the proud boast of women that they never contributed a line to the Bible." George W. Foote
- "Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by difference of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated. I was in hopes that the enlightened and liberal policy, which has marked the present age, would at least have reconciled Christians of every denomination so far that we should never again see the religious disputes carried to such a pitch as to endanger the peace of society." George Washington, October 20, 1792
- "One good teacher is of more use than one hundred priests." Thomas Paine
- "Belief in a cruel god makes a cruel man." Thomas Paine
- "Religion, superstition, myth, and fantasy all have one thing in common the power of the human imagination to indulge in make-believe." James A. Cox
- "The critical issue is the quality of the purported evidence, rigorously and skeptically scrutinized not what sounds plausible, not the unsubstantiated testimony of one or two self-professed eyewitnesses." Carl Sagan
- "If you follow the evidence you must change as additional evidence arrives and invalidates earlier conclusions. It is those who support ideas for emotional reasons only who can't change. Additional evidence has no effect on emotion." Isaac Asimov

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## December Highway Clean-Up

by **Hank Kocol**

AOF had another highway clean-up on Saturday, December 14, at noon. We had a cool, sunny day, making the work very pleasant. We had a record sixteen people picking up litter: Karen Abbe, Janet Borchers, Steve Borchers, Jason Borchers, Dave Flanders, Dave Jacobs, Don Katz, Don Knutson, Randy Kelley, Cleo Kocol, Don Massey, Ed Mcconnell, Lia Posey, Roland Roberge, Betty Simonsma, Pete Studelska, and I.

The crew included three brand new members who came to their first AOF meeting on the previous Sunday! With this crew, we were able to make up for the uncleaned area we missed the last time. After the clean-up, eleven of us spent a delightful hour at Lyon's Restaurant on Richards Boulevard for a late lunch and visiting.

Since some of our members can more easily work with us on Sunday and others on Saturdays, we are changing to a Sunday for the next clean-up day.

Thus, the next clean-up day will be Sunday, February 23rd, 1997. It will still be winter with possible foggy and rainy conditions, especially early in the morning, so 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, in the "News and Views", and on the AOF voice mail.

If you are interested in more information, or to volunteer, please contact me via the voicemail number.

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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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## **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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## **January Meeting Speaker**

AOF's January 12th general membership meeting will feature short presentations from three different people: Betty Simonsma, Richard Langley, and Floyd Cothran. Their topics will range from health issues to mithra. Join AOFers on January 12th for a discussion on a variety of important issues.

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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