

# April 1997

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## Awesome Architecture! Monuments of Faith or Uncertainty?

by John C. Reiger

**AWESOME!** The word is used so often these days that it begins to lose meaning, but I can't think of a better word to describe being inside a Renaissance era cathedral. My wife, Debra, and I were vacationing in Barcelona, Spain; visiting all the museums, parks and architectural wonders, including the many churches and cathedrals. As a confirmed atheist this latter activity gives me mixed feelings.

One doesn't have to believe in a god to marvel at the sheer size of these edifices, but I always felt a bit like a traitor to the cause in entering these temples of superstition. Especially when services were in progress or worshipers were genuflecting. If you've ever been in one of these colossal cathedrals you know the awesome nature of the place. Vaulted ceiling high, high overhead, carved stone pillars, carved stone walls, impressive stained and leaded glass windows, candles and altars all over the place, and a general sense that you are in another world. All of this is by design of course, intended to evoke feelings of awe in the congregation. I was a bit unnerved when I realized that it evoked a feeling of awe in me too.

I'm a rational person and can put aside the metaphysical awe and just appreciate the architectural awe. Or can I? Yes I can! And appreciate it, I did. But a nagging sense of the metaphysical awe kept creeping in. Just think, I said to myself, if it has this effect on you what strong emotions

must be evoked in the believers. How comforting it must be to be part of a belief system that can erect such a monument to itself.

How comforting, during life's travails, to come here and surrender to the awe, be surrounded by the echoing silence, go through the timeless rituals and be fortified by some priest's words. We atheists have to do all that by ourselves. No wonder we are so few in number. As I thought about this at greater length I realized that there is another way to view this whole matter of Christian cathedrals and the awe they inspire.

They are truly magnificent monuments to the power, if not the truth, of faith - but they are also magnificent monuments to the fragility of faith.

Do religious leaders convinced of the truth of their faith, and the unswerving adherence of their followers, need such awe-inspiring testimonials. Could there be some (unconscious?) lack of faith, or fear of backsliding by the congregation, which underlies the construction of Europe's cathedrals? We'll probably never know, but I wouldn't be surprised, and I like to think of these awesome structures in this new light. It makes it easier for this atheist to enjoy looking at, and experiencing, some of Christendom's greatest contributions.

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## **April Program**

AOF's April 13th general membership meeting will feature a special visitor in addition to three short presentations. Matt Cherry, Executive Director of the Council on Secular Humanism, will be visiting our group and will be available to socialize with us after the meeting. We will hear from Hank Kocol on the topic of church/state separation. We will then be enlightened by George Weber who will talk about his gay life of 70 years. Then Brenda Anthony will outline a new "religion" relating to gangster rap. Join AOFers on Sunday April 13th for this lively meeting.

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## **President's Desk**

**by Karen Abbe**

Countless AOF members have been working behind the scenes since 1993 to keep AOF alive and well. It will be difficult, however, to maintain the schedule of events and meetings that we have without new members taking leadership roles.

Please consider the extensive list of individual jobs and projects that I noted in my president's message in the February News & Views. There are dozens of small tasks that must be completed each month, and you need not be an AOF officer to fulfill many of these tasks.

But if you can make the commitment to serve as an officer, contact this year's nominating committee, Jody Craig & Paul Storey, via AOF's Voice Mail Line. Jody and Paul will take your nominations for the purpose of choosing new officers to fulfill commitments to AOF from June 1997 through May 1998.

If you would like to nominate any AOF members for office, or run for an office yourself, please inform Jody and Paul as soon as possible. Voting will occur at the May 11th general membership meeting. Following is a brief overview of the general duties for each AOF officer.

**President** -- Chairs Board meetings and general membership meetings, oversees implementation of Board and membership decisions in a timely manner, delegates authority and responsibility, and cosigns checks for the disbursement of funds when necessary.

**Vice President** -- Performs duties of the President in the absence of the President, having all powers of (and is subjected to all the restrictions on) the President.

**Treasurer** -- Keeps records of funds received/expended in accordance with AOF bylaws, makes recommendations as to the fiscal consequences of the Board and membership decisions, prepares and submits an annual financial report to the Board and the membership, disburses funds as specified by the Board.

**Secretary** -- Prepares and maintains minutes of Board and membership meetings and submits those minutes to the Board for approval, reports on correspondence to the Board and membership, and cosigns checks in the absence of the Treasurer.

**Director-at-Large** -- Attends and participates in Board meetings having an equal voice and vote in all Board decisions. (AOF bylaws allow a maximum of five Directors-at-Large.)

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## Letters to the Editor

*(edited (by Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter Committee) for space)*

### **Judith Hayes**

Eleanor Bernstein's letter of January 9 harshly criticized voluntary euthanasia. But her reasons make it clear that either she is uninformed or disingenuous. In her story about her battle with suicidal depression, she says she is grateful that her loved ones were not "kind" enough to have

"put me out of my misery." This is preposterous. She had no terminal illness. No one has ever suggested that physician assisted suicide would be suitable for depression.

Nor has anyone ever recommended it for seniors who are simply lonely, as Bernstein also mentioned. And her reference to pain that "was not being properly managed" reflects an (enviable) lack of experience in that area. Some types of pain are not manageable. (Unending feelings of suffocation, for example.)

Proponents of active euthanasia make it quite clear that it would apply only in the last stages of a terminal illness when no further medical help is available. Safeguards would be in place requiring at least two doctors to agree with family members or patient advocates; and the wish for death must be durable. Opponents portray it as a spur-of-the-moment activity, as though a patient's first mention of a death wish will result in someone pulling a revolver and blowing him away. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is worth noting that in The Netherlands active euthanasia has been practiced for two decades, involving 50,000 patients, and not a single case of abuse has been reported. (See *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1996/97.) Obviously safeguards can and do work. If someone is beyond medical help, and pain is all that is left when facing certain death, then a death wish should be honored. It is HIS life not yours, nor mine, nor Eleanor Bernstein's.

**Sincerely, Judith Hayes**

#### **Editor's Note**

*Editor's note: This is clearly a hot issue. We received more comments and letters on this issue than we can print. Ethicist Margaret Pabst Battin believes that right-to-die issues will become the major social issues of the next decade, replacing abortion in that role. If so, you will be reading lots more about it. For a good article on the other side of this issue, see "Whose right to Die?" by Ezekial Emanuel in the March 1997 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.*

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#### **Karen Tipton**

Dear Editor:

I look forward to your newsletter every month. I would like to see more news about your association in the media. Could you send out flyers? Religion does all these things. Religious organizations just take over every one and everything. I, for one, am sick of it.

And also, some of my friends who are believers say they can prove god exists because of Bible prophecy. Can any of your members comment on this? I don't know the Bible too well. I would really appreciate it. Good luck to all of you.

**Many thanks, Karen Tipton**

## **Editor's note:**

*We agree with you about getting into the media. We have had two articles about us in the Bee (one on the organization, which included a large photo of then-president Betty Simonsma and one when we sponsored the Barker-Morehead debate last August).*

*We are represented by Pat Kelley in the Bee's Ethics and Religion section on a rotating basis, where each week three people from the community respond to a question about some ethical issue. We have had some public service announcements on the Access Sacramento cable channel, and we are working with the Sacramento Rational Alliance to produce some programs on the Access channel.*

*We have advertised our meetings in the Bee's Ticket magazine which comes out on Fridays (but this is expensive) and we try to get in the Bee's list of religious events in the Ethics and Religion section the Saturday before our meetings. We have also had advertising in Sacramento News and Review and other local publications.*

*As to prophecies, each one can be analyzed individually, but in general they are some combination of: (1) pure fantasy, where there is no documentation of the prophecy, (2) reading into Old Testament words a meaning that could not reasonably have been intended, to create a fulfilled prophecy, and (3) rewriting history to make it match a purported prophecy. The writers of the New Testament were anxious to demonstrate prophecy fulfillments, and saw prophecies everywhere, especially in vague statements.*

*An excellent source for information on this and related topics is The Skeptical Review, P.O. Box 717, Canton IL 61520. There are 6 issues a year for \$6.00.*

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## **Quotes - etc.,**

"Truth, in the matter of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived." **Oscar Wilde**

"We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart." **H. L. Mencken**

Walter Schwartz sent in a clipping from US News and World Report (March 10, 1997) on human cloning, and highlighted the question : If humans are cloned, will the clones have souls? "Seeing that 'SOULS' have never been seized, sized, or spoken with, this question indeed is very interesting!" he notes.

Yes, it is. Maybe being a theologian is harder work than it seems. It can't be easy to respond to questions like this.

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## Book Review

[The Art of Reading the Bible, by A.J. Mattill Jr.](#)

Reviewed by Betty Simonsma

I sent for the four books offered by The Flatwoods Free Press and was pleasantly surprised by the little booklet titled The Art of Reading the Bible.

Author Mattill found 15 ways of reading the book, each interesting and well covered by biblical quotes. He tells us in his preface that the "I" of the narrative is only partly autobiographical. Using the first person narrative in this way approaches the Bible as individual readers would do. However, most readers would stop at the "Devotional method." A few would use the "Allegorical" or "historical-critical" method, but Mattill keeps searching through various methods of interpreting the Bible.

As an example, Mattill writes in Section VIII:

"In a mood of desperation, I turned to some of my more erudite fundamentalist friends who assured me that the 'bumblebee method' of reading the Bible would fortify my weakening faith in the Word. Then they told me all about their method. Although we cannot explain how a bumblebee can fly, we nevertheless trust that there is an adequate explanation, since it is obvious that the bee does fly.

So too I should trust that God preserved each biblical author from errors of any kind, even when I am unable to understand God's words. I should believe in the verbal, plenary, infallible, unlimited in errancy of the Bible, for the writers were the amanuenses of God, the hands of Christ, and the pens of the Holy spirit." By this method Mattill attempts to understand parallel accounts of the cock's crowing at Peter's denial. He was not convinced this method worked so he continued on the "glory of the book" method among others.

I found the Art of Reading the Bible informative and amusing. It is for \$3.00 with a prepaid order from The Flatwoods Free Press, Route 2, Box 49, Gordo AL 35466-9517.

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## March Meeting Review

by Kay Dickey

AOF's March 9th general membership meeting featured a short presentation from Cleo Kocol and the main presentation was from Dr. Ernie Dahl.

Cleo, an AOF member and officer, spoke about Elizabeth Cady Stanton in honor of Women's History Month. "Whatever the Bible may be made to do in Hebrew and Greek, in just plain English, it does absolutely nothing to exalt or dignify woman."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a suffragist, worked with Susan B. Anthony, and was born in 1815. In 1877 she became interested in the tax-exempt status of churches. In 1885, while giving a speech at the National Women's Suffrage Convention, she said, "You may go over the whole world, and you will find that every form of religion which has breathed upon this earth has degraded woman. There is no one which has not made her subject to man, men may rejoice in them, because they make men the head of the woman."

In 1885, at her 70th birthday, Stanton said, "I can say that the happiest period of my life has been since I emerged from the shadows and superstitions of old theologies, relieved from all gloomy apprehension of the future, satisfied that as my labors and capacities were limited, to this sphere of action, I was responsible for nothing beyond my horizon, and I could neither understand nor change the condition of the unknown world." These readings were taken from the book, "Women Without Superstition: No Gods, No Masters", available from the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Dr. Ernie Dahl, recently retired philosophy instructor at American River College, and head of the human services department for 32 years, then gave his presentation to AOF. Dahl currently has his own practice in family law mediation, working in child custody and divorce issues.

Dahl honors our willingness to question the prevailing attitudes in society, and to encourage us to continue in this quest. As freethinkers, we do not have to put down the emotional side of ourselves.

Creativity may be thought of as an attitude toward the self and toward the world. The willingness to accept the novel, the unique, the fresh, the unexplored, and a challenge rather than as a threat. There are various ways to define creativity. One author divides it into two major forms. One, that which is concerned with a technology of things, that result in tangible results, inventions, scientific theories, poems, music, production of artistic matter, and the other is new applicable responses to daily challenges, for effective coping and personal growth. The latter was the focus of his comments to AOF.

Paul Torrance, a great teacher in the area of creativity, noted "we teach curiosity killed the cat, we speak of curiosity as just mere, idle curiosity." Our culture just really tries to dampen the whole spirit of questioning, of change. What are some more specific definitions of creativity? Call it originality. Eric Fromme used the words "spontaneous activity, the desire to make new." A first rate soup is more creative than a second rate painting. It's what we do with our efforts that really counts.

There are two basic types of thinking. We have convergent and divergent. Convergent thinking is thinking towards a one correct answer. This is what our schools, and religion, is all about. Contrasted with that is divergent thinking where first a problem is discovered, and then one searches for various ways to solve the problem. This is really what life is all about. With most of life's choices, we have more than one direction we can take. Torrance has done some research, and has found that most of classroom time is taken up with convergent thinking and memory work, and this does not encourage a creative mind.

What makes this topic important? One author stated that "Stifling creativity cuts out the very roots of satisfaction in living." One's creativity is the most valuable resources we have in coping with life's stresses, to find alternative solutions, to find new ways of approaching our own goals and relationships; it is terribly important. It's even thought that some emotional illness is caused by lack of creative thinking, and it is true that the seriously mentally ill folks are tested as the least creative individuals.

This is worth dollars and cents also. On any test of creativity, the more creative individuals are the more productive workers. And yet, very few companies test for creativity at all.

Dahl handed out a list of characteristics in children. The characteristics which are most often desired by teachers and parents, include competitive, industrious, obedient, popular, and willing to accept judgements of authorities. The characteristics found in creative people include adventurous, always asking questions, curious, independent in judgment, and unwilling to accept anything on mere say so. Interestingly, there is no overlapping in the two groups. Teachers tend to be irritated by original answers. There's a need to keep the child in his/her place.

The creative individual faces a number of social pressures. They may not be well-rounded. In our culture, we're expected to be good at sports, to be interested in dress and appearance, and to be effective in making good money. The creative individual may be fairly narrow in pursuing goals that are exciting to that individual.

The most creative individuals have worked very hard to achieve what they have achieved. There is no sudden dawning of insight that occurs to most great people, or to more normal folks. It is the result of past thinking and studying. Wolfgang Mozart said "People make a mistake who think that my art has come easily to me. No one has devoted so much time and thought to composition as I. There's not a famous master whose music I have not studied over and over." The one ingredient that every creative person has in common is the ability to work long and hard.

What can parents do to support children so they can become more creative? We do not need to eliminate fantasy from a child's thinking. The world does that soon enough. We need to encourage children to use their own initiative thinking in problem solving. Dahl does not regard this as permissiveness, but it is including the child in decision making and allowing them to express their opinions. Would we rather have our children bring home all B's or half A's and half B's? Half A's shows the child is excited about some areas. Children and adolescents need a non-judgmental ear. Also, we need to give less-structured toys, to allow for more creativity and imagination in playing.

Dahl ended with a poem, "Rebel and Rover" by Lew Sarett. Questions and answers followed.