

# June 1997

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### • ***The Power Of The Vatican by Cleo Kocol***

A talk by Stephen Mumford, Ph.D., president of the Center for Research on Population and Security, at the recent [Atheist Alliance](#) and Humanist Conference in Florida made clear two points. One was the immense power of the Vatican, and the other was the eroding of that power. These two statements would seem to be at odds with one another, but Mumford's facts made clear the truth of both allegations.

As background material, it is important to remember that the Roman Catholics did not have the notion of infallibility until 1870. Before then, the papal states controlled things Catholic. After that date, power shifted to the Pope. His teaching could not be in error. = The Catholic church began to paint itself into a corner over birth control. Thus it became more entrenched than ever. The Pope cannot accept birth control without denying infallibility.

Today fewer than 6,000 American men study to be priests, of whom one-half quit before reaching retirement age. Also the average age of U.S. nuns is sixty-five. Only 28% of U.S. Catholics attend mass, and American Catholic lay people's beliefs regarding birth control and abortion are the same as non-Catholics'. = Because of these facts, the Vatican views the United States as missionary territory.

In 1964 a papal commission on birth control asked, how can the Church change its position without undermining papal authority? Pope Paul's report stated that if the Catholic Church conceded that birth control was acceptable it would have to admit that Protestants were right, and the Church was wrong in many areas.

In 1980 John Paul stated that infallibility was the key to Catholic faith. A change in how the Church viewed birth control would ruin the Church. The principle of infallibility had to be maintained. = He further stated that the authority of the Pope was challenged by democracy.

While the Catholics were locking themselves into place, in 1970 President Nixon set up a commission to study contraception and abortion. The report stated that contraception and abortion should be available to everyone. However in 1972, an election year, not one word came out about the commission and its findings.

In 1975, another study group concluded that the population explosion affected the whole world and that family planning should be available to everyone world- wide. A two-child family by the year 2000 was advocated with abortion as part of the program. No country has reduced population growth without abortion. The study group said overpopulation threatened American security more than nuclear war. = This report was endorsed by President Ford. The Vatican intervened, and nothing came of the report.

Later, the U.S. Catholic Bishops adopted a plan for a Human Rights Amendment and became friendly with the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. = Their influence in politics and government is ongoing.

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### ***President's Message by Hank Kocol***

First, I want to thank Karen Abbe for her very active presidency during the past year. Probably the single greatest accomplishment during her tenure was the "Does God Exist" debate between Dan Barker and John Morehead, followed by the Dan Barker concert. = She closed her term in office with a personal ceremony of recognition of members who have contributed time and effort to AOF throughout the years.

Secondly, I wish to thank the membership of AOF for its collective trust in making me president for the next year, and for electing a very able and activist group of officers with whom to work. Karen will continue on the Board with the title of Immediate Past President, giving all of us much-needed continuity in the workings of AOF.

I look forward to the next year and the continuation of projects already in process: the charity dinners and highway clean-up, both projects which show the community that we exist and are interested in helping society; community outreach through Access Sacramento radio and TV programs; progress toward freethought video programs including the Humanists and Skeptics; interaction between AOF and the Humanists of the Greater Sacramento Area (HAGSA) by visits of each president to the other group. There will also be new initiatives upon which the new Board will work; these will become obvious as the year progresses.

I request continual input from all members as to the direction which they think AOF should take. This Board can only fulfill the needs of the members if the members communicate those needs to the Board; therefore, all of us on the Board look for your ideas.

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### ***June AOF Program***

AOF's upcoming June 8th general membership meeting will feature Jack and Lois Trimpey, co- founders of Rational Recovery, a self-help program. = Don't miss this important presentation.

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### ***May AOF Program***

AOF's May 11th general membership meeting featured community leader Jerry Sloan. Jerry is an AOF member and co-founder of the Lambda Center and Project Tocsin.

Jerry spoke about the "Army of God" which is a leaderless resistance movement consisting of little cell groups. These are shock troops of people who want to establish a theocracy. He also spoke about what little is known about this movement, and indicated that the terrorism committed by the groups will probably increase in the future. Jerry explained that this type of revolution has been going on for centuries, in different countries, civilizations, and cultures.

Later in the program, AOF members formally voted in a new slate of officers as follows:

President Hank Kocol vice-president Dave Flanders Co-Secretaries Lia Posey, Steve Knapp Treasurer Ed McConnell Director-at-Large Kay Dickey Director-at-Large Cleo Kocol Director-at-Large Paul Storey Director-at-Large Art Auble

And finally, attendees of the May 11th meeting were treated to an awards recognition ceremony, a celebration cake, and some really bad Karaoke singing. = All in all, it was a fun meeting.

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### ***Letters to the Editor***

May 11, 1997 Dear Editor,

May I take a few minutes to say I just heard about you from a friend. And I saw the copy of the newsletter. Are you for real? Are the religious groups fighting you? If so, stand up and keep fighting and don't go away. I may be able to join and help in some way. My wife is a strong believer, so I don't really know how she'll react. In any case, this is great to hear. = And the very best of luck to all of you.

**Sincerely, A Happy Nonbeliever**

May 9, 1997 Dear Editor,

I haven't written you in a while. Hope you are still going strong. I have met most all of you and you're a great group. My daughter and I have attended some of your meetings and they were great. We'll try to get to some more meetings. But I look forward to my newsletter and everyone knows I am a non believer and am happy to know you are here in our area.

**Wishing you the best, Carol Mattern**

May 20, 1997 Dear Editor and AOF Board,

Thank you for the beautiful plaque and flowers at the May meeting. I trust my singing did not dissuade any members from attending future celebrations.

**Thanks again. Faithlessly yours, Karen Abbe**

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### ***Atheist Programming For Your Viewing Pleasure***

## by Bob Wilson

There are many freethought shows scheduled = for Channel 74 on Sacramento Cable as shown below. = The programs for the next few weeks are as follows:

Wednesday June 4 <sup>th</sup> 10:00 pm,	<a href="#">Atheist Alliance</a> Presents	(Minneapolis)	Confronting Stereotypes
Sunday June 8 <sup>th</sup> 6:00 pm,	Atheist Viewpoint (American	Atheists, NY)	Circumcision, Part 2
Wednesday June 11 <sup>th</sup> 10:00 pm,	<a href="#">Atheist Alliance</a>	Presents (Minneapolis)	Senator Bill Lockyear
Thursday June 12 <sup>th</sup> 5:30 pm,	Atheists Talk Summer	Solstice Picnic	
Sunday June 15 <sup>th</sup> 6:00 pm,	Atheist Viewpoint.	(American Atheists, NY)	Atheist Activism
Wednesday June 18 <sup>th</sup> 10:00 pm,	<a href="#">Atheist Alliance</a> .Presents	(Minneapolis)	Religious Basis for Sexual Censorship
Sunday June 22 <sup>nd</sup> 6:00 pm,	Atheist Viewpoint	.(American Atheists, NY)	Witnessing for Atheism
Wednesday June 25 <sup>th</sup> 10:00 pm,	<a href="#">Atheist Alliance</a> Presents	(Minneapolis)	Journey to India
Thursday June 26 <sup>th</sup> 5:30 pm,	Atheists Talk	Discussion show format from Minneapolis	
Sunday June 29 <sup>th</sup> 6:00 pm,	Atheist Viewpoint	(American Atheists, NY)	Nightmare of Christmas

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## ***The "great" Debate of 1997 Does God Exist***

### **15 May by Steve Knapp and Lia Posey**

The crowd filled the Crossroads Christian Fellowship church to hear Dr. Desmond Ford, an Australian theologian, attempt to prove, and Dr. Clifford Anderson, Professor of Philosophy at Sac State University, to disprove, the existence of God. Ten or so AOF members occupied lifeboats of skepticism in what seemed at first to be a vast ocean of believers.

The format consisted of about 120 minutes of alternating monologues by the two debaters followed by questions from the crowd. Theologian Ford tried four "proofs" as follows:

1. Mind: God must exist because it is a miracle that the human mind is able to ponder the universe (or maybe Ford's logic, which would indeed require a miracle).
2. Goodness: Reversing the problem of evil, the existence of evil implies the existence of good, and therefore you know who.
3. Order: This is the worn out Bishop Wilberforce "divine watchmaker" argument Originally made in a truly great debate with Thomas H. Huxley at Oxford in 1860, but spoiled by a speed-of-light sequence of hardly scientific cosmological quotations from famous old physicists and astronomers, all of whom, if their limbs were not decomposed into their elements, would now be thrashing about violently.
4. The Man: A hands-raised evangelical diatribe using somebody's scriptural quotations attributed to someone named Jesus to the effect that he Jesus, not Ford was indeed God; a circular argument apparently conveying truth as straight as a ray of glorious sunshine to fundamental Christians.

Professor Anderson, a professed atheist, modestly delivered a version of the problem of evil as a simple case against the existence: If God is simultaneously (a) omnipotent, (b) omniscient, and (c ) all good, then (d) how can there be evil, both moral (human) and natural, to the degree that there is. Anderson made it clear that the degree in question was his own personal assessment, a point missed, it seems, by many of the it's-either-black-or-white believers. He quietly asserted that to reconcile a god with such apparent concentrations of evils in our world, some of the absolute properties (a), (b), ( c ) must be diminished and if that happened, then what was left could not describe a god.

Questions were taken from the audience for a long time. Many questions were from members of the church congregations who used circular arguments, largely based on scriptures, or guilt, or whatever, in attempts to force Anderson to confess that he should have slept with these very scriptures more extensively before even dreaming about the possibility of a divorce.

But making it all more worth while were a number of questions from freethinkers and atheists, not by any means solely members of AOF, directed to Ford. = Of the undecided, perhaps Ford's intervals of fire-and-brimstone preaching swayed the latent faithful, and Anderson's quiet reasoning and personal modesty moved the contemplative.

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## ***Member Profiles by Cleo Kocol***

**Gene Sproul** is a retired attorney who was raised a Christian Scientist and didn't see a doctor until he was eighteen years old. Discussion when he was in college led to his present beliefs. They are far-ranging, including a new look at the beginning of life.

Gene says many of society's present ideas regarding criminal law and justice arise out of the Bible and that we punish criminals according to the results of their criminal conduct rather than the conduct. He gives as an example two scenarios -- a high speed chase where the driver drove in a dangerous manner, but nobody was injured, and a pistol toting robber in a store where nobody got hurt. The punishment for the driver and the wielder of the gun were similar and much less severe than if someone had been injured. In other words, the biblical, eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth prevails while little attention is given to the conduct that sometimes leads to the loss of the eye or tooth.

Gene passed the bar relatively late in life at age thirty-eight, but during his years as a practicing attorney, he had some fascinating clients including a woman and four of her children who were living in her car because her husband had been beating them with a buggy whip. Another interesting case involved a man who survived two self-inflicted bullet wounds. Gene and his spouse live in Sacramento. =

**Betty Simonsma**, past AOF president and one of our most active members, is recovering from a minor stroke. Her presence and contributions are greatly missed by everyone. Betty, hope you're feeling better and will be back to meetings and other activities soon

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## ***Congress and The Ten Commandments***

**by Peter B. Dension**

(Reprinted from the Merrimack Valley Freethinker, April 1997)

One wonders if the members of Congress who so overwhelmingly voted to allow the posting of the Ten Commandments on courthouse walls really know what these commandments are. It should be interesting to examine the commandments and determine how relevant they are to law enforcement. =

1. Worship no other gods but Yahweh. Does this mean that those who don't worship the Judeo-Christian god are not entitled to justice in the courts? Are goddess worshipers, for instance, not to be allowed to take their cases to court? Our Constitution specifically allows people to swear or affirm.
2. No graven images to be worshipped. Only of sectarian significance; it is not even included in the Catholic version of the commandments.
3. Don't take god's name in vain. No business of the court, and anyway, most vulgar language nowadays refers to bodily functions.
4. Remember the Sabbath Day. Is the court still supposed to enforce blue laws? The first four commandments obviously have no relevance to law enforcement.
5. Honor parents. In general a good idea, but not something to be enforced by the courts. Actually, the courts have returned too many children to abusive parents in deference to "Christian family values" only to have them murdered. This commandment should certainly have no place on the courthouse wall.
6. Don't kill. At last a relevant rule, but this is universal and not just a product of the Bible.
7. Don't commit adultery. In general this is a good idea, but adultery is no longer criminalized in most states. Would this rule influence a judge in what legally is now a no-fault divorce proceeding?
8. Don't steal. The second relevant rule.
9. Don't bear false witness. This is relevant; perjury certainly is and should be illegal. The third relevant rule.
10. Don't covet. This may be good psychological advice, but the courts should have no role in enforcing this.

Thus we have three commandments, 6, 8, and 9, which are truly relevant, and are secular laws in all cultures. The first four are purely religious or sectarian and have no place in a secular courthouse. The remaining three, 5, 7, and 10, do contain some good advice, but certainly should not be enforced by any court. Indeed, as in dealing with child abuse cases, those commandments, if taken seriously, could well lead to incorrect rulings by a court, with disastrous results. = I wonder how many Americans who honor the Ten Commandments really know what the actual provisions are. Many liberal Unitarians have been known to express reverence for these commandments mainly because they haven't looked at them for several decades, and only remember that somehow or other they must be good.

My guess is that many liberal Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, are almost as ignorant as the Unitarians. Evangelicals and Fundamentalists can probably recite the commandments, or most of them, but I wonder if they could come up with any justification of any commandments other than 6, 8, and 9. Frankly, I doubt it.

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## ***Celebrity Freethinkers***

**Vladimir Pozner**, Commentator Pozner, Russian journalist and former spokesman for the Soviet Union, co-hosted a talk show on CNBC with Phil Donahue. Numerous times on the show, Pozner said he was an atheist.

**Molly Ivins**, Columnist/Commentator Ivins describes herself as a Freethinker.

**Michael Kinsley**, Editor/Columnist Kinsley formerly wrote the TRB column in the New Republic and now writes for the New Yorker and appears regularly on CNN's Crossfire and PBS's Firing Line. = He has described himself as an atheist.

**Katha Pollitt**, Editor/Poet Pollitt, an associate editor of The Nation, is a noted poet and feminist. She is also an outspoken atheist who has been named by the Freedom From Religion Foundation "Freethought Heroine" of the year. In the December 26, 1994 issue of The Nation she wrote in her column "For me religion is serious business; a farrago of authoritarian nonsense, misogyny and humble pie, the eternal enemy of human happiness and freedom."

**Jack Germond**, Journalist/Columnist he has remarked publicly a number of times both in the press and television (e.g., on The McLaughlin Group) about his lack of religious belief. =