

July 1997

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Angels Anyone?

by **Betty Simonsma**

Ancient and medieval people widely accepted the influence of good spirits, or angels, and evil spirits, or fallen angels, Satan, or demons. Angels reported the coming of Jesus and the resurrection.

According to Grolier's Encyclopedia, during the Middle Ages theologians developed a hierarchy of angels. They classified them in the following nine ranks beginning with the lowest:

angels
archangels
principalities
powers
virtues
dominations
thrones
cherubim
seraphim

Today we have angels everywhere we look. Have we made any headway? Maybe we have. At least we don't hear much about the other eight.

Upcoming July AOF Program

AOF's July 13th program will feature George Anastas, Director of Environmental Health and Safety and Campus Radiation Safety Officer at California State University, Sacramento. The focus of his presentation will be, "The Accident at Chernobyl and What the Future Portends."

Mr. Anastas accompanied a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) sponsored group of scientists to Kiev, Chernobyl, Minsk and the environs around the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station during late July and early August of 1993. The ongoing NAS activity is part of an effort to team scientists from the Ukraine and Byelorussia with scientists from the United States in collaborative environmental research. Mr. Anastas was responsible for radiation protection and occupational safety while the NAS team was at Chernobyl.

Our speaker will present a brief overview reporting upon the occupational safety, environmental effects, radiation protection aspects and public policy consequences of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl. The presentation will include transparencies, slides and videotape material including footage of the NAS team entering and rapidly (!!!) exiting the Sarcophagus (the tomb covering the damaged reactor). He will identify and discuss some of the non-technical root causes of the accident.

President's Message

by Hank Kocol

Don Massy recently gave me a copy of an article published in *THE ARTFUL UNIVERSE*, a book by John D. Barrow of the University of Sussex. In the article, Mr. Barrow discusses rational thinking versus irrationality in the evolution of human society. His conclusion is that irrationality, in the forms of mysticism, theology, and symbolism, has a much longer human history than rationality and, therefore, must have had some evolutionary edge over logic and the scientific method. The obvious evolutionary advantages include the certainty of the conclusions concerning the rightness of a cause and the advantage of that certainty in defending the home territory against intruders with differing conclusions.

I agree that there are properties of humans which had evolutionary advantages, but because of the further development of human culture are now destructive to the species as a whole. Rationality versus irrationality is but one of those. Our propensity to distinguish ourselves by groups with varying properties of language, social custom, religious thought, and racial characteristics all had evolutionary advantages in the past; those distinctions separated friend from foe, "us" from the "other." Such distinctions were necessary to enable groups of humans to form cohesive bonds with those of like characteristics so as to protect those homogeneous bands of humans from interlopers.

I maintain that as human societies have developed to the complex states of today, with overpopulation and the destructive powers in the hands of the technologically-advanced societies, those evolutionary advantages have outlived their usefulness. The global problems of the present and future force us, in the interest of continuing the human species, to overcome those evolutionary relics of the past and to use our rationality to develop newer modes of thinking and dealing with each other. We must realize that we are, after all, one species, all related, all important for the advancement of our lives and those of our progeny. Irrationality will not lead to that conclusion; rationality will do so.

April AOF Program

by **Kay Dickey**

AOF's April 13th general membership meeting featured two speakers, George Weber and Hank Kocol. Both speakers are members of AOF, and Hank is our current President.

George Weber, speaking from his experience of living 71 years, shared a very personal story. He talked about his life as a gay person. George included many touching details about his family background and childhood, and about his life as an adult.

George has undergone years of therapy in order to understand and accept himself. He feels he was always gay, and he suggested a theory that his gayness may have originated from the trauma and stress his mother underwent during her pregnancy. Being gay was not a matter of choice for him, and biology and environment may go hand in hand in determining sexual orientation. He had no positive male role models as he was growing up, and the joyless evangelical midwestern attitudes did little to foster his self-acceptance or self-esteem.

George is much happier now than he has ever been, and he's happy that his children and family accept him. AOF members appreciated and enjoyed his frankness and the sharing of this very personal story.

Later in the meeting, Hank Kocol spoke on the subject of state/church separation. He gave credit to the Freedom From Religion Foundation for some of the material he presented.

Hank focused on the First Amendment, quotes from our founding fathers, and notable Supreme Court decisions. He began his presentation reciting the First Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,..." Amendment 1, U.S. Constitution, effective December 15, 1791. Hank pointed out that many problems have arisen out of the latter phrase, "prohibiting the free exercise thereof" because some have attempted to exercise their religious ideas by attempting to make this a Christian nation.

Hank also spoke about Thomas Jefferson who coined the phrase, "wall of separation between church and state" in the following letter by Jefferson to the Danbury, Connecticut, Baptist Association in 1802: "I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American

people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof' thus building a wall of separation between church and state."

Jefferson was not an author of the constitution. He was an ambassador to France at the time the constitution was written. He was, however, an author of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. He considered this statute to be one of the highlights of his life. On Jefferson's tomb are three highlights: author of the Declaration of Independence, author of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, and founder of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Those were the things he did for the American people. Being president was what the American people did for him.

Hank continued his presentation by reciting eloquent quotes from Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and Ulysses S. Grant. Then he provided a synopsis of many cases settled by the U.S. Supreme Court involving church and state issues. It appears clear that the U.S. Supreme Court has said over and over again that there should be a separation between church and state.

June AOF Program

AOF's June 8th general membership meeting featured Jack and Lois Trimpey, co-founders of Rational Recovery. A summary of the meeting will follow in a subsequent issue of AOF's News & Views.

Letters to the Editor

(edited for space)(by AOF news editors)

Randy Kelley sent in the Miss Manners column from the May 29 Sacramento Bee, with a problem that many of us have probably faced in some variant. The problem as stated in the column:

"My husband and I are trying to bring up our young children to be devoted Christians, and this includes the giving thanks before meals. The children's grandparents, with whom they get along well, are hostile to any display of a belief in God." And their solution, "When visiting, we usually sneak our family grace in the bathroom while the children wash their hands."

Doesn't that give you an image? It used to be that you could assume that if a bunch of people piled into a bathroom, it was for drugs. Now it may be a worship service.

They feared the situation would get more complicated as the children grew older. Miss Manners responded:

"Don't worry about this getting any more complicated. Miss Manners assures you that the etiquette you need to teach right now is about as complicated as it ever gets. Furthermore, it is not only the children whom you need to teach. Everybody involved needs to learn about the meaning and practice of respect and tolerance."

"Etiquette requires those who do not say grace to sit in silence while others do so. Provided you are not praying aloud that your in-laws be saved, they have no cause to take offense."

Does anyone have a different opinion on this? We'd like to hear it.

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter Committee

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:

Sunday July 6th 6:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists, NY) - Santa and the plate glass virgin

Wednesday July 9th 10:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) - Nietzsche

Sunday July 13th 6:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists, NY) - Visit from Eugene

Wednesday July 16th 10:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) - Global Congress

Sunday July 20th 6:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists, NY) - Prayers at gunpoint

Wednesday July 23rd 10:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) - University student atheists and humanists

Saturday July 26th 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk - discussion show

Sunday July 27th 6:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists, NY) - Atheists; their dilemma, Part 1

Wednesday July 30th 10:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) - UFO, cults, and religion

Sunday August 3rd 6:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists, NY) - Panel discussion

Wednesday August 6th 10:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) - Matt Cherry speaks about atheism and humanism

Member Profiles

by Cleo Kocol

Freethinkers come in every variety and often with intriguing elements unknown to the general membership. A tireless worker for the organization and for two years a member of the AOF Board, Don Massy fits that general description. But he has many added dimensions.

An automotive engineer, he's also a member of Mensa. Raised a Methodist, in the 1950's he began to question their teachings. This led him to Unitarianism and eventually he became a full-fledged Atheist. A list in Free Inquiry led him to AOF.

When Don isn't helping out at the Charity Dinners or at the Highway Cleanup, you'll probably find him motor carring. A little-known hobby, motor carring has enthusiastic participants. People own their own railroad motor cars, called speeders. They purchase them at railroad auctions when they're put on surplus. Don belongs to the club called Motor Car Operators West. The club rents a railroad track or the railroad sets aside time and gives permission for the "speeders" to use the track at that time. Don, and the other club members -- 20 to 50 cars -- have from one to four day events. A favorite trip is the McCloud River where the run is through pine trees, snow, and near Mt. Shasta. Another favorite is the Skunk Line.

Don has two children in their 30's and is "semi" retired. He can be reached by e-mail at dmassy@syix.com.

Sacramento AU Chapter

Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) is forming a Sacramento Chapter. A formation meeting was held on June 23rd and several AOF members were present. For information regarding the next meeting or the chapter's activities, contact Susan Mogull at (916) 944-3459 or Carl Seratt at (916) 451-0650.

Congress and The Ten Commandments (Part 2)

by Judith Hayes www.thehappyheretic.com jhayes@goldrush.com

Sections excerpted from In God We Trust: But Which One? by Judith Hayes, pages 65-67.

Few people realize that there are not really ten commandments. There are anywhere from eleven to eighteen to hundreds, if you count every, single directive in the Old Testament. If you then add the commandments of the New Testament, such as "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:31), you've got more.

The most familiar ones, the Ten Commandments, recorded in Exodus 20, are ten in number only if you refer to some of the "thou shalt's" as single entities while lumping others together to form only one commandment. The commandments recorded in Exodus 34 that were literally replacement commandments, since Moses apparently dropped and "breaketh" the original set, don't resemble the first set, even though God literally states that they will: "... and I will write upon the tables the words that were in the first tables..."

But have you ever heard a preacher exhorting his flock to keep the feast of weeks or to refrain from seething a kid in its mother's milk? Well, you certainly should have, since these are among the replacement commandments carefully recorded in the Bible. How could these lists *possibly* not agree? Isn't God's word supposed to be infallible and unchangeable? If this omnipotent God dictated a set of replacement commandments, shouldn't they absolutely match the first set? But even if they don't, shouldn't they be as important as the first set, and observed with the same respect? Who arbitrarily decided that the first list was better than the second list? The whole thing reeks of mistranslations, interpolations, and just plain sloppiness, none of which should appear in a divinely inspired book.

When the commandments are viewed as a whole, they are woefully lacking in moral guidance.....We are warned not to "have" any other gods. But if there aren't any other gods, how can they be had? It's like warning us not to have any other blue sky except the one that's up there. Do we have any choice here? Obviously the warning is against the worship of false gods, but if they are false, they are clearly not gods. The warning is oddly phrased.

[Coveting and lying are on the list, but]not mentioned in the commandments, unbelievably, are cannibalism, slavery, child sexual abuse, wife beating, assault and battery in general, torture, and kidnaping....Aren't these all a tad more serious than coveting your neighbor's Corvette?

Sections excerpted from In God We Trust: But Which One? by Judith Hayes, pages 65-67. This excellent book looks at a number of issues from a reasonable, logical, 20th century viewpoint and highlights the utter nonsense that frequently constitutes religious positions. It is available for \$15.00 from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, P.O. Box 750, Madison WI 53701.

(And remember, the U.S. House of Representatives recently voted to endorse the display of the ten commandments. You probably already know more about the contents of the big ten than most of the people voting for their display. Maybe the whole situation will wind up shining some light on the true contents of these commandments and tarnish their popular luster.)

Freethought Quotes

"Give a man a fish, and you'll feed him for a day. Give him a religion, and he'll starve to death while praying for a fish." -- Anon

"This crime called blasphemy was invented by priests for the purpose of defending doctrines not able to take care of themselves." -- Robert Ingersoll

"Christians say that--without exception--their God answers all of their prayers; it's just that He sometimes says "yes" and other times "no," "maybe", or "wait." Of course, the same thing could be said of the rain-god, Bob." -- Rev. Donald Morgan

"Life in Lubbock, Texas, taught me two things: One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love" -- Butch Hancock

"Christ died for our sins. Dare we make his martyrdom meaningless by not committing them?" -- Jules Feiffer

"God was invented to explain mystery. God is always invented to explain those things that you do not understand. Now, when you finally discover how something works, you get some laws which you're taking away from God: you don't need him anymore. But you need him for the other mysteries. So therefore you leave him to create the universe because we haven't figured that out yet; you need him for understanding those things which you don't believe the laws will explain, such as consciousness, or why you only live to a certain length of time--life and death--stuff like that. God is always associated with those things that you do not understand. Therefore I don't think that the laws can be considered to be like God because they have been figured out." -- Richard Feynman

(Reprinted from The Separationist, the Newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, Charleston, SC, May 97.)

Freethinkers Camping Trip!

Board member Steve Knapp has organized a camping trip for July 25th - 27th for AOF members and other interested participants.

Please speak to Steve at the July 13th general membership meeting for details regarding cost and destination. Steve will provide maps as well as a list of suggested items to bring on this exciting excursion.

AOF
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See you at our July 13th meeting!