

October 1997

Contents

- [September Meeting](#)
- [October AOF Meeting](#)
- [Picketing at Upcoming Billy Graham Crusade](#)
- [President's Desk](#)
- [Highway Cleanup](#)
- [Letters to the Editor](#)
- [How I was Loosed from the need for a God \(Step 2 and a half\)](#)
- [A Visitor from the East](#)
- [AU Chapter Meeting](#)
- [From the Internet](#)
- [Atheist TV Programs for Your Viewing Pleasure](#)
- [Member Profiles](#)
- [San Francisco Freethought Seminar](#)
- [Freethought Quote](#)

September Meeting

By Dave Flanders and Steve Knapp

The speaker for AOF's September 14th general membership meeting was Clifford Anderson, Professor of Philosophy at Cal State University Sacramento. Dr. Anderson's talk gave a broad view of several aspects of the current state of ethics in philosophy.

Throughout his talk, Professor Anderson took a number of questions and the discussion was lively. He started with the observation that philosophy is not stuck in the past. Indeed, since the 1960s, new and original work has been made in the area of secular ethics. An important debate is ongoing on the subject of social justice, and particularly the distribution of income and wealth.

Dr. Anderson summarized the recent work of three authors, John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Ronald Dworkin. These authors addressed the issue of individual vs group rights, and from differing points of view. Rawls was emphasized as he has proposed a theoretical social contract methodology which has received some broad acceptance. But these philosophers treat the question from a 19th century approach, emphasizing individual rights. In an era with an exploding population and a global village, such approaches may not be best. It may be essential to examine the consequences of individual actions on the larger group or groups.

Professor Anderson said that he expects that economic ethics will be an ongoing and dominant topic in the future.

Picketing at Upcoming Billy Graham Crusade

Dr. Billy Graham brings his notorious "crusade" to San Francisco's Cow Palace Thursday October 9th thru Saturday October 11th. Those interested in picketing at the event should contact Don Havis, a freethinking activist in the bay area. Don can be reached at (650) 344-1745. A few suggestions for picket signs are:

Science & Sanity Over Superstition

You Can Be Good Without Jesus

Be a Thinker, Not a Follower

"Religion is bunk" Thomas Edison

There is another way -- SCIENCE

Magical Thinking is Dangerous

God is Obsolete

Prayer is Wishful Thinking

This is not an AOF event, but some members may want to take part just the same.

October AOF Meeting

AOF's October 12th meeting will feature Paul Storey, an engineer who works at McClellan Air Force Base. Paul serves as an AOF Board member, and the focus of his talk will be his viewpoints on atheism vs. religion. Join AOFers at noon for this lively discussion.

President's Message

by Hank Kocol

We have all been surrounded by news of funerals for the past month. Even I, eschewing any news of celebrities, have been unable to keep my mind clear from these distractions. Rather than wax polemic concerning the characters, of lack thereof, of the individuals who dies, I wish to consider two larger issues concerning these events.

First of all, I see the very barbaric funeral customs of this and most every other society. Instead of leaving family and friends to grieve in private for the loss of a loved one, society expects an almost circus atmosphere of "paying respect" to the dead person. The public even thinks it has the right to criticize the way in which funeral arrangements are made by the griever. The expectation is that even those who scorned the individual in life are to behave as if that person were the greatest living being since Jesus.

How can we be sure the same fate does not follow our deaths, that someone will make decisions which would be completely antithetical to our philosophies and characters? We need to act individually to ensure that the circus atmosphere does not follow us to our graves.

Unfortunately, even with clear instructions, there are times when relatives think they know better than the dead person would as to what is appropriate. I have observed religious funerals of freethinkers, presided over by ministers, because some family members have thought to satisfy their own needs rather than accede to the wishes of the deceased. In my own case, I have left specific instructions as to the lack of any rituals to be followed by my survivors. If you elect to do the same, I suggest leaving those instructions with several people, as one person may be easily swayed by religious family members. Since life is uncertain, we should all have such explicit written instructions, no matter our age.

The second larger issue is that the death of a yet to be officially canonized saint has caused weeping and the gnashing of teeth worldwide. If the believers in the cult to which she belonged, or those in similar cults, really believed what they say about an afterlife, they should be celebrating with great joy that this, to their minds, very deserving individual finally has her true reward, to be happy forever with her creator, away from this valley of tears. I see a prime example of the hypocrisy of religion in the reaction of those religious to this death, or that of any other person who has led a "holy" life.

Highway Cleanup

AOF's latest highway cleanup project was conducted on Sunday morning, September 7th. Don Knutson provided the leadership, and the following members provided the manpower and womanpower: Dave Flanders, Steve Borchers, Janet Borchers, Jason Borchers, Steve Knapp, Don Massy, Karen Abbe, Betty Simonsma, Ed McConnell, and Hank Kocol.

The next highway cleanup project is Saturday October 25th at 10:00 a.m. Details and directions are available on our voicemail phone line (920-7834).

Letters to the Editor

Dear AOF Editor,

With regards to Karen Owens's inquiry in the September issue: The Authorities (exousia) were a distinct order of angels in angelology prior to John of Damascus, who standardized the hierarchy in De Fide Orthodoxa (Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, 8th Century); John equated them with the Virtues, placing them 6th in the sequence counting down from the Seraphim, and the association more or less stuck. In the apocryphal Testament of Levi and some early liturgies, the Authorities dwelled in the 4th Heaven with the Thrones (thronoi). After John the name was less commonly used, "Virtues" being the favored appellation for Dionysis the Areopagite, Thomas Aquinas, and Dante. I have no idea why I know these things.

With respect, Ken Nahigian

How I Was Loosed From The Need For A God (Step 2 and a Half)

by Denis De Luchi

The visual journalism of the 1940's was newsreels. During the war they attempted to show the progress of our armed forces in the various theatres, and they showed, until very late in the war, a lot of Hitler, eternally making speeches. He, of course, was the major demon, and in many people's minds remains the major demon of this century and perhaps of all time. The actual extent of his monstrosity didn't become apparent until just before the end of the war, when newsreels began to show the concentration camps.

So, a ten year old boy, sitting in the dark, sees images of skeletal people, of bodies stacked in mass graves, and, most horrible of all, the ovens. Rows and rows of ovens, each just big enough to squeeze a person inside. No visions of a Dantani Hell were as vivid as these actual pictures. Surely the man responsible for all this horror was destined for just such a Hell, especially since he committed suicide. And that was my problem.

Hitler goes to Hell. That seemed fair. (It doesn't anymore. Eternal damnation is excessive, even for Hitler.) But I was told that I could join him, just for missing Sunday mass, or masturbating, without subsequent absolution before death. In fact, Aquinas had a particularly nasty Hell lined up for those who played with themselves. Now that didn't seem fair. A few years later, during Confirmation catechism, I tried to discuss this with a priest. He deflected my questions by wondering if even Judas had avoided Hell. Perhaps, after he hanged himself, but before he died, he gagged out an Act of Contrition from inside the horse collar. This would let the guy who narked on Christ skate.

There are serious questions of degrees of goodness and reasons to be good here, but our discussion seemed to dwell on ways of avoiding Hell, and, I suppose, of avoiding the discussion. It began to look as if I were stuck with a god who put somebody, willy-nilly, on earth, to play a game of staying out of a really bad place. What could the absence of badness have to do with goodness? Was I dumb or was God trivial?

A Visitor From the East

Mynga Futrell visited us this month from Richmond, Kentucky. She was here for only a short time and was unable to come to our meeting. For you newcomers, Mynga was instrumental in helping us get started in 1993. She was Director-at-Large, wrote for our newsletter, and helped in our Charity Dinner project. Later she published our newsletter and helped in the mailing.

When Mynga and her husband, Paul Geisert, moved to Kentucky they were sorely missed, for Paul was our second president and was active in the dinner, newsletter, and Directors-at-Large. They may be able to move back here next year.

Pat Kelley, Ken Nahigian, Cleo and Hank Kocol, Karen Abbe, Peggy Lucas, and Betty Simonsma met at Eppie's to say a quick hello and goodbye to Mynga until she returns.

AU Chapter Meeting

Sacramento's AU Chapter (Americans United for Separation of Church & State) met September 25th. Several AOF members were in attendance. During the meeting, committees were formed for the following three areas of interest: stealth candidates, State Fair Family Fellowship Day, and religion in education.

In addition, Dan Pone (Staff Counsel with the Assembly Judiciary Committee) provided copies of Assembly Bill #1617 and Assembly Constitutional Amendment #24. Both bills relate to religion. AB 1617 is better known as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. ACA 24 provides that "the free exercise of religion and enjoyment of religion without discrimination or preference is guaranteed." For more information regarding future AU meetings, contact Susan Mogull at (916) 944-3459.

From The Internet

From the internet comes an e-mail by Paul O'Brien on a study he did several years ago of mass and serial murderers. This was not a scientific study -- the source of information was his local newspaper, in Flint, Michigan -- but it does have some interesting observations. In nearly all cases (11 out of 12), he found that they either had a very religious upbringing, or they carried a Christian Bible with them at all times, or they believed in demons and devils.

After considering several cases, O'Brien concludes that religion is the catalyst that ignites them into being mass murderers. All the other factors--people with few friends, people with mental problems, bad genes, bad parents, alcoholics, divorce, women raising children by themselves--are present in other instances and in other countries and yet without the catalyst of religion they do not have the serial or mass murders.

And that does make some sense. Inside the fantasyland of religion, events are the result of evil spirits. Life here on earth is trivial compared to eternal life afterwards. Logical, rational thinking draws to a halt. And as O'Brien observes, in so many instances when a multiple murderer is apprehended and wants to explain his conduct, verses from the Bible are right at the top of the explanation.

At around 2400 words, the study is too long to reprint here. The author of the study is:

Paul O'Brien

6033 Hopkins Rd.

Flint, Mi. 48506

(810) 736-8873

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 October 8th 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Divine Deposition

Thursday October 9th 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk -- Life on Mars

Sunday October 12th 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Activism

Wednesday October 15th 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Read the Bible

Sunday October 19th 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Frequently Asked Questions

Wednesday October 22nd 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Study of the Religious Right

Thursday October 23rd 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk -- Giordano Bruno

Friday October 24th 7:30 pm, 6000 Year Anniversary of the Earth

Sunday October 26th 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Atheist Demographics

Member Profile: Karen Abbe

by Cleo Kocol

To promote reason over superstition is one of Karen Abbe's goals in life. In her growing up years, she received a mixed message. She and her sister attended church with her mother while her father went hiking or bike riding. The latter looked like more fun, but Catholicism meant getting new clothes at Easter, something all little girls want. That was the good part; the bad part was following certain rules. To look at the choir -- who were supposed to represent angels -- was a sin. Forbidden to turn around and peek at the singers in back (upstairs from the congregation), she obeyed. Not once did she see what a Catholic choir looked like!

Confession brought questions and subterfuge. "I never had anything interesting to say, so I made things up. The punishment was always the same, a bunch of Hail Mary's and Our Fathers while kneeling in front of some candles. And I had to pay to light the candles! Apparently, you can't confess your sins for free."

Religion was unimportant, ambiguous, and just plain strange. During her teens, Karen quit going to church. She was well on her way to becoming the avowed atheist she is today.

Since its inception, Karen has been very active in AOF. She helped begin the charity dinner project and organized the movie outings. She's an active participant in highway cleanup's. She's a vital part of most AOF social functions. A good speaker, she's given radio and television interviews that present the atheist view. Currently, she is involved in the cable television project. An avowed atheist, she led AOF during one of its most active years. During her term, AOF sponsored the highly successful debate between Freethinker Dan Barker and Christian John Morehead. In addition to being AOF's first secretary, Karen is Immediate Past President.

A public servant, Karen works in the field of child support enforcement. Such work bolsters her independence and helps her realize how peaceful and good her own life is.

When she's not involved with AOF, she can be found country dancing, sun bathing, bicycling, and attending movies. Her all time favorite movies are as diverse as "Rainman," "Tootsie," "Our Town," and "Rosemary's Baby" -- to name a few. They are somehow like her, a many-faceted woman who, in addition to wanting to eradicate superstition, wants to "have a little fun before I die." She says this with a twinkle in the eye that assures that she will succeed in the latter goal and go a long way toward the former.

San Francisco Freethought Seminar

by Kay Dickey

"Defending Reason In An Irrational Age" was the theme of the conference held in San Francisco on September 20th and 21st. There was a strong showing of AOF members at the conference as follows: Kay Dickey, Marv Blackman, Karen Owens, Karen Abbe, Peggy Lucas, Bob Wilson, Judith Hayes, Pat Hayes, Brad Clark, and Alvin Bernstein.

Both the Saturday and Sunday sessions provided critical information for freethinkers. Matt Cherry, Executive Director of the Council For Secular Humanism, spoke about "Building a Secular Humanist Future." Matt expounded on the many functions of the Center For Inquiry International located in Amherst, New York, and about the ten year plan of the organization. These plans include increasing the number of groups in the Campus Freethought Alliance from 40 to 100, increasing the number of Centers For Inquiry, including a new center to be built in Los Angeles, and increase the number of subscribers to Free Inquiry. He mentioned the four aims of the Council are to promote secular humanistic principles, increase support and participation of the public, develop education and research, and to expand resources to meet the goals and long-term growth of the organization.

Later in the program, Bob Steiner gave a demonstration of extra-sensory perception. Bob is the founding Chair of the Bay Area Skeptics, and former President of the Society of American Magicians. Bob's demonstration included a card trick with Karen Abbe as the willing subject.

Norm Allen, Jr., Executive Director of African Americans for Humanism and Associate Editor of Free Inquiry, spoke about promoting reason and "defending the humanistic life stance." Norm's organization has published many articles in Free Inquiry and in the AAH (African American for Humanism) newsletter, by and about black intellectuals and humanists.

AAH promotes skepticism, humanism, and the human rights struggle, and the importance of critical thinking. He published an anthology in 1991 entitled, African-American Humanism.

Dr. Andrew Fraknoi, Chair of the Astronomy Department at Foothill College and Director of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, spoke on the topics of astrology, Heaven's Gate, and the Face on Mars: Distinguishing Fiction Science from Real Science as we Explore the Solar System.

Dr. Fraknoi spoke about the history of astrology. He gave a list of questions to ask astrologers, and gave all the reasons it is inaccurate. He mentioned that the appeal of astrology is that people do not have to make decisions. The reason some astrologers have satisfied clients, is due to the fortune-cookie affect, in which people only remember the ones that are correct. Dr. Fraknoi has co-written a book about astronomy called Voyages Through the Universe.

Molleen Matsumura, Network Project Director, National Council for Science Education, and Associate Editor of Free Inquiry, spoke about creationism vs. Science in American schools. She spoke about significant court decisions regarding evolution and creation issues. Even after Edwards vs. Aguillard in 1987, creationism didn't go away. Many states are attempting to water down evolution.

During the Sunday session, Barry Karr, Executive Director of CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigations of Claims of the Paranormal), spoke about the Council for Media Integrity which is co-chaired by Steve Allen. They will be speaking to the media when unscientific stories are portrayed on television as being scientific. Barry also provided video clips of 'unscientific' programs.

CSICOP has two new annual awards. "A candle in the Dark" award for the best scientific show on television (given to Bill Nye this year) and the "Snuffed Candle" award for the worst pseudo-science show (given to Dan Akroyd this year). CSICOP also has plans to purchase stock in media companies in the hopes of having influence on their productions.

During the Sunday Session, Bob Steiner gave a demonstration of "psychic surgery." Apparently, psychic surgery is illegal in this country so it's being performed in the Philippines and is often performed on terminally ill people. Steiner performed surgery on an audience member, complete with fake blood. He spoke about the harm when people believe in psychic powers. They create dependency relationships, and do not teach -people to work out their problems. He also spoke about acupuncture, reflexology, and debunking faith healers.

Video presentations were given at both the Saturday and Sunday sessions by the representatives of the Center for Inquiry West, for which money is still needed before a site can be established.

The Sunday session ended with an open forum in which members of the audience asked questions of panel members. Representatives from various local groups announced their activities and projects.

Freethought Quote

"God is always the equivalent of *I do not know*."

Annie Besant 1847 - 1933