

# November 1997

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## Upcoming Carl Sagan Symposium

Don't miss AOF's upcoming Carl Sagan symposium! It will be held Sunday November 9th noon to 4:00 at the Sierra 2 Community Center Room 10, 2791 24th Street in Sacramento. This event will be held during AOF's regular meeting time and place, although we have reserved the meeting room for extra time to accommodate an extended program.

The program will begin with Dr. Scott Perry, Professor of Astronomy at American River College. Dr. Perry will speak on "Intelligent Life in the Universe, An Astronomical Perspective." Later, Dr. Brad Dowden, Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Sacramento, will speak on the scientific method as a way of learning about nature. AOF members will fill out the program with presentations about Dr. Sagan's life and contributions, his writings, and the Drake Equation (used to estimate the number of possible intelligent civilizations in our area of the universe).

Dr. Sagan, who died in December 1996, would have been 63 years old on the date of AOF's symposium. Most people remember Dr. Sagan from his very popular public television series, "Cosmos" shown originally in 1980 and repeated many times since then. Dr. Sagan was a prime exponent of the teaching of science and the scientific method to the public. "Cosmos" dramatized one part of science, astronomy, and led many people to study further that science and others, increasing the awareness of the American public in this most important field of inquiry, especially in our technologically advanced culture.

Among Dr. Sagan's contributions are many books some of which are: Intelligent Life in The Universe, The Dragons of Eden, Broca's Brain, Cosmos, Contact, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors, Pale Blue Dot, The Demon Haunted World, and Billions and Billions. Dr. Sagan was very active in the SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) project. He also developed the coding used on the Voyager spacecraft. Voyager has already left the solar system and contains information decodable by other intelligences concerning the source of the spacecraft and messages from earth. He was also instrumental in the Mars Lander project. From a societal perspective, Dr. Sagan was one of the first scientists to propose the possibility of a "nuclear winter" after a nuclear war.

As always, visitors are welcomed at AOF meetings, so spread the word about this special meeting. See you there!

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## President's Message

by **Hank Kocol**

I have just returned from the conference of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) in Amherst, New York. Some of the ideas generated at that conference indicate the direction in which the affiliated societies are heading. As with all such meetings, I do not necessarily agree with all the proposals, but exciting possibilities have arisen.

I was very impressed by the Center for Inquiry (CFI), headquarters of the CSH as well as that for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), of which the Skeptics are a part. Their library now contains 25,000 catalogued volumes and several thousand others, most notably from the estate of Gordon Stein.

CFI has established several regional CFIs, most recently at the University of Moscow and at Oxford. Nationally, regional CFIs are located in Los Angeles, Kansas City, and Boulder. Each center is directed by CFI as to policy, but develops its own programs within CFI guidelines. All sponsor lectures, conferences, and debates on subjects of interest, from pseudo science to philosophical discussions on secular principles. Future sites are planned for San Francisco and other mid-west cities.

Relating specifically to AOF interests, the conference contained workshops about mentoring (whether for someone to begin a new organization or become a future leader), and on celebrants for secular rituals having to do with life changes such as naming, coming of age, weddings, and funerals. Some attendees see a need for such; others are simply reminded of the religion they have left and abhor all rituals.

I was disturbed that the Skeptics met apart from the secular group for some sessions. At first, I was unsure as to which group I belonged, being interested in both facets of inquiry. I was educated in the fact that the Skeptics wish to stay away from the atheist groups since many of

their members are clergy and, thus, they fear losing support from some members if religion is criticized. With that knowledge, I did attend the appropriate break-out sessions.

A very enlightening program was presented by Edward Tabash, Beverly Hills, concerning the spread of the atheist message. His argument is that most people are unwilling to listen to rational arguments while they have an emotional attachment to religion. He challenges those people by relating a true story of how his mother became an atheist after very emotional life experiences, a message which opens to theists the possibility of someone's becoming an atheist. Once that door is opened, he claims to have a much easier time explaining the atheist message.

In all, this is only a summary of the conference. I will give a fuller report at a membership meeting (NOT in November).

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## Picketing at Billy Graham Crusade

by Kay Dickey

On Saturday October 11th, my husband, Marv Blackman, and myself joined about 10 members of the Atheists of the San Francisco Region (ASFR) and the Humanist Community of The Peninsula (HCOTP) for a special event. We conducted an informational picketing action outside of the Billy Graham Crusade at the Cow Palace in San Francisco. Members of both ASFR and HCOTP had also picketed on Thursday and Friday.

The purpose of this picketing was to let those attending the event know that there is a different point of view of the world than that which is advocated by religionists such as Billy Graham. The theme of the picketing was "Science, Not Superstition." We greeted the people who were walking up to the entrance and people getting off of buses with signs such as Science, Not Superstition, Christianity is a Myth, Religion is Bunk (Thomas Edison), and There Are No Demons Haunting the World (Carl Sagan).

Some of the faithful just ignored us, some made nasty comments as they walked by, (i.e., "you're going to hell," etc.) And a few engaged us in conversations. One young man stood and shouted at all of us. It was an interesting evening, and we felt we had done our small part in disseminating information to the crusade attendees that there are alternative ideas and viewpoints. And as usual, it was great meeting and talking with fellow unbelievers.

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**Letters to the Editor**

10/14/97

Dear AOF Editor:

As Bea and I listened to Paul Storey's slide presentation on atheism vs. religion we were in awe at the amount of factual material he has assembled regarding the myths, fairy tales, and destruction that religion has wrought upon the world. Only when questions were being taken from the floor and a guest suggested that it was atheist Russia that introduced mass murder to the world did I wonder why AOF and other like groups go through this exercise of dissecting the bible, reliving that history and then attempting public relations to prove we're nice people. Is it just to reassure ourselves?

I feel that most of us agree that separation of church and state is our goal, not converting the religious world, or making them love us. We live at a critical time in America and only if groups such as ours put their thoughts and energies towards stopping the Vatican and the Christian right from forcing on us their school vouchers and prayer in schools, banning of abortion, forbidding death with dignity, along with greater government support of religion, can we live in a truly free society.

In life, if we are confronted by a force too large to change, we must work to control it, and that should be our mission.

Ken Dunn

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## **How I Was Loosed From The Need For A God (Step 3)**

**by Denis De Luchi**

Just before I was off to college, the family habit concerning religion became fixed. On a Sunday morning I would get my dad's Buick and five bucks for the collection basket, and my friend George and I went to mass.

George and I had it figured out. There was only a small amount of mass that had to be witnessed to save one's soul from Hell. That lasted from 10:17 to 10:48, depending upon how good the altar boys were. We timed our arrival and departure accordingly, saving our souls but not wasting time on prayers for Dominic Balinese, whoever he was. We would enter as quietly as possible by the rear side door, stand in back by the confessionals, and make our escape when we were sanctified.

The parish was run by an unpleasant Monsignor, a large bald man. Even before the incident which finalized my divorce from the church, he had come to personify a fictional character to whom I had recently been introduced. In A.J. Cronin's "The Keys to the Kingdom," the young priest/protagonist, a fine and truly spiritual man, describes another priest whom he dislikes with his most bitter invective. He calls him a "gross and worldly man." This was our Monsignor.

He was a man who liked to yell at children, whose smile was thin and stiff, and whose great pleasure was forcing young confessors out of the anonymous dark and onto his lap for their confessions. Timing when to go to confession to avoid him is what had suggested timing other holy activities.

On the day of the divorce, George and I arrived at our usual time and took our usual place. The monsignor noticed us immediately, came back to our position, and ordered us to sit in a pew near the front of the church. We declined. He ordered again. We declined again. His next utterance, an ultimatum, convinced me that some people shouldn't be priests. "Go to the front or leave!"

We went to the front AND left, with some style, since that old pseudo-gothic church was quite large, and our divorce procession of two took us down the aisle and out the altar door. I'm sorry to say that the church has since been sold off to pay liabilities for priests molesting young boys.

I never went back to church, except to marvel at Gothic or Romanesque architecture. My mother returned to regular mass about the time I left, and has remained faithful even though they took her parish church away from her to pay for their sins. She still thinks I'll go to heaven.

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## **AU Chapter Meeting**

Sacramento's AU Chapter (Americans United for Separation of Church & State) met on Friday, October 17th in the basement of the state capitol. Dave Flanders and Karen Abbe represented AOF at the meeting. AU President Susan Mogull stated she would be attending the national convention in November (in Washington, D.C.). Jerry Sloane gave an update on the state fair situation -- his plan was to attend a meeting on October 25th at the state fair and will be asking some pointed questions. Jan Ferris, new religion editor of the Bee, agreed to have lunch with Jerry Sloan to discuss various things -- anyone who wants to be privy to the conversation can call Jerry and maybe come along on the lunch date.

A reminder to those at the meeting is that membership is \$25 to join AU. Also, Susan and others noted that AU needs people with good speaking and writing skills so people don't go off half-cocked with the newspaper and other media. A suggestion about having a special program (speakers, etc.) was bandied about. In addition, AU bylaws were distributed. The next AU meeting will be at CTA (California Teachers Association) 1118 10th Street on Thursday November 20th at 11:30 a.m. Hopefully someone from AOF can attend. For more information regarding AU meetings, contact Susan Mogull at (916) 944-3459.

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

Limited information was available for the national atheist programs submitted from other cities for replay on Sacramento Cable's Channel 74, so an abbreviated listing will follow.

Please note, however, that the joint freethought cable program (spearheaded by Peggy Lucas and others) will be premiering Friday night, November 7th! Yeah! This inaugural program features a distinguished panel discussing the topic of UFO abductions, and other such nonsense. The show was produced in Sacramento, therefore, it can be replayed on Sacramento Cable Channel 73, not 74. Please make a note of it. The show is called Access Reality, and it will eventually be a regular program shown at a regularly scheduled day and time.

Friday November 7th 10:00 pm, Access Reality (Sacramento) -- Aliens and UFO Abductions -- Channel 73

Saturday November 8th 4:00 pm, Access Reality (Sacramento) -- Aliens and UFO Abductions (repeat) -- Channel 73

Sunday November 9th 10:00 am, Access Reality (Sacramento) -- Aliens and UFO Abductions (repeat) -- Channel 73

Sunday November 9th 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Congress Promotes Bigotry -- Channel 74

Wednesday November 12th 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Atheist Issues -- Channel 74

Thursday November 13th 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk --

Atheist Issues -- Channel 74

Sunday November 16th 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Dr. John Higdon Interview -- Channel 74

Wednesday November 19th 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Atheist Issues -- Channel 74

Sunday November 23rd 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Bill Baird Interview -- Channel 74

Wednesday November 26th 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Atheist Issues -- Channel 74

Thursday November 27th 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk --

Atheist Issues -- Channel 74

Sunday November 30th 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Promise Keepers -- Channel 74

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## Member Profile: Don Knutson

by Cleo Kocol

Born in Fairbanks, Alaska, Don Knutson and his family left there five years later. According to family stories they left because his strong-willed mother slapped a military general when his father was only a corporal. Don brought his own teenage rebellion under control attending an excellent school where Japanese officers had trained during World War II. The next stop was Ft. Riley, Kansas which, according to Don, "was the true pits." He felt that the military had betrayed his father by sending him there. But Don went on to become a graduate of the University of Kansas.

Early on, Don had a negative impression of church. His mother, a very independent woman, formulated her own brand of religion. She hated the new testament and admired the Jews who she felt had a tendency to be rich. She drilled into her children her attitudes which made Don feel very guilty. He always had a lukewarm relationship with a god he viewed as vindictive.

After he was on his own, he began attending a Unitarian Church, but it was the Women's Bible, written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, that was the real eye-opener for him. "What a radical work! That women could take such a critical look at the bible and patriarchal society was profoundly liberating. Religion aids ethnocentrism, bigotry and hatred." Also, feminism helped him to see that one doesn't need to know everything.

The Unitarian Church was not answering Don's needs. After seeing a listing for AOF in News and Review, he attended a meeting and was impressed, "with the honesty and straightforwardness of the members." An activist, he soon volunteered to coordinate the AOF Highway Cleanup Program and is heading that program at this time. Don is actively involved in numerous groups whose members work for social change. "American influence is felt around the world. If we get together in numbers, activists can exert pressure on governments." In July he was in Nicaragua. He believes in bringing change that is for the good of all.

Currently a property manager, this allows him to be his own boss. He states that he never wanted to specialize, to settle on one thing. He's worked in areas as diverse as disc jockey and gardener, but he's rigidly independent and believes, "that it is a miracle to be existing here today, and we should enjoy it and be a positive force, someone who views the preciousness of our planet and wants to preserve it, not one who allows others to demean and ignore it."

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## Talking With Clara Carlson

by Cleo Kocol

Newsletter subscriber Clara Carlson lives in Port Angeles on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula. With views of the Olympic Mountains and the San Juan Straits, it is a place of rare beauty, but not a place where freethinkers abound. Clara Carlson is one exception.

A 91 year old great-grandmother and a woman of charm and wisdom, she never lets the local populace lose sight of the fact that when it comes to belief systems, there is more than one view. She has no qualms in stating that she's a non-believer and a radical feminist. She has been a vocal minority in her area for much of the 37 years since she and her husband (95 year old Ralph) retired to Port Angeles. Clara was a trained nurse, he a Red Cross official.

Recently, when a creche sprouted at the local post office, she fought the locals and the post office until she won her point. Through the years her views were often seen via letters to the editor of the local papers. Because of her opinions, she's been subjected to crank calls and crank letters, but more often she's been treated with respect, and by those who know her, affection. Local television and radio programs have interviewed her, and she has always been able to express her opinions.

During women's history month, she's appeared at local schools and colleges to tell about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other early-day-suffragists, and in 1992 she went to Washington, D.C. as part of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) delegation for the huge national rally and march supporting the pro-choice position. She has been a member of NOW, the Women's Political Caucus, Emily's List, and many other women's organizations as well as FFRF and the AHA. Clara began life in Oakland, California, spent her high school years in Lincoln, California, and graduated from San Rafael High in 1924. In a question and answer session, Clara gave the following opinions and insights.

Question: (Knowing that as a child Clara attended various Christian churches.) How did you come to your present belief system or philosophy?

Clara: "In my teens I began to question the dogma of the Judeo-Christian beliefs. By the time I was 18, I was well on the way to being an agnostic. After a time, I realized that for me agnosticism was a safety valve, a crutch, that I was an atheist. I asked myself, why do we have to follow Hebrew and Christian myths as fact? A belief in a Hebrew god is unrealistic. He certainly is not a loving god, but how can anyone say what a god would be? I never felt finished as an agnostic. With Atheism I feel satisfied. I have all the answers I need. For some time I was part of a Unitarian Fellowship, but I quit them when they got too 'churchy.' They wanted a minister and hymn singing."

Question: How did you or do you satisfy your needs for community with like-minded people?

Clara: "After leaving the Fellowship, I took part in a local group we called a 'think tank.' Also through the years I've gone to many free-thinking conventions and national conferences, mainly the American Humanist Association and the Freedom From Religion Foundation. For many years I also was the oldest woman in attendance at a local women's camp each fall. I also was co-founder of a women's group called The Wavemakers which was active for many years. We had no dues, officers, and the membership was restricted to eight. We took turns reviewing feminist books and tried to get a women's center funded in Port Angeles but without success. I also correspond with several freethinkers."

Question: What issue are you working on currently?



Clara: "I have become most concerned about the Waldorf Schools. I've talked to Dan Dugan who sent me material, and I've sent copies of this material to the schools in this area."

Question: Is that your abiding passion?

Clara: "It's one of my concerns. I'd say my big passion in life now is overpopulation. It should be the world's number one priority."

Question: You called yourself a radical feminist. What do you mean by that?

Clara: "It means that we've been fighting the fight for equality for so long I grow impatient with those who don't get it. When I was speaking to a college class regarding the women's movement, I was asked what I would teach children today. I told them I would teach them manners. Manners are merely consideration for other people. Consideration for other people extends to groups and countries. I would also teach young people sex education and marriage training before they get to high school. For young girls in sexual situations, self-esteem is necessary to give one the courage to say no."

Question: Do you enjoy dispensing knowledge?

Clara: "I'm happy to open someone's mind, especially if they're a person loaded with stereotypes. Circumstances and the ages of life alter one's thinking. You have to change and adjust. If not, you fall by the wayside."

Question: What do you think about American marriage?

Clara: "Traditional marriage is based on romantic dreams. I'm against that. I believe a written contract between two people is much more desirable, a contract based on reason. This should be written when both are thinking rationally and not when they are in the heat of passion which is what happens in traditional marriage. As for relationships between men and women, they too, should be based on consideration. Please and thank you are needed; we should never be at liberty to scream and yell at one another."

Question: Are you political?

Clara: "I've been a member of the League of Women Voters for 40 years. That has helped me know the thinking on both sides of an issue. I believe strongly that all people should vote and they should be as active in local, regional, and national politics as they are capable of being."

Question: I understand you have some hobbies that tie into your beliefs.

Clara: "If you mean my storytelling, I find that everyone expects me to tell feminist stories. One man started telling a Christian story, and I stopped him immediately."

*Clara is also a talented painter and sends friends and family members her original watercolor greeting cards. An avid reader, she devours books regarding freethinking and feminism. A*

*current favorite is Women Without Superstition, edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor. I feel lucky to count Clara as a personal friend, and I hope to emulate her in the years to come.*

See you at the November 9th symposium!