

December 1997

Contents

- [Skepticism Conference at Sacramento City College](#)
- [President's Desk](#)
- [December AOF program](#)
- [Letters to the Editor](#)
- [How I was Loosed from the need for a God \(Steps 4 through Whatever\)](#)
- [Carl Sagan Symposium](#)
- [Freethought Quotes](#)
- [Atheist TV Programs for Your Viewing Pleasure](#)
- [Highway Cleanup](#)
- [Modern Theater Ensemble](#)

Skepticism Conference at Sacramento City College

On October 31st and November 1st, the Staff Resources Center at Sacramento City College hosted a conference entitled "Skepticism and Belief." The program featured three outstanding speakers.

- Social psychologist and author Carol Tavris on " the Psychology Wars," the conflict between therapists and research/scientific psychologist.
- Physician Wallace Sampson on pseudo science in Modern alternative medicine, and
- UC Berkeley professor of anthropology and folklore Alan Dundes on the psychological approach to legends and other forms of folklore.

Tavris talked about the difference between therapists and scientific psychologists as illustrated in the cases where there are allegations that children have been abused. Therapists were not interested in whether the abuse actually occurred; they were interested in whether the patient believed abuse had occurred, because the patient was acting on that belief. If that belief leads to legal charges being brought against someone, such as a parent or day care provider, then the situation changes. It is vital that the truth of the abuse be established, as someone could end up spending the rest of his life in prison based on these charges.

This led her discussion of how children could frequently be led to believe something suggested to them repeatedly, whether it was true or not, and how the legal system should respond to cases

like this to protect children who were really being abused and also protect people who were falsely charged.

Sampson discussed alternative medical treatments that included homeopathy and group therapy for cancer. Evidence to support alternative treatments is generally lacking, and studies that have been done are of such poor quality that their findings are ambiguous at best.

Often the treatments are offered as folk medicines, practiced in some parts of the world for hundreds of years. There are intense political and economic forces involved in alternative medicine. Failures of conventional medicine are inevitable - everyone is going to die eventually - and this guarantees that there will be opportunities for practitioners of alternative medicine to offer attractive (though futile) hope for desperate people.

Dundes related one of the functions of folklore, which is to pass cultural wisdom on to new generations. An example is the vanishing hitchhiker story, which functions as a way to relate to young girls the dangers of hitchhiking with strangers. Among the examples of urban legends he cited were the \$250 cookie recipe (from either Niemann-Marcus or Mrs. Field's, depending on the version) as a reaction to perceived corporate greed.

Freudian symbolism occurs frequently in folklore, and Dundes had several examples. With the advent of copiers, fax machines, and the Internet, tales can spread more widely and quickly than ever before.

President's Message

by Hank Kocol

One of the great attractions to me for AOF is its activism. Members take part in many different activities to bring to the local community the facts of our existence and that we are very conscious of community needs and try to fulfil those needs.

Traditionally, those needs have been filled by charitable organizations, mostly attached to churches. Hence, the public thinks "churches" when they hear of charities and organizations which aid the local community. On a larger, national scale, the public does realize that there are secular charitable societies such as American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, and the Alzheimer's Society. However, the existence of secular charities to benefit the needy individual members of society is largely unknown.

As I travel to other freethought groups and to national associations of such groups, there are always parts of the meeting wherein representatives of the various groups report on the activities of their home groups. Such reports may include membership data, actions concerning church/state issues, and the ability to advertise the existence of the groups with the local media. Representatives of AOF also provide such information to members of the audience. However, at

every such forum, the activities that bring the greatest applause are the projects involving the highway cleanup and the charity dinners. Every time those two projects are discussed, audience reaction is, " Why didn't we think of that?" and "How can we get started on such projects?"

Don Knutson is doing a great job coordinating the highway project. We have had wonderful coordinators in the past for the charity dinners - Betty Simonsma, Kay Stinson, Jody Craig, Paul Geisert, Mynga Futrell, Karen Abbe and Heather Lucio. However, the project is about to fail for the lack of a coordinator to continue this work.

Perhaps the reason that a new coordinator has not volunteered is the perception of the work involved. The coordinator position description is something like the following: makes arrangements with the community center for a date for the dinner, generally once per quarter; decides upon the menu to be served; collects donations for the purchase of the groceries and associated items; purchases the groceries and/or asks volunteers to do so; obtains volunteers for cooking, serving, and clean-up.

In the past there have been no lack of members who would donate funds, purchase groceries, cook , serve, and clear the room after dinner. There is no fixed term for a coordinator; someone may volunteer for the position on a one-time-only basis. Thus that person can determine whether he/she wishes to continue for another time or relinquish the position to another. One solution may be a rotating coordinator among several AOF members.

The rewards of serving the charity dinner are great. The diners are people who are obviously in need, including children. Many are poorly clothed. Some have other obvious needs such as dental or medical care. These people are not the " welfare queens" touted by some politicians in their stories to justify removing aid from those in need.

My plea, as well as the plea of the needy is simply, "Won't someone care enough to coordinate the charity dinners, even once?"

December AOF Program

The next AOF meeting will be on Sunday at the Sierra-2 Community Center. The program, from noon till 2:00 pm will feature Clara Henderson, a volunteer lobbyist for state/church issues, speaking on " Fighting the Two-Headed Dragon, Church and State"

Ms. Henderson became interested in her subject when working for tax reform. It became obvious to her that no such real reform could occur unless churches paid their fair share of taxes as is required of the rest of us.

Ms. Henderson is a former auditor for the California Franchise Tax Board and is currently a Tax and Financial Analyst for a major international corporation. Thus, she certainly has the

background and knowledge to speak authoritatively on her subject. This promises to be a most interesting meeting.

Letters to the Editor

12/3/97 New York Times wire service report re the KY shootings of students at high school prayer meeting: The boy's family minister named Rev. Paul Donner called a press conference Tuesday to say that Carneal (the shooter) had been confirmed in May. " I'm firmly convinced Michael Carneal is a Christian. He's a sinner, yes, but not an atheist."

Bad enough he should shoot up a gathering and frightful that he is a sinner. Thank God he's not an atheist, too boot.

NOTE: The above comment was erroneously attributed to me (Pat Kelley) in the print version of AOF News & Views. I only forwarded the comment which was made by someone else on an internet discussion group. Now I can't find my copy of the forwarding to properly attribute the remark - help?

How I Was Loosed From The Need For A God (Steps 4 through Whatever)

by **Denis De Luchi**

Actually, gods are kind of fun. At least some of them are. When I went to college, although I majored in scientific discipline, I studied the literature of several religions. Siva turns out to be a fun god if one likes black humor. Yahweh cum allah is just as petulant, and his literature is basically silly.

I found American Indian mythology the most aesthetically pleasing, but I found some form of Buddhism the most attractive, for two reasons. First, it seems to be the antithesis of evangelism, which I detest. Second, there is a lack of an external godhead, which is the next step to non-church.

By the time I was introduced to Einstein's cosmology, I was used to seeing things work without a god. I was shocked to learn that Albert was an adamant theist, but when I chased his god down, I found that it didn't matter. Along the way, I also thought of a couple of ways to physically prove the existence of a god, besides parlor tricks. The only trouble is, one would have to be that god to gather the necessary data. Maybe the Mormons have it right.

It's true that I've made some compromises. To sham the family, my wife and I talked an Episcopalian priest into performing our wedding ceremony. He did it in the chapel in the San Francisco Presidio. The chaplain there had refused the task, stating that he didn't want "to enable people to bring children into the world to go to hell." And, when I applied for the astronaut program (at the time the Aerospace Research Test Pilot Program), I listed myself as a Unitarian. I knew how the Air Force felt about atheists. As it turned out, it didn't matter. I got involved in space in a different way.

I finally underwent a kind of non-believer's epiphany, which is another whole story, and achieved a non-believer's state of grace. I don't drink or smoke or cheat or steal. I would never lie for self-aggrandizement, although I might make a deathbed promise I had no intention of keeping. In short, I live pretty much like a Mormon or Moslem, but I'm None of the Above. What always amazes me is the number of people who have reached a similar world view from such disparate starting points, and without liturgy or litany. Why is that, do you suppose?

Carl Sagan Symposium

AOF hosted the Carl Sagan Memorial Symposium in place of the regular meeting on Sunday, November 9th, which was the date of Sagan's birth.

President Hank Kocol introduced the symposium with a summary of Sagan's achievements as a scientist, as a popularizer of science, and as a debunker of the various manifestations of pseudo science. Hank then gave a selection of excerpts from eulogies of Sagan by Richard Dawkins, Arthur C. Clarke, and others.

One of the features of the symposium was a very friendly and warm lecture by Professor Scott Perry from the American River College on the subject, "Intelligent Life in the Universe - An Astronomical Perspective." Professor Perry began with several brief readings from Carl Sagan's writings, including a reaffirmation of the idea that science has a spiritual component, and that, contrary to the beliefs of some, and understanding of science can facilitate a greater appreciation of the beauty around us. Then he gave brief perspectives on several crucial topics, including cosmology, the solar system, star types, and the concept that all living organisms are constituted of recycled star material.

Perry followed with a short summary of the history of astronomy. He illustrated his lecture with various photographs illustrating regions of star birth, clusters, galaxies, etc. He concluded with a description of the differentiation of the materials which aggregated during the birth of the planet Earth, resulting in a dense core of heavy metals and a surrounding mantle containing the lighter organic building-block elements, principally carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen, in form of CO₂ and methane (for Hydrogen). Professor Perry took quite a number of questions from the audience at the end of his lecture.

AOF member Steve Knapp, who has graduate training in astronomy, then gave a short description of the Drake Equation, which is a tool for estimating (or guesstimating) the number of possible intelligent civilizations in the Milky Way Galaxy. The Drake Equation is, however, merely a conceptual aid. Steve talked about the ongoing SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) efforts and showed slides of some of the large radio telescopes involved in the searches.

After a short intermission, Cleo Kocol, herself an experienced professional writer, discussed Sagan's writing from a literary perspective. She read short excerpts from some of Sagan's works to highlight his literary talent.

Brad Dowden, Professor of Philosophy at Cal State University, Sacramento, delivered the second half of the symposium entitled, "Fair Play for Pseudo Science." This talk addressed how to distinguish between (hard) science and pseudo science (such as parapsychology, or creation science). Professor Dowden suggested that science is characterized by (1) Goals, (2) Results, and (#) Methods. These properties can be used in a "Demarcation Criterion" to distinguish science from pseudo science. Science depends both on experiment and also on the underlying theory. Parapsychology has had 100 years to make its case, and it has failed to produce results, and there is no theory. Similar remarks apply to astrology.

He emphasized that Science invites refutation. For example, atomic theory is accepted because scientists have been unable to discover a better one. Marxism and Creationism are forms of ideology, where a premise is assumed and evidence is sought out. In science, over the long run the process accepts what is the best explanation of the natural system, without prejudgment. Professor Dowden's talk was followed by considerable spirited discussion.

Hank Kocol wrapped up the symposium with a brief summary. Just about all of the audience, which had filled every seat in the meeting room, stayed for the entire four-hour program.

Freethought Quotes

"The most dangerous madmen are those created by religion, and people whose aim is to disrupt society always know how to make good use of them on occasion."

Denis Diderot (1713-84), French philosopher.

"The act of bellringing is symbolic of all proselytizing religions. It implies the pointless interference with the quiet of other people."

Ezra Pound

"You never see animals going through the absurd and often horrible folleries of magic and religion. Dogs do not ritually urinate in the hope of persuading heaven to do the same and send down rain. Asses do not bray a liturgy to cloudless skies. Nor do cats attempt, by abstinence

from cat's meat, to wheedle the feline spirits into benevolence. Only man behaves with such gratuitous folly. It is the price he has to pay for being intelligent but not, as yet, quite intelligent enough."

Aldous Huxley

"The Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one."

David Hume

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.

Thursday December 11 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk - Skeptical Review -- Channel 74

Sunday December 14 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) - Circumcision -- Channel 74

Wednesday December 17 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) - Atheist Issues -- Channel 74

Sunday December 21 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) - John Jones -- Channel 74

Sunday December 28 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) - Baptists, Boy Scouts, & Bigotry -- Channel 74

Thursday January 8 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk - Atheists on Television -- Channel 74

Highway Clean-Up Set for December

The next highway clean-up project will occur on Saturday, December 20th, noon till 2:00 pm. The reason for the date and start time is two-fold:

- After that date, there will be no opportunity for cleanup until mid-January, since we do not perform that work during holiday weekends.
- The winter season will be upon us with its associated early morning fog. The later start time will allow fog to lift

For further information, including the possibility of rain cancellation call the 24-hour voice mail line at: 916-920-7834 and leave a message for Don Knutson.

Modern Theater Ensemble

If you're interested in improvisation and theater games, join others during an evening of comedy and improv on Friday, December 19th at 8:00 pm. This is an event for "those who wanna." All performances are held at the Sierra-2 Community Center. Follow posted signs to the event.