

July 1998

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The July 12 meeting speaker will be Fritz Stevens, Director of the Center for Inquiry-West in Los Angeles.

Fritz Stevens is a fourth generation freethinker active in the humanist and skeptic movement for the last nine years. He holds a B.A. in Theatre/Film, from CSU Fullerton. He has held nineteen jobs ranging from the conventional to the weird, predominantly in real estate, nightclub management, live entertainment, graphic design and sales.

He is a co-founder and president of SHOLA (Secular Humanists of Los Angeles) for 8 of the last 9 years. He is the former president of the Alliance of Humanist, Atheist, and Ethical Culture Organizations of Los Angeles County. He has been a co-organizer of several HUMCON conferences in Southern California over the last several years.

Besides being the Director of the Center for Inquiry-West in L.A., he is also the Regional Director of the Council for Secular Humanism, and President of SHOLA.

Responding to slurs

I want to start promoting an idea for doing something about the constant slurs flung at unbelievers. We are equated with everything nihilistic and immoral. Just yesterday, the local [Minneapolis] paper's Faith and Values section featured an article about Africans (from Africa) coming here as missionaries to straighten us out. The cutline with the photo of the "missionary" being interviewed quoted the guy saying he came here because "the Bible said to go to all nations. There's more killing here today, and so many runaway kids and drugs, divorce and many atheists and agnostics..."

WELL! And just where does he get off lumping US with these social problems!?!? This is as bad as when Hilary Clinton, in reporting on the Beijing Women's Conference, wrote in a newspaper column, "After all, we're not radicals or atheists out to destroy the family."

As soon as I log off here I will let the newspaper know exactly what I think of that "missionary's" bigotry and ask for equal space to straighten out him and all like-minded others.

What we need is a joint all-freethought-organizations Anti-Defamation League. Maybe we can pick up on Margaret Downey's Anti-Discrimination Support Network. It's focused on Boy Scout bigotry so far but there's no reason it can't be expanded. Every last organization of unbelievers in the country joins the Network. We hire a clipping service to monitor this crap. We get local groups to be alert for slurs and let us know about them ASAP. We come down on the perpetrators like gangbusters with news releases, talk show interviews, legal threats (and maybe action). We do this until all these bigots are scared to death to imply we unbelievers are anything less than decent, normal citizens deserving of respect. I intend to do a major rant on this topic in the Oct-Dec. issue of Secular Nation. There is just a ton of material showing the mean-spirited way unbelievers are treated. I am way past being fed up!!! (Oh, and of course, I will rant politely. But firmly.) Do any of the orgs on this list see a problem with forming a joint anti-discrimination committee? Strength in numbers. One voice alone is just a pipsqueak. Let's face it. Thanks!!

Marie Alena Castle, President, Atheist Alliance

Wisconsin Supreme Court Upholds Vouchers for Religious Schools

The Wisconsin Supreme Court on June 10 issued a 4-2 decision upholding the expansion of the Milwaukee voucher program to religious schools (thus overturning contrary rulings of the trial and appellate courts). The court majority held that the expanded voucher program - under which public funds are provided to religious schools - does not violate either the state or the federal Constitutions.

This case has had a long and circuitous history. A broad coalition of parents and other groups filed the case in 1995 in the state trial court, but pro-voucher Gov. Thompson then asked the state Supreme Court to hear the case as a matter of original jurisdiction, which it agreed to do (bypassing the trial court and the court of appeals). In March 1996, the Court split 3-3 on the constitutionality of including religious schools in the voucher program, and so it sent the case back to the trial court to start all over. The coalition won in both the trial and appellate courts, but lost in the state Supreme Court.

Politically, it's important to note that between March 1996 and now, one of the Justices on the coalition's side of the 3-3 split retired, and was replaced (via election) by someone strongly supported by Gov. Thompson. This newest Justice provided the swing vote for the majority in this decision.

Editor's note: If these schools are receiving public money, then the taxpayers have every right to know how it is being spent. Who are they admitting, and who are they rejecting for admission? On what criteria are they making admissions decisions? Do they admit handicapped students? What are they teaching? What do their texts say? How do the students perform on standardized tests? What are teachers' salaries? Administrators' salaries? How much of their funding goes to administration and how much to the classroom? Let the audit of these schools begin.

Solstice Outing

Lake Tahoe, the jewel of the Sierras, was the setting for AOF's first summer solstice get-together in the mountains. Although the turnout was slight, those who came gave a thumbs up to making this an annual event. The picnic table groaned with good food. The weather was perfect; the company tremendous. After a potluck picnic, we took the bike trail to the historic home sites. The Forest Service maintains and conducts guided tours of homes that were built as luxurious summer places beginning in the Victorian era and extending into the 1920's. In the 1950's the affluent owners began going to Europe and other far off places instead of coming to Tahoe with their servants and families and celebrity visitors. They sold the redwood and cedar complexes to the Forest Service. Also of interest to AOFers was the slide show and exhibits at the nearby museum. Thanks to Kay Dickey for setting up this fine event.

Internet Site of the month

The recommended Internet site for July is:

<http://www.talkorigins.org/>

This site is a newsgroup devoted to the discussion and debate of biological and physical origins. Most discussions in the newsgroup center on the creation/evolution controversy, but other topics of discussion include the origin of life, geology, biology, catastrophism, cosmology and theology.

The site contains an archive of articles and essays, most of which have appeared in talk.origins at one time or another. The primary reason for this archive's existence is to provide mainstream scientific responses to the many frequently asked questions (FAQs) and frequently rebutted assertions that appear in talk.origins.

Quotes of the month

"Why don't we teach astrology in the schools? Astrology holds that the course of each human life is determined to a considerable degree by the position of the stars in the sky at the exact moment of the individual's birth. Belief in it, in one variant or another, has probably been held by most of the people on earth. Even today, some universities in India offer degrees in the subject. Yet American believers do not pressure boards of education to add their subject to the curriculum. If believers in astrology became as well organized as the creationists, it is hard to see how their demands could be withstood."

Garrett Hardin, "Marketing Deception as Truth"

"What is it about the idea of a god that gives it its stability and penetrance in the cultural environment? The survival value of the god meme in the meme pool results from its great psychological appeal. It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence. It suggests that injustices in this world may be rectified in the next. The 'everlasting arms' hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies which, like a doctor's placebo, is none the less effective for being imaginary. These are some of the reasons why the idea of God is copied so readily by successive generations of individual brains. God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture."

Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene.

And Jesus said unto them, "And whom do you say that I am?"

They replied, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the ontological foundation of the context of our very selfhood revealed."

And Jesus replied, "What?"

From the Internet Infidels

Highway Clean-up

The next highway cleanup will be July 18 at 9:00. The starting site is Highway 99 and Elkhorn Blvd., in the Park and Ride lot just west of Highway 99.

To the editor:

I read recently of an incident in Des Moines, where eight men were arrested for robbing a jewelry store last September. Before starting, they prayed for protection during the heist.

Were these guys former football players, who were just in the habit of praying before a big game? Things like this bring the latent theologian in me out of the twilight zone. Let's do some speculation. Where would Yahweh's sympathies lie if the jeweler were an infidel - a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or even an Atheist? Would Yahweh disregard the "Thou Shalt Not Steal" bit in favor of answering his people's prayers? After all, the infidel was worshipping a false god - or no god - which is another one of the big 10 no-no's, and one that got higher billing than "don't steal". Yahweh was once known to zap whole cities for offenses like that. Does a big time sinner like this deserve to have his store robbed, as punishment, or as a lesson to get in line with Yahweh? Would this choice between commandments constitute an ethical dilemma for Yahweh?

Since they got busted, we do know that their invocation didn't work. The only definite theological statement we can make from this incident is the one that freethinkers have known for a long time -- "Nothing fails like prayer".

Michael Cornwell

From the fringe

Ken Nahigian, who gets on the mailing lists of fringe groups as a hobby, sent in a newsletter from an Identity Baptist church in Missouri. The newsletter looks professionally produced, which implies a large circulation. The contents are a real grabber, scary and absurd in the way that only cults can be.

The lead article, about 4 pages plus, is written by the pastor, quotes scripture generously, and concludes that Europe and North America are the true promised land of Israel. The "Edomite Jews" who hate Christ and Christians now control Israel, the ACLU, the news media, the film industry, and the UN. There's more, but it all has that crazy touch.

Reading on, we find a fascinating story (with the source being Inside Edition) about a Nordic type woman who received the transplanted pancreas and kidney from a young murdered black man, and who developed a passion for watching boxing, hockey and basketball, where she had no interest in sports before. This was the result of "cellular memory", and the conclusion is that this was a "soul transplant", the soul being in the blood. Since her bloodline has become adulterated, she has committed adultery. It goes on with warnings about blood transfusions, which carry this risk of this adultery.

There is a scientific section of two pages, which appears to be written at the level of the late elementary grades, and not very professionally. To their credit, lightning is described in terms of positive and negative charges, and not someone's wrath. There is also a paragraph each on pulsars, uranium, Mir, refracting and reflecting (explained so briefly that no one could get much out of it), and why some rocks are smooth (it's water wear). The whole thing really seems out of place in this publication, but that's part of the craziness.

This is what is coming out of the far edge of the religious right. It is worth remembering that there are people out there who are buying into the Christian Identity movement all the way.

Quoted without comment

St. Augustine found lying among the clergy so prevalent that he wrote two books (De Mendacio in 395 AD and Contra Mendacium in 420 AD), urging that it stop.

Gordon Stein, [A Second Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism](#)

June Speaker

The speaker at the June meeting was Hal Verb, former president of the Atheists of the San Francisco Region. His topic was one that most of us had unfortunately never heard of, the American Freeman newspaper published from 1929 to 1951 by E. Haldemann-Julius.

In addition to the American Freeman, Haldemann-Julius also published the series known as the little blue books and the big blue books. The writers he published included Bertrand Russell, Edgar Allan Poe, Upton Sinclair, D. H. Lawrence, and Sigmund Freud. He published all the works of Robert G. Ingersoll.

The American Freeman was started in 1895 as The Appeal to Reason, and was the largest socialist publication in the United States. In 1917 it became the New Appeal, before becoming the American Freeman.

Copies of the American Freeman are hard to find. There is a collection at the University of Kansas, and it is the only complete collection (though Hal Verb's personal collection is almost complete, lacking only a few issues).

Hal read some excerpts from the publications to illustrate the clever, incisive wording that characterized the American Freeman.

It was a remarkable publication, taking strong stands that were not at all popular. The fact that Haldemann-Julius himself never completed grammar school makes it even more remarkable.

Calendar of Events

Sunday, July 12, noon to 2:00 p.m. Fritz Stevens

Sunday, July 19, Newsletter Committee Meeting

Wednesday, July 22, 6:30 p.m. Board Meeting