

August 1998

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August Program - Year Zero

The speaker at the August 9 meeting will be Alan Dechert, the founder of the Year Zero ("YZ") campaign. Year Zero would have the calendar go from the year 1999 to the year 0. YZ is known not only from its supporters (such as Paul Kurtz) but from attacks in the media from the Religious Right.

Alan Dechert recognizes that he has an uphill battle. But it's a battle that is great fun too! The thrill of getting the Religious Right riled-up about this is indescribable joy.

YZ is more involved than it may appear at first glance. It touches on politics, computers, millennium madness, calendrics, history, and, of course, religion. This is one of those new, different, and very interesting ideas.

Internet site of the month

The Internet site of the month, by no coincidence, is Alan Dechert's site. This site is: <http://www.go2zero.com>

Here, you can read about the YZ concept, its rationale, and some reactions to "go to year zero".

July Speaker

The July speaker was Fritz Stevens, Director of the Center for Inquiry-West in Los Angeles.

The nominal title of Fritz Steven's talk was "Freethought vs. Fundamentalism - From Ingersoll to the New Millennium". While Fritz did discuss aspects of the history of this philosophical

battleground, in fact his talk moved from Ingersoll to Paul Kurtz and on to the present and future prospects for the freethought movement.

We often don't realize that the 19th Century was even more fundamental than today: bible reading in schools was common, new sects including the Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists were being created, and freethinkers were unpopular. Ingersoll, who Stevens identifies as the biggest name in freethinking since Thomas Paine, had an uphill battle.

Ingersoll was a lecture-tourer. Fritz' great grandfather personally attended an Ingersoll lecture in the Midwest and was strongly influenced by the experience. Fritz heard his grandfather rail against clergymen, and his father also taught freethinking. Fritz identified himself as a freethinker at about age 11, by which time his family were farmers in San Dimas, east of LA.

Fritz attended a Catholic school for two years, because, as he admitted, his parents wanted to keep his behavior "correct". He went through baptism and then confirmation at ages 10 and 12. Unfortunately, he could think independently by that time, and Fritz caused real trouble for nuns by asking questions in school. When it came time to pick a saint for his confirmation, he picked Saint Thomas the Doubter. He may have been the only one in the history of the school with that pick. The Catholic school experience led him into a more thorough study about state of education and institutions with respect to religiosity.

Fritz became concerned during the 1970s when a resurgence of missionary and other religious activities became pronounced. He notice an increase in the number of "Jesus freaks" on campus. He looked for alternatives. He had some problems with Madalyn Murray O'Hare and the cultlike aspects of her organization, which kept him from moving toward American Atheists, but he remained skeptical. He later founded the Secular Humanists of Los Angeles.

Fritz asked the audience what writers influenced their adoption of freethinking. The most common response was Bertrand Russell. He stated that we are witnessing a frightening resurgence of fundamentalism during last decades leading to the turn of century. It will be interesting to see what happens around 2004 when the much-awaited return of Jesus still hasn't happened.

Current efforts by freethinkers are relatively modest. He mentioned Lance Jencks, of Orange County, CA, who is trying to return the Pledge of Allegiance and the currency to their original neutral forms. The phrase "In God We Trust" came into coins in 1864. Fritz passed around a penny from 1840s and a small bill which don't have the phrase. "Under God" came to the Pledge of Allegiance in the 1950s.

Freethought cannot match the funding of religious organizations. The Center for Inquiry in Amherst raised \$5 million to build its Center building, but in contrast James Dobson and his Focus on the Family organization has an annual budget of \$80,000,000. There is a tremendous organization and resurgence of religious fundamentalism at present time; a member of the audience mentioned the take over of Texas School Boards by fundamentalists.

Where are we going? Fritz says he sees more organizing of freethinkers. He mentioned new affiliate organizations in San Diego and Ventura, and noted the campus freethinkers as an example of getting younger people organized. The Center for Inquiry-West contributes some staff time to help other organizations, like the Secular Organization for Sobriety, but has limited staff and financial resources.

Stevens passed around his newsletter [Friends of the Center for Inquiry-West], which has the goal of being a unifying force among different freethinking groups. It costs about \$2000/mo to publish and mail to 4600 subscribers. Stevens mentioned the difficulty of having to deal with 'independent' people, with diverse biases and interests. He also mentioned some specific difficulties of working on the west coast.

Stevens asked what do we in the audience want to see. He answered a question about momentum, saying we need programs aimed toward 20 year olds and noted one singles-oriented organization. The fragmented nature of freethought demands a very strong leader like Paul Kurtz, who started both the Council on Secular Humanism and the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

A questioner noted that all names associated with the organizations were men. What does this mean? Fritz responded that Joann Mooney had recently come to work at CSH. He wants to have more involvement at the top by women. At least one other organization, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, is headed by Anne Nicole Gaylor.

In answer to a question, Fritz said he is opposed to militant atheists who are as dogmatic as fundies. A questioner pointed out that fundies are largely involved with hot-button issues like abortion and homophobia, and can push these buttons to do great harm. We atheists and freethinkers should present alternatives.

Fritz admitted to pessimism about religion going away. He suggested that human beings want simple comfortable answers, and that this need may be in the genes. He also recommended a greater emphasis on "reason and evidence" vs. mysticism, and less on "no religion". Many people have an emotional attachment to a Martin Gardner type of deism, which is not excluded by reason and evidence.

Quotes of the month

"When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; a Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain 'gnosis,' -- had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble. And, with Hume and Kant on my side, I could not think myself presumptuous in holding fast by that opinion."

Thomas Henry Huxley, "Agnosticism" *Agnosticism and Christianity and Other Essays* (1889, Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1992), p. 162.

"Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away."

Philip K. Dick.

"One man's religion is another man's belly laugh." Robert A. Heinlein.

From the Internet Infidels site, where they were contributed by Larry Reyka.

President's Desk

The Land of the Free

Somehow I sense that a sailor using this map of the universe* to sail around the world would find it quite awkward, to say the least. Navigation has improved over the years because of readjustment of our convictions and practices in the light of our unfolding experience of the real world.

There is a common and mostly unspoken conviction that the moral and political domain is utterly different from the scientific domain. Scientific principles express objective facts, it is often said, whereas moral and political principles do not. They express only subjective feelings, romantic hopes, arbitrary rules, or the oppression of this week's tyrant, benign or otherwise.

However, I think moral knowledge, broadly speaking, is real knowledge precisely because it results from the continual readjustment of our convictions and practices in the light of our unfolding in the real world, readjustments that lead to greater collective harmony and individual flourishing. If this is the way one wishes to argue for the rough objectivity of moral knowledge, then the world's great religions, the Western ones anyway, are poor examples to help one do it.

The bumper sticker "GOD SAID IT/I BELIEVE IT/THAT SETTLES IT" suggests to me an awkwardness or complete inability to learn from mankind's subsequent moral and social experience. Of course, by now you can guess that I prefer the Darwin sticker.

*Diagram from *Mythology's Last Gods*.

Dave Flanders

To the editor:

You had a great quote in the July newsletter by Garrett Hardin, where he was suggesting that if astrology believers were better organized and more demanding, they could get astrology taught in the public schools, the way creationists are trying to do with their "alternatives to evolution".

If anything, he understated the case. Creationism has been rejected by the courts because it is fundamentalist Christianity in a thin disguise. You could not say that about astrology, since it predates Christianity and exists under other religions. There is no religious case to throw it out.

Actually, you can make a stronger case for astrology than for creationism. For starters:

- You could cite some correct astrological predictions to demonstrate its validity, while creationism predicts nothing. (You can make correct predictions with the stars, tarot cards, tea leaves, and tables of random numbers. If you just ignore the wrong predictions, you can also have an impressive record for accuracy. If you word your astrological wisdom carefully and vaguely, it will be so meaningless as to be right most of the time anyway.)
- Astrologers do original research; creationists just misquote and distort research by biologists and geologists. (From time to time, someone will correlate birthdates of entertainers or athletes or political figures with astrological signs. I didn't say it was worthwhile research, I just said it was research.)
- As Hardin noted, astrology is taught as an academic subject in some universities in India, where they offer degrees in it. Why not here? Is it just an example of Eurocentric bias? The stars they see in India are the same ones we see in America, so they should have equal predictive power. (In fact, they DO have equal predictive power. Nonsense is nonsense everywhere.)
- A lot of people believe in astrology, and in a democracy, all voices have a right to be heard. (That's what gives us the unending stream of morons on talk radio. People tend to confuse the concept of everyone's right to hold an opinion with the concept that all opinions are of equal value. They are very different ideas.)

So, the next time anyone suggests to a school board that creationism should be taught to provide exposure to alternative theories of origins, we should be right there demanding that astrology be taught to provide an exposure to alternative theories of cause and destiny. Make it a real circus.

Michael Cornwell

Calendar of Events

Sunday, August 9, noon to 2:00 p.m. Alan Dechert

Sunday, August 16, Newsletter Committee Meeting

Wednesday, August 19, 6:30 p.m. Board Meeting