

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

January 1999

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January Meeting

The January 10 meeting will have Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert speaking on "Snapshots: Religion in the Public Schools and the 'Teaching about Religion' Movement."

This will be a two-pronged look at the religious tides and currents present in the public schools. The first snapshot: the current legal rights and responsibilities regarding religious activity (and humanism/atheism activity) in public schools. The second snapshot: the California law that schools must teach about religion, and the broader national movement to implement "Teaching about Religion" (and its counterpart, non-religion) in the public schools.

Reference materials behind the talk include a number of Supreme Court decisions regarding religion in the schools, the current California law mandating teaching about religion in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, the California 3Rs project (rights, responsibilities, respect) from the Freedom Forum 1st Amendment Center, an important new book by Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, references from the Anti-defamation league and ACLU regarding religious liberty in public schools, and the Williamsburg Charter (a national "manifesto" on teaching about religion signed by diverse groups and now being used as the "founding document" for a movement to teach about religion in public schools nationally).

Internet sites of the month

www.theonion.com/onion3419/prayers_answered.html

www.theonion.com/onion3301/popehellbound.html

Start the year with some funny parodies from The Onion.

December Speakers

For the December General Meeting, AOF members took turns speaking about aspects of their personal freethinking and intellectual development.

Paul Storey led off with an expression of delight at the progress science is making in medicine and the biosciences. Paul started with a note of thanks for the success of his mother's recent bypass surgery. He then talked the emerging genetic codes and about the genetic continuity among organisms.

Betty Simonsma read excerpts from a letter she courageously sent her nine grandchildren regarding her lack of beliefs. She mentioned her cognitive dissonance experienced during the 40 years during which she studied religions. She summarized her discovery of contradictions in "scriptures", and then the emergence of scientific explanations. She described the persistence of superstitions and their cultural entrenchment. Her worldview became palatable when she no longer had to have it dictated by others. It includes acceptance of nature and the world, and the finality of death.

Kay Dickey read two poems, the first by Michael Bakunin, a 19th century Russian, and the second by Phillip Appleman, "On the Beagle", about the Darwin voyage.

Paul Wolf said it was disgraceful that America should allow the impeachment to Clinton to proceed; he mentioned many former presidents (e.g., Kennedy, Reagan, Bush, etc.) and their violations of their oaths of office.

A retired engineer, an agnostic, and a Mason, after 40 years of travelling he has visited over 60 countries. He has concluded that religion is a matter of personal preference. It is his opinion that all religions have in common some version of the Golden Rule.

Mynga Futrell said that she came from an educated family, and grew up in a community of 20,000, with pressures toward conformity to Christianity. She studied several churches: Baptist, Presbyterian, Church of Nazarene, moving from one to next. Her thinking did not match the religions. Eventually, Mynga found Bertrand Russell, and his writings began a process to atheism through agnosticism. She read a particularly significant passage from Russell.

Don Knutson talked briefly about several topics. Julia Hill, who has by camping aloft on two 6x8 platforms in a 1000 year old Humboldt County redwood, brought attention to preservation of ancient timber. Don said that the "Women's Bible", by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was a profound influence on his intellectual development and he read two quotations.

On animal rights, Don read a quote published in a vegan magazine from the Sagans regarding the treatment of animals by homo sapiens. On nuclear annihilation, Don read a poem by the late Denise Leverthall regarding the annual memorial in Hiroshima to the dead from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Steve Knapp briefly summarized his current conclusions drawn from careful study of the new discipline of Behavioral Genetics and its comparisons between identical twins reared separately, on the nature and nurture of religiosity (nature dominates).

Ed McConnell recounted how he became a freethinker. Raised Catholic, he was sent to parochial school. However, he learned about Copernicus and the known universe did not match what the Catholic doctrine taught, so he put the whole issue of religion on the back burner for over 30 years. Ed reminded us that "Man as the supreme creation" is the last stand of religion. Ed suspects that many people don't believe in any religion, and simply ignore the whole topic as irrelevant to their lives.

Paul Storey brought the meeting to a humorous conclusion by recounting how, as a Catholic young man undergoing puberty, he could not accept the Church's guilt-trip associated with sexual thoughts and acts. He said although he had served as an altar boy, he began to avoid attendance, faced his parents in a big confrontation, and finally abandoned Catholicism for study of biology in college.

All the members in attendance seemed to enjoy the sharing of personal experiences.

Steve Knapp

President's Message

1998 has been a learning experience for me. I am grateful that various members have helped me along the way: Hank and Cleo Kocol, Karen Abbe, Ed McConnell, Paul Storey, Steve Knapp, Kay Dickey, Peggy Lucas, Don Knutson, Jody Craig, Paul Geisert, Mynga Futrell, Ken Nahigian, Jerry Sloan, Marilyn Vogel, Pat Kelly, David Henderson, Richard Langley, Bob Wilson and others as well. Thanks much! Wishing you a happy 1999,

Dave Flanders

Quotes of the Month

"The most savage controversies are those about matters as to which there is no good evidence either way. Persecution is used in theology, not in arithmetic."

Bertrand Russell

"If I have any beliefs about immortality, it is that certain dogs I have known will go to heaven, but very, very few persons will."

James Thurber

Highway cleanup

AOF's highway cleanup crew hits the road again January 24 at 9 am to tackle the two mile stretch of Highway 99 between Elkhorn and Elverta Boulevards. It will have been nearly 2-1/2 months since the last cleanup, so there will be a need. Please consider joining in the camaraderie and exercise. In case of rain or fog, call Don, 682-9502, for rescheduling.

Freethinkers Forum

Let's have a potluck before the next Freethinkers' Forum on Jan 30, 1999!

Potluck is at 6 pm, forum is 7:30 pm – 9:30 pm. I may have to limit the number of participants for the potluck, so I will take phone reservations beginning Jan 23 for the potluck only. You do not need to call first if you only want to come to the forum at 730. Call Jody Craig, (916) 452-2770. Directions will be available at the Jan 10 meeting. See you there!

Atheist Alliance Convention, 1999

Next Easter weekend, April 2-4, 1999, all atheists and other freethinkers are invited to Austin, Texas for the 1999 Freethought Roundup, the national convention of the Atheist Alliance. Speakers already scheduled include Dan Barker, who will speak and perform a Freethought Concert, and Dr. Arthur F. Ide, author of over 400 titles on a variety of issues, many of relevance to non-believers. The Atheist Community of Austin, host for the event, is still entertaining suggestions for speakers and workshops.

A Friday dinner will be served, as well as lunch on Saturday and a banquet Saturday evening. All meals will feature the flavorful fare for which Austin is widely known. Plans are also being made for a visit to Esther's Follies for some irreverent hilarity, and of course, there is always a possibility of a drive to the recent cenotaph battleground of Comfort, Texas. Expect the weather to be fair and the wildflowers to be in bloom.

The 1999 Freethought Roundup will be held at Austin's Downtown OMNI Hotel at 700 San Jacinto (512-476-3700). We are getting a special rate, so tell them you're with the Freethought Roundup (or Atheist Alliance Convention) to get the good deal.

The OMNI is only a block away from 6th Street's collection of restaurants, live music venues, and the hottest night life in Texas. The Capitol Building is only a few blocks away, and most of Austin can be seen from the rooftop pool.

The 1999 Freethought Roundup promises to be an exciting, informative, and revitalizing event for all non-believers. The friendly folks at the Atheist Community of Austin will do their best to make your convention experience a positive one.

Contact Don Rhoades at 512-892-3188, donrodz@swbell.net, or Mary Sue

Osborne at terrafemme@aol.com for further information.

Observations on a Debate

Dear friends,

Several members from Minnesota Atheists and the Humanist Association of Minneapolis & St. Paul had an informal debate with members of an Evangelical Free Church in St. Anthony, MN, on Oct. 4, 1998. Here are some notes I made which you may find interesting and useful.

August Berkshire

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When the existence of evil and suffering in the world was raised, they claimed that Christian scholars had studied the question and developed many responses, yet they were unable to provide even one.

When it was pointed out that there were certain similarities between Jesus and Hercules, they were unable to explain why they believed in Jesus and not Hercules.

When debating evolution/creationism with fundamentalists, pro-evolution arguments do not carry much weight. They believe creationism can account for the same thing. It is usually more effective to show the weakness of the creationist argument. For example, after Noah's Flood,

why didn't dolphin bones sink as deeply in the sediment as shark bones? Why are there whale fossils with hind legs?

When debating the Bible, we make little headway arguing that there is no proof of anything miraculous. They believe that because it is written down that it is true. We are more effective if we can show inconsistencies and absurdities within their own "holy" book.

Also, they claim that their god is just, while we can cite many examples of injustice, both in the Bible and in nature.

Another tactic which I have found effective is to demonstrate that if they were given the power of a god, they could have done a far better job in designing the world than their god did.

Jesus is not mentioned by any historian during the time that he supposedly lived, despite the fact that the gospels claim that Jesus' fame went abroad into all the land. However, this "argument from silence" is not very effective with fundamentalists, who claim that the historians were biased.

Also, they believe the passage in Josephus mentioning Jesus is genuine, because there are no copies of the document which lack it. They seem oblivious to the fact that anti-Christian writings (and writers) have been burned over the centuries. Most scholars today acknowledge that that passage is a forgery.

It was acknowledged by the fundamentalists that polls show most scientists to be atheists. Their leader countered that most scientific advances had been made by religious people. I said that in the 21st century the advances will be made by atheists. "Maybe so," he quietly agreed!