

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

February 1999

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February Meeting - Special Announcement

There will not be a regular general meeting in February. Instead, the second annual joint AOF-HAGSA Darwin Birthday celebration will be held on February 14, starting at 1:30 at the Sierra II Community Center. Tickets cost \$7.00 and include a catered Mexican lunch. See the flyer included with this newsletter for more information.

January Speakers

Our speakers for the January General Meeting were educational textbook authors, school policy analysts, and AOF members, Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert. They addressed two related issues relating to K-12 public education: "Religion in the Public Schools", and "The 'Teaching about Religion' Movement", with emphasis on California. Paul and Mynga worked as a team, taking the podium alternately in what was a well-prepared presentation. They also provided several handouts for discussion and reference.

Paul and Mynga stated their conclusion that religion WILL be in the schools; the question is what kinds and what controls will exist. They argued that the Clinton administration has helped by generating carefully worded guidelines for religion in schools which went to all school systems; this short-circuited attempts to make more permissive laws and prevented new forms of proselytizing. They were issued in 1995 and updated in 1998.

They distributed a summary of the Williams-burg Charter, a consensus document based on two premises derived from the First Amendment: (1) No Establishment and (2) Free Exercise.

Mynga and Paul handed out a useful summary sheet that listed many activities and classes of expression and indicated which were and were not permissible in the school environment.

The second presentation discussed the "'Teaching about Religion' Movement". Paul asserted that schools may not teach religion but may teach ABOUT religion. A classroom approach may be academic but not preaching. Balance and exposure are acceptable, but coercion or promotion or denigration (e.g., of atheism) are not.

On the critical subject of textbooks, Paul and Mynga say that new ones are tending to include more complete discussions of religion. Momentum is moving strongly toward having more religion in curricula. In 1987 the state of California ruled that schools must teach about religion in grades 6, 7, and 8. The problem is that atheism and freethinkers (e.g., Voltaire) are not included. In fact, Thomas Paine, George Washington, and many founders of America were Deists, which is not mentioned

in the California textbooks. Since publishers orient their books toward large markets like California, these texts often become national textbooks. The rights of non-religious people are mentioned in textbooks, but not discussed at any length.

The population growth of California is bringing forward many "small" religions, who also want more tolerance to a variety of thought in schools. Paul and Mynga have some hope that this may force more tolerance in textbooks. In this context, "post modernism" was also briefly mentioned as a consideration; New Agers seem to consider all religions as being equal, apparently omitting atheism.

Mynga and Paul, under sponsorship of OABITAR (Objectivity, Accuracy and Balance in Teaching About Religion, a freethought advocacy organization) have produced guidelines for teaching the non-religious perspective in their book Different Drummers. This book is aimed at helping to introduce language about freethinkers and non-belief into school system mission statements.

There were many questions from the audience during the presentations. One asserted the proposition that there is no place for teaching about religion in schools, so the balanced treatment summarized by Paul and Mynga is a Trojan horse. This produced a dialog about the impossibility of teaching objectively about religion in precollege education.

Steve Knapp

Freedom From Religion Foundation

21st Annual Convention, Oct. 16-18, 1998

notes by Hank Kocol

(with added comments by Cleo Kocol)

The FFRF Convention was held at Madison, WI, at the lakefront Edgewater Hotel within easy walking distance of the State Capitol and the sights of Madison. (Madison is a treat in itself, a university town, the capitol built on top of a hill, so that no other building obstructs its marvelous sight lines. The inside of the capitol is also a visual feast, one of the most beautifully decorated in the nation.)

On Friday afternoon, October 16, the Freethought Hall, headquarters for FFRF, was opened to Convention attendees for refreshments and socializing. The Hall is a two-story structure two blocks from the Capitol, containing the usual office space, but with the addition of a very extensive freethought library. That afternoon, a tour of the Frank Lloyd Wright Convention Center was offered to attendees who had pre-registered. The Center overlooks one of Madison's five lakes and offers total convention facilities for the area. (If you picture Freethought Hall as the usual boring headquarters building, you're in for a treat and a surprise. Shiny clean, with sun shining in the windows and freethought talk stirring all the corners, it is the proper center for the FFRF. The convention center Wright planned is in the works for a FFRF convention in the future.)

On Friday evening, the Conference opened with presentations of awards. Receiving the Freethought Heroine Award was MaryKait Durkee of Fallbrook, CA, who challenged her school's unconstitutional policy that all students must stand and/or participate in the religious pledge allegiance to the flag. She had to file a lawsuit to prove her right to abstain. With poise and dignity, the 16-year-old gave a very well organized speech concerning her experience. We should all look for her in the future of the freethought movement. (I led the standing ovation for this outstanding young woman. The future of people who live without religion depends upon the generations following us, and she is a tremendous example.)

The Freethinker of the Year Award was given to four individuals who were involved in the case concerning good Friday as a legal holiday in Wisconsin: Alan and Mary Porath, Floyd Olson, and Esther Mattson.

The Emperor-Has-No-Clothes Award is a new award given to someone who has called publicly to the shortcomings of religion. This year's awardee was Chuck Reinders, who fought the placing of a religious shrine on public property in Marshfield, WI. (Kudos to another person who said, enough is enough.)

Adam Butler received the Dixie Jokinen Student Activist Award for developing a campus freethought group at the University of Alabama. Here is another future leader in the

freethought movement. His speech and its delivery had all the right properties: organization, humor, logic, poise, confidence. (Oh, if only we all could be as poised and articulate as this fantastic young man. It's a joy to listen to him.)

On Saturday morning, the Convention opened with a welcome by the FFRF staff followed by a talk, "Parochial School Vouchers? Will the Floodgates Open?" by attorney Jeffrey Kassel. The message was that we need to maintain vigilance to ensure the continued existence of the public schools by keeping public funds away from private/religious schools. The courts seem increasingly willing to distribute tax dollars to religious schools. The "religious wrong" will continue its fight to destroy the public schools at every opportunity. (I am continually amazed at the number of people in the general populace who see nothing wrong about vouchers.)

Professor Stanley Kutler spoke on "How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song?", an expression of concern over allowing outright religious expression in the public schools at the implicit approval of school authorities. (They're creeping up on us, a symbol here, a prayer there and our tax dollars paying for it.)

Attorney Rick Ganulin of Cincinnati spoke about his lawsuit against the continuation of Christmas as a federal holiday. His talk, "I Really Don't Hate Santa," described Christmas as the only federal holiday originally established without any secular purpose whatsoever, and, thus, a complete violation of the Separation Clause of the First Amendment. (A new look at an old subject, but my feeling is we have to choose our battles astutely.)

Catherine Fahringer discussed the problems with the freethought cenotaph, which was conceived as a monument to freethought German settlers in the Texas hill country of the last century. Everyone in authority seemed to approve of the idea until it was discovered that freethinkers might be atheists! That discovery led to an organized movement that has successfully kept the monument from being dedicated. (Fahringer always injects a note of humor into an otherwise serious subject.)

George Whatley spoke on "Religion and Science", describing the distinct differences between the two areas in basic philosophy, acceptable proofs, and testing of hypotheses. (A different look at a familiar subject. What he called science was really medicine.)

At the banquet that evening, the speaker was Prof. Edward J. Larson, whose Pulitzer Prize winning book Summer of the Gods made a very detailed study of the Scopes Trial, its historical context, the personalities involved, and the resulting verdict.

On Sunday morning, the Membership Meeting was held where representatives of the various groups attending gave reports on their activities. We presented AOF as a very active organization with a growing membership and activities such as the highway cleanup, the charity dinner, and video projects. (The charity dinners and the highway cleanup are always applauded when they are mentioned at national conferences. In

addition, we were the first group that has instituted an annual Darwin birthday celebration. This joint program with HAGSA was also viewed as a good way to foster friendships among freethinking groups.)

Highway Cleanup

David Flanders, Mynga Futrell, Paul Geisert, Don Knutson and Pete Studelska experienced a beautiful but crisp January morning in cleaning AOF's Adopt-A-Highway 2-mile stretch north of Elkhorn Blvd on Highway 99. The small turnout allowed us only a superficial cleaning, so the beautiful cormorants often seen there must wallow in the remaining filth. Our next scheduled cleanup is Saturday, March 20, 9 a.m.

Don Knutson

Note on the Darwin Program

For those who signed up for the Darwin program at the January meeting: please notify Dave Flanders in advance if you cannot attend. His number is on the flyer. AOF is paying the caterer based on the number signed up.