

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

March 1999

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March Meeting

The March 14 meeting speaker will be Mary Jo Brooks, speaking on Misogyny and Religion. Mary Jo is a long-time AOF member and supporter. She is the former president of the Sacramento chapter of NOW, who devotes much of her time and energy to the SPCA and other animal rights causes.

Internet Site of the Month

This is the homepage of the [Rationalists of East Tennessee](#). It contains some good articles and links to related sites.

February Darwin Program

The second annual AOF-HAGSA Darwin Birthday Celebration was held on February 14, 1999. The Celebration was jointly conducted by Anna Andrews, President of the Humanists of the Greater Sacramento Area, and AOF President Dave Flanders. While the 100-plus attendees enjoyed a catered Mexican meal, three speakers presented various perspectives of Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution.

The first speaker was actor/impersonator David Giessen, who gave an "up close and personal" view of Darwin. Dressed in period attire, he pretended to be addressing a contemporary group of naturalists. Giessen/Darwin spoke of many aspects of his life and discoveries. These included mentions of varieties of species within phyla; of natural selection for characteristics; of partying in university and learning little there; of his family; of his hobbies, personal idiosyncrasies, and interests; of the Galapagos cormorants; of the resemblance and difference between land birds on the Galapagos and those on the South American continent, and especially the finches on the Galapagos; of the distribution and layering of rocks in mountains; of the appearance and causes of the volcanic atolls and other structures in Pacific; of Lyall's view of geological change taking immense amounts of time.

Giessen/Darwin told tales about life aboard the Beagle; how he interviewed with the creationist captain; about his joy each time he explored a new territory, or revisited one: about Argentina and the gauchos; about finding sea fossils in the high Andes; about the South American woodpeckers, whose toes, heads, beaks are all adapted; and about his difficulty with Thomas Malthus' book about the geometric increase in populations. He summarized at the end of his monologue his synthesis of all his observations into one theory: that of evolution by natural selection.

The next speaker was Paul Geisert. Paul is a former University of Wyoming biology professor and former AOF president. In contrast to the entertainment and personal view of Darwin provided by the preceding impersonation, Paul's presentation was more scholarly and focussed on the theory of evolution. He discussed the differences due to inheritance and differences due to survival; these two ingredients are the basis of the theory of evolution by natural selection.

Paul applauded science, as the grandfather of the theory. The theory of evolution is equivalent to: "Life has changed over time". At this time the theory is solid "fact" unchallenged by any reputable scientist. But a majority of Americans do not see this; they perceive it as a pronouncement by high priests of science, not as an empirically based construct. The idea of evidence underlying the theory is vital.

Paul points out that the latest California public curriculum science standards emphasize memorizing terminology without understanding how science studies the evidence to produce the theory and subsequently to make predictions. As a consequence, students will not understand that evolution and its terms are empirical, and different from "religious" explanations.

Paul gave examples of current science concepts that are "incomprehensible": (a) the inflationary universe in cosmology; (b) the generation of all life from some primordial single cell creature, more than a billion years ago, with no prior plan; (c) the close genetic similarity of humans to chimps, and even the substantial human genetic overlap with roundworms. With no understanding of the empirical basis of these concepts, the ordinary citizen sees these ideas as just three more opinions.

Then Paul summarized the theory. First, species (or gene pools) evolve, not individuals. Second, external and internal pressures induce changes in species over long times. Life has existed on earth long enough for major changes, and empirical evidence supports this statement. Third, each

individual in a species is unique, as shown by DNA investigations. Fourth, changing environments provide circumstances where certain individuals survive while others of same species do not. Fifth, survivors' offspring will have genes better adapted to environment. These five rules are all that are required for evolution. Summary: "Evolution is the greatest story ever told".

Frank Decourten, Professor of Paleontology at Sierra College spoke on recent (since 1900) developments in paleontology relating to the theory of evolution. It is now believed that life has been on earth for several billion years. But humans can not conceive of this quantity of time. He presented a graph of Phyletic Gradualism, showing evolution of structures as traits over time, such that eventually a new species emerges. He also showed a graph of "Tree of Life", showing convergence of species as time is traced backward.

Darwin was unable to find support for his view of the theory of evolution in the fossil record, which he thought should show a smooth history of new variations. Instead, what was (and is) found is an intermittent record of new species, with abrupt shifting of species (examples: snails, deep sea plankton, dinosaurs), often synchronized in epoch. Darwin thought that the fossil record was incomplete, and it is. But why should the record so frequently become poor just when the changes happened?

Decourten said that paleontologists were not contributing toward a solution to this question, until the paper by Eldridge and Gould: "Punctuated Equilibria: An Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism", in 1972. According to Eldridge and Gould, a subspecies evolves very quickly when it is isolated from the rest of the species (gene pool). External factors, like a change in environment, force rapid change when before there had been "stasis" for long periods of time. The creationists, by the way, misquote Eldridge as disagreeing with Darwin while in fact he only disagreed about the pace of evolution, not the process.

At present, excitement has returned to paleontology, according to Professor Decourten. For example, Eldridge now suggests that evolution may occur on multiple levels.

Steve Knapp

Secure Your Place in History

How often do we ordinary mortals have a chance to ensure that our names live on as long as the human race survives? Each one of us now has that chance -- and not once but twice!

The Atheist Alliance member societies are holding a contest to find the one perfect, universal, symbol that will represent all atheists throughout the world forever after. It will never -- unlike the American Atheists' atom orbital -- be trademarked or restricted in any way.

The winner of the contest will receive a cash prize of \$100 and have a star named after him or her by the International Star Registry, thereby assuring that his or her name will live on, both in human history and in the universe.

When it is chosen, the winning symbol will be publicized by all AAI member societies to their local media, so our new atheist symbol will get nationwide attention. The winner's name will also be publicized, with his or her permission.

Some tips: The winning symbol will be easy to draw and easy to recognize and will lend itself to being made into jewelry, bookends, etc.

Rules: Draw your symbol on a sheet of paper no larger than 8 1/2 x 11, using a separate sheet for each symbol you submit. You can draw it by hand or on a computer, but it must be drawn, however roughly, not just described verbally. Write a statement on the page about why you think the design is appropriate and why it should be chosen. Also write your name, address, telephone number and e-mail address on the same page, or staple that information to the drawing. Send all entries to:

Marie Castle
President, AAI
5146 Newton Ave. N
Minneapolis, MN 55430

Deadline: All entries MUST be received by May 1, 1999. The Atheist Alliance board (made up of representatives of all Alliance member societies) will vote to select several top-ranking symbols. These will be voted on by all members of all AAI member societies. Votes will be tallied by June 30 and the winner will be announced in member societies' newsletters.

Devil Update

The Vatican reaffirmed (actual vote count unavailable) the existence of the Devil as it issued updated rules on exorcism. Genuine possession could be inferred from various things, e.g., use of unknown languages; "extraordinary strength"; "disclosure of hidden occurrences"; and "a vehement aversion to God."

Sent in by Ken Nahigian. From Chuck Shepherd's News of the Weird column, at <http://www.msnbc.com> (click Comics).

Quoted

"...there was Jesus saying the way was deliberately obscured even from righteous people who want to know it and that his stories, which I call the terrible parables because they're usually about tormentors and slaves, could be understood by only the disciples. Honestly now, have you ever known of a bigger bunch of clods than the disciples? After all, Luke tells us that they "understood none of these things." A friend of mine says Jesus was the Rodney Dangerfield of the Holy Land. He just couldn't get any respect from his family, his neighbors, John the Baptist, the disciples, or the Jews, not even from a fig tree, and I wondered if he was the first omnipotent god to come to earth and not be recognized."

From Ruth Hurmence Green, "What I Found When I 'Searched the Scriptures'". Reprinted in Women Without Superstition, edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor.

Recommended Reading (and Cheap)

The Seven Mighty Blows to Traditional Beliefs, first edition, by A. J. Mattill, Jr.

This is a remarkable condensation of many freethought concepts into a 39 page booklet. It is available for \$3.00 from:

The Flatwoods Free Press
Route 2, Box 49
Gordo AL 35466-9517

Also available for 50 cents from the Flatwoods Free Press is "Displaying the Decalog". This is a devastating analysis of the "Ten Commandments" (or by the author's count, the 613 commandments of the Old Testament).

Freethinker's Forum

Free Thinker's Forum Attracts Bay Area Humanists to its Lively Discussions

LeRue Grim, well known humanist and AOF speaker, joined the AOF'ers at Peggy Lucas's home on Saturday evening, Feb. 20, 1999. Eric Worrell, of the Bay Area Skeptics and the East Bay Secular Humanists attended an earlier Forum held at Peggy's place. LeRue commented that the group showed an unusual level of civility and respect for each other—which allowed for diverse ideas and opinions to be exchanged without rebuke, rancor or contentiousness. The next Forum will be on March 20, at 5:30 p.m. at Jody Craig's home.

The topic will be "Monogamy". Call VoiceMail line for info/directions.

Highway Cleanup

Our next scheduled cleanup is Saturday, March 20, 9 a.m. We will meet at the park and ride lot just west of Highway 99 at Elkhorn.

Television Notes

In March, AOF'S Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell will be on Access Reality doing a presentation on their "Different Drummers" curriculum, developed to provide non-theistic teaching materials for schools to introduce the accomplishments of notable nonconformist thinkers in history. The show's host is Terry Sandbek, president of the Sacrament Skeptics Society.

The [Access Realty cable television show](#), developed and produced by a group of Sacramento skeptics and freethinkers, is shown on Channel 73 Wednesday nights at 9:00 p.m. and repeated on Thursday afternoons at 1:00 p.m.