

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

July 1999

Contents

- [NATO's war in Kosovo](#)
- [June Program](#)
- [An e-mail letter from Dan Barker of the Freedom from Religion Foundation](#)
- [Internet site of the month](#)
- [Freethinkers' Forum](#)
- [Highway cleanup](#)
- [Calendar of Events](#)

NATO's war in Kosovo

NATO's war in Kosovo is over and the result is another defeat for Yugoslavia and a further fracturing of that nation into more countries. The ethnic and religious divisions we have heard so much about are the immediate cause of the wars that have wracked that nation this past decade. However, the dissolution of Yugoslavia was not inevitable -- outside pressure, especially from Germany and important elements in the US were instrumental. A brief history of Yugoslavia will be given to help explain the actions of many of Yugoslavia's foreign enemies that lead up to the present situation in Kosovo. A number of questions will be addressed: Even after all these complicating historical factors, was Kosovo a humanitarian war? If yes, does this mean that humanitarian war should now be an instrument in US foreign policy? If no, why did the US intervene? Dr. Mike Syvanen, of UC Davis, will give his perspectives on this history, on the immediate questions of the latest war and finally his thesis that US leaders blundered their way in but were also manipulated by narrow forces that had their own reasons for war.

June Program

Jeanie Keltner, a local activist, editor of [Because People Matter](#), and one of the Sacramento Soapbox cable television personalities, spoke to AOF on moving "from information to action."

How does information transition to action? As befitting the English professor that she is, Jeanie started with a dictionary definition of the word *inform*: "to impart knowledge, to pervade or permeate to change character, to animate or inspire, to furnish incriminating evidence." Carrying on that line, information is facts told, read, or communicated, maybe unorganized or unrelated, just discrete bits. Knowledge, then, is organized information, and wisdom is knowledge of facts firmly assimilated.

Jeanie spent three years in Paris during the Socialist Mitterand administration, and saw a government working in the interests of ordinary people. Returning to Sacramento in the early 1980's, she found a greater level of fear than she had remembered, a widespread use of cocaine, and a surprising amount of new wealth.

Several events, especially involving the arming of the Contras by the Reagan administration, caused Jeanie to start seeing connections that she had not seen before. She started reading the alternative press, and found it very accurate. Only five corporations control most of the mainstream media, and the media control people's picture of reality and the world.

At this point Jeanie began the transition from information to knowledge, as she saw connections among the Central American wars, the cocaine trade, the activities of major corporations, and the nation-state, which she described as the military arm of the corporations.

But to return to the question, how does information transition to action? She quoted poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (whose atheism got him dismissed from Oxford) that there is a creative faculty involved, that we have to imagine that which we know. Facts won't cause action; imagination and emotion need to be involved.

A current problem Jeanie cited was television. This medium shapes the image of the world for a large segment of the American population, with few alternative views presented, and no likelihood of seeing connections and developing knowledge.

An e-mail letter from Dan Barker of the Freedom from Religion Foundation

Infidel friends,

This comes up sometimes in debates: morally and practically, are Christians better off than non-Christians?

I just read George Barna's book, [The Second Coming of the Church](#) (Word Publishing, 1998). Barna is a born-again Christian, sociologist, founder and president of Barna Research Group, which releases many meaningful survey results.

Although 90% of Barna's book is just a sermon to Christian ministers on how the church should regain its lost status, he does report some frank statistics showing how the present church has "failed" in its mission. The numbers are based on his own studies, and other national studies.

On page 6 he gives a table: "Examples of the Similarity of Behavior Between Christians and Non-Christians." The 25 items on this list include:

"Have been divorced (among those who have been married)"

Born Again Christians - 27%;
Non-Christians - 23%

"Took drugs or medication prescribed for depression, in past year"

Born Again Christians - 7%;
Non-Christians - 8%

"Watched an X-rated movie in the past 3 months"

Born Again Christians - 9%;
Non-Christians - 16%

"Read all or part of a book for pleasure, in the past week"

Born Again Christians - 50%;
Non-Christians - 57%

"Donated any money to a nonprofit organization, in past month"

Born Again Christians - 47%;
Non-Christians - 48%

"Bought a lottery ticket, in the past week"

Born Again Christians - 23%;
Non-Christians - 27%

"Attended a community meeting on local issue, in past year"

Born Again Christians - 37%;
Non-Christians - 42%

And so on . . .

On page 121, he gives another table, "Examples of the Similarity of Attitudes Between Christians and non-Christians"

"Feel completely or very successful in life"

Born Again Christians - 58%;
Non-Christians - 49%

"It is impossible to get ahead because of your financial debt"

Born Again Christians - 33%;
Non-Christians - 39%

"You are still trying to figure out the purpose of your life"

Born Again Christians - 36%;
Non-Christians - 47%

"Satisfied with your life these days"

Born Again Christians - 69%;
Non-Christians - 68%

"Your personal financial situation is getting better"

Born Again Christians - 27%;
Non-Christians - 28%

Barna concludes: "We think and behave no differently from anyone else". [p. 7]

He also sheds some light on the definition of "God" that most Americans claim to believe in:

"Since more than nine out of ten Americans own at least one Bible, and 86 percent call themselves Christian, you might expect people to pay homage to the deity described and followed by the Christian Church. In July 1997, we asked a nationwide sample of 1,012 adults to describe the God they believe in. Two out of three adults (67 percent) said they believe that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of the universe who rules the world today. The remaining one-third described their god as 'the total realization of personal, human potential'; or 'a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach'; or said, 'Everyone is God'; 'There are many gods, each with different power and authority'; or 'There is no such thing as God.' The remaining 5 percent said they did not know." [Page 25-26]

So, according to Barna, one American out of three does not really believe in "God" at all.

Dan Barker

Religion is a mere question of geography.

Edward Gibbon

Internet site of the month

This month's site is titled "Evolution, Creationism, and Crackpots" and is found at

www.tiac.net/users/cr/origins.html

Here is an introductory excerpt from Changing Views of the History of the Earth, one of the many excellent papers at this site:

"If, in the year AD 1600, you had asked an educated European how old the planet Earth was and to recount its history he would have said that it was about 6000 years old and that its ancient history was given by the biblical account in Genesis.

If you asked the same question of an educated European in AD 1900 you would have received a quite different answer. He would have answered that the Earth was ancient, that there had not

been a Noachian flood, and that the species of life had not been fixed over the history of Earth. In short, Genesis was an allegory and not literal history.

The story of this great change in the conception of the history of Earth is not a simple one. The chronicle of this great change can be broken into five periods:

The pre-scientific period before AD 1600. In the pre-scientific era the Biblical account and the speculations of the Greek philosophers were accepted without great question.

The era of speculative cosmogonies ran from AD 1600-1700. In this period a number of comprehensive cosmogonies were proposed. These were long on armchair speculation and short on substantive supporting evidence. These cosmogonies were part of the new emphasis of science in seeking rational explanations of the features of the world.

The disestablishment of Genesis ran from AD 1700-1780. This period was marked by a great deal of field geology rather than grand cosmogonies. It became clear that there had been significant changes in the Earth's topography over time and that these changes could neither be accounted for by natural processes operating during the brief nor by the postulated Noachian flood. Notable observations included:

- Studies of strata suggested that they were laid down by natural processes in which the sea and land had changed places several times.
- Studies of earthquakes and volcanoes showed that the surface crust is subject to massive natural transformation.
- Observation of rain, wind, water erosion, and sea erosion in action showed that they were forces capable of reducing mountains and creating valleys.

The catastrophist-uniformitarian debate ran from about 1780-1850. By the end of the 18th century it was clear that the Earth had a long and varied history. Interest in major cosmogony was revived. The major debate was between the catastrophists, e.g., Cuvier, who held that the history of Earth was dominated by major catastrophic revolutions and the uniformitarians, e.g. Hutton and Lyell, who held that the history of Earth was dominated by slow relatively uniform changes in an Earth with a static over all history. During the early part of this period there was a considerable amount of activity by scriptural geologists who attempted to reconcile Genesis and geology. The efforts of the scriptural geologists failed signally; by 1830 scriptural geology was a dead issue in Science.

The modern period runs from AD 1850 to the present. The great debate was won by the uniformitarians, so much so that the degree of gradualism was overstated and the importance of catastrophes was unduly minimized. The modern period has been marked by an enormous expansion of the detailed knowledge of the geological history of the Earth and the processes that have acted during that history."

To the editor

I want to thank you for including the TV time for atheist programs. I really appreciate and use them. I write the time on my calendar and put little flags on my TV set to remind me. Seeing that we are not the only people who are rational thinkers is great. If we make the public aware that we are out here, we are doing great.

Betty Simonsma

Freethinkers' Forum

Instead of the usual forum, we will convene at the amphitheater in Old Land Park (directly across from Sacramento Zoo) at 6:30 pm on Saturday, July 31 for a picnic. Bring a potluck dish to share and your own utensils. At 8:30 p.m. the Sacramento City College Drama Department performs Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors", \$10 adults, \$8 senior citizens. You can purchase your own ticket in advance or on that night if you want to take a chance that they will not be sold out. Their number is (916) 558-2228. You can come to either the picnic or the play, or to both activities. Come early for the play only, as there is no assigned seating. Our topic for the evening will probably be a preview of the plot and related topics. For further information, call Jody at 916-452-2770.

Highway cleanup

Join us again to clean up beautiful Highway 99, Saturday, July 17, bright and early at 8 a.m. We'll meet at the park-and-ride lot on Elkhorn, just west of Highway 99.