

# **Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter**

**March 2000**

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## **March Meeting**

The March 12 meeting speaker will be Steve Knapp, on the Burning Man Festival. Steve will give an informal report on his expedition to Burning Man 1999, and his impressions of the event. He will also attempt to convey some idea of the "techno-artistic" foundation of the festival and will have information downloaded from the Burning Man web site ([www.burningman.org](http://www.burningman.org)) and materials distributed at the event. The general ambience of Burning Man is similar to that exhibited at AOF. He will also provide news regarding this year's festival (Burning Man 2000).

## **Darwin Day Program**

The featured speaker at the third annual AOF-HAGSA Darwin Day was Dr. Mark Wheelis, a senior lecturer in microbiology at UC Davis and an expert on biological weapons and warfare. Dr Wheelis noted that Darwin began a revolution in the human psyche, one that is not yet complete after 140 years. The revolution included how humanity sees itself in nature -- the place humans occupy in the world.

In the West, the prevailing view came from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Most of it was contained in the first two chapters of Genesis, about the creation of life and of humans. The essential features of the story are:

- A God created the world and stayed involved.
- All species were created at the same time, with no changes since their creation.
- Plants and animals were provided for human use.
- Humans were created in the image of God.

- A duality of body and spirit characterizes humans.

Darwin's work challenged all of these in a serious way.

Some predecessors who influenced Darwin include:

- Linnaeus (1735) set out to classify all living things. The scientific binomial classification used today can be traced to him. He classified humans with primates, rather than as a separate class.
- Buffon (1779) estimated the age of the earth as 75,000 years. While it was much too low, it did challenge the 6,000 year estimate from the Bible.
- Hutton (1795) found no vestige of the beginning of the Earth in his Theory of the Earth.
- Lamarck (1805) held a truly evolutionary view. Much of his work has been misstated and underrated. He saw life as evolving from
- preexisting life, and saw in the evolution how humans might have developed language, rather than it being of divine origin.

In 1858, Darwin and Wallace independently published papers on evolution, and in 1859, Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. This presented overwhelming evidence for evolution from many areas, including biogeography and comparative morphology. It set forth a theory where natural selection was the dominant mechanism of evolution. The basic components were that variability exists within a species, the variation is heritable, more offspring are produced than are able to survive and reproduce, and very few will transmit their genes to progeny in the far distant future.

From the 1830s, Darwin had kept a set of notebooks on humans. In 1871, he published *The Descent of Man*, which directly challenged the old views. Among the points he made were that the human body is clearly a product of evolution, and that traits like reason, language, morals and religion had a natural biological origin. Darwin was fully aware of how radical these proposals were.

Darwin didn't address the question of how much of human behavior has genetic roots. It has only been since the mid-1960s that this has been studied significantly. The concepts of sociobiology have been widely accepted in animals, though there is still some resistance to accepting these concepts in humans.

The evolutionary tree drawings that are common in textbooks are misleading. A more accurate drawing would resemble tumbleweed, and most of the end points would be bacteria.

The concepts of evolution do not preclude the possibility of a god, but they do demonstrate that there is no evidence of or need for any active participation by a god. Natural processes operating over vast periods of time provide sufficient explanation.

Darwinism has some important moral implications, which stem from the fact that all living things are related to each other. This requires a reevaluation of the relationships and use of living things. Some rights and privileges must be extended to non-human life. Costs and benefits to

non-human individuals and species must become part of economic analyses. A precautionary principle should guide behavior and policies, in areas like extinction and global warming.

## **Justice Scalia's Religious Opinions**

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's jurisprudence regarding the First Amendment has sparked controversy. What do jurists think of Scalia's decisions regarding religion? Recently three law professors participated in a symposium at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu. The panelists were: Erwin Chemerinsky, University of Southern California; Kathleen M. Sullivan, Stanford Law School; and William K. Kelley, Notre Dame Law School. Chemerinsky is the author of over ten books on Constitutional Law issues, and a pre-eminent Constitutional scholar. Sullivan, listed in the National Law Journal as one of the fifty most influential women lawyers in American, is a top Constitutional scholar and litigator who has argued before the U.S. Supreme Court. Kelley served as law clerk to Kenneth Starr, Warren Burger, and Antonin Scalia; he was also assistant to the Solicitor General, U.S. Department of Justice.

During opening statements, Chemerinsky noted that Scalia flip-flops when a case has issues concerning his beliefs. Scalia maintains that he keeps to an original intent philosophy, but he departs from that when the original intent differs from current Republican platform philosophy. Scalia believes in majority rule, giving no protection to minorities in areas of religion. It concerns Chemerinsky that Scalia frequently uses sarcasm against the opinions of his fellow Justices. He throws around terms such as "ludicrous," "beyond absurd," "preposterous," "ridiculous," and has used the words "vandalizing the court." Once he said that

Justice O'Connor's opinion was "the least responsible of all."

Sullivan defined the four possible positions on the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses. One can be strong or weak on either clause. She defined Scalia as being weak on both clauses. By contrast, Justice Stevens holds the "secularist" position, that religion is vestigial in modern life; he is strong on Establishment and weak on Free Exercise. Sullivan said that Scalia is biased toward majority rule and believes that this position is based in the Constitution. As a man of faith, he is sympathetic to minority religious practices and some of his opinions have supported minority religions. He maintains, however, that minority rights are already secured through the political process. He also maintains that religion is a strong force in American life.

Kelley said that it was difficult to say where the line exists between permissible and non-permissible accommodation of religion. He also said that one faith was not harmed by accommodation to other faiths and that judges should not be the be-all and end-all of protecting religious rights.

In the Question-and-Answer period, the issue of military chaplains was raised. The panel agreed there is a place in the military for chaplains, as those in the military often did not have access to other clergy. But, the panel also agreed that chaplains for legislatures are not necessary because legislators can see the clergy at any time.

Chemerinsky and Sullivan agreed that a public subsidy to religion through school vouchers could be a slippery slope. As an example, they asked, "How can one say that the money will go only for secular activities rather than to religious indoctrination?" They felt that school vouchers would become a total subsidy to religion. Chemerinsky, when asked how the current court would vote regarding vouchers, said he believed it would uphold vouchers. Kelley believes that vouchers would be upheld if private groups sponsor the system, rather than the government; he believes that government-sponsored vouchers would be in violation of the Establishment Clause.

The panel discussed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). They all agreed that if such a law were passed in an individual state, that law may be legal and binding depending upon that state's Constitution. It may be the right of Congress to pass such a law for the nation. All of this was speculation on the part of the panelists. The more liberal members of the panel said that the RFRA could be seen as an establishment of religion.

Kelley described Scalia's original intent argument as holding that the Constitution means today exactly what it meant in 1789 when it was written. Sullivan pointed out that the Constitution says "he" when discussing the President, and thus, this interpretation would forbid a woman from running for the Presidency. Chemerinsky also agreed that the interpretation of the Constitution must change with the times.

In an issue important to Hawaii with application to the entire nation, a question arose concerning religious symbols on the doors of state legislators in the Capitol corridors. O'Connor's opinions seem to hold that the test is the "reasonable observer" rule. "What would a reasonable observer think? Would he/she think that such symbols are a reflection of government support of religion, or simply that of the individual legislator?" She maintains that the observer would see the legislator's, not legislature's support. This seems to reflect the current thinking of the Court. Sullivan added that she agreed that that would be the interpretation, but her opinion is that all posters and Christmas trees should be removed from government property.

An audience question addressed geothermal drilling on sacred Hawaiian lands. The question was, "How does one prove religious beliefs?" The local court required proof of injury to the god Pelee whose property that was. The difficulty of an answer in such a case only proves the authors' stance for the strict separation of state and church.

**Cleo and Hank Kocol**

## **The Man Behind Knight -- Howard Ahmanson Is Working to Bring Back Biblical Law.**

Since 1988 Howard F. Ahmanson Jr., heir to the giant Southern California H.F. Ahmanson Company, the former parent company of Home Savings and Loan, has been a major player in California politics by financing political, religious-extremist candidates for the state legislature and constitutional officers. He also has been a major source of financing for wedge-issue initiatives that have pitted one segment of California citizens against another -- such initiatives as

school vouchers, immigrant rights, affirmative action, and now the highly divisive Proposition 22, known as The Knight Initiative or The Limit of Marriage Act, which will appear on the March 7 ballot. Ahmanson, reported to have an annual income of over \$20 million, contributed \$210,000 or 35 percent of the money raised to put Proposition 22 on the ballot.

He was helped by two close political associates in the California Independent Business Political Action Committee, Edward G. Atsinger III and Roland Hinz. The total contributed by just these three men is 65 percent and they have continued to give large amounts of money to the campaign.

In the past 15 years there have been few local or state anti-gay initiatives in California that have not received Ahmanson's financial backing. In 1994 his contributions were a major factor in helping the Republicans win a majority in the state Assembly. Overall, he made contributions to almost one third of the members of the legislature that year. He also has been a major contributor to Focus on the Family's California political front, the Capitol Resource Institute, which for over a decade has been the leading anti-gay lobby at the Capitol. Other records on file at the Office of Political Reform confirm that since 1990 Ahmanson has contributed over \$1 million each year to political causes in California. He also contributed \$25,000 to the Amendment 2 initiative in Colorado that would have prevented anti-discrimination laws for gay citizens.

Most Californians know little about Ahmanson, and the California media have been most cooperative in keeping the public ignorant about him and his political activities.

So why should citizens be concerned about what most would consider a personal matter of religion, however extreme, or the eccentricities of a fabulously wealthy man? How are Howard Ahmanson Jr. and his associates of the California Independent Business PAC different from other political special-interest groups that influence California's public policy?

To answer these questions one must look at Ahmanson's quarter of a century association with the Rev. Dr. Rousas John Rushdoony and Chalcedon, Inc., an extremist religious organization.

Although Ahmanson is now the most prominent member of the Board of the conservative Claremont Institute, few know that he has for he has been on the Board of Chalcedon for 23 years. Public records at the Registry of Charitable Trusts show he contributed over a million dollars to Rushdoony's organization. He also has given money to Christian Reconstructionist causes which do not require public disclosure.

He is not yet 50 years old; this means he has devoted almost half his life to Chalcedon and to Presbyterian minister Rev. Dr. Rushdoony. The reverend is known as the "Father of Christian Reconstructionism", a form of Dominion Theology whose goal is to put the world and the United States in particular under Biblical Law. Biblical Law is defined as the 600-some laws that are found in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus. These laws cover everything from the punishment for murder to a woman setting aside a special chair during her menstrual period.

In a 1985 interview with the Orange County Register, Ahmanson stated, "My purpose is total integration of Biblical law into our lives." His every action indicates this is his goal for the 21st

century. The millions of dollars Ahmanson has contributed to Chalcedon and the years he spent on its board of directors can lead only to the conclusion that he supports Christian Reconstructionism.

What would it mean to totally integrate Biblical law into our lives? A look at Rushdoony's Institutes of Biblical Law (see Rushdoony's Philosophy, page 5) gives some idea.

Ahmanson's political ally and former minority leader in the California State Senate, Rob Hurtt, Jr., stated in a Los Angeles Times article that he would like to send gays to jail for 20 years. But Rushdoony, and Ahmanson if he subscribes to all of Rushdoony's tenets (which by saying he supports "total integration of Biblical Law" apparently he does), would instead demand the death penalty for homosexuals.

He doesn't just want to prevent gays and lesbians from marrying or having any kind of social equality, he wants to see them dead!

He also doesn't want to see women, minorities or working people have rights nor does he want to tolerate other people's religious beliefs.

Regardless of one's views on same-sex marriage,

Proposition 22 only promotes religious bigotry and intolerance. It is disguised as a law to "protect marriage" but would ultimately be only a step in the battle to establish one group's religious beliefs as public policy, in violation of our nation's historic doctrine of separation of church and state.

Ahmanson's devotion to Christian Reconstructionism explains his zeal for using his fortune to quash the rights of gays, women, labor, and ethnic and racial groups. Californians must look behind the mask to the true motive -- or risk being beguiled into a return to the dark ages of religious fanaticism.

**Jerry Sloan**

## **Rushdoony's Philosophy**

While Jesus took only a few words to sum up the Law and the Prophets --love God and your neighbor as yourself -- Rev. Dr. Rousas John Rushdoony takes 1,600 pages in The Institutes of Biblical Law to give his interpretation of Biblical Law. Here's some of what he says:

- Gays today should be put to death.

The Bible is without reservation in its condemnation of homosexuality . . . "If a man also lie with mankind . . . they shall be put to death." (Lev. 20:13) . . . This is certainly clear enough and there is not a single text in all of the New Testament to indicate that this penalty has been altered or

removed. . . (pp 422-25). . . We find that St. Paul far from setting aside the law and its penalties appeals to the death penalty against homosexuals as an established and continuing fact. (Rom 1:32)(p735)

· Democracy Is An Enemy of Christianity

One faith, one law and one standard of justice did not mean democracy. The heresy of democracy has since then worked havoc in church and state . . . Christianity and democracy are inevitably enemies. (p 100)

· Woman Should Not Have Equal Rights

In the name of equal rights, women are being stripped of the protections of the family and given no place except the perverse competition of a sexual market in which increasingly shock, deviation, and aggressiveness command a premium . . . (p. 208)

· Black Civil Rights Are Based on Voodoo

The civil rights' revolutionary groups are a case in point. Their goal is not equality but power. The background of Negro culture is African and magic, and the purposes of magic are control and power... Voodoo or magic was the religion and life of American Negroes. Voodoo songs underlie jazz, and old voodoo, with its power goal, has been merely replaced with revolutionary voodoo, a modernized power drive." (p. 61)

· Slavery is appropriate for today

Biblical law permits voluntary slavery because it recognizes that some people are not able to maintain a position of independence . . . The law is humane and also unsentimental. It recognizes that some people are by nature slaves and will always be so. (pp. 286, 251)

**Jerry Sloan**

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**Quote**

An atheist ... only has to be someone who believes that the evidence on the God question is at a similar level to the evidence on the werewolf question.

**John McCarthy**