

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

April 2000

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March Program

The March speaker was AOF member Steve Knapp, talking on the Burning Man festival he attended in 1999. Steve had several pictures to illustrate his talk.

Burning Man takes place in the Black Rock desert of Northern Nevada during the week just before Labor Day. It is in its 16th year. It is an art festival, but it is also much more.

Burning Man is an experiment in temporary community. It is not a spectator event. Participants build their own world where they display art, play music, and create a community. Everyone is allowed free expression with anything permitted. Only one group had to be removed from Burning Man in 1999, and their form of artistic expression involved offensiveness with loudspeakers.

Burning Man is an exercise in self reliance. Participants rely on themselves and each other for survival. Commerce is not a part of the Burning Man. No transactions involving money are allowed, except for a coffee shop and ice sales. Any other transactions are barter. All participants are expected to bring whatever they will need for their stay.

One element of the Burning Man is survival in the desert. Temperatures well over 100 degrees, and dehydration can occur in minutes. Participants have to constantly be aware of their condition.

The burn is on Saturday night. As it is described "As the procession starts, the circle forms, and the man ignites, you experience something personal, something new to yourself, something you've never felt before. It's an epiphany, it's primal, it's newborn. And it's completely individual."

When the festival is concluded, the desert is restored to its previous condition. All of the participants dismantle what they have built, take with them any waste they have generated or objects they have used. Volunteers then restore the desert to its pristine condition.

People who have participated in Burning Man find it difficult to put the experience into words, but they want to repeat it.

Creationism-Evolution Seminar in May

Dr. Eugenie Scott, Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education, will be a featured speaker at a seminar on the creationism-evolution controversy on Sunday, May 7, 2000. It will be held at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento, 2425 Sierra Blvd., starting at 3 p.m. (not 2 p.m., as reported earlier). She will be joined by Marty Miller Mattox from the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences of the Graduate Theological Union. That organization, like NCSE, favors teaching evolution.

Quotes

Trying to find God is a good deal like looking for money one has lost in a dream.

Lemuel K. Washburn

I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do because I notice it always coincides with their own desires.

Susan B. Anthony

Proselytizing

At the moment I'm pondering the nature of religious proselytizing in light of the Pope's rather defiant response in India to a bunch of Hindus saying please lay off, stop trying to convert us. During his recent visit to India, he said, in effect: my religion is better than yours and we shall overcome. In other words, if some of you Hindus don't like our efforts to convert you, that's tough.

Present efforts by Catholicism and certain other Christian faiths to spread the Gospel in overpopulated but underdeveloped parts of Asia resemble the strategy of the big American tobacco companies. They are losing ground in their home territory, so they branch out where the perils of their product are less well known.

The Pope is arrogantly assuming that his God has given him the right, indeed the obligation, to tell people of other faiths that their gods are no good and that they must convert or go to eternal damnation. This is not, of course, something he has dreamed up on his own, during his present incumbency. Christians throughout the ages have included militant proselytizers among their ranks. So, of course, have the Muslims; Islam is at least as militantly expansionist as Christianity. Hinduism and Buddhism are less obviously aggressive, but the temptation to expand is at least latent in their ranks.

I suppose humanists also nurture expansionist ambitions, when you come right down to it, but our collective wings are mortally clipped by our inability to promise potential converts a vision of paradise, or at least provide some satisfactory notion that life goes on after death. Poor us, we cannot bribe or blackmail the unwary, we have to rely on rational arguments.

But except for humanists and agnostics and atheists, life out there is a jungle. The different religions, and subsets within each religion, are like carnivorous beasts roaming around, looking hungrily for their next meal. They are in constant competition with each other for scarce resources. But in all fairness, the forms this competition takes are not always on the kill-or-get-killed model; sometimes proselytizing can take a relatively benign form.

At the ugly end of the spectrum is conversion by force, by the sword--embrace my god or die! The Shias in Iran have been trying to do this to their Baha'is. It is old-fashioned now, but still, many zealots secretly think it's the way to go.

A slightly less ugly kind of proselytizing involves conversion by trickery, stealth, or bribery. Mother Teresa got Hindus on the deathbed and promised them salvation if they accepted Christ. This was the basic technique by which she achieved sainthood. Other Christian missions, mostly Protestant, use other similarly dubious techniques to gain Asian converts. Closer to home, fundamentalists in the USA seek to control the subjects being taught in our public schools. If they succeed we'll see more of this attempted conversion by suasion not persuasion. Catch 'em young and all that.

More benign is the stance of the Christian missionaries who opened schools like Godavari in Nepal (Catholic) and the American University of Beirut (Protestant). Do good works, set a good example, and let those who are sufficiently impressed to want to join you do so of their own free will. I can live with that. My peeve in this essay is with the more extreme forms of proselytizing.

Ideally, adherents of different religions would commingle peacefully, with no attempt to proselytize at all. Live and let live. The lion lying down with the lamb and all that. If you have to encourage others to share your world view, do it by setting a good example, letting the people you want to impress draw their own conclusions. As a humanist, I tend to regard any proselytizing with suspicion these days. It is no more a human right than the right to steal. The Pope, as usual, is selfishly promoting Catholicism at the expense of everybody else. What he is telling the Hindus in effect is a version of the old "What's mine is mine, what's yours is negotiable."

As long as Hindus are the ones the Pope has targeted, my emotions are only marginally engaged. A pox on all their houses, let them eat each other. But when the proselytizers of any stripe move in my country, nibbling away at the constitutional barrier between church and state, I am roused to action. This may not be exactly fair, but charity--and protection of one's right to hang onto one's own belief system--begins at home.

In the United States and other educated, prosperous lands, the tide is with the humanists, the non-believers. We don't have to go out armed with pamphlets to airports and railway stations. We don't have to go from door to door harassing people in their homes. The enlightenment is spreading, and our main job is to keep the old guard from using dirty tricks to shutter out its rays. We lead by example and by the essential rationality of our worldview.

But that doesn't mean we have to approve of what the Catholics and other fundamentalists are up to in places like India. What they are doing is wrong. The Pope is wrong on this issue, as he is on so many others.

Carl Coon, 11/11/99

(This essay was reprinted with Carl Coon's permission from the Progressive Humanism web site, www.progressivehumanism.com. There are many excellent essays at this site).

Florida Court Strikes Down Private School Voucher Program

Florida's private school voucher program, the first statewide voucher plan passed in the United States, has been ruled unconstitutional by a state court.

State Judge L. Ralph Smith Jr. issued his ruling today [March 14], concluding that the voucher plan violates Article IX, Sec.1 of the Florida Constitution.

"Yet another court has struck a blow against a useless and unconstitutional voucher experiment," said Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which helped sponsor the lawsuit. "Sooner or later, voucher advocates will just have to give up."

In November 1998, 71 percent of Florida's voters approved a constitutional amendment declaring that the maintenance of an "efficient, safe, secure and high quality system of free public schools" is "a paramount duty of the state." Today's ruling in *Holmes v. Bush* was based on this constitutional provision.

"Florida's residents have made it clear that they want an efficient, well-funded public school system," Lynn said. "This voucher scheme undermined that goal, and Judge Smith was right to strike it down. I challenge the Florida Legislature to stop wasting its time on this unconstitutional boondoggle and concentrate on supporting the public schools."

Judge Smith ruled, "By providing state funds for some students to obtain a K-12 education through private schools, as an alternative to the high quality education available through the system of free public schools, the legislature has violated the mandate of the Florida Constitution, adopted by the electorate of this state."

Lynn added, "The language in the state constitution is clear and unambiguous. I don't understand how voucher supporters in Florida ever thought they would get away with this stunt in the first place."

Under the Florida plan, public schools received a grade, from A to F, based on standardized test scores. Schools that scored well got extra money from the state, but in schools that received an F, students were eligible for a \$4,000 voucher at any private school that accepted them, including religious schools. Public schools lost the funds that students took to private schools.

Americans United is a Washington, D.C.-based religious liberty watchdog that has been involved in every school voucher controversy considered in U.S. courts.