

# **Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter**

**May 2000**

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## **May 14 Meeting**

Eduardo Cohen, a Middle East scholar, is AOF's May speaker. He will be speaking on "Racism, Propaganda & American Perceptions of Middle East Conflict". He will focus at least in part on the complications a theocratic government (like Israel's) brings to peace negotiations. The U.S. stands alone in the world in its dedication to Israel both financially (more than \$100 billion in aid since 1948) and defending its excesses at every diplomatic turn. This fanatical devotion (based at least in part on scriptural dictates that Israel exist for the Second Coming to occur) has seriously complicated American standing as the lone superpower in being a fair arbiter of international conflict. This has also focused the sights of terrorists on this country and its individual citizens. Eduardo is a Vietnam veteran, a peace activist, a labor union organizer and is very learned of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. He is a personal friend of Hanan Ashrawi, the former Palestinian National Council member.

## **FREETHOUGHT ACROSS THE MILLENNIA**

### **Sixth Annual Atheist Alliance Convention**

**by Cleo Kocol**

Two years ago when Atheists and Other Freethinkers took on the task of hosting the Sixth Annual Atheist Alliance Convention, the actual weekend seemed a long way in the future. Now it is in the past, and we can take pride in a job well done. We had 161 attendees and sold 199 debate tickets, and among us we ate 333 dinner and lunch meals. Some attendees remarked that it was the best convention they had ever attended, and many said we had done a great job. It's time to take credit.

## **THANKS**

Thanks to Kay Dickey and Cleo Kocol who stuck their necks out and obligated AOF for the task. We're all grateful to Hank Kocol who spearheaded the complete convention from those first days to its completion, keeping all the myriad details straight and the convention running smoothly and on time. He did a marvelous job from getting speakers to answering all queries, serious, frivolous, and just plain stupid and keeping the planning running smoothly.

Thanks to Kay Dickey who as treasurer for the convention dealt daily with debits and credits, supplying a running total to AOF convention personnel. Thanks to myself who as Hank's right-hand helper, suggested, vetoed, applauded, and helped to implement the myriad tasks. Congratulations to Jody Craig who spearheaded the Publicity for the convention and to Paul Storey who also worked in that area and to Peggy Lucas and Richard Daniels who designed and distributed marvelous posters and flyers. In the design department, much appreciation goes to Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert who did a fantastic job turning out convention name badges that were not only attractive but easy to read. Recognition goes to Pat Kelley who staffed the computer display at the convention, showing attendees our web site, and another thanks for her ongoing work as web master. Thanks to Don Knutson, Ed McConnell, Jody Craig, Peggy Lucas, Richard Daniels, and Paul Storey who met people at the airport and transported them to the hotel. Kudos to Betty Simonsma, Lydia Sheridan, and Gail Sanders for their tireless work at the registration desk and selling debate tickets. Appreciation also to Bob Wilson, Dave Henderson, Paul Storey, and Peggy Lucas who videotaped the speakers. Without all of us the convention wouldn't have been the great success it turned out to be.

## **SPEAKERS**

But no matter how good the efforts of the local group, a convention is no better than its speakers. This one was a feast of interesting and informative talks, many laced with humor. From Herb Silverman's Friday evening address, "The Candidate Without a Prayer" to Jon Nelson's Sunday morning talk, "Morality, Absolute or Relative?" speakers consistently added a lighter touch, playing with words in ways that charmed the audience.

Our own Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert spoke about the status of teaching about religion and freethought in public schools, sparking their comments with a visual presentation. Paul Storey gave his usual informative and inspiring talk about over-population. But the convention also afforded attendees a chance to comment, gripe, or blast off extemporaneously at the "secular soapbox." This proved to be a popular event, a line soon forming at the mike for the three-minute member contributions.

## **Convention Not an Isolated Event**

Because of Jody Craig's work, the Sacramento Bee interviewed Hank Kocol and Peggy Lucas before the convention weekend and published an article on the first page of the Metro section. Also at the end of the weekend, Channel 10 television news interviewed Marie Castle, president of the Atheist Alliance, Inc.

Due to the newspaper exposure the attendance for the Saturday night debate between Dan Barker of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and John Morehead of the Watchman Fellowship exceeded our expectations. But it did not occur without problems. After the article appeared crank calls began to come into the hotel. By the second day the hotel considered the calls enough of a threat to hire security guards and bill them to us.

Luckily, none of the crazies, who have trouble letting nontheists exist, caused any further disturbance. The debate, moderated so ably by Richard Russell of Wisconsin, probably changed no one's mind, but it was tremendously popular with everyone.

## **Entertainment**

To dispel the notion that non-theists have their intellectual heads in the clouds, Joe Morrow stepped down from his "real world" identification as professor of psychology and performed as "Ace the Magnificent." As such he managed to debunk charlatans of the slight of hand. On Saturday Bob Webb, whose resemblance to Mark Twain is uncanny, gave us Twain's "Letters from the Earth". Twain was accompanied by his pantalooned and hoop-skirted wife, Lydia.

## **Awards**

We at AOF were proud that two of the awards presented were to people who have been connected to AOF from its beginnings. Ninety-three year old Clara Carlson, of Port Angeles, Washington, has been a member and receiving our newsletter since its inception. We have been astounded at her activities. She has consistently been in the forefront of non-theistic activities in her area in Washington State. Not only has she written letters to the editors for years, she is the contact person for the media, appearing on shows and speaking out at meetings. She didn't just observe when a crèche appeared in her post office, she did what she could to get it removed. She didn't just talk about getting young people involved in the freethought movement, she addressed high school classes, and she has been doing this for years. At her age how many of us will be doing the same? It was a distinct pleasure for the Alliance and AOF to honor her.

The other awardee named by AOF came from our appreciation of his ongoing efforts to spread the word of Darwinism. Dr. Ted Pengelley not only is a non-theist, he is a font of knowledge about Charles Darwin and the whole Darwin family. He has addressed our group as well as many others, including the combined Humanists of the Greater Sacramento Area and AOF at their joint Darwin Day Birthday Celebration.

AAI Awards were also given to Joe Zemel, whose Atheist Alliance web site and links has been given praise and awards for non-theistic sites and to other awardees who consistently carry forward the non-theistic word.

A posthumous award was given to Mike Crutchfield who managed during his life to touch many of us with his activism and beliefs.

## **Hotel**

The staff at the Hilton Hotel, the site of the convention, consistently treated us with the deference and respect we hope to get everywhere. In addition, the food was magnificent! Some people say that's the real mark of a successful convention, but we know it takes a bit more!

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## Internet at the Convention

by Pat Kelley

Thanks to Dave Flanders, who generously donated the use of his personal computer, the Sacramento Freethought Website was available to Atheist Alliance Convention attendees both Friday and Saturday. Many people dropped by to peruse the website or watch others discover the extensive amount of freethought literature and resources placed there by the Internet Infidels and others.

While I didn't keep an accurate count, I estimate that at least 50 people took the website out for a spin! Several people signed up as members of the Sacramento Freethought Online email list, and I think I must have handed out at least 500 AOF business cards.

Seems we freethinkers love to test our knowledge as many people (including Dan Barker) took the online Freethinker Quiz. Dan missed one question, but was pleased to know that he is "well on his way to being a real freethinker!" (The quiz is just for fun by the way - not to be taken seriously!) Several others went further and took the Bible quiz as well. (That one is a bit harder since you've got to really KNOW the Bible to pass!)

I was pleased to finally be able to meet people that I've known only in cyberspace via the Sacramento Freethought Online email list. One email list member, speaker Andrew D. Benson, along with several friends, blew into the convention like a whirlwind and took us all by storm! Andrew is personable, friendly, extremely knowledgeable, has good looks to die for, and is a great speaker with a refreshing new message on how to reach out to the public. (Sounds like the Anti-Christ to me! :-).

He'd brought with him a box load (35) of his book "The True Origins of Christianity and the Bible." I voluntarily shared my booth with him and while he was speaking, I brought up his website to display and printed out several book order forms. When his speech ended a huge crowd gathered at my booth and I just had to step back and make room while Andrew personally signed and sold every last copy (at \$25.00 a pop)! Hours after he'd left, 6 people approached me for instructions on how to obtain a copy. (I simply handed them the pre-printed order form.) Freethought has definitely scored a hit with Andrew D. Benson! Just remember - we discovered him first! (or at least I think we did.)

His website address is: <http://www.prudentialpublishing.com/>. He is also listed in the Sacramento Freethought Website under the heading "Freethinking Writers," which is a collection of local members' writings. (Anyone can join - free!)

This was the first freethought convention that I've ever attended and I am glad I did. As with most freethinking people, I tend to 'hole up' and neglect my personal need to reach out and contact 'kindred spirits.' Yeah, I have the website and email and all that wonderful intellectual stimulation - but there's really nothing quite like getting out and mingling with friendly,

intelligent people. Seeing, hearing, touching and being involved with all the hubbub actually rejuvenated me and rekindled my passion for carrying on the work I do the rest of the year while 'holed up' in my little home office. Here's to the next conference!

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## **We Had a Great Turnout for the Atheist Alliance Convention!**

**by Jody Craig**

Attendance at the convention turned out to be everything we hoped for, and on Thursday before the convention, the Sacramento Bee published an article about us. As a result, quite a few local people came to the Hilton to inquire about AOF. We also had attendees who had seen it in the Davis Enterprise and in the Lodi Sentinel. The icing on the cake was when channel 10 showed up on Sunday (unfortunately, as we were winding down). They took quite a bit of footage and interviewed several people. The final piece aired on Sunday, April 23 on the channel 10 news. The debate also brought more people than we expected--about 300 people total were there during the debate. Expect to see and welcome quite a few new faces at the May meeting!

## **Quotes**

I have only a small flickering light to guide me in the darkness of a thick forest. Up comes a theologian and blows it out.

**Denis Diderot**

Scriptures: The sacred books of our holy religion, as distinguished from the false and profane writings on which all other faiths are based.

**Ambrose Bierce**

## **Creationism and Evolution: The Struggle Continues**

**Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento,  
2425 Sierra Blvd., Sacramento  
Sunday, May 7, 2000 3 PM**

A program featuring Dr. Eugenie C. Scott, Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education, with Marty Miller Maddox, researcher for the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Graduate Theological Union

Dr. Eugenie C. Scott, Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education and nationally recognized authority on the creationism-evolution controversy in the public schools, will be the featured speaker at an educational seminar sponsored by the Sacramento Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Forum Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento. The program will interest educators and the general public, particularly those concerned with separation of church and state.

As we enter the 21st Century, the struggle between science and religion continues to make headlines in Kansas and elsewhere. Dr. Scott has spoken to scientists, educators, and religious groups throughout the nation and is a frequent guest on television and radio programs. She will be joined by Marty Miller Maddox, researcher on the creationism-evolution conflict from the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences of the Graduate Theological Union.

The program will cover four aspects of the creationism-evolution controversy:

- Curriculum-- how content of a science course comes about; science teachers are to stay within the boundaries of an established science curriculum.
- Law-- a school's curriculum must follow existing law, and courts have spoken on certain aspects of this controversy (with respect to science and religion).
- Religion-- why the law has not found creationism appropriate for inclusion in a public school science curriculum; the difference between creationism and the more generic and prevalent point of view that "God created."
- Science-- proper education in modern science necessitates teaching youngsters about the scientific theory of evolution through natural selection.

Sponsors:

- Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Sacramento Chapter
- Forum Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Society

Co-sponsors:

- Atheists & Other Freethinkers
- Dahl Mediation Service of Davis
- Hadassah
- Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area
- Humanities/Religious Studies Department, California State University, Sacramento
- Interfaith Religious Liberty Foundation
- Jewish Community Relations Council
- OABITAR: Objectivity, Accuracy, and Balance In Teaching About Religion
- Philosophy Department, California State University, Sacramento
- San Juan Teachers' Association
- San Juan Unified School District

## **Kansas Retreats Further Toward the Dark Ages with Dismissal of Kansas University Secular Humanist Professor**

By Marie Alena Castle, President, Atheist Alliance International

The community of reason has a long history of opposition to prejudice and injustice. We have stood with women, workers and racial and sexual minorities in their fight for legal and social equality. We have also waged an ongoing battle for our own right to express our opinions and to be free of religious coercion. For our efforts, we have been consigned to the cultural attic, demonized and slandered by religious authoritarians as morally suspect and unsuited for citizenship in this nation, supposedly "under God."

That our battle is far from won is evident in the treatment of Prof. Fred Whitehead who, for 21 years, has taught family medicine at Kansas University's medical school. It wasn't bad enough that the Kansas Board of Education effectively removed the teaching of evolution from public schools. Now, continuing that state's retreat to the Dark Ages, Kansas University is attempting to silence the voice of reason and academic freedom by dismissing a renowned and respected secular humanist, apparently for his lack of god beliefs, although KU so far won't say one way or another.

What is at stake here are issues vital to a free society: academic freedom, due process, the right of atheists to employment in circumstances where religious organizations are heavily promoted, and the role of reason and science in medical education as well as the humanities. What is at stake here are not only the rights of one individual, but the right of those who find the cultural gods seriously lacking in credibility to exist as equals in society.

The dismissal notice was given October 6, to take effect June 30. Whitehead is fighting this with a formal complaint to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). He is charging the university with violating his academic freedom and engaging in religious discrimination against him for his lack of religion.

Whitehead believes, with justification, that his problems stem from his avocation. He is a well known historian, specializing in the freethought movement in America. Among other projects, he co-edited a groundbreaking anthology, *Freethought on the American Frontier*, which shows the surprising extent and positive impact of nonreligious, atheistic thinking in our pioneer days.

To date, the university has given Whitehead no reason in writing for his dismissal despite his insistence that this be done. Whitehead says he was told only verbally by Dr. Deborah Powell, the school's executive dean, that the reasons were budget shortfalls and that Whitehead's research "did not fit the mission of the school." No supporting evidence has been provided. Since Whitehead's research in family medicine has been ongoing and substantive, one can justifiably wonder if it was his sideline research uncovering the atheistic components of this nation's history that didn't fit. This government supported university seems to find a good fit in its almost-weekly sponsorship of religious events.

Following the dismissal notice, Whitehead attempted to find an accommodation with KU. He tried the university's appeal process but the university administrators did not respond to his letters. He met with Dr. Donald Hagen, the executive vice chancellor, who indicated the school would try to find him another position. Whitehead proposed that he be reassigned to science education, a reasonable and logical move for two reasons: 1) The university had actually formed a task force following the Kansas Board of Education's evolution decision, and 2) Whitehead has a good background in this area, having given lectures and published on topics covering the history of science in Kansas. So far, KU has said they "have no interest" in his proposal.

Meanwhile, in November, Whitehead helped sponsor an academic conference at the university on the evolution-creationism controversy. For this, he says he was verbally harassed by two administrators as conference plans developed. Whitehead reports that one of them said such an event had no place at a university. It was subsequent to this that Whitehead's proposal for reassignment was rejected. At this point, Whitehead says, the issue of religious discrimination became abundantly clear to him and he filed his complaint with the EEOC.

The KU treatment of Whitehead reflects an invidiously discriminatory favoritism for religious expression and the rejection of any opposing expression. This is blatant bigotry that would not be tolerated in our society if directed against any other law-abiding minority's views. We will support Whitehead in every way possible in his fight for academic freedom and social justice for the millions of U.S. citizens who are religion-free.