

# **Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter**

**July 2000**

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## **July Meeting**

The speaker for the July 9 General Meeting will be Bob McGee, who will speak on "Should any, some, or all drugs be legalized?" Mr. McGee is the President of the El Dorado Chapter of the League of Women Voters. He has recently completed a policy study, and has presented it at the national LWV convention. This will be a very topical presentation, because the League has just adopted a national study of Election Systems and Drug Policy.

## **June Speaker**

The June speaker was Dr. Robert Moon, a retired Methodist minister whose last post was St Mark's Church in Sacramento. Dr. Moon is an associate of the Jesus Seminar and has attended all of its meetings.

About 15 years ago, the Jesus Seminar was established to attempt to use current knowledge to identify the historical Jesus. About 40-50 scholars met at the Seminar meetings, mostly American, but with some from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The Jesus Seminar has been looking at the historical accuracy of the Bible.

No original copies of any book of the Bible are known to exist. There is a book known as "Q" (from the German word for "source") which no longer exists. Paul quoted Jesus 6 times from this book, and Matthew and Luke quoted from it extensively.

In 1945, an Egyptian peasant dug up an earthen jar with some old papers inside. These eventually went to the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, and in 1971, this department along

with UNESCO published some of the remaining papers from this find. Along with a poor translation of Plato, there was a book of Thomas, which can be regarded as a fifth gospel. This book was a collection of Jesus' sayings, with no reference to the context of the sayings -- when they were spoken, to whom, or where. No copies of this book had been discovered previously.

The only records of Jesus' life are the four gospels, Q, and Thomas. Secular historians of the time are silent about Jesus. Jesus himself never wrote anything. There is no indication that he ever made a reference to virgin birth or surviving death or crucifixion. There are no references to family relationships, original sin, or salvation. Jesus talked of the Kingdom of God, but not of God. He did not ever claim to be the son of god.

We know nothing about Luke, and we don't know the names of the writers of the other gospels. We do know that none of these was written by a witness or near witness. Of the four gospels, John (written around 95 CE) is the most accurate in geography and historical events. John used a different vocabulary and was from a different community than the other gospel writers. By the time John was writing, there was no one left who could challenge the accuracy of what he wrote.

The Jesus Seminar has concluded that Jesus did not speak the words attributed to him in the four gospels, with three minor exceptions. One of the exceptions was "turn the other cheek." Nearly all the items that the Seminar concluded Jesus either did speak or might have spoken were on ethical issues.

Some extraneous influences on the Bible changed it over time. An ecclesiastical influence to enshrine the power of the pope got the text changed to reflect that Peter was established as the pope. Anti-Semitic references were added in the New Testament. Paul's position that civil authorities must be obeyed was an effort to court the Roman emperor.

There has been a controversy over the question whether Jesus ever existed, given the lack of contemporary historical references. Nazareth is not on any map of that era. It is impossible to prove either way, though Dr. Moon suggested that it was

like looking at a ship's wake on the water and inferring the existence of a ship.

The Resurrection was not in Q, Luke, or Mark, though it was later added. The first mention was two generations after Jesus was gone, and Easter was never celebrated until 250 CE. The empty tomb story did not arise until after Rome destroyed Jerusalem. Paul described a vision, but did not see a real event. The resurrection did not empower the first followers. Rather, the earliest followers were empowered by a vision that the Kingdom of god was within them and the community.

## **Quote**

The idea of the sacred is quite simply one of the most conservative notions in any culture, because it seeks to turn other ideas --uncertainty, progress, change -- into crimes.  
- Salman Rushdie

## **Summer Reading Suggestions**

### **Thumbnail Book Reviews - by Cleo Kocol**

#### ***Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt**

All you ever suspected and knew about catholicism, the Irish and dirt poor poverty during the 1930's and 40's in the Emerald Isle comes true in McCourt's memoir. The book works because this essentially ugly, bigoted, prejudicial society is seen through the innocent eyes of childhood. While the Church and State give guilt trips and grudging charity, its members lie, cheat and steal while telling all and sundry, "God bless you" and "The saints preserve you."

#### ***The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver**

A fire and brimstone fundamentalist preacher takes his family to the Congo when it was still the Belgian Congo. A few months later when independence and Patrice Lumumba stirs the country, the preacher man refuses to leave. The novel is a sweeping denunciation of obsession and dominance whether by people or countries. God, as interpreted by Kingsolver's preacher has no compassion, merely thou halts and thou shalt not. The story is shown through the viewpoint of the pastor's four daughters.

#### ***The Cider House Rules* by John Irving**

The case for situational ethics is interestingly put forth in this novel. Although the examples used are sometimes extreme, they underscore the point that good people at times bend the rules. The young male protagonist learns during the course of this pro-choice movie that life is not all black or white but varying shades of gray. This is also a movie. Irving won an academy award for the screenplay, and the acting is also exceptional.

#### ***Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson**

That the past marks the future is shown beautifully through this tale of an island community where murder revives the bigotry of World War II when Japanese/Americans were interred. Also a movie, the fantastically lovely photography give a poetic feel to the film that is absent in the book. However, to do the story full justice, one has to read Guterson's very good book. It brings to life the people and the community as the movie doesn't.

#### ***The Statement* by Brian Moore**

Moore's novel lays bare the anti-Semitism in society, not only in World War II, but also today. Pierre, a Nazi collaborator and killer of Jews is hidden for forty years by clerics in France. That

Pope Pius's non-judgmental attitude toward the Nazis helped create a climate where the Holocaust could happen is made clear in the various scenes in the novel. The book left me with the thought that we have stamped out individuals who hate, but not the hate that festers still under the trappings of civilization. A very timely novel.

Additional recommendations from the editor:

For those with an interest in foreign relations, a new book, *Culture Wars and the Global Village: A Diplomat's Perspective* by Carl Coon

Why is there so much conflict in the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, and many other parts of the world? Is there something innate in human nature that makes it next to impossible to achieve peaceful coexistence? Carl Coon is a career diplomat, former US Ambassador to Nepal, and proprietor of the Progressive Humanism website: <http://www.progressivehumanism.com>.

He suggests that cultural conflicts are an inevitable result of our evolutionary heritage, and offers insights on how to manage the transition to a new, global society.

Finally, for lighter reading, of the detective story genre, *Alley Kat Blues* by **Karen Kijewski**.

Sacramento private detective Kat Colorado has a murder victim who has broken off from her strict Mormon family. Set in Sacramento and Las Vegas, the local landmarks are familiar. Kijewski has little patience with intolerant religious characters, and two of the villains of this novel are among the Mormon devout.

## **Supreme Court Ruling on Football Prayer a Victory for Individual Freedom, Says Americans United**

The June 19 Supreme Court ruling against official prayers before public school football games slams the door on majority rule in religious matters, says Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

"The Supreme Court made the right call. School-sponsored football prayer deserved to be sacked," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United.

"The justices rightly said that students should never be allowed to bully classmates into religious worship they may not believe in," Lynn added. "Allowing majorities to impose their religion on everyone else is fundamentally un-American."

The case, *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, centered on the constitutionality of a Texas school system's policy of allowing students to vote on whether to have prayers during school events, like football games. A federal appellate court struck down the policy, and this morning the Supreme Court upheld that decision.

In a 6-3 ruling written by Justice John Paul Stevens, the court majority held that student-led, student initiated" prayers at football games violate the separation of church and state by coercing students to participate in religion.

"Religious Right groups that complain that the court has censored prayer are dead wrong," Lynn said. "The court has reaffirmed the principle that prayer cannot be imposed on young people against their will. Mob rule on religion has no place in our public schools."

## **And on evolution teaching**

Also on June 19, the Supreme Court declined to hear a case relative to evolution disclaimers. The following is excerpted from the article Court Refuses Evolution Disclaimer, by Richard Carelli, Associated Press Writer, Monday, June 19, 2000

WASHINGTON -- The Supreme Court refused to let a public school district require that the teaching of evolution be accompanied by a disclaimer mentioning "the biblical version of creation" and other teachings on life's origin. The justices, by a 6-3 vote Monday, let stand rulings that struck down a Louisiana school board's disclaimer policy as a violation of the constitutionally required separation of church and state. Monday's action was not a precedent-setting decision but only a denial of review. Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas voted to hear arguments in the case.

The Tangipahoa Parish school board in 1994 voted to require teachers to tell students about to study the theory of evolution that it is "presented to inform students of the scientific concept and not intended to influence or dissuade the biblical version of creation or any other concept." The disclaimer drafted by the school board also said: "It is the basic right and privilege of each student to form his-her own opinion or maintain beliefs taught by parents on this very important matter. ... Students are urged to exercise critical thinking and gather all information possible and closely examine each alternative toward forming an opinion." Three parents of students sued in federal court to challenge the policy, and a federal judge blocked its enforcement. The judge said the disclaimer was unconstitutional because it had a religious purpose.

A three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed that the disclaimer had to be struck down but cited a different reason - it had the effect of promoting religion. The panel did not rule out the possibility that a school board could require some type of disclaimer stating that evolution was not the only accepted explanation of the origin of life. But it said the Tangipahoa Parish disclaimer "under the facts and circumstances of this case ... is not sufficiently neutral" to be constitutionally permissible.

In the appeal acted on Monday, lawyers for the school board argued that "the mere mention of the biblical version of creation by way of illustration does not present a significant risk of perceived endorsement of Bible-based religion." The appeal said reasonable high school or elementary students would not interpret the disclaimer as a pro-religion message. "The central message of the disclaimer resolution is that there are no outsiders or insiders, no one who is favored or disfavored, on the issue of life's origin but persons of all viewpoints are full members in the school community."

Lawyers for those who challenged the disclaimer disagreed. "By disclaiming only evolution - the one element of the school curriculum that generates religious controversy - the school board has violated both the constitutional mandate of neutrality toward religion and its obligation to provide its students with secular educations free from religious indoctrination or partisanship," they said. They noted that the disclaimer was drafted shortly after the school board voted 5-4 to reject a proposal to teach "creation-science" in the district's schools.

The Supreme Court in 1987 barred states from requiring the teaching of creationism in public schools where evolution is taught, calling such a Louisiana law a thinly veiled attempt to promote religion. The teaching of evolution has been controversial since the famous 1925 "monkey trial" in which teacher John Scopes was convicted and fined \$100 for teaching evolution when Tennessee law made it a crime to teach anything but the Biblical version of creation. Scopes' conviction later was overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court on a procedural matter and never reached the nation's highest court.

Writing for the court's three dissenters Monday, Scalia criticized the court for standing by while an appeals court "bars a school district from even suggesting to students that other theories besides evolution -including but not limited to, the biblical theory of creation - are worthy of their consideration."

## **Letter to Dr. Laura**

Dear Dr. Laura:

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's law. I have learned a great deal from you, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate.

I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Lev. 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. How should I deal with this?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as it suggests in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev. 15:19-24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

Lev. 25:44 states that I may buy slaves from the nations that are around us. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans but not Canadians. Can you clarify?

I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev. 10:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

Lev. 20:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear prescription glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

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