

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

September 2000

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September Speaker

The speaker at AOF's general meeting on September 10 will be Devara Berger. She is a health policy consultant and has over 20 years experience in policy and government work. She will give an overview of what legislation right-to-die groups have been responsible for in California, the status of the physician-aid-in-dying legislative effort in California, and an overview of what has happened since Oregon made physician-aid-in-dying legal. In addition to her policy work, she is a published writer and national speaker on health issues.

August Speaker

The speaker at the August meeting was Bories Alsonof-farhangi, a professor of economics and political science from the University of Azerbaijan, now a visiting professor at CSUS. He noted that when he first came to the United States, he was surprised to see all the religious groups. With their many campus tables set up by religious groups, the campus looked like a holy land.

He provided a brief history of Azerbaijan. It was formerly a Soviet Republic, first colonized by the czars and later by the Communists. The Soviets eliminated religion, teaching classes in atheism in the school system. People could declare a religion, but not until they were at least 18 years old. Historically, 90% of the population of Azerbaijan was Moslem. Now the population knows little or nothing about that religion.

In the years since the fall of the Soviet Union, when Azerbaijan became an independent nation, several missionaries have arrived. The people of Azerbaijan find it insulting, asking in effect "why is your myth any better than mine?" Also, Azerbaijanies believe in unselfish help; by contrast, they see that the missionaries offering help have ulterior motives.

Bories has found that in the United States, students are ignorant of the world around them, geographically, culturally, and historically. They know technology; they do not know philosophy.

Their role models tend to be athletes or entertainers. He finds this to be a failure of the American education system.

To illustrate the economics of organized religion in Sacramento, he noted that the minister of one large congregation had an income of \$75,000, a housing allowance, and a car furnished. This is substantially more than a professor at CSUS can earn after 30 years. He noted that many preachers really don't believe what they are saying, but are unwilling to give up their jobs.

Atheists need to offer a vision for the 21st century. They have allowed others to define them. In particular, they need some equivalent of youth pastors. They should be on university campuses, with their table set up along with all the religious groups.

He noticed that in the same building, just down the hall from the AOF meeting, was a Holy Roller type of religious sect holding a service and talking in tongues. He wondered whether they would notice the difference if he were to go in speaking Azerbaijani.

He noted that globalization and uncensored communications are a fact of the 21st century. The demise of the Soviet Union was due to the satellite dish and uncensored communications, and now Iran finds that its number one enemy is the satellite dish.

From the "Theology as Legal Defense" file:

A Hartford, CT, couple failed to make payments on their mortgage for several months, so the Federal National Mortgage Association filed a foreclosure lawsuit. The couple explained "It was our desire to be free from this mortgage debt. Therefore we asked God our Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ. He heard us and he freed us from this mortgage bondage." The judge was not sufficiently devout and approved the request to foreclose on the property. (Freethought Today, May 2000)

From Lyon, France comes the story of Catholic priest Father Laguerie who was pulled over by the gendarmes for speeding. The father agreed that he was going too fast but argued that it was not his fault. He told the officer that he was driving along at a normal rate of speed when suddenly the car became "possessed" and "some evil force took over" causing him to exceed the speed limit. The officer didn't buy his story and wrote the father a ticket. The question is, does the car need to go to the garage or to the exorcist? [Bozo criminal of the day, December 9, 1999.](#)

Classic works

August has been a slow news month, so what follows are two brief classic works of freethought, by [Thomas Jefferson](#) and [Robert Ingersoll](#). Enjoy the eloquence of their expression along with their ideas.

Letter by Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, his nephew.

Religion. Your reason is now mature enough to examine this object. In the first place, divest yourself of all bias in favor of novelty and singularity of opinion. Indulge them in any other subject rather than that of religion. It is too important, and the consequences of error may be too serious. On the other hand, shake off all the fears and servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear. You will naturally examine first, the religion of your own country. Read the Bible, then as you would read Livy or Tacitus. The facts which are within the ordinary course of nature, you will believe on the authority of the writer, as you do those of the same kind in Livy and Tacitus.

The testimony of the writer weighs in their favor, in one scale, and their not being against the laws of nature, does not weigh against them. But those facts in the Bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a variety of faces. Here you must recur to the pretensions of the writer to inspiration from God. Examine upon what evidence his pretensions are founded, and whether that evidence is so strong, as that its falsehood would be more improbable than a change in the laws of nature, in the case he relates.

For example, in the book of Joshua, we are told, the sun stood still several hours. Were we to read that fact in Livy or Tacitus, we should class it with their showers of blood, speaking of statues, beasts, etc. But it is said, that the writer of that book was inspired. Examine, therefore, candidly, what evidence there is of his having been inspired. The pretension is entitled to your inquiry, because millions believe it. On the other hand, you are astronomer enough to know how contrary it is to the law of nature that a body revolving on its axis, as the earth does, should have stopped, should not, by that sudden stoppage, have prostrated animals, trees, buildings, and should after a certain time have resumed its revolution, and that without a second general prostration. Is this arrest of the earth's motion, or the evidence which affirms it, most within the law of probabilities?

You will next read the New Testament. It is the history of a personage called Jesus. Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions: 1, of those who say he was begotten by God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and 2, of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition, by being gibbeted, according to the Roman law, which punished the first commission of that offence by whipping, and the second by exile, or death "in furea"

Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a

God, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement; if that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a God, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love.

In fine, I repeat, you must lay aside all prejudice on both sides, and neither believe nor reject anything, because any other persons, or description of persons, have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision. I forgot to observe, when speaking of the New Testament, that you should read all the histories of Christ, as well of those whom a council of ecclesiastics have decided for us, to be Pseudo-evangelists, as those they named Evangelists.

Because these Pseudo-evangelists pretended to inspiration, as much as the others, and you are to judge their pretensions by your own reason, and not by the reason of those ecclesiastics. Most of these are lost. There are some, however, still extant, collected by Fabricius, which I will endeavor to get and send you.

What Would You Substitute for the Bible as a Moral Guide, by Robert G. Ingersoll

You ask me what I would "substitute for the Bible as a moral guide."

I know that many people regard the Bible as the only moral guide and believe that in that book only can be found the true and perfect standard of morality.

There are many good precepts, many wise sayings and many good regulations and laws in the Bible, and these are mingled with bad precepts, with foolish sayings, with absurd rules and cruel laws. But we must remember that the Bible is a collection of many books written centuries apart, and that it in part represents the growth and tells in part the history of a people. We must also remember that the writers treat of many subjects. Many of these writers have nothing to say about right or wrong, about vice or virtue.

The book of Genesis has nothing about morality. There is not a line in it calculated to shed light on the path of conduct. No one can call that book a moral guide. It is made up of myth and miracle, of tradition and legend.

In Exodus we have an account of the manner in which Jehovah delivered the Jews from Egyptian bondage.

We now know that the Jews were never enslaved by the Egyptians; that the entire story is a fiction. We know this, because there is not found in Hebrew a word of Egyptian origin, and there is not found in the language of the Egyptians a word of Hebrew origin. This being so, we know that the Hebrews and Egyptians could not have lived together for hundreds of years.

Certainly Exodus was not written to teach morality. In that book you cannot find one word against human slavery. As a matter of fact, Jehovah was a believer in that institution.

The killing of cattle with disease and hail, the murder of the first-born, so that in every house was death, because the king refused to let the Hebrews go, certainly was not moral; it was fiendish. The writer of that book regarded all the people of Egypt, their children, their flocks and herds, as the property of Pharaoh, and these people and these cattle were killed, not because they had done anything wrong, but simply for the purpose of punishing the king. Is it possible to get any morality out of this history?

All the laws found in Exodus, including the Ten Commandments, so far as they are really good and sensible, were at that time in force among all the peoples of the world. Murder is, and always was, a crime, and always will be, as long as a majority of people object to being murdered.

Industry always has been and always will be the enemy of larceny.

The nature of man is such that he admires the teller of truth and despises the liar. Among all tribes, among all people, truth-telling has been considered a virtue and false swearing or false speaking a vice.

The love of parents for children is natural, and this love is found among all the animals that live. So the love of children for parents is natural, and was not and cannot be created by law.

Love does not spring from a sense of duty, nor does it bow in obedience to commands. So men and women are not virtuous because of anything in books or creeds.

All the Ten Commandments that are good were old, were the result of experience. The commandments that were original with Jehovah were foolish.

The worship of "any other God" could not have been worse than the worship of Jehovah, and nothing could have been more absurd than the sacredness of the Sabbath.

If commandments had been given against slavery and polygamy, against wars of invasion and extermination, against religious persecution in all its forms, so that the world could be free, so that the brain might be developed and the heart civilized, then we might, with propriety, call such commandments a moral guide.

Before we can truthfully say that the Ten Commandments constitute a moral guide, we must add and subtract. We must throw away some, and write others in their places.

The commandments that have a known application here, in this world, and treat of human obligations are good, the others have no basis in fact, or experience.

Many of the regulations found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, are good. Many are absurd and cruel.

The entire ceremonial of worship is insane.

Most of the punishment for violations of laws are unphilosophic and brutal. . . . The fact is that the Pentateuch upholds nearly all crimes, and to call it a moral guide is as absurd as to say that it is merciful or true.

Nothing of a moral nature can be found in Joshua or Judges. These books are filled with crimes, with massacres and murders. They are about the same as the real history of the Apache Indians. The story of Ruth is not particularly moral.

In first and second Samuel there is not one word calculated to develop the brain or conscience. Jehovah murdered seventy thousand Jews because David took a census of the people. David, according to the account, was the guilty one, but only the innocent were killed.

In first and second Kings can be found nothing of ethical value. All the kings who refused to obey the priests were denounced, and all the crowned wretches who assisted the priests, were declared to be the favorites of Jehovah. In these books there cannot be found one word in favor of liberty. There are some good Psalms, and there are some that are infamous. Most of these Psalms are selfish. Many of them are passionate appeals for revenge.

The story of Job shocks the heart of every good man. In this book there is some poetry, some pathos, and some philosophy, but the story of this drama called Job, is heart-less to the last degree. The children of Job are murdered to settle a little wager between God and the Devil. Afterward, Job having remained firm, other children are given in the place of the murdered ones. Nothing, however, is done for the children who were murdered.

The book of Esther is utterly absurd, and the only redeeming feature in the book is that the name of Jehovah is not mentioned.

I like the Song of Solomon because it tells of human love, and that is something I can understand. That book in my judgment is worth all the ones that go before it, and is a far better moral guide. There are some wise and merciful Proverbs. Some are selfish and some are flat and commonplace. I like the book of Ecclesiastes because there you find some sense, some poetry, and some philosophy. Take away the interpolations and it is a good book.

Of course there is nothing in Nehemiah or Ezra to make men better, nothing in Jeremiah or Lamentations calculated to lessen vice, and only a few passages in Isaiah that can be used in a good cause.

In Ezekiel and Daniel we find only ravings of the insane.

In some of the minor prophets there is now and then a good verse, now and then an elevated thought. You can, by selecting passages from different books, make a very good creed, and by selecting passages from different books, you can make a very bad creed.

The trouble is that the spirit of the Old Testament, its disposition, its temperament, is bad, selfish and cruel. The most fiendish things are commanded, commended and applauded. The stories that are told of Joseph, of Elisha, of Daniel and Gideon, and of many others, are hideous; hellish.

On the whole, the Old Testament cannot be considered a moral guide. Jehovah was not a moral God. He had all the vices, and he lacked all the virtues. He generally carried out his threats, but he never faithfully kept a promise.

At the same time, we must remember that the Old Testament is a natural production, that it was written by savages who were slowly crawling toward the light. We must give them credit for the noble things they said, and we must be charitable enough to excuse their faults and even their crimes.

I know that many Christians regard the Old Testament as the foundation and the New as the superstructure, and while many admit that there are faults and mistakes in the Old Testament, they insist that the New is the flower and perfect fruit.

I admit that there are many good things in the New Testament, and if we take from that book the dogmas, of eternal pain, of infinite revenge, of the atonement, of human sacrifice, of the necessity of shedding blood; if we throw away the doctrine of non-resistance, of loving enemies, the idea that prosperity is the result of wickedness, that Poverty is a preparation for Paradise, if we throw all these away and take the good, sensible passages, applicable to conduct, then we can make a fairly good moral guide, -- narrow, but moral.

Of course, many important things would be left out. You would have nothing about human rights, nothing in favor of the family, nothing for education, nothing for investigation, for thought and reason, but still you would have a fairly good moral guide.

On the other hand, if you would take the foolish passages, the extreme ones, you could make a creed that would satisfy an insane asylum.

If you take the cruel passages, the verses that inculcate eternal hatred, verses that writhe and hiss like serpents, you can make a creed that would shock the heart of a hyena. It may be that no book contains better passages than the New Testament, but certainly no book contains worse.

Below the blossom of love you find the thorn of hatred; on the lips that kiss, you find the poison of the cobra.

The Bible is not a moral guide.

Any man who follows faithfully all its teachings is an enemy of society and will probably end his days in a prison or an asylum.

What is morality?

In this world we need certain things. We have many wants. We are exposed to many dangers. We need food, fuel, raiment and shelter, and besides these wants, there is, what may be called, the hunger of the mind.

We are conditioned beings, and our happiness depends upon conditions. There are certain things that diminish, certain things that increase, well-being. There are certain things that destroy and there are others that preserve.

Happiness, including its highest forms, is after all the only good, and everything, the result of which is to produce or secure happiness, is good, that is to say, moral. Everything that destroys or diminishes well-being is bad, that is to say, immoral. In other words, all that is good is moral, and all that is bad is immoral.

What then is, or can be called, a moral guide? The shortest possible answer is one word: Intelligence.

We want the experience of mankind, the true history of the race. We want the history of intellectual development, of the growth of the ethical, of the idea of justice, of conscience, of charity, of self-denial. We want to know the paths and roads that have been traveled by the human mind.

These facts in general, these histories in outline, the results reached, the conclusions formed, the principles evolved, taken together, would form the best conceivable moral guide. We cannot depend on what are called "inspired books," or the religions of the world. These religions are based on the supernatural, and according to them we are under obligation to worship and obey some supernatural being, or beings. All these religions are inconsistent with intellectual liberty. They are the enemies of thought, of investigation, of mental honesty. They destroy the manliness of man. They promise eternal rewards for belief, for credulity, for what they call faith. These religions teach the slave virtues. They make inanimate things holy, and falsehoods sacred. They create artificial crimes. To eat meat on Friday, to enjoy yourself on Sunday, to eat on fast-days, to be happy in Lent, to dispute a priest, to ask for evidence, to deny a creed, to express your sincere thought, all these acts are sins, crimes against some god, To give your honest opinion about Jehovah, Mohammed or Christ, is far worse than to maliciously slander your neighbor. To question or doubt miracles. is far worse than to deny known facts. Only the obedient, the credulous, the cringers, the kneelers, the meek, the unquestioning, the true believers, are regarded as moral, as virtuous. It is not enough to be honest, generous and useful; not enough to be governed by evidence, by facts. In addition to this, you must believe. These things are the foes of morality. They subvert all natural conceptions of virtue.

All "inspired books," teaching that what the supernatural commands is right, and right because commanded, and that what the supernatural prohibits is wrong, and wrong because prohibited, are absurdly unphilosophic.

And all "inspired books," teaching that only those who obey the commands of the supernatural are, or can be, truly virtuous, and that unquestioning faith will be rewarded with eternal joy, are grossly immoral.

Again I say: Intelligence is the only moral guide. Robert G. Ingersoll was considered the finest orator in America during the late 19th century. Many of his works can be found at the Internet Infidels site at www.infidels.org.

Reminders

Reminder: The AOF movie weekends have resumed. On the fourth Sunday of every month, we meet at the Tower Theater, 16th and Broadway, at 12:30. The decision about which movie to see is made then by the group that meets that day. The next movie Sunday will be September 24. Another reminder: If you haven't checked the AOF web site at <http://www.rthoughtsfree.org> recently, you should. This is really an impressive site, shared with other local organizations with similar goals.

Joke

Farmer McDuffy visited the parish priest and explained that his dog had died. "I never cared much for people, but this dog meant the world to me," the farmer said with a tear in his eye. "Could you say a mass for her?"

"We don't do services for animals," the priest replied with a huff. "There's a new, modern denomination down the road -- no telling what they believe in."

"I had hoped for a Catholic service, but I understand," McDuffy sighed. "Do you think \$5,000 is enough to donate to them for the service?"

"Good lord, man," the priest exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me the dog was Catholic?"

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