

AOF News & Views

Sacramento, California

March 2007

Sunday, March 11 “First Freedom” Activism

Special Points of Interest

- Mark Your Calendars—AOF’s meeting time is now 1:30PM (page 1)
- Manufactured controversies in Darwin Day press coverage? (page 3)
- C.S. Lewis a Pagan in Christian Clothing? (page 4)
- Meet AOF’s New Board Member (page 6)
- Introducing the AOF Volunteer Job Board! (page 7)

Safeguarding separation of church and state is one of the primary aims of the AOF organization. **Activism** on this very topic is the essence of the new “First Freedom First” campaign (<http://www.firstfreedomfirst.org/about>) which also sees religion/government separation as crucial. In fact, FFF deems it essential to a meaningful constitutional guarantee of America’s “first freedom.”

Religious liberty gets this name because it comes *first* in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”). Although a high (Number One!) priority for the Framers of the Constitution in the 18th century, it isn’t doing so well in the 21st. Under assault all along, separation of religion and government is facing perhaps its most serious challenge ever right now. Consequently, a FFF campaign was recently

(Continued on page 3)

Standard Fare

Next Meeting	1
AOF Line	2
Meeting Recap	3
Highway Clean-Up Event	5
AOF/HAGSA Movie Night	5
Membership Form	6

Mark your calendars now....

New General Meeting Time Starting in March! 1:30—4PM

Be sure to update your calendars, the AOF general meeting time is changing to **1:30-4PM**.

Financial considerations prompted the time change. With two weeks advance notice, the Sierra 2 Community Center informed AOF of a new \$25/hr fee for use of Community Room 10 from 4-5PM (beginning January 2007) .

The AOF board concluded the extra monthly cost was not a responsible use of member dues.

Other financial considerations, such as the additional increased room rate year-over-year from \$35/hr to \$40/hr also played a part in the decision.

The new time is the earliest time

(Continued on page 2)

An Awesome Inspiration

AOF Line

By Don Knutson

A former neighbor sent me a list of what she called "ambiguities" which included "atheism is a non-prophet organization" and "if man evolved from monkeys and apes, why do we still have monkeys and apes?" Now, she is a Christian and she is as aware of my non-theistic beliefs as anyone in my community and so I felt compelled to respond to the latter quotation. I wrote to her that our secular community's 10th annual Darwin Day, February 11th, was privileged to have Dr. Geerat Vermeij, a distinguished UC-Davis professor and MacArthur Fellow as its keynote speaker. I said that I believed he would answer, based on his lecture, that predation and geographical location would strongly influence the varying genetic evolutionary paths of primates. My friend is wheelchair-bound and has become a well known activist for disability rights in California and so I mentioned to her that when Dr. Vermeij submitted his substantial biography to the Darwin Day Committee, he didn't include the fact that he had been

The purpose of the organization, AOF, is to promote the civic understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community.

blind since the age of 3. I was astounded to learn how casual he was about such a major disability and didn't allow it to prevent him from writing five books and travel to the far and wide reaches of the world to do his research on shells, or, as he calls them, housing for crustaceans. His example made me think about the numerous numbers of second-class citizens there have been in western culture and how their status was explained away by mainstream culture as a "disability". In our own country, for instance, women were denied the right to vote among many other rights because they were perceived to be "too emotional" and men of color were seen as inferior for they allegedly "lacked intellectual ability" compared to white males. And it was all absolute rubbish! Dr. Vermeij's example, of course, is the inspirational one to follow in taking our alleged "disabilities" in stride and focusing on our strengths and abilities regardless of society's interpretations.

(Continued from page 1)

currently available in Room 10 on second Sundays, as another group meets in the room until 12:30PM, and Sierra 2 requires 30 minutes to configure the room between events (seating, lectern, tables, and so forth).

AOF has met at 2:30PM since early 2003, when Sierra 2 asked AOF to change times from 12:30 to 2:30PM to accommodate a church group meeting in Room 10 four times per month. In return for changing times, Sierra 2 agreed to allow AOF the ability to remain in the building after the normal closing time of 4PM on Sundays.

With the additional financial pressures of upward rental rates in Room 10, the AOF Board agreed by consensus at the February board meeting to resume a tabled search for a new monthly meeting location.

If you have suggestions for meeting locations, please share them with the board using the contact information in the column to the right.

AOF Board (2007)

President: Don Knutson

Vice President: Mynga Futrell

Secretary: Jerry Sloan

Treasurer: Ken Nahigian

Directors at large:

Beverly Church, Kay Dickey, Kevin Schultz, Paul Storey, Susan Vergne

AOF Committees

Newsletter: Kevin Schultz (Editor)

Tom Nicolette (Mailing)

Freethought Day, Oct. 7, 2007

Beverly Church, Mynga Futrell, Carla Corbett, Kay Dickey, Jerry Sloan, Tom Ikelman, Kevin Schultz, Brian Krofchok

Darwin Day, Feb. 10, 2008:

Bronda Silva, Mynga Futrell, Dave Henderson, Ed McConnell, Kay Dickey, Ken Nahigian,

Ad Hoc Committees:

Web Portal (Kevin Schultz, Richard Langley); Alternate Meeting Place/ Time (Jerry Sloan, Ken Nahigian, Kevin Schultz); Youth Outreach (Jerry Sloan, Tina Burgess, Mynga Futrell); Connections (Kevin Schultz, Betty Simonsma); Growing AOF Membership (Jerry Sloan, Kevin Schultz)

Archive: Jody Craig, Kay Dickey, Mynga Futrell, Ken Nahigian, Betty Simonsma

AOF's Voluntariat

Affiliation Liaisons:

Mynga Futrell, Kay Dickey (AAI)
Hank Kocol (CSH)
Kevin Schultz (AA)
Beverly Church (AHA/HAGSA)

Community Service Projects:

Don Knutson

Internet Website: Kevin Schultz

Meetings: Dave Flanders, Ken Nahigian
Jerry Sloan, Betty Simonsma

Membership Database:

Ken Nahigian

We welcome additional involvement from AOF members. Right now we need volunteers to perform very small tasks at our meetings. Just phone the voice mail at **447-3589** if you can help us out. Or, send an e-mail to us at

aofboard@aofonline.org

Darwin Day 2007 Recap

Darwin Day Press Mixed

By Mynga Futrell

This year's Darwin Birthday celebration on February 11 got some long overdue local press! Most exciting was the advance feature article in the *Sacramento Bee* Friday, February 9. A pull-out mentioned the location and time of the coming "community party," which doubtless added quite a few folks to Sunday's attendance. A shorter, but not insignificant, *Bee* follow-up article Monday reported on aspects of the presentation.

Both articles by *Bee* staff writers ("Darwin Day hosts visionary scientist" and "Every day is Darwin Day for UCD prof") featured Professor Geerat Vermeij as central figure and noted his topic, "Shells as a Window on an Evolving World." The two different forms of journalistic treatment of the *context* of the Darwin Day event are worth recounting.

As a caption (quoting Dr. Vermeij in the second article) stated: "*How we talk about evolution is important to how people understand it.*" So, how does the *Bee* talk about evolution?

Carrie Peyton Dahlberg's article has as its subhead: *Nationwide celebrations revere 'science and human-*

ity'). She wrote an uplifting profile of Dr. Vermeij, publicizing the blind scientist's exemplary accomplishments in his chosen discipline and depicting his joyful explorations on hands and knees "in the field." She clearly portrayed him as a human being and conveyed his "...passion for science that shines through (his life)." The text and accompanying color photographs (3!) got across well why Sacramento's Darwin Day is a *celebration of science and humanity*.

The follow-up article by Lakiesha McGhee took a different tack, as indicated by its subhead, *Theory still contentious in U.S.* She placed evolution into the context of fundamentalist beliefs, rather than scientific enterprise. Five of the 17 paragraphs focused on a local parent's wish to "talk about evolution" in public schools from the perspective of Biblical literalism. As a way to inform the public about evolution, this approach, especially in a short article, is more confusing than edifying.

Why is "evolutionary theory" so contentious? Would journalistic handling of the topic have anything to

(Continued on page 5)

AOF Program Continuation

(Continued from page 1)

launched with a petition on the subject. Now its goal is to urge even more citizen activism around this "number one" First Amendment freedom.

How can each of us better engage to protect the crumbling wall? The FFF campaign has prepared a set of materials and a brand new video (just released Feb. 23) that focuses on activism around the "first freedom." There are eight interest areas: end of life care, reproductive health, democracy (not theocracy), no religious discrimination, academic integrity, sound science, respect for all families, and last (but not least!), freedom to worship...or NOT.

At the March AOF meeting, attendees will see the new video projected (large size !) and discuss the varied strategies around several favored topic areas.

Sacramento Events Calendar for Freethinkers



<http://sacportal.humanists.net/calendar>

Your favorite freethought events, centralized

Atheists and Other Freethinkers



AOF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization. It is one of 50 member societies of the **Atheist Alliance International** ("a positive voice for atheism"). AOF

also maintains affiliations with the Council for Secular Humanism, American Atheists, and the American Humanist Association.

AOF's Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the association, Atheists and Other Freethinkers, is to promote the civic understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community. To accomplish this purpose, AOF will, through educational programs, projects, and publications, extend atheistic perspectives concerning the separation of church and state and the right to think and speak freely on these perspectives.

AOF News & Views: Copyright © 2007 by *Atheists and Other Freethinkers*, PO Box 15182, Sacramento, CA 95851-0182. The contents of News & Views are informational and educational. Views expressed via the articles in this publication are not necessarily those of Atheists and Other Freethinkers.

Subscription \$12 per year (free to members).

Reprinting of original material in this newsletter is granted to atheist, freethought, rationalist, skeptical, and secular humanist groups as long as acknowledgment is given. Exchange of newsletters with aforementioned organizations is solicited.

Historical Figures Series

C.S. Lewis

By Ken Nahigian

In American Christendom he is a near icon, a poster-boy for conversion and a hero of apologetics—I know, having been a fan myself. A Monrovia, California, church window even sanctifies him in stained glass. In England his reputation is less luminous, more that of a peculiar, slightly eccentric propagandist for the Anglican church who also did a few things right: good studies of medieval poetry and some enjoyable children's books. What is his story?

Born Nov 29, 1898, Clive Staples Lewis had a traumatic childhood, made no easier by his mother's early death, a cold father and abusive treatment at Irish boarding school. A reluctant atheist at age 13—as he wrote, “angry at God for not existing ... equally angry at Him for creating a world”—he developed, perhaps by way of escape, a love of myth, folklore and medieval literature, and of classics of literary fantasy. Deep in the pages, dreaming of magic, Lewis found a numinous emotion. He called it “joy.”

After a year at University College, Oxford, he enlisted in the British Army. Age 19, his experience on the front line did not encourage belief in a good God—“the horribly smashed men still moving like half-crushed beetles”—and nightmares of it haunted him for the rest of his life.

Wounded, mended, back in Ireland, life was brighter. Lewis had an affectionate relationship (possibly romantic) with an older woman. After she died he returned to Oxford, where he graduated with honors and won a teaching post at Magdalen College. He found friends, mostly Christian believers. Long late-evening talks led him by nudges into a kind of intellectual

theism. Christian Mythology, as he then called it, began to take on the haunting, numinous magic of his childhood readings. Two years later, on a long restless trip, a half terrified Lewis, aged 33, leapt over the threshold to Christianity.

He began to write: religious allegories, literary studies, children's fic-



C.S. Lewis in 1947 (photograph by Arthur Strong)

tion, apologetica, lectures, poetry, even Christian science fiction. He developed a congenial, easy-going style with compelling imagery. Before long he had a following. In the late 1950's he met and married one of his fans, Joy Gresham, who suffered from bone cancer. Lewis was certain his prayers caused her remarkable remission—if it didn't work for others, well, they weren't doing it right. But Joy relapsed. In 1960 she died painfully. The result was a crushing crisis of faith, as well as some of Lewis's most heartfelt writings. After that, his own health began to decay.

He died of kidney failure on November 22, 1963. In the national news it was barely a footnote. John F. Kennedy and Aldous Huxley died the same day.

C.S. Lewis was a whirl of disparate elements, pagan, atheistic, modern and Christian; one reason he was such an effective apologist: he knew his audience, and could be all things to all people. But converted mostly by “joy,” he never deeply asked why it was Anglican Christian, not another faith. His favorite point was that either Jesus was mad—like “a man who says he is a poached egg”—or lying, or right. Jesus didn't *seem* like a madman or liar, so what he said all must be true. A slick argument, it forgets human character, our ability to compartmentalize. It excludes many middle alternatives.

Lewis saw the Anglican Church not as just one way among others but *the single cosmic truth* extending from the farthest galaxy to his front porch. It never seemed to troubled him that this one staggering truth also happened, coincidentally, to be the formal faith of his own tribe, supported by English politics of his day and the university where he worked. His Christianity was parochial, English, Irish and Northern—even Roman Catholicism was alien to him, which much irked his Catholic friend J.R.R. Tolkien.

But most of what made Christianity joyful for Lewis seemed to be the pagan elements it got from its sources. So it may be his leap to Christianity was more of a slide back. And Lewis came to Bethlehem more by way of Narnia than the other way around.

Highway Clean-Up Event Mar 25

By Don Knutson

AOF is staging another highway cleanup on Sunday, March 25 so join us at 8a.m. and we'll be done no later than 10:30 at which point we will be rewarded at a nearby home with doughnuts and coffee. We have been cleaning up a two-mile segment of Highway 99 north of Elkhorn Blvd for the last 12 years. There is sure to be much to collect courtesy of the California drivers and commuters who travel that stretch. We work for a maximum of two hours and AOF provides all the CALTRAN'S' required equipment. We hope to have enough volunteers to turnout so that we can pair up which allows the work to be more enjoyable and experience shows that a more thorough job is generally



AOF's stretch of highway—it's really flat!

done. So please join us. We gather at the Park & Ride on Elkhorn west of 99 @ 8a.m. We only go out at that time when traffic is at its lightest. If you have further questions, you can call (916) 447-2169. Let us do justice to our proud AOF Adopt-A-Highway signs which sit on either side of Highway 99. Rain or wet conditions cancel.

AOF - HAGSA

Joint Movie

Night:

An Inconvenient Truth

Friday, March 9, 7PM

Former Vice President [Al Gore](#) is in the midst of waging a passionate campaign—not for the White House, but for the environment. Laying out the facts of global warming without getting political, Gore makes a sobering impression in this Oscar-winning doc on the audiences who hear his message, urging them to act "boldly, quickly and wisely" ... before it's too late to act at all.

Home of Beverly Church, 24 Adkinson Ct, Sacramento. Call **916-359-5423** for additional information.

(Darwin Day Recap, continued from page 3)

do with it?

Dr. Vermeij's talk was simply straightforward science (ecology). He presented facts concerning the evolution of shells, a process that required a history of many billions of years. That such a presentation would, as McGhee contends, "stir controversy and pit scientific theory against religion" is but another example of the depth of journalistic misunderstanding of both science and religion that is so prevalent.

Dr. Paul Geisert, emcee of the Darwin event, said upon reading the article: "It seems to me that this journalist considers the words 'scientific theory' to *equate* with 'religious beliefs,' making the presentation on evolution somehow a direct challenge to religion. If one takes her statement literally, a scientist should not present well-established scientific understanding lest it offend religious belief. Dr.

Vermeij did not present "his point of view" about evolution; he presented documented factual information about the evolution of shells. The scientific "theory of evolution" is scientific *fact*, not scientific *belief*."

Evolution challenging religion? Which religion? Of course, it challenges only *some* religion – *some* specific fundamentalist interpretations held by *some* people. A great many religious people and organized religions strongly support sound science education and accurate depictions of "the scientific understanding" of our world.

If so, then who is perpetuating a controversy between science and religion here? While the *Bee*'s attention to Darwin Day is appreciated, it matters greatly "how journalists talk about evolutionary theory."

It is, after all, *science*. Divisive characterizations impel persons

who care about good science education to cut through the "controversy fog" and invite the community at large to hear from *scientists* themselves about evolutionary theory.

Darwin Day 2007 –Worth the trip?

Attendees answered this question by email one week after the event. Each respondent was among the two dozen randomly selected from the door prize ticket-holders asked for feedback (50% response rate at press time).

Yes, yes, yes! Fascinating topic that at first seemed obscure but which he made quite accessible and understandable (5 miles)

Emphatically yes! One of the best speakers I have heard in a long time (90 miles)

YES! YES!! YES!!!! (half mile)

AOF Subscription / Membership Form

Mail to: AOF, P O Box 15182, Sacramento CA 95851-0182 (Attn: Membership)

Name(s) _____ Phone () _____

Street _____ Apt. # _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

E-mail address (print legibly!) _____

Check your preference:

Newsletter Subscriber Only (\$12) Family Membership (\$30)

Low-income Member (\$10) Patron (\$50)

Single Membership (\$20) Donation (\$ _____)

Please check here if you do NOT want your name on lists occasionally provided to organizations similar to AOF.

Please check here if you DO want to be on our AOF activist list.

We can arrange to deliver your monthly newsletter electronically via the e-mail address you print above. Please check the mode you prefer. E-mail Postal mail

AOF Autobiography Series

The Life and Times of a New Board Member

By Susan Vergne

I was born at a hospital in Pomona, California, as the youngest of three children. My father was from a Catholic family in Boston, Massachusetts, and my mother was from a nonreligious family in southern California. My parents divorced when I was four and, since divorce was not supposed to be what Catholic people did, my mother reneged on her vow to raise the children as Catholic, and I was, therefore, raised in a secular manner. As my mother explained it, she was raised with the golden rule, and that was basically how she raised her children. I remember my mother demonstrating the importance of honesty by loading her three young children back in the car to return to the grocery store, because she discovered she had received too much change. I am certain, such demonstrations contributed to my ingrained sense of honesty, right, and wrong.

In our nonreligious home, there was never talk of whether there was a god or any other such "religious" matters. I do remember my brother

(the oldest) proudly proclaiming that he was an agnostic, to which I replied, "I am an atheist." I do not remember ever believing otherwise. It just never made any rational sense to me. After all, I was a well-behaved little girl with very high moral standards. Yet, when my honesty compelled me to reveal my beliefs, or lack thereof, to friends, they told me they would pray for me, because they didn't want me to go to hell. How could I be going to hell for simply not acknowledging the existence of God? What kind of a god is that? Others were doing things I would never consider doing, but they were not going to hell – I was. This lack of reasoning confirmed my belief early on, and nothing I have learned in my life has changed it.

I have had the opportunity to research my family genealogy and found prominent religious members on both sides. My father's side traces back to the religious leader of the Mayflower—William Brewster, who became the spiritual leader of Plymouth Colony. On my

mother's side, my fourth great uncle was Jedediah Strong Smith, a fur trader who traveled to California to find trade routes. He was also known as "the bible toter." However, if there is a religious gene in my family, I did not inherit it.

My educational background is in biological science. I took all of the animal/wildlife, ecology, and evolution courses available and especially enjoyed the field trips to be in the great wondrous out of doors – communing with nature. After graduation, my working life basically followed the opportunities provided by the environmental laws of the day beginning with fisheries and the implementation of the 200-mile fishing limit, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species/Environmental Quality Acts, and finally, hazardous materials/wastes.

I worked as a graduate student assistant for the California Department of Fish and Game, as a fisheries biologist for a consulting firm, and in environmental compliance for a public

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

utility. I became project manager for design and construction of facilities for a few years before returning to environmental work in hazardous material/waste compliance, and finally, vice-president of operations for an engineering and hydrogeology consulting firm involved with superfund sites.

I moved to Sacramento after becoming an at-home mom, and when my son graduated from high school, I attended law school. I am now a practicing attorney, primarily in real property, commercial development, land use, and environmental law, with a focus on private property rights. However, near and dear to my heart are civil rights and personal freedoms, and I still hope to

make a difference in those areas.

I learned of AOF in 2000 when I read in the newspaper that there was a conference of atheists in Sacramento. I have since enjoyed many opportunities for intellectual growth with similar-minded people. I have not been as involved and certainly am not as knowledgeable as the dedicated folks that keep AOF going, but as a new director, I hope to contribute to promoting the civic understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community.

FREETHOUGHT DAY!

[Want to join the Committee?](#)

Contact Bev at 359-5423

Newsletter Submissions

Submit your newsletter items to the N&V submissions editor at this e-mail address:

newsletter@aofonline.org

or mail item to the AOF mailbox: PO Box 15182, Sacramento, CA 95851-0182.

Preference is given to material in a PC-compatible word processing format such as *Word*, *Wordpad*, or *Notepad*. (To submit, attach your file to the e-mail and send.)

AOF also welcomes succinct and substantive letters to the editor. Note: All letters are prioritized by AOF's publishing criteria deriving from the organization's Statement of Purpose.

AOF Volunteer Job Board

By Kevin Schultz

We're trying out a new idea this month—matching volunteers with activities. The idea being that the right volunteer with the right activity makes a world of difference. Send us your ideas for projects and/or volunteer using the contact info on page two. *Thanks!*

March Volunteer Job Board

- *Archive Committee*
 - Volunteer needed to jump-start committee and archive various historical materials dated 1993-present. Great way to learn the history of AOF!
- *AOF Librarian*
 - Volunteer needed to create lending process. Volunteer must promise to spend at least as much time on the process as reading the many fascinating books in the col-

lection. For a list of books see <http://aofonline.org/library>

- *Program Committee Volunteer(s)*
 - One or more volunteers to recommend speakers and meeting format changes to board. Great way to meet monthly speakers!
- *Caring Committee Volunteer(s)*
 - One or more volunteers to let AOF members know we're thinking of them in times of need.
- *Publicity Volunteer*
 - Volunteer needed to take over monthly publicity announcements. Publicity primarily done via e-mail and web site submissions. Help AOF grow through public awareness of our programs!
- *Freethought Day/Darwin Day*
 - Volunteers needed in these broad areas: logistics, finance, publicity, outreach, planning.

AOF February Board Meeting Summary

Members present: Don Knutson (President), Mynga Futrell (Vice President), Ken Nahigian (Treasurer) Jerry Sloan (Secretary), Beverly Church, Kay Dickey, Susan Vergne, Kevin Schultz. Absent: Paul Storey

Meeting called to order at 9:58AM on 2007-02-18 at the home of Bev Church.

January Secretary and Treasurer reports accepted by consensus.

Numerous discussion items.

Meeting adjourned at 12:20PM. Next meeting 2007-03-18, 9:30AM, home of Susan Vergne.

Newsletter Freebie Policy

We'll be pleased to send one free newsletter to any person upon request, but after that time, please subscribe to AOF's newsletter for only \$12 per year. Or, better yet, why not become a member? That way, you'll get our newsletter FREE as part of your membership!



P.O. Box 15182
 Sacramento, CA 95851-0182

We're on the Web!
aofonline.org



March Calendar of Events

AOF/HAGSA Joint Movie Night: "An Inconvenient Truth"	Friday, March 9, 7 - 9 PM
AOF General Meeting	Sunday, March 11, 1:30 - 4 PM
AOF Board meeting	Sunday, March 18, 9:30 AM
AOF's Highway Cleanup	Sunday, March 25, 8 - 10 AM
Davis Community Meal	Tuesday, April 17, 4 - 7 PM
Humanist Assoc. of the Greater Sac. Area (HAGSA)	Friday, March 2, 7PM; Sunday, March 18, 3PM

AOF meetings are open to the public and are generally held on the second Sunday of the month, from 1:30 - 4 PM at the Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10. Note: The months of February and October are exceptions, since AOF co-produces two public education events: (1) an outdoor fair in October - "Sacramento's Freethought Day" (2007-10-07), and (2) a science and humanity celebration - Sacramento's "Darwin Day Educational Gala" (2008-02-10). Watch the newsletter for details.

Directions to AOF's General Meetings

The Sierra 2 Center is located at 2791 24th Street in Sacramento, just south of Broadway and the Department of Motor Vehicles. Visitors are welcome. Parking is available on the street or in the rear, off 4th Avenue. AOF Board meetings are held at alternating sites, so please inquire about the location. For AOF's 24-hour recorder, call 447-3589. Leave your name and a number (repeat for clarity) and someone will phone back to answer your questions about AOF.

