

# AOF News & Views

Sacramento, California

January 2011

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## Sunday, January 9, 1:30-4:00 p.m. Secular Round Table

For our first meeting of 2011, AOF will work with the **Sacramento Coalition of Reason (SCOR)** to host a panel of Valley-area secularist groups. The focus will be a frank discussion of our diversity of goals, the local landscape of secularism and freethought, and how the groups might work together in the coming year.

Organizations invited so far include **Americans United Sacramento**, the **Sacramento Area Skeptics**, the **Stockton Area Freethinkers**, **HAGSA**, Michael Newdow of the **First Atheist Church of True Science (FACTS)**, **Sacramento Freethinkers**, **Atheists and Nonbelievers (SacFAN)**, and others.

The meeting will be followed by an after-meeting dinner party, starting at 4:30 p.m. Details to-be-announced at the meeting.



## AOF in February Save the Date! Darwin Day—Feb 13, 2:30-4:30: “Back to the Future: The Louisiana Science Education Act of 2008”

**Note:** As in past years, in lieu of AOF's February general meeting, AOF encourages members to attend Darwin Day. AOF resumes regular second Sunday general meetings in March.

Mark your calendars now for February 13, 2011, from 2:30 to 4:30 pm (doors open at 2 pm) for the Sacramento Darwin Day Event that will celebrate Darwin's 202nd birthday. It will be held at the John Smith Hall in the La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road, Carmichael, CA. **Dr. Barbara Forrest**

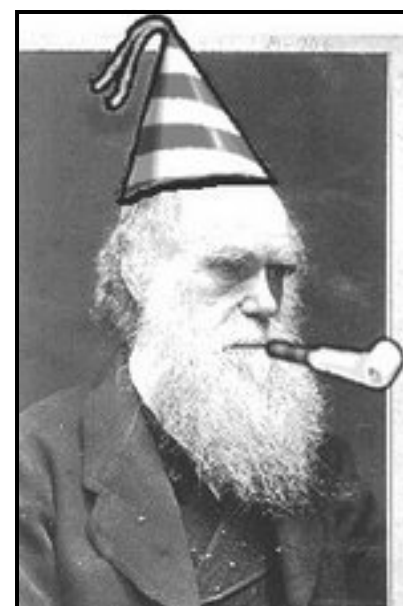
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## Help Make Our Stretch Look New Adopt-A-Highway This Saturday, Jan 8 @ 9:00 By Don Knutson

Herald in the New Year when we conduct a long overdue cleaning of a 2-mile stretch of Highway 99 north of Elkhorn Blvd.(one mile north of the 99, I-5 split) this Saturday, January 8 @ 9a.m.

We meet at the Elkhorn Park & Ride west of 99.

We provide hard hat, gloves, picker, trash bags and vests. We limit our good work to a maximum of two hours.

Any questions, including carpooling inquiries, can be addressed at (916)447-2169.

Don Knutson  
AOF Highway Cleanup Coordinator

## AOF Family News

From Nadell Gayou, wife to David Henderson, once-AOF member and longtime AOF supporter, on Dec 26:

"... David is in the hospital. My daughter and I took him to emergency last night because he has been having trouble with his leg this past week. He kept insisting it was getting better but I could tell it wasn't. I had actually scheduled an appointment for this coming Thursday but it was apparent yesterday that we couldn't wait.

Things haven't been finally determined yet but David in all likelihood will lose his leg. He has a urinary tract infection that has to be cleared up as well as severe loss of kidney function. We are hoping the kidney function will come back once the UTI is cleared up. At that point we will go on to further decisions since an operation to remove his leg can't be done until the other issues are addressed. He will not regain the use of his leg no matter what according to the vascular surgeon. At this time he is in Room 2010 at Kaiser Roseville Hospital on Eureka Rd. I am not sure how long he will remain there but you can always check where he is by calling the hospital at 784-4000. ... —Nadell Gayou"

## AOF Board (2011)

**President:** TBD at January Board Meeting

**Vice President:** Mynga Futrell

**Secretary:** Jillian Stanley

**Treasurer:** Ken Nahigian

**Directors at large:** Kristi Craven, Mynga Futrell, Peggy Lucas, Mario Sandri, Jerry Sloan, Jillian Stanley, Vincent Wales

## AOF Standing Committees

All AOF members are urged to volunteer in the organization. There are openings in every committee listed here. Please contact the chair or coordinator of any area of interest to you to learn details of getting involved. We would love to have your participation! Phone AOF 916-447-3589 or e-mail [aofboard@aofonline.org](mailto:aofboard@aofonline.org) for direct contact to relevant personnel.

### Programs and Events Committee

Program Planning (Team Coordinator, *Open*)

Meeting Matters / Logistics (Team Coordinator, *Open*)

Social Activities (Team Coordinator, *Open*)

### Membership Committee

Members Tracking (Team Coordinator, Ken Nahigian)

"Freethought Friends" (Team Coordinator, Jillian Stanley)

Outreach / Recruiting (Team Coordinator, Steve Campbell)

### Communications Committee

Beverly Church, Chair

AOF News Team (newsletter editor, events editor, public editor, postmaster, webmaster)

### Education, Activism and Service Committee

Service Projects Coordinator: Don Knutson

Education/Action Coordinator: Mynga Futrell

### Building / Reason House Committee

Beverly Church, Chair

Paul Geisert, Mynga Futrell, Mario Sandri

### Freethought Day 2011: Date to-be-announced

Beverly Church, Chair. (Save the date! – It's a celebration of reason and church/state separation)

### Darwin Day 2011: February 13

Mynga Futrell and Bronda Silva, Co-Chairs

(Save the date! – It's a celebration of science and humanity)

## AOF Voluntariat

### Affiliation Liaisons

Mynga Futrell, Atheists Alliance International (AAI), <http://atheistalliance.org/>

Kevin Schultz, American Atheists (AA), <http://atheists.org/>

Beverly Church, American Humanist Association (AHA), <http://americanhumanist.org/>

Hank Kocol, Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), <http://secularhumanism.org/>

### AOF News Team

Newsletter Editor: Kevin Schultz

Postmaster: Jerry Sloan

Webpeoples: Pat Kelley, Robert Poeschel (Openings for Events Editor and Public Editor)

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## Dr. Terry Sandbek on “The Ancient Battle Between Religion Vs. Science” December Meeting Recap By David Flanders

The topic “The ancient battle between religion and science—A millennial old war,” was the topic of the December AOF meeting. Skeptic Dr. Terry Sandbek was our speaker. Terry said that surveys show religions are weakening their dogmatic positions in the world—and that is good for the educated who enjoy living in liberal democracies that support science. Some would suggest that science got its start when the scientific experiment of farming 10,000 years ago provided sustenance for humankind, and that made the possibility of civilization possible. But those seeking a supreme reality by way of an ad hoc explanation (religion) slowed down scientific progress.

The Greek practice of debate, the maritime economy, and wandering scholars (which prevented parochialism), promoted an objective, analytical way of thinking not found elsewhere in the ancient world. It does appear that then and now that scientist make use of that atheist methodology (science) to avoid fooling themselves.

Meanwhile, in Israel, where self appointed prophets lived in poverty and scarcity, some of them decided that a monopoly on human thought (monotheism), is the best route to the supreme reality. In the land of much sheep and goat herding, conformity ruled.

Epicurus described the problem of evil and sometimes that reality trumped the supreme reality, God, but most of the time the “god brain circuitry,” for many, was more efficient in providing a solution (any solution) within the constraints on the owners brain. The religious solution used less energy per second, thus, that decision won out. Some would describe it as evolution favoring action over thinking. Years of education can change neural plasticity so that one could become scientifically literate. But most prefer other activities.

Back 2000 years ago, some believed that an upgrade to their sky god was needed—one more personal and loving—a better brain soother. Constantine, a powerful roman general 1,700 years ago, decided for the people which version (algorithm, etc.) of Christianity was to be for future generations. Romantic optimism is what slaves and women wanted—and they got it by “downloading” Christianity into their brain circuitry. “They took a step out in faith” is what obscurantist faith based folks would rather call it. For those marginalized in society, monotheism, in whatever stripe, seems to be more user friendly for stressed minds—one god preferred over many deities. Evolution, which seems to be indifferent to Constantine, continued to “design” variations of human brain circuitry and that in turn assisted in the creation of the different religions we see today. Jesus (supposing he was an actual historical person) advised his followers to pray for god’s monopoly kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. With the different religions established (hardwired?) in the brains of people on earth, and science gaining a foothold, it appears Jesus will never get his kingdom on earth. Ever. Possibly 10% of the world population today is scientifically literate. Billions encounter extreme complexity and encounter cognitive threshold. Many observe their minds resorting to the “brain-soother” religion of their culture and then accept the ad-hoc explanations it provides.

Hopefully courageous freethinkers will discover solutions for society’s ills. Will the human race survive or go extinct? The battle between religion and science continues.

### 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 of atheism and the acceptance of atheists in our community. Through educational programs, projects, and publications, AOF will extend secular perspectives, including the separation of religion and government and the right to think and speak freely on these perspectives.*

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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

# The Patron Saint of Cranks

By Ken Nahigian

He was Charles Hoy Fort, and he was the pioneer, the grass bender, the alpha-dog of fringe science: the first truly systematic collector of odd, awkward facts we now call anomalous, or paranormal, or even *Fortean*. You see, his name has taken seed and root in our language. It is his testament and memorial.

Born August 6, 1874, in Albany, New York, Charles Fort was a deeply unhappy child. His mother died when he was four; his father, reportedly a repressive lout, beat him and his two brothers. He grew up resentful and distrusting of authority. Intelligent, shy and bookish, above all a loner, he collected shells, stamps and rocks, and poured over obscure books in the library. Like many bright children he floundered at school, but radiated curiosity like spectral sunshine; and his mind soaked details like a sponge.

At age 18 he set out to find the world. He trekked across the United States, to Scotland, England and Africa. In South Africa he contracted malaria, then returned home, where the young family maid nursed him to health. They fell in love, married in 1896, and settled in the Bronx. To live, Fort took various odd jobs and began to write stories and novels. He struggled at first—the couple endured crushing poverty, and Fort wrestled with depression.

In 1916 he received an inheritance from an uncle. The next year one of his brothers died, so Fort received part of that share also. Now he could quit his day jobs, and write full time.

In all he produced ten novels. Only one, a proto-absurdist satire, saw print, and sales were poor. He wrote two more “nonfiction” books, titled *X* and *Y*, expounding fringe-scientific theories, for which an admiring friend and fellow writer tried and failed to find a publisher. In a fit of despair, Fort burned the manuscripts and turned to the project that would remake his life. It was *The Book of the Damned*.

It was not what you might think. The “Damned” were not vampires or lost souls, but data that mainstream science had consigned to oblivion, so Fort thought, because they did not fit accepted orthodoxy. In it were accounts of poltergeists, rainfalls of fish or frogs, odd disappearances, levitations, cryptozoology, aerial lights, UFOs, ball lightning, out-of-place artifacts, and teleporation (he actually invented the term).

Fort rarely validated these reports, simply presented

them in an eccentric and poetic style, punctuated with contrarian wit and his own weird guesses and speculations—and not because he took the guesses seriously, but apparently just to needle and deflate what he saw as the pretensions of “orthodox” science. It was a fine point, missed by many.

To his bemusement, the book sold well, earned positive reviews, and went through several printings. Soon Fort had a following. This also bemused, even disturbed him—many of the “followers” were cultists, occultists and religious fanatics, whom Fort found even more dogmatic than mainstream scientists. Some tried to set up a formal organization to study the “Fortean” anomalies. Fort “did nothing to encourage any of this,” according to a biographer, and “found the idea hilarious,” as it simply represented another kind of orthodoxy. He was an intellectual anarchist to the core, perhaps the first post-modernist. To Fort, the world was more mysterious than we can ever know, and all knowledge, *all* of it, is convention and dogma.

Fort published *The New Lands* in 1923, all about mysteries of meteorology and astronomy. In 1924 he moved to London to be near the British Museum, but returned to the Bronx in 1926. His health declined. Distrusting doctors, he eschewed medical help, and continued to collect anomalies and write. His next book, *Lo!*, appeared in 1931. His final book, *Wild Talents*, came out a year later. His publisher rushed the advance copies to show him at the hospital, hours before he died, likely of leukemia, on May 3, 1932.

He was buried in Albany. His copious notes (60,000 of them) went to the New York Public Library. Charles Fort was an oddity himself, standing within his whirlwind of oddities. His research could be shallow and uncritical, often based on newspaper clippings and secondary sources. And he seemed to mistake the nature of science—not realizing that accepted theory is not dogma, nor a claim to absolute truth, but simply a model to connect some current body of data, fallible and tentative, ever subject to question and change.

Or maybe he knew it well. Fort played a certain coy game with his readers, tossing out benignly self-conflicted theories, refuting and discarding them, then recalling them a page later. He flirted with religion while mocking it. He shocked, dazzled, and entertained. He seemed to take none of it seriously. “I believe nothing of my own that I have ever written,” he once said. He was more like a hy-

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*AOF members serve gatherers at the November 30 Davis Community Meals event at St. Martin's Church in Davis  
(photo by Don Knutson)*

**HAPPY  
NEW  
YEAR**



Same tired gifts, same tired tree?

Give the Gift of Free Thought!



## Celebrate Solstice with an AOF Gift Membership

With one AOF Membership purchase or renewal, additional gift memberships are just \$10 apiece.  
(Offer expires January 31, 2011)

Hello AOF! I would like to purchase **one AOF Membership** at the standard rate for myself or a friend:

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E-mail address (print clearly please!) \_\_\_\_\_

**Membership Level (circle one):** Patron (\$50), Family (\$30), Individual (\$20), Low-income (\$10)

**Include a Newsletter:** \_\_\_\_\_ Send printed newsletter by postal mail (\$12 extra)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Send newsletter by email (*Free!*) – see email address above

**Total for this membership:** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

...with **additional AOF Gift Memberships** (new members only) at a mere \$10 apiece, plus newsletter fee:

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E-mail address (print clearly please!) \_\_\_\_\_

**Gift Membership fee: \$10**

**Include a Newsletter:** \_\_\_\_\_ Send printed newsletter by postal mail (\$12 extra)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Send newsletter by email (*Free!*) – see email address above

**Total for this gift membership:** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

### Second Gift Membership:

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City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP + 4 \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address (print clearly please!) \_\_\_\_\_

**Gift Membership fee: \$10**

**Include a Newsletter:** \_\_\_\_\_ Send printed newsletter by postal mail (\$12 extra)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Send newsletter by email (*Free!*) – see email address above

**Total for this gift membership:** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

### Third Gift Membership:

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Street \_\_\_\_\_ Apt. # \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP + 4 \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address (print clearly please!) \_\_\_\_\_

**Gift Membership fee: \$10**

**Include a Newsletter:** \_\_\_\_\_ Send printed newsletter by postal mail (\$12 extra)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Send newsletter by email (*Free!*) – see email address above

**Total for this gift membership:** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional Donation:** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Grand total Enclosed:** \$ \_\_\_\_\_



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per-skeptic, standing between nothing and everything, in the wild frontier of orthodoxy, dancing and dreaming, as he tried to dissect the very possibility of knowledge.

If Fort had a philosophy, it was this, which he called "Intermediatism":

... existence is like a bridge, like the Brooklyn Bridge, upon which multitudes of bugs are seeking a fundamental—coming to a girder that seems firm and final—but the girder is built upon supports. A support then seems final. But it is built upon underlying structures. Nothing final can be found in all the bridge, because the bridge itself is not a final thing in itself, but is a relationship between Manhattan and Brooklyn. If our existence is a relationship between the Positive Absolute and the Negative Absolute, the quest for finality in it is hopeless. Everything in it must be relative....

This starts to make sense about the third time you read it. The apparent point is that all we see depends on something else unseen. To get to the final truth behind the world, we must get *out* of the world. Which is impossible. So all our models are arbitrary and pointless. Like blind men describing the elephant, we face a nihilism where nothing is absolute, nothing sure, and reality changes, melting like wax or snow, or unfolding forever like an infinite nest of Chinese boxes. If true, of course, we can never know. Fort simply wanted us to think of it, and wonder.

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will be the event's presenter. The specifics of the event are:

**TOPIC:** Back to the Future: The Louisiana Science Education Act of 2008 - The Louisiana Science Education Act that was passed in 2008 is the product of an alliance between the Discovery Institute, a creationist think tank in Seattle, and the Louisiana Family Forum, the Louisiana arm of Focus on the Family. Governor Bobby Jindal, a close ally of the Louisiana Family Forum, served as the lynchpin of the LFF's plan to promote a version of the Discovery Institute's model legislative statute on "academic freedom." This model bill is really a creationist Trojan horse, and it is now the law in Louisiana.

#### ABOUT THE SPEAKER:

Dr. Barbara Forrest is a Professor of Philosophy in the Department of History and Political Science at Southeastern Louisiana University. She is the co-author with Paul R. Gross of *Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design* (Oxford University Press, 2004; 2007, 2nd ed.), which details the political and religious aims of the intelligent design creationist movement. She served as an expert witness for the plaintiffs in the first legal case involving intelligent design, *Kitzmiller et al. v. Dover Area School District*, which originated in Dover, PA, and was resolved with a judgment in favor of the plaintiffs in December 2005. She is a member of the board of directors of the National Center for Science Education and the National Advisory Council of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. She has appeared on Larry King Live, ABC's Nightline, and the BBC's Horizon documentary about the Kitzmiller trial, "A War on Science." Her radio interviews include NPR's Science Friday with Ira Flatow and Americans United's Culture Shocks with Barry Lynn. She is the 2006 co-recipient with Brown University cell biologist Kenneth Miller of the American Society for Cell Biology's Public Service Award.

#### Newsletter Submissions

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

**[newsletter@aofonline.org](mailto:newsletter@aofonline.org)**

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

Preference is given to material in a word processing format. (To submit, attach your file to the e-mail and send.)

AOF 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.

#### Newsletter Freebie Policy

*This newsletter is free by e-mail to everyone. Just send your e-mail address. If you prefer printed copy by postal mail, AOF will send one free issue on your request; after that, please subscribe at \$12 per year. For details, see the signup form on page six.*

**Want to send a letter to the Editor?**

**E-mail [newsletter@aofonline.org](mailto:newsletter@aofonline.org)!**





P.O. Box 15182

Sacramento, CA 95851-0182

*We're on the Web!*  
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## January/February Calendar of Events

AOF Dinner Social: Capitol Dawg, 1226 20th Street between Capitol and "L"; Contact: 419-2105 or [shastaseer@sbcglobal.net](mailto:shastaseer@sbcglobal.net)

Thu, Jan 6, 6:30 p.m.

**AOF Adopt-A-Highway Cleanup Event**

**Sat, Jan 8, 9:00-11:00 a.m.**

**AOF General Meeting in January**

**Sun, Jan 9, 1:30 p.m.**

**Darwin Day Celebration Gala (In Lieu of February AOF General Meeting)**

**Sun, Feb 13, 2:30-4:30 p.m.**

*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" (Oct 2011), and (2) a science and humanity celebration - Sacramento's "Darwin Day Educational Gala" (Feb 2011). 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.

