



AOF

Atheists and Other Freethinkers

AOF News & Views – Newsletter for November 2020

✧ ✧ Upcoming AOF Events ✧ ✧

Videos of Recent Online Meetings

The splendid October 25 presentation by Sarah Posner, topic Evangelicals and Donald Trump, is now available at this link: https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/nl_4PQan7_I3V2AkSLXf8SK6U5MouFE-awD_tbx7G6kJUBvKB6S18E6EEyLdDcB.OldeW4kGxocX8FyD
Passcode: Yb!vc5b@

It will be there for about a month, so visit soon. Susan McLean moderates with grace and verve. Sarah's talk begins at the 34 minute mark.

Likewise, the video of California Freethought Day 2020, which occurred Sunday, Oct 11, is now available to view at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KgZtnxE1eQ> or <https://youtu.be/0KgZtnxE1eQ> (either will work).

View or download the program book at <http://www.freethoughtday.org/documents/CFD%202020%20Program.pdf>.

➤ Free Movie Nights!

Fridays, Nov 6 & Nov 20, 2020, 7pm – 10pm

Twice a month, [Reason Center](#) (RC) and AOF host a **Free Movie Night** under an [MPLC License](#). The License prohibits us from telling you the movie titles. But we can hint.

The first may be the classic 1975 British comedy film about the Arthurian legend, written and performed by the Monty Python comedy group, often cited as the second-best comedy of all time. The second movie may be the 1990 Jim Henson production of a Roald Dahl story, with Angelica Huston.



Alas, the regular movie venue, Reason Center (RC), is closed. So how to attend? You'll need a personal Netflix account + a laptop or desktop computer with the Google Chrome web browser. If you don't have these we apologize -- be patient please until RC can reopen. Else, here's how to join us:

- Open your Chrome web browser right now and install the **Netflix Teleparty Extension**. Get it from <https://www.netflixparty.com/>. (Really, do it *now*, don't wait till movie night!)
- Just before show time, fire up the Chrome browser again and go to the very special Netflix Movie Teleparty link, which is ... *[the link will appear about a half hour before show time on the AOF website]*.
- Click that link. The Movie Teleparty page will open. Log into Netflix (if not logged in already). At the top right of the browser frame check your "Extensions" list. Find the letters **TP** in red. Click on the letters.
- The Netflix movie party should begin. You'll be watching it along with the rest of us. As it plays we can chat on the side of the screen and make silly, snarky comments.

Free Movie Night is especially for Reason Center members, but non-members are welcome too. RC may beg a small (voluntary) donation to cover costs. To become a Reason Center member, sign up at <http://reasoncenter.com/donate/>. Membership is a measly \$5 a month, is tax deductible if you itemize, and the perks (like this one) just get better.

Location: A Netflix Teleparty link, see above.

Contact: See the Reason Center Contact Page, <https://reasoncenter.com/contact/>.

Free Movie Nights occur two Friday evenings each month. Suggest your own fave film for a future viewing!

➤ Adopt-a-Highway Cleanup

Saturday, Nov 7, 2020, 9am - 11am

A stretch of Highway 99 runs two miles from Elkhorn Boulevard to Elverta Road -- *our* stretch. Sac-area freethinkers "adopted" it in July 1995. It's pretty tidy because we have cared for it, nurtured it, lovingly rescued it from litter and debris, and received recognition for our work. As one of our more successful civic efforts, it proves freethinkers can also serve the community.

So join us, please join us! Enjoy a morning commune with nature, and do a deed for the environment and local area wildlife. The refuse we collect would otherwise ultimately be swept by the rain into tributaries and into the ocean, degrading habitat, and leading to a slow death for many sea creatures.

As usual, the stalwart activity captain will provide all safety equipment, including comfortable, natty hard-hats and gloves, stylish safety vests, collection bags, and handy trash pickers. The cleanup takes a scant two hours. Please dress for the season. It may be a good idea to bring a backpack or fanny-pack to carry 3 or 4 trash bags.



To get there, go north from Sacramento on I-5, past the Sleeptrain Arena. Take the "Highway 99 - Yuba City, Marysville" exit. Exit at Elkhorn Boulevard less than a mile on. Turn left, cross the overpass. The park-&-ride lot will be on your left.

Contact: 916-447-2169 (Don Knutson), or see <https://www.aofonline.org/contact.html>

Location: Caltrans Park-&-Ride lot, W. Elkhorn Blvd, see map at <https://goo.gl/maps/TkxnRwaK1AZF53tD8>.

Note: This is a great event for older children, but please leave smalls safe at home.

➤ Healing the Political Divide

Sunday, Nov 29, 2020, 2pm – 4pm

The polls are closed, the votes counted. A spray of loose chads go scudding in the wind. And you -- you want to climb a water tower with a rifle. But don't, please don't. We know the feeling. And [Braver Angels](#) is here to help.

Braver Angels is the conversation for which we've hoped, that we need. A rational attempt to heal America's political wound; a bipartisan movement dedicated to closing the political chasm and reuniting our divided country.

Attend the online screening and discussion of the Braver Angels documentary, [Reuniting America](#). (To get a jump on the content, see the documentary at <https://vimeo.com/326913665> and use the password "angels"; or visit their website, <https://braverangels.org/>.) It features a workshop held shortly after the 2016 election, when 8 Trump voters and 8 Clinton voters met to trade views. See for yourself how the Braver Angels methods can reduce polarization and increase respect even among people with radically different political ideas. The participants started the workshop polarized and tense. By the end, they were able to find common ground and see each other's humanity. We will view the conversation and discuss your reactions. A leader of the local Braver Angels chapter, Ed Jaszewski, will talk about Braver Angels and answer questions. It promises to be an inspiring and uplifting experience.

This is another knockout event of the AOF Speaker Series. Yeah, we so cool, our coffee got iced.

How to attend (Reason Center will still be closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so this meeting will be online only):

- Any time before the event: Go to <https://zoom.us/download>. Download & install the "Zoom videoconference tool" if you haven't already. (Do it just once; it will be good for all future online Zoom meetings.)
- Moments before the meeting, go to <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88235150578?pwd=NE1HUj92K09jYURJYUhhUcVhMGpVQT09>. It will open a Zoom Page.
- If it asks you to sign in: If you have a Facebook or Google account, or even an SSO account, just click one of the buttons for those, then sign in with your Facebook or Google info. Or create your own free Zoom account, but this is not necessary.
- If it wants a Meeting ID (it probably won't), the ID is 882 3515 0578.
- If it wants a passcode (it probably won't), the passcode is 166761.
- The videoconference should begin. Speakers on, please! Sit back and enjoy.

Or listen in by phone at 1-669-900-6833. Same meeting ID (882 3515 0578) and same passcode (166761). This is for the Sacramento area. (More details at <https://www.meetup.com/SacFAN/events/273874114/>.)

Location: Online Videoconference via Zoom - see link above.

Contact: Email "programs (at) aofonline.org", or see <https://www.meetup.com/SacFAN/events/273381228/>.

To support the Speaker Series, join AOF at www.aofonline.org/join. Without AOF, it wouldn't happen. And without you, we are bupkis (that means nothing, you goyem).

✧ ✧ Other Upcoming Events ✧ ✧

➤ Sacramento-area Online Meetings

Others in the local community of reason now get together via online videoconference. Join these meetings of minds and share your wisdom. For details on most see <https://www.meetup.com/SacFAN/events/calendar/>.

- Monday, Nov 9, 5pm – 7pm, The Fear of Hell.** Licensed professional counselor [Hayley Twyman Brack](#) speaks to members of Recovering from Religion Sacramento. Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/186729414>. (For details see <https://www.meetup.com/RfR-Sacramento-CA/events/274315732/>.)
- Sundays, Nov 15, 10:30am - 12 noon, Online Coffee and Community**, hosted by Nancy Sneed. BYO beverage & snacks! Use video link <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84984111659?pwd=cThkaGdTK0FCdXJpWnB3MVZ1R213Zz09> to attend.
- Wednesdays, Nov 11 & 25, 7pm – 9pm, What's your story?** Meet other local freethinkers to discuss beliefs, philosophy and what led you to where you are now. Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85489607519?pwd=a1V2eEVKb3hnWXhZMVZRMm04Wk5BQT09>.
- Wednesday, Oct 25, 7pm – 9pm, Recovering from Religion Support Group.** Providing ongoing and personal support to those letting go of religious faith. Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82268955990>. (For details see <https://www.meetup.com/RfR-Sacramento-CA/events/bbhxsrybcbphc/>.)

➤ More Events!

A general calendar exists of skeptical or freethought events in this Central Valley area. See the Sacramento Coalition of Reason site at <https://unitedcor.org/event-calendar-2/>, in case you're not busy enough.

You can help, you can help, you can help. Here's how.

Support Reason Center

[Reason Center](#) opened in July 2014. It has hosted hundreds of events and accrued twelve partner organizations. Its mission is to support a social and intellectual community for freethinkers, contribute to society through education and community service, advance the civic understanding and acceptance of freethinkers, and uphold the separation of religion and government. All good work.

Now "RC" has temporarily closed pending a move to a new location. Meanwhile please continue to support it, because it has supported you. To set up a monthly or one-time donation, visit ReasonCenter.org.

Support AOF

You can support AOF *without spending a dime*. How? When you purchase goods at Amazon.com, simply use this link: <https://smile.amazon.com/ch/68-0325762>. Bookmark it now! Prices & service will be the same, but AOF will receive a small kickback for whatever you purchase. Sweet!

Suggest a Meeting

Know a compelling speaker, have a great meeting idea? Tell the AOF Program Committee! Go to <http://www.aofonline.org/contact.html>, click "Program Committee" in the drop-down line, and enter your thoughtful suggestion. (Reasonable honorariums paid to speakers.)

Volunteer?

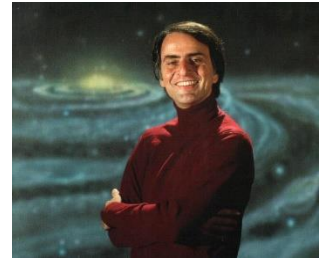
We suggest it meekly. See <http://www.aofonline.org/learn/committees.html>.

✧ ✧ **Secular Holidays** ✧ ✧

➤ **Carl Sagan Day**

Monday, Nov 9, 2020

How many Sagans needed to change a lightbulb? Billions & billions, of course. Carl Sagan Day marks the birthday of the great Carl Sagan, and is a celebration to honor his memory. Carl Sagan was Professor of Astronomy and Space Science and Director of the Laboratory for Planetary Studies at Cornell University, an outspoken skeptic, humanist and freethinker, and a Pulitzer Prize winning science author. But for the most part the public remembers him as the creator of the *Cosmos* television series. This Emmy and Peabody award-winning PBS series transformed educational television when it first aired in 1980. Thirty years later it still seems fresh, and has gone on to affect the hearts and minds of over a billion people in sixty countries.



His magnum opus was his final book, [The Demon-Haunted World](#), published in 1995, the year before his untimely death.

Few other science writers (perhaps only Isaac Asimov) were able to reach and teach so many nonscientists in such a meaningful way. So in 2009, the Center for Inquiry inaugurated [Carl Sagan Day](#) as a secular holiday. Each year we will continue to celebrate Dr. Sagan, remember him and his work, and revel in the wondrous cosmos he helped us understand.

➤ **Church/State Separation Week**

Sunday, Nov 22 – Saturday, Nov 28, 2020

Many freethinkers have adopted the week of Thanksgiving (~November 24) as Church/State Separation Week, to offer concerned and active citizens an opportunity to educate others about the importance of a clear division between Church and State. The hope is that this secular holiday will rally us and provide a platform to celebrate one of this nation's finest contributions to civilization.



Secularist societies such as Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, the Institute for First Amendment Studies, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Atheists and the Institute for the Secularization of Islamic Society, as well as others united for a secular government, have supported this celebration.

In humanist circles, some also celebrate November 24 as Evolution Day, marking as it does the anniversary of the first publication of *The Origin of Species* (Nov 24, 1859). For the most, however, the focus is on church/state separation this week. Charles Darwin has his own secular holiday (see: February 12).



☛ Help AOF! Be a Board Member in 2018. ☛

Have ideas for AOF but don't know how to start? Here's your chance: Be an AOF Director in 2021!

Once a year the door opens to those willing to go an extra mile to help AOF thrive, by joining the AOF Board of Directors.

As a 501(c)(3) democratic educational association in California, AOF's bylaws require an elected board of at least 5 directors. Elections are around the corner. The term is just one year. And nominations are now open.

Requirements? Simply to be an AOF member in good standing. It helps to have a sharp mind and email access. You're all that, right? Minimum duties: one brief planning meeting every few months, usually by phone or online teleconference, at which you will share your wisdom, help make decisions, and plan how AOF can serve this wonderful community of reason.

The benefit: You'll make a difference! Your comely face and amazing bio will appear on the AOF website. Others will admire you. Petals will fall and rainbows will bloom in the sky.

Most current Directors could serve another year, but the Board needs more. And maybe the old rascals need a bit of competition. AOF seeks new ideas, more creative minds, and more help.

Interested? Great! What's next? Tell us! Contact AOF via its contact page or voicemail number (916-304-3796). Then cobble a brief paragraph, 300 words max, about yourself as a freethinker and your background. Include a pic if you can.

Submit to this newsletter at <newsletter@aofonline.org>, subject line: AOF Board Candidate Statement. Do it by about the end of November, please.

That's all! Fame & glory await! You will love being on the team. The planning meetings are a blast. And we will love having you.



Not yet an AOF member? Please join us!

Atheists and Other Freethinkers is a 501(c)(3) non-profit association, FEIN 68-0325762, incorporated in 1993. Meetings are free and open to the public. AOF also hosts civic service projects, dinners, movies and parties! See what awaits you at www.aofonline.org.

AOF President & Editor: Fantastic Fran Evanisko

Vice-president: Marvelous Mynga Futrell

Secretary: Rapid Ruth Rezos

Treasurer & Registrar: Kinetic Ken Nahigian

Webmistress: Palpable Pat Kelley

Program chair: Super Susan McLean

Facebook page: Keen Kaeleigh Pontif

Directors at large:

Roger Zabkie, Pamella Rivers, Ben Tuason,

Linda Ostrofsky (Jetta), Kaeleigh Pontif

How to Contact AOF:

- Call 916-304-3796 (voicemail)
 - Or write to PO Box 15182, Sacramento, CA 95851-0182
- Or visit <http://www.aofonline.org/contact> to e-message us

How to Join AOF:

Visit <http://www.aofonline.org/join>, or come to a meeting. We have forms.

AOF's Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Atheists-and-Other-Freethinkers/533365556831322>

AOF Mission Statement:

"The purpose of Atheists and Other Freethinkers (AOF) 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."

What is a Freethinker? One striving to form opinions of life, religion, politics and philosophy on the grounds of reason and experience, rather than tradition, authority or custom. He or she need not be an atheist, though in a religious society most atheists do tend to be freethinkers.

AOF supports a benign separation of Church and State as the best means to protect the liberty and intellectual commerce of citizens. "... to keep forever from these shores the ceaseless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries" (James Madison, 1803).

Our vision: to be a venue where secular and unchurched citizens can socialize, dialog, develop friendships and enjoy shared company. AOF does not discriminate on such grounds as race, sexual orientation, age, gender, class, physical debility or (*cough*) religion. We welcome the fair-minded of all political persuasions and preferences. Be respectful, and you may join.

Donations to AOF are tax deductible, and the newsletter is free by email. Please share with sympathetic friends.

Letters, submissions? We love them! See:

<http://www.aofonline.org/read/submission-guide.html>.

James Randi Dies

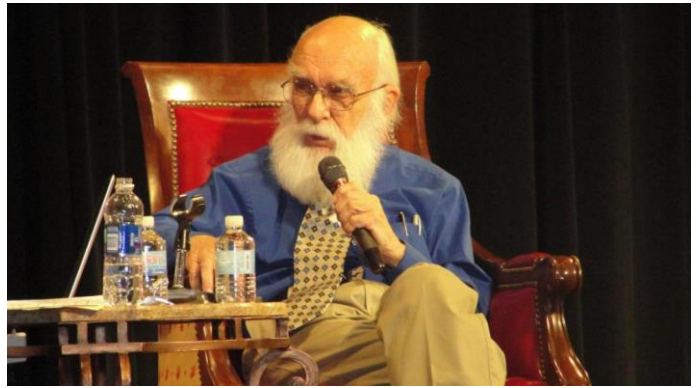
Memorial at <https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2020/10/21/james-randi-legendary-magician-and-skeptic-has-died-at-age-92/>

James Randi, "The Amazing Randi," stage magician, skeptic and debunker, died on October 20, 2020, at age 92.

The James Randi Educational Foundation announced his death [in a brief post](#), saying simply, "We are very sad to say that James Randi passed away yesterday, due to age-related causes. He had an Amazing life. We will miss him."

The Friendly Atheist wrote, "We knew this day would come soon but it doesn't make it any less heartbreaking. There's no one in the broader skeptical 'movement' that had as much influence as Randi did on generations of debunkers, illusionists, and just plain critical thinkers."

To read about Randi's remarkable life, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Randi.



Smoking a cigar to the glory of God

From http://www.ship-of-fools.com/features/columnists/loose_canons/, condensed

THEY CALLED HIM the last of the Great Puritans. They called him lots of other things as well. But most of all they called him CH Spurgeon (1834–1892), pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London

He was, to be fair, a very positive kind of Puritan, happier to eulogize what he favoured (salvation, predestination, you know the kind of thing). But he did enjoy telling people what he was against.

The Pope was top of the list, with the Arminians a close second. Then there were such iniquitous pursuits as dancing and theatre. He was as tolerant of coarse language as the next person, but the next person was the founder of Smutbusters. Spurgeon wouldn't allow organ music or choirs in his church. He would get apoplectic about Sunday trading.

So the Rev. DF Pentecost assumed he was on safe ground.

Reverend Pentecost visited from the United States in 1874, and came to "The Tab". It was decided that both of them would preach in the Sunday service, Pentecost kicking off, Spurgeon responding in the second half.

Penetecost told the 1000-strong congregation about the dangers of tobacco. He shared his own struggle with the noxious weed, from which God had graciously and wondrously delivered him. He warned his listeners that there was no smoke without hellfire, and urged them to sin no more and commit their lungs to Jesus.

It went down a storm with the crowd. Not quite so well with Spurgeon, though, who was, unexpectedly, the heaviest smoker this side of Marlboro Man. He could have kept schtum and picked up on some other point of Pentecost's inspirational 40 minuter. But that wasn't Spurgeon's gift.

He mounted to the pulpit and explained that his well-intentioned brother was sadly misled on the subject of tobacco. Smoking was no sin. "In fact," he concluded, "I fully intend, this very night, to smoke a cigar to the glory of God."

Pentecost wasn't thrilled by this revelation. The press, however, were. They paid slightly closer attention to Baptist sermons in those days.

Reports fired off. Soon the papers were ablaze with impassioned debate on the theology of smoke. Spurgeon's unorthodox technique for glorifying his maker reached such notoriety that opportunist cigar makers started putting his face on their packets.

So Spurgeon won the home leg of this international friendly, I suppose. In fact, you could say he won the away game as well. For, while Spurgeon was inexplicably never invited for a return visit himself, before Pentecost had long been back home, he (Pentecost) once again succumbed to the need for weed. Whether for chemical or theological reasons, we don't know.



The September 2020 issue of *The Truth Seeker*, the oldest freethought journal in the West (est. 1873), is now available. For details and to order, see <http://thetruthseeker.net/>. Not a paid ad, we thought you'd like to know.

The dubiousness of miraculous revelations

By James A. Haught, from <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/freethoughtnow/the-dubiousness-of-miraculous-revelations/>

In the mid-1800s, a prisoner in Persia (as Iran was then known) allegedly saw a vision of a “heavenly maiden” who informed him of his holy status. Later he declared that he was Baha’u’llah, the Promised One of All Religions. In effect, he said he was Jesus returning for Christians, the Messiah coming for Jews, Lord Krishna coming for Hindus, a long-awaited divine imam coming for Muslims, and so on. He drew thousands of followers, called Baha’i. Surrounding Shi’ite Muslims massacred them, but they persisted. The Persian’s brother tried to poison him and declared himself, instead, the Promised One of All Religions. But the brother’s attempt fizzled. Baha’is slowly grew to 7 million around the world today, although they remain cruelly persecuted in Iran.

Also in the mid-1800s, a Chinese man read Christian missionary tracts and experienced a vision in which God told him he was a divine younger brother of Jesus. God commanded him to “destroy demons.” The vision-receiver drew followers, launched the Taiping religion and a Taiping army that conquered much of China, causing an estimated 20 million deaths.

Around the same time period (a fertile era apparently), a much-arrested mystic named Joseph Smith said he was visited by an angel named Moroni who showed him golden tablets buried on a New York state hill. The angel allegedly gave him magic stones that enabled him to translate ancient writing on the tablets. It became the Book of Mormon, describing a North American civilization that was visited by Jesus. But nobody could see the golden tablets and magic stones as proof, because the angel supposedly took them back to heaven. Today, the Mormon faith numbers 15 million worldwide.

Mary Baker Eddy said she heard supernatural voices as a child, and she later became devoted to a hypnotist healer. Then she claimed that divine inspiration led her to write a faith-healing book and launch the Church of Christ Scientist in the 1870s. But critics claimed that she lifted most of her spiritual healing ideas from the hypnotist and from Eastern religions.

In 1935, according to the Unification Church, Jesus appeared to Sun Myung Moon in Korea and commanded him to finish the “incomplete” work that Christ started 2,000 years earlier. Moon began evangelizing and slowly created the “Moonie” faith that spread worldwide.

In the 1970s, a French racecar driver called Raël said he was visited by extraterrestrials called the *Elohim*, who originally created all life on Earth. Rael wrote books and launched a religion that consists mostly of naked assemblies, casual sex, and efforts to bring the Elohim back to the planet. Estimates of the number of Raelians range from 50,000 to 90,000.

And, as everyone knows, the Prophet Muhammad claimed in the seventh century that the Angel Gabriel visited him repeatedly for 23 years, dictating the Quran. Muhammad was illiterate, but supposedly relayed the angel’s words to others and scribes, who put them on paper. This launched the Muslim faith, which now has 1.5 billion adherents.

You get it. Time after time through history, people have claimed miraculous visits. The visionaries began preaching and spawned religions. They drew great numbers of followers — showing a remarkable human craving for miracle tales.

Alleged communication from gods and godlings goes back to the earliest writings. Greek King Agamemnon supposedly offended the goddess Artemis, who calmed winds when the king’s army tried to sail for Troy. The goddess supposedly told the prophet Calchas that she would relent only if Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, and it was done.

The bible reports many visitations. Genesis 6 implies that angels came to Earth, impregnated women and bred giants.

The all-time champion of holy appearances is the Virgin Mary, who often makes herself visible to believers — in 1531 at Guadalupe, Mexico; in 1858 at Lourdes, France; in 1917 at Fatima, Portugal; in 1981 at Medjugorje, Bosnia; in 1983 at a farm in Georgia, to name a few. Vast multitudes of worshipers flock to these sites. It’s odd that Mary doesn’t appear to Jews, Buddhists, Protestants or atheists. As a wag said, “Some things must be believed to be seen.”

Troy Taylor, a collector of ghost tales, wrote that the Virgin made numerous appearances in Illinois. A retired railroader, praying by a crucifix at Queen of Heaven Cemetery at Hillsdale in 1990, saw Mary, St. Michael and three angels, he said. Swarms of believers rushed to the spot and made miracle reports of their own. At Belleville in 1993, a man said a voice told him to visit the Lady of the Snows shrine, where Mary appeared from a bright light and gave him messages.

Meanwhile, various Orthodox churches around Illinois reported weeping or bleeding statues or paintings of the Virgin. And a family at Hanover Park said Mary appeared in 1997 in shadows on an apartment wall, drawing crowds of the faithful.

How many divine revelations and visitations have been claimed through the centuries? Tens of thousands? Millions? The total is uncountable. Clearly, it’s part of human experience. It’s somewhat akin to people who say they were abducted by space aliens, taken aboard UFOs and subjected to sexual experiments.

Are these vision-seers psychotics or “fantasy-prone” neurotics who really believe their tales? Or are they charlatans who invent lies, then spend the rest of their lives repeating them?

One exception to the lie-repeating premise is an American named Alex Malarkey. In 2004, when he was 6, a car crash sent him into a coma. After he woke up, he said he had gone to heaven and visited Jesus and Satan. His father helped him write a best-selling book, *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven*, which sold a million copies and was made into a television movie. But at age 16, the paralyzed boy said his tale was a hoax to get attention. The publisher halted sales of his book. His name should have been a giveaway.

The widespread phenomenon of miraculous encounters should be a field of study for psychiatrists. What facet of the mind causes some people to claim that divine visitors came to them — and causes other people to believe?