



AOF News & Views – Newsletter for January 2021  
*A New Year! Aren't we glad.*

**Video of Recent Online Meeting**

The excellent Dec 27 presentation of Sean O'Brien channeling the great [Robert Ingersoll](#) (41 attendees!) is available to view, through this month's end at least, at this link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82406444382?pwd=QXZMOHFNbEdEN2dqU3MxVjBRbzVLZz09>  
Please jump to time mark 15:30; that's when the real meeting starts. The first 15 minutes ... booooring.

**AOF Board Election Results**

Thanks to all who participated in the recent online election (25 voters). The new Board of Directors will consist of Fran Evanisko, Roger Zabkie, Pamella Rivera, Linda Ostrofsky (Jetta), Kaeleigh Pontif, Ken Nahigian, Pat Kelley and Chistine Tweet. Visit <https://www.aofonline.org/learn/fearless-leaders.html> later this month to see their bright, shining faces.

✧ ✧ **Upcoming AOF Events** ✧ ✧

➤ **Adopt-a-Highway Cleanup**

**Saturday, Jan 9, 2021, 9am - 11am**

A stretch of Highway 99 runs two miles from Elkhorn Boulevard to Elverta Road -- *our* stretch. In July 1995, Sac-area freethinkers "adopted" it. It is tidy because we have cared for it, lovingly removed 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! Enjoy a morning commune with nature, and do a deed for local wildlife and the environment. 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 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, maybe bring a backpack or fanny-pack to carry 3 or 4 trash bags.

To get there, travel 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 north. Turn left, cross the overpass. Park in the park-&-ride lot if possible, else somewhere on Elkhorn Blvd near it.

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

**Location:** Caltrans Park-&-Ride lot or the vicinity, W. Elkhorn Blvd, see map at <https://goo.gl/maps/zw3Rwct9yR52>.

*This is a great event for older children, put please leave smalls safe at home.*

Please review the CalTrans Highway Cleanup guidelines at <https://dot.ca.gov/programs/maintenance/adopt-ahighway/covid19>.



➤ **Board of Directors Meeting**

**Sunday, Jan 10, 2021, 3pm – 5pm**

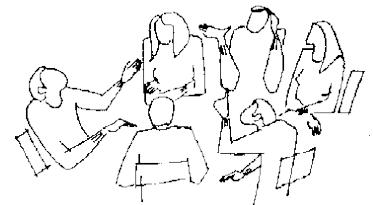
It's an AOF planning meeting, mainly for AOF directors & officers but open to all. These occur as required, and are a lot more fun than they sound. Honest.

Join us, meet the Board, and keep an eye on the shenanigans! We love visitors. And maybe you'll have good ideas.

Note, this special Board meeting will be by **online Teleconference**. Which means you can attend from home in your cozy jammies & bunny slippers, with the comforting proximity of your snack bin, using your computer or smartphone. How does it work? At meeting time, simply click this link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82406444382?pwd=QXZMOHFNbEdEN2dqU3MxVjBRbzVLZz09>

Your capable web browser will take it from there. If you haven't teleconferenced before it may require some trial and error, but you're a smart cookie, you'll muddle through. (Or attend by phone: **669-900-6833**, Meeting ID **824 0644 4382**, Passcode: **519353**.)



**Location :** An online Videoconference via Zoom - see link above.

**Contact :** See the AOF Contact Page, <https://www.aofonline.org/contact.html>.

*Bring your ideas for AOF, your strategies, your suggestions for events and activities -- most of all, your volunteerism. Helping hands are wonderful.*

## ➤ Free Movie Nights

**Fridays, Jan 15 and Feb 5, 7pm – 10pm**

Twice a month, [Reason Center](#) (RC) and AOF join hands to host a **Free Movie Night** under an excellent [MPLC License](#). We can't name the movies, but we can hint.

The Jan 15 movie is the witty, exciting, suspenseful story of Sherlock Holmes' little sister, from 2020. While sleuthing for her missing mother, this intrepid teen uses her gimlet mind to outsmart her big brothers and to help a runaway lord. The Feb 5 movie is undetermined.

Can't guess? Contact Reason Center (see below). They'll tell you, you can tell anyone.

Alas the regular movie venue, [Reason Center](#) (RC), is still closed due to the Coronavirus lockdown. To attend, you'll need a personal Netflix account + a computer with the [Google Chrome web browser](#). If you don't have these we apologize -- please be patient until RC can open its doors. Else, here's how to join us:

1. Open your Chrome web browser right now and install the Netflix Teleparty Extension. Get it at this link: <https://www.netflixparty.com/>. (Really, do it *now*, don't wait till movie night!)
2. Just before show time, fire up the Chrome browser again and go to the very special Netflix Movie Teleparty link, which will appear on the AOF website about a half hour before showtime.
3. **Click that link.** The Movie Tele party 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.
4. 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 was made for Reason Center members, but non-members are welcome. We *may* beg a small (voluntary) donation to cover costs. How to become a Reason Center member? Sign up at <http://reasoncenter.com/donate/>. Membership, a measly \$5 a month, is tax deductible if you itemize. And the perks are so great, the choice is ... elementary.

**Location:** A Netflix teleparty link, see above.

**Contact:** Email Reason Center at <[reasoncenter@gmail.com](mailto:reasoncenter@gmail.com)> or call 916-426-6416.

*Free Movie Nights generally occur two Friday evenings each month. You can suggest your own fave flick for next time, how cool is that?*



## ➤ Red-Blue Workshop: Starting the Conversation

**Sunday, Jan 31, 2021, 1pm – 4pm**

Presenting a participatory event of the AOF Speaker series! *Excla-freaking-mation* mark!

You know about [Braver Angels](#), right? Say yes, please say yes. It's a national nonpartisan, nonreligious group seeking to heal political divides. Launched in 2016, Braver Angels bring liberals and conservatives together at the grassroots level — not to find compromises, but to find the person behind the ideology.



Their ongoing Red-Blue Workshops help Americans understand each other beyond the stereotypes, form community alliances, reduce the vitriol that poisons our civic culture, and eventually sing Kum-ba-yah.

This time eight "Reds" and eight "Blues" will participate in an online meeting, guided by two moderators. Others will observe. We will not be recording this meeting. Here's your chance to participate or to just see up close how these workshops operate. For an example of the process, watch Braver Angels' 50-minute documentary, "Reuniting America," on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6kZpN5T3IU&t=8s>.

Like to participate as an active Red or Blue? Contact the Program Team (see email below) and the team will contact you to confirm.

### **How to attend:**

Reason Center is currently closed, so this meeting will be by online videoconference.

- **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. Forever.)
- **Moments before the meeting:** Go to this link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82579700060?pwd=dzk1N0lxVm5yS3k3SHdLQXR6NGITdz09>.
- **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 **825 7970 0060**.
- **If it wants a passcode** (it probably won't), the passcode is **315920**.
- The videoconference should begin. Speakers on, please! Sit back and enjoy.

Or **listen in by phone** at 1-669-900-6833. Same meeting ID (**825 7970 0060**) and same passcode (**315920**).

**Location:** An online Videoconference via Zoom - see link above.

**Contact:** Email "programs (at) aofonline.org", or see <https://www.meetup.com/SacFAN/events/274970009/>.

To support the Speaker Series, join AOF at [www.aofonline.org/join](http://www.aofonline.org/join). Because without AOF, it wouldn't happen.

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## ✧ ✧ Other Upcoming Events ✧ ✧

### ➤ Sacramento-area Online Meetings

In the face of the lockdown, other local groups meet via online videoconference. Join them and share your worthy thoughts!

- **Wednesdays, Jan 6, Jan 20 & Feb 3, 7pm – 9pm: What's your story?** Meet other local freethinkers to discuss beliefs, philosophy and what led you to this place. Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85489607519?pwd=a1V2eEVKb3hnWXhZMVZRMm04Wk5BQT09>.
- **Saturday, Jan 9, 10am – 12 noon: Argument Ninja Dojo.** Learn to be better at political, academic and activist argumentation, and to be more informed about issues. Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88370183359>. Details, see <https://reasoncenter.org/event-calendar/>.
- **Monday, Jan 11, 5pm – 7pm: Conversion Therapy.** The [Sacramento Recovery from Religion chapter](#) will examine "ex-gay treatments," aka Conversion Therapy, with author [Bill Prickett](#). Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/186729414>.
- **Tuesdays, Jan 12, Jan 26 & Feb 9, 7pm – 9pm: Porch Talk.** A social gathering on the virtual front porch. Join us for a chat about topics of the day, or anything. Link: <https://www.meetup.com/SacFAN/events/mhjncsycccbqbl/>.
- **Wednesday, Jan 13, 7pm – 9pm: Black Lives Matter and Me.** An online discussion of social justice and racism. Link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82590278514?pwd=K1pzaXA0dGVESzlvS1UcEs4RnE2UT09>.
- **Sundays, Jan 17 & Feb 7, 10:30am – 12 noon: Online Coffee and Community,** hosted by Nancy Sneed. BYO beverage & snacks. Attend via video link <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84984111659?pwd=cThkaGdTK0FCdXJpWnB3MVZ1R213Zz09>.
- **Thursday, Jan 21, 6:45pm: A virtual meetup** with the Atheist Community of Los Angeles (SFV west unit). Link: <https://zoom.us/j/93640958377?pwd=QSt4SEZJbHR2dWJYR2RvUmNkQlg5Zz09> (password: 666). Details, see <https://www.meetup.com/ReasonCenterEvents/events/gdmncsycccbcc/>.
- **Virtual Sacramento Skeptics in the Pub, Friday, Jan 22, 6:30pm – 9:30pm.** A virtual social meeting for Area Skeptics. We welcome new Skeptics and like-minded folks! See <https://www.meetup.com/sacskeptics/events/tsvpxycccbdc/> for details.

### ➤ More Sacramento Area Events

Are we done with you? No way! For other freethought events in the area please check out the Sacramento Coalition of Reason general calendar at <https://unitedcor.org/event-calendar-2/>. Just click an event for details.

### *You can help. Here's how.*

#### Support Reason Center

Reason Center opened in July 2014. It is now closed, temporarily we hope. But in meanwhile it hosted hundreds of events and accrued twelve partner organizations. Its mission was (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.

To continue, "RC" relies on support from members and donors. Please stand up for Reason Center, because it stands up for you. To set up a monthly or one-time donation, visit [ReasonCenter.org](http://ReasonCenter.org). You can afford it!

#### Support AOF

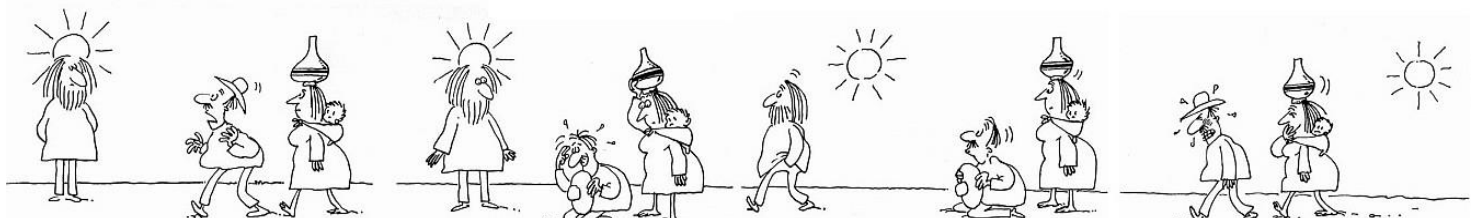
You can support AOF *without spending a dime*. How? When you purchase goods at Amazon.com, simply use this link: <https://smile.amazon.com/ch/68-0325762>. Bookmark it now! Prices & service will be the same, but AOF will receive a small kickback for whatever you purchase. Sweet!

#### Suggest a Meeting

Know a compelling speaker, have a great meeting idea? Please 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 thoughts. (Reasonable honorariums paid to speakers.)

#### Volunteer?

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



Thanks, Sergio Aragonés



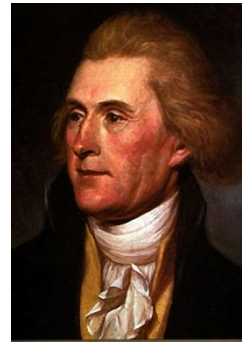
## ✧ ✧ Secular Holidays ✧ ✧

### ➤ Religious Freedom Day

**Saturday, Jan 16, 2021**

[National Religious Freedom Day](#) is in the truest sense both a religious *and* a secular holiday. It marks the anniversary of the passage of the Virginia [Statute of Religious Freedom](#), the 1786 colonial statute that disestablished the Anglican Church in Virginia and set the foundation for Separation of Church and State. Thomas Jefferson marked this statute as one of his greatest achievements. Among other things it declared the following:

- "that to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical,
- "that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions any more than our opinions in physics or geometry,
- "that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of Religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge or affect their civil capacities."



Congress first marked Religious Freedom Day in 1993. It is a day to reflect on the hard-won separation of civic and religious life, and to refresh our resolve to inform fellow citizen about liberty of conscience in matters of faith, a liberty which must include both freedom *of* and *from* religion. Because otherwise, it is no freedom at all.

### ➤ Thomas Paine Day

**Friday, Jan 29, 2021**

**Thomas Paine Day**, also called Freethinkers Day, promotes appreciation of free thought through the life and works of American patriot Thomas Paine. Paine (1737-1809) was a courageous freethinker whose life and work inspired great social and political advancement across world. Raised in England, Paine played a vital role in the American and French Revolutions. His books and pamphlets, including *The Age of Reason*, *The Rights of Man*, and *Common Sense*, gained a mass audience for the liberating philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Paine arrived in America in 1774 at Benjamin Franklin's request. On January 10, 1776, he published *Common Sense*, a remarkable and powerful republican pamphlet which had an immediate success. He served in the Revolutionary War under General Greene and later in official positions appointed by congress and in the Pennsylvania legislature. In his later publication, *Age of Reason*, Paine expressed that "all religions are in their nature mild and benign" when not associated with political systems. Paine was the quintessential Deist of the 18th century.



Between March 1791 and February 1792 he published numerous editions of his *Rights of Man*, in which he defended the French Revolution. The words of Thomas Paine inspired many to strive for political, economic and social advancement. He was among the first to call for an end to slavery and the establishment of human rights around the world.

In the 1990s, the *Truth Seeker* magazine began celebrating Freethinkers Day on Thomas Paine's birthday in order to educate the public on the importance of Thomas Paine in the history of freedom. Its poetic description of the day, on [this webpage](#), is worthy to repeat:

**This day honors Thomas Paine and is on his birthday, January 29. This is a global holiday and is simply celebrated by giving and displaying a White Rose with Thorns. The simple beauty and purity, the fragility and yet not without the danger of drawing blood by a thorn prick, makes this an excellent icon for those Freethinkers who want to reflect on Freedom and promote the ideas of personal liberty as expressed by Paine in The Declaration of Independence.**

**This is a holiday that celebrates the concept of Freedom by honoring the man who declared our Independence by giving us Common Sense and The Declaration. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Thomas Paine.**

**So you are welcome to celebrate with us. Just remember a White Rose with Thorns.**

Also in the 1990s, the Thomas Paine Foundation began celebrating the birthday of Thomas Paine on January 29th, a Thomas Paine Day proclamation on June 8 and other Paine theme events during the year.

### ➤ National Gorilla Suit Day

**Sunday, January 31, 2021**

From the sublime to the ridiculous. On the heels of Thomas Paine day comes [National Gorilla Suit Day](#), a pseudo-holiday invented by famed Mad Magazine cartoonist [Don Martin](#). An effluvium of controversy continues to surround this secular celebration: to some it is a blatant conspiracy of gorilla suit manufacturers to promote their wares, others see it as one of

America's more important and venerable holidays. Its origins lie in a 1963 comic strip. Don Martin aficionados later evolved the tradition that "NGSD" falls on the last day of January each year.

Whatever your opinion of NGSD, few deny the cartooning genius of Don Martin. Art historian Charles Taylor described Martin's unique style of art and wit:

*His people are big-nosed schmoes with sleepy eyes, puffs of wiry hair, and what appear to be life preservers under the waistline of their clothes. Their hands make delicate little mincing gestures and their strangely thin, elongated feet take a 90-degree turn at the toes as they step forward. Whether they're average Joes or headhunters, Martin's people share the same physique: a tottering tower of obloids. Martin puts the bodies of these characters through every kind of permutation, treating them as much like gadgets as the squirting flowers and joy buzzers that populate his gags: glass eyes pop out from a pat on the back; heads are steamrolled into manhole-cover shapes. All of this accompanied by a Dadaist panoply of sound effects found nowhere else: shtoin! shklorp! fwoba-dap! It's unlikely Samuel Beckett was aware of Don Martin, but had he been he might have recognized a kindred spirit.*



### 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](http://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: Kaeleigh Pontif

Directors at large:

Roger Zabkie, Pamella Rivera, Linda Ostrofsky (Jetta),

Kaeleigh Pontif, Christine Tweet

#### 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 is affiliated with the Alliance of Secular Humanist Societies (ASHS), Atheist Alliance of America (AAA), American Atheists (AA), American Humanist Association (AHA) and the Sacramento Coalition of Reason (SCoR).

#### 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. Any who will treat others with respect and dignity 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>.

**Note to AOF from Emmett Fields of the Bank of Wisdom website, <https://bankofwisdom.com/>:**

"I have uploaded [400 Years of Freethought](#) [by Samuel P. Putnam, 1894] to introduce the modern Scholar to the time when Science and Human Reason had progressed to the point where religion was being rejected by the general public. I will upload other basic books from the Progressive Era, and try to have them kept together for a period Reference Library. The last 9 pages of *400 Years* has a list of Subscribers who paid so the book could be published. There are some interesting names there; Check it out, you may find you have a Freethinking Ancestor from before Theological Intellectualism was outlawed in America."

Emmett F. Fields, <bowemmett (at) gmail (dot) com>

*400 Years* is available courtesy of the [Internet Archive](#) or [Google Books](#). Click either link to read for free.



#### **AOF Board Election results:**

<b>Candidate:</b>	Fran Evanisko	Roger Zabkie	Pamella Rivera	Linda Ostrofsky	Ken Nahigian	Pat Kelley	Kaeleigh Pontif	Christine Tweet
<b>Votes:</b>	25	24	23	18	21	18	22	20



### **My Adventures in the Bible Belt**

By [James A. Haught](#), from [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com)

For many years, I was my newspaper's religion reporter and, believe me, I met some amazing denizens of Appalachia's Bible Belt.

Consider Clarence "Tiz" Jones, the evangelist-burglar. He had been a state champion amateur boxer in his youth, but succumbed to booze and evil companions, and spent a hitch in prison. Subsequently converted, he became a popular Nazarene revivalist. He roved mountain communities, drawing big crowds, with many coming forward to be saved.

But police noticed a pattern: In towns where Jones preached, burglaries happened. Eventually, officers charged him with a break-in. This caused a backlash among churches. Followers said Satan and his agents were framing the preacher. They formed a "Justice for Tiz Jones" committee and staged protest marches. Then Jones was nabbed red-handed in another burglary, and his guilt was clear. He went back to prison.

Another spectacular Appalachian minister was "Dr." Paul Collett, a faith-healer who claimed he could resurrect the dead — if they hadn't been embalmed. Collett set up a big tent in my town of Charleston and drew multitudes, including many in wheelchairs and on crutches. The healer said he had revived a corpse during a previous stop. He urged believers to bring him bodies of loved ones, before embalming.

Collett moved his show into a former black movie theater and broadcast over radio stations. One night, he claimed "a cancer" fell onto the stage. Another night, he said he turned water into wine. I attended a service and wrote a skeptical account, focusing on his many money collections. After the article appeared, 40 of Collett's followers invaded my paper's newsroom. Luckily, it was my day off. The night city editor called the police and also summoned burly printers from the type shop, who backed the throng out the door.

Collett claimed to have 10,000 adherents. For five years, he collected money to build a 12-doored "Bible Church of All Nations," which was to be "the biggest tabernacle in West Virginia." Then he moved to Canada, leaving not a rack behind.

He returned some years later and preached at a serpent-handling church in a mountain hollow. (I often wrote about the ardent rural worshipers who pick up buzzing rattlesnakes and thrust their hands into fire to show their faith. They're earnest and decent people — even though they have a high mortality rate during prayer services.)

The leader of the serpent church, who never took money from members, began to suspect that Collett was bilking his congregation. In an Old Testament-type showdown, the two ministers scuffled, one shouting "Manifest him, Lord!" and the other yelling "Rebuke the devil!"

Then, Collett vanished for good. Meanwhile, the serpent churches spawned other tales:

Once, a weekly newspaper printed photos of a church wedding in which the bride and groom each held a rattler.

Another time, we heard that politicians in a rural county allowed serpent-handlers to meet in the dilapidated courthouse. Some snakes escaped into crevices in the walls — and emerged weeks later, causing bedlam among courthouse employees.

A University of Charleston sociologist, Nathan Gerrard, studied the serpent phenomenon. He administered a psychological test to the serpent flock, and gave the same test to a nearby Methodist congregation as a control group. The serpent-handlers came out mentally healthier.



On one occasion, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox accompanied Gerrard and me to a serpent church. When the worshipers began their trance-like “dancing in the spirit,” we were surprised to see Professor Cox leap up and join the hoofing.

Meanwhile the parade of colorful evangelists never stopped. One was faith-healer Henry Lacy, who handed out calling cards saying simply “Lacy the Stranger.” He often came into our newsroom to lay hands on reporters to cure hangovers. He once offered to halt a cold wave if state officials would return his driver’s license, which had been confiscated.

And there was a roving healer, A.A. Allen, who visited West Virginia with jars containing bodies that he said were demons he had cast out of the sick. (Skeptics said they were frogs.) He vanished after a revival at Wheeling, and was found dead of alcoholism in a San Francisco hotel room with \$2,300 in his pocket.

There’s also the tale of when “the Plastic Eye Miracle,” the Rev. Ronald Coyne, visited town. He was a former Oklahoma farm boy who was blinded in one eye by a piece of baling wire. He said a faith-healer enabled him to see through his artificial eye. Several of us in the audience wrapped tape over his good eye, and he read aloud items we handed him, using his empty eye socket. It seemed legitimate, and I was mystified. I guessed that maybe his optic nerve had regenerated a glimmer of vision.

Those were heady days in the Bible Belt, before evangelists created million-dollar TV empires and became the ayatollahs of the Republican Party. The holy rovers of yesteryear provided marvelous theater. Today’s mountain religion seems pale in comparison.

*James A. Haught, syndicated by PeaceVoice, was the longtime editor at the Charleston Gazette and has been the editor emeritus since 2015. He has won two dozen national newswriting awards and is author of 12 books and 150 magazine essays. He also is a senior editor of Free Inquiry magazine and writer-in-residence for the United Coalition of Reason.*



## Was John XII the worst-ever Pope?

**T**HERE HAVE, YOU’VE GOT TO ADMIT, been some bad Popes here and there. Like [Formosus](#) the corpse-botherer, and plenty more where he came from. But I think it’s safe to say that John XII was the worst ever.

John was the illegitimate son of the devout 10th-century Roman lord Alberic - though reading that sentence once again, perhaps not all that devout. Alberic spent years reforming the corrupt Roman church, and making sure that all the Popes appointed were holy men who subscribed to the spiritual revival movement of Cluny abbey.

But on his deathbed, Alberic was overcome by family values and decided to undo all his reforms by making his son Pope. John was not a holy reformer, he was a spoilt 17-year-old.

The Cluny movement was making people less tolerant of papal debauchery, but blissfully unconcerned about what anyone was tolerant of, John did what any 17-year-old with all the resources of Rome at his disposal would do, and opened a brothel in the papal palace. Pilgrims who were unwary enough to visit St Peter’s alone were pounced on and sexually assaulted.

John is said to have consecrated one of his bishops in a stable. In the same refreshingly relaxed attitude to the dignity of the episcopal office, he allegedly castrated one.

When pilgrims brought offerings to St Peter’s, John simply pocketed them. When he was strapped for cash he paid his lovers from the church plate.

In 958, he went on a foray to conquer some Italian districts for the Papal State, but it went wrong, and he had to call the German king Otto to rescue him from the tribe he was meant to be attacking. But the deal Otto cut with him was a bit steep, so John tried to have Otto overthrown (by the tribe he was meant to be attacking).

So Otto marched on Rome to overthrow John instead. The holy father filled his bags with all the ecclesiastical gold he could get his hands on, and ran for it.

John died shortly afterwards in bed (not his own) of a stroke, in his mid-twenties. John was actually baptized Octavian, but made the unprecedented decision to take a saintly pseudonym when he became Pope. So if you ever wondered which Pope started the tradition of taking a new name to dissociate one’s private frailties from the holy office, unfortunately perhaps, but not inappropriately, it was John.

[Reprinted from [Ship-of-Fools](#)]

