

# September 1996

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## The Debate: Does God Exist?

On a hot August 13th night, Atheists & Other Freethinkers hosted a lively debate with the topic of "Does god exist?" Even with the temperature peaking over 110 degrees, an overflow crowd of 250 listened to arguments presented by atheist and former fundamentalist preacher Dan Barker from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and by former Mormon member Sacramento theist John Morehead from the American Religion Information Center.

Moderator Hank Kocol and timekeeper Ed McConnell ably kept the debate on schedule. Freethinkers from San Jose, San Francisco, Palo Alto, Stockton, Redding, and other cities joined AOF members and many believers in this AOF milestone activity.

Morehead began the debate by stating that atheists were required to prove that god does not exist. He introduced the theists' claim that the universe was designed, whereas atheists claim that the "Big Bang" created the universe from nothing. Barker followed by noting that Morehead was in error in claiming atheists must prove that god does not exist since one cannot prove a negative; therefore, proving the existence of god was in the theists' court. He stressed the laws of nature and pointed out that, if indeed

god existed, he was impotent as he could not or would not prevent diseases and other disasters. Barker also stated that if god existed, Isaac Asimov would have written a book about it by now. Morehead rebutted with several theological arguments for the existence of god noting that god tolerates evils. Barker later stated that if god is infinite, then god doesn't exist because god would also have to have a beginning. Thus, "Where did god come from" asked Barker. When Barker stated the existence of god remains a mystery, Morehead nodded in agreement. Barker pointed out that people in the past worshiped Zeus, Jupiter and other gods but he, Barker, just believes in one less god than Christians do.

Written questions were submitted by audience members and moderator Hank Kocol rotated the questions between believers and freethinkers. In this exchange, Barker stressed that everything had to be caused, whereas Morehead claimed that everything was caused except god, and everything was designed except god. To this, Barker pointed out the circular reasoning of Morehead's claims. Morehead claimed god was non-physical, a spirit, but was unable to define a spirit to Barker's satisfaction.

Barker brought up the Second Law of Thermodynamics which states that entropy increases over time and that creationists erroneously use this concept in refuting evolution. Morehead did not know how many Laws of Thermodynamics there were nor did he know the First Law of Thermodynamics which states energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed.

The debaters also questioned each other during a freeform session. On the matter of evil and violence in the Old Testament, Barker stated that god had to cleanse his people by killing those who did not obey him. Then Morehead raised the question as to what moral standard atheists use to criticize Old Testament violence. Barker cited Isaiah, noting that god created evil and god condoned and ordered killings in the Old Testament.

On the matter of morality, Barker noted that man uses his brain to avoid harming others and to avoid others harming him and does so without absolute moral standards. Barker noted the "Bronze" rule of Jesus "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and the "golden" rule of Confucius "Don't do that unto others what you would not have them do to you." He cited Confucius' rule as superior to that of Jesus. Morehead's position was one of absolute moral standards, and he also cited that animal rights activists refer to "harm" and "pain" when talking about moral standards. Barker refuted Morehead's statement that atheists claim something was created from nothing. He also referred to scientific studies where prayer had no beneficial effect in healing the sick.

The debaters agreed on the issues of church and state separation and the ineffectiveness of faith healers. The debaters were cordial in their presentations and the audience was orderly. The debaters informally agreed to the possibility of a future debate on the Resurrection. Barker stated "we'd probably get a rise out of it" and Morehead stated that Barker's arguments on the subject "would be all dead." Laughter ensued.

Proceeds from the debate allowed AOF to make a sizable contribution to the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

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## President's Desk by Karen Abbe

Thanks go out to all who labored on the Dan Barker events. To name just a few, the dependable Don Massy arrived early to transport and set up equipment. Kay Stinson worked on tickets, refreshments, and securing the facility for the piano concert. Art Auble and Bea Dunn served coffee and water at the debate. Ed McConnell prepared a cash box and served as the official timer.

Kay Dickey and her husband Marv Blackman helped in setting up the backdrop, taping down wires, and collecting questions from the audience. Edgar and Judy Brichta worked on tickets and admission at the front door. Peggy Lucas and her two friends tirelessly captured the debate on videotape. Dave Flanders worked on cleanup of both events. Betty Simonsma organized volunteers, did promotion, set up the literature table, prepared refreshments for the concert, and helped with setup and cleanup of both events.

Roland and Debra Roberge worked on the banner and equipment setup, took till photos, and provided their beautiful piano for the concert. Cleo Kocol first contacted Dan Barker regarding setting up the debate, helped with collecting questions from the audience and promotion of the debate, and hosted Dan Barker in her home. Hank Kocol served as official moderator, outlined the debate rules, and negotiated important matters between Dan Barker and John Morehead.

Jody Craig distributed literature and provided a friendly face for people who were seeing AOFers for the first time. Ralph Matthews wrote an article for our newsletter about the debate. Brad Clark arrived early to work on equipment setup and Mary Lou Mendum helped with last minute emergencies.

On top of all those who worked on the events, there were also scads of AOFers who came from far away to attend and give their moral support, like Karen Owens from Tracy and Larry Judkins from Orland.

These events happened because so many AOFers gave of their time and energy. If I left anyone out, it's because I couldn't actually see everyone because I was phenomenally busy! Overall, I witnessed AOFers coming together to make both events successful, and a big thank you goes out to all.

*(The following was added at the insistence of the newsletter committee) Yes, you left someone out, you. You were incredibly busy before, during and after. What other president could greet our speakers, emcee and videotape the program, get the janitor to open the kitchen, see that setup jobs were completed, and hurry 250 people out of the hall in our allotted time, all while looking lovely in an orchid suit? Thank you, indeed.*

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## Charity Dinner September 20th

Thanks to the generous contributions of time, food, and money by AOF members, we'll be serving up our 11th dinner-for-the-needy Friday September 20th. Let's keep this wonderful tradition alive in our organization, at a time when there is such great need.

There will be food packets with spaghetti "fixins" at the next general membership meeting on September 8th. Please pick one up along with instructions, or sign up to help set up, serve meals, or clean up at the Robertson Community Center at 3525 Norwood Blvd. Monetary contributions are always welcomed if you aren't free to help out on Friday September 20th.

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## **Evolution vs. Creationism: An Explanation of Life**

AOF's August 11th speakers, Paul Storey and Dave Flanders, gave a presentation addressing the theory of evolution. Evidence supporting evolution came from the sciences of geology, anatomy, physiology, embryology, genetics and immunology.

Pictures from geology illustrated the vast expanse of time which has preceded us. Illustrations from leading publishers depicted forms of life throughout earth's history from cell to multi-cellular sphere, to worms, to fishes, to amphibians, to reptiles, to primates to man.

Attention was given to the final stages of evolution from the apes to men, because many people choose to deny this is possible, even though genetic and immunological measurements show less than 5% of humans are different from the genes of the great apes. The variation in genes in one generation is visible in the differences between siblings. Multiply these differences by a million generations, at 20 years per generation, and it shows how much genetic change and diversity in a species can occur in 20 million years.

Gradual change through eons of time were compared to the concept of catastrophism. Dave Flanders addressed the philosophical implications of evolution with charts that he constructed, and the following evolution timeline was presented.

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### **Milestones in the Development of Thought On the Origin of Life: 30,000 B.C.**

cave drawings, nomadic tribes worship gods of the hunt, gods of war, goddesses of fertility, etc.

### **2,000 B.C.**

the Egyptian employed gods that are half human, half animal.

**1,000 B.C.**

Greek and Roman mythology depicted immortal gods in human form, who played chess with the lives of men.

**50 A.D.**

Christianity unified all gods into one, all powerful, all present god of abstract form.

**0 A.D.**

People believed that the earth was flat and the center of the universe and life came from encapsulation like one Chinese box inside the other: inside the sperm of the first man was his seed, inside the seed was a tiny little man, his son, inside the tiny man was a tiny tiny man, etc.

**1492**

Visalius discovered circulation of the blood. Previously it was believed blood originated in the liver, was boiled in the heart, and went out the through the blood vessels into the ether. The religiously dominated society refused to accept this explanation for a hundred years.

**1600**

Galileo showed Earth was not the center of the solar system. Galileo was persecuted by the Church for heresy. His works were burned. The heliocentric solar system defied the biblical story that Moses stopped the sun in the sky which really meant Moses stopped the earth from rotating 1,000 miles per hour (a very sudden deceleration). Galileo's ideas did not become widely accepted for a hundred years.

**1723**

Leeuwenhoek first observed microorganisms.

**1778**

Linnaeus classified all living things into logical groupings.

**1840**

Malthus described the math of living organisms reproducing exponentially, until reaching the limits of the food supply.

**1857**

Charles Darwin published Origin of Species describing gradual change over long periods of time (natural selection as a filter which separates the good from the bad). Survival of the fittest is the mechanism of evolution. His ideas are still gaining acceptance 140 years later.

**1861**

Pasteur disproved spontaneous generation of life.

**1876**

Robert Koch proposed the germ theory of disease. Before this, it was believed that disease was divine punishment for sins. The new idea was quickly accepted when the Queen of England allowed herself to be vaccinated against smallpox, even if it meant her thwarting God's will.

**1900**

Mendel's law of genetics were recognized.

**1962**

Crick and Watson discovered the chemical structure of DNA.

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## **NEW-FANGLED VOICE MAIL SYSTEM**

For more than two years, AOF has been using a voice mail system called Bigmouth generously donated by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell. Paul and Mynga also donated a hard drive, monitor, and keyboard dedicated to run the system 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Recently, however, Bigmouth crashed and sadly, could not be revived. No amount of CPR or "Big" mouth-to-mouth resuscitation would bring the old geezer back to life! He was gone for good.

After performing minor "miracles" AOF now has Hewlett Packard's voicemail system up and running on another computer. The transition to the new system has no affect on our phone number of (916) 920-7834. Callers still have several options to choose from, ranging from directions to our meeting place to the highway cleanup project. Feel free to call the system anytime and see how it works!

The old system will be buried in the back yard in a non-denominational private ceremony. In lieu of flowers at the funeral, you can make donations to AOF in remembrance of Bigmouth, our friend that served us so well for so long. A tombstone and shrine will be constructed at a later date.

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## **Bob Dunning Show: KFBK Interview**

On August 1st Atheists & Other Freethinkers ventured into the radio interview market on the Bob Dunning show. The program was heard on AM station KFBK in Sacramento. When Sid Fong, the show's producer, called Betty Simonsma to ask if she would do the interview she did not turn him down. She felt she must begin to speak out for atheism if she was serious about her position.

As those who listened to his whole three hour show know, Dunning interviewed her for approximately 20 minutes (including ads) and took only four calls relating to atheism. Then he definitely and soundly switched to the subject of the Giant's baseball player who turned his AIDS ribbon into a fish to proclaim his opposition to homosexuality.

Dunning got in his first negative by complaining that her name, Simonsma, did not have enough vowels which, incidentally, has one more than his name. He then wanted to discuss the meaning of 'freethinker' claiming he was one, a Catholic who came to his belief through free thought, even though he had gone to parochial schools. (Stop laughing.) AOF president, Karen Abbe, squeezed in a call by saying she had a couple of questions for Dunning. She managed to tell of the upcoming debate with Dan Barker.

Dunning's other three calls pertaining to atheism were from fundamentalists who discussed the word 'freethinker' by also trying to assure the public they owned the word. Every caller for the rest of the three hours was seeped in religious righteousness and fervor and praise for Dewey and his fish.

Betty was able to speak of AOF's concern over the separation of government and religion and that if any other religious groups were trying to put their prayers into the schools by changing the U.S. Constitution the public would be up in arms. The name Atheists and Other Freethinkers was mentioned often. That was the big plus.

Betty commented afterwards that she emerged from the experience convinced that atheists must speak out and not let others have all of the platforms, podiums, pulpits, airwaves and simple conversations. She said we all need practice learning how to handle the subject atheism. As Judith Hayes wrote in her letter to the Stockton Record, "...believers will simply not tolerate the absence of belief. They will tolerate wildly contradictory faiths but not unbelief."

The public needs to listen to atheists and learn what we are all about and atheists need to speak out proudly.

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**Life is Good\***

*(\*Title of one of Dan Barker's songs )*

What a grand way to relax after preparing and presenting the big debate! About 50 atheists and freethinkers got together on August 14th to listen to the wonderful singing and piano playing of Dan Barker. Some of the singing was done by an enthusiastic audience, but mostly it was Dan's delightful entertainment. For some of us, it was our first experience of hearing this freethought music and it was like balm to our minds.

The room we rented for the occasion did not have a piano so Roland and Debra Roberge moved their own full-size marvelous electronic piano, a Yamaha Klavinova, to the site for the enjoyment of us all. A thousand thanks to Roland and Debra! We also had snacks and drinks, but they definitely took second place in our evening. We can't thank Dan enough for giving us this delightful evening. For those who have purchased his audio cassette tapes, the pleasure can be enjoyed over and over.

The evening's event was videotaped just for fun, but due to overwhelming requests, the videotape has now been dubbed and "dan-fans" can purchase a tape by sending a \$10 check made payable to AOF.

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## **AOF Member Scheduled To Speak at HAGSA**

AOF member, Hank Kocol, will be giving a presentation at Sacramento's Humanist organization on Friday September 6th at 7:00 p.m. His topic will be: Science and Religion are they really opposites? The presentation will be given at the Unitarian Church located at 2425 Sierra Blvd. in Sacramento.

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## **Letters to the Editor**

Hi I was really surprised when I learned about your organization. I would like to check out your meetings. I am a scientist and a little rationality would be uplifting. Can you please send me a newsletter, the date of your meetings, or whatever? I'd be happy to attend.

**Thank you, Michael W.**

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**Dear Editor:** I enjoy the News & Views each month, and I want to thank you for your continuing effort. My renewal for the coming year is enclosed. I want to comment about the article on "Why come out as an Atheist?" It would be hard to come out of the proverbial closet in the bible-belted, red-neck South, but fortunately for us living in the West the climate is much better. I also believe that it is very important on how we introduce ourselves as atheists when it comes to being accepted by society. We must be able to explain our irreverent rationale for life. We need honest, informed answers to their inevitable question about why we happen to exist in this cold, hard universe; for all homo sapiens, no matter how primitive they might be, want to know...

**Sincerely, Bob Erickson**

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## **Snips & Clips In the News**

### **Sacramento Bee August 24th, 1996**

I was treated this last Saturday in the Bee's religion and ethics section to the spectacle of three ministers dancing on the head of a pin over where God was when TWA Flight 800 crashed taking the lives of 230 people. Each of them seemed pretty sure where he was although they each played out slightly different scenarios. Dee Dee Lundahl's offering danced around the whole issue with the grace of a politician. But at least she exonerated God, which was a relief to me since I think he gets a bad rap for man's condition anyway.

Dale Robbins was the star of the dance, giving his version of Orwell's doublespeak. He cites shadowy evil forces that roam the world bringing about plane crashes and like DeeDee, he acquits God of any culpability in the tragedies of life, like death, which he says is everyone's fate.

But the real capper to his supposition is that we should open our eyes to God's goodness, that indeed he saw fit to see 6 million other passengers safely to their domestic destinations. Now I'm confused. Dale tells us that this God, who can be ticket agent and control tower director for the USA and who can daily see 6 million people safely to their destinations, can't forestall the crash of one air plane and 230 passengers? Or was it because they took an international flight? Rod Kuehne Carmichael Andrew Greeley's article of September 17th states that revenge and rage are not of Christianity. Christians must follow Christ's example and forgive...Yet Christians inhabit a universe where I will receive the same rewards as Hitler. I am a moral and ethical member of society, but because I am an atheist, I can look forward to eternal and everlasting torture in the company of Hitler, Stalin and other worthies...

**Dennis Hoey Citrus Heights**

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## **AOF COMMITTEES**

- [Atheist Alliance](#) liaison: Cleo Kocol
  - Dinners-for-the-needy: Kay Stinson
  - Highway cleanup project: Hank Kocol
  - Internet website: Pat Kelley
  - Meeting facility: Betty Simonsma
  - Speaker scheduling: Karen Abbe
  - Newsletter editor: (opening available)
  - Newsletter publishing: (opening available)
  - Voicemail system: Karen Abbe
  - Membership database: Betty Simonsma
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## **AOF BOARD**

- President: Karen Abbe
  - Vice-President: Cleo Kocol
  - Secretary: Kay Dickey
  - Treasurer: Ed McConnell
  - Directors-at-Large: Don Massy, Edgar Brichta, Roland Roberge, Kay Stinson, and Betty Simonsma
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## **SEPTEMBER PROGRAM**

For AOF's monthly meeting on September 8th, we have two fine speakers scheduled. Each will give a short presentation relating to a critical health issue.

Elaine Coleman, an AOF member, will discuss the importance of detection and treatment of breast cancer. Her remarks will include personal experiences during her battle with cancer. Dr. Floyd Cothran, a retired allergist, will speak on the issue of the church's influence in the ongoing AIDS epidemic. His remarks will also cover his personal experiences relating to blood transfusions.

Both presentations will have question and answer periods so that AOFers and other audience members can share their own views on these important issues of health.

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## **Calendar of Events**

Friday, September 6th, 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. AOF member Kocol speaks at HAGSA  
Sunday, September 8th, noon to 2:00 p.m. General meeting (topic: health issues)  
Tuesday, September 17th , 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. AOF Board meeting  
Friday, September 20th, 4:30 to 6:00 p.m. Dinner-for-the-needy  
Sunday, September 22nd, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. Newsletter committee meeting  
Sunday, October 13th, noon to 2:00 p.m. General meeting (topic: politics)  
Saturday, October 26th, 8:00 to 10:00 a.m. Highway cleanup project

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## **Directions to AOF's General Meetings**

AOF meetings are open to the public and are held on the second Sunday of every month from noon to 2:00 p.m. at the Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10. The Sierra 2 Center is located at 2791 24th Street in Sacramento, just south of Broadway and the DMV. Visitors are welcome. Parking is available on the street or in the rear, off 4th Avenue. After the meeting, join AOFers at the New Helvetia coffee house, one block north of the Sierra 2 Community Center, where we often go for muffins and conversation.