

# September 1997

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## Movie Review: Contact by Don Knutson

I have thought for some time that contact with intelligent life from another planet would have profound consequences for established religion. "Contact", the new movie based on Carl Sagan's oneandonly novel, deals with this topic as debate rages between theologians and empiricists after communication is established with someone on the other side of the cosmos.

Jodie Foster stars as an astronomer struggling against all odds to maintain her research funding when contact is finally made through transmissions, and designs are sent in order to construct a transport device for one person. Of course, competition immediately ensues as to who will represent the human race. Foster's character is a finalist but is booted when she cannot profess a faith in a god. Terrorism by a religious fanatic destroys the first module in spectacular fashion giving Foster the chance to take the "trip" to the alien's planet.

President Clinton is seen several times in the film as himself. Director Robert Zemeckis reflects his experience from "Forrest Gump" as he splices together several actual news conferences to make it look as if Clinton is addressing the country about contact with extraterrestrials. This goes to show that a politician's canned rhetoric can be inserted in most any instance. The film also

features James Woods whose role as a government bureaucrat reminds us of how out of place military officials would be if we ever make contact with beings from another solar system.

The ultimate message of the movie is a relevant one: theists and atheists can cooperate and live in harmony as long as both are devoted to the search for truth.

## September Meeting

Our September 14th meeting will feature Dr. Clifford Anderson, Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Sacramento. Professor Anderson will speak on "Atheism, Ethics, and the Philosophy of Mind; a discussion of some philosophical quandaries."

Professor Anderson will discuss two issues: 1) Can an atheist maintain that morality is objective? Or, put another way, can there be such a thing as a rational morality? 2) Does an atheist have to be a materialist? A great deal of interesting work has been done recently on the human mind and whether it is something overandabove the material brain.

Professor Anderson holds a B.S. in electrical engineering, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Washington. He is a past president of the Sacramento Valley Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and is a current member of the bio ethics committees of Woodland Memorial Hospital and Sutter Senior Care. Join AOFers for this important presentation on September 14th.

## President's Message

by **Hank Kocol**

A friend recently sent me a copy of an article published in THE NEW REPUBLIC of October 14, 1996, entitled, "The Last Taboo," written by Wendy Kaminer. Ms. Kaminer, a self-proclaimed atheist, compares the acceptance of freethought and atheistic ideas in the past with the current social stigma attached even to the idea of atheism.

In describing her own history, the author shows herself toying with the supernatural after viewing the movie, KING KONG, and her resulting fearful dreams. She countered such dreams with childlike superstitious rites she performed to ensure that the monster would not attack her or her home. Of course, she likens those juvenile rituals with similar actions taken in the name of religion by many "modern" members of our society.

With a look to the past, Ms. Kaminer contrasts today's societal views with the acceptance of freethought and atheistic ideas in the U.S. in the past two centuries, citing, as examples, statements by H.L. Mencken and Mark Twain. We all realize that there were others of the same

ilk, such as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Robert Ingersoll, who also deserve credit for their writings on the subject. Today, the media, whether "conservative" or "liberal," give much recognition to religious matters without any criticism of religions' negative influence in the world. Yet, any atheistic or antireligious expression is suppressed via media selfcensorship.

The essay also describes the negative aspects of religion, of which we are all aware: Crusades, witch burning, persecutions, religious wars throughout history and today. If we, as a society, neglect to study that history, we will be doomed, in the words of Santayana, to repeat it.

The author does not say that religion should be abolished, but she does indicate that by restricting, however subtly, the expression of freethought, our society has deliberately cut itself off from thinkers who, from history, were responsible for many, if not most, of the progressive thought and actions which brought to our country a social ethic. As a society, she concludes, we are losing the battle for rationality in favor of superstition. The result cannot be positive for progress in education, morals, or social justice.

## Highway Cleanup

As a reminder, the next AOF highway cleanup project is Sunday September 7th at 8:00 a.m. Details and directions are available on our voicemail phone line (920-7834).

## Crucified Saviors

In Reasonings, the Newsletter of Atheists and Agnostics of Wisconsin, March/April 1997, Richard Russell cites the book, The World's 16 Crucified Saviors, or Christianity Before Christ, by Kersey Graves. The book is dated 1875, so it might be tough to find a copy at the local Barnes and Noble, but it does have this list of 16 divine saviors who gave their lives for their people before Jesus. All the dates are BCE (before the Common Era):

Chrishna, India, 1200 Sakia, Hindu, 600 Thalmmuz, Syria, 1160 Wittoba, Telingonese, 552 Iao, Nepal, 622 Hesus, Celtic Druid, 834 Quesalcote, Mexico, 587 Quirinus, Rome, 506 Prometheus, Caucasus, 547 Thulis, Egypt, 1700 Indra, Tibet, 725 Alcestos, Euripides, 600 Atys, Phrygia, 1170 Crite, Chaldea, 1200 Bali, Orissa, 725 Mithra, Persia, 1600

We might speculate that there was a time when any cult without a savior who gave his life (and maybe was born of a virgin?) was doomed to go nowhere. So naturally, new cults developed their theology accordingly.

## Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

Regarding the News & Views July 1997 list of Angelic hierarchy: Was "dominations" a misprint? It should have been "Dominions" (kuriotetes).

Also, aren't archangels, princes, archaiei, & principalities all the same? You don't mention the Authorities (exousiai) which are different from the Powers (dunamis) or Thrones (thronoi). I never heard of the Virtues.

The more elaborate the theology, the more people are inclined to believe that it must be true. Unfortunately, they can't bring themselves to believe that their fellow human beings are cunning enough to have made all this stuff up.

Karen Owens

## How I Was Loosened From A

### Need For A God (Step 2)

by Denis De Luchi

My father often took me to Yosemite Park when I was between the ages of 3 and perhaps 15. This started in the late 1930's, when the park accommodations were somewhat more rustic and the park itself considerably less crowded than now.

We did the hiking and fishing things, and stayed in those tentsided cabins that the Yosemite Park and Curry Company provided. Even then, I was very interested in science, and paid rapt attention to naturalist presentations on geology, wildlife, plants, and weather. I learned that stuff more thoroughly and more permanently than I did my catechism.

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The old Yosemite Lodge had a fire ring near its tent area, and each night a bonfire was ignited, so that visitors could sit around in the chill mountain air and enjoy the darkness which surrounded us.

My dad had a vivid imagination and was a great storyteller. He had made it a habit to tell me, as we sat by the fire, "Little Indian Joe" (LIJ) stories. The original story, about a brave Indian lad outwitting a voracious wolf, was not his. But the continuing saga of Little Indian Joe was, and LIJ got braver and smarter with each new adventure, I loved it, mainly because I was there with

him. From our place on the valley floor I could see LIJ running along the cliff rims, even when those rims were no longer visible. There was that line in the dark where the stars stopped.

One evening, at twilight, just before my dad was to begin a new tale, I was enjoying those cliffs as the last illumination faded. There was a young woman, seated on a rock next to me, doing, I guess, the same thing. She turned to me and asked, with a truly religious awe, "How could anyone look at all this and not believe in god?"

(continued on page 4)

That was a pivotal point in my life. Up to that moment, I hadn't even considered the idea that it was possible to NOT believe in god. She had dropped a seed, and it fell on ground that I had tread that morning on a nature walk. The ranger had described, in some detail, the geologic processes that had formed Yosemite Valley. It had all made good sense, and no gods were involved. As I came to think of it, LIJ never used gods to escape angry bears, either.

The woman had made me think that it was possible not to believe. The ranger and LIJ had shown that belief might not be a necessity. These people had put me on some path, and I had no idea where it led.

## **Interesting News Item**

(Quoted without comment from the Sacramento Bee, July 27, 1997)

"I believe that some of my best work might be ahead of me." the Rev. Don Moomaw, former President Reagan's expastor, on his return to active ministry two years after being disciplined for sexual misconduct with five women.

## **Atheist Programming For Your Viewing Pleasure**

**by Bob Wilson**

There are many freethought shows scheduled for Channel 74 on Sacramento Cable as shown below. The programs for the next few weeks are as follows:

Wednesday September 10th 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Women Without Superstition

Thursday September 11th 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk -- India

Sunday September 14th 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Religious Freedom Amendment

Wednesday September 17th 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Views of Death

Sunday September 21st 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- American Atheist News

Wednesday September 24th 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Frank Smerke

Thursday September 25th 5:30 pm, Atheists Talk -- What Atheists Read

Sunday September 28th 10:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Religion, Cults and Comets

Wednesday October 1st 9:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Fighting Back

## Member Profile: Kay Stinson

by Cleo Kocol

At age sixteen, native Sacramentan Kay Stinson was looking for structure in her life. She converted to Catholicism, believing that this was the answer. She later married and was the mother of five children, all of whom were baptized Catholic.

Kay states, "When I was in my late twenties I had my mind opened to the hypocrisy and contradictions of religious doctrines." Teaching catechism was the catalyst. She realized that religion and church were unnecessary elements in her life, but it took a little longer for her to come to the conclusion that she didn't "believe" in a god. Slowly, she became comfortable with the idea of non-belief, arriving at this place through reading freethought books and philosophy.

When she heard Tom Flynn speak at an AOF meeting about his book, [The Trouble With Christmas](#), her awareness took another leap. Becoming a member of Atheists and Other Freethinkers was the next step for her. She says AOF speakers, talks, and reading material have all helped to develop her understanding of atheist thought and being. An activist member, she chaired AOF's Charity Dinner for almost two years.

Kay, an employee at McClellan Air Force Base, works as a Civilian Outreach assistant and will be retiring in 1998. When she's not working or at AOF meetings, Kay can often be found enjoying her hobby, long distance bike riding. Recently she took part in a fundraiser for the Lung Association, a ride which took her from Iron Mountain to Coloma to Roseville. "Riding gives such a sense of freedom. I see so much more than when I'm in a car." She's been participating for eight years, also taking bicycle maintenance classes where she learned the basics of bike care including changing her own tires.

Kay, a grandmother, says her grown children, while respecting her beliefs, are still making their own private philosophical searches.

## Dinner for the Needy

Friday August 22nd was the date of AOF's most recent dinner-for-the-needy. Kay Stinson and Jody Craig organized the dinner which included spaghetti and all the fixens'. No food went to waste as every last morsel was eaten by our hungry guests (which included quite a few young children). AOF helpers included Ed McConnell, Don Massy, Cleo and Hank Kocol, Pete Studelska, Karen Abbe, Don Knutson, Jason and Janet Borchers, and Dave Flanders.

AOF has been providing free meals for the needy on a quarterly basis. Kay and Jody appreciate all the help provided (serving and cleaning up, as well as financial donations). Due to their busy work schedules, it is now necessary to find new dinner chairpersons to organize the events. The duties of the chairpersons will be to plan the menus, purchase food and utensils, and organize the preparation and serving of the food.

If you are interested in taking an active leadership role in putting on our dinners, contact either Kay or Jody or any Board member. This is a worthwhile cause.

## Revisionist Religious History

**Sacramento News and Review August 21, 1997** Recent letters to the editor would have us believe that the United States was founded by a bunch of Christians, and that the wall between church and state is a recent perversion of the Founding Fathers' intent.

Baloney!

The early Americans were not establishing a Christian nation; in fact, the opposite. It may surprise readers to learn that the majority of the Founding Fathers were not Christian at all. They were a mix of Deists (who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ), Christians, Jews, agnostics, Moslems, atheists - you name it. They had fled a nation that imposed Christianity as a state religion.

George Washington never declared himself a Christian, either in his speeches or his abundant letters. He did not wish to have clergy at his deathbed.

The second U.S. President, John Adams, wrote, "This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it!"

Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776. He later referred to the biblical Book of Revelations as "the ravings of a maniac." When he was our third president, Jefferson refused to call for a religious Day of Thanksgiving, saying it was "not the governments

business to do so." In his writings, he criticized the coercive nature of all state established religions.

James Madison, our fourth president, wrote, "During almost 15 centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What has been its fruits? More or less, in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution."

As for the SN&R letter writer who portrays the United States as "one nation under god" since day one, the phrase "under God" wasn't added to the Pledge of Allegiance until June 14, 1954, during the shameful McCarthy witch hunt era. "In God we trust" was made mandatory on money in 1955. The national motto was changed in 1956. Not exactly ancient history.

In re-writing history, religious fundamentalists are using the big lie: if you say something often enough and loud enough, people will believe it. Luckily for us, the public library is available to set the record straight. Of course, if fundamentalists have their way, public libraries - and all other secular public education - will go the way of the Dodo bird. Stay tuned.

Preston Reece  
Gold River