

April 1998

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April AOF Program

On April 12, 1998, AOF will host Molleen Matsumura from the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), Berkeley, who will speak on the latest in the Evolution/Creationism controversy. As you may know, fundamentalist christians have been demonstrating for years to have creationism taught in high school science classes whenever evolution is discussed. As a result, to avoid the controversy, many school boards have selected biology textbooks which make no mention of evolution, the uniting principle of biology as atoms are for chemistry. One result of this effort is the lack of scientific knowledge among our students so that they place dead last in knowledge of science and math as compared to other nations.

A confounding influence, of course, is the lack of scientific knowledge among the American public and the media who fall for the creationist argument that, since evolution and creationism are both "theories" it is only fair to give each equal time. The funnymentalists do not intend to give equal time to other creation "theories" such as those of the Native American religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other ethnic cultures. The creationists will not stop. Come to the April meeting of AOF for the latest tack being taken to eliminate science from science classrooms.

Darwin's Birthday Celebration

by Steve Knapp

Dr. Eric T. Pengelley's lecture was the focus of a joint AOF-HAGSA gathering February 15th, 1998 to celebrate the 189th anniversary of the birth (in 1809) of Charles Darwin.

The lecture was a clear, comprehensive, humanistic and often humorous discourse on the life of Charles Darwin and its historical context.

After a warm introduction, Dr. Pengelley described the intellectual background of Darwin's time, and particularly the concept of "teleology." Teleology is the study of final causes, the idea of nature being directed or planned. For example, a teleological view would be that our legs were created in order to walk; a design exists, i.e. god's plan as contrasted with "mechanistic" origins. The philosophical, scientific, and social context into which Darwin was born was teleological. The great theory that Darwin was to develop and publish, that of evolution by natural selection, broke away from the teleological view. Dr. Pengelley supported the appraisal by several modern authorities (including Carl Sagan) that the theory ("Darwinism" for short) is the most important idea to have been discovered in history.

Charles Darwin was able to think of the world as mechanistic (evolutionary), populationist (variation, not types), and statistical (random variation leading to natural selection). He had some advantages: Erasmus Darwin, his grandfather, has already started to think of some evolutionary concepts; his father was a physician, and the family was well off. Darwin dropped out of the University of Edinburgh as a freshman, and found himself at Cambridge, studying theology, but concentrating on botany and geology.

In 1831, he accepted the position of naturalist on HMS Beagle on a global charting voyage. The voyage of the Beagle lasted from 1831 to 1836, with a concentration on South America. Darwin crossed the Andes, where he found fossils at 14,000 feet. He made his first visit to the Galapagos. In the South Pacific, he was able to confirm by observation his prior theory of the formation of coral reefs and atolls. He became recognized as a major authority on barnacles.

Darwin married his cousin, Emma Wedgwood. The marriage lasted 42 years, and produced 10 children. Curiously, his wife was profoundly religious. He mulled over the key ideas for the "Origin of Species" for several years, and made a 200 page outline for the theory in 1842. He hesitated for years to publish for fear of censure.

He started "Transmutation of Species" to be at least 4 volumes when fortune intervened. Alfred Russell Wallace (who had traveled about the world like Darwin, but years later) proposed an identical idea in 1842. This forced Darwin's hand. He and Wallace jointly published a short paper in 1858: "On the Tendency of Species to Form Varieties." When Darwin's paper was read at the Royal Society, it was ignored. Darwin published a shorter version of the "Transmutation of Species", called "On the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection", which sold out its initial 1200 copies on the first day! The book was reviled instantly, except by the young generation of biologists.

Darwin later re-edited the "Origin" five times, concentrating on botany. Dr. Pengelley described the famous debate before the Oxford meeting of the British Association in 1860 in which the

young Thomas Huxley demolished Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and established the theory of evolution in the scientific world.

Dr. Pengelley noted that Charles Darwin was born in affluence, never had to teach, and was married to a woman who was also wealthy. He had spent his life noticing the little things that, taken together, make life what it is. Dr. Pengelley's lecture on Darwin must rank as one of the great AOF events during the last twelve months.

President's Message

by Hank Kocol

During this past month, several articles and letters appeared in The Sacramento Bee concerning atheism. Letters appeared which indicated that non-believers could not be moral, showing that the writers had not studied history (Crusades, wars, witch burnings, persecutions, etc.) nor read the news articles concerning religious persecutions and wars in the world today (Bosnia, Ireland, the Middle East, etc.). It is very difficult to argue with someone who is not aware of these events. I believe the bible says something about those who do not see (history and current events) and yet believe such nonsense.

Also in The Bee was an article whose subtitle was "Many atheists adhere to high moral and ethical standards." Frankly, I resent that statement as if it were astonishing that atheists are moral. Again, this must have been written by someone who had not studied history nor read the recent news. The article does pay homage to Madalyn Murray O'Hair's "in-your-face American Atheists." When AOF was organized we made a deliberate choice NOT to associate with American Atheists, simply because of the "in-your-face" approach of that group; we wanted to project an aspect of "positive atheism" to the community as shown through our highway clean-up and charity dinner projects. Later we did associate with the [Atheist Alliance](#) (AAI). Unfortunately, in spite of all continuing efforts to educate the media that we exist, most people still think of Ms. O'Hair when the word "atheist" appears.

The article does, however, briefly list other atheist and agnostic groups such as the American Humanist Association, the Council for Secular Humanism (with which AOF IS affiliated), Americans United for Separation of Church and State (although not an atheist group, AU does have many atheist members), Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), and the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (which is affiliated with both FFRF and the [Atheist Alliance](#)). The impression is that all these organizations are separate (similar to churches?). As we all know, many people are members of several of these groups. In spite of the subtitle, the article spends most of its lines on describing the separation of state and church issues of which we are all aware -- the misnamed Religious Freedom Amendment, the Boy Scouts, and tax-supported religious schools.

The subtitle of the article returns when Jerry Falwell is quoted as saying (GET THIS) that "Many atheists have a high moral standard based upon respect for people." He does give away his

prejudice for pie in the sky proselytizing when he speaks of the difficulty about evangelizing "as an atheist." I do not know of ANY atheists who "evangelize!" Our philosophy is a live-and-let-live one of "leave me to my beliefs founded upon rationality and science and you may keep your myths; just don't try to impose those myths on me!"

As a kicker, Falwell is quoted as saying about atheists that "When they die, they're all dressed up with no place to go." We can criticize that statement as a logical fallacy (begging the question, false premise, etc.) which can be done by any college student in a first year logic class. However, if Falwell were speaking to an audience who thinks logically, he would have to find an honest way to make a living, probably one a lot less lucrative also.

February Meeting

The February AOF meeting featured Don Havis, a retired special education teacher and now an educational consultant, speaking on "The Seven Intelligences." The seven are:

Verbal/linguistic
Logical/mathematical
Visual/spatial
Body/kinesthetic
Musical/rhythmic
Interpersonal
Intrapersonal

The presentation was laced with optimism and humor. In the past, idealistic educators promoted the idea of "an equal brain for all" in classrooms to imply that everyone has an equal chance to get an "A" in any subject. Some thought this was a way to promote self-esteem in all students.

For several years now we have known that there are innate differences in how infants process information. Now we need to apply the knowledge of these "hard wired" differences in education. Applying a "one size fits all" model leaves behind many talented students who could be thriving with a different approach.

A lively question and answer period followed, as some teachers in the audience compared their observations and experiences to those of the speaker.

Letter to the AOF Editor

March 3, 1998

Keep up the great work with the newsletter. I always enjoy it, learn from it and pass it along to others. The March 1998 "President's Message" was SUPERB.

I enjoyed the subject matter of the article "Darwin's Ship" immensely, however, I must take exception to the authors' characterization of non-human animals as "dumb animals", while exclusively referring to human animals as "children" and "adults." For such seemingly enlightened folks, the authors really blew it with this arrogant and specist position. If "dumb" was intended as a measure of intellect, then given the enthusiastic destruction of its own habitat by human animals for centuries (a characteristic unique to humans in the animal world), common sense tells us that humans are by far the "dumbest" animals on the planet. If the intent was merely to imply that non-human animals do not speak, then such an idea is equally arrogant and inaccurate. Human languages are not the only forms of communication in the world.

Human beings ARE animals. Period. To refer to all non-human animals as if they were a separate scientific "kingdom" is absurd. I am not ashamed to be an animal, nor do I think I am exalted above the other animal species with whom I share the planet. It is a scientific classification, nothing more...

Sincerely, Mary Jo Brooks

The March newsletter was a joy to read! The President's Message on the very critical issue of the fallacies of religious dogma concerning the morals of reproduction was hard hitting and accurate. It clearly stated the essentials in an ongoing controversy that affects all of our lives. Thanks, Hank, for sharing the wealth of your lifetime of insight.

I must also congratulate you Hank for the degree of excellence of the speakers you have arranged for our monthly meetings.

Additionally, the article 'Darwin's Ship' was superb. The complexities of billions of years of evolution and a thousand years of philosophical debate was condensed into 4 pages. Bravo to Nahigian and Babinski! I am proud to be an atheist and a member of AOF.

[Paul Storey](#)

Clara Henderson sent the following note on the church taxing issue.

The Iowa Supreme Court held that Iowa sales and use tax on personal property used to operate a religious broadcasting station does not violate the U.S. and Iowa Constitutions. The reasoning is as follows:

1. The tax does not violate the free-exercise provisions of the Constitution as the tax is generally applicable even though it may incidentally impose a burden upon a particular religious practice.
2. The tax also does not affect the right to free speech since it does not affect program content.
3. The tax, having a secular purpose does not entangle government in the operation of a religion. Since the state acted in a totally secular manner, the tax does not affect the functioning of the ministry.

4. Since the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Religious Freedom Restoration act unconstitutional, that act does not affect the ruling.

The following is an excerpt from a Project Tocsin press release:

Hillary Clinton says there is a "vast right wing conspiracy" out to get her husband. While "vast" may be slightly exaggerated, Project Tocsin thinks she is right and a number of Californians are involved.

Leading the charge to impeach or drive President Clinton from office is a Winchester, CA based organization called Citizens for Honest Government. It is a division of Creative Ministries, Inc. Citizens for Honest Government publishes a newsletter, Citizens' Intelligence Digest. It is edited by John Wheeler, Jr., a former editor of The Christian American, published by the Christian Coalition.

A number of California religious political extremist activists or people with strong California ties are contributors to Citizens' Intelligence Digest. Among them are:

- William Dannemyer, former member of Congress, a leader of the Christian Reconstructionist leaning Christian Activist Network, a member of the Council for National Policy
- Joseph Farah, former editor of the Sacramento Union and Christian Reconstructionist apologist, a member of the Council for National Policy
- The Reverend Tim LaHaye, formerly of San Diego whose religious political extremists credentials are too numerous to mention, a member of the Council for National Policy
- Dr. Stanley Monteith M.D., self-styled expert on AIDS, Santa Cruz radio talk show host, a member of the Council for National Policy
- Brad Phillips - former staff member of Dana Rorabacher, M.C.
- Larry Pratt, Gun Owners of America and close associate of former state senator H. L. "Bill" Richardson, both members of the Council for National Policy
- Carolyn Stanke of Parents Involved In Education (PIE), who also led the fight to abolish the California Learning Assessment Test (CLAS).

The Citizens for Honest Government maintain a page on the Internet located at: www.chg.org.

Charity Dinner

by Cleo Kocol, February coordinator

A big thanks to everyone who contributed in any way to the dinner for the needy which we served Friday, February 20th at the Robertson Community Center in Sacramento. Again it was an overwhelming success.

An estimated 75 people appeared for dinner, and because we had prepared for 120, we were able to provide second helpings and also feed those of us who cooked, served, and coordinated the event. It was a good feeling to know that everyone had plenty to eat.

Chili provided the main course, and in these damp, rainy times, it was stick to the ribs good, especially accompanied by French bread and California oranges and grapefruit and topped off with spice cake with butter cream frosting. As usual Betty Simonsma, with assistance from Jody Craig, staffed the coffee and lemonade table.

Dishing up were Janet Borchers and son Jason, Don Knutson, Hank Kocol, Cleo Kocol, and Ed McConnell. Serving as liaison between kitchen and dining room was Randy Kelly, and servers were Karen Abbe, Dave Flanders, Ken Nahigian, and Pete Studelska as well as four students adding to their work/study credits. Kay Stinson, who coordinated many past events, washed dishes. Also thanks to those of you who donated money for the supplies.

Calendar of Events

- April 10th to 12th -- [Atheist Alliance](#) Convention in St. Louis, Missouri
- Sunday, April 12th noon to 2:00 p.m. -- Molleen Matsumura (see page 1)
- Sunday, April 19th -- newsletter committee meeting
- Wednesday, April 22nd 6:30 p.m. -- Board meeting
- Saturday May 16th 10:00 a.m. to noon -- Highway Cleanup Project