

May 1998

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May AOF Program

On May 10th, AOF member Don Knutson will speak about his work in Nicaragua. We are all aware of some of the political, social and colonial problems in that part of the world. Don will give us insights into those problems and how they affect the lives of the people who live there.

Also at the May meeting, AOF will hold its annual elections for officers and Board members. All AOF members should be present to vote. This is the major step that all members can take in directing the Board toward activities which will reflect your particular needs and desires.

A third and very important agenda item for the May meeting is the updating of the AOF By-Laws, mostly cleaning up of language and making them consistent with practices. Please vote on these changes also.

April Program

April AOF Meeting: Status of Evolution vs. Creationism in American public education

by Steve Knapp

Molleen Matsumura, from the National Center for Science Education (NCSE) at Berkeley, came to address AOF at the request of President Hank Kocol. Molleen spoke on the status of Evolution

vs. Creationism in American public education. The evolution vs. creationism conflict is an ongoing controversy despite a Supreme Court decision against teaching creationism as science a few years ago.

States usually use advisory committees of professionals to set the standards for school curricula, which is fine. But items like textbook selection become political issues, as state school boards are subject to influence and special interest pressures. This is exemplified by the adoption by some states' school boards of a disclaimer, originated by Alabama, deprecating the theory of evolution.

The conflict also takes place outside of schools. Zoos and libraries have been pressured to put non-evolutionary dogma up front. This is a blatant violation of the principle of separation of church and state, as the alternative is always the Genesis creation myth.

Now, most of us think that this sort of interference is silly: "How could someone believe that stuff." However, note that (supposedly intellectual) William F. Buckley's Firing Line had a program debating the validity of Creationism. The "Divine Watchmaker" idea is still around. This broadcast debate demonstrated how a rapid-fire discussion could leave the politicians and lay persons in the dust, thinking that creationism has scientific justifications.

Another trend is more crafty wording of positions to "get around" objections to evolution. The state of New Mexico employed the requirement of biology curricula to "employ all researches..." thereby insinuating creationism without using the term.

Fundamentalists moreover attempt to trap the listener into the idea that religion (or perhaps "spirituality") and atheism are mutually exclusive and consequently that moral/ethical behavior and atheism are mutually exclusive.

Americans are poorly educated in the sciences. Statistics (i.e. Gallup) repeatedly show that 1/2 of persons in America think God created the world about 10,000 years ago. Only about 10% believe in evolutionary origins, and about 30% straddle the question. People by and large are happy with the benefits of technology derived from science, but they do not know how it works. Moreover, teachers teaching science don't understand the subject adequately, a condition worse at the lower grades. Also people don't know what a "theory" is, and they oppose it to "fact." There is lots of room and scope for us to educate the vast majority of folks, who simply have neither the education nor the tools for critical thinking.

As for our state of California, the standards revision for public school curricula is scheduled for 1999. Physicist Glenn Seaborg is Chair of the science committee, but public hearings will be held to make it final, and there are going to be pressures to include creation "science", which is NOT science. Molleen brought literature for us to contact our representatives to prevent concessions to creationism.

Molleen's talk was followed by a number of questions. She gave insights into why otherwise intelligent people should oppose evolution, including fear of immorality, propaganda, and early

educational biases. For those interested in the 1925 Scopes "Monkey" trial, Molleen mentioned a new in-depth book, "Summer for the Gods", by Edward Larsen.

President's Message

by Hank Kocol

Since this is my last column as President, I will take this opportunity to recognize the AOF members who have helped immeasurably in making my term of office easier and a real joy.

First of all, of course, I wish to thank my predecessor, KAREN ABBE, who not only left a very viable organization in AOF for me, but continued for the entire year as an advisor, maintainer of the Voice Mail system, supplier of her personal sound system for AOF use at meetings, arranger of the meeting room, recorder of meetings with her personal video recorder, liaison with the new chapter of Americans United, and, generally, was available on an as-needed basis whenever and wherever she could be of help. Her name also appears below in recognition of her efforts in other AOF activities. THANK YOU, KAREN.

Next, of course, the Board which was elected by the membership gave me full support and advice concerning the decisions which needed to be made throughout the year. Specifically, thanks to DAVE FLANDERS, Vice President, STEVE KNAPP, Secretary, ED MCCONNELL, Treasurer, and members-at-large KAY DICKEY, CLEO KOCOL, and PAUL STOREY. Two of these, CLEO and KAY, were our liaisons to the Atheist Alliance and contributed time, effort, and personal funds to represent AOF so well with that group. KAY has also worked on updating our by-laws, a difficult, tedious, but necessary job.

The Newsletter was very capably issued on time and with interesting articles and announcements by the Newsletter Committee composed of KAREN ABBE (layout/desktop publishing), ED MCCONNELL, KAY STINSON, and JODY CRAIG (editorial committee).

Thanks to the members of the Access Sacramento Project working on TV programs to air the freethought point of view: KAREN ABBE, DAVE FLANDERS, DAVE HENDERSON, RICHARD LANGLEY, PEGGY LUCAS, PAUL STOREY, and BOB WILSON.

DON KNUTSON very ably coordinated the highway clean-up project. Thanks to the following who helped clean our section of highway: KAREN ABBE, THE BORCHERS (JANET, STEVE, JASON, and KEVIN), KAY DICKEY, DAVE FLANDERS, CLEO KOCOL, STEVE KNAPP, ED MCCONNELL, LIA POSEY, BETTY SIMONSMA, KAY STINSON, and PETE STUDELSKA.

Among those helping with the Charity Dinners were: KAREN ABBE, EDGAR and JUDY BRICHTA, THE BORCHERS (JANET, STEVE, JASON, and KEVIN), JODY CRAIG, KAY DICKEY, DAVE FLANDERS, RANDY KELLY, DON KNUTSON, STEVE KNAPP, CLEO KOCOL, ED MCCONNELL, KEN NAHIGIAN, BETTY SIMONSMA, KAY STINSON, and PETE STUDELSKA.

At our meetings, necessary set-up help was provided by KAREN ABBE, DAVE FLANDERS, the video crew, and BETTY SIMONSMA as official greeter and "keeper of the name badges." BETTY also ensured that meeting announcements were posted in the Sacramento Bee.

PAT KELLEY has done a great job, one necessitating much time, work, and creativity, in forming and maintaining the freethought web site.

Thanks to the Nominating Committee for working hard to develop a slate of officers for next year: JODY CRAIG, KAY DICKEY, and DON KNUTSON. Thanks also to those who heard the call for help and decided to run for office for the next year.

If your name is not recognized above, I may have missed you, for which I apologize. Otherwise, you may look over the various AOF projects and get yourself involved in one or more. Each of the projects can use more help. There is something here for everyone; if not, create your own project!

Elections at May Meeting

The candidates for officer elections at the May meeting are President: Dave Flanders, Vice President: Don Knutson, Secretary: Steve Knapp, Treasurer: Kay Dickey, Directors at Large: Hank Kocol, Peggy Lucas, Marilyn Vogel, and Paul Storey. The election will include bylaws changes.

Boy Scouts Issue

After the California Supreme Court declared in effect that the Boy Scouts were exempt from the antidiscrimination laws that apply to public accommodations, and were free to discriminate against atheists and gays, AOF members wrote the following letters to the Sacramento Bee. They were published on April 8, 1998. See the following re-prints of the letters.

Thoughts from a freethinking female

by Cleo Kocol

They're creeping up. I feel them breathing down my neck. Who? The religionists, of course. It's hard to digest my breakfast with this kind of thing constituting a steady diet. My granola begins to taste like sand.

From Rome came an article that the Vatican (finally) apologized for not saying or doing something during the Nazi extermination of more than 6 million Jews. Aren't they Johnny on the spot? I think I'll do a couple hand springs. But in the interest of all of us getting along, I suppose this is progress of a sort. That they would question their pope's pipeline to a higher power is a bit much to ask, but I still throw it out there.

The U.S. has the largest prison system in the world. We lock up more people than any other country. What ever happened to christian forgiveness? I find more charitable thoughts and more kindness in most non-theistic citizens than I do in those who only talk the christian language. They're out for getting even, for punishing anyone who doesn't conform to their rigid rules.

A Wall Street banker says he will donate millions of \$'s for school vouchers. Disgusting. Naturally he wouldn't want to donate that money to the public schools. He's out to destroy them. Better to control the schools, get the kids and parents to thinking about that christian god who will punish them if they break the rules. Told a lie? Maybe we should cut out his tongue.

The funeral business and the Catholic diocese have joined forces in Los Angeles. The church will get a percentage from all funerals conducted by a particular company. The Cardinal involved hopes the money will help him build his \$100 million dollar cathedral downtown.

The above examples came from my local paper and articles in U.S. News and World Report. That same morning the print media had those blatant statements, C-Span had that charlatan from Focus on the Family on their call in program.

My day didn't start out well. It improved considerably later on. Acerbic, sarcastic, witty, and oh, so right, Gore Vidal made an uncustomary and welcome appearance on television. Among other pithy comments regarding society, he advised Clinton, "Don't ask, Don't Tell." I wish the christians would use that same slogan.

Letters to the Editor

I've gotten into the habit of listening to what people say after natural disasters. Typically, survivors attribute their survival to god's goodness, even if everything they owned was destroyed, which presumably was also evidence of god's goodness. Sometimes, an observer will find evidence that the disaster was god's retribution for something or other.

An interview on NPR following the tornadoes in the South a few days ago was particularly interesting. The interviewee had been in a church when it sustained some damage, though no one inside was hurt. He observed that a place of adult entertainment (he almost had to spit out those words) down the road a couple of miles had not been damaged at all. The dissonance was almost audible. He just could not state the logical conclusion. Years ago, Pat Robertson attributed a Los Angeles earthquake to god's punishing the iniquity of Hollywood. He was strangely silent when a hurricane hit his home area of Virginia Beach a few years later. I guess that was just a natural disaster.

Going back a couple of centuries, to the invention of the lighting rod, many ministers were outraged at this human attempt to interfere with a message from god. Lightning was god's way of telling humans to straighten up. However, there was a little joker here. Lightning tends to strike the highest point in an area. In many towns, the highest point was the church steeple, so churches took an inordinate number of hits. This left ministers saying (if not aloud) "lightning is god's

punishment for the wicked and it's hit my church 3 times in the last two years." Another dissonance situation. Within about 20 years, churches were a major user of lightning rods.

Michael Cornwell

Excerpt: Clarence Darrow, Why I Am An Agnostic

The truth is that the origin of what we call civilization is not due to religion but to skepticism. So long as men accepted miracles without question, so long as they believed in original sin and the road to salvation, so long as they believed in a hell where man would be kept for eternity on account of Eve, there was no reason whatever for civilization: life was short, and eternity was long, and the business of life was preparation for eternity.

When every event was a miracle, when there was no order or system or law, there was no occasion for studying any subject, or being interested in anything excepting a religion which took care of the soul. As man doubted the primitive conceptions about religion, and no longer accepted the literal, miraculous teachings of ancient books, he set himself to understand nature. We no longer cure disease by casting out devils. Since that time, men have studied the human body, have built hospitals and treated illness in a scientific way. Science is responsible for the building of railroads and bridges, of steamships, of telegraph lines, of cities, towns, large buildings and small, plumbing and sanitation, of the food supply, and the countless thousands of useful things that we now deem necessary to life. Without skepticism and doubt, none of these things could have been given to the world. The fear of God is not the beginning of wisdom. The fear of God is the death of wisdom. Skepticism and doubt lead to study and investigation, and investigation is the beginning of wisdom. The modern world is the child of doubt and inquiry, as the ancient world was the child of fear and faith.