

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

May 1999

Contents

- [April Speaker: Peter Keat](#)
- [Election in May](#)
- [Quoted](#)
- [Internet site of the month](#)
- [A Church for Nonbelievers?](#)
- [Pagan Gods Remain](#)
- [American Atheists Demonstrating in SF](#)
- [Freethinkers' Forum](#)
- [Highway cleanup](#)
- [Calendar of Events](#)

April Speaker: Peter Keat

The April speaker was Peter Keat, District 5 Director of the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, on the topic of "Cooperatives and Other Democratically Controlled Enterprises: Why They Matter". Peter is a founder of the natural food coop in Sacramento and is a member of the Sacramento Coop Board. His thought-provoking talk drew a steady stream of questions and comments.

Peter introduced himself as being interested in democratically governed institutions. He related this interest to the concentrations of wealth and power, and the disparities in the salaries of corporate upper management compared to workers.

Peter introduced several comparisons between democratically governed and investor-governed businesses: (a) Sacramento Coop vs. a family-owned grocery store (hypothetically called "Baileys"); (b) SMUD vs. a hypothetical investor-owned gas utility; (c) the Group Health Coop of Puget Sound (managed collectively by some 500,000 Seattle consumer-owners) vs. a typical hypothetical hybrid Health maintenance organization (affectionately named "Fuhrer's").

Peter gave us two definitions: democratically-owned businesses are run by a one vote per one owner basis, whereas investor-owned business are run by a one vote per one investment dollar basis. Investor-owned businesses give a decision power in proportion to one's level of investment. In democratically owned businesses, the profit is proportional to one's level of activity, but the decision making power is fixed at one unit. The value of the share remains the same, and it is returned when the holder leaves. Registered voters in Sacramento, for example, are owners of SMUD on a one vote each basis.

In general, owners of cooperative businesses have four main responsibilities:

(1) to select a general manager, who makes the day to day business decisions with the direction and oversight of the board of directors.

(2) to set policies and set a budget. Peter illustrated this task by relating some SMUD experiences. For example, voters in SMUD chose 10 years ago to close the Rancho Seco nuclear plant, and build several cogeneration plants instead. Another example was to put a strong emphasis on conservation methods and products. A third SMUD policy was to promote solar and wind renewable sources of power. A fourth policy was to promote local economic development. Since investors keep profits of a business, this is an example of how in publicly owned businesses the profits can stay in the community. Finally, a fifth policy is a long-term SMUD plan to promote Sacramento as the "clean-air capital of the world", waiting mainly for successful electric vehicle to arrive in the community. These policies were to benefit the entire community, in contrast to the common case in which only a small number of owners profit from business.

(3) to monitor the performance of the business and reflect the wishes of the general ownership.

(4) to plan for the future.

Peter emphasized that the democratically owned business is not a 'collective' organization, which is terribly difficult to put into action. He also asserted that most non-profit organizations are less democratic than customer-owned ones.

How is the cooperative movement doing? With a 150-year history in the U.S., some successes stand out, like Blue Diamond foods, REI, credit unions, and some 20 food coops, mainly in the West. The large investor-owned grocery chains dominate the market, partly because the food coops usually specialize in natural foods. (The Davis coop is an exception.) The Ace Hardware chain uses something similar to a coop model to get the economies of large purchases.

How are profits distributed at the end of the year? This depends on the coop; sometimes patrons get discounts, or social events are sponsored. SMUD distributes to its community programs. The distribution is usually decided democratically.

Isn't the democratically owned business a form of socialism? Yes, in a sense. And it avoids some of the worst features of capitalism.

Finally, Peter noted the unfortunate fact that the democratically owned coop model is not widely publicized in America, because the powers that be resist such publicity.

Steve Knapp

Election in May

The election of the AOF board of directors for the next year will be held at the May meeting.
Candidates are:

President: Dave Flanders
Vice President: Paul Storey
Secretary: Kay Dickey
Treasurer: Ken Nahigian
Directors at Large: Don Knutson
Peggy Lucas
Hank Kocol
Cleo Kocol

Quoted

To know a person's religion we need not listen to his profession of faith but must find his brand of intolerance.

Eric Hoffer

If merely "feeling good" could decide, drunkenness would be the supremely valid human experience.

William James

That fear first created the gods is perhaps as true as anything so brief could be on so great a subject.

George Santayana

Internet site of the month

If you have some interest in the history of freethought, this has a collection of documents dated prior to 1970.

<http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/>

A Church for Nonbelievers?

A Church for Non-believers? It seemed a contradiction in terms, until I listened to Mike Sullivan explain at the recent Atheist Alliance, Inc. conference in Austin, Texas. Mike, Dr. Tim Gorski and their wives launched The North Texas Church of Freethought in February, 1995, and it's been a going concern ever since. The four founders contributed \$4,000 (at \$1000 each) and then added another \$1000 each in July of the same year to get their project going well. Since then, the "church" has been self-sustaining.

The first Sunday forty people attended the services. Since then upwards of 100 attend for the scripted presentation which has a theme and never takes more than an hour. Professional music is always part of the service. There are no dues, no passing of a collection plate, but donations have been substantial from the beginning. The founders believe this is because they appeal to reason. The Church has \$5000 in a building fund.

Another reason they believe their Church of Freethought is successful is that they include the word church. It is what people are used to. It is non-threatening, part of the culture. Those officiating also present a professional appearance, wearing suits and ties, although the attendees dress however they please. After the service everyone in attendance who is interested joins Sullivan, Gorski and their families for lunch at a local restaurant. This includes children for whom the Church of Freethought provides childcare during services. Members represent all age groups and both sexes.

The founders advise anyone wishing to set up a similar organization to have four or five dedicated persons. Get together and discuss logistics before starting. The Sullivans and Gorskis tossed ideas around from 1992 but began serious discussions in 1994. They say leaders should be prepared to spend 30 to 40 hours of work each month for the organization. That's roughly one day each week per person. They also say groups should adhere to a regular schedule and leaders should have regular communication with members.

In addition to services, the NTCOF has various social events from garage sales to parties to sightseeing and a movie night. They also have an active singles group. Tim Gorski just officiated at and solemnized a wedding. This was a first.

Calling themselves a church has benefits. The NTCOF gets automobile donations from members and friends, and discounts from places like Kroger (grocery store) and Amazon.com.

Some atheists object to the use of the word church as well as the word "freethought". John Rush of Austin, Texas, has printed a pamphlet called Real Atheists Don't Attend Church. In it he contends that a Church of Freethought is just as likely to appeal to religionists as atheists. Freethought, he says, doesn't automatically register with most people, including many atheists.

It would seem to me, however, that anyone who stumbled into the NTCOF would know by the tenor of the talks that this wasn't a "god-centered" group. According to Sullivan, sermons reflect the atheist view. Humor is used when appropriate. He said the leaders look forward to the day when they can pass the torch to the next generation. He seems positive that will take place. He pointed out that the church has a phone message service, a web site and leaders on e-mail. Publicity has been good. They had an appearance on CNN and heard favorable comments about

their organization on public radio. They lead a membership that likes what they're doing, and all of them like calling themselves Atheists with a capital A.

I both admire and wonder about the feasibility of similar setups working other places. Many non-theists bristle at the thought of anything called a church. I, myself, have trouble with leaders who are not elected democratically. Others reading these words may come up with other reasons to follow or not follow this innovative atheist group. Send your comments, pro and con, to News and Views.

Cleo Kocol

Pagan Gods Remain

Where did the names of the seven days of the week come from? They can be traced back to Mesopotamia, which had the astrological notion that the seven celestial bodies (sun, moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn) revolved around a stationary Earth and influenced what happened on it. The system was adapted by Hellenistic Egypt. In 321 CE, the Emperor Constantine superimposed this astrological system onto the Roman calendar. The sequence of days of the week was: "Sun's Day", "Moon's Day", "Mars' Day", "Mercury's Day", "Jove's (or Jupiter's) Day", "Venus' Day", and "Saturn's Day."

This new Roman system was adopted with modifications in Western Europe; in the Germanic languages (which include Old English) the names of four Roman gods were converted to the corresponding Germanic gods. The days became: Sunnandag, Sunday; Monandag, Monday; Tiwesdag, Tuesday (the god Tiu, like Mars, was a god of war); Wodnesdag, Wednesday (the god Woden, like Mercury, was quick); Thunresdag, Thursday (the god Thunor in Old English or Thor in Old Norse, like Jupiter, was lord of the sky); Frigedag, Friday (the goddess Frigg, like Venus, was the goddess of love); and Saeternesdag, Saturday.

So the old pagan gods are still living with us, and we refer to them, by name, nearly every day. We just don't realize we are making that reference.

Source: The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, 1992.

(submitted by Michael Cornwell)

American Atheists Demonstrating in SF

American Atheists is planning a "Tear Down the Cross" demonstration at the Mt. Davidson cross in San Francisco (Lansdale and Dalewood) on Saturday, May 22, at noon. This will provide publicity for the American Atheists' suit against the sale of the cross and surrounding land. The

trial begins June 1. Contact Dave Kong (415-771-9872 or dksf@atheists.org) for more information.

Freethinkers' Forum

The next forum will be held on Saturday, May 15, 6:30 p.m., at Jody Craig's home. The topic for discussion will be atheism and religion in the work place. Directions will be available at the May 9 meeting or call Jody at (916) 452-2770.

Highway cleanup

Our next cleanup is scheduled for Sunday, May 16 at 9 a.m. The meeting location is the park-and-ride lot on Elkhorn Boulevard, just west of Highway 99. With ten hardy members prepared to get good exercise, we can clear our 2-mile stretch of trash in about two hours. So, consider joining us for the community and the noble cause.