

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

August 1999

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August 8 Meeting

AOF Vice President Paul Storey recently attended and videotaped the speakers at the Council for Secular Humanism 1999 International Conference entitled: "Why does Religion Persist?" Paul will be showing short video segments of the following:

- Paul Kurtz speaking on the takeover of the media companies by multinational conglomerates which tend to suppress dissenting points of view [the humanist, atheist, rationalist perspective] from being shown on the subsidiary television networks.
- Susan Sackett, longtime personal assistant to Star Trek creator and atheist Gene Roddenberry, displaying cuts from many episodes of the series showing ridicules of religion.
- Stewart Guthrie, Professor of Anthropology, presenting his new book *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*.
- Derek Araujo, President of Campus Freethought Alliance, talking about the startup of humanist groups in colleges around the country.
- David Noelle, postdoctoral fellow in neural cognition, talking about the brain, the mind and myth of the soul.
- Excerpts of interviews with other authors, activists, students and fascinating characters.

Each of these tapes will be eventually shown in full length on cable TV. Glimpses of twenty-five hours of presentations will be given in ninety minutes, the best of the best, a real smorgasbord of ideas.

July Program

Dr. Mike Syvanen, Professor of Genetics at UC Davis, spoke on the Yugoslavian situation. Mike became interested in the Balkans because his father fought along side the Yugoslavian forces during WW2.

The purpose of his talk was to summarize the history of the Balkans and to critically examine the US involvement in Kosovo. He noted at the start that, unlike the reaction to the defeat of Iraq, the US/NATO victory in Serbia has largely been ignored by the US public. People just didn't understand what the war was about.

Mike has been involved in the politics of opposing the war for the last 3 months. This political activity is unusual for him and it results from his perception that the bombing was incredibly stupid. He said that the picture being presented in the US is that of a humanitarian war.

Dr. Syvanen started with a brief history of the Balkans region starting in 1900. Turks of the Ottoman Empire were driven out by combined forces of Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria. Subsequently, Serb and Greek armies drove the Bulgars north to what became Bulgaria.

These were brutal conflicts. In 1908, the Austria-Hungarian Empire annexed Bosnia; this was the background for the 1914 Serbian terrorist assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, the act that started WW1. Mike used a geopolitical map and a cultural map to illustrate different ethnic distributions and regions for his talk.

Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro were combined at the end of WW1 to become Yugoslavia. In 1940 Germany occupied Yugoslavia, and gave Croatia independence under a puppet government.

In 1944, Tito led Yugoslavia in fighting Germany to a standoff, tying up 300,000 German troops. He led the government after WW2 until his death in 1980. Mike noted that during WW2, the Serbs maintained an underground railroad for Jews; Israel did not support NATO in the Kosovo bombing.

About 15% of Serbs were killed in WW2. Many immigrants that escaped the ravages of the war remained unified in exile and have affected things in modern times.

The ethnic composition of Kosovo evolved after WW2. Starting at about 50-50 Albanian-Serbian, it became strongly Albanian in the post war years. There were two main reasons for this: (1) the birth rate of Albanians is the highest in Europe, (2) the postwar government of Albania drove 100,000 refugees into Kosovo. The population shift was strong enough to make Albanian the official language in Kosovo.

In 1989-90, outside influences entered the politics. When the 1989 elections were held, the extreme nationalists Tudjman and Milosovich were elected locally in Croatia and Serbia

respectively. Tudjman, an unknown, got outside support from Croatian expatriates, particularly in the US and in Canada. Serbs living in Croatia became concerned, because fascists left over from WW2 were given power. Tudjman controlled the media and blasted the Serbs with propaganda. Milosovich was doing the same in Serbia. At the time, President Bush and Secretary of State Baker had what seems now to have been the correct policy. They pressed European leaders not to recognize the break away regions, but the German government recognized Croatia and Serbia as independent states. At the time, the Yugoslavian military was multiethnic, but it lost control with the emergence of political forces for independent states. Since then, there have been atrocities more or less equally on all sides, although this has not been reported in our media with the balance it deserves. Many of the present militia members came from prior criminal gangs.

The Dayton accords laid the seeds for later violence in Kosovo. By 1995 Albanian terrorists were killing Kosovan police. The Kosovan response eventually brought in US bombing in Kosovo.

Steve Knapp

August Meeting Format

At the June meeting, the officers and members of the board decided that in August we would try a new format. As all of you are aware, AOF has been attempting to give more time for socializing at restaurants after the formal meeting.

Lately we have been meeting at the Co-op. Although the food is fantastic, and the company is always great, such meetings are also limiting. Not everyone can attend, and we can visit only with those seated nearby. We decided for August we will extend the regular meeting another half-hour. Please bring finger food and cold drinks to share (nothing that needs refrigeration.) We will nibble and visit beginning at approximately 1:30.

American Atheists responds to news report

AANEWS for July 17, 1999 THE WORLD CHURCH OF THE CREATOR: IS IT AN "ATHEIST GROUP"? Discussion continues in Atheist circles about whether or not the World Church of the Creator is, as some -- including the Washington Post -- say, is an "atheist group." The WCC has been peripherally linked to a series of hate crimes, including a shooting spree by a former church member who over the July 4th weekend went on a racially motivated killing spree in Indiana and Illinois. The reported gunman, Benjamin Nathaniel Smith, committed suicide following a police chase. The WCC denies any responsibility or role in these tragedies, of course, but some insist that the literature and teachings of the church motivated those who carried out these horrific acts. The World Church of the Creator is headed by the self-proclaimed "Pontifex Maximus," Matthew Hale. Media coverage of the WCC -- fueled mostly by Smith's

rampage -- focused mainly on the group's racist ideology which teaches that Jews, Hispanics, Blacks and others ... are inferior to the White race. Last Monday, July 12, however, Los Angeles Times staff writer Rena Sanchez described the World Church of the Creator as an "atheist group," an observation based on the church's somewhat cryptic writings about religion, and the claim that it is an "anti-Christian" movement. American Atheists promptly issued a press release noting that Hale's church (the term "church" meaning "house of the Lord" and "a place of worship") was not involved in promoting atheist and related issues, such as the separation of church and state, and was "doing the bidding" of America's fundamentalist right-wing Christians. AANEWS excavated the background of the World Church of the Creator and its founder, Ben Klassen, who was heavily influenced by the Christian Identity theology. It is our position that aside from a Church being no place for atheists, the World Church of the Creator seems to espouse a vague form of deism, rants against anything vaguely connected with the Jewish or Christian beliefs -- not because they are necessarily wrong but because they happen to be Jewish or Christian -- and, not being involved in atheist activism, is not an "atheist group." It should be noted, too, that while we disagree with the odious opinions of Mr. Hale, "hateful" speech is not and should not be an excuse to invoke government censorship. Indeed, those who would ban, censor and attempt other ruses to shut down the World Church of the Creator (civil liability suits are one example of this danger) or censor its publications or site on the internet, may well expand their net in an ever-widening circle. As a First Amendment voluptuary (a term borrowed from writer Jeff Smith), your editor enthusiastically embraces the notion that "the best answer to bad speech is more -- not less -- speech."

Internet site of the month

The Internet site this month is:

www.edge.org

The header for this web page reads:

To arrive at the edge of the world's knowledge, seek out the most complex and sophisticated minds, put them in a room together, and have them ask each other the questions they are asking themselves.

One of several interesting items on the page is a "debate" between Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker on the question "Has science killed the soul?" Excerpts from this item follow:

From Richard Dawkins:

Carl Sagan wrote, shortly before he died, "How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, 'This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant'? Instead they say, 'No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.' A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence

of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths."

Well it's common enough for people to agree that religions have got the facts all wrong, but "Nevertheless," they go on to say, "you have to admit that religions do provide something that people need. We crave a deeper meaning to life, a deeper, more imaginative understanding of the mystery of existence." Well, in the passage I've just quoted, Sagan seems to be criticizing religions not just for getting it wrong, which many people would accept, but for their deficiencies precisely in the sphere in which they are supposed to retain some residual virtue. Religions are not imaginative, not poetic, not soulful. On the contrary, they are parochial, small-minded, niggardly with the human imagination, precisely where science is generous.

From Steven Pinker:

We look with wry amusement at the debates in cosmology of three or four hundred years ago, in which great moral significance was attached to the debate between the geocentric and heliocentric theories. It was considered not to be just an empirical question of science, but a problem of great moral weight whether the earth went around the sun or the sun went around the earth. Now we look back and see that this was all rather silly. Either one theory is true or the other one is true, and people had to find out which is which. Any notion that meaning, purpose, ethics, morals and so on hinge on that contingent fact of cosmology came from unsound reasoning. I suspect that the idea that meaning, purpose, and morals hinge on a soul..., a ghost in the machine, will have the same fate. The ghost in the machine has been exorcised, and meaning and values are none the worse for it.

Highway cleanup

Contrary to a report, our Adopt-A-Highway stretch of 99 between Elkhorn Blvd. and Elverta Rd. was quite dirty. Unfortunately, only five AOF members turned out to enjoy a cool and bright Saturday morning and so only a cursory cleaning could be completed. Nonetheless, Mynga Futrell, Paul Geisert, Don Knutson, Hank Kocol and Pete Studelska collected more than 15 bags of refuse--summer heat is tough on truck tire tread. Consider joining us for the next cleanup tentatively scheduled for Saturday, September 18, 8a.m. Seldom do you find yourself in a relatively quiet environment, doing a worthwhile repetitive task, which allows your mind to organize and formulate your plans for the following week by which you could change the world or at least make a difference! Submitted by Don Knutson