

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

September 1999

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September 12 Meeting

The September speaker will be Susan Mogull, president of the Sacramento Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. She will speak about "Religion in the Public Schools." She will discuss the current legal interpretations that govern school districts' policies, religion in the curriculum, and recent local and national issues related to religion and public education. Susan is Capitol Region leader of the California 3Rs Project, an educational organization that offers training for educators on the constitutional approach to religion in the public schools.

August Program

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 showed 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.

- Journalist Eric Zorn discussing the media exploitation of Littleton, and changes in the story as time went on. The story was played in such a way that religion could not lose. As another example of how religion cannot lose in the media, he cited a story in which it was reported that church members' faith was bolstered by the destruction of their church.
- Stewart Guthrie, Professor of Anthropology, presenting his new book *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. He discussed the human predisposition to see patterns in randomness.
- 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. He is looking at the neural basis of religion, including feelings of the loss of self.
- Wendy Kaminer speaking on the proliferation of pop psychology, spirituality, and new age books. She noted that in the early 1990s the mass market moved away from recovery books to spirituality books. One best selling example is *The Celestine Prophecy*, a book she described as genuinely moronic. She also suggested that if there were no fear of death, there would be no religion and no pop spirituality.
- Richard Dawkins, the British evolutionist and science author, discussing memes and the possibility of the brain being preprogrammed to be infected by certain memes, including religion.

The invisible and the non-existent look very much alike.-- Delos McKown

FFRF Northern California Conference

The Northern California Mini-Convention of the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) was held in San Francisco on July 30-31, 1999. With attendance of 167, it was more than a mini-convention. Among those present were ten members of AOF: Steve, Janet, and Jason Borchers; Bea and Ken Dunn; Dave Flanders; Cleo and Hank Kocol; Eric Pengelley; and Paul Storey. The Convention began on the morning of Saturday, July 31, although a social hour and a Dan Barker Concert were held on Friday evening.

The Saturday program began with the FFRF-traditional non-prayer breakfast followed by the also traditional moment of bedlam.

Dick Hewetson, of Atheists of the San Francisco Region, and the local contact for FFRF who did the bulk of the work in organizing the Convention, spoke on "From Episcopalian Priest to Atheist Activist." He delineated his work as a priest and his conversion to atheism. He has been active in atheist circles ever since.

Ken Dunn, an AOF member, spoke of being "An Atheist in a Foxhole" during some of the most intense battles in the Pacific in World War II. He also said that, of course, there were many other atheists in foxholes, contrary to the religious propaganda that stipulates otherwise.

Dr. Eric Pengelley then spoke concerning "On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection -- 140 Years On." He gave his great speech concerning the Theory of Evolution and

made sure to include the MEANS with which Darwin says evolution occurs. Many religionists who argue against Darwinism fail to appreciate that the means is an essential part of the theory. Dr. Eugenie C. Scott, of the National Center for Science Education, spoke concerning "Just When You Thought It Was Safe to Teach Evolution." She reported on the latest issues in teaching evolution such as the anthropic argument as a new "design argument" as well as the old issues that still arise. She made a very effective use of introducing the "F Word," eventually defining it as "Fact". The anti-evolutionists seem to have a problem understanding that scientific term.

Dr. Meg Bowman's talk was entitled "An Atheist Do-Goooder." She described her activism in various forums for the past many years, from feminism and other social causes, to educational programs the world over, especially Africa.

The Activism panel followed with Nora Cusack, Don Havis, Cleo Kocol, and Hank Kocol each describing a particular definition and need for active participation, whether it be in civil disobedience, letters-to-the-editor, broad views of general activism, and social and medical causes. Some of the panel had no problem using the "A" word to others while some were more circumspect about leaving the closet. The panel was actually a great opening for audience members to discuss their own views and activities. If the goal of the Convention organizers was to obtain audience participation in creative ways to be active, the goal was met.

Annie Laurie Gaylor gave her presentation on "Women Without Superstition" which was very well received.

After the banquet, George H. Smith discussed his first book, "The Case Against God," which he wrote over twenty years ago. He is a very engaging and humorous speaker, keeping everyone's attention.

Although the San Francisco newspapers completely ignored the Conference, a reporter from the Contra Costa Times did attend, took photographs, and wrote a report which was printed in Sunday's paper.

Hank and Cleo Kocol

(Hank and Cleo Kocol each gave talks on the topic of Activism at the conference. They are reprinted here.)

Activism - by Hank Kocol

The dictionary definition of activism is "the doctrine or policy of taking positive, direct action to achieve an end, especially, a political or social end." Action, of course is defined as "the doing of something; behavior, habitual conduct."

So, before we take action or become activist, we must have a political or social end in sight. For people in this audience, we may have as many ends in mind as there are people. Some will be primarily interested in State/Church Separation. Others may be primarily interested in advancing rational, as opposed to superstitious, thought. Still others may wish most to make the term "atheist" an accepted term in this society, so steeped in religious acceptance. For many of us, as for me, there are multiple ends. I wish to advance and continue the separation doctrine brought to this country, paraphrasing James Madison, so that these shores would not be steeped with the

blood of religious conflict as had Europe for centuries before, and since. How do we act in ways to promote separation?

I am very interested in public speaking. Thus, I have been a member of three Toastmasters chapters. If you know the Toastmasters culture, you are aware that the traditional meeting contains a portion entitled an "Invocation." Most of the time, the invocation is used as an excuse for someone to pray or proselytize a particular religious doctrine. In two of the chapters, which happened to meet on federal and State property respectively, I was able to eliminate that portion of the program simply by using the separation argument effectively. In the third chapter, the same end was accomplished by appealing to the diversity of our society. These are small steps, but they can be taken. Recently, I gave a speech to my local speakers' group concerning the "Ten Commandments Support Act." This Act, overwhelmingly passed by the House of Representatives, in its infinitesimal wisdom, is its proposed solution to the school killings with which we have all become familiar in the past few years. The solution is to encourage the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools nationwide. I pointed out the fact that there are at least two versions of the Decalogue in the xtian tradition (protestant and catholic); most people are completely unaware of the existence of two versions. Which would be posted? If government decides to post one version, it is telling those of a different xtian tradition that they are not counted as important. Then what about students from other religious traditions, Judaism, Buddhist, Islam, Freethinkers? In speaking with Jewish friends, I found that Judaism does not emphasize the Ten Commandments, even though they appear in Exodus. Thus, I was able to question governmental intrusion into religion, and vice versa, without using the "A" word. I am sure that others here can come up with other separation issues which they can discuss from a Constitutional or fairness viewpoint.

In the same instance, I sent a letter to the editor of the local newspaper which did, in fact, publish the letter. I sent a revised version to "my" congressional representative who voted FOR the Act; he and I disagree so drastically, that if he were to say it was Thursday, I would be absolutely sure it really was Sunday. I do not expect to change his mind; I simply will continue to show him that there are residents of his district of a different mind from his. We can all write such letters. After all, I think that every newspaper in the country has a Letters-to-the-Editor page wherein readers can express themselves on current issues. The religionists certainly get their letters published; it is up to us to make our views known. Legislators need to become aware that there are different views out here. In advancing rational thought, I have for years spoken to groups concerning the scientific method as a way of understanding nature and our place within it. I continue this mode of teaching even in private conversations when people ask my opinion on scientific matters. I am able to distinguish between superstition, hype, and rational thought with a few well-chosen comments concerning the topic under discussion, be it Christ's picture on a potato or alien abduction. Many of Carl Sagan's writings come in very handy for this purpose.

As to developing an acceptance of atheism, I have been open about my philosophy, unfortunately, however, not as in-your-face as many religionists are; I am a bit more sensitive. When people ask about my religion, I usually simply say that I have none or that I consider the subject private, depending upon the circumstances. I see religion as, of necessity, entailing faith (the ability to believe something in spite of all evidence against it), and ritual. As a freethinker, I do not accept faith as a reason for any belief. If the conversation extends beyond religion to a

philosophy of life (You MUST believe in SOMETHING), I describe myself as a humanist. Such definition can sometimes lead to a very interesting conversation concerning values, ethics, afterlife, etc. Some religionists, unable to imagine someone with NO faith or worship, ask sincerely whether I am a devil-worshipper; such a question can obviously bring in further ideas concerning faith and worship. With the appropriate audience, the conversation can then really take off.

Other activist activities with which I have been associated was a year-long picket of the under-construction Mormon temple in Bellevue, WA, during the days of the fight for the ERA. I have walked in marches concerned with "Fight the Right" in San Francisco, with ERA marches, and in other parades concerned with various social issues. Since the founding of Atheists and Other Freethinkers in Sacramento about seven years ago, our identifying banner has been proudly carried on marches over the local area.

The question then arises, "What can each of us do?" especially those of us who must live in isolated communities where we feel like the only atheist around. How about those who are too shy or inhibited to march in public? I suggest starting small, perhaps writing letters to the editor and to your Congressional and State representatives. DO NOT get discouraged if the letters do not bear immediate fruit, nor all get published immediately. Newspapers have certain restrictions on published letters, such as length and frequency (some papers will not publish more than one letter per writer per month). Keep your letter to one subject. Do not try to solve all the world's problems in one letter, a sure way to have the letter disregarded.

The same criteria apply to letters to legislators -- short, to-the-point, single subject. Do NOT include threats to vote for the opponent, a sure way to be disregarded. Remember also to praise a legislator who does the right thing. I recently sent a letter to Barbara Boxer praising her stances with which I agree and thanking her for her support for my position.

ALL legislators have e-mail, so the letter you send does not even need postage. How easy can it get? All you need do is to compose and click on "SEND."

Activism - by Cleo Kocol

When Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and editor of Freethought Today, asked me to participate in the FFRF mini-conference in San Francisco, July 30 and 31, I hesitated, not because I didn't want to take part, but because she called me an activist. I didn't consider myself one. I remembered my overwhelming response to freethought and feminist activism in the past, and contrasting my more low-key involvement now, I had trouble calling myself an activist. But, indeed I am.

What does it take to be an activist? Involvement. Dedication. Commitment. But at your own pace. This can mean anything from taking tickets at an event, making the coffee, to being the main speaker. It can mean speaking up at a secular meeting where everyone else assumes everyone is Christian. Not letting religious baggage corrupt secular affairs, you might ask "what

about the non-believer, or the Buddhist, or the Jew?" This can mean something as simple as calling your neighborhood party a holiday party, not a Christmas party. Sometimes this will lead to further explanations. This can mean writing a letter to the editor of your local paper or a magazine. Being concise, literate, and not preachy is all that's necessary in addition to sticking to one subject.

Being an activist can also mean coming "out of the closet" in a limited or full scale way. You can say you're a-religious, or non-religious or use the terms atheist, agnostic, freethinker, humanist or skeptic. It can mean educating people who are less informed, speaking out at feminist meetings where the majority are "new age" or into goddess belief. This can be as simple as letting others know about your own involvement with freethought groups. If they already know and respect you, this works really well.

I remember vividly the first time I picketed a Catholic Church. This was in New Jersey in the 1970's and this particular church was abrogating the line between church and state, being very outspoken regarding abortion. A group of us from the National Organization for Women picketed outside the church. This was in the days when we weren't that sophisticated, so we all had homemade signs. Most of the signs read something like, "Keep Your Hands off My Body." But I carried one that said "Shut Up or Pay Taxes." The church was large and halfway through our demonstration a car emerged from the rear of the church with a priest and three nuns. It was clear that they hadn't realized we were there. When they spied us, their mouths flew open, they shook their heads in indignation and wagged their fingers at us. It was as if they were saying, "you naughty girls." Most people, whether Catholic or not, reacted in similar fashion. Priests and nuns were sacrosanct. People were indignant that we had the audacity to say that the church was doing something wrong. Well, I persisted. You can, too. After Annie Laurie Gaylor unmasked their pedophilic activities and published a book about their sexual perversions, priests can no longer hide behind their clerical collars.

Letters to legislators as well as to newspapers and magazines, appearances on television, radio, and before members of clubs can be effective. I found that all subjects for talks left some avenue for injecting a thought about freedom of and from religion within its body. At meetings where talk about starting with a prayer injects its ugly head, ask whose prayer and name several offshoot religious groups. The point is that no one has to be on the front lines of action, but he or she can still be an effective activist. Find your way. And if it involves going the whole enchilada, don't forget we picket Promise Keepers, we march for freedom of non-belief, we debate fundamentalists, and we become spokespersons for our group. But do so only if you're informed and comfortable doing such.

If you're among the rest of us, write for your newsletter, create a website, stuff envelopes, keep records, make telephone calls, E-mail, but in some fashion, some way, get involved. You'll sleep better when you do.

Demonstration Against the Promise Keepers Agenda

Saturday, September 11, 7:00-11:00 a.m., Stagg Memorial Stadium, University of the Pacific, Stockton.

At every 1998 Promise Keepers event in California, American Atheists members were also there to educate the public about the PK's bizarre post-millennial theories and political aspirations. It's fun, and it's important.

It's time to do it again. On Saturday, September 11, join us in Stockton to peacefully demonstrate against the theo-political aspirations of the Promise Keepers.

Driving Directions: Exit Interstate 5 at March Lane; go east about one mile to Pacific Avenue, then South on Pacific Avenue to the University of the Pacific campus entrance at Pacific Avenue just north of Stadium Drive. Stagg Memorial Stadium is located on the western edge of the campus along Pershing Avenue. American Atheists will provide signs and flyers. We will have lunch together at a nearby restaurant, after the demonstration. For more information, call (415) 771-9872 or contact dksf@atheists.org.

Internet site of the month

The Internet site this month is:

<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/faq-transitional.html>

As a result of the Kansas teaching of evolution fiasco hitting the newspapers, there are several creationists submitting letters saying that there are no transitional fossils. Obviously, their entire knowledge of evolution comes from creationist publications. This site has lists, compiled by Kathleen Hunt, of many examples of transitional forms.

Freethought Equinox Potluck Picnic

Cleo and Hank Kocol will host a Freethought Equinox Potluck Picnic on their patio on Saturday, September 25, 1999, 4:00 to 8:00 pm. Bring your favorite picnic foods to share. Members of AOF, HAGSA, SORT are all invited to share food and thoughts. Questions and Directions? Call 771-5231 or e-mail at hkocol@hotmail.com.

Highway cleanup

Saturday, September 18 is indeed the next adopt-a-highway cleanup day for AOFers and it is part of CalTrans' California Coastal Cleanup Day sponsored by Brita. We will hit the road bright &

early at 8a.m. at the Elverta Boulevard Park & Ride west of Highway 99. All reports indicate that our stretch already needs a hands-on cleaning.

Submitted by Don Knutson

PLANS Suit Against Public Funding of Waldorf Schools

Dan Dugan was the speaker on Waldorf schools at an AOF meeting about 3 years ago. He is the one of the people behind PLANS, "People for Legal and Non-sectarian Schools", that is litigating against public funding for Waldorf Schools and Rudolf Steiner's semi-religious philosophy, anthroposophy.

Supporting advisors for PLANS include Joseph E. Morrow (aka "Ace the Magnificent", Dept. of Psychology, CSUS), skeptic/magician James Randi, and Dr. Eugenie Scott (of the NCSE).

Dan has written to AOF: "We've had no contact in a long time. PLANS' federal lawsuit against the Sacramento and Twin Ridges school districts for violation of the first amendment is proceeding well. We are \$2500 short on cash we promised our lawyer for out-of-pocket expenses, however, and I'm wondering if the Atheists and Other Freethinkers might be able to help. Membership in PLANS, Inc., is \$15/yr regular, \$100/yr patron, and \$1000/life angel. Would it be possible for you to mention our needs in your newsletter?"

Thanks in advance, Dan Dugan

Anyone interested in helping PLANS can write to: **PLANS**

**c/o Dan Dugan, Secretary
290 Napoleon St. Studio E
San Francisco, CA 94124-1017**

Further information is on the Web at: <http://www.dandugan.com/waldorf/index.html#join>