

Atheists and Other Freethinkers Newsletter

October 1999

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October 10 Meeting

October's speaker, Wayne Anderson, PhD, teaches physics and astronomy at Sacramento City College. He is a long-time Skeptic and has authored articles on science and superstition for the Skeptical Inquirer, New York Times, and Free Inquiry magazine.

Wayne describes his inevitable evolution to atheism being accelerated when, as a kid growing up in Chicago, he heard Billy Graham's affirmative answer to the question: "If only Christians qualify for HEAVEN --does that mean Buddhists and other non-Christians must burn in HELL?" That "yes" answer "did not make sense", and this doubt grew to a more sensible, scientific understanding of the natural universe. Wayne's topic is "Science vs. Religion", or "Are we still in Kansas, Toto?"

September Program

The September speaker was Susan Mogull, president of the Sacramento Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, on "Religion in the Public Schools." 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.

Susan started by noting that she is a member of the Jewish community. She said that she liked addressing atheist groups because "atheists are thinking people, and because they will never accuse us of killing their lord." She also noted that many Jews are atheists.

Americans United was founded 52 years ago, and has 60,000 members nationwide. The Sacramento chapter was started 2 years ago, and is one of 45 chapters nationwide. The formation of local chapters is just in its beginning stages.

The first 16 words of the first amendment establish the separation of church and state. With respect to religion in public schools, Susan identified two aspects of the issue: curriculum, and legal issues.

By the 1950's, less than a third of public schools had religious reading, and nearly all of these had a Protestant focus. In the 1960's, this had mostly stopped, due to Supreme Court rulings. Studying about religion was permissible, providing it was done in an academic and neutral way, but by the 1980's, most textbooks had dropped mention of religion.

In the 1990's, religion is a part of the history curriculum, and is also found in art courses. It again has a Protestant focus. The curriculum runs from the fourth to eleventh grade in California.

The California 3Rs project trains teachers about religion and teaching religion. It is not required training, and teachers have to pay for the training, which keeps the training less widespread than it might be.

In legal issues regarding religion and schools, some issues are settled and others are not. For example, students can proselytize, though they cannot harass other students. Educators are restricted more than students; for this practice, they ARE the government.

What students can or cannot say at graduation is not settled. Locally, a federal judge has blocked students from giving overt "altar call" graduation speeches. Whether students can establish a graduation prayer, by vote or any other method, is uncertain with conflicting rulings on the topic.

Students can have religious clubs on campus if there are other non-academic clubs (e.g., a chess club). The club must have a faculty member to monitor it; this faculty member cannot participate or sponsor the club. Outsiders cannot come in except as guest speakers.

Reaction to sale of Atheist website name

News that the web site name "Atheist.com" was up for sale (for \$18,000) brought this response from AOF Vice President Paul Storey.

Selling this domain name to a religious organization would be a crime against humanity for all time. It is bad enough the religionists dominate the airwaves and every other street corner with

their prominent churches, crowding out the voice of reason to young minds looking for answers about our place in this world.

The way to rid the world of supernatural beliefs is to show the superiority of reason, science, humanity, respect for life, reverence for nature and understanding of our place in evolution, caring for our biological heritage and for the future of our children's children and our biosphere. This website is a prime place to do this.

The future of our world depends on our understanding of mankind's place as part of nature, not above it, superior to all other living things by virtue of our immortal soul. Belief in heaven steals from our natural world and mother nature the reference, awe, appreciation, and the motivation and action to address problems here and now that comes from these feelings.

As Einstein said, and I paraphrase his thoughts: Those who have the opportunity and abilities to reach new levels of understanding and insights have the duty and obligation to share these understandings with others.

It is we, the atheists, who have risen above millennia of superstition and fantasy, who have the moral obligation to share our understandings and insights with those who are not as scientifically literate, not as familiar with history, not as psychologically able to stand on their own without the need for immortality. It is we who are able to judge right and wrong by ourselves, without the carrot and stick of heaven and hell, who are independent enough to break away from indoctrination of our childhood and youth. It is we, the atheists, who have reached a state of mind mature and rational enough to assess with our own intelligence what makes common sense, as opposed to blind acceptance and unquestioned belief from others. It is we who have made the determination to accept responsibility for our own decisions and actions without a need for a higher power, that the higher power is the better part of ourselves. It is we who realize that happiness and love do not come from above, but come from our own minds, hearts, experiences, passions, laughter, friends and family. It is we who have concluded life here and now is far more joyous and rewarding than the hope of anything after we are dead. And above all else, it is we, the atheists, who must be courageous enough to tell the truth.