

AOF News & Views

Sacramento, California

January 2005

Sunday, January 9

Against the Immortality of the Soul

Special Points of Interest

- Stay Free for Darwin Day Celebration! (page 1)
- KVIE Pledge Volunteers (page 4)
- The "Stealing Christmas" Accusation: A Response (page 6)

The January AOF meeting features Dr. Matt McCormick, member of the Department of Philosophy at California State University Sacramento (CSUS). Dr. McCormick will present an argument undermining the idea of life after death, a notion firmly entrenched in the minds of most Americans.

How entrenched? According to a October 25, 2003 report by Ms. K. Connie Kang of the *Los Angeles Times*, the Barna Research Group found "76 percent of Americans believe in heaven and 71 percent in hell—same as a decade ago. Among those who believe in heaven, nearly half (46 percent) described it as a "state of eternal

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LAST MINUTE ADDITION TO NEWSLETTER

As tsunami tragedy unfolds, how will AOF respond ?

PLEASE SEE INSERT !

Darwin Day 2005 Coming Soon! Speaker is MacArthur Grant Recipient

Mark your calendars right now for the upcoming Darwin Day Birthday Gala at La Sierra Community Center in Carmichael. This year the Darwin event takes place on the actual birth date of Charles Darwin (Feb. 12th, (2-4:30 PM)

A wonderful program is in store for those who attend (and refreshments, too!) Our speaker will be Dr. Leah Krubitzer, a professor at the University of California-Davis, who is a 1998 recipient of the renowned MacArthur grants (known as the "genius grants").

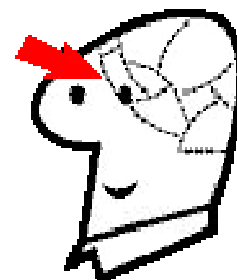
Dr. Krubitzer will be speaking on the topic, "**How Evolution Built a Brain,**" a topic that should be of considerable interest to those interested in humanity and education.

In mid-January, AOF members will be receiving a **special mailing** about the gala. Watch for it!

When you get the flyer in your mailbox, be sure to sign up quickly and get your ticket(s) at the advance purchase bargain of \$8. The tickets at the door will be \$10. Invite all your friends to this informative and fun event!

And just how did evolution build our brains?

It's one of the hottest topics in science today, and on Feb. 12 you can hear it expertly explained



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The AOF Line

By Kevin Schultz

On behalf of the AOF board of directors, I would like to wish everyone a happy new year. The new year traditionally affords a time for reflection and resolutions. I would like to encourage everyone to attend the AOF January 9 general meeting as one resolution. The refutation of the human "soul" should prove interesting.

Another good way to start off 2005 -- looking at the American Humanist Association (AHA) Grass Roots manual's chapter on "Issue Advocacy."

AOF's main purpose is to serve as a community resource for education on the topics of atheism and atheistic perspectives on separation of church and state. The core issue which binds members of AOF is the belief that both worldview-advocates and government work best when separate.

The AHA recommends a few strategic steps to foster issue advocacy within local grassroots organizations. First, learn what's going on. Second, form coalitions with like-minded groups. Third, act locally. Fourth, form Action Alerts to keep activists notified. Finally, the AHA gives hints on how to get members involved, turn them into activists, delegating and managing tasks, and creating an inclusive atmosphere.

First, issue advocacy depends on learning what's going on.

Many national organizations track national issues, but many local issues get missed. National organizations simply don't have the resources to track every local issue. So the AHA recommends beginning by establishing small committees to cover specific issue areas and report back to the group. Activities can be issue specific or

source specific. E.g., tracking movements in the state legislature or tracking the local religious right activities.

Second, forming coalitions with like-minded organizations helps strengthen the probability that the desired goal will be achieved. The AHA lists a number of coalitions they support, including the Council of Ethics-Based Organizations (CEBO) and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR).

Third, once coalitions have been formed, and group members are tracking what's happening locally, it's a good time for action. The following actions have a positive effect: letter-writing, press conferences, public educational forums, voter registration drives, visits to key representatives, public protests (E.g., candlelight vigils, marches), or any other creative act.

Fourth, action alerts can mobilize members and activists. They inform people about issues they care about so they can raise their voices to be heard.

Finally, the AHA lists a number of suggestions for getting members involved, turning members into activists, delegation and

management of tasks, and creation of an inclusive atmosphere. Every group has a primary core of activists, which form approximately 5-10% of the membership,

plus a secondary core of activists, approximately 10-20% of members, who attend meetings and will volunteer when asked. Delegation and management of tasks is easier when lists are created to note everything which needs to be done. Then tasks can be assigned based on member interest. Creating an inclusive atmosphere can be

The purpose of the organization, AOF, is to promote the civic understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community.

AOF Board

President: Kevin Schultz
Vice President: Kay Dickey
Secretary: Dave Flanders
Treasurer: Ken Nahigian

Directors at large:

Tina Burgess
 Beverly Church
 Mynga Futrell
 Don Knutson
 Betty Simonsma

AOF Committees

Newsletter: Mynga Futrell, Editor
 Kay Dickey, Asst. Ed. (Submissions),
 Jerry Sloan (Mailing)

Programs / Outreach:

Kay Dickey, Mynga Futrell,
 Kevin Schultz, Don Knutson, Jerry Sloan, (more members welcome!)

Archive: Jody Craig, Kay Dickey,
 Mynga Futrell, Ken Nahigian,
 Betty Simonsma

Darwin Day, Feb. 12, 2005:

Bronda Silva, Mynga Futrell,
 Ken Nahigian, Ed McConnell, Kay Dickey
 Dave Henderson

Freethought Day [~Oct. 9, 2005]:

Beverly Church, Mynga Futrell,
 Ken Nahigian, Kay Dickey, Jerry Sloan,
 Tom Ikelman

AOF's Voluntariat

Affiliation Liaisons:

Mynga Futrell, Kay Dickey (AAI),
 Hank Kocol (CSH),
 Betty Simonsma (AA),
 Beverly Church (AHA/HAGSA)

Community Service Projects:

Don Knutson

Connections (ad hoc):

Kevin Schultz (Caring; E-mail)
 Tina Burgess (Youth)
 Betty Simonsma

Internet Website: Pat Kelley

Meetings: Dave Flanders,
 Jerry Sloan, Betty Simonsma

Membership Database:

Betty Simonsma

We welcome additional involvement from AOF members. We need volunteers to perform very small tasks at our meetings. Just phone the voice mail at 447-3589 to volunteer.

Meeting Recap

A Victory Against Intolerance

By Dave Flanders

The December AOF speaker was Rena Lowry. Rena said she grew up in a liberal family that was tolerant of different world views being discussed and questioned. People appreciated the social harmony that the secular US government provided. Rena, with two children (a son and a daughter) had moved with her husband to the Rocklin school district. She, very much pro education, enjoyed volunteering at the school her seven-year old daughter attended.

At school, Rena's daughter encountered some kids who attempted to frighten the child into believing in their Christian God. Their efforts failed, but Rena's daughter—an atheist, did not appreciate the bullying tactics she encountered.

In 2001, about a month after 9-11, Rena drove her daughter to school and saw on the school's marquee, "God Bless America."

For Rena, that was the last straw and she requested the phrase be removed or her daughter would not attend that school. She informed the principal that her daughter nor other students should be forced fed his version of faith.



Happy with a victory, at long last!

The principal—a man of faith himself refused to remove the phrase.

Rather than keeping the matter private, Rena's name was released to the news media. The majority of the corporate media sided with the message on the marquee. Violent threats arrived on her phone answering machine.

The Rocklin police department voluntarily provided 24 hour protection for Rena and her family. Rena home schooled her daughter for three months, then got her into a better school. Renas' law-

yer sued the school district. Renas' lawyer won the case. A message was sent statewide to California school districts: in the future you will *not* violate the 1st Amendment of the US Constitution nor the California State Constitution regarding separation of church and state. Also, Rena was awarded \$3000. Rena said the money will go towards her daughters college education.

Rena said her daughter has become stronger as a result of this victory. She said she doesn't regret her actions. Rena expressed gratitude for the emotional support she received from atheists and other freethinkers. Rena said she encourages freethinkers to organize and continue to promote secularism here and abroad, to make this a better world to live in.

AAI Convention

Los Angeles March 25-27

Sacramento AOFers and friends are invited to the annual convention of the Atheist Alliance International.

Penn & Teller, Dr. Bruce Flamm, and more!
Watch for flyer in February News & Views

Atheists and Other Freethinkers



AOF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization. It is a member society of the Atheist Alliance International. AOF maintains affiliations with the Council for Secular Humanism, American Atheists, and the American Humanist Association.

AOF's Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the association, Atheists and Other Freethinkers, is to promote the civic understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community. To accomplish this purpose, AOF will, through educational programs, projects, and publications, extend atheistic perspectives concerning the separation of church and state and the right to think and speak freely on these perspectives.

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Subscription \$12 per year (free to members).

Reprinting of original material in this newsletter is granted to atheist, freethought, rationalist, skeptical, and secular humanist groups as long as acknowledgment is given. Exchange of newsletters with aforementioned organizations is solicited.

General Meeting January 9

(Continued from page 1)

existence in God's presence" and almost a third (30 percent) said heaven is "an actual place of rest and reward where souls go after death." One in eight said heaven is just "symbolic" (14 percent)...."

Just five percent denied a belief in an afterlife. Another five percent didn't feel strongly enough to answer one way or the other.

As for hell—"Four out of 10 (39 percent) believe that hell is "a state of eternal separation from God's presence" and one-third (32 percent) "an actual place of

torment and suffering where people's souls go after death." One in 8 believe that hell is just a symbol of an "unknown bad outcome after death" (13 percent)."

In addition to his teaching responsibilities, Dr. McCormick has also undertaken an advisory role to a new Secular Student Alliance group at Sac State. We commend him for his encouragement of student involvement. Dr. McCormick's talk will be followed by a Q&A session and light refreshments. The public is invited.

AOF Line

(Continued from page 2)

accomplished by holding committee meetings in public places, keeping "in-crowd" conversation to a minimum, inviting and inciting discussion, and allowing new activists and members to contribute.

The AHA Grassroots manual is available, at cost (\$15 with binder, \$12 without binder), to any AOF member. If interested contact any AOF board member to request.

From all of us on the AOF Board, we wish your new year filled with happiness, health, and opportunity.

Solstice Party Time!



The audience is entertained as "Atheist Annie" (Mynga Futrell) stuns "Father Faultfinder" (Ken Nahigian) in a skit, *Dialing for God* written by Cleo Kocol and narrated by Paul Geisert. Other actors (not shown) are Jerry Sloan as "Bishop Beatemup" and Tom Nicollete as "God." Photo by Bill Potts

There was much laughter during the joint AOF-HAGSA Solstice 2004 Celebration on Sunday the 19th of December. The centerpiece was a skit, but there was much else on the planned program.

Ted Gangursky provided some "mood music" beforehand as folks were gathering. Just prior to everyone diving into the delicious treats of the holiday potluck, **Anatole Lubovich** offered his particular brand of "saying grace" and a "Noel" with a twist (his poem). There were

a number of spontaneous contributions from those in attendance. And then too, Paul Geisert sang a couple of seasonal items: "A Solstice Tribute" (with words by Dan Barker to the tune of "Old Little Town of Bethlehem") and "A Humanist International Anthem" to the tune of Auld Lange Syne,

With the help of volunteers blowing up balloons and arranging the spread, it was a marvelously fun-way for freethinkers to "survive" the December holiday time frame.

AOF Member Vince Wales to Have Book Signing

When he spoke to our group in 2003, AOF member and novelist Vincent Wales gave AOF members a preview of his then forthcoming novel. At long last, he has laid down the pen and seen the book through the publication process.

The novel, *One Nation Under God*, is now in print, and Vince will be temporarily picking up the pen again to sign copies for any who would like to purchase this extrapolation of what our own nation would be like if things keep progressing as we have some reason to fear they might!

As the book's cover states most ominously about the subject matter: "One Nation Under God—It's closer than you think."

The book signing will be **January 22nd**, from 5:00 onwards at the **Sky Bar Café** (15th Street between I and J downtown). All AOFers are welcome to come by and congratulate Vince on his accomplishment!.

AOF Works KVIE Pledge Drive New Experiences Combine Work and Fun

By Kevin Schultz

Many thanks to all AOF members who volunteered their time and energy through the late evening of Sunday, December 12 -- Allan Demo, Joy Fisher, Mynga Futrell, Paul Geisert, Mark Kurowski, Nancy Lewis, Ken Nahigian, Tom Nicolette, Kevin Schultz, Jerry Sloan, George Sterpka, Mardi Wally, Mardi's mother, and two other AOF members I did not record the names of -- thank you very much for attending!

Thanks also go to non-AOF volunteers Carla Corbett and son, Mark Craig, and Bill Potts. Mark, Carla, and Carla's son volunteered from the Sacramento Atheists and Independent Thinkers Alliance (SAITA) and Bill Potts volunteered from the Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area (HAGSA).

Volunteers chose hats as a means to present a coordinated image for our viewing audience -- to accent our heads; the place where reason



Joy Fischer's hat denotes the name chosen by the KVIE volunteers to encompass the three organizations whose members were participating in the pledge drive—the Sacramento Community of Reason.

originates. Volunteers Mark Craig, Nancy Lewis, and Bill Potts designed the coordinating stickers which tied us all together. Nancy deserves a special thanks for purchasing and printing the stickers as a donation to the event. Tom Nicolette also deserves a special thanks for donating \$50 to help support the event. As it was not used for food and drinks as originally planned, Tom has indicated the money go to AOF as a general donation. Many thanks to you Tom!

The actual effectiveness of the event as an advertisement for freethought seems uncertain. All members seemed to enjoy participating, and the opportunity to socialize with one another while not taking pledges (or yawning!) was appreciated. One volunteer put it this way: "I guess my take home message was that volunteering for KVIE is good for your group's resume, but not for increasing visibility or getting your name out there."

Due to the low pledge rate during the evening, KVIE sent us home one hour early, and diverted the remaining calls to a central call center. The low call rate, incidentally, was not due to the



Tom was happy to help

presence of atheists on public television, but rather to the unattractive programming running that evening.

If you would like to be kept abreast of future AOF events like this one, please consider joining our AOF E-Tree. Send your email address to: aofboard@rthoughtsfree.org, and indicate you would like to join the AOF E-Tree.



AOF Subscription / Membership Form

Mail to: AOF, P O Box 15182, Sacramento CA 95851-0182 (Attn: Membership)

Name(s) _____ Phone () _____

Street _____ Apt. # _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

E-mail address (print legibly!) _____

Check your preference:

Newsletter Subscriber Only (\$12) Family Membership (\$30)

Low-income Member (\$10) Patron (\$50)

Single Membership (\$20) Donation (\$ _____)

Please check here if you do NOT want your name on lists occasionally provided to organizations similar to AOF.

Please check here if you DO want to be on our AOF activist list.

Please check your preference. We can deliver your monthly newsletter via an attached pdf file to your e-mail address above. E-mail newsletter Postal mail

Christmas Wars

The Jews and Secularists Did Not Steal Christmas, but It Was Stolen!

By Michael Lerner

"The Christmas Wars" was a news release of Monday, Dec. 20, 2004. It is reprinted here by permission of Tikkun Magazine, of which Rabbi Lerner is editor. (www.tikkun.org)

Flush from their electoral victories in November, some leaders of the Christian Right have decided to make an issue of the secularization of Christmas. Objecting to the move by Macy's and some other retailers to wish their shoppers "Happy Holidays" or "Seasons Greetings" instead of the traditional Merry Christmas, they have begun to accuse secularists in general, and, on some of the right-wing talk shows, Jews in particular, of undermining Christmas.

It's easy to dismiss these Right-wingers as sore winners. They are well on their way to packing the judiciary with judges who may erode the division between church and state, make abortion more difficult or illegal, and support the pro-torture position of Bush's choice for Attorney General. Yet the 25% of Jews who voted for Bush in this past election may not have imagined that along with his vigorous support for Sharon and for

the war in Iraq, Bush's electoral victory could spur a public assault on the legitimacy of Jewish identity in the U.S.

The assault has been led by Bill O'Reilly, the most popular cable newscaster, who told millions of viewers that there was a systematic assault on Christmas by secularists. When challenged by a Jewish caller who said he felt uncomfortable being subject to frequent attempts to convert him by Christians at his college, O'Reilly responded: "All right. Well, what I'm tellin' you, is I think you're takin' it too seriously. You have a predominantly Christian nation. You have a federal holiday based on the philosopher Jesus. And you don't wanna hear about it? Come on -- if you are really offended, you gotta go to Israel then. I mean because we live in a country founded on Judeo -- and that's your guys' -- Christian, that's my guys' philosophy. But overwhelmingly, America is Christian. And the holiday is a federal holiday honoring the philosopher Jesus. So, you don't wanna hear about it? Impossible. And that is an affront to the majority. You know, the majority can be insulted, too. And

that's what this anti-Christmas thing is all about."

Meanwhile, Richard Viguerie, the master of Right-wing direct mail campaigns, interviewed by Terry Gross on NPR's Fresh Air on Dec. 13, repeated the charge that Christians were the victims of a systematic secularists assault against Christmas. On MSNBC last week William Donahue of the Catholic League insisted, "Hollywood is controlled by secular Jews who hate Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. It's not a secret, OK? They like to see the public square without nativity scenes."

Liberals and civil libertarians would be making a huge mistake to see this as merely the rantings of a few overt anti-Semites and anti-civil-liberties extremists. They articulate a legitimate concern that many Christians say privately: their children have learned that Christmas is about buying and the person with the most expensive gifts wins!

There is a beautiful spiritual message underlying Christmas that has universal appeal: the hope that gets

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Highway Cleanup Report by Don Knutson

A crisp, foggy morning greeted six hearty AOF volunteers Saturday, December 18 as they worked to clean both sides of a two-mile stretch of Highway 99 north of Elkhorn Blvd. Due to inclement weather previously, we hadn't been able to carry out this necessary cleaning of the area for several months and it felt good to do uphold the honor of the blue ribbons on our Adopt-A-Highway signs.

Dave Flanders, Mynga Futrell, Don Knutson, Tom Nicolette, Kevin Schultz and Pete Studelska did yeomen's work in filling some 25 trash bags of sopping wet refuse reminding us of the heavy water content of fog. We do not anticipate returning to the site until Saturday, March 19 @ 8a.m. Save the date!

Member Perspective

"Unbelief is not generational, it's an intelligence, and perhaps an ethics thing. It's the capacity to see existence as something larger than ourselves or our little circles of awareness. We don't need the comfort of having a warm fuzzy god to make us feel safe or see us through a crisis.

And we don't need a deity to remind us when we've been bad or good. We're just good for goodness sake..."

And you can quote me on that!
Pat Kelley

Newsletter Submissions

Submit your newsletter items to the N&V submissions editor, Kay Dickey, at this e-mail address:

frethnkr@mindspring.com

or mail item to the AOF mailbox: PO Box 15182, Sacramento, CA 95851-0182.

Preference is given to material submitted online in a PC-compatible word processing format such as Word, Wordpad, or Notepad. (To submit, attach your file to the e-mail and send.)

AOF also welcomes succinct and substantive letters to the editor. Note: All letters are prioritized by AOF's publishing criteria deriving from the organization's Statement of Purpose.

Stealing Christmas

(Continued from page 6)

reborn in moments of despair, the light that gets re-lit in the darkest moments of the year, is beautifully symbolized by the story of a child born of a teenage homeless mother who had to give birth in a manger because no one would give her shelter, and escaping the cruelty of Roman imperial rule and its local surrogate Herod who already knew that such a child would grow up to challenge the entire imperialist system. To celebrate that vulnerable child as a symbol of hope that eventually the weak would triumph over the rule of the arrogant and powerful is a spiritual celebration with strong analogies to our Jewish Chanukah celebration which also celebrates the victory of the weak over the powerful. And many other spiritual traditions around the world have similar celebrations at this time of year. The loss of this message, its subversion into a frenetic orgy of consumption, rightly disturbs Christians and other people of faith.

Yet this transformation is not a result of Jewish parents wanting to protect their children from being forced to sing Christmas carols in public school, or secularists sending Seasons Greeting cards. It derives, instead, from the power of the capitalist marketplace,

operating through television, movies and marketers, to drum into everyone's mind the notion that the only way to be a decent human being at this time of year is to buy and buy more. Thus the altruistic instinct to give, which could take the form of giving of our time, our skills, and our loving energies to people we care about, gets transformed and subverted into a competitive frenzy of consumption.

Not surprisingly, the Christian Right is unwilling to challenge the capitalist marketplace because their uncritical support for corporate power is precisely what they had to offer the Right to become part of the conservative coalition. Their loyalty to conservative capitalist economics trumps for them their commitment to serving God. But for those of us who want to prevent a new surge of anti-Semitism and assaults on the first amendment, our most effective path is to acknowledge what is legitimate in the Christians' concern- and lead it into a powerful spiritual critique of the ethos of selfishness and materialism fostered by our economic arrangements. It's time for our liberal and progressive Christian leaders and neighbors to stand up against on behalf of Jews and on behalf of their own highest spiritual vision- and challenge the *real* Christmas thieves!

OBTAINING SECULAR SERVICES...

Planning a life event? AOF member Phil Lazier is available for conducting secular ceremonies. Contact him at: 916-362-7224 or phillazier@aol.com

DONATING BLOOD...

Making a donation? AOF is Blood Source group # 4857 Tell them you are part of the group when you give blood.

KEEPING GOV'T OUT OF RELIGION AND RELIGION OUT OF GOV'T...

Interested in local activism? The next planning meeting of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Sacramento Chapter focuses on California issues: Monday, January 10, 7PM, SMUD Customer Service Center, 6301 S Street, Sacramento

Newsletter Freebie Policy

We'll be pleased to send one free newsletter to any person upon request, but after that time, please subscribe to AOF's newsletter for only \$12 per year. Or, better yet, why not become a member? That way, you'll get our newsletter FREE as part of your membership!



P.O. Box 15182
Sacramento, CA 95851-0182

We're on the Web!
www.rthoughtsrfree.org/aof.htm

December Calendar of Events

AOF General Meeting **Sunday, January 9, 2:30 - 5 PM**

AOF Board Meeting (open to members) Sunday, Jan 16, 9:30 AM

Darwin Day 2005 Celebration **Saturday February 12, 2 - 4:30 PM**

Atheist MeetUp (*Mountain Mike's Pizza*), phone for Tina at 447-3589) Thursday, Jan.. 20, 7 PM

Brights MeetUp (*location TBA*, phone for Tom at 447-3589) Monday, Jan. 24, 7 PM

Directions to AOF's General Meetings

AOF meetings are open to the public and are generally held on the second Sunday of every month, from 2:30 - 5 PM at the Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10. The Sierra 2 Center is located at 2791 24th Street in Sacramento, just south of Broadway and the Department of Motor Vehicles. Visitors are welcome. Parking is available on the street or in the rear, off 4th Avenue. AOF Board meetings are held at alternating sites, so please inquire about the location. For AOF's 24-hour voice recorder, call 447-3589.

