

AOF News & Views

Sacramento, California

September 2007

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Sunday, September 9 A Conversation with Michael Newdow

Atheists and Other Freethinkers' September general meeting (1:30-4 PM) will feature **A Conversation with Michael Newdow**.

Mr. Newdow attained national prominence a few years ago when he argued before the US Supreme Court against the "under god" verbiage in the pledge of allegiance. This renaissance man will inform and entertain you, drawing on his experiences as an attorney, first amendment advocate, ER physician, performer, and, most recently, organizer of the First Atheist Church of True Science <http://www.restorethepledge.com> (click on Mike's Church, FACTS).

Location/Address:

Sierra 2 Center for the Arts and Community, Room 10
2791 24th Street, Sacramento, CA

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AOF October General Meeting Canceled In Lieu of: Freethought Day 2007—October 7!

Please note that due to the sixth annual gala celebration of Freethought Day on October 7, AOF will **NOT** hold a general meeting on the second Sunday in October. Please see details in the enclosed insert for information on attending this years Freethought Day event in Waterfront Park, Old Sacramento!

Where: *Old Sacramento's Waterfront Park (Front and L Streets)*

When: 12-5 PM

More information: <http://freethoughtday.org> or see the enclosed insert!



Reflections Upon Returning From Bolivia

AOF Line

By Don Knutson

When I finally gave up on my Mom's misguided religion as a young man and became an atheist, I distinctly remember wondering at the time what other learned beliefs I would ultimately learn to discard. In short order, the carnivorous habit and the belief that persistent violence and killing by my own government in overseas lands would lead to an enduring peace soon evaporated as obsolete values.

During my recent trip to Bolivia, this reflection occurred to me as I viewed the indigenous people's struggle to adjust to a new system where they have relatively equal opportunities today compared to the more than five centuries of oppression their ancestors had experienced since the Spaniards had arrived. Do they follow the old European path to success and prosperity now available to them or do they embrace their proud native tribal traditions

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

which may be somewhat more humble? Monotheism or polytheism? Monogamy or polygamy? The clash between the different orientations is breathtaking and appears in some instances to be irreconcilable.

Here in the U.S., we have no such contradictions having chosen the European model long ago. But we are all still socialized and programmed to believe a certain way by our families and more importantly by our endemic culture. And this process of indoctrination will determine our pre-dispositions in life unless trauma or an epiphany makes us reevaluate those individual pre-dispositions.

Our ability to free ourselves from those influences and allow logic and reason to be our guide will determine our level of personal liberty.

Call for Nominations

AOF Elections 2008

By Kevin Schultz

There's no greater time than this coming year that AOF needs your personal help and support. Yes you, silly! In 2008, the AOF board plans to map out strategy for the next two to five years. If you join the board in 2008, you'll have a chance to steer AOF in the direction you want it to go. Do you want more social events? National speakers? Debates? A change of venue?

AOF holds elections during the November general meeting (the 11th). Nominations must be submitted by the time the October newsletter goes to press (end of October) and will be noted by the President in the next newsletter.

Everyone has something to offer AOF—including you! Submit your nomination to info@aofonline.org or call the voice-mail at 916-447-3589. Thanks!

AOF Board (2007)

President: Don Knutson

Vice President: Mynga Futrell

Secretary: Jerry Sloan

Treasurer: Ken Nahigian

Directors at large:

Beverly Church, Kay Dickey, Kevin Schultz, Paul Storey, Susan Vergne

AOF Committees

Newsletter: Kevin Schultz (Editor)

Tom Nicolette (Mailing)

Freethought Day, Oct. 7, 2007

Beverly Church, Mynga Futrell, Carla Corbett, Kay Dickey, Jerry Sloan, Tom Ikelman, Kevin Schultz, Brian Krofchok

Darwin Day, Feb. 10, 2008:

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

Ad Hoc Committees:

Web Portal (Kevin Schultz, Richard Langley); Alternate Meeting Place/ Time (Jerry Sloan, Ken Nahigian, Kevin Schultz); Youth Outreach (Jerry Sloan, Tina Burgess, Mynga Futrell); Connections (Kevin Schultz, Betty Simonsma); Growing AOF Membership (Jerry Sloan, Kevin Schultz)

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

AOF's Voluntariat

Affiliation Liaisons:

Mynga Futrell, Kay Dickey (AAI)

Hank Kocol (CSH)

Kevin Schultz (AA)

Beverly Church (AHA/HAGSA)

Community Service Projects:

Don Knutson

Internet Website: Kevin Schultz

Meetings: Dave Flanders, Ken Nahigian

Jerry Sloan, Betty Simonsma

Membership Database:

Ken Nahigian

We welcome additional involvement from AOF members. Right now we need volunteers to perform very small tasks at our meetings. Just phone the voice mail at **447-3589** if you can help us out. Or, send an e-mail to us at

aofboard@aofonline.org

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Pictures from Jerry Sloan's 70th Birthday It's a Party!



(left to right) **Susan Vergne, Karen Scott, Paul Geisert, Mynga Futrell.**
In the background is **Don Knutson** talking with **Richard Kowaleski.**



(left to right) **Ken Nahigian, Ruth Rezos, Hank and Cleo Kocol.**

AOF Program Continuation

(Continued from page 1)

Parking instructions:

Street parking and the Sierra 2 parking lot off of 4th Avenue and 24th Street.

E-mail contact: info@aofonline.org

Phone contact: 916.447.3589

General Meeting Information:

AOF meetings are open to the public and are generally held on the second Sunday of the month, from 1:30 - 4 PM at the Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10. The event is free and open to the public. Light refreshments served; join the group for dinner following the meeting.

URL for additional information:

<http://restorethepledge.com>

Sacramento Community Events Calendar for Freethinkers



<http://sacportal.humanists.net/calendar>

Subscribe to all the local happenings online!

Atheists and Other Freethinkers



AOF is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization. It is one of 50 member societies of the **Atheist Alliance International** ("a positive voice for atheism"). AOF

also 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.

Historical Figures Series

Presbyter John the Emperor-Priest

By Ken Nahigian

Religions excite passion: passionate commitments, passionate divisions, passionate hopes. Exceptions occur, of course, but Christianity was never one. While Jews fumed at the idea that God would sire a son, Christians bickered over his nature—a son wholly divine, wholly human, or a mix? The “orthodox” answer, derived in CE 451, was that he was both, yet not a mix—both 100% human and 100% divine. We moderns have largely forgotten these heated early disputes, the rages and schisms, hopes kindled and crushed, blood spilled, and curious resolutions. But they show Christendom was never monolithic. From its first heartbeat it was in turmoil, broken by faction, riven by conflict, wrapped in paradox, and balancing worlds on a grain of sand.

No surprise, the environment it made was a fertile soil for rumors, myths and mysteries. Prester John was just one such, by no means the strangest.

In the 1160s, while Pope Alexander III held his curia in France, a mysterious letter began to circulate. No one knows the true author. Passed hand to hand, it told of a magical Eastern empire, a milk-and-honey Christian utopia in the “three Indias,” besieged by infidels. The supposed writer was its ruler, Prester (Presbyter) John, of the family of the Three Magi.

Eager scribes copied the letter and passed it on. Today we have over 100 versions, most of them addressed to the Byzantine Emperor of Rome, others to the Pope or the French King. Alexander took it on himself to answer. He sent his personal physician, Master Philippus, out twice to find the Prester. So far as we know, Philippus never returned from the second outing.

Other expeditions followed, hoping to reach and rescue the Prester’s kingdom, and maybe skim a small profit from his magic seeing-mirror, the rivers of gold or the Fountain of Youth (the letter was the first recorded mention of such a fountain). One problem: no one knew where the Three Indias were—like Cathay (China) and Ultima Thule, India was more of a metaphor than for “someplace far.” One envoy after another came limping home, or van-



Prester John, from Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle*, 1493 (Source: Wikipedia)

ished off the edge of the map. Meanwhile, editions of the letter grew more fabulous and more intriguing.

Why did the Prester so fascinate European Christians? He showed the universality of the Church, proved that Christian Faith transcended culture and geography, encompassed all humanity, at a time when ethnic and religious strife were casting doubts on the idea. It was much as if we received a message from extraterrestrials to find that they are much like us, and share our taste in ice cream.

So they sought. In the 13th century Marco Polo identified the Prester with the chief of a Mongolian tribe which was then Nestorian Christian.

Others looked to China. After 1340, most had decided the Prester’s kingdom was not in Asia, so a story revision put his realm in Ethiopia (vaguely, deep Africa). Portugal sent expeditions to find Prester John through the fifteenth century. Eventually it imagined it did, and much annoyed the Abyssinian ambassadors by calling their monarch by that name, which was not on their official list of regnal names or titles.

The myth continued to live and unfold, ghosting through the mythic maze of Christendom. Up to about 1700, cartographers still used the magic empire to fill blank spaces on their maps. The story would vanish or sleep, then revive at odd moments, generally times of crisis.

For example, when Crusaders fought the Saracen “paynims” (heathens), and were losing badly, in 1219: Suddenly a miracle appeared from the East—the paynim armies were in rout, their forces smashed and drained. Surely it was the great Emperor, marching at last from the “Indies” or “beyond Persia and Armenia” to help restore Israel to the cross! Ecstatic street prophets raved of the Prester, coming to mark the beginning of the end of time.

Then the miracle reached the gates of Vienna. It was not the Prester, but the Mongol horde, led by the great Genghis Kahn. Flush with victory against the Moslem, seeking new worlds to conquer, he paused to whet his sword. Soon the Church had a new wolf at its throat—one that made it think wistfully of the Saracen. And again, dreams of Prester John and his wondrous empire melted in the cruel light, fading back into smoke, into the myth and shadows and mystery which had engendered it, to slumber, and return another day.

We Prayed For You

By Anatole Lubovich, Republished Posthumously

Anatole Lubovich's poems and character touched many AOF members during his time in Sacramento. Since his death in November 2005, Do Gentry, Anatole's partner and administrator of his estate, has published a number of his poems in local publications. With Do's permission, AOF continues selected republication of Anatole's poems. After republication, AOF will post the poem to <http://aofonline.org/resources> for public distribution—*Editor*

We Prayed for You

“Thank God you're out of jail. We heard that you were given a lengthy sentence for protesting against the Government, or something of that sort. But now you're out, I see. Well, you look good. Oh no, I'm sorry, I don't mean to say that it was good for you—it must have been quite awful: locked in a prison and all that. But still, thank God you're out. We prayed for you. Almighty God has heard our supplication and worked a miracle to set you free.”

Are you referring to the same Almighty who in his wisdom let me be abducted and held in prison helpless and abandoned? Is he the one who deafened judges' ears to pleas of reason and demands for justice?

And was it his design to make me suffer pernicious vengeance by the hand of State, rewarding me for patriotic conscience, for bringing fatted bureaucrats to task of living up to sacred Constitution?

Is he the one who played a joke on Job, that hapless and bewildered servant who in his guileless and naive devotion could not find reason for descent of plagues upon his head in spite of curious counsel?

We're told that God rewarded in the end this steadfast victim of a pointless test. That enigmatic exercise revealed that fickle God plays games beyond a reason to be explained by wisest of his creatures. Tormented and exasperated soul of Job was crushed and driven to repentance, although not one of his three old advisors, not Eliphaz, not Bildad, and not Zophar,

nor Elihu, the young one, nor himself were able to find a reason to repent, except to curse the day that he was born. When the Almighty's list of works debased all vestiges of human dignity, the men were silenced, and poor Job was moved to beg forgiveness for his own existence.

That God demean himself to meet a challenge by a Fallen Angel is beyond contempt. That he should deign to sacrifice his creature to satisfy the slander of a traitor, a loser in celestial coup d'état, does not bespeak secure omnipotence.

A question that was raised is whether man may judge the actions of a God who made him. From me you'll hear a loud, resounding “Yes!” If I in fatalistic acquiescence resign my life without demanding justice from God by saying that his perfect will is too incomprehensible for me, and stand in silent stupor in his shadow, what moral sense should summon me to bow?

Is God unable to communicate his purpose clearly to my feeble mind? If so, I cannot then believe he's perfect. If so, the burden must be laid on him.

I cannot claim he's just when I see justice, then when I see injustice, simply say, “It is God's will, it's not right for me to question.”

My human sense of right cannot employ elastic rule to gauge such mystic God.

So he rewarded Job for bearing boils and standing loss of family and cattle with generous replenishment of wealth—more children and superfluous sheep and camels. New daughters even rated proper names: Jemima, Kez and Keren were all beauties. But former three, as well as seven brothers, remain forgotten, nameless in the rubble, along with servants smitten by Chaldeans.

The bountiful new blessings were perhaps enough to make Job think his tribulations were worth enduring, that's if he forgot his slaughtered children, animals and servants.

But being a bit more sensitive than God, I look beyond myopic moral focus of this heroic painted tale of faith,



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.

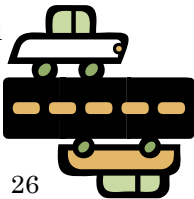
Please check here if you DO want to be on our AOF activist list.

We can arrange to deliver your monthly newsletter electronically via the e-mail address you print above. Please check the mode you prefer. E-mail Postal mail

Tidbits, News, and Events of Interest

AOF Family News

- An intrepid group of AOF members and volunteers set to work on Sunday, August 26 to cleanup a considerable accumulation of trash along Highway 99 and restore the luster of our two AOF signs along the highway. At least 25 bags of refuse were collected by **Rich & Debra Prowse and his daughter Cassie, Kelly Scott, Mynga Futrell, John Reiger, Vick Vickland and Don Knutson**. Particular appreciation goes to Rich and his wife, **Debra** for allowing us to use their van to dispense the crew. The sliding van door reminded me of a helicopter dispensing firefighters to put out flames and the metaphor is apt as we prevented countless pieces of debris ultimately finding their way into our tributaries and threatening young wild-life.



- Past AOF President and current member **Paul Geisert** appeared in the **Sacramento News and Review's July 26 issue** as part of a panel segment entitled



Virgin Territory: <http://tinyurl.com/23loq2>. The panelists answered a hypothetical, ethical question from a theoretical virgin wondering whether he was ready for his first sexual experience.

- AOF board member **Jerry Sloan** would like to thank all of his community of reason friends for attending his **BIG 7 - 0 birthday party**—in attendance were **Cleo and Hank Kocol, Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell, Ken Nahigian and Ruth Re-**



zos, Don Knutson, Susan Vergne, Bill Potts, Linda Ostrofsky, and Richard Kowaleski. See page three for pictures!

- Wedding bells for AOF Treasurer Ken Nahigian and Ruth Rezos! A little blue bird told *AOF Family News* that they married on August 25. The secular wedding ceremony featured both graceful traditional motifs and healthy doses of humor and cheer. Please wish them well as they begin a new chapter in their lives!



Do you have any info that you'd like to share with the AOF membership? Please submit items to: newsletter@aofonline.org and specify in the e-mail that you'd like to announce the information in the Family News section. Thanks!

(Continued from page 5)

into the faint obligatory strokes
on the periphery behind the figure
who is the subject of this panorama.

My eye falls on the slaughtered serfs and children.
There is no mention of a cause to damn them.
According to the Writ, their lives were pious.
But even still, Job offered sacrifices
on their behalf to satisfy demands
for adoration by the righteous God.
The offerings were pleasing to the Lord.
Then what's the cause for their obliteration?

Those souls seemed insignificant in God's
intent to furnish feeble proof to Satan,
not worthy of the same consideration
as showered on the patriarchal male.
What had they done that they deserved extinction?
Why were their lives considered less than equal
to his, which found redemption after torture?

What sort of spirit is your Mighty Master?
What conscience and what sense of right compels him
to toy with human lives for his amusement
by wreaking vengeance on those helpless creatures
who resolutely follow his commands?

Why should I thank him for unlocking chains
which he had wrapped around my wrists and ankles?
If you should be assaulted (God forbid)
by someone clubbing blows to smash your bones,
should he get tired or have had his fill,
would you then thank him if he stop the beating?

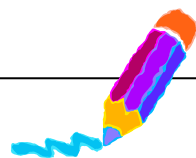
If we expect our fellow human beings,
driven by selfish traits and faulty reason,
to curb their passions and pursue their aims
without committing harm to one another,
how can we hold Almighty God exempt,
pretending that although he holds all power
in his omnipotent and perfect hand,
he's not responsible for any evil?

How can the measures set for lowly humans,
with our imperfect wisdom, greed and malice,
with apelike traits producing lethal weapons,
be more demanding than the ones that guide
the absolutely unencumbered will
of what, you say, is good and perfect God?

If you give thanks to him for all your blessings,
you must give thanks to him for all your pain.
For all that happens, pleasant and distressing,
attribute equal credit: loss and gain.

But as for me, both kindness and abuse
that come my way I'll store on crowded shelf
of life experience in my mind and not confuse
the human acts with acts of God, and I refuse,
refuse to worship someone lower than myself.

—Previously published in *Selected Poems of Anatole Taràs Lubovich* (The Live Oak Press LLC, Palo Alto, 2006)



Want the latest AOF board minutes?
E-mail aofboard@aofonline.org

Newsletter Submissions

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

newsletter@aofonline.org

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

Preference is given to material in a PC-compatible word processing format such as *Word*, *Wordpad*, or *Note-pad*. (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.

AOF Volunteer Opportunities

Calling all volunteers! Send us your ideas for projects and/or volunteer using the contact info on page two. Open positions:

- *Post-meeting lunch coordinator*
- *Archive Committee*
- *AOF Librarian*
- *Program Committee Volunteer(s)*
- *Caring Committee Volunteer(s)*
- *Publicity Volunteer*
- *Freethought Day/Darwin Day*

Interested? Call 916-447-3589!

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!
aofonline.org

August Calendar of Events

AOF General Meeting	Sunday, September 9, 1:30 - 4 PM
AOF/HAGSA Joint Movie Night	Friday, September 14, 7 - 9 PM
AOF Board meeting	Sunday, September 16, 9:30 AM
AOF Davis Community Meals Charity Event	Sunday, October 30, 4-7 PM
HAGSA First Semi-Monthly Meeting (hagsa.org)	Friday, September 7, 7-9 PM
SORT Monthly Meeting (http://home.surewest.net/kitray)	Tuesday, September 25, 7:30-9 PM
Freethought Day	Sunday, October 7, 12-5 PM

AOF meetings are open to the public and are generally held on the second Sunday of the month, from 1:30 - 4 PM at the Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10. Note: The months of February and October are exceptions, since AOF co-produces two public education events: (1) an outdoor fair in October - "Sacramento's Freethought Day" (2007-10-07), and (2) a science and humanity celebration - Sacramento's "Darwin Day Educational Gala" (2008-02-10). Watch the newsletter for details.

Directions to AOF's General Meetings

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 recorder, call 447-3589. Leave your name and a number (repeat for clarity) and someone will phone back to answer your questions about AOF.

