

AOF News & Views

Sacramento, California

July 2009

Special Points of Interest

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Sunday, July 12, 1:30-4:00PM Cleo Kocol Discusses James and Dolly Madison's Views on Separation of Church and State

Cleo Kocol, AOF's July speaker says, "One can't divorce President James Madison from his beliefs or from his wife, Dolly. Like most people, James had many dimensions, and I will touch upon many of them, including his friendship with Jefferson, and his staunch support for separation of church and state." Both Madisons had a big influence on history, James as the father of the Constitution, and Dolly who saved George Washington's portrait when the British attacked during the war of 1812. Kocol will tell about James's life and Dolly's in relation to him.

Kocol is a charter member of AOF, a former member of the board of directors of the American Humanist Association, and a former member of the board of the Atheist Alliance, Inc. She was chair of the AHA's Feminist Caucus and received the Humanist Heroine Award in 1988. She grew up in a non-religious household, but turned briefly to religion in an attempt to escape an unhappy marriage. In a short time she found religion wanting. Today she says she doesn't regret her brief participation as she

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Hot Speeches + Cool Eats to Beat Summer's Heat Another Summer Sizzler In the Works!

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Make Your Preparations!

Every few years, the AOF meeting turns into a fabulous food and freethought menagerie. It has been so much fun in the past, so now we're going to have another!

Food-wise, it's a potluck. To keep us cool, the fare is rather light (salads, desserts, beverage). But the talks, wow! They can be hot stuff.

Don't miss it. And plan your own speech topic now, so we can put you on the list to speak! **The flyer inserted in this newsletter has the details.**



Neutrality: The Educational Goal A Skewed Situation

By Mynga Futrell

By and large (in this nation), the adult population can be viewed as being divided on the matter of faith into two camps: those with and without a faith. Across public school classrooms, the teachers are similarly situated. Some have a faith, and some don't. As would be expected, a far larger proportion of both citizens and teachers falls into the "have a faith category."

The notion of American citizens "having a faith" carries widespread cultural approbation. By comparison, the popular and media considerations of citizens who "lack a faith" evidence more than a tinge of moral disapproval. In fact, the reproach is not always unstated. Within some segments of society, censure may be loudly proclaimed.

Then, too, distinctions are linguistic as well as moral. A constricted labeling of many of the nonreligious (no faith) citizens is prevalent in society. There is a milieu that socially stigmatizes as "nonbelievers" those persons who happen to have a naturalistic worldview. Their nonconformity to the acceptable situation (that of "having a faith" or "having credence in some supreme being") is a departure from the accepted cultural norm. This narrow characterization of people who have naturalistic outlooks is ubiquitous in the nation.

In public schools, the educational ideal (and legal guideline) is that teachers' protect the liberty of conscience of all the pupils. The teachers' conduct is to be *neutral* regarding matters of religion and faith. The teachers' demeanor and actions are not to favor or privilege pupils of any situation or background, whatever their own personal worldviews may be. Viewed in the civic sense, all are to be treated equally.

But teachers don't stand separate and apart from the broad cultural milieu. Can we really expect teachers to be evenhanded when the overall civic arena is tilted?

If prevalent in any region, culturally condescending views and narrow, negative labeling are seldom alleviated by the process of schooling. So what do teachers know about people who have a naturalistic worldview? Where does most of the information that teachers have available to them come from? Even the most highly educated teachers know little other than what they have learned from the very same popular sources that tilt in a "faiths" rather than a "neutrality" direction.

Neutrality is the educational goal, and what most teachers need for evenhandedness is good, solid objective information about those citizens who live on the secular side of the faith/no faith chasm. (*Part 4 in this mini-series will start to focus on what the teachers need to know.*)

 "A Skewed Situation" is the third in a series of mini-commentaries on society and education by Mynga Futrell, Ph.D., director of OABITAR (*Objectivity, Accuracy, and Balance In Teaching About Religion*). They are adapted from an article published in the quarterly of the California 3Rs (*Rights, Respect, Responsibility*) Religious Liberty Project in May 2008.

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 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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June AOF Meeting Recap Richard Carrier's New Book, "Not the Impossible Faith" By Debora Smith

"A common apologetic argument for the truth of the Christian religion is that its origins were too improbable for it to be false. This argument has appeared in many forms over the years, but most of the usual ideas are combined into a single popular effort by James Patrick Holding ... Holding's argument is that the origin and success of Christianity in the ancient Roman Empire was so improbable that it must have been based on a true story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

This quote is from the introduction to Dr. Richard Carrier's latest book, *Not the Impossible Faith: Why Christianity Didn't need a Miracle to Succeed*, which he wrote to thoroughly refute Holding's argument. At the June meeting, Dr. Carrier took a good-sized AOF audience on a whirlwind tour of this refutation.

The core of Holding's contention is his claim of "17 factors" which cannot be denied, and therefore must be true, about the evolution of early Christianity. Dr. Carrier discussed how he devoted separate chapters to debunking each of these "undeniable" factors, and explained briefly how a scholarly con-

sideration of the people and culture of the region at that time shows fairly clearly and consistently that aspects of Christianity such as resurrection, persecution, following a tradesman from Galilee who was executed as a criminal, acceptance of a new world order, and belief in a gospel that occasionally relied on the testimony of women were neither unexpected nor unexplainable.

Following his talk, Dr. Carrier answered questions on a variety of topics, from the odd placement and phrasing of the passages mentioning Jesus in *The Antiquities of the Jews* by Flavius Josephus to the future of religion in America and the world (he thinks the trend is toward more liberal, less dogmatic Christianity and Islam, and an increase in secular, liberal values, which will cause fundamentalists to become more confrontational and deceptive in their practices).

The book-signing which followed the talk ended with Dr. Carrier selling out of all the copies of *Not the Impossible Faith* that he had brought with him.

AOF Program Continuation

(Continued from page 1)

learned about the bible and other parts of the Christian religion she hadn't known and adds, "Knowledge is never a bad thing."

She was an activist in both the women's movement and the freethought movement from the 1970's on, and also took part in various peace movements, including the peace camps of the 1980's. She's now married happily and is proud to say she's a great-grandmother. Her "leisure" is spent writing fiction and occasional non-fiction. She's been a published writer since the late 1970's. She wrote and performed her one-woman, many character shows from 1982 through 1987 throughout the United States including Alaska.

She developed the talk about James Madison for a seminar at the Renaissance Society at California State University, Sacramento, in the spring.

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 of atheism and the acceptance of atheists in our community. Through educational programs, projects, and publications, AOF will extend secular perspectives, including the separation of religion and government and the right to think and speak freely on these perspectives.

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Print subscription \$12 per year, e-mail subscription free to all on request.

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

La Barre Day

By Ken Nahigian

Can freethinkers have holidays? If so, July 1 should be one. A French observance little known in the United States, La Barre Day marks the execution of a young man for religious impiety. As with most holidays, it has a sheen of myth, and sources are shady. The two most popular reports come from François-Marie Arouet, a.k.a. Voltaire, who tended to color and polemicize his history, especially history that lit his passion. This history did. The reports also somewhat contradict. But other records corroborate him, to degrees; so surely something occurred then, in 1766—something worth knowing.

Jean-François Lefevre was the Chevalier de la Barre, a petty and poor nobleman in Abbeville, France. “Chevalier,” or knight, was an honorific title in the day. Europe still bled from the wounds of the Thirty Years War, as France ached its way slowly through the spiritual dislocations of the Enlightenment. White-knuckled and fearful, the Church clung to power.

The Chevalier, 19 years old, had the misfortune of a standing quarrel with a local judge. When someone vandalized a wooden crucifix on a bridge, pious townsmen called on the bishop, who demanded clues from the citizenry under pain of excommunication. None came forth with useful information. But the judge seized the opportunity to accuse La Barre and two of his friends of some irreverent crimes—among them the public singing of lewd songs, and refusal to doff their hats at a religious procession. Though not execrable offenses, the gaffes had weight. One of the young men fled to Holland; another paid a fine. Then, searching La Barre's bedroom, authorities found several proscribed books. One was Voltaire's

Philosophical Dictionary.

This was more serious. According to Voltaire, civil and church authorities were now sure they had found the vandal. La Barre pleaded for



A statue of Jean-François Lefevre in France.

clemency; withheld. He filed an appeal in Paris. His aunt, who headed an abbey in Willancourt, defended him. None of it helped. Magistrates questioned La Barre, tortured him, condemned him, cut out his tongue, and finally decapitated him and burned his body on a public pyre with the forbidden books.

Voltaire made the case a *cause célèbre*, outraged, so he wrote, by “this sentence so execrable, and at the same time so absurd, which is an eternal disgrace to France,” but likely also because his own famous *Dictionary* was a key piece of evidence in the case. Ever anticlerical, Voltaire emphasized the Church's

role. But in fact the prosecution was technically secular (though based on law which made Catholicism the state religion, and collusion between the judge and bishop was evident).

Over years, Voltaire worked to rehabilitate the youth's name. He failed. But brighter moons were rising, and the tide of public sentiment, mixed at first, turned slowly to favor the Chevalier. In 1794 the French Revolution National Convention finally and formally annulled the sentence.

A century later, French humanists opposing religious oppression celebrated La Barre Day openly, holding festivals and speeches. The holiday is now less popular. On the outskirts of Paris, the Montmartre district raised a statue to La Barre in 1905, but in 1941 the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy government melted it for munitions, while preserving various statues of saints and kings.

Today, to us at least, the memory of such oppression seems far off and quaint. Even then, almost 70 years after Great Britain's last execution for blasphemy, it was unusual. But many nations still torment or kill freethinkers and dissidents. As you think of this, the two and a half centuries melt away, become wind, and the Chevalier sits at our table. Surely his day deserves standing: a day to give our minds wings, to remember the persecuted ones, and to speak for those who struggle. Will you celebrate?

Current Events

Darwinius masillae: Just Another Missing Link?

By PZ Myers

This is an important new fossil, a 47 million year old primate nicknamed Ida. She's a female juvenile who was probably caught in a toxic gas cloud from a volcanic lake, and her body settled into the soft sediments of the lake, where she was buried undisturbed.

What's so cool about it?

Age. It's 47 million years old. That's interestingly old...it puts us deep into the primate family tree.

Preservation. This is an awesome fossil: it's almost perfectly complete, with all the bones in place, preserved in its death posture. There is a halo of darkly stained material around it; this is a remnant of the flesh and fur that rotted in place, and allows us to see a rough outline of the body and make estimates of muscle size. Furthermore, the guts and stomach contents are preserved. Ida's last meal was fruit and leaves, in case you wanted to know.

Life stage. Ida is a young juvenile, estimate to be right on the transition from requiring parental care to independent living. That means she has a mix of baby teeth and adult teeth — she's a two-fer, giving us information about both.

Phylogeny. A cladistic analysis of the fossil revealed another interesting point. There are two broad groups of primates: the strepsirrhines, which includes the lemurs and lorises, and the haplorhines, which includes monkeys and apes...and us, of course. Ida's anatomy places her in the haplorhines with us, but at the same time she's primitive. This is an animal caught shortly after a major branch point in primate evolutionary history.

She's beautiful and interesting and important, but I do have to take exception to the surprisingly frantic news coverage I'm seeing. She's being called the "missing link in human evolution", which is annoying. The whole "missing link" category is a bit of journalistic trumpery: almost *every* fossil could be called a link, and it feeds the simplistic notion that there could be a single definitive bridge between ancient and modern species. There isn't: there is the slow shift of whole populations which can branch and diverge. It's also inappropriate to tag this discovery to human evolution. She's 47 million years old; she's also a missing link in chimp evolution, or rhesus monkey evolution. She's got wider significance than just her relationship to our narrow line.

People have been using remarkable hyperbole when discussing *Darwinius*. She's going to affect paleontology "like an asteroid falling down to earth"; she's the "Mona Lisa" of fossils; she answers all of Darwin's questions about transitional fossils; she's "something that the world has never seen before"; "a revolutionary scientific find that will change everything". Well, OK. I was impressed enough that I immediately made Ida my desktop wallpaper, so I'm not trying to diminish the importance of the find. But let's not forget that there are lots of transitional forms found all the time. She's unique as a representative of a new species, but she isn't at all unique as a representative of the complex history of life on earth.

When Laelaps says (3), "I have the feeling that this fossil, while spectacular, is being oversold," I think he's being spectacularly understated. Wilkins (4) also knocks down the whole "missing link" label. The hype is bad news, not because Ida is unimportant, but because it detracts from the larger body of the fossil record — I doubt that the media will be able to muster as much excitement from whatever new fossil gets published in *Nature* or *Science* next week, no matter how significant it may be.

Go ahead and be excited by this find, I know I am. Just remember to be excited tomorrow and the day after and the day

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Main slab of the *Darwinius masillae* holotype fossil (specimen PMO 214.214)

AOF Subscription / Membership Form

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Newsletter subscription:

___ Send my printed newsletter by postal mail (\$12 extra)

___ Send my newsletter by email (*Free!*) – my email address is above

Additional Donation: \$ _____

Total enclosed: \$ _____

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permitted by law. Non-members may receive the AOF Newsletter (same rate - \$12 printed, free via email).

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

Please check here if you DO want to be an AOF Activist (e-mail address required).

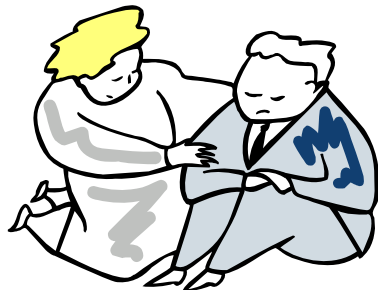
(Continued from page 5)

after that, because this is perfectly normal science, and it will go on.

Laelaps (5) has some serious reservations about the analysis — the authors may not have done as solid a cladistic analysis as they should, and its position in the family tree may not be as clear as it has been made out to be.

Source: Franzen JL, Gingerich PD, Habersetzer J, Hurum JH, von Koenigswald W, Smith BH (2009) Complete Primate Skeleton from the Middle Eocene of Messel in Germany: Morphology and Paleobiology. PLoS ONE 4(5): e5723. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0005723.

Links: (1) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darwinius> ; (2) http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2009/05/darwinius_masillae.php ; (3) http://scienceblogs.com/laelaps/2009/05/a_discovery_that_will_change_e.php ; (4) http://scienceblogs.com/evolvingthoughts/2009/05/there_is_no_missing_link.php ; (5) http://scienceblogs.com/laelaps/2009/05/poor_poor_ida_or_overselling_a.php



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!**

Upcoming Local Events: In Brief

- Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Sacramento: Monday, Jul 6, 7:00 p.m., SMUD Building, Headquarters Conference Center, 6201 S Street, Sacramento. Contact: 916-684-4730, Cavelarde@aol.com
- Humanists of the Greater Sacramento Area (HAGSA): Sunday, Jul 19, 4:00 p.m.: Mid-July Potluck (AOF members invited). 4100 Orange Grove Ave, Sacramento. Contact: 916-974-7922, president@hagsa.org
- Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT): Tuesday, Jul 28, 7:30-9:30 p.m., La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road, Carmichael. Contact: (916) 978-0321 kitray2@comcast.net
- Humanists of the Greater Sacramento Area (HAGSA): Sunday, Aug 30, 3:00 p.m.: Late August Potluck (AOF members invited). 189 Westbury Circle, Folsom. Contact: 916-785-8329, president@hagsa.org

Current Events

2/3 of UK Teens Do Not Believe in God

Nearly two-thirds of teenagers don't believe in God and think reality television is far more important than religion, new research has revealed.

The survey showed 66 per cent of teens do not believe a deity exists while 50 per cent have never prayed and 16 per cent have never been to church.

Teenagers rated family, friends, money, music and even reality TV shows above faith. Other statistics which emerged from the report included:

- * **59 per cent of children believed religion has had a negative influence on the world**
- * **60 per cent only go to church for a wedding or christening**
- * **Only 30 per cent of teenagers think there is an afterlife...**
- * **... while 10 per cent believe in reincarnation**
- * **47 per cent said organized religion had no place in the world**
- * **60 per cent don't believe Religious Studies should be compulsory in schools**
- * **However, 91 per cent agreed they should treat others the way they wished to be treated themselves**

The study of 1,000 teenagers aged 13 to 18 was carried out by Penguin books. It also revealed the south-east was the region with the least faith as only 28 per cent of those surveyed believed in God.

A Church of England spokesman said: 'Many teenagers aren't sure what they believe at that stage of their lives, as is clear from the number who said they don't know whether they believe in God. On the other hand, many of these results point to the great spirituality of young people today that the Church is seeking to respond to through new forms of worship alongside tradition ones.'

Hanne Stinson, chief executive of **The British Humanist Association**, said: 'I am not at all surprised by the results. Some of the results are very interesting, for example that only four per cent believe God is the biggest influence in their lives. That is consistent with Government research which shows that while religion is very important to a small proportion of adults, most people rank religion with very low in importance in their lives. Also significant, and reassuring for those who are worried about children's values, is that 91 per cent think they should treat others as they wish to be treated.'

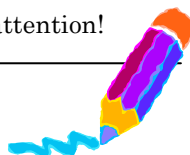
big brother It confirms that young people - like adults - do not need a religion to have positive values.'

The survey was carried out to mark Penguin's publication of controversial novel 'Killing God' by Kevin Brooks. The book is about a 15-year-old girl who questions and rages at the existence of God. Mr. Brooks, who is a popular teenage author, said: 'I can't say I am surprised by the teenagers' responses. Part of the reason that I wrote Killing God was that I wanted to explore the personal attitudes of young people today, especially those with troubled lives, towards organized religion and the traditional concept of God. How can the moralities of an ancient religion relate to the tragedies and disorders of today's broken world? And why do some people turn to God for help while others take comfort in drugs and alcohol? These are just some of the questions I wanted to consider... And I wasn't looking for answers.'

Link: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1194711/Two-thirds-teenagers-dont-believe-God--think-reality-TV-important.html?printingPage=true>

Thanks to member Jerry Sloan for bringing this article to our attention!

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 *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.

Newsletter Freebie Policy

This newsletter is free by e-mail to everyone. Just send your e-mail address. If you prefer printed copy by postal mail, AOF will send one free issue on your request; after that, please subscribe at \$12 per year. For details, see the signup form on page six.



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We're on the Web!
aofonline.org

July Calendar of Events

AOF Dinner Social @ New Canton Restaurant (upstairs),
2523 Broadway. Contact: 419-2105

Thursday, July 2, 6:30 p.m.

AOF July General Meeting

Sunday, July 12, 1:30-4:00 p.m.

July AOF Board Meeting

Sunday, July 19, 9:30-12:00 p.m.

AOF August General Meeting

Sunday, August 9, 1:30-4:00 p.m.

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" (Oct 2009), and (2) a science and humanity celebration - Sacramento's "Darwin Day Educational Gala" (2010-02-07). 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.

