

Atheists of Florida CHAPTER MEETINGS:

MIAMI:

Sunday, March 24th, at the Ft. Lauderdale Main Library, 2:00 pm in the Boardroom. Additional information -- Atheist Hotline: (305) 936-0210.

TAMPA:

New times, but same location for meetings this year. Saturday, March 30 at the Clearwater East Public Library, 2251 Drew Street, Meeting Room B. Beginning at 12:30 we will present a showing of the Atheists of Florida Forum. Upon completion at 1:00 we will allow one hour for our regular meeting. At 2:00 the Humanists of the Suncoast hold their monthly meeting in Room A and all A of F members are invited to attend.

Buddhism *continued from page 2*

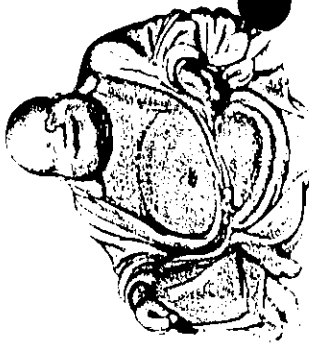
the individual, not worship of any spirit apart from yourself.

The confusion of Buddhism arises with the differing sects which have sprung up within the religion. In Tibet, the Dalai Lama is an important part of Buddhist practice. In recent months, stories have appeared regarding the 4-year old Seattle boy who is said to be an incarnation of the Dalai Lama. This is in

keeping with tradition in that the Dalai Lamas are all supposedly reincarnated upon death. The film *Little Buddha* is also based upon this same myth of the reincarnated spiritual leader.

Iraq and Burma have their own elaborate Buddhist rituals, often a far cry from the simple, inwardly spiritual nature taught by the Gautama Buddha. In China, the myths of Buddha have been incorporated to the point where Buddha descends to earth on a white elephant with six tusks! This is also one explanation of why the ascetic Gautama Buddha is sometimes portrayed as a fat, "Laughing Buddha". The actual man and the legends of local regions combine at times to produce the shrines and statues portrayed under the umbrella of "Buddhism".

Of the actual man known as Buddha, he lived to be around 80 years of age, teaching his followers and often using the Socratic method to validate his philosophy. About 100 years after his death, his teachings were recorded by an unknown author. —MLJ



Readers Note...

The Atheists of Florida newsletter is published eight times a year. Four issues a year will represent combined months like this issue.

Coming in our next issue...

- What's going on in Colorado? A petition is being circulated to include a proposition to tax religious properties on the next election ballot. We'll get the latest information about it at the Alliance convention and update you along with a full convention report.
- Our religion of the month will be Judaism.

8 February/March 1996



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Atheists of Florida

Volume V Number 2

February / March, 1996



Testing the Power of Prayer

—by Jim Strayer

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH ballyhoo about prayer helping the sick in hospitals. That type of statistical evidence has too many variables to be considered scientifically reliable.

I propose an experiment using myself as an atheist who will not pray and a theist, as yet unnamed who will pray. We will be admitted into a hospital and put under anesthesia. While unconscious our left upper arm bone (humerus) will be broken. The break will be of a compound nature, that is, a bone must pierce the skin.

While we are still unconscious doctors will treat my condition, setting the bone and repairing any damage to the muscle and nerves. The theist will not receive any medical treatment, but will pray when he regains consciousness. He may get prayer assistance from friends, relatives, church leaders and the public in general.

I will remain in the hospital as long as the doctors deem necessary and doctors will monitor my recovery.

The theist will leave the hospital and doctors will monitor his recovery, but perform no medical treatments. He and others will pray for

recovery.

At the end of a six month period both of us will be examined by a team of atheists and theists to determine who has had the better recovery. A standard set of exercises will be given to each of us before and after the six month period as a test of recovery.

There is the possibility that someone might pray for my recovery and skew the results. Therefore the experiment should be conducted as if only the theist were injured. My part will be kept secret and will only be revealed at the end of the six month period.

There is a possibility that someone might think that I would resort to praying. I would be willing to have the doctors administer some drug that would prevent this from happening.

The importance of this experiment is obvious. It is repeatable and observable. It should satisfy the requirements of the scientific method. The medical part of the experiment could be kept constant, but any number of prayer types could be tested.

If it were proven that prayer really works and the theists recovered as well or better than the atheist, we could then test to see which religion has the best results with prayer.

I am sure that after many tests if the theists heal better than the atheists that most if not all atheists would be willing to accept the power of prayer. I am also sure that if the atheist heals better than the theist then the theists would reject the power of prayer.

Will the first theist please step forward. **A**



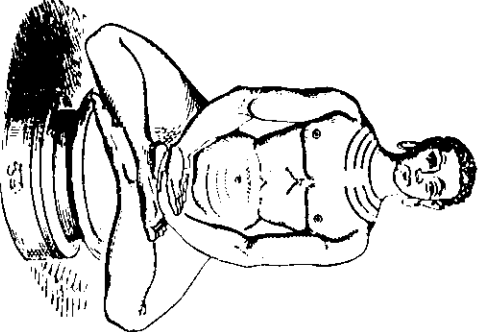
As a special feature this year, the Atheists of Florida newsletter will present a scenario of a different religion each issue.

uddhist religion, as in Hinduism, encompasses many different sects and followers.

Although Hindu worship many thousands of different gods, many Buddhists can trace their worship to a single man, born with the given name Siddhartha. There is a question of exactly when Siddhartha, known also as the Gautama Buddha, actually lived. He lived in 5th century B.C. and died between 420-400.

The known facts of Buddha's life are that his father was either a king or a wealthy landowner who lived in the lower Himalayas in a fertile area of Nepal. About 500 B.C. he married and had a son. At 29, Siddhartha abandoned his home and wandered as an ascetic (*the practice of self-denial*). At this time, he became known as Gautama. Legend was that Gautama saw pain and old age and then lost his youth.

He travelled for 7 years seeking spiritual enlightenment by studying



BUDDHISM

under two teachers and living as an ascetic until he came to the kingdom of Magadha and the town of Urvella. It was there in a beautiful forest that he sat under the famous tree of enlightenment, the bo tree, and meditated, waiting for enlightenment. He was 35 years old at the time. He had tried fasting, suppression of breath and repression of desires as an ascetic, but was still searching. The five other ascetics travelling with him eventually left. Finally, sitting under the tree of knowledge, he passed thru stages to achieve enlightenment, or *Nirvana*.

At this time he became the Buddha, or enlightened one.

At first, he stayed near the tree, enjoying his enlightenment. At the request of the Supreme Being himself "Brahma Sahampati", Buddha purposefully resolved to proclaim to the world the truth of his knowledge, enlightenment. He formally opened a mission at Benares. Preaching first to ascetics who had been his companions, he told them of the perfect way leading to inner peace, knowledge and enlightenment. The 8-fold path to Nirvana is as follows:

1. Right faith
 2. Right resolve
 3. Right speech
 4. Right action
 5. Right living
 6. Right effort
 7. Right thought
 8. Right self-concentration.
- Buddhists believe, as the Hindus, in

transmigration of souls. The four sacred truths are: 1) Suffering is universal; 2) Cause is desire or attachment; 3) Attachment is ended by nirvana; 4) The way to attain nirvana is thru enlightenment. Thru nirvana, the soul is released from the evil of desire and ignorance.

The essence of Buddha's teaching is suffering. Regarded by Hindus as the bane of existence, it is a feeling which could easily arise in the atmosphere of strife and oppression in which they lived. Birth is suffering, life is suffering, and so on...

Buddhism differs from Hinduism in that there is a freedom from ceremonies. To become a Buddhist monk, for example, requires no vows of obedience or rites to administer. To leave the order, you may simply state that you wish to leave and walk away. Buddha ignored the caste system and stressed the importance of the individual. The predominant explanation of Buddhism's rising popularity was that in the Eastern lands where it began, there was already a questioning of the high Brahman pretensions, along with the sacrifices, the Vedic teachings, and the strict rules within the caste system.

Buddha's teachings have some surface similarities with the teachings of Christ. He often taught in parables, he had a gang of followers surrounding him wherever he went, and there was even a courtesan similar to Mary Magdalene in one of his encounters. But the Christian virtue of love is not taught in Buddhism. Benevolence is a better description, which would mean a feeling that is alike with regard to both joy or pain, honor or dishonor.

In this regard, Buddhism has been said to be even atheistic, as the moral precepts taught are not based upon belief or obedience to a supreme ruler or being. The practice of Zen Buddhism and the sects which have arisen in China and Japan do not regard Buddha as a god. The emphasis is on the importance of enlightenment of

(continued on back page)

Fellow atheists, we are not alone. Some of the most distinguished intellects of our time have espoused the same views as our members regarding the existence of a god and an afterlife. Here are two recent quotes from Carl Sagan, the distinguished astronomer, and Marilyn Vos Savant, who writes a column by virtue of her exceptionally high IQ level:

Fellow feeling

Sagan: "...I share the view of a hero of mine, Albert Einstein: 'I cannot conceive of a god who rewards and punishes his creatures or has a will of the kind that we experience in ourselves. Neither can I—nor would I want to—conceive of an individual that survives his physical death. Let feeble souls, from fear or absurd egotism, cherish such thoughts. I am satisfied with the mystery of the eternity of life and a glimpse of the marvelous structure of the existing world, together with the devoted striving to compre-

hend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the Reason that manifests itself in nature."

Savant, when asked about "Moral authority" writes: "Most people find the source of moral authority in their religions, but I don't. That's because there would be multiple authorities, many of them in conflict and most of them biased. Speaking only for myself, I find the sources of moral authority in the lessons of history—the principles that arise out of the mass of good choices, bad ones and all the rest in between.Not only do we learn from the mistakes of others, but we also learn that it is wiser to enthrone and follow principles than it is to enthrone and follow people."

In spite of the hostility our culture seems to hold toward us, it seems we atheists are in good company!

*This particular quote is used at the introduction of all Atheists of Florida Forum cable TV programs.

ATHEISTS are



BYOND BELIEF

Use the form below to join or renew your membership in Atheists of Florida for 1996. Shown at left is our most recent bumper sticker. Dark blue on yellow, the actual size is 3" X 1 1/2". Available for \$1 donation to Atheists of Florida. Tampa or Miami.

Atheists of Florida, Inc. MEMBERSHIP FORM

If your mailing label is correct on the reverse side of this form, you need only check the membership category you desire and send this form to:

Atheists of Florida
P.O. Box 530102
Miami, FL 33153-0102

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Phone: () _____

Date: _____ Signature: _____



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Imagine A World Beyond Belief See the future as it could be...at the 2nd Annual Atheist Alliance Convention

Easter Weekend April 5,6,7, 1996
Minneapolis-St.Paul, Minnesota

Hosted by Minnesota Atheists

Humankind is in deep trouble and religionists claim they have the answer--government mandated prayers, tax supported religious activities and a return to the repressive practices of the 50's.

What do atheists say? Do we have a better answer? This convention invites you to imagine a world beyond belief, where solutions to problems are found in compassion, common sense, reason and facts, not irrational dogma. We will explore some of our current problems from this secular, human-centered viewpoint.

The Sheraton Park Place Hotel is the site for our convention. We have negotiated room rates at the astonishingly low price of \$39 a night, single or double, plus the lowest hotel tax in the area -- only 6.5%.

An Outstanding Program

This convention will offer an inventive mix of mind-expanding presentations and creative entertainment.

"Sexuality in America: Walking Backwards Into the 21st Century"

...is the title of the presentation by our Saturday banquet speaker, the noted sociologist and sex researcher, Prof. Ira Reiss, from the University of Minnesota. Reiss is a provocative speaker and co-author of *An End to Shame: Shaping our Next Sexual Revolution*, a book that highlights the negative influence of religion on the development of a healthy sexuality.

Entertainment!

Our Friday night dinner party will feature the delightful Bob McCoy, a W.C. Fields look-alike, master showman, and proprietor of The Museum of Questionable Medical Devices. Topic: "P.T. Barnum Was Right."

A Speculative Look at the Future

The religion-free future imagined by the late Gene Rodenberry, creator of *Star Trek* will be analyzed by Scott Lohman and Margaret Downey. See what happens when "Capt. Kirk" meets "Capt. Janeway."

Hotel Reservations

Call by March 16 Sheraton Park Place Hotel
1-394 and Hwy 100, Minneapolis
1-800-542-5566

Be sure to say you are with the Atheist Alliance Convention to get the special rates.
For more information call Minnesota Atheists
Marie Castle, 612-588-1597 / Steve Petersen, 612-484-9277

The 1995 Mark Twain Scholarship Fund first place scholarship award was presented February 25, 1996 at the Humanists of Florida seventeenth annual conference in Clearwater. Here is the text of Reyes' winning entry.

An Atheist's Manifesto of Human Rights

—George I. Reyes
Since the dawn of humanity, atheism has been relegated to a negative, contrary intellectual philosophy. Our detractors have made us look like anything but the intelligent, tolerant, and conscious people we are. Atheism has been assigned to silence, thrown into the lowest heap in the market place of ideas.

If someone would ask: "what have Atheists contributed to the general welfare of humanity?" the answer could be close to silence. However, our influence, contrived and distorted, has to be polished in order to realize that without freethought, our world would be in a still graver state of affair: without secularism generally and atheism in particular, the spirit of brotherhood would be non-existent.

Religious ideas have engendered crimes we are still recoiling from. Its irrational premises from which it bases its dogma puts little faith on human dignity, human worth, and human individualism. And why should it not? Religion is an inherently anti-human conviction based on a primitive view of the world.

Today we live in a world where people with single-handed amnesia give credit to religion, especially Judeo-Christianity, for the human rights we all take for granted. Our religious leaders prey upon that amnesia to limit the knowledge of what they fear the most: religion has been adversary to freedom, not the ally.

Sadly, the founders of our secular country are thought of as deeply religious men who asked for divine guidance in their affairs. How soon do we forget that those men were representatives of the European enlightenment, a movement which tried to shackle off their inherited superstitious bonds. Jefferson, Washington, Lincoln, or Franklin are often misquoted and relegated to a strange form of Christian fundamentalism no one dares to oppose. But none of these men could have been an ally to religion.

Freedom to express ourselves unhampered by dogma was gained by hard-fought endeavors

developed and found upon reason, logic, and sanity. Our social contract is a document which accepts all of us, regardless of national boundaries, as worthy people, deserving respect. Every form of government, every political treatise, every document respecting the rights of men and women to fulfill their human dignity did not come from divine inspiration from a god and/or a paradise we know nothing about.

Political rights to disempowered groups cannot be conferred when religion thinks they are an abomination to god's plan. Equality to women cannot be conceded when the religious mind-set dismisses her as the cause of original sin. In this country alone, the earliest feminists were strong foe of religion. Not one of them would think that religion would give them their inherent worth since, after all, it is god who irrationally bestowed that right.

A theocracy could not have found a United Nations, or formalized plans for a League of Nations, or established a Constitution where the church was separate from civil society. A theocracy could not have fathomed freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to privacy. A theocracy could not have envisioned freedom for dissidents, or freedom of the mind. Ask yourselves, when was the last time you read in a religious treatise: "All human beings are born free and equal with reason in dignity and right." Never! Calvin, Luther, or another "respected" religious figure would have flinched in horror.

The Bible, god's word, is filled to the brim with mental insanity and paranoia, xenophobia, and ethnic cleansing. The Koran borders on senselessness. Evangelism blinds reason to a sad mockery.

The heavens are devoid of morality. Gods are figments of human imagination. If we don't work for a better future, we will go down into the dark ages with unrelenting speed. Atheists more than ever need to be vocal, to energize themselves for action, to learn about their past, and band themselves with the will often lacking in the past. Global peace demands it, brotherly sympathy entails our call to action. For there cannot be peace when religion intermingles itself with the course of human affair.

The great Spanish philosopher George Santayana once remarked that one is doomed to repeat history if one was ignorant of it. Atheists need to know that unless we are unabashedly aggressive, I cannot but sadly concur with Santayana that our hard-fought battles can easily turn into the bony remnants of Don Quixote's nag, Rocinante. For, a constitution, a political treatise, or a universal declaration on human worth wanting in tolerance, balanced judgement, and respect can easily degenerate into an artificial sham.

NEWS FILES

Court Upholds Verdict Against Christian Scientists in Child's Death

WASHINGTON — Four Christian Scientists lost their Supreme Court appeal last January of a \$1.5 million award they were ordered to pay over the death of a boy whose diabetes was treated with prayer instead of medical care.

Christian Science teaches that prayer is the most effective treatment for illness and that conventional medicine interferes with spiritual healing.

Eleven-year-old Ian Lundman of Independence, Minn., died of diabetes in May, 1989 after severe vomiting and excessive urination. His mother, Kathleen McKown, had prayed for her son. When his condition did not improve, she and her husband, William McKown, consulted church officials and brought in a Christian Science practitioner and nurse to pray over him.

The McKowns and church practitioner Mario Tosto were charged with second-degree manslaughter. Minnesota courts dismissed the charges, saying state law lets parents rely on "spiritual treatment" for sick children. At least 40 other states have similar laws.

Douglas G. Lundman, Mrs. McKown's former husband and Ian's father, filed a wrongful-death lawsuit in 1991 against the McKowns. Tosto, Christian Science nurse Quinna Lamb and the First Church of Christ Scientist in Boston. The church was ordered to pay Lundman \$9 million in punitive damages, which are designed to punish and deter misconduct, while the four church members were ordered to pay him \$1.5 million in compensatory damages. A state appeals court upheld the compensatory award but threw out the punitive award. The church's advocacy of spiritual treatment is "entitled to substantial free exercise protection," the court said.

Lundman's attorney, James Kaster, said the \$1.5 million award sends the message "that exclusive reliance on prayer treatment instead of medical care for a seriously ill child can give rise to ... liability."

The four church members' appeal said that forcing them to pay damages amounts to punishment for religious thought and for practicing religion.

House Approves Controversial School Voucher Program for DC

WASHINGTON — The House approved a school voucher program last November for District of Columbia schools that has been opposed by city officials and teachers unions but pushed by Christian conservatives. The program to give poor residents access to private school scholarships funded partially with federal money was contained in a \$100 million school reform plan that otherwise had the support of the district's delegate to Congress and city council.

Christian conservatives, unhappy with public schools, have for years pushed the idea of giving parents tax money to send their children to private schools. Currently, Milwaukee has the only operating program, but its program and an Ohio proposal have been challenged in court on the grounds that they violate the constitutional separation of church and state.

Opponents of the D.C. voucher plan said it would draw off the best students from public schools at a time when officials should be trying to improve the overall system.

"I don't dispute the obvious — that some individual students may profit. But how in the world would that improve the educational quality in the district for those not privileged to be accepted at private schools in neighboring states?" asked Rep. William Clay, D-Mo.

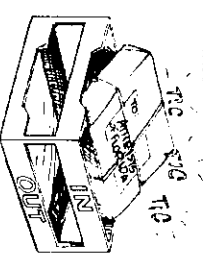
House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who made a rare appearance in the debate, said, "We should quit requiring the children of District of Columbia to go to violent schools, drug-ridden schools and schools that are dens of illiteracy and dens of ignorance, and we should give them a chance to have a scholarship and go to a decent place." The speaker also took swipes at President Clinton and Vice President Gore, whose children live in the district but attend private schools.

Critics maintain such voucher programs are unconstitutional because tax money could be spent to send students to religious schools. "You cannot pass the collection plate to taxpayers," said Joseph Conn, a spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State. The group says it will file a lawsuit challenging the plan if the House version of the city's budget becomes law.

Last month, Congressional Republicans kicked off a "Community Renewal Project" that includes pilot school voucher programs for low-income students in as many as 100 blighted cities.



Letters



Author says "thanks"

Dear Editor:
Enclosed is my membership renewal for 1996.
Thank you for publishing my letter in the December, '95 newsletter. I know you have a space constraint.
Your announced scenarios for a different

religion must be a cliché. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are contradictory religions in such a way that it would be impossible for a single, serious god to have inspired or dictated them. Since each one affirms to be the "true one," without any evidence whatsoever, the conclusion must be that all of them are man-made.

Jim Strayer's work on the ten commandments was also very interesting, for the Bible itself is crowded with passages that contradict the ten commandments.

Sincerely,
Mike Perdomo
Miami

Direct from the West Garden!

This letter, sent our way on the internet, was a response to another letter in the Daytona News Journal.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
News Journal
Daytona Beach FL 32118
January 22, 1996

Yo!
This letter is in response to "BELIEVER PROUD OF IDEALS OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT", sent in by David Itoh.
The human species has been

evolving and stumbling around this insignificant planet for about 70 million years. Primitive human creatures first discovered fire only 1.5 million years ago, and figured out the benefits of the wheel only 6 thousand years ago.

Back in the very early days of humanity nobody knew why it rained, what the sun was, or why the moon changed shape. It wasn't even known what the moon was! "In the beginning", (before knowledge and science), religion was "created" as a knowledge substitute. Over the ages, religion was also found to be a useful political tool for controlling populations. When you say "historically these ideals have worked for this country for more than 200 years and if given a chance, they can work again," that could actually be a true statement.

Religion has worked wonderfully well at thwarting science, technology, and social progress at every turn. Religion is also the biggest cause of war. And as for your 200 year track record, it's like driving a new car around the block and then declaring it dependable. I hate to break it to ya bud, but you're driving a clunker which just rolled off the assembly line.

This country is big and powerful, but I could hardly call it "great". When we stop terrorizing the planet with our big fists & war machines, end racism, poverty, and hunger, and stop creating homelessness & despair, we would still be far from "great". Furthermore, what "founded this country" was some thinking person's "bizarre idea" that the world wasn't flat.
Get a grip. This country is a zygote. Let it be born and become great.

RC WILLIAMS
New Smyrna Beach, FL

MARK ANDREW TROP

Attorney at Law

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