

# Celebrating the End of Spectral Evidence

If it can't be shown to exist, it isn't evidence.

By David Diskin

Atheists don't have no songs, according to Steve Martin. Of course that's not entirely true, as evidenced by the growing number of specifically non-religious artists like Shelley Segal and Quiet Company.

Music is just one aspect of a culture. There's art, and we have that too. Adrian Covert, from San Francisco, has wonderful pieces that pay tribute to beloved secularists and many of us are familiar with the clever and creative ceramic pieces from artist Amy Davis Roth. Not to mention the wealth of atheist documentaries and films and a number of atheist film festivals that are popping up across the nation.

But what about holidays? Do atheists have no holidays? Surprisingly, Steve, we do. This October, Atheist groups throughout the country will be celebrating Freethought Day. Specifically, the 322nd Freethought Day, as it dates back to October 12, 1692. If there's anything you might recognize from 1692, it's the Salem Witch Trials. Not exactly the highlight of our country's history, but the date is significant from a secular perspective.

For about eight months prior our special day, residents of Massachusetts were put on trial for the most bizarre of crimes – and the evidence for these crimes was often supernatural. You've likely seen *The Crucible*, written by Arthur Miller (an atheist), which portrays quite well the ridicu-

lousness of the court system that ultimately led to the execution of twenty people, mostly women.

The folk of Massachusetts were fond of invoking what was termed "spectral evidence". That is, the Devil decides to wrong someone by taking the shape or body of a person. However – and this is how the court found people guilty – theology claims that the Devil can only embody an individual with their prior consent.

And so, if the wronged person

claimed to have seen the Devil's apparition – or something equally spooky – that alone was "spectral evidence" for a conviction. Often the punishment was death. (The use of the word "evidence" reminds me of the Creation Museum's use of the word "museum".)

To their credit, several ministers pleaded the court to cease this practice – or at the least require a secondary piece of evidence that coincides with the spectral claim. Increase Mather, a Puritan minister

and friend of many judges, offered several sermons in attempt to quell the hysteria and denounce the admission of such "evidence".

In Mather's book "Cases of Conscience", he wrote "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one Innocent Person should be Condemned." This was based on Mather's belief that the Devil could occupy the body of a perfectly innocent person, not because of rational thought.

Mather's son, Cotton Mather (also famous for championing inoculation) took the conversation a step further. Working with his father and other ministers, he compiled "The Return of Several Ministers Consulted, Verse III

Nonetheless, it added fuel to the fire and several took notice, including the Governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, William Phips. Newly appointed to Massachusetts, Phips found himself in a colony succumbed to the mass hysteria that we now call the Salem Witch Trials. He established a court specifically to deal with the 100-150 arrests and cases, and over the course of a half-year many lives were lost. But upon hearing testimony from concerned citizens, including ministers and those pleading for their lives, Phips took action. He wrote two letters to the Privy Council of the British monarchs describing the events that had taken place and relaying his decision to end the admission of "spectral evidence":

"... I found that the name and shape of several persons who were doubtless innocent and to my

certian knowlege of good reputation for which cause I have now forbidden the committing of any more that shall be accused without anavoydable necessity, and those that have been committed I would shelter from any Proceedings against them wherein there may be the least suspicion of any wrong to be done unto the Innocent."

In his second letter, he adds:

"When I put an end to the Court there ware at least fifty persons in prison in great misery by reason of the extream cold and their poverty, most of them having only spectre evidence against them and their mittimusse being defective, I caused some of them to be lettout upon bayle and put the Judges upon consideration of a way to reliefe others"

After his declaration many cases were tried from January to April 1693, and because "spectral evidence" was not permitted, most cases were outright dismissed. Of those that went to trial, only three were found guilty – and they were later pardoned by Governor Phips.

So where does that leave us, 322





years later?

In Orlando, the Florida Humanist Association will hold a three-day event with headline speaker Lawrence Krauss and many others. And further north, the Secular Humanist Society of New York is hosting a Freethought Day Celebration Lunch with Jennifer Michael Hecht, author of *Doubt*.

On the other side of the country, I'll be celebrating with hundreds of my friends at Sacramento Freethought Day. We started our annual event, which we believe is the largest of its kind, 13 years ago.

For its first ten years, Freethought Day was a compact event that lasted half an afternoon and drew dozens of locals to a public place for celebration. Many know the event's coordinator for its first decade, Mynga Futrell. She and her team set forth a series of traditions that we still practice today.

We sought out recognition from our local elected officials, asking them to proclaim "Freethought Day" in the name of the advancement of science, upholding the separation of church and state, and the first amendment. Every year since, we repeat the process and reach out to more officials, adding more recognition to our displays. And yes, we are occasionally snubbed but we march

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on.

We also sang, as a group, "Die Gedanken Sind Frei ("Our Thoughts are Free!"), and have done so every year since. (We now print the lyrics in our program.)

Our first speaker was none other than Bobbie Kirkhart, vice-president of Atheist Alliance of America. We also heard from activists Henda Lea, Cleo Kocol, Ron Fegley, Paul Geisert, and Kevin Schultz.

While our first event thirteen years ago peaked at about 30 people, we've grown into a weekend event that is expecting 400 this year at the perfect venue: the California State Capitol Building. Looking back, past venues included the Sacramento County Courthouse, the Old Town Waterfront Park, Caesar Chavez Park, the McGeorge School of Law, and Sacramento's Land Park. We've strived for places where the public might casually stroll past, take a gander, and perhaps join us in celebration.

Our speakers have always been a big draw, too. And we try to mix recognizable names with local and regional speakers that also have something important to say. Past speakers have included Michael Newdow, Matt LaClair, Mel Lipman, Fred Edwards, Dan Barker, Michael Werner, Mikey Weinstein, Jessica Ahlquist, AJ Johnson, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Heina Dadabhoj, Sean Faircloth, and Greta Christina.

This year, we're looking forward to hearing from sociologist Phil Zuckerman, secular lobbyist Tom Manger of the Secular Coalition for California, author Dan Arel, illusionist Ryan Kane, podcaster Ross Blocher, and skeptic Rebecca Watson.

Music and live entertainment has been a big part of our event each year, too. Being an outdoor festival that is partially designed to attract the public, we recognized early on that music is important in achieving that. From our first year with Futrell and Lea on guitar, recent Sacramento Freethought Days have played host to entertainers Shelley Segal, Baba Brinkman, the Phenomenauts, Keith Lowell Jensen, Brian Dalton (Mr. Deity), and poet Victor Harris. We've even brought in our local irreverent musical group, the Mockingbirds, led by author and speaker Andi Griffith. And in support of the written word, a recent addition to our traditions is our Authors' Panel, an hour-long Q&A session featuring a half-dozen local and national authors like David Fitzgerald, Richard Carrier, and Brendan Powell Smith... and now podcasters too, including Tom Beasley (An American Atheist) and Carrie Poppy (Oh No, Ross and Carrie).

Local groups have contributed greatly to Freethought Day over the years. The Sacramento Public Library often brings a table dedicated

to "banned books". We've provided tables to WEAVE, the local domestic violence organization, and affiliates of the Secular Student Alliance. Local groups also chip in to share the expenses, including Atheists and Other Freethinkers, the Humanist Association of the Greater Sacramento Area, and the newly established Sacramento chapter of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Camp Quest West even provides a program of its own for children whose parents want to attend the main event, complete with bounce house and balloon animals.

Each year at Sacramento Freethought Day has its own theme. Last year we celebrated the diversity of the secular movement with "The Many Voices of Reason". In 2010 we proclaimed "Equality for Everyone"

and in 2008 we urged attendees to "Celebrate our Secular Heritage".

Running an event like Freethought Day does not come without its expenses... speaker airfare and lodging, venue and furniture rentals, marketing and decorations all have a price. Thankfully, the Sacramento area is generously supportive and contributes through donations and tickets to our Supporters' Reception. The reception is a chance for attendees to mingle with speakers while enjoying wine and dessert and live entertainment.

And one of the most important -- and attractive -- parts of each year's event is our Freethinker Gallery that features large portraits of those who have contributed to the freethought movement in substantial ways. Past inductees include Hypatia, Bayard

Rustin, Frank Zappa, George Orwell, Butterfly McQueen, and nearly a dozen more.

With each new generation, traditions, music, art, and more add to our culture. In February we honor the birth of the great Charles Darwin. In April, many of us load up on carbs for "Pastaover", in honor of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. In December, we enjoy Human Light.

And in October, I hope you'll join me in celebrating the end of spectral evidence -- and all that it represents -- at Freethought Day.

*David Diskin is the chair of the Sacramento Freethought Day Committee and president of Camp Quest West. He lives in Lodi, CA and teaches computer science at University of the Pacific.*

Atheists · Humanists · Skeptics · Agnostics · Freethinkers

# Sacramento's Freethought Day

Free Admission!

Sunday, Oct 12<sup>th</sup> · California State Capitol