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Inside This Issue

- 1** February 25, 2004 Meeting:
CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

- 1** STOKING THE "PASSION"

- 2** CAUGHT ON THE INTERNET

- 3** THIS MONTH'S BOOK BEAT:
Camus & Sartre and *Faking It*

- 3** DEMI-DARWIN AWARD?

- 4** THE RATIONAL COMMUNITY
CALENDAR

For past issues, bibliography, links to other skeptics, and more, check out the SORT Website:

www.quiknet.com/~kitray/index1.html

For more about the co-founders of SORT, see

www.spangenburgandmoser.com

February 2004
SORT Meeting
Wednesday,
February 25, 2004
7:00 P.M.

Room 1, Library
Kinney High School
2710 Kilgore Rd., Rancho Cordova
(See driving directions, p. 3)

The **SORTified NEWS**

“Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.”

—Clarence Darrow

February 25 Meeting

CONSIDERING CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

It's a question that we don't have to face everyday and when it does come up we usually have a quick answer. For most of us, though, an echo lingers and we spend a little while rethinking our answer, running through possible permutations, going through "what ifs." Then the daily business of our lives kicks in again and we set the questions aside, fall back on our original answer and go about our business.

This month at SORT we'll be taking a look at capital punishment and the arguments for and against it—and in the process we may learn a little more about ourselves, our basic philosophies and the society we live in.

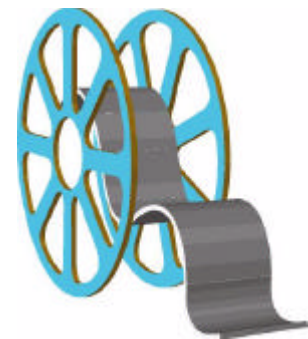
It should be an intriguing and thought-provoking evening and we hope to see you at our open roundtable discussion.



Bring yourself, bring a friend. Remember all SORT meetings are free and open to the public. As usual there will be free coffee

(regular and decaf), soft drinks and cookies to keep the conversation warm and stimulating.

As usual, you'll find us at the Kinney High School library in Rancho Cordova. (See driving directions on page 3.) That's Wednesday, February 25th, from 7:00–9:00 p.m.



STOKING THE "PASSION"

Well, Ash Wednesday is coming up and with it the opening of Mel Gibson's controversial religious film *The Passion of the Christ*. Unless you have been living in a cave somewhere you can't have missed the heavily orchestrated Hollywood hype.

It seems like only a few months ago, when word went around that Gibson was having trouble finding exhibitors for the film. Now, thanks to some fancy dancing by the Hollywood hype machine, hundreds of churches in the U.S. are promoting the film and turning its opening into a quasi-reli-

gious event. A typical example is a church in Arkansas that has rented six local theaters and purchased 1,400 tickets.

“I’m very excited about what Gibson has done, he’s risked so much to portray the last week in Jesus’ life,” Pastor Chuck Monon told a local television news crew. “We’re encouraging people to bring friends and family. Response has been huge.”

During a recent NASCAR race at Daytona one of the participating drivers displayed logos from the film on his race car, while a television station in Kansas City, Missouri, quoted local religious leaders as saying that the film was the greatest “outreach opportunity in 2000 years.”

Even the negative publicity by Jewish groups who fear the film will promote anti-Jewish feelings due to its portrayal of Jews and by others who are concerned about the film’s high level of violence and brutality has only helped to promote the film even more.

Recently, too, rumors have sprung up that the release pattern of the film has it playing in small cities first and areas without large Jewish populations in order to build up more positive hype to counter any later attacks labeling the film as anti-Semitic.

Whether these latest rumors are true or not, the heavy and obvious orchestration of the hype surrounding the film makes us question somewhat Gibson’s sincerity as he makes the rounds of talk shows and news interviews. There is little doubt that Gibson is honestly a deeply religious man,

and also one who puts his money where his mouth is. The film represents a large investment of both his money and his time. There is also little doubt, though, that the whole situation is beginning to look a little too much like the all-too-familiar exploitation practiced by seedy television evangelists, writ on a much larger, Hollywood-sized scale.



CAUGHT ON THE INTERNET

And finally, a weird little story from the Florida Television station WFTV.com to accompany this month's SORT topic. The web page reports that Brian Price, a former prison chef, has just completed a cookbook featuring the last meals of death row prisoners.

The book, entitled *Meals to Die For*, is scheduled to be published in March and includes recipes for such items as “gallows gravy” and “rice rigor mortis.” One of the 42 recipes in the book of last meals requested by convicts about to be executed, “Old Sparky’s Genuine Convict Chili,” measures levels of spice in 5,000, 10,000, and 20,000 volts. “Some folks think that I’m making fun at a serious and solemn subject,” Price told interviewers. “My

The Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT) . . .

- Is dedicated to the promotion of rational thinking in all areas of life.
- Upholds the superiority of science over the mystical.
- Promotes and supports all efforts of intelligent communication that provide a counterpoint to the strong waves of anti-rationalism, irrationalism, and mysticism sweeping the world today.

Toward these ends we . . .

- Host a monthly discussion group.
- Publish a monthly newsletter.
- Host special events, talks, and presentations.
- Host a web page.

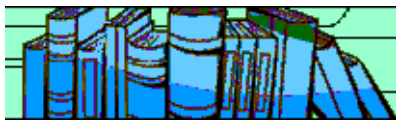
While SORT began with and still continues to be concerned with the promotion of critical thinking in areas dealing with the pseudo-scientific, the paranormal, the mystical, and the fraudulent, we strongly promote critical thinking in *all* areas of human thought and endeavor.

The core of SORT activities is our discussion group. The art of intelligent conversation is not dead. We at SORT believe that rational conversation--the meeting of minds, the free exchange of ideas and the provocative stimulation of critical questions-- is one of the most civilized and enlightening of all human activities.

SORT discussion topics have ranged from UFOs to the Holocaust, from “alternative medicine” to the problems in communicating science to the public, from classic and recent cons and scams to the teaching of critical thinking. Our discussions are hosted by one of the SORT founders, and participants are by no means limited to experts (although they may include experts) but are made up of intelligent and questioning people concerned with the topic of the evening.

intention is not to offend anyone...there's a fascination with death, the macabre, a curiosity of the dark side." Dianne Clements, president of the Houston, Texas-based "Justice for All" organization sees the situation a little differently. "He's a scum-sucking bottom feeder," she told interviewers.

Price, an ex-convict himself, was paroled last year after serving 14 years for a crime involving the kidnapping of his brother-in-law and sexual assault on an ex-wife.



THIS MONTH'S BOOK BEAT

Two interesting new books out. *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It* takes an astute look at these two French writer-philosophers and the way that their diverging philosophical views on existentialism, commitment, and the philosophical-political problem of violence dramatically involved them in an intellectual argument that altered both their lives.

Ronald Aronson is the writer and the book is published by The University of Chicago Press.

While existentialism called for an "authentic self," the second fascinating book out this month, *Faking it* by William Ian Miller, takes a look at how we all, each day, engage in personal fakery

both to ourselves and in our relationships. It's a witty philosophical-sociological take on a human process that most "self-help" authors would turn into pop-psyche pablum. It's published by the Cambridge University press, but like the Camus-Sartre book, it should be available through most book stores.

AND . . . NOMINEE FOR A DEMI-DARWIN AWARD?

Let those lobsters alone! O.K., you can take this one as true or leave it. It comes from "Crazy News," one of our favorite "strange news" sites on the Web. According to Crazy News, it seems that a 24-year-old shop-lifter in Bristol, England, found himself in serious trouble while making a quick grab at a supermarket. His take? A couple of live lobsters snatched from a tank. When spotted in his theft, he shoved the live lobsters down the front of his pants and bolted past other startled customers for the door. You can probably see what's coming, although our less-than-brainy thief obviously didn't. Arriving police found him on the ground, screaming in pain. Emergency medics used a pair of pliers to remove the lob-

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About the Founding Members:

Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser are a husband-and-wife writing team specializing in science and technology. They are co-authors of 52 books and over 100 articles, including publication in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and they are former co-editors of the *Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet (BASIS)*.

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ster claws from what British reporters called "his manhood." Hospital doctors said the shop-lifter would face some lasting effects from what they called a "do-it-yourself vasectomy."

GETTING TO KINNEY HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARY (SORT MEETING PLACE)

Just off Highway 50: Traveling east, Zinfandel Exit to Folsom Boulevard; traveling west, Sunrise exit to Folsom Boulevard. Then:

- (1) Traveling west on Folsom Boulevard, turn left on Kilgore Rd., just past Sunrise. Or, traveling east on Folsom Blvd., turn right on Kilgore.
- (2) Turn right into the Kinney High School parking lot. The library is in the building just south of the parking lot, and the entrance is on the west side of the building.

THE RATIONAL COMMUNITY

CALENDAR

Wednesday, February 25: SORT Meeting (Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking)

Topic: Considering Capital Punishment

Time: Wednesday, 7:00–9:00 p.m., Room One (Library),

Place: Kinney High School, 2710 Kilgore Road, Rancho Cordova

Everyone is welcome and all meetings are free.

Sunday, March 14: AOF Meeting (Atheists and Other Freethinkers)

Topic: Early American Origins of Church–State Separation

The speaker will focus on efforts made by the framers of the Bill of Rights to protect citizens’ “liberty of conscience,” especially pertinent in this time of “faith-based” governmental actions.

Speaker: Dr. Leigh Johnson

Time: Sunday, 2:30–5:00 p.m. (New time)

Place: Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10, 2791 24th Street. (South of Broadway).

Free to the public.

March 2004: Sacramento Skeptics

Topic, Time, and Place: To be announced

For further details, contact Richard Kowaleski at
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SORT

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*Educating Ourselves
and Educating Others*

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