



CRAIG KOHLRUSS / THE FRESNO BEE

People gather for food and free thinking at the Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics' first "Heretics Barbecue" held at Clovis' Letterman Park Sunday. Committed atheists, the curious, the skeptical and even some Christians attended the event.

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## 'Heretics Barbecue' gathers skeptics

**Group for atheists and other nonbelievers hosts local event that goes against the grain.**

By John Ellis / The Fresno Bee

09/07/08 22:24:51

There was a time when Mark Boyd's truck sported a "Darwin fish," which is a parody of the Christian ichthys symbol. Then somebody ripped it off, broke it into four pieces and put it under one of the vehicle's windshield wipers.

Sometimes, it's not easy being an atheist in the Fresno area.

Boyd knows this, which is one of the reasons he helped form the Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics. He wanted a group that allowed like-minded people to gather and discuss issues of common interest.

"It's a conservative city," Boyd said of Fresno metropolitan area. "It's good to have a way to find each other."

On Sunday, about 30 people -- some card-carrying members of the group, some simply curious -- gathered at Letterman Park in Clovis for discussion, some debate and even a bit of chess.

Many Christians might well have been shocked by the conversation. But know this, too: believers in Bigfoot, homeopathic medicine, unidentified flying objects, ghosts and male enhancement drugs would likely have been offended as well.

That's because it wasn't simply a religion-bashing contest. Other areas some dubbed "pseudo-science" also were bashed.

Even some Christians attended, such as Bullard High School science teacher Scott Hatfield, who came to the event straight from Memorial United Methodist Church in Clovis, where he is music director.

Hatfield said there are "flavors of atheism." Some are evangelical in their non-believing zeal, while others may be questioning their faith. In his case, he is a Christian with a strong belief in critical thinking.

Such skepticism, he said, is vital to people who move in society, be it for voting or simply buying products. And because he is a Christian, he sees the good in others in the group whose beliefs steer strongly toward a nonbelief in God.

That includes people like Fresno writer Nick Lewis, who won a Bible at his church as a youngster and was turned off by the words inside. "I was born an atheist," he said. "No one's going to change that."

Dubbed the first "Heretics Barbecue," the gathering also featured books such as "Atheist Universe" alongside pamphlets such as "Skeptical About Homeopathy" and "10 Ways To Be An Atheist Activist."

Those present built UFOs to photograph -- proof, they said, of how easy it is to create a hoax of photographing actual alien spacecraft. They did experiments to debunk homeopathy. They talked of the dangers to society created by those who refuse to vaccinate their children.

Fresno resident Richard Moore talked of the importance of science and scientific methodology and how such serious concepts have been hijacked by those such as "ghost hunters," who

often get rankled when their conclusions are questioned.

Boyd no longer advertises his nonbelief on his car, but he is working to grow the local atheists and skeptics group and others across the San Joaquin Valley as well.

The nonbelievers and skeptics are out there, he said, and are more numerous than people believe. But he admitted it is a struggle in a part of California where Christianity is strong.

"It's not like a church," he quipped. "We can't threaten people with hell if they don't show up."

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CRAIG KOHLRUSS / THE FRESNO BEE  
Scott Hatfield, standing, a Bullard High School science teacher and Christian, chats with members of the Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics at the "Heretics Barbecue" held Sunday in Clovis.



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"Get Out of Hell Free" cards were offered at the first "Heretics Barbecue."

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