

FIG Leaves

Volume 14 Issue 4

April 2005

April FIG Meeting: Tuesday, 26 April 7:00 PM

Baubles of Blasphemy

At the April 26th FIG meeting, Edwin Kagin, Kentucky State Director for American Atheists, will give a lively and humorous talk on his recently released book *Baubles of Blasphemy*. It contains many of Edwin's essays, poems, and other works on a wide variety of topics, many relating to what he has called the "American Religious Civil War (ARCW)". Other writings satirize the ongoing debate regarding Answers in Genesis and their museum of creationism set to open soon in Northern Kentucky, a project with which FIG has done battle.

In *Baubles of Blasphemy*, Edwin defines "blasphemy" as "... the crime of making fun of ridiculous beliefs someone else holds sacred." Come and bring some guests for an evening of humor and fun. Copies of *Baubles of Blasphemy* will be available for purchase at the talk.

Edwin Frederick Kagin, J.D., was born in Greenville, South Carolina, on November 26, 1940. He is an attorney in Union, Kentucky. Kagin is the son of a Presbyterian minister and married to Helen McGregor Kagin, a member of FIG's Board of Directors. He is a founding member and former Vice President of FIG. He is the Director of Camp Quest, the nation's first residential secular summer camp for children of atheists and other freethinkers (www.Camp-Quest.com), started in 1996 by FIG. Kagin is a frequent speaker and debater at regional and national freethought meetings and an outspoken public critic of attempted religious intrusions into secular life and government. He and Helen Kagin recently received the "Atheists of the Year" award from American Atheists.

May FIG Meeting: Sunday, 22 May 2005 (Note Day!)

At 2 PM on Sunday, May 22, Shawn Jeffers will guide us through *Mapping Our Tears*, a unique Holocaust exhibit at the Hebrew Union College

In this innovative, multimedia exhibit, a 1930s European attic setting creates an intimate atmosphere to take you back in time. Every item in the exhibit is connected to a person from the Cincinnati area who survived to tell their stories to the world.

Shawn Jeffers is the Education Coordinator with The Center for Holocaust and Humanity Education and the lead educator for the *Mapping Our Tears* exhibit. He is a member of FIG and serves as a staff member and board member for Camp Quest, Inc.

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Events

(note May meeting Change)

April Potluck

Tuesday 12 April 6:30 PM
At the home of

April Meeting

Tuesday 26 April 7:00 PM
at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio

May Potluck

Tuesday 8 May 6:30 PM
At the home of

May Meeting

Sunday 22 May 2:00 PM
Hebrew Union College

Skeptic's prayer:

Dear God, if you exist, please save my Soul, if I have one.



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March Meeting

Did this Author get it Right?

Speakers: Randy Weaver and Wolf Roder

The discussion was based upon the ideas put forth in the book, *Guns, Germs and Steel* by Jared Diamond (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. 1997) The subject is the role of the environment in the development history of civilizations, with Randy presenting the author's point of view and Wolf generally disagreeing.



Speaker: Randy Weaver

fifty thousand years ago modern humans, -- *Homo sapiens*, appeared. It was after this great leap that humans first entered Australia and New Guinea around forty millenia ago. In these areas all the large animals (*megafauna*) disappeared after the first people arrived. About fourteen thousand years ago humans entered the Americas, and another extinction of *megafauna* occurred. The Mediterranean islands of Crete, Cyprus, Corsica, and Sardinia where entered between 8500 and 4000 BCE. The Caribbean Islands about four thousand BCE. Between 1200 BCE and 1000 CE the Polynesian and Micronesian Islands became inhabited. Not until 300- 800 CE the big island of Madagascar. Polynesian farmers colonized New Zealand around 1000 CE. They became the Maori people.

Drawing on his experiences working with a hunter-gatherer societies in New Guinea, Diamond concluded these people were quite bright. But in more crowded human environments immunity to disease was a more important factor for survival than intelligence. Which leads him to focus on infective diseases. More "primitive" people may actually be brighter than "civilized" people. Diamond states his major theory as: History followed different courses for different peoples because they lived in different environments, not because of biological differences among people themselves.

Diamond feels the Polynesian Islands are a good laboratory for the effects of environment on human societies. People of the same stock populated all of these islands. They entered the islands with cultivated crops (taro, sweet potatoes, breadfruit, bananas and coconuts) and domesticated animals (dogs, chickens and pigs). On some islands these crops would not grow. As the islanders moved farther east some of the domesticated animals were lost. The islands varied in climate, size, isolation and degree of fragmentation, as well as in natural mineral resources. The kinds of societies, which evolved, were, as one would predict based on the environments. Where large populations and high population



FIG Leaves - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to:

figleaves@fuse.net;

or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 19034, Cincinnati, OH 45219. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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densities were possible, relatively complex societies arose. Where densities and small populations were all that could be supported, only simple hunter-gatherer societies survived. New Zealand was uniquely different. This very large island not only supported agriculture, but an advanced agriculture, which allowed a high population density and a high degree of political organization.

Diamond devotes a chapter to the encounter between the “old world” of Europe and the “new world” in the Americas. The steel, guns, horses, germs, and greater communication skills of the Spaniards simply overwhelmed the native Americans. Why were they so easily overwhelmed?

Randy moved on to – Farmer Power. More consumable calories means more people. Most plant species are useless as food. By selectively growing things we can eat so that they constitute 90 percent of our diet rather than a small proportion, we are able to support a hundredfold population. By adding livestock we gain the advantages of manure and of animal power in plowing as well as of meat and milk. The ox-drawn plow enabled cultivation of land which otherwise can not be plowed. We have to understand that farming wasn’t suddenly *discovered* whole. It was developed in little steps. Most species tamed have really become planet wide staples. These were domesticated by prehistorical people many years ago. One of the striking facts about the domestication of plants and animals is how few species were tamed in the last two thousand years. The question is: why did agriculture arise in some places earlier than in others?

Was it problems with the local people or problems with the available wild plants? There are some two hundred thousand species of flowering plants, but only a few thousand are eaten by humans, and only a few hundred have been more or less domesticated. A mere dozen species account for over 80 percent of the modern human consumption. These dozen are: wheat, corn, rice, barley, sorghum, soybean, potato, manioc, sweet potato, sugar cane, sugar beet, and banana.

Diamond compared three regions: The Fertile Crescent, New Guinea, and the eastern United States. In these three regions food production seems to have arisen independently. The rise of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent has been the most heavily studied. For most plants the wild ancestor has been identified. Its historic range is known, its changes under domestication are known, and the approximate place and time of domestication are known. The Fertile Crescent has three major environmental advantages: 1) the region has a mild Mediterranean climate, wet winters and long dry

summers; 2) the wild ancestors of many of these plants were abundant and highly productive. 3) The flora contains a high percentage of hermaphroditic self-pollinators and therefore “breed true.” Improvements are easy to make in such species.

In New Guinea the climate is tropical, and the typography is diverse. There are many plant and animal species. Archeological evidence shows that agriculture originated around 7000 BCE during a time when all surrounding land masses were still occupied by hunter-gatherers. The world’s leading crop, sugar cane, was developed there. Other crops are *Australimusa* bananas, giant swamp taro, a nut tree-*Canarium indicum*, as well as various grass stems, roots and green vegetables. But New Guinea suffered from major disadvantages: 1) no indigenous cereal crops, 2) no domesticable animals, and, 3) the crops raised were limited in both calories and protein content.

In the Eastern United States in the period 2500-1500 BCE, four crops were domesticated: sunflower, sumpweed (a daisy relative), goosefoot (a relative of spinach) and a local species of squash. For two thousand years these plants were only used to supplement hunter-gathering. They were far short of a complete food package. Between 500-200 BCE knotweed, maygrass and a little barley were domesticated, and only then farming provided a major part of the diet. All of these plants were rich in protein, and two were high in oil. Mexican crops reached the area by the begin of the common era. Corn arrived about 200 but didn’t really catch on until about 900 when a strain was developed that could survive in the northern climate. Beans and Mexican squash were added around 1100 and these formed a rather complete package. This Mexican threesome became the staple farming package throughout much of the central and eastern U.S.

The difference between the Fertile Crescent, New Guinea and the Eastern U.S. followed from the differing suites of animal and plant species available, not from the limitations of the people themselves. When more productive plants arrived from elsewhere both New Guinea and the Eastern U.S. readily adopted them. Randy then commented on the domestication of animals

Why were so many European animals domesticated and so few African or American? Was the fault in the animals or the people? Fourteen species of big herbivorous animals were tamed. Here they are with dates of domestication: sheep (8000 BCE); goat (8000 BCE); cattle (6000 BCE); pig,

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(8000 BCE); horse, (4000 BCE). These were the major five. There were nine others considered minor: Arabian camel (2500 BCE); Bactrian camel (2500 BCE); llama and alpaca (3500 BCE); donkey (4000 BCE); reindeer; water buffalo (4000 BCE); yak, Bali cattle, Mithan. Some dates are unknown. So it appears that thousands of years ago humans domesticated all the large animals that could be domesticated. Diamond makes the point that the important ones inhabited the Middle East, and thus gave Europeans an environmental advantage. Diamond further claims Europeans developed resistance to domesticated animal diseases: measles, tuberculosis, smallpox, flu, pertussis, *falciparum* malaria. These illnesses ravaged the Native American populations, while only one New World disease was brought back to Europe from the Americas – syphilis.

If we look at the world at the time of Christ, clearly the Roman Empire, particularly the northern coast of the Mediterranean was the leading developed region. Places like England, Germany and most of France were backwaters. Look at the world at 1500 before Columbus and the European expansion all over the world. At that time the most important region would have been the Ottoman Empire; they dominated the Mediterranean, the Middle East and much of Europe all the way to Vienna. It was the Ottoman Empire that blocked the way to the Far East and caused the Spanish and Portuguese to try to find a seaway to Asia.

When you talk about the environment, clearly it plays some role in the development and evolution of societies and in economic development. This idea is very old, it goes back to about 400 BCE to the Greek historian Herodotus. He pointed out that environment plays a great role in the nature of peoples; the Scythians, for instance, the people who lived north of the Black Sea are blond and blue-eyed and the Ethiopians are black and have curly hair. Today we don't really ascribe these difference the environment directly.

Wolf went to the history of his own discipline – geography, which became established around the turn of the last century, about 1890-1910. This was the high point of “scientific” racism. A period when it was “known” that development was the result of human races. It was obvious to European scientists that Africans were backward and stupid, the Chinese were sneaky and underhanded, the Japanese were imitative and couldn't invent anything themselves, and the Indians have an unreliable and weak character. These were taken as absolute truths. Jim Crow was at its peak in the U.S. and Europeans grabbed all parts of the world not yet taken by colonial powers, i.e. Africa and Asia.

Some early geographers disagreed and pointed to the effects of the environment. The dean of geographers at the time, William Morris Davis, downright preached that geography was the study of the effects of environment on society. Ellen Churchill Semple explored eastern Kentucky on horseback. She observed an anglo-saxon population whose ancestors had settled in this backwoods area. They still spoke a Shakespearean English. Obviously the best biological type, yet among the most backward Americans. Clearly the remote and isolated environment was to blame. Semple went on to become a major scholar and a president of the Association of American Geographers. She wrote a number of volumes on the role of environment in history, 



At this point we leave Randy and go to Wolf's presentation.

Wolf began by saying if he knew what made some countries rich and some poor he could become very rich as advisor to the governments of poor countries. The Question of economic

Speaker: Wolf Roder

development is not as simple as President Reagan thought, who exalted the democratic free market to make everyone rich. A lot of countries in Africa have followed perfectly good free markets since colonial times, and yet they're poor. On the other hand the Chinese seem to be doing very well without democracy. The Russians built their industry in the thirties without a free market while the rest of the world was in a depression.

Where Wolf disagrees with Jared Diamond is the claim the environment is a major cause of development. Over Diamond's long history it is quite difficult to explain why some countries are rich and some are poor. If you were to look at the world about twelve thousand years ago, there was no agriculture and most parts of the world were equally rich or poor. In later history, the “most advanced” varied by time and place.



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which are still worth reading.

Another geographer Ellsworth Huntington became famous by writing about the effect of changes in climate in *The Pulse of Asia* and many other volumes. One of his papers, in the 1919 *Geographical Review*, looks at the recently liberated Palestine. His conclusion is that no modern, industrial society can arise in this environment. We talk about this history as the era of environmental determinism, in fact it sometimes was referred to as “geographic” determinism.

Change came with the rise of cultural, as distinct from physical (racial) anthropology. Franz Boas immigrated from Germany, he had a PhD which included some training in geography. In the United States he was offered an opportunity to study Eskimos villages. He went there fully expecting to find how Eskimo society was shaped by the environment. He found they did not learn from the environment, but from their parents and their culture. The determinant of what people do is not the environment but it is culture. Franz Boas had invented cultural anthropology. He taught at Columbia University for many years. Some of the most famous anthropologists were his students, e.g. Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. The disagreement between geography and anthropology has not been completely resolved to this day.

In the twenties geographers had to ask: What is the actual effect of the environment on people? How does the environment have an effect on the culture? For several summers a number of professional geographers met for field research in Wisconsin to find out exactly what was the effect of the environment on local farmers. Much was learned (and published) about the environment, especially on soils and water courses. Some things were learned about farmers’ decision making. But the influence of the environment on the farming culture remained elusive. Immigrants to America don’t ask the native people or look to the environment. They farm the way they learned from their parents in the old country.

In science, it is not enough to have a broad correlation, which is all Diamond has, you need to learn how the mechanism works. For many years doctors knew smoking in general was not good for people, but until it was understood how the smoke affected the *alveoli* no action was taken.

—Reported by George Maurer (Special thanks to Randy Weaver for sending me a copy of his notes after my recording apparatus failed to pick up his opening remarks.)

Science meets Society: AAAS and “non-Overlapping Magisteria”

On Saturday, six distinguished scholars solemnly discussed the late Stephen Jay Gould’s idea that both science and religion have their place in a full life, but do not overlap. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have chosen science as a career have an obligation to share with the public what we learn about how the world works. Not because scientists have any claim to greater intellect or virtue, but because science is the only way we have of separating the truth from ideology, or fraud or foolishness. It pains me that some of us get so little gratification from this that they carry on a separate affair with this *Magisteria* person.

— *What’s New* Robert L. Park (25 Feb 05)



2005

Atheists Of The Year

Helen and Edward Kagin

In Honor Of Your
Many Years Of Commitment
And Support For
Atheist Youth In America
From
Grateful American Atheists

When Physicists disagree: Charles Townes wins the Templeton Prize, is cited for spiritual progress.

In his famous paper, *Gathering of the Realms: The Convergence of Science and Religion*, Townes wrote that “Understanding the *order* in the universe and understanding the *purpose* in the universe are not identical, but they are also not very far apart.” They are a universe apart. Steven Weinberg, another great Noble-laureate physicist, wrote “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.” Nevertheless, by our count Townes is the sixth physicist to win the Templeton, which in dollars is larger than the Noble Prize. Others awarded the Templeton include Charles Colson of Watergate fame, and the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham.

-- *What’s New*, Robert L. Park, (11 Mar 2005)



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For the Perplexed: Religion or Science?

By Margaret O’Kain

In the March 27 *New York Times*, Dr. Joel Ibrahim Kreps, a Canadian psychiatrist writes, “There is a well known discrepancy in the literature between psychoanalysts and their clients. While 90 percent of Americans believe in God, only 43 percent of psychiatrists... do.” He then admits he is the exception to the rule and writes what he has noticed about depressive patients from his faith-based point of view.

Depressive people are, “both realistic about life in the world and sensitive to what is going on around them, especially in other people. And almost by definition they are not willing to buy into the hype of the marketers and “good-time Charlies” of the modern world, where everyone is about enjoying oneself and having a good time.” He goes on, “depression is about seeing the world... as it is. If one only sees this lower world of suffering and pain and testing then depression is the only possible affect.” He then offers a way to treat depression by giving his patients, “a sense of the other world – the *Akhira* (the afterlife) and also a sense of the *Ghaib* (the unseen world).” He explains, “from these latter points of view, life takes on new meaning and the heaviest of the material world can be alleviated.”

First, I am struck by how rational and sensitive and seemingly well adjusted the patients he describes are and secondly how simplistic the doctor’s approach to treatment seems to be. However, I do agree with the doctor that we all need to occasionally take leave of this “lower world”, but instead of religion I would argue that science can not only give us a sense of the “unseen world” but also a sense of the “after life!”

Bill Bryson, in his book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, has managed to write about very entailed, dense scientific concepts and make them, not only accessible, but also utterly amazing. He reminds us that one cubic centimeter of air (that takes up the space of a sugar cube) contains 45 billion, billion atoms. He writes, “every atom each of you process has certainly passed through several stars and has been a part of millions of organizations on its way to becoming you.” He continues, “we are so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death that a significant number of our atoms up to a billion for each of us, it has been suggested-probably once belonged to Shakespeare. A billion more each came from Buddha and Genghis Khan and Beethoven and any other historical figure you care to name.”

And as for the “afterlife” Bryson writes, “when we die our atoms will disassemble and move off to find new uses elsewhere as a part of a leaf or other human beings or a drop of dew. Atoms go on practically forever, probably 10³⁵ years.”

Religion might help some escape the day-to-day, earth bound concerns we all must contend with, but the contemplation of science and all its ramifications can also lift our spirits and certainly give us a sense of “other worlds”.

The Pope

Everyone talks about the Pope. For days we have heard little else on the news, and for weeks yet we shall hear more. So I feel we too have to say something about the Pope. Repeatedly we have heard how this Pope was a “media superstar,” and indeed he talked a good talk of peace, and reconciliation, and love. But, it seems there was more talk than action. He was said to have a great impact on young people, but he did little or nothing about his pedophile priests. Indeed, it seemed as if he did not understand that the issue was large and serious. Nor did he seem to understand celibacy as a cause of his shrinking priesthood as his seminaries are forced to recruit or accept less than the best. The Pope ignored reason which calls for research on embryonic stem cells, nor did he appreciate the effects of his “be fruitful and multiply” - no birth control allowed policy on a human population threatening to exceed the carrying capacity of the planet.

So here is what we have to say. We are willing to lay bets on how short a time until this Pope is created a saint. The believers are already praying to him before he is comfortably settled in heaven. I say he will be canonized in about a year, but certainly in less than five.



A Creationist Experiment.

A creation scientist is into experimenting in biology. He has a flea on his lab desk and commands it: “Jump!” And see, the flea jumps. But then he cuts the flea’s hind legs off, sets him on his desk, and commands again: “Jump!” But the flea remains sitting there.

From this experiment the creationist draws the following scientific conclusion. When you cut the hind legs off a flea, then God will strike him deaf.



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Noah's Canyon

Geology collides with theology at the National Park Service. From © *Sierra*, magazine of the Sierra Club, (Mar/Apr 2005) p. 12

When one-armed Civil War hero John Wesley Powell made the first recorded descent of the Grand Canyon in 1869, he predicted that the gorge would prove “a Book of Revelations in the rock-leaved bible of geology.” Today we’re back to the literal Bible: A best-selling book in local national-park stores argues that the canyon was sculpted about 4,500 years ago, in the aftermath of Noah’s Flood. *Grand Canyon: A Different View* brings together the views of dozens of creationist theologians and “flood geologists” to present an alternative to what they call the “evolutionist” or “uniformitarian” view that the canyon’s strata represent up to 1.8 billion years of geological history. A disclaimer notes that all contributions have been peer-reviewed “to ensure a consistent and biblical perspective.”

“Creationist Geologists don’t need to speculate about history,” boasts *Different View* contributor Tasman Walker, “because we accept the eyewitness accounts of past events, preserved in a reliable written record--the Bible.”

Harmonizing that record with the strata of sandstone and limestone full of fossils is no simple task. The fossils are described as the remains of victims of the Flood, and the sedimentary layers as having been deposited by its waters. But then the Flood itself couldn’t be responsible for the canyon, hence the *deus ex machina* of “a great dammed-up lake full of water from the Flood”; when the dam broke, the canyon was carved.

Stuff like this drives “uniformitarian” geologists crazy. Wilfred Elders, professor emeritus of geology at the University of California at Riverside, calls the book “bad theology and bad science.” A letter from the heads of seven leading geoscience societies demanded that the National Park Service “distinguish religious tenets from scientific knowledge.”

The Park Service did go so far as to take the book out of the “Natural History” section and move it to “Inspirational.” But critics contend that the park bookstores are supposed to carry only material that supports the park’s scientifically based interpretative program. David Barna, spokesperson for the National Park Service, says that the ultimate decision may reside with the Supreme Court, which is now considering the constitutionality of displays of the Ten

Commandments on government property. In 1987, the Court ruled that “creation science” was intrinsically religious, but if it sanctions Moses, a book about Noah will probably stand as well.

— reported by Paul Rauber

Was George Washington a Christian?

From a review of Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (Knopf, 2005) by Garry Wills in *The New York Review of Books* (10 March 2005) p. 16

Washington’s death was marked, Ellis says, by a significant absence. The director of Mount Vernon, James Rees, tells me that members of the religious right complain that not enough is made of Washington’s religion in the displays and literature at his plantation. It is a firm tenet of many evangelicals that Washington was as godly as Jefferson was godless. The first president is their best display that this nation was born “under God.” But Washington never referred to Jesus or to Christ, rarely to God, most often to Providence. It is not surprising, then, that Ellis notes “a missing presence at the deathbed:”

There were no ministers in the room, no prayers uttered, no Christian rituals offering the solace of everlasting life. The inevitable renderings of Washington’s death by nineteenth-century artists often added religious symbols to the scene, frequently depicting his body ascending into heaven surrounded by a chorus of angels. The historical evidence suggests that Washington did not think much about heaven or angels; the only place he knew his body was going was into the ground, and as for his soul, its ultimate location was unknowable. He died as a Roman stoic rather than a Christian saint.

Quote

• Political campaigns are fun, dramatic and significant.
• Covering these slugfests blends sports reporting and instant history. Meanwhile, we can flatter ourselves that we’re doing the central job of a free press: making democracy work. The only drawback is that we’re supposed to be in the truth-telling business, and political campaigns draw us inexorably into a labyrinth of lies and deceptions. Political campaigns are exercises in exuberant irrationality. People say things that they know are untrue; indeed, if they believed some of these things, they ought to be barred from office.

— Robert J. Samuelson, *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (19-25 July 2004)

.....Unquote



Report on Philadelphia meeting of American Atheists and Affiliates.

It was a terrific convention in Philadelphia last weekend. Lots of great speakers, and an opportunity to meet Atheist friends old and new. Our Affiliates meeting was packed with good people and good ideas. We now have 46 affiliated clubs, and we're headed for 100 by next year.

I'd like to summarize several items for those not able to attend.

Website Listings: Clubs report getting several new members a month from <www.atheists.org/affiliation>.

Free AA Memberships: Yes, free. HQ is developing a plan to provide free introductory AA memberships to affiliated club members. It's a good way to promote AA to your club. Watch for more info about this program.

New Affiliate Staff: We're growing, and now we have more help. I'll continue as overall Affiliate Director, but Lance Wilhelm is our new HQ guy working on affiliate stuff. We welcome Lance, available at <Lanceomatic_51@yahoo.com> You'll be hearing more from him.

Atheists in Foxholes - March on Washington: The Godless Americans March in 1998 showed Atheist power in Washington, DC. Now the Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers is planning to really "send in the troops." On Veteran's Day, Friday, Nov. 11, 2005, all Atheist veterans and their friends are invited to parade down the National Mall and attend special programs. It's not a rally for or against the Iraq war, it's an event to support Atheist troops and veterans. Please invite everyone to attend this innovative event. For more info, see website, <www.atheistfoxholes.org>

Atheist Movies: Brian Flemming is directing two new Atheist movies. *The God Who Wasn't There* is coming in this June to debunk the gory *Passion of Christ* and religion itself. You'll want to promote it to your group. Selected affiliated clubs may even sponsor their own showing. See <www.thegodmovie.com> This movie is a warmup for *The Beast*, with a release date of 6/6/6 also known as the number of the beast. This film could be bigger than *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

So there is a lot going on in the Atheist movement. 2005 is going to be a big year. Let's work together to make it yet better, both for your group and for American Atheists. Contact me anytime with ideas or questions.

Jim Heldberg, National Affiliate Director, American Atheists, <www.atheists.org/affiliation> and <jheldberg@atheists.org> or 650-438-5661 cell.

Higher Authority: Evangelicals rely on the Bible for Guidance. It's not just creationism.

The success of the religious right in the last election seems to have led them to test the limits. In Colorado, the State Supreme Court took a man off death row after it was disclosed that in imposing the death penalty, the jury had consulted the bible (Leviticus 21:24, "an eye for an eye..."). In pharmacies around the country, devout pharmacists are refusing to fill prescriptions for birth control and morning-after pills because of their religious beliefs. But surely the strangest case is that of John Brown, an evangelical Christian from Dallas, who founded Zion Oil. It has always seemed ironic that the "chosen land" should be the only place in the Middle East that doesn't sit on a sea of oil. Brown is convinced that passages in the Old-Testament pinpoint the exact spot to drill: a field near Afula. In Deuteronomy 33:24 Moses said, "Most blessed of sons be Asher... may he dip his foot in oil." Asher's plot of land looks like a foot to Brown, and he has a license to drill under the toe. This sort of Bible Code led the faithful to sink millions in Brown's plan. Lo, there came oilmen from the West.

-- *What's New*, Robert L. Park Friday, (1 Apr 05)

Taslina Nasreen applies for Indian citizenship

Taslina Nasreen, author, activist and Honorary Associate of *Rationalist International*, has applied for Indian citizenship. "I dream of living in Bengal, either East or West," she says. The Indian government considers meeting her wish; the final decision is still pending.

Meantime a writ petition has been filed in the high court of Calcutta, the capital of the Indian state of West-Bengal, challenging the decision of the communist government of the state to ban Taslina Nasreen's autobiographical Novel *Dwikhondito* (Twilight) for allegedly denigrating Islam. The author, though personally not party to the case, attended the first hearing in order to support the effort to uphold freedom of expression. "In this country, one can at least fight for ones rights," she commented.

Taslina Nasreen had to leave her own country, Bangladesh, after Islamic fanatics threatened to kill her in 1994 for her alleged blasphemous writings. Several of her books are banned. A court case against her for hurting religious sentiments is still pending after several hearings *in absentia*.

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Bulletin # 141 (26 Feb. 2005)



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From an Atheist

The man who has nought of belief in a God
 Has known paths of freedom by many not trod.
 He is "true to himself" with his mind all uncluttered.
 He is free to peruse any word ever uttered.
 Unafraid of the creed that so narrows the mind,
 He can read and compare and the "truth" better find.
 To this man who's thus free and can turn as he will
 There's a special good feeling and many a thrill;
 For as part of this nature, its good and its bad,
 His sympathy's close to the bright and the sad,
 To the song of the lark and the ravage of cancer
 He seeks to appreciate -- heal -- find the right answer.
 No prayer -- but works -- on his two feet he stands
 With faith in himself and the work of his hands.
 And this man with his object the here and the now,
 His face turned to man, not away in the cloud.
 Will work all his might by example to show
 That good will and tolerance mighty will grow
 When men will meet men, their difference forgetting
 To accent their likeness, their friendship begetting.

Arthur W. Lindholm

(From *Sullivan Daily Forum* [Indiana], 10 June 2003)



The Science Book Club schedule for 2005

We will continue to meet in room 3A at the Cincinnati downtown library at 2:30 on the 4th Sunday of each month except where noted.

Sunday April 24 - *Facing up : Science and its Cultural Adversaries* by Steven Weinberg, 2001 (**Note change of Title!**)

Sunday May 22 - *Opening Skinner's Box : Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century* by Lauren Slater, 2004

Sunday June 26 - *Prime Obsession : Bernhard Riemann and the Greatest Unsolved Problem in Mathematics* by John Derbyshire, 2003

Sunday July 24 - *The Ancestor's Tale: a Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* by Richard Dawkins, 2004 (**Note change of Title**)

Sunday Aug 28 - *Godel, Escher, and Bach* by Douglas Hofstadter, 1979

Sunday Sept 25 - *The Electric Meme : a New Theory of How We Think* by Robert Aunger, 2002

Sunday Oct 23 - *Where Mathematics Comes From* by George Lakoff and Rafael Nunez, 2000

Sunday Nov 20 (3rd Sunday) - *Eyes on the Universe : a History of the Telescope* by Isaac Asimov, 1975

Sunday Dec 18 (3rd Sunday) - *The Science of Good and Evil : Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* by Michael Shermer, 2004

Atheist Meet-up in April

<http://atheists.meetup.com/90/events/4256350/>

What: The Cincinnati Atheists April Meetup

When: Wednesday, April 20 at 7:00PM

Where: Wild Oats; 2900 Edmonson Rd.

Rookwood Pavillion; Cincinnati OH 45207

513-396-8966

Please let the organizer know if you are coming. Join the group for optional food and definitely good talk.

MEETING SUNDAY, APRIL 17 AT 3 PM

End of Life Choices of Greater Cincinnati

The speaker will be Nancy Bale, Chapter Relations Representative, Compassion and Choices. Her talk is titled, "From Hemlock, to End of Life Choices, to Compassion and Choices - What does it mean to you?"

Living Wills and Durable Powers of Attorney for Health Care will be available at the meeting. The meeting will be at the Roselawn Lutheran Church, 1608 Summit Road. For directions check MapQuest or contact Joelevee@aol.com.

There are three things which even God the Father does not know:

- (1) what a Jesuit is really and truly thinking.
- (2) how many good Church going Christians are atheists.
- (3) how much wealth the Catholic Church actually owns.





Fig Leaves



Creating a Modern World.

Once upon a time, many long years ago, before the white man came sailing down the Ohio, many wood buffalo lived in the forests north of the great river. This was a time when a squirrel could run and clamber through the tree tops from the eastern coast of the ocean all the way to the Father of Rivers without having to touch ground anywhere. The winters were colder then and the snow would linger on the land for days and weeks at a time. Late in Fall the buffalo would migrate along the broad valley of the Mill Creek and swim across the Ohio River to find lush grazing in the blue grass landscape south of the river.

The Shawnee and Miami Indians would follow along the trail the buffalo had trampled out. They would hunt the great animals in Kentucky for their meat, and they would build their tepees from his hides. The buffalo fur would be made into blankets, and clothes for men, and women, and children. And thus the buffalo trail along the Mill Creek became an Indian path.

In the middle of the eighteenth century white hunters, explorers, and assorted scalawags started drifting down the Ohio from Pennsylvania and points further east. Some settled on the Kentucky side and others sought out the wide terrace above the river near the mouth of the Mill Creek. And they followed the Indian trail along the Mill Creek into the interior to pursue trade, and hunting, and generally to take the Indian's land.

Towards the end of the century more permanent settlers with wives and children began to arrive at the mouth of the Mill Creek creating the settlement of Losantiville and the threat of Fort Washington. Settlements also sprang up in the interior along the Mill Creek and further north in the valley of the Miami River. John Cleves Symmes, a man with political clout, managed to persuade the Congress to let him have all the land between the Big and Little Miami Rivers. Influence then was as important as it is now. Symmes got rich selling his Miami purchase to later arrivals. By this time the Indian path no longer sufficed to carry wagon loads of goods into the interior. So the early settlers constructed a plank road where the buffalo had shown the way.

The economy of the region thrived. Thousands of swine grew fat on the acorn mast of the surrounding woods, and were slaughtered in the stockyards of Cincinnati. The city was known as *porkopolis* for a reason. It smelled that way too, but the scourge of air pollution was not to be invented for another hundred years. For a time Cincinnati became the

largest city west of the Appalachian Mountains. Hence, the Queen City of the West.

The most efficient transport for large loads was by water, but rivers don't run everywhere. So it was clear that artificial water ways would be needed, and Americans engaged in a boom of canal building. A canal to connect Lake Erie in the north with the Ohio river followed the old trace of the plank road along the Mill Creek. It met another canal from Indiana, to enter the City along Central Parkway to eventually divide the terrace into downtown and a region *over the Rhine*.

The famous English writer Charles Dickens once took a passenger ship from Cincinnati to Lake Erie and described the stink of mules, who pulled the boat, and the stagnant water that carried it. He also remarked on getting stuck, when upstream workers did not release timely and enough water to float the canal boat. It was possible to get stuck for days when grounded. Grand Lake St. Mary and Indian Lake south of Wapakoneta are remnant water supply reservoirs of the canal era. Cincinnati suburb Lockland is, you guessed it, where a series of locks allowed the canal to descend to the plain.

The canal era didn't last long. By the middle of the nineteenth century the railroads paralleled the canal in the Mill Creek valley. They were faster and more efficient, so the canals fell into disuse, and soon became derelict. In the early part of the twentieth century Cincinnati tried to build an underground railway on the old canal right of way, but the powers in charge ran out of money. The abandoned tunnel entrances can still be seen from the highway.

Some forty years ago as the passenger railways lay dying, the old canal right of way was filled and became the route for the most important north-south Interstate Highway. I-75 runs from where the United States meets Canada between the Great Lakes to the southern most tip of Florida. And if you ask who laid the route right through the middle of the busiest part of Cincinnati, the answer is, why it was the wood buffalo some two hundred years ago. Nothing is so modern it isn't old.

Quote
• "It was divine intervention. I have a great devotion
• to Our Lady of Guadalupe ... and had just looked up at
• the \$ 2 million and said a little prayer to her when I hit the
• Jackpot. Our Lady really looks out for me."
• Guadalupe Lopez (Jennifer Lopez's mother)
• on hitting the \$ 2.4 million jackpot in Atlantic City.
• *Newsweek*, (19 April 2004) p. 23
•**Unquote**



Fig Leaves



Give Me a Break: How I exposed Hucksters, Cheats, and Scam Artists and Became the Scourge of the Liberal Media . . .

By John Stossel
(New York: HarperCollins, 2004)

The story of the conversion of John Stossel from a liberal consumer reporter to a true fundamentalist believer in the Free Market. Stossel tells us how he grew up stuttering, but still managed to become a TV reporter. How he pursued and confronted the evil corporate scam artists, the cheats, the rip-offs. Stossel pursued the liars and quacks who were hawking miracle cures to thicken your hair, thin your thighs, or enlarge your breasts. He exposed envelope stuffing scams, he confronted fake wrestling, and a dirty chicken packing industry. He saw himself as a hero with a camera exposing the bad guys.

Then John Stossel had an “epiphany” (title of Chap. 4). He tells us: “For years I bought the stereotypes that serve as conventional wisdom in the news business: Corporations are evil; all risk is intolerable; consumers need more government to protect us.” (p. 49). But he learned it is the discipline of the free market that keeps companies in line, and evil comes from government in too much, too detailed, too crude regulations. We live in a “nanny state” (p. 69), an over regulated illiberal society in which governments try to control every risk and danger. And thus John Stossel became the scourge of the arrogant government regulators.

Many of Stossels examples are telling and to the point. It used to be that pumping your own gas was considered too dangerous, because you might blow yourself up. Today virtually every state permits self-service gas stations. Only in Oregon and New Jersey pumping your own isn’t safe, and self-serve is not allowed. But many of his examples seem to leave something out.

Stossel extolls the deregulation of telephone service, the lowering of long distance rates by competition, and the explosion of new technology and services. All very good and true, but tell that to the poor person who wants only minimum local service. Stossel praises the deregulation of utilities and how competition has brought down gas and electricity prices. But tell that to California, where Enron cornered the

free market and gauged the prices of the whole state. Stossel sees advertising by doctors, lawyers and others as increasing competition, but doesn’t see the harm done by promoting prescription drugs on TV.

There is little doubt that much government regulation of the economy is useless, unnecessary and a hindering the smooth flow of business. Severely limiting right to work by those under age 14 prevents youngsters from getting early work experience. Stossel points out there is very little exploitation of such children. But without regulation, the temptation to find ways of mis-using the young might be great for some companies. Some things need to be regulated. I for one would not know a competent doctor or a good tire by looking at them. Thus licensing for physicians and rules for making safe tires are a necessity. No doubt, many government regulations are ridiculous, and the fear of some risks is way over done.

Stossel omits the insight that many of the rules are made to favor or benefit an industry or professional association. Plentiful contributions to politicians pay for rules that fleece the public. You can not buy a new car on the internet — only from a dealer, after paying his mark-up.

Surely each of the stories Stossel tells, and the TV shows he reviews in the book tell a truth, and represent reality. But Stossel’s narrative is too cut and dried, all is in black and white, there are the bad government bureaucrats and the good corporate leaders. I do think, much of the world is somewhere in between in various shades of gray. The free market is good for many things, but it is not the end all and be all of social organization.

Perhaps our legislatures and administrative rule making bodies are all idiots, as Stossel implies. Ultimately, what he is criticizing is the democratic process by which we elect our leaders and law makers. He is also complaining that we live in a society of written laws, not flexible rules. And the written law, the attempt to take account of all possible cases, is a clumsy beast. As long as we depend on laws and rules, the sort of ridiculous events he deplores will happen.

— Wolf Roder

Quote

● My wife is from the Midwest. Very nice people there. Very ●
● wholesome. They use words like “Cripes” - “For Criipes sake!” ●
● Who would that be; Jesus Criipes? Or “Jiminy Cricket” the son ●
● of “Gosh” of the church of “Holy Moly”? I’m not making fun ●
● of it. You think I wanna burn in “Heck”?

— very dubiously ascribed to Andy Rooney

Unquote



FIG Leaves
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FIG

Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. (FIG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists.

Though most of our members are secular humanists, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.



To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail figinfo@gofigger.org, or leave a message at (513) 557-3836. Visit our web site at gofigger.org.