

# FIG Leaves

Volume 11 Issue 8 August 2002

## Important Event in November: "FAQs" for the Godless Americans March on Washington

### What is the "Godless Americans March on Washington"?

The "Godless Americans" March is designed as "the next level" for our nation's growing community of Atheists, Freethinkers, Humanists and others who have no religious beliefs or creeds to speak out for civil rights, state-church separation and a growing role in public policy. According to the [American Religious Identification Survey \(ARIS\)](#), nearly 30 million people in the United States profess "no religion." The March on Washington seeks to make this wide swath of our population visible to media, elected officials and others. When and where will this happen? Currently, we have preliminary approval for a peaceful assembly on Saturday, November 2 on the Mall in Washington, DC. This venue has been a tradition site for various social cause movements groups to speak out, to be recognized, and to demand "a seat at the table" in the great discussion we call democracy.

### What will the March on Washington consist of?

We are currently finalizing plans for a peaceful March down the Mall to the area west of the Capitol Building. There, we are planning a program of speeches, entertainment and other events. We are soliciting participation from national, regional and local Atheist, Freethought, Humanist and other groups consisting of those who have no religious belief.

### Who can participate in this event?

"Godless Americans" of all stripes and labels are invited. We realize that members of our extended community use all sorts of monikers to describe what they do and do not believe in. Some prefer labels like "Atheist" or even "Agnostic" or "Freethinker," while others might describe themselves as "Secular Humanists" or "Rationalists." What we have in common, though, is more significant than our various self-descriptions. We do not believe in a deity or deities (or we seriously doubt such a belief), and we reject religious creeds, "revelations," prophecies and teachings. We embrace a secular morality, and a secular vision of society.

### Why not invite religious people who agree with some of what we have to say?

There are some religious people and groups who agree with some of the things we support, including separation of church and state. While we can welcome support from diverse groups on specific issues, any movement -- any group, any "cause" movement -- inevitably has to forge its own

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## Events

**August Meeting**  
We don't normally have a  
meeting in August, so we'll  
see you in September!

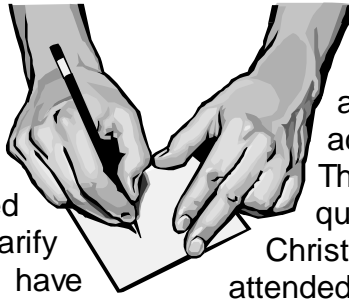
**September Potluck**  
Tuesday, September 10th  
at 6:30

## Letter from the Editor

August 11, 2002

I was an English major in college and continue to be fascinated by words and their potential to clarify and to mystify. Two examples have caught my attention recently. The "Godless Americans March" scheduled for November 2 in Washington D.C. is detailed elsewhere in this issue. I had a wide range of reactions when I first read the notice. The first was something like, "What a great idea!" followed closely by, "Oh no! Can't they think of a better name?" It's the "godless" word that gets me. When so many of us who consider ourselves clear-headed thinkers try so hard to dissociate ourselves from the "god" concept/obsession surrounding us, how ironic it is then that we can't come up with a better term with which to make clear to the world who we are and what we stand for. I cringe at least four or five times a day when I hear the reflexive comments thanking God (for rescuing the miners, for example) for warding off evil and bringing just desserts; it's a concept I want to be diminished in its power and range so why acknowledge it, partake of it?

Perhaps the temptation to be "in your face" is overpowering. When, for example I watch the unruly demonstrators against corporate globalization try to trash a World Bank gathering with their street theater antics, I silently rue the fun they're having, certain that it's costing credibility points with many witnesses. Perhaps the loose coalition of groups can't agree on a common platform of what they represent. And yet many of the atheist, humanist, rationalist, etc., groups have quite eloquent position statements. Clearly to the majority of the world the word "godless" is a synonym or catchword for evil, amoral, unethical, etc. If you march against war, it doesn't take a great leap of mind to know that you wish for peace; if you march against "god" the public will hear only the message of the "devil" because that's where the popular vocabulary ends.



The dilemma of editors who check the facts to ensure that claims made in advertisements be "verifiable and accurate" was described in an article in The New York Times (7/22/02). The ad in question was presenting the full text of a Christmas Day meeting "in the spiritual world" attended by Jesus, Muhammad, Confucius, Buddha, Martin Luther and John Harvard. God didn't attend but sent a message on 12/28 seconding Jesus' remarks. (I wonder what was so important that he missed his son's birthday?) At least eight big city newspapers published the ad and two, including The Times did not. I can't decide whether to be relieved or dismayed. I am sure though, that I would have liked to have been invited.

I.D.

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## FIG Meeting July 23,2002

**Speaker: Cindy Kerkhoff, President of Hemlock Society of Ohio**

**Subject : Our Search for a Peaceful Death**

Cindy began by relating her own experience in starting the Hemlock Society of Ohio. There had been an earlier group centered in Cleveland which failed just about the time that Cindy wrote to the national organization for information about starting a group in her area (Columbus). They responded with a suggestion that she assume responsibility for the whole state thereby replacing the group centered in Cleveland. This was done and the new group became affiliated with the national organization, and Cindy became its president.

She went on to give a brief description of The Hemlock Society and how it interacts with local chapters. It is both an educational and advocacy group. Persons joining become members of the national organization but a portion of their dues are shared with the local chapters, where they exist. There are some 40 chapters around the United States.

Cindy explained the meaning of *Advanced Directives*. These include *Living Wills* which authorize the providers of care to withhold certain treatment from a terminally ill patient or one who is in a permanently vegetative state. This is a document freely signed by a person who is of a sound mind at the time of signing.

Another *Advanced Directives* is the *Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care*. This document names as agent a relative or friend and empowers that person to make decisions regarding the continued provision of health care if the patient is unable to make such decisions for himself or herself.

It is important to make care providers aware of these documents by providing them with copies. They should also be kept up-to-date and notified of any changes. You may also want to convey your value system to providers and clarify treatment goals with them.

*Advanced Directives* also include *Do Not Resuscitate Order (DNR)*. This form precludes the use of extraordinary means to maintain life (e.g. someone whose heart has stopped and who

also has a debilitating and possibly terminal illness). If a DNR existed, it would preclude medical practitioners from restoring the heartbeat.

These are not necessarily old persons' issues. Every adult person should be aware of and have considered Advance Directives. In the United States only 15% of Americans have the Advanced Directives.

While pain relief has improved in recent years there is still room for greater improvement. One form of easing pain and suffering in the terminally ill is *Palliative Sedation*. It has been defined as "deliberately inducing and maintaining deep sleep but not deliberately causing death in very specific circumstances." Palliative Sedation is used to treat severe pain that is not treatable by normal medicines. It is a legal mode of treatment.

The state of Oregon has enacted a law enabling physician assisted voluntary life termination. This has been twice passed by voters in the state. Now the Attorney General of the United States, John Ashcroft has challenged the law in court and has threatened physicians with Federal prosecution if they take advantage of the law to assist patients in terminating an unbearable life. The outcome remains to be seen but the likelihood is that the case will have to be decided by the Supreme Court of the United States.

Cindy explained how the Hemlock Society acts as an advocate for patients whose wishes are being ignored by medical practitioners where legal documents exist such as Living Wills and Durable Powers of Attorney and DNR's.

Cindy brought with her a store of hand-outs. It is to be hoped that those in attendance availed themselves of this opportunity to have this information.

Some interesting questions were asked during Question and Answer period.

How does the Hemlock Society relate to the Hospice Movement? The Hemlock Society is not antagonistic to the Hospice Movement although they are frequently pitted against each other in the media. The Hospice Movement is against the intentional termination of life (the

*(Continued on page 4)*

**“Whenever we remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion and government, we increase the risk of religious strife and weaken the foundation of our democracy.”**

**Mr. Justice Stevens**, dissenting, in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, (holding Cleveland Ohio’s voucher scheme constitutional) **SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES**, June 27, 2002 (During Camp Quest 2002).



(Continued from page 3)

Oregon experience). Hospice care is primarily home care and is not 24 hour care. It needs someone in the home to be a caretaker.

Another questioner cited a case where the son of a friend was injured in an accident. He was brain damaged and put on life support systems. His mother then requested that the life support be discontinued. Was this legal? The response was that yes this can be legal. Just because a treatment is started, doesn't require that it be continued.

Cindy was asked to comment on Dr. Kevorkian. She said that he felt that the subject needed to be aired for public discussion. The Michigan Supreme Court turned down his appeal but another appeal may be in the offing.

Cindy concluded her remarks with information about *The Caring Friends Program*. This program is for society members who are considering hastening the termination of their lives. They submit their medical records medications list to a Senior Committee consisting of a physician, 2 hospital nurses, a social worker and a minister (or not if they object to the latter). If this committee accepts the application, a trained volunteer contacts the applicant and reviews the options available. The process is handled out of Colorado where the training of volunteers takes place. The program does not provide the means or assist in the administration of terminating a life.

George Maurer

## **LARRY JONES ELECTED VICE-PRESIDENT OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANIST AND ETHICAL UNION**

Lawrence D. Jones, president of the Institute for Humanist Studies, has been elected vice-president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). Larry came to Cincinnati in March to speak to FIG about the mission and activities of the Institute.

Headquartered in London, UK, the IHEU was founded in 1952 and is the only umbrella organization of Humanist, rationalist, atheist, secularist, ethical culture, and agnostic groups around the world. It has over 90 member organizations in 35 countries. Its activities include supporting the development of new and existing humanist groups, and representing the interests of Humanists at the United Nations, UNICEF, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe.

In 1999, Larry started the Institute for Humanist Studies, an international educational institute that promotes a nonreligious perspective on human rights and ethical issues. Based in Albany, NY, with six employees, the Institute provides information and analysis to media, public and academia, as well developing on-line educational courses.

I am delighted by the appointment of Lawrence Jones to the executive committee of the IHEU, says IHEU Executive Director Babu Gogineni. We look forward to working with someone with complete understanding of our goals and with much importance in the humanist movement in North America. [Babu also spoke to FIG a year or two ago.]

The election took place in Holland at the IHEU's 50th Anniversary Congress on July 6, 2002. Larry's term will last 3 years.



# BOOK REVIEW

## ***Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia***

by Ahmed Rashid

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)

Perhaps the most important aspect of this study is that it was written and published before the attack on the World Trade Center, that is before we decided the Taliban are our sworn enemy, and before we went to war against Afghanistan, a country which had done us no harm. Rashid is a reporter who writes for a number of Pakistan and British papers. He has made Afghanistan his special beat, and is reporting from many years experience observing the country. His reportage has three parts; he gives us a history of how the Taliban came to be; a section on the religion, politics, and economy of the organization, and a review of the oil factor. It appears a number of international and American oil firms have been trying to build an oil pipe line from the former Soviet Central Asian republics to world markets. Such a pipeline almost of necessity has to traverse Afghanistan to a port where the oil can be loaded on tankers. Until 9/11 a number of American politicians and companies had reason to court the Taliban and did.

In many ways the Taliban is a product of American neglect. The United States did not create the Mujaheddin, the forces which ejected the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, but we supported them with advice, money, and weapons. We thus encouraged bringing together 35,000 Muslim radicals from 43 countries, to study in the madrassas (religious schools), and to fight with the Mujaheddin as a kind of Islamic international brigades. At the same time no United States body was willing to consider the consequences of creating a virtual university of Islamic radicalism. Rashid quotes President Carter's secretary of state Zbigniew Brzezinski: (p. 130)

What is more important in the world view of history? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet Empire? A few stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?

Perhaps he ought to tell that to the victims of World Trade Center attack!

After the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, so did United States interest. The country descended into chaos of civil war in which various

leaders, war lords, tribal groups, and bandits fought for supremacy or merely a larger slice of the pie. The Taliban arose out of this chaos as a fighting force of young and very young students of the worst kind of primitive Islam. It proved to be the only force able to bring stability to the country, the stability of draconian Islamic laws and justice. Rules confined women to their residences, and outlawed movies, TV, and virtually all other forms of entertainment. Except heroin, Afghanistan became a major source of opium poppy cultivation.

Bin Laden left Afghanistan in 1990 to return to Saudi Arabia, but kept in touch with the former Arab-Afghan fighters, none of whom were Afghan and many were not Arab either. He helped many resettle in Saudi Arabia. When Iraq, hitherto an American ally fighting Iran, invaded Kuwait, Bin Laden offered to raise a fighting force from the Afghan veterans. It came as an enormous shock to him (p. 133) when the Royal Family invited the Americans to defend the Kingdom. He saw it as a betrayal of Islam. His criticism escalated to the point he had to leave Saudi Arabia. He left for Sudan to take part in the Islamist Revolution there. In May 1996 he was back in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban. The rest is a history of attacks on American interests.

Rashid concludes in 1998: "The entire Afghan population has been displaced, not once but many times over." and "There was not even an estimate of those killed. The only productive factories in the country are those where artificial limbs, crutches and wheelchairs are produced by the aid agencies." (p. 207) He also reviews the multiplicity of outsiders who have contributed to the instability of the country. Besides the former Soviet Union and the United States, these meddlers include the oil companies and their clients in the neighboring former Soviet central Asian republics, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as India and China. When Rashid finished the book the future of Afghanistan looked bleak.

Wolf Roder



# FIG Leaflets

Over the centuries, theologians contrived to proscribe sex on Fridays (the day Christ died), on Thursdays (the day He was arrested), on Saturdays (in honor of the Virgin Mary), on Sundays (in memory of the Resurrection) and on Mondays (in memory of the Departed). Even Tuesdays and Wednesdays were forbidden during the forty days of Lent. Other priests argued that intercourse could take place only with the woman positioned on her back, and the more devout fashioned a heavy garment with a small hole in it so that the minimum of bodily contact took place during intercourse. Sex was literally an undercover operation.

Malcolm Potts and Roger Short, *Ever since Adam and Eve* (1999) p. 296

## University Talk

By long custom, social discourse in Cambridge is intended to impart and only rarely to obtain information. People talk; it is not expected that anyone will listen. A respectful show of attention is all that is required until the listener takes over in his or her turn. No one has ever been known to repeat what he or she has heard at a party or other social gathering, only what he or she has said. There may then be further enlargement on the skill and emphasis with which the compelling point has been made; to this, also, no one has ever been known to pay attention.

John Kenneth Galbraith, A Tenured Professor (1990) p. 78

## Taking the Pledge.

Indeed, an interesting thing about chastity pledges is that virginity must remain a minority value, and the pledgers a countercultural clique, in order to succeed. As soon as more than about 30 percent of a school's students climb on, the pledged virgins start falling off the wagon.

Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors:*

## He ought to know.

Television, to be blunt, is a series of commercials with blank spots in between that have to be filled with programming compelling enough to keep the viewer watching until the next commercial. "Don't go away," "stay tuned," and "when we return" are carefully crafted phrases that mean "don't touch the clicker." Clicker phobia lies hidden just beneath the surface of the television business. No show segment should be longer than seven or eight minutes the perceived attention span of the American public. Interviews are chopped up into sound bites nothing more than three to four sentences. Background music must be up beat. Edit cuts are quick and abbreviated no long, slow pans across mountain ranges or lakes as one might see in a Ken Burns PBS documentary. Yes, most people that work in the television business realize that most of the claims presented on these paranormal shows are utter nonsense. They know but they don't care because they are in the business of selling commercials, not ideas.

Michael Shermer, *The Borderlands of Science* (2001) pp. 11; 14

Human beings find meaning in life through a variety of philosophies and faiths. We advance no cause by proclaiming that those who disagree with us feel something or act in some way that they know they do not.

Jean Pond, *NCSE Reports* (Jan-Apr 2002) p. 29

## A depraved and extravagant superstition.

Outside of the Gospels, the Letters, and the Acts nothing is known about first century Christianity. The comments supposedly written about Jesus by the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37-101) are considered Christian interpolations by most scholars. Claims leveled against the Emperor Nero (37-68), that he accused the Christians of burning Rome in 64, are also considered spurious. In fact, few if any Christians had arrived in Rome this early. Thus, the very earliest credible mention of Christians and their religion appears in a letter written by Pliny the Younger near the end of the year 111 from the region of Pontus to

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the Emperor Trajan. It is not flattering.

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus was a member of the Roman nobility, and at the time served the empire as Governor of the province of Bithynia and Pontus, the northwestern region of modern Turkey. He was born in 62, the year the Apostle Paul is thought to have died. The letter itself does not occupy a special place in his work, it is merely number 96 in the tenth volume of Pliny's correspondence, devoted to business with the Emperor. Pliny's collected letters and other works are a major source for our understanding of social life at the height of the Roman Empire.

Pliny describes for the Emperor what he has done with individuals accused of being Christians, and asks for instructions about how to treat them in future.

I asked the people themselves whether they were Christians. Those who admitted they were I asked a second and third time, warning them of the punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I was in no doubt that, whatever it might be that they were admitting to, their stubbornness and unyielding obstinacy certainly ought to be punished.

The ancient world was tolerant of many public creeds disdained and avoided by Christians. The crimes or abominations popular rumor attributed to Christian secrecy were incest, infanticide, and cannibalism. Pliny is uncertain about what these Christians were up to, and questioned them closely. His letter continues:

Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, after they had called upon the gods when I dictated the formula, and after they had made offerings of incense and wine to your statue which I had ordered to be brought in along with the cult-images of the gods for this purpose, and had in addition cursed Christ, none of which acts, it is said, those who are truly Christians can be compelled to perform, I decided should be discharged. Others, named by an informer, said that they were Christians and then denied it; they said that they had in fact been

Christians but had given it up, some three years before, some more years earlier than that, and a few even twenty years ago. All these also both paid homage to your statue and to the cult-images of the gods and cursed Christ.

A conscientious colonial administrator, Pliny is concerned to find out precisely what these Christians had been doing, and reported this in his letter to the Emperor. The Christians claimed,

They had been in the habit of gathering together before dawn on a fixed day, and of singing antiphonally a hymn to Christ as if to a god, and of binding themselves by oath, not to some wickedness, but not to commit acts of theft or robbery or adultery, not to break faith, not to refuse to return money placed in their keeping when called upon to do so. When these ceremonies had been completed, they said it had been their custom to disperse and to meet again to take food, but food that was ordinary and harmless; they said that they had given up doing even this after my edict, in which, in accordance with your instructions, I had banned secret societies. So I believed it to be all the more necessary to ascertain what the truth was from two slave women, who were called Deaconesses, and under torture. I found nothing other than a depraved and extravagant superstition.

The governor was quite concerned about the danger to public order caused by the spread of this superstition in town and country, among both sexes and all ages. He argues for pardoning Christians willing to reform if given opportunity for repentance. In fact he surmised the temples had begun to be thronged again for the traditional rites, and that the meat of sacrificed animals again found buyers. Thus the established order would be preserved, which was a chief concern of the administrator.

Translations by Wynne Williams (1990)

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the Quotes.

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identity, and step out on its own. It has to become a force to be reckoned with if it wants to influence the culture. Marches such as the one we are planning, social and political action, demonstrations -- these are some of the indicators that a movement is "coming of age," and ready to take that seat at the table. We can't expect others to do this for us.

### **Why now?**

Why not now? One good reason is that in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the leadership of America used religion as a way of trying to rally the nation. Atheists and others of no religious belief were often excluded or marginalized in what became a theo-political revival. Nonbelievers have been insulted in the news media. Despite progress by other groups -- black and Hispanic Americans, women, gays and lesbians for example - - nonbelievers continue to lag behind. Some surveys indicate that a majority of Americans would not vote for an Atheist for president. Despite the fact that there are millions of us, our rights are violated constantly. Politicians want to tax us in order to support faith-based social programs. Groups like the Boy Scouts which receive direct and indirect support from government will not admit Atheists to membership. If that type of discrimination and bigotry were practiced against other groups, there would be a national outcry and wave of indignation! So, the March on Washington will change all of that? No, but we think it will be an important first step, a "coming of age" for millions of Atheists, Freethinkers, Secular Humanists and other nonbelievers in America.

### **Who's behind the Godless Americans March on Washington? Who can participate?**

The March is sponsored by a Godless Americans Task Force headed by Ellen Johnson, who is also president of American Atheists. Other organizations -- national, regional and local -- are being actively solicited and urged to participate in this historic event. The rally by the Capitol will include representatives from many different organizations. One of goals is a show of positive unity around a [common set of objectives](#). Godless Americans are a diverse group of people, often very independent, hard to organize. We embrace different organizations (if we join any at all!), use different labels, and frequently disagree over how or if to proceed on a particular issue. The March cannot

change that diversity -- nor does it seek to. It is not an attempt to impose a "coalition" on various groups, or make demands that all Godless American organizations or individuals must conform to. It is a positive, proactive effort to emphasize many of the issues we may have in common, and break through barriers to communication. The "Godless Americans March on Washington" seeks to encourage our community to respect our diversity, to deal with each other on the basis of mutual respect, and to work together -- when and where possible -- on an ad hoc basis. Toward that end, all groups and individuals in agreement with the issue-oriented goals of the March are invited!

### **I do not approve of all of the groups that are endorsing the march! What about these organizations?**

When the Task Force began planning the Godless Americans March on Washington (GAMOW), we wanted to open this event to as many individuals and groups which can honestly describe themselves as "Godless" and nonbelievers in religion. We realize that due to differences in the labels we use to describe ourselves (Atheists, Freethinkers, Secular Humanists, Rationalists...) as well our different types of organizations and "styles," not everyone will be totally comfortable under the "Big Tent" we are working to foster. The only criteria for groups and individuals who wish to endorse this event is that they sincerely describe themselves as "Godless Americans" of some type, and agree with the Statement of Principles for the March. We do not use any other test. We cannot "pick and choose" which individuals or organizations to include simply because someone might happen to disagree with a label, or how that particular group operates. Who would decide, for instance, which groups may and may not participate? Some may object to the presence of "Queer Atheists," while others resent Humanist groups or how some Freethought groups organize themselves. Many are afraid of organizations that openly proclaim themselves to be Atheists. All of this can lead to divisiveness, hurt feelings and resentments -- the very negative atmosphere that we hope this March overcomes, at least in part. So far, the endorsing groups have expressed overwhelming solidarity with the March and agreement on this particular issue.

### **How will The Godless Americans March On Washington operate?**

The rally is scheduled for 11 AM - 2-3 PM on Saturday, November 2, 2002 and will include speeches, entertainment and other activities. We are

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currently planning to begin with a march down the Capitol Mall starting near 14th street. This should take about 20-30 minutes, and reach the demonstration/stage location which is between 3rd and 4th Avenues. We will walk on the gravel pathway down the Mall since the grassy areas up to the staging area will be closed to the public at this time. There will be a press conference and dinner/social event on Friday night, November 1, 2002. Details on this will be posted shortly. At the March, there will be a program of speakers and entertainment. Portable toilets will be located at the rally site (handicapped accessible). The sale of food or commercial items is not permitted by the National Park Service. Plan accordingly, and we suggest bringing a nonalcoholic beverage. Also, you are encouraged to bring tasteful banners and other signs that are in keeping with the theme of this March. Small handheld American flags will be available, along with GAMOW stickers. There will be Marshals located at various locations to assist you and help to facilitate a peaceful demonstration. We must remember to not "feed the fundies" by engaging in arguments with religious protesters and hostile "prayer warriors" who want to "save" us. This is a waste of time, and it can detract from the ambiance of the GAMOW which, we hope, is upbeat, positive and constructive. There will be an Information/Lost-and-Found booth at the front of the rally near the stage. Groups and individuals are urged to take all trash with them when departing the event.

### **Do you think this march will change anything?**

The goals of the March are evident in our [Statement of Principles](#). We hope, however, that there are peripheral benefits to the our diverse "Godless Americans" community. These would include: Demonstrating that Atheists, Freethinkers, Humanists and other nonbelievers can work together in a positive and productive way on an ad hoc basis and on issues of mutual concern; Fostering a new "code of conduct" for our various organizations based on mutual respect, polite acknowledgment of our differences as well as what we share in common, a consensus to "agree to disagree" on some things while still searching for common

ground, a pledge to not make demands on each other or attempt to interfere in the internal working of our respective groups, and much more. No group, movement or coalition is perfect. Not everyone will agree on everything, and differences WILL arise. We hope that the experience gained from the Godless Americans March on Washington, though, helps demonstrate how our diverse community can close ranks and work together around specific issues, and on the basis of mutual respect and a proactive agenda.

### **Is this really possible?**

Well, you don't know if you don't try. The response to the Godless Americans March on Washington has been overwhelmingly upbeat and positive. We CAN and should try to work together when possible to help achieve the many objectives we have in common.

### **How can I help?**

First, express your support for the Godless Americans March on Washington by signing the [Endorsement page at this web site](#). Attend the March if possible. Check out the [tips page](#) for links to resources, including transportation and lodging in the Washington, DC area. If you are a member of a national, regional or local group, consider urging your compatriots to support and participate in the March on Washington. A representative of your group can contact the March Task Force from the [Organizations Page](#) or by email to [coordinator@godlessamericans.org](mailto:coordinator@godlessamericans.org). Finally, "spread the word." [Here, you'll find links](#) to logos and other material you can download for distribution in your area.





# Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by  
Massimo Pigliucci  
Department of Botany,  
University of Tennessee

**N. 27, August 2002**  
**Is God in your brain?**

This column can be posted for free on any appropriate web site and reprinted in hard copy by permission. If you are interested in receiving the html code or the text, please send an email (skeptic@rationallyspeaking.org). Or, you can subscribe (free) to the Rationally Speaking announcements list.

Imagine you are about to have a mystical experience. You may be absorbed in prayer in the silence of your room, or perhaps you are meditating and—helped by the lack of distraction to your senses—you are about to experience a feeling of unity with the universe, an experience that will reinforce your conviction that there really is another world out there; that what we call reality is only a pale reflection of the real thing. The question is: what is going on in your brain while all this is happening? Are your mental powers, in fact, allowing you to, at least temporarily, gain a higher view of the universe? Or, is your brain simply malfunctioning under unusual circumstances and playing tricks on you? In the following, I will lay out the evidence as best as we can assess it; by the end of this essay, you may wish to look into this matter more carefully and decide for yourself.

Andrew Newberg and Eugene D’Aquili, two researchers interested in the neurobiology of mystical experiences, carried out an intriguing set of experiments. They asked Buddhist

meditators and Franciscan nuns, respectively, to try to achieve a state of deep meditation or prayer while in an isolated room in a laboratory. The subjects were hooked to a computerized scanning machine that could visualize which parts of their brains were unusually active or inactive. The results were very similar in the two cases. For one thing—and not surprisingly—the brains of the meditators and nuns activated areas that are associated with intense concentration: praying or meditating is an intellectual activity that requires effort on the part of the brain. More interestingly, Newberg and D’Aquili saw that another region of the brains of their subjects was going almost completely dead: the posterior superior parietal lobe. This area is known to be in charge of determining the boundaries of one’s body, a fundamental task for any living being because it allows us to navigate a complex three-dimensional world with no more accidents than occasionally spilling the coffee.

We know that the posterior superior parietal lobe plays that particular role because there are patients with damage in this same region who literally cannot move around without falling, missing the chair they intended to sit on, and generally having a fuzzy understanding of where their body ends and the rest of the universe begins. It is a truly awful condition, one of many that have taught neurobiologists so much about the inner workings of the human brain.

Now, what is interesting is that Newberg and D’Aquili’s subjects described their mystical experience in an uncanny similar way to the reports of brain-damaged patients: they said that, at the peak of their meditation or prayer, they felt “one with the universe,” feeling a dissolution of their bodies into the wholeness of reality. The brain scans supported their interpretation of what was happening: because of the low level of sensorial stimuli (the experiments were being conducted in dark rooms with no sounds) the brain was fed little in the way of information about the outside world and simply shut down the corresponding areas (possibly to save energy: the brain is by far the metabolically most costly organ we have).

**Quote of the month:**  
**“Ooops. My brain just hit a bad sector.”**  
**Anonymous**

(Continued from page 10)

The question is: where the Franciscan nuns and Buddhist meditators really accessing an alternate reality, or where they simply experiencing an odd side effect of putting their brains under unusual circumstances?

Michael Persinger is a Canadian neurobiologist who, like Newberg and D'Aquili, is interested in scientifically investigating mystical experiences. He has started out with the known fact that some patients who suffer from seizures in the temporal lobes are subject to auditory or visual hallucinations, which they often interpret as mystical experiences. Some of these patients are convinced that they talked to God and that, as a result, they gain a special "cosmic" insight into reality, consciousness, and the meaning of life. Persinger set out to literally repeat these experiences under controlled laboratory conditions. He built a helmet that causes small, intense, and directed magnetic fields inside the brain to simulate micro-seizures that do not cause any permanent damage. In perfectly Victorian tradition, the good doctor has experimented upon himself and found that magnetically induced seizures in the temporal lobes do indeed generate the same sort of hallucinations and mystical experiences reported by the patients.

Again, what is going on? Is Persinger's helmet a machine that can potentially put everybody in direct contact with God, or does it show that many mystical experiences are in fact caused by my seizures, that is by a malfunction of the normal brain circuitry?

Here is where the facts end and the theorizing begins. From the point of view of purely logical possibilities, the 'faulty-brain-under-unusual-circumstances' and the 'triggered-real-mystical-experiences' interpretations are both possible, and we are free to believe whatever fits better with our general outlook on such matters. However, I would argue that by far the simplest and most reasonable explanation of the facts is indeed the naturalistic one (i.e., that we are witnessing a temporary malfunction of the brain triggered by abnormal conditions such as sensorial deprivation or seizures). Why? First, this interpretation fits with all we know about the brain, the phenomenon of hallucinations, and even the natural tendency of human beings to

invent explanations when faced with unusual sense data. Second, if God really built that ability in our brains for the purpose of communicating, why did He choose to make it much easier for some individuals and essentially impossible for others to achieve such a state of blessing? Third, it is interesting that different subjects interpret their experiences differently, depending on their cultural background and previous beliefs, again something that fits better with a naturalistic explanation than with the refined plan of a supernatural being.

Either way, you'll have to use your brain to reach a conclusion, but how do you know that you are not having a seizure that is biasing your judgment? Isn't the human brain a wonderful thing to ponder with and about?

#### **Further readings:**

*Why God Won't Go Away*, by Newberg and D'Aquili, the first chapter is a fine example of science, the rest a good illustration of scientists climbing up mirrors to justify their ideological biases.

#### **Web links:**

MedLine's page on research on brain injuries, where you can find the latest in this fascinating field of study.. (<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/headandbraininjuries.html>)

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Next month:

Why bother?

Why being liberal doesn't have  
to lead to depression

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