

# FIG Leaves

Volume 11 Issue 6 June 2002

## June Meeting

### “Ludwig Feuerbach: The Religious Atheist”

Presented by:

William Jensen  
University of Cincinnati

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) is the best known proponent of the idea that God is created in the image of man, rather than the other way around. Though neither the first nor the last to suggest this idea, no one has ever developed this insight in greater detail than Feuerbach. He first applied his psychological projection theory to an analysis of Christianity in his famous book, "The Essence of Christianity" (1841). He later used this theory to analyze religions in general in his more accessible "Lectures on the Essence of Religion" (1851). The speaker will outline Feuerbach's life and career and illustrate his views on religion, atheism, and humanism, particularly as outlined in the latter publication.

*About a year ago, Bill Jensen talked to FIG about the life and views of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, one of the founders of Western humanism. Those of you who were there know how well he can explain ideas and bring to life the person he is describing.*

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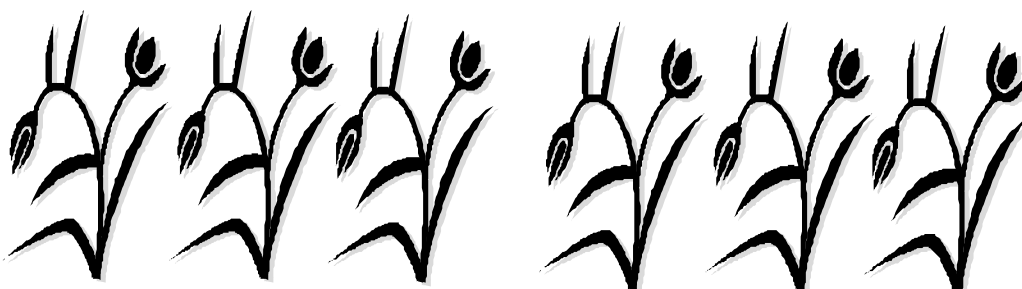
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## Events

**June Meeting**  
William Jensen  
“Ludwig Feuerbach: The  
Religious Atheist”  
Tuesday, June 25 at 7:00 P.M.  
Vernon Manor Hotel

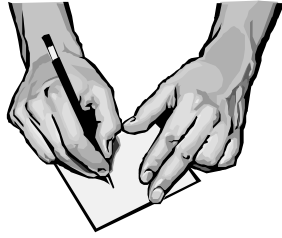
**July Potluck**  
Tuesday, July 9 at 6:30 P.M.



## Letter from the Editor

Dear Fig Members:

Saturday, June 15, 2002



This morning I heard someone knocking at the front door. I immediately didn't respond, because anyone who knows me or is invited, comes to the kitchen door at the back of the house. Later, when I looked out the front window, I saw two middle-aged women lumbering up the steep steps of the house across the street. They looked like women who could bake a flaky fruit pie, or sing a gentle lullaby to a baby. Jehovah's Witnesses, for sure, saving souls on Saturday mornings. I thought how lucky they are that I didn't answer the door.

Proselytizing! Such arrogance, to be so benighted by your beliefs that you'd waste a beautiful morning appealing to unfriendly strangers, intruding on the privacy of their homes. A few days ago, I watched an interview with one of the two American young women who had been rescued from captivity by the Taliban, who had been suspected of distributing Christian texts along with their charitable acts. Now she was "fessing up" that indeed she was trying to spread the word of the Gospel; she expressed no contrition, only a fierce desire to go back to Afghanistan to save souls. We all have been reading about the rescue of Gracia Burnham and the murder of her husband Martin and another woman on the Philippine island of Mindinao. While I felt some sympathy for the cruelty she experienced, I wondered if she had any understanding of the people she was ministering to. Did they have a religion of their own that had comforted them before she arrived? Had she studied it to learn what was meaningful to them? Was she so sure that hers was better? Did she know what she was debunking and devaluing just by suggesting that she had a better way?

I recently read a quote that struck me as "right on" which I will have to paraphrase since I didn't copy it down. "There are very few real differences among people, but the ones that do exist become very meaningful." We seem forever to be scanning the horizon for "us" or "not us" and trying our best to eliminate the "other". So the Witnesses ring doorbells, the Christians travel to exotic lands, the Indians and the Pakistanis muster one million armed soldiers on their border, and the Palestinians and Israelis fight over a small piece of desert. What's really strange is that while we hear reports that everyone hates Americans, those same people still yearn to move here. Maybe there is something to the "melting pot" idea after all.

I.D.



FIG Leaves Volume 11, Issue 6, June 2002 - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in electronic format via Internet to [figeditor@choice.net](mailto:figeditor@choice.net) or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 8128, Cincinnati OH 45208. Contributions received before the first Tuesday of the month will be considered for publication that month. All material printed in FIG Leaves may be reproduced in similar publications of non-profit groups which grant FIG Leaves reciprocal reprinting rights as long as proper credit is clearly attributed to FIG Leaves and the author. Opinions expressed in FIG Leaves are those of their authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the editor or the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., its Board, or officers. © 2000 The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. FIG Board of Directors: President: Philip Ferguson, Vice President: Michele Grinoch, Secretary: George Maurer, Treasurer: Joe Levee Members: Frank Bicknell, Nurit Bowman, Martha Ferguson, Edwin Kagin, Helen Kagin, Tim Kelly, Boyd Riley and FIG Leaves Editor: Idelle Datlof.

## **FIG Meeting, May 29, 2002:**

### **“Judaism from a Humanistic Perspective”**

The speaker for this meeting was Rabbi Robert Barr of Congregation Beth Adam in Cincinnati which he founded and has served for twenty-two years.

He started by asking for the audience's perception of what Judaism is. These things were put forward to contribute to a definition of Judaism: a culture, ethnicity, tradition, Old Testament, belief in one god, a religion. He agreed that Judaism is all of these things. He went on to say that in the US the general perception was that it is a religion among the three major groups (Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism). Now frequently Islam is being included. But to say that Judaism is a religion exclusively is to miss a lot of what Judaism really is. You can be Jewish without ever going to synagogue. On TV when one sees a Jew it is either a Seinfeld or Hasidim, but there is a lot more variation in Jews than these two extremes show.

Across the board, there is no hierarchy. There is no Jewish pope who can speak for all Jews. To be sure there are boundaries but these are constantly changing. However, there remain limits and once one has stepped over the line you can no longer be considered Jewish. An example of stepping over the line would be Jews for Jesus or a Jew who had accepted Islam. They may call themselves anything they want but the Jewish community won't accept them.

A discussion arose as to whether “tradition” does not serve as an authority for Jews. In this instance does not “tradition” equate to a “past” which everyone has? There is a vast store of literature available (Judaica) and an

examination of this literature can produce two or more contradictory opinions about the same question. When Christianity came along they considered themselves to be a continuation of or replacement for Judaism and in biblical terms they developed a “new” testament. But Judaism did not stop but continued on in a different direction and developed commentary and reinterpretations in the form of the Mishnah and Talmud. Orthodoxy would continue to work within the boundaries of reinterpretations provided that one had the proper education to do that; the Conservative movement could change interpretations as a group effort, and the Reform movement would endow those educated in that movement with the right to individual interpretation.

One questioner asked if, in order to be considered a Jew, one had to be born of a Jewish mother. Rabbi Barr answered “No” then went on to explain that the Talmud outlines how one becomes a Jew. One, is to be born of a Jewish mother, another is to convert according to Jewish law. As Judaism began to change, the Reform movement adopted born of a Jewish mother or father. He went on to explain how this applied in the State of Israel.

Rabbi Barr said that the most frequently asked question he encounters is “Do you believe in God?” Before answering he says he always asks, “What definition of God do you mean?” Many people use the word but define it differently. Spinoza equated god with Nature. Judaism says you don't know God's name, you can't see God and you don't know what he does. To this Erich Fromm adds if God is all these things, any time you think you know what God is, by definition you don't. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstruction Judaism



## Fig April Meeting (cont'd)

has this definition: "God is the process or power that allows people to become fully human". These were some of the definitions that find acceptance with the speaker.

A questioner said he heard that Humanistic Judaism is atheistic and wanted a comment on that by the speaker. Rabbi Barr said he did not agree. He went on to explain that there is a technical religious language and particularly in the US a political religious language where religious terminology is used to achieve a political purpose and this goes back to the Eisenhower administration and the Cold War mentality. One needs to be careful to distinguish which kind of discussion you are in. He explained further that theism is a belief in a God of nine attributes: all knowing, all powerful, all present, all good, etc, an a-theist is one who does not believe in that sort of god, so technically speaking by definition a deist, a pantheist, are also atheists.

Are Humanistic Jews different from other Humanists?, a questioner asked. Humanistic Jews are approaching Humanism in terms of their Jewish experience, their liturgy, practice and the non-rational aspects of life. Non-rational does not mean irrational but refers to those things such as the beauty of a sunset, a song or other aspects of our emotional life as differentiated from the scientific and rational thought.

Rabbi Barr concluded with an eloquent plea for cooperation among like-minded groups and underscored the need for a positive message to convey to the community at large. If we are opposed to an idea that is being promoted in our community, we need to have a positive alternative to promote in its place.

George Maurer

(Photo Courtesy of Edwin Kagin)

### Two Scientists: I - George Bush, (A response to a letter of inquiry from a FIG member, but not from the White House)

Hi Mr. Levee,

Thank you for your email regarding President Bush's thoughts on biology. We appreciate your interest. During the 2000 presidential campaign, the issue of Bush's position on teaching evolution in public schools came up a couple of times. In particular, when the Kansas Board of Education decided to remove virtually all references to evolution in the state science standards, candidates were peppered with questions about the controversy.

Bush, at the time the GOP front-runner, expressed support for the Kansas decision and endorsed "state and local" control of the evolution issue. Bush told NBC Nightly News, "It's up to local districts to make decisions on how to achieve standards of excellence as far as I'm concerned. "A month later, in an interview with *U.S. News & World Report*, Bush endorsed teaching both evolution and creationism in schools, despite a prohibition on this from the Supreme Court.

"I have no problem explaining that there are different theories about how the world was formed," Bush said. "I mean, after all, religion has been around a lot longer than Darwinism.... I believe God did create the world. And I think we're finding out more and more and more as to how it actually happened."

I hope this information is helpful. Thank you again for your email and support of Americans United. If we can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,  
Steve Benen, Americans United for Separation of Church and State



## Gunslinger Science

BY ROGER DOWNEY

**BEHIND ALL THE** condoling voices last week mourning the death of Steven Jay Gould, you could sense a certain relief. Gould was a maverick, never content unless embroiled in a bitter quarrel, usually with fellow scientists. Most of his popular-science writing, originally appearing as monthly essays in the magazine *Natural History*, was devoted to illustrating the wayward history of life on Earth in line with mainstream Darwinian evolutionary theory. But it was his heretical notions about how evolution works in detail that generated the most noise and heat in professional circles.

Gould's take-no-prisoners approach to scientific argument deeply offended many of his colleagues. But they were even more

upset by the way his notions of "punctuated equilibrium" and "developmental spandrels" began to get about outside the scientific establishment, where they were taken as challenging the very foundations of evolutionary theory--music to the ears of creationists and other enemies of Darwin, who took to saying that evolution *must* be a flawed concept ("Why, even Steven Jay Gould thinks it's full of holes!").

Ironically, Gould was in complete agreement with his mainstream critics about one thing: He never really bothered to object to the ways anti-evolutionists used--misused--his ideas. Like more conventional scientific brethren, he felt that responding to nonscientific critics of science merely dignifies them. Ignore them. Deprived of your august attention, they will wither like weeds in a sequoia's shadow.

-Seattle Weekly 5/30—6/5/02

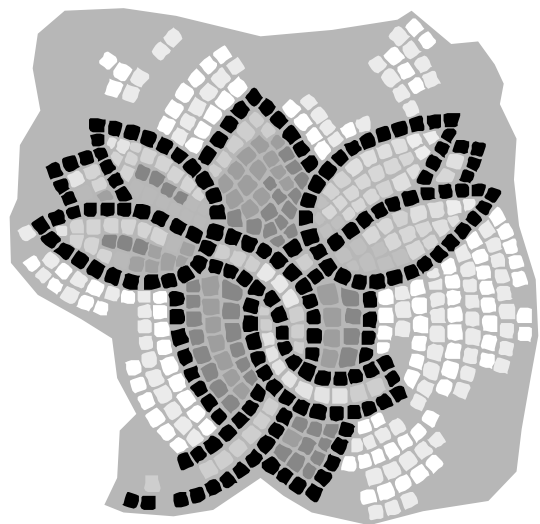


## A HOME RUN HITTER

*Does a lifetime spent thinking about evolutionary processes shape the way you think about everything, even baseball? Should it?*

Well, evolution is one of the great subjects. It's the story of our origin and development. And of course, metaphor is an inevitable part of language. But when you mix it up with reality, you're in trouble. Life does not imitate the World Series, and it doesn't begin on opening day.

-Stephen Jay Gould in an interview in The New York Times, 6/2/02, shortly before his death





# BOOK REVIEW

## ***The Routledge Historical Atlas of Religion in America***

by Bret E. Carroll  
(New York: Routledge, 2000)

The Atlas is a very good reference book on religions and their denominations in the United States. The book begins, appropriately, with native American hunting and agricultural religions. It ends with the creeds brought by the latest immigrants and with the "invented in America" beliefs, such as Scientology. Most articles cover a double page, for a major denomination and period, or for several smaller related religions. Almost every page is illustrated with small maps in pleasing colors.

Most present denominations came to America with immigrants. While the immigrants have largely lost their ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness, with Irish, German, and Italian becoming American, they generally kept their religion. To be sure, each denomination became Americanized, accepting worship in English, but still a Lutheran or Catholic imprint remains on the landscape.

We can identify four original directions of religious invasion. The English impact of Anglicanism, Methodism and Congregationalism remains strongest on the eastern seaboard. The Spanish Catholic invasion penetrated deeply into the American southwest near the Mexican border. Another Catholic penetration came from French Canada along the St. Lawrence Valley and the Mississippi River. And Russian Orthodoxy arrived originally via the Bering Strait and Alaska, where it remains strong among the Native peoples. Regardless of from whence they arrived, American religions were carried across the country with the various migrant streams.

The historical approach of the Atlas allows us to follow the ancestry of the various denomination, as they grew out of their predecessors in the same way as Christianity and Islam grew out of Judaism. Thus, Methodism and Puritanism grew out of the

English Church, Congregationalism out of Puritanism, and Unitarianism out of Congregationalism. Quakers also have their origin in the English Church. All this before the American Revolution. Baptists are more related to the continental reformation movements, and along with Presbyterianism draw on Calvinist doctrines. The Holiness movement grew out of Methodism, but also drew powerfully from the Baptists. It in turn gave birth to the Nazarene Church and to the Pentecostals, among whom the Assemblies of God are the largest denominational body. The numerous proliferations of various religions in the United States seem one consequence of religious freedom and of the disestablishment of colonial churches soon after Independence.

Proliferation of denominations is not confined to Christianity. Buddhism has brought major directions from its home of origin, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, plus two versions of Vajrayana. As well as Zen, which finds its devotees mainly among white middle-class Americans, not Asian immigrants. Islam, too has brought Sunni and Shia versions to America, plus a number of Black American Islamic groups. Even Judaism is divided into Reform, a German invention but thoroughly Americanized, Conservative, Orthodox and any number of Hasidic groups, the latter mostly in Brooklyn.

So is America a Christian country? The Atlas never really looks at total present numbers. We do learn that many groups had very early representation. The Anglicans settled as early as 1607, and the Puritans in 1620. However, the first Lutherans arrived in 1630, the first Jewish people in 1654, both in Dutch New Netherland. The Calvert family founded Roman Catholic Maryland in 1634. And long before any of these the Spanish Catholics reached Puerto Rico, Florida, and New Mexico in the Sixteenth Century. Several of these earliest settlements were incorporated into the American Southwest after the conquest of northern Mexico in 1848. We have been a very mixed bunch from the beginning. Yet, America after the Revolution and until the Irish Catholics arrived in large numbers in the 1840's was in practice entirely

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# FIG Leaflets

## **Increasingly logical.**

If God had intended whites and blacks to live together, they would have been living together in biblical times and before. The Last Supper would have been an integrated evening. At the distribution of the loaves and fishes there would have been a representative group of men and women of color. Segregation was no matter of contemporary discovery and preference; a deeper theology was in control.

John Kenneth Galbraith,  
"A Tenured Professor" (1990) p. 117

## **The creation of humans:**

We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a "higher" answer - but none exists.

Stephen Jay Gould

## **Unbelief in the "Reader's Digest"**

Leave it to the Reader's Digest to peddle a piece on "Prayers for Unbelievers." (April 2002, p. 100) It is a bit fake, in that you seem to need to believe in something. The first part draws on Buddhist practice, quoting a Zen priest, "From our perspective, the function of prayer is to connect us with that which is greater than our small self." The second part draws on Jesuit practice of examining the conscience. It involves conscious reflection on the events of the past day. "As they play through your mind, you try to notice where you sensed God's presence." Eventually something will remind you of "the fact that God is immanent." Why do I have the feeling the "Reader's Digest" would n't know the truth if it hit them over the head with a two-by-four.

-reported by theologian Franz Bibfeldt Jr.

## **Letters to the Editor, "Atlantic Monthly" (May 2002)**

In the West the culture war started by Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo is almost over, though here and there especially in the United States rearguard actions are still being fought. Within the Muslim world it has hardly begun. At its core it is, I suggest, a conflict between two visions of truth -- one hierarchical and authoritarian, in which revealed truths are constantly threatened by heresy and apostasy; the other democratic and tolerant, thriving on innovation and criticism, in which truths about the world and the human condition are always incomplete, always subject to revision and improvement. In science only one of these ways works, and this may be a source of hope. For although Muslim fundamentalists (like their Christian and Jewish counterparts) would like to take their followers back to the pre-modern world, most ordinary people, whatever their religious or ethnic loyalties, want the benefits of science-based technology and medicine. No society, however, can hope to enjoy the goods that religious fundamentalists would like their followers to forgo unless it supports a thriving scientific community. And although science is culture-neutral, flourishing as well in Japan as in California, it is not value-neutral. As European history shows, and as events in the Soviet Union and present-day China have borne out, its core values anti-authoritarianism, openness to criticism, and the belief that reason and evidence are the surest guides to truth are contagious. They also happen to be core values of modern secular democratic societies.

-- David Layzer, Professor of Astrophysics,  
Harvard University

## **Religious Views?**

Gilder also asked James Moore, biographer of Darwin and historical consultant for Evolution, about the effect of his study of Darwin on his personal religious views; Moore, finding the question impertinent, explained that he would "as soon talk about my sex life as about my particular religious views in public."

"Preparing for the Deluge"  
"NCSE Reports" (Sept/Dec, 2001) p. 5



## *Rationally Speaking*

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

N. 25, June 2002

### **Ecology vs. Ecophily: Is it good to lie for the environment?**

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The situation of the environment is getting worse by any reasonable estimate, and we are simply not doing enough: not only to protect what's left, but to reverse the trend and finally start the long path toward sustainability instead of uncontrolled growth. The problem impacts everybody, including Knoxville, which has just been declared the 8th most polluted city in the US – not exactly a record to be proud of.

Among the many environmental problems we face, few have such a high emotional impact as species extinction. More and more people realize that extinction is, literally, final, which raises not only practical questions (what if we just lost a species of plants producing chemicals useful to fight cancer?), but ethical (what gives us the ethical ground to condemn entire kinds of other organisms to death because we wish to augment our own standard of living a bit more?).

However, should we go as far as lying in order to save the environment? Some people apparently think so, and seem to follow the same suggestion that Martin Luther gave to his followers: "What harm would it do, if a man told a good strong lie for the sake of the good and for the Christian church [...] a lie out of necessity, a useful lie, a helpful lie, such

lies would not be against God, he would accept them." Well, I don't know about God, but I'm not too sympathetic toward people who lie, even for a good cause.

In the case of the environment, I draw a distinction between ecologists and ecophiles. An ecologist, strictly speaking, is a professional who studies the interactions of living organisms with the environment. I do research on ecological matters, so I am an ecologist in that sense of the word. An ecophile is somebody who loves the environment and the living world and wishes to do something to protect them. Accordingly, I am an ecophile as well.

The problem comes when people mix the two perspectives and misuse science in order to advance the cause of environmental protection. When that happens, we are lying for the greater good, just like Martin Luther suggested we should do. In both cases, I think we are wasting ethical currency, because neither God (presumably) nor the environment need that sort of help.

Let's consider a recent example of questionable ecophilia. Biologist and Pulitzer Prize winner E.O. Wilson has given an interview to the Christian Science Monitor (25 April 2002) in which he has made an impassioned appeal for scientists to be activists. I couldn't agree more. Scientists have an ethical duty as human beings to become involved in issues of public education, especially when they can bring their expertise to direct bearing over fundamental questions such as the preservation of biodiversity. And Wilson has done an admirable job in just such role. However, Wilson also abandoned himself to statements that he will come to regret, as soon as the perennially vigilant anti-environment movement will hear about it. And the damage will be all the greater for the environmental community because of the high status of the scientist who made those claims.

Wilson said that "Before humanity came along, species were dying at a rate of about 1 per million per year, and they were being born 1 per million per year. So, through time immemorial, things have been pretty much in balance. Now we're speeding up the death of the species 1,000 times and we're lowering the birthrate. The cradles are being destroyed."

There are various problems with this statement, which

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take a significant amount of power out of it and put a dent into Wilson's, and the entire environmental movement's, credibility. First off, Wilson knows very well that extinction and speciation rates have fluctuated wildly throughout the history of the planet, with several documented mass extinctions and a constantly fluctuating rate of "background" extinction: no such nice balance between death and birth has ever been maintained on this planet. Indeed, biologists would be at a loss to explain how such balance could possibly happen by natural forces (which are not in the business of long-term environmental planning). Second, Wilson – later on in the same interview – states that the current estimate of the total number of species living today on earth varies from 1.8 to 10 to 100 million. Hmm, given that we are talking about at least two orders of magnitude of difference, how do we know that we have sped up things by 1,000 times? It could be only 10 times, or maybe 100,000 times. The data are simply not there for us to make an educated (as opposed to a wild) guess.

Now, I am sure that Wilson did not mean to consciously mislead the Christian Science Monitor readers, and it is not certain to what extent what was printed was what he meant to say. However, similar exaggerations are presented by ecophilists commonly enough to have fueled a copious literature by a backlash anti-environmental movement (see the excellent book by Paul and Anne Ehrlich, *Betrayal of Science and Reason*). We don't need to exaggerate the sorry state of the environment; it's bad enough as it is. There is good science to give plenty of ammunition to those who wish to advance the environmental cause. However, if we are not careful with the accuracy of our statements (not to mention if we lie about the facts as some environmental groups have repeatedly done) we lose the moral high ground and we do irreparable damage to the cause of scientific education and to the very problem we are so concerned about. Let's be scientists and activists by all means, ecologists and ecophilists, but always keep the facts as separate as possible from the feelings. That really helps the environment.

**Next month:**

Economic vs. Social health: it's not the economy, stupid!

© by Massimo Pigliucci, 2002

Many thanks to Melissa Brenneman and Bob Faulkner for patiently editing and commenting on Rationally Speaking columns.

**Quote of the month:**

"It is hard to believe that a man is telling the truth when you know that you would lie if you were in his place." (H.L. Mencken)

**Further readings:**

*Biophilia: the Human Bond with Other Species*, by E.O. Wilson, where you can take a closer look at Wilson's serious arguments.

**Web links:**

The Ecological Society of America, an organization of professional ecologists who are also concerned about the environment. (<http://www.esa.org/>)

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(Continued from page 6)

and without doubt a Protestant realm, in which the Constitutional separation of church and state was simply and tacitly ignored.

Freethinkers, atheists, and secular humanists are not mentioned in this history. I would say they are conspicuous in their absence. Since we do not claim religious status, we perhaps ought not to complain.

Wolf Roder