

FIG LEAVES

Volume 16 Issue 5

May 2007

May FIG Meeting:

SPEAK-OUT!

*The Free Inquiry Group of Cincinnati
and Northern Kentucky (FIG) will sponsor:*

“Rally for Reason Speak-Out”

**Sunday, May 27th, 2007, at 7:00 pm. (EDT)
Hilton Cincinnati Airport, 7373 Turfway Road,
Florence, Kentucky. Phone (859) 371-4400.**

The hotel is easy to get to. It is just off of the Turfway Exit on I-71 / I-75 in Northern Kentucky.

This meeting will be the evening before the Rally for Reason, that is set for outside of the gates of Answers in Genesis, on Monday, Memorial Day, May 28th, 2007.

Come, meet others, and hear such speakers as Arlene-Marie, President of Michigan Atheists; Reverend Mendle Adams, a Christian minister; Frank Zindler, author and scientist, Dr. Gene Kritsky, an evolutionary biologist; Helen Kagin, a retired physician and many others.

Yes, there will also be an open mike and an opportunity for those of you who have come for the Rally for Reason to speak out as well. The press has been invited. Some folks are making a documentary of this event.

Details for the Rally for Reason will be discussed.

Did you miss Woodstock?

Did you miss Stonewall?

Did you miss Selma?

Did you miss People's Park?

Did you miss the 60s?

June FIG Meeting:

Sunday, 24 June 2:00 PM At the Vernon Manor

Religion in Violent Conflict

Amanda Metskas

Amanda Metskas will present to FIG for our June program meeting. Amanda is a PhD candidate at The Ohio State University in Political Science. Her current research focus is in the role of religion in violent conflict. Amanda will use this research for her dissertation work at OSU. Previous areas of focus have included the role of Evangelical Christianity in US Foreign Policy Attitudes. In June, she will speak to FIG about both her personal research and the attitudes of leading scholars on these important topics. Amanda has presented in the past to the Secular Student Alliance and the Humanist Community of Central Ohio. Amanda has served on staff at Camp Quest since 2003 and is the Board President for Camp Quest Ohio.



April Meeting...

Humanity vs. the Environment

talk by Peter Seidel

Our speaker, Peter Seidel is an architect and urban planner, a teacher and member of Fig. He is an editor of *Global Survival: the challenge and its implications for thinking and acting* (2006) and author of *Invisible walls : why we ignore the damage we inflict on the planet-- and ourselves* (1998)

What got him started recently thinking about this topic was a request asking him to write a scenario on human extinction for the journal *Futures*. For many years he had been thinking about the future and environmental problems and where is this taking us? And then arrived at the thought that maybe evolution is self-destructive. But writing the article, made him terribly depressed. At the time he was reading a book called the *Revenge of Gaia* by James Lovelock. Putting the two of these together left him with a terrible impression.

He decided to talk first about Gaia's Revenge. Then about the actual response we may have to what is happening.

In the world everything is connected in some way even though we don't always see the way. The reality out there is different from the world we see. We have colorful models in our heads. Yet, there is no color in the real world. There are merely electromagnetic waves. The different frequencies these take, we see as different colors. Everything in reality is practically a void. Atoms are almost nothing just a nucleus and a few electrons. Thus, the world we think we see is not the real world. The world we think we see is only part of the real world. So what is happening to that real world now?

Tomorrow there will be 221,000 more people on earth. All of those people will need space, food, and they will produce garbage. Also 27,000 hectares of arable land will be either degraded or abandoned. In China alone ten km² of land plus additional land in Africa is desiccated annually. Tomorrow there will be 32,000 more cars on the planet; not to mention trucks. There will also be 5.2 million metric tons of carbon added to the atmosphere; about half of that being absorbed by the oceans. Terrestrial animal ↗



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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species are becoming extinct a thousand and more times faster than before modern industry. And thirty thousand children will die from mal-nutrition or preventable diseases. Last week we lost 32 people at Virginia Tech and think of all the attention and concern that got. At the same time about 200 people were killed in Iraq and probably hundreds more maimed.

Some of these things are not so new, for example, global warming. Peter asked when was global warming first written about? Peter said the earliest mention was made in 1896 by a Swedish chemist. About the same time an American geologist developed the same insight. As early as 1968 a white paper of 26 pages dealing with global warming appeared, and look where we are today. The press has been slow to pick up on this and they deserve a lot of responsibility for ignoring the problem.

He then held up two books about the environment both published as far back as 1948. *Our Plundered Planet* by geologist Fairfield Osborn; the other *Road to Survival* by William Vogt. These should and did arouse Americans to a consciousness of how we were ruining the very soil beneath our feet. What did it do? As a result of these, and other authors' work, the Government initiated a comprehensive soil conservation program. The population has doubled since then, and many new environmental challenges have arisen.

Peter began to talk about James Lovelock. He has an amazing mind. He calls himself a "global physician." He has written more than two hundred scientific papers. In 1962 he published his *Gaia hypothesis*. Basically he claims the living matter on earth interacts with the inert matter in such a way it results in maintaining a climatic state of equilibrium. We know the sun like all similar stars has warmed as it aged and it is now 25 percent hotter than when life began on the planet. Yet, the earth succeeded to stay close to the right temperature for over three billion years and has kept life going. This is truly incredible! There was a lot of skepticism about this concept when Lovelock first formulated it; but a lot of that has vanished today. So today it is called the *Gaia Theory* rather than hypothesis

But, Peter went on to say that we have flushed a huge quantity of carbon gas into the air and the earth is weakened by the loss. The land we took for food is changing the whole level of carbon dioxide and the atmosphere is



warmer because of that. The earth is returning to the hot temperature it had millions of years ago. As it warms most living things will die. Even if all the good intentions expressed by the Kyoto and Montreal meetings were secured immediately they would not alter the outcome.

Lovelock suggests we switch to nuclear energy immediately. Peter attended a conference Lovelock organized in New York City in 2002. A lot of very interesting people came. Several people from government, scientists, several theologians, a philosopher. Lovelock seemed very modest. Although he organized the conference he spoke only once or twice himself, he always had other people addressing the conference.

We are basically hunters and gatherers and we haven't evolved that much since. Considering that, we have accomplished an incredible amount.

Last but not least, Peter suggested action. Some things we are concerned about are trivial others are serious. Terrorism, for example, is serious but more serious than all is keeping the planet a viable place to live. This should be number one and we have to do our best to preserve mother earth. Some people really commit themselves to helping the environment like helping the bald eagle or the whooping crane and these things are good. But keeping our planet viable will take much more.

-- Reported by George Maurer ☚

The Bishop of Cincinnati died and stands at the Pearly Gates.

"So who are you?" asks St. Peter.

"The Bishop of Cincinnati."

"Cincinnati? Never heard of it. Where is that located?"

"In America. That's where we recently held the National Bishops Conference."

"You don't say!" exclaims Peter, "I'll have to ask the Holy Ghost about that."

He picks up the phone, dials, and explains: "There is a man here, claims he is the Bishop of Cincinnati. Is that possible?"

"Cincinnati?" can be clearly heard in reply, - "never been there."





ATHEISTS ENDORSE



RALLY FOR REASON PROTEST AT OPENING OF CREATIONIST MUSEUM MONDAY, MAY 28, 2007

AMERICAN ATHEISTS today announced its full support for the “Rally for Reason” protest slated for Monday, May 28, 2007 (Memorial Day) at the grand opening of a creationist “museum” operated by an evangelical religious group in Boone County, KY.

The \$27 million facility is a project of the Answers in Genesis group which promotes a literal, biblical view of how life and universe ostensibly began, and challenges mainstream scientific findings about evolution. The museum will reportedly include exhibits reflecting the inaccurate claim that dinosaurs and human beings co-existed in a “Garden of Eden” style Earth, and that our planet was fashioned by the Judeo-Christian deity approximately 6,000 years ago.

The *Rally for Reason* is calling on all groups -- including Atheists, Freethinkers, Humanists and other non-believers -- as well as religious, civic and educational organizations that support good science to join in the peaceful protest outside the gates of the “Answers in Genesis.” According to Edwin Kagin of the RfR, the rally is not challenging the right of AIG to present their world view. “They can teach that things fall up if they wish,” said Mr. Kagin. “We are simply trying to show that the views they are promoted are not accepted by those who do not share their fundamentalist religious views, and their effort to sneak those teachings into the public schools.”

“Our organization endorses this important action to speak out against creationist pseudo-science,” said Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists. “The scientific enterprise must be kept free from meddling by religious or other groups. Good science is a foundation for any enlightened civilization, and we want to support that as a cultural and political value.”

WHAT: Peaceful protest outside the gates, opening for the Answers in Genesis creationist museum.

WHERE: Bullittsburg Church Road, Exit 11 off Rt. 275, Boone County, KY.

WHEN: Monday, May 28, 2007 (Memorial Day) beginning at 9:00 AM

MORE INFO: “Rally for Reason” web site at <http://rallyforreason.arkonuts.com/> or contact: Frank Zindler, Science Advisor for American Atheists (614-299-1036); (Dave Silverman, Communications Director for American Atheists (732-648-9333); or Edwin Kagin (859-384-7000.)

Notes on the Rally for Reason:

Several well meaning people, for whom I have great respect, have expressed their opinion that it is a mistake to give any attention or press to something as unacceptable to rational persons as the idea of “Creationism” and the “Creation Museum” dedicated to forwarding this mythology.

Ordinarily, I would agree with this analysis. We need not protest those who hold to a Flat Earth “theory,” etc. However, the situation in Northern Kentucky is different. “Answers in Genesis” has managed to get world wide press for their fantasy presentations. The “Creation Museum” is being endorsed by official convention and tourist outlets for the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The Governor of Kentucky has expressed support for teaching Bible stories in public schools, and Boone County, Kentucky is giving breaks on laws and taxation, denied others, to the vendors of religious dogma. The temporary President of the United States has even opined that the jury is still out on evolution.

Foolish ideas can come dressed up, just as there can be dressed up fools. And the presentations of the “Answers in Genesis” (www.AnswersInGenesis.org) outfit are well dressed indeed - yes, this is a compliment to their marketing. But such well dressed ideas can deceive many to their great cost. Just ask some Germans and Italians whether they would rather their country had not been treated to, much less accepted, the dressed up ideas of Hitler and Il Duce.

If, given all of the publicity that has been generated, nothing supporting science and evidence is offered, the impression will be given to the public, the press, and lawmakers that no one objects, and that if fancy, growling, expensive, mechanized displays of dinosaurs and humans living at the same time, and sharing “Noah’s Ark,” are presented as true, with no word to the contrary, then it must be so.

Discussing these matters learnedly in secular discussion groups, that are attended by few, and snickering at those who think it is only fair to teach creationism in public schools, does not get the message to well meaning, but misinformed, people who will visit the “Creation Museum” to view displays and dioramas slickly designed to “prove” the Earth is only some 6,000 years old. And thus will our society become a bit more “dumbed down,” and will in



consequence be internally weakened.

The attitude that it is best not to give nonsense credit by opposing it can be quite dangerous. School boards and legislators might well conclude, without further information, that if scientists, teachers, and the public are not opposed to the well publicized idea of teaching Bronze Age myths as fact, then such misinformation is okay.

As unpleasant as such may appear, the appropriate way to respond is to be there. To go through the "Creation Museum." Get over the idea that you are helping to fund them by buying a ticket. This is the only way to obtain the knowledge needed to help save the scientific method and civilization from returning to another Dark Age. You should see it, if for no other reason than to know what you are talking about.

We can politely, and with dignity, carry signs, perhaps humorous ones, and pass out serious literature, and listen to entertaining talks, all designed to inform, to present fact over fantasy, truth over dogma, light over darkness. We can help those, who do not know, understand that evolution is a "theory" in the same manner that gravity is a "theory." People do understand that things do not fall up when dropped.

And you can meet some nice people.

While the site is quite rural, with no facilities, do not despair. There are motels, restaurants, gas stations, etc. within a very few miles from the site. And if you need to go inside, this might be a good time to inspect the Creation Museum.

Here is our website with more information:
<http://rallyforreason.com>

And, if you think being outdoors in response to a threat to the foundations of knowledge is too much trouble, do not worry. Those who would establish a theocracy over us have promised to attack only when it is convenient for you, when it is not raining, when you can be warm, dry, safe, well fed, and have had plenty of time to engage in Liberal Angst over just what to do. Meanwhile, others will fight the American Religious Civil War and protect your freedoms for you.

-- Edwin Kagin, Organizer, Rally for Reason

On getting to the "Creation Museum" of Answers in Genesis.

It is recommended that you arrive on Sunday, May 27th. This is so you can maybe go to the "Rally for Reason Speak-Out," being generously sponsored by the Free Inquiry Group of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky (FIG) the evening before the event.

You can perhaps stay on the ground outside of Answers in Genesis in a sleeping bag if you wish. Maybe even in a tent.

But you must bring everything you need. Nothing is provided. You know, just like it was when Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, and that sort of human were first visiting Kentucky.

Speaking of you bringing everything, if you want to pass out educational materials, sell stuff, or whatever, you will need to bring your own table or do without one.

Lewis and Clark used a Dutch oven for both chamber pot and cooking use. They didn't have a lot of room for redundancy.

To get here, you must first figure out how to get to Kentucky, or, if already in Kentucky, how to get to Exit 11 off of I-275, which can be gotten to from I-71/I-75 or from I-74. Doing so should be a simple matter for those who went to school when geography was still taught or by a clever eight year old with access to a computer.

If you are flying, this information, while interesting and educational, is unnecessary in that airplanes work sort of like horizontal elevators. The Cincinnati Airport (yes, the Cincinnati Airport is in Kentucky--don't worry about it. The Cincinnati IRS is in Kentucky too, and Kentucky owns the Ohio River. It is a long story) is quite close to Answers in Genesis.

If you have a GPS, you only need to tell it where you want to go and it will tell you how to get there. Just imagine, if Moses had such a device he could have saved 39.2 years of wandering in the desert and he might not have wound up in a country with no oil.

Here are (should be--this is not a precise science) correct directions. These are the official AiG directions to the Creation Museum and AiG-USA headquarters, borrowed with our thanks from their website: http://www.answersingenesis.org/feedback/directions_aigus.aspx

- Take I-75/71 to I-275 (road to Airport)
- Go west on I-275 for about 11 miles. (Past Airport)
- Take the Petersburg exit (exit 11), bear right.
- Go south (under I-275 overpass) this is route 8.
- Take the first left (Bullittsburg Church Rd.) and go about 1/3 mile.

PLEASE NOTE: You have to get to the site and get back to wherever you are going next on your own. There are no buses, cars, bikes, rickshaws, mules, or any such whatsoever provided by the organizers to transport you. It is strongly suggested that you make arrangements with someone with a car for a ride. Failing this, you could take a cab. We cannot in good faith suggest that you could walk from your motel to the site. Some could, but I am certainly not now one of them.

--Edwin





THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



SEE - Society for Evolution Education



The Society for Evolution Education is presenting a series of workshops on each Saturday night throughout the month of May and June.

May 12, 2007 "Evolution in Vertebrate Tetrapods" by Dr. Richard Durtsche, Associate professor of Biological Sciences at Northern Kentucky University.

May 19, 2007 "The Evolutionary Theory of Sexual Selection" by Dr. Denice Robertson, Lecturer in Biological Sciences at Northern Kentucky University.

May 26, 2007 "The Role of Transitional Fossils in Evolution" by Dr. Brenda Kanke, Paleontologist, Cincinnati Natural History Museum.

June 2, 2007 "Galapagos: Showcase of Evolution" by Dr. Miriam Kannan, Regents Professor of Biological Sciences at Northern Kentucky University.

June 9, 2007 "The Evolution of the Eye" by Dr. Elke K. Buschbeck, Assistant Professor of Biology at the University of Cincinnati.

June 16, 2007 "The Evolution of Plants" Dr. Maggie Whitson, Assistant Professor in Biological Sciences at Northern Kentucky University.

The cost is \$5.00 per person per lecture. For additional information, call 859-781-5502.

There is also a Daytime Family Program "Evolution on the Farm", 10:00 am- 2:00 pm and from 2:00 pm - 4:00 pm. These tours will be offered on the next seven Saturdays.

The lecture series and the tours will take place at Sunrock Farm, 103 Gibson Lane, in Wilder Kentucky. For more information call 859-781-5502



The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

When: Tuesday, 15 May at 8:00PM

Where: Joseph-Beth Booksellers
2692 Madison Rd. Rookwood Pavillion
Cincinnati OH 45207; 513-396-8966

To see who's coming and to see more event details:
http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve

SCIENCE BOOK CLUB: 2007 Schedule

Science book club as in past years plans on meeting at the Cincinnati Downtown Library on the 4th Sunday of each month at 2:30pm in Room 3A, except on the 3rd Sunday because of holidays or other conflicts as noted below:

May 20 (3rd Sunday)- *The Difference Engine : Charles Babbage and the quest to build the first computer* by Doron Swade

June 24 - *Natural Justice* by Ken G. Binmore

July 22 - *The Mountain People and The Forest People*, both books by Colin Turnbull

Aug. 19 (3rd Sunday) - *Into the cool : energy flow, thermodynamics, and life* by Eric D Schneider

Sept. 23 - *The big splat, or, How our moon came to be* by Dana Mackenzie

Oct. 28 - *Facts and mysteries in elementary particle physics* by Martinus J.G. Veltman

Nov. 18 (3rd Sunday) - *What we believe but cannot prove : today's leading thinkers on science in the age of certainty* edited by John Brockman

Dec. 16 (3rd Sunday) - *The Republican war on science* by Chis Mooney



The Evolution of Religion

The propensity for religious belief may be innate since it is found in societies around the world. Innate behaviors are shaped by natural selection because they confer some advantage in the struggle for survival. But if religion is innate, what could that advantage have been?

No one can describe with certainty the specific needs of hunter-gatherer societies that religion evolved to satisfy. But a strong possibility is that religion coevolved with language, because language can be used to deceive, and religion is a safeguard against deception. Religion began as a mechanism for a community to exclude those who could not be trusted. Later, it grew into a means of encouraging communal action, a necessary role in hunter-gatherer societies that have no chiefs or central authority. It was then co-opted by the rulers of settled societies as a way of solidifying their authority and justifying their privileged position. Modern states now accomplish by other means many of the early roles performed by religion, which is why religion has become of less relevance in some societies. But because the propensity for religious belief is still wired into the human mind, religion continues to be a potent force in societies that still struggle for cohesion.

-- Nicholas Wade, *Before the Dawn*, p. 164



For God's Sake

By Paul Krugman, *The New York Times*, 13 April 2007

In 1981, Gary North, a leader of the Christian Reconstructionist movement - the openly theocratic wing of the Christian right - suggested that the movement could achieve power by stealth. "Christians must begin to organize politically within the present party structure," he wrote, "and they must begin to infiltrate the existing institutional order."

Today, Regent University, founded by the televangelist Pat Robertson to provide "Christian leadership to change the world," boasts that it has 150 graduates working in the Bush administration. Unfortunately for the image of the school, where Mr. Robertson is chancellor and president, the most famous of those graduates is Monica Goodling, a product of the university's law school. She's the former top aide to Alberto Gonzales who appears central to the scandal of the fired U.S. attorneys and has declared that she will take the Fifth rather than testify to Congress on the matter.

The infiltration of the federal government by large numbers of people seeking to impose a religious agenda - which is very different from simply being people of faith - is one of the most important stories of the last six years. It's also a story that tends to go under reported, perhaps because journalists are afraid of sounding like conspiracy theorists. But this conspiracy is no theory. The official platform of the Texas Republican Party pledges to "dispel the myth of the separation of church and state." And the Texas Republicans now running the country are doing their best to fulfill that pledge.

Kay Cole James, who had extensive connections to the religious right and was the dean of Regent's government school, was the federal government's chief personnel officer from 2001 to 2005. (Curious fact: she then took a job with Mitchell Wade, the businessman who bribed Representative Randy "Duke" Cunningham.) And it's clear that unqualified people were hired throughout the administration because of their religious connections. For example, *The Boston Globe* reported on one Regent law school graduate who was interviewed by the Justice Department's civil rights division. Asked what Supreme Court decision of the past twenty years he most disagreed

with, he named the decision to strike down a Texas anti-sodomy law. When he was hired, it was his only job offer. Or consider George Deutsch, the presidential appointee at NASA who told a Web site designer to add the word "theory" after every mention of the Big Bang, to leave open the possibility of "intelligent design by a creator." He turned out not to have, as he claimed, a degree from Texas A&M.

One measure of just how many Bushies were appointed to promote a religious agenda is how often a Christian right connection surfaces when we learn about a Bush administration scandal. There's Ms. Goodling, of course. But did you know that Rachel Paulose, the U.S. attorney in Minnesota - three of whose deputies recently stepped down, reportedly in protest over her management style - is, according to a local news report, in the habit of quoting Bible verses in the office? Or there's the case of Claude Allen, the presidential aide and former deputy secretary of health and human services, who stepped down after being investigated for petty theft. Most press reports, though they mentioned Mr. Allen's faith, failed to convey the fact that he built his career as a man of the hard-line Christian right.

And there's another thing most reporting fails to convey: the sheer extremism of these people. You see, Regent isn't a religious university the way Loyola or Yeshiva are religious universities. It's run by someone whose first reaction to 9/11 was to brand it God's punishment for America's sins. Two days after the terrorist attacks, Mr. Robertson held a conversation with Jerry Falwell on Mr. Robertson's TV show "The 700 Club." Mr. Falwell laid blame for the attack at the feet of "the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians," not to mention the ACLU and People for the American Way. "Well, I totally concur," said Mr. Robertson. The Bush administration's implosion clearly represents a setback for the Christian right's strategy of infiltration. But it would be wildly premature to declare the danger over. This is a movement that has shown great resilience over the years. It will surely find new champions.

Next week Rudy Giuliani will be speaking at Regent's Executive Leadership Series. ☘

The Creator is a comedian whose audience is afraid to laugh.
-- H. L. Mencken



Religious bias may color doctors' views

Few topics are more likely to cause argument among doctors than the influence of religion on healing, but a survey suggests most physicians bring their ideas about religion into their practice, U.S. researchers reported on Monday. Physicians have been debating studies about the influence of religion and spirituality on patient health for more than a decade, but little consensus has emerged.

A new study may give clues about why, said Dr. Farr Curlin, a University of Chicago researcher whose findings appear in this week's *Archives of Internal Medicine*, Curlin and colleagues surveyed U.S. doctors about their views on religion and spirituality and healing and found a strong association between physicians' views and their own religious beliefs. "This is yet more evidence that doctors are not just objective, neutral scientists. Their religious or secular commitments influence the way they respond to patients and the way they interpret data," Curlin said in a telephone interview.

Curlin and colleagues mailed a survey in 2003 to a random sample of tow thousand practicing U.S. doctors aged 65 or younger from all specialties. Some 63 percent responded and the average age of respondents was 49. They found that 85 percent of those surveyed believe religion or spirituality has a generally positive effect, but only six percent say it often changes medical outcomes, reflecting some sort of miraculous healing. About three quarters of those surveyed say spirituality helps patients cope and believe it gives them a positive state of mind. About seven percent, however, said it often causes negative emotions such as guilt and anxiety and some four percent think patients use spirituality to avoid taking responsibility for their health.

Doctors who are most religious are more likely to see the positive influence of religion on their patients. These physicians are much more likely to report that their patients bring up religion and issues of spirituality. They are much more likely to say religion has a strong influence on health and to interpret religion and spirituality in positive rather than negative ways.

"Physicians' notions about the relationships between religion and spirituality and patients' health are strongly

associated with physicians' own religious characteristics," Curlin's team wrote. Based on their findings, the researchers said doctors should be aware that their own views of religion could influence how they provide care, and patients should take note of their doctors' biases. "Their doctor's own religious beliefs will influence how the doctor responds to the patient's spiritual concerns," Curlin said.

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Working to promote and defend reason, science, and freedom of inquiry in all areas of human endeavor

What is the Center for Inquiry?

by Paul Kurtz

Many people ask us to describe what the Center for Inquiry does. The following is a brief account of its structure and goals.

The Center for Inquiry is an international federation of *many* organizations: the Council for Secular Humanism (1980), publisher of *Free Inquiry* magazine; the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (formerly CSICOP, 1976), publisher of *Skeptical Inquirer*; the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (1983), publisher of *CSEER Review*; the Commission for Scientific Medicine and Mental Health (1997), publisher of the *Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice* and the *Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine*; Secular Organizations for Sobriety (1988); African Americans for Humanism (1989); American Rationalist Association, (formerly) publisher of the *American Rationalist* (1946); the Society of Humanist Philosophers (1998), publisher of *Philo*; the International Academy of Humanism (founded 1983); the Institute for the Secularization of Islamic Society (1996), and others.

To read this report in its entirety go to: <<http://www.centerforinquiry.net/whatiscfi.html>>

Cooling down the IPCC warming report.

The assessment of the impact of global warming issued by the IPCC last Friday, grim though it was, had actually been toned down in the final negotiations in Brussels at the insistence of the U.S. and China. According to the *New York Times*, Bush's top environmental advisor told reporters that the report "reinforces" the policies of the administration. Without population control measures, however, no other policies will help in the long run.

- *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 13 April 2007



President Bush vows to protect one-celled people.

The Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act passed the Senate 63-34, but President Bush promises a veto. He said the use of embryonic stem cells in research “crosses a moral line.” In case you’re wondering where this “moral line” is drawn, we have looked into it. George W. Bush and other conservative theologians believe a “soul” is assigned to the fertilized egg at the instant of conception. That makes it a person, even though it’s not counted in the census. In-vitro fertilization makes a lot more of these one-celled people than it needs; leftovers are stacked in the freezer until it starts filling up. President Bush cares deeply about these helpless one-celled people and wants to ensure they are properly flushed down the disposal rather than exploited by godless scientists interested only in the reduction of suffering.

– *What’s New*, Robert

Sex Education: Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder.

Students who participated in sexual abstinence programs were just as likely to have sex as those who did not, according to a study ordered by Congress. Nor did they have fewer sex partners, or wait longer to become sexually active. The report, released late last Friday, comes just after the abrupt resignation of Dr. Eric Keroack, an anti-birth control zealot, appointed by Bush just four months ago to head the Office of Population Affairs of the Department of Health and Human Services. A non-board-certified gynecologist/obstetrician who operates six Christian anti-abortion centers in Massachusetts, Keroack had been notified of a state investigation into his private practice.

--*What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 20 April 2007 ☞

Supreme Court abortion ruling places Women’s Rights in limbo..

Last month’s 5-4 decision upholding a ban on partial birth abortion ensured that the composition of the court will be an issue in the coming election. The awkward fact is that all five justices in the majority are Catholic. Stem cell research draws similar religious opposition from the Catholic Church and fundamentalists. It’s based on the magical belief that a soul is assigned to the zygote at conception. The zygote is certainly alive, with its own

unique DNA, but that’s true of a bacterium.

Based on a Genesis passage in which God breathes life into Adam, Jews and liberal Christians usually argue that the soul arrives when the newborn draws its first breath. However, there is not shred of evidence that a “soul” even exists, and it certainly has no place in science or law.

Maybe the court should have checked with the Vatican. Ironically, just a week after the Court rendered its decision protecting the fetus from late-term abortion, a 30-member International Theological Commission appointed by the Vatican abolished limbo. Limbo was where babies who died before being baptized were sent, including aborted fetuses. Because they were saddled with original sin, they couldn’t go to heaven. But now the panel has decided that because God is merciful, he’s going to let them into heaven anyway. It’s not clear what new information they have. Pope Benedict XVI agrees. While still a Cardinal he wrote a report saying limbo was “only a theological hypothesis.” Isn’t that all any of it is, Benny?

– *What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 4 May 2007

Wild promises or has George II agreed to end the war?

What a turnaround! According to a tiny story in this morning’s NY Times, Bush told Congressional leaders yesterday in a two-page letter that he would veto any measures that “allow taxpayer dollars to be used for the destruction of human life.”

– *What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 4 May 2007

Global warming accelerates as “eyes in the sky” grow dim.

Sea ice in the Arctic is melting far faster than estimated. Molly Bentley points out in BBC News that the National Research Council found our ability to monitor change from space deteriorating as NASA collapses under the weight of human space flight.

– *What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 4 May 2007

The new East of Germany, where roughly eighty per cent of the population no longer recognize Christianity even as a rumor, where it appears as the exception, not the rule, and where one has the opportunity to reflect on the truth of the claim “this is as good as it gets.” -- Burkhard Müller



Jesus says, you can eat at McDonald's but not plant any trees.

Written by Poorie Black, 6 April 2007

Easter Friday is upon us once again. Every one gets a day off to celebrate the death of Jesus Christ, some hippy from ages ago who started some religion. However, those who don't practice His religion are directly affected by His imposed rules for Good Friday. All shops must close their doors on this day in New Zealand. Except of course McDonald's (they have some sort of arrangement with Jesus).

I never did understand Good Friday. It commemorates the crucifixion and death of Jesus at Calvary. So your prophet is murdered and made to die a horrible death and you call it Good Friday? The only thing I can think of is that Christianity is synonymous with bloodshed and violence and therefore, Friday may have been particularly good for followers witness to this crucifixion.

In recent years nurseries have opened their doors in hope that a day off will encourage home owners to buy plants and use their day productively to make their gardens prettier. Blatantly ignoring Jesus' rules will land you in trouble with the law. Garden centers that decide to stay open end up with huge fines and are punished severely for doing so.

Buddhists, Muslims and Atheists etc. are all made to suffer a day off with no pay. Their lives are directly affected by laws imposed on them by another religion. They must break the law in order to keep their enterprises running to feed their families.

So back to McDonald's, Jesus says, feed your families rubbish and help to increase obesity but don't, whatever you do, help the environment by planting trees while you get some quality outdoor time.

Happy Easter!

Source: www.stuffed.co.nz

After the Vatican II conference and its many documents one Cardinal comments to another.
"Now I think, we have the proof that God really wrote the ten commandments."
"How proof?" asks the other.
"Can you imagine ten simple, rational sentences, no ifs, buts, or clauses?"

The Meaning of Genesis.

The writers of Genesis, . . . who wrote about the creation of the world in seven days, knew nothing about the process of creation. They believed the earth was flat with water above and below it. They wrote that God created light on the first day and the sun on the fourth day. Genesis was not written to explain the process of creation, of which these writers knew nothing. It was written to help explain the purpose of creation. It was written to help us grasp a spiritual truth, not a scientific or historical fact. And this purpose, this spiritual truth, is something the writers did know about. These biblical writers, at their best, understood our divided nature. They knew our internal conflicts and battles; how we could love our brother and yet hate him; the oppressive power of parents, even the best of parents; the impulses that drive us to commit violations against others; the yearning to lead a life of meaning; our fear of mortality; our struggles to deal with our uncertainty, our loneliness, our greed, our lust, our ambition, our desires to be God, as well as our moments of nobility, compassion and courage. They knew these emotions and feelings were entangled. They understood our weaknesses and strengths. They understood how we are often not the people we want to be or know we should be, how hard it is for us to articulate all this, and how life and creation can be as glorious and beautiful as it can be mysterious, evil and cruel. This is why Genesis is worth reading, indeed why the Bible stands as one of the great ethical and moral documents of our age. The biblical writers have helped shape and define Western civilization.

- Chris Hedges, "Faith," pp. 7-8

Q: How many presidential aides does it take to change a lightbulb?

A: None, the president likes being in the dark; besides there is nothing wrong with the lightbulb; its condition is improving every day.

Any reports of its lack of incandescence are totally unfounded; the result of delusional "spin" from the fanatic, elitist, liberal media. That lightbulb has served honorably, and anything you say against it undermines the lighting effect and dims its ego. Why do you hate America?





This is what the clash of civilisations is really about

by Julian Baggini, 14 April 2007, *The Guardian*

Relativism has made liberal openness appear weak, empty and repugnant compared with the clarity of dogma. I don't usually consider either the Ministry of Defence or the Vatican to be prescient founts of wisdom. But when two such different oracles issue remarkably similar warnings, you have to take notice. Earlier this week it was revealed in this newspaper how the MoD believes that "the trend towards moral relativism and increasingly pragmatic values" was causing more and more people to seek "more rigid belief systems, including religious orthodoxy and doctrinaire political ideologies, such as popularism and Marxism". Flash back to 2004 and you find Pope John Paul II encouraging the then Cardinal Ratzinger to challenge a world "marked by both a widespread relativism and the tendency to a facile pragmatism" by boldly proclaiming the truth of the church. Ratzinger has been preaching about the dangers of relativism ever since.

Put the two together and you have a worrying prognosis. The clash of civilisations is happening not between Islam and the west, as we are often led to believe, but between pragmatic relativism and dogmatic certainty. On this analysis, it is easy to see liberal democracy not as the crowning achievement of civilisation but a manifestation of a laissez-faire, morally bankrupt modernity. "Relativism appears to be the philosophical foundation of democracy," said Ratzinger in 1996. "Democracy in fact is supposedly built on the basis that no one can presume to know the true way."

It is no surprise that both the MoD and the Pope believe that the beneficiaries of this polarisation will be those offering certitude, since belief in something is almost always preferable to belief in nothing. As Walter put it in the film *The Big Lebowski*: "Say what you like about the tenets of national socialism, Dude, at least it's an ethos."

How did we get to this dismal Hobson's choice? The finger of blame has to be pointed largely at academics and intellectuals who have been so keen to debunk popular notions of truth that they have created a culture in which the middle ground between shoulder-shrugging relativism and dogmatic fundamentalism has been vacated.

Of course, the works of truth-deniers such as Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty are hardly bestsellers. Yet their ideas do filter through to society as a whole. Consider, for instance, how what passes for common sense about morality has been turned on its head. For millennia, most people believed that right was right and wrong was wrong, and that was all there was to it. Now, university lecturers report that their fresh-faced new students take it as obvious that there is no such thing as "the truth" and that morality is relative. In educated circles at least, only the naive believe in objectivity. What was

shocking when Nietzsche first proclaimed it at the end of the 19th century became platitudinous by the start of the 21st.

Perhaps the most powerful idea to filter through from the universities to the streets was articulated by Foucault, who adapted and popularised the Nietzschean idea that what passes for truth is actually no more than power. There are no facts, only attempts to impose your view on the world by fixing it as "The Truth". This idea is now so mainstream that even a conservative like Donald Rumsfeld could complain about those who lived in the "reality-based community", arguing "that's not the way the world really works anymore ... when we act, we create our own reality."

Most Anglophone philosophers find this kind of hyper-scepticism absurd and pernicious. But although these ideas were hatched by philosophers, they have gained wide currency in the humanities and the social sciences, often in bastardised form.

Some philosophers, such as Bernard Williams and Simon Blackburn, have waded into the public debate in an attempt to put the relativist genie back into the bottle. Books such as *Why Truth Matters*, by my colleagues Jeremy Stangroom and Ophelia Benson, have also tried to stem the tide. But this is not really a highbrow academic debate about whether there is Truth with a capital T - it is about how abstract ideas relate to the business of everyday life.

Richard Rorty, for example, argues against Truth brilliantly, and it is far from clear that he is simply wrong. The problem is that he does not concede as unequivocally as he should that in practice his theories usually leave the world more or less as it is. Rorty believes as much as anyone else that the Holocaust happened more or less as described in history books, he just refuses to use an allegedly outmoded vocabulary

of truth to say so. It is not quite fair to call his refusal in such contexts a pose, but it is certainly not quite what it seems.

Ironically, like many left-leaning intellectuals, Rorty thinks that denying objectivity and truth is politically important, as a way of liberating people from the ways of seeing the world promoted as the Truth by the powerful. However, it turns out that Rorty and his ilk seriously misjudged what happens if intellectuals deny truth stridently and frequently enough. Far from making liberal openness more attractive, such denials actually make it appear empty, repugnant and weak compared to the crystalline clarity and certainty of dogma.

They owe us an apology for failing to either see themselves, or make it clear to others, that in the everyday world we can and must distinguish truth and falsity, right and wrong, even if on close examination these terms do not mean what we thought they did. Science may not be God-like in its objectivity, but it is not just another myth. Moral values must be questioned, but if discrimination against women, homosexuals or ethnic minorities is wrong here, then it is wrong anywhere else in the world. Truth may not be the simple phenomenon we assume it to be, but falsehoods must be challenged.

Unless we can make a convincing case that the choice is not between relativism or dogmatism, more and more people will reject the former and embrace the latter. When they do, those who helped create the impression that modern, secular rationality leaves everything up for grabs in the marketplace of belief will have to take their share of the blame.

Julian Baggini is the editor of the *Philosophers' Magazine* and author of *Atheism: a very short introduction*. <julianbaggini.com>





Shout your doubt out loud, my fellow unbelievers

by Matthew Parris, *The London Times*, 21 April 2007

Christianity was part of my upbringing and education. Because I am fascinated by moral philosophy, enjoy reading the Bible and, as Private Parris in the Boys' Brigade, detested military drill, nautical knots, whiting-up my sash and polishing my brass belt-buckle, I have acquired a reasonable grounding in the other skill you could shine at in the BB: religious knowledge. I think religion, like politics, is tremendously important.

The trouble is, I'm sure religion is wrong. This drives me as a columnist into a curious dilemma. My subject is of interest mostly to those of my readers who are liable to be offended by me. One is left writing for a minority audience predisposed to take umbrage at what one says. Those who don't care for religion don't care to read about it.

The dilemma was brought home by readers' responses to a column I wrote on Maundy Thursday, inveighing against claims that a French nun has recently been cured of Parkinson's disease through invoking the name of the late John Paul II, and that this alleged miracle could lead to the possible canonisation of the late Pope. I have been deluged with letters, almost all from Christians, and overwhelmingly critical of the column.

Three strands of opinion in particular emerge from this fascinating pile of letters. The first insists that miracles do occur, that saints may be invoked and that the successful invocation of putative saints may be grounds for canonisation. Such assertions have been made by a number of Anglican correspondents. I should remind them that their own Church had something to say on this more than 400 years ago. Article 22 of the Thirty-Nine Articles states: "The Romish doctrine concerning . . . invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded on no warranty of Scripture." I rest my case.

The second strand is more tentative. "Why rule out the possibility?" sums up the thought, variously expressed to me. Things do occur for which there is no available explanation in Nature; in such cases is it not perfectly rational to accept that the divine explanation is at least a contender for the truth?

For the answer to this, I need only go back two-and-a-half centuries, to the greatest philosopher our islands ever produced: the Scot David Hume. Hume took a cool view of "the usual propensity of mankind towards the marvellous." A miracle, began Hume (*On Miracles*, pt I), "may be accurately defined, [as] a transgression of a law of Nature by a particular volition of the Deity".

But "there is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves." Forced to choose between doubting the evidence, and believing in a divine suspension of the laws of Nature, only someone already convinced that divine intervention occurs could opt for the miraculous as an explanation. Miracles cannot therefore be evidence of a divinity: belief in a divinity must be the evidence for miracles. In consequence, Hume concludes (hinting at atheism with such sly elegance that no Edinburgh pharisee could pin it on him): "The Christian religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one."

But stop. Why should Hume, or Richard Dawkins, or lesser polemicists such as me, bang on about this? For heaven's sake, wail many of my correspondents (and this is the third strand in my pile of letters), what are you getting so het up about? You don't believe. Fine. Well why not shut up, then? Tell us about things you do believe in. Surely it is those who believe who should be proclaiming. How can one be a passionate non-believer, they ask, hinting that, like Saul, I may be battling against my own inner faith.

Proselytisers for atheism such as Richard Dawkins will be as familiar as am I with the lament. I heard it most memorably from a Conservative Chief Whip (urging me to pipe down about homosexuality) who remarked to me that he had never believed in God, but felt absolutely no imperative to jump to his feet in church and broadcast this fact to his astonished constituents.

How do we reply? An *ad hominem* response would be to remark that when the Church had the upper hand it was happy to

persecute, imprison or behead non-believers and fight crusades against other religions. Now it has lost its boss status it simply asks us to keep our opinions to ourselves (but still wants laws to criminalise us for mocking its pretensions). On the back foot at last, it discovers (first) a brotherhood between all its sects. Then as the situation deteriorates Christianity discovers within itself a respect first for Judaism (suddenly we are all "Judaean-Christians,") then women with a Christian vocation, then for divorcees, and finally finds a common purpose with religions such as Islam, too (the "faith" community). Needs must.

And as the Devil (or falling church attendance) drives, these "members of the faith community" cease enforcing their moral imperatives upon a secular world and retreat into whimpering about their "freedom of conscience" to carry on persecuting the minority groups upon whose sinfulness they can still find a consensus. Freedom of conscience, my eye! If only there were an afterlife: Martin Luther would have loved Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor's protests. They don't like it up 'em. As mainstream Christian church attendances fall farther still I predict that the Church of England, and finally the Roman Catholics, will be driven to conclude that they cannot even afford to make enemies of homosexuals, unmarried couples and family planners, and start welcoming them in too. I expect they'll call it the "love community." In truth it's the "can't afford to be choosy" community. But there I go again. Getting passionate, fighting dirty. But we have a better argument than "you'd do the same to us if you could" -- though they would, and until about half a century ago they did.

It is that they will again, unless we non-believers are watchful, and energetic and -- yes -- passionate. I hate ending up in



scraps with nice Anglicans and thoughtful Catholics because the Church of England and intelligent Catholicism are not the problem. They are the best kind of Christians, but the best lack all conviction. It is the worst who are full of passionate intensity. Look at the evangelical movement in America, and to some extent, now, here. Look at the Religious Right in Israel. Look at fundamentalist Islam. What they share, what drives them, the tiger in their tanks, is an absolute, unshakeable belief in an ever-present divinity, with plans for nations that He communicates to the leaders, or would-be leaders, of nations. They are the very devil, these people, they could wreck our world, and their central belief in God's plan has to be confronted. Confronted with passion. Confronted because, and on the ground that, *it is not true.*

Disbelief can be passionate. Sometimes it should be. Agnosticism can be passionate. A sense that we lack certitude, lack evidence, lack the external command of any luminous guiding truth, may not always lead to lassitude, complaisance or a modest silence. Sometimes it should provoke a great shout: "Stop. You don't know that. You have no right."

I hit you, earlier on, with a burst of the admirable David Hume. But he was not always right. "Opposing one species of superstition to another," he wrote, "set them a-quarrelling; while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy." No, David. Listen instead to Nietzsche. "This eternal indictment of Christianity," he said, "I will write on walls, wherever there are walls."

We who do not believe must be ready with our paintbrushes, our chisels and our cans of aerosol spray. Disbelief can be more than an absence of belief. It can be a redeeming, saving force.

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Why assume so glibly that the God who created the universe is still running it? It is certainly conceivable that he may have finished it and then turned it over to lesser gods to operate.

-- H. L. Mencken

Did John Paul II perform a miracle?

Matthew Parris, *The London Times*, 5 April 2007

During Holy Week we are treated to a variety of decent-sounding people in print and on the airwaves explaining that religion — or "faith" as they now prefer to call it — is basically all about shared moral values, making the world a better place and gaining a proper sense of awe at life's mystery. We are given to understand that the great world religions are all really fumbling towards the same truth.

And by dovish voices we are urged to join what is essentially a campaign for increasing the amount of goodness in the world. Who could be against that? Such faith sounds so reasonable. Churlish nonbelievers like me are made to feel it is we who are being arrogant, dogmatic, and closed-minded. How can we be so sure? And then this: a nun has apparently been cured of Parkinson's disease through writing the name of John Paul II on a piece of paper.

Ecclesiastical authorities in the Roman Catholic Church have been investigating the alleged miracle, interviewing neurologists, graphologists, psychiatrists and medical experts. The diocese of Aix-en-Provence is now satisfied that it has a putative supernatural intervention on its hands, and this week submitted its dossier to Pope Benedict XVI, who may declare an official miracle and begin procedures for making the late Pope a saint.

Meanwhile one determinant of US foreign policy towards Israel is the belief, widely held on the Religious Right, that before the prophecy of the Second Coming and the end of the world can be fulfilled, the Israelites must be given their Biblical lands of Judaea and Samaria.

Where are you, intelligent Christians? Where is your voice, your righteous anger? Where is your honest contempt for this nonsense? Take that claimed recent miracle, for instance. I know lots of nice, clever Catholics — friends, thoughtful men and women, people of depth and subtlety, people of some delicacy, people who would surely cringe at the excesses of Lourdes. Do they believe that John Paul II may have cured this nun from beyond the grave?

Where are the shouts of self-respecting bishops and cardinal-archbishops, raised against the woeful confusion of faith with superstition? I have a theory about their

reticence. I think they know this stuff is the petrol on which the motor of a great Church runs; that without these delusions to feed on, the unthinking masses would falter. And they may be right. But what a melancholy conclusion: that the thinking parts of a religion should be almost extraneous to what moves it; far from the core; just a little fastidious shudder; a wink exchanged between the occupants of the reserved pews.

There is, of course, an alternative: that they too believe the nonsense; that the Prime Minister's wife (and maybe the Prime Minister), and the Communities Secretary, and the Chancellor of Oxford University and former Governor of Hong Kong — not to mention several of my colleagues on these pages in *The Times* — honestly entertain the possibility that from beyond the grave the late Pope John Paul II interceded with God to cause a woman to be cured of Parkinson's disease.

You are living, dear reader, at a watershed in human history. This is the century during which, after 2,000 years of what has been a pretty bloody marriage, faith and reason must agree to part, citing irreconcilable differences. So block your ears to the cooing voices on *Thought for the Day*, and choose your side.

"But how can you be sure?" Oh boy, am I sure. Oh great quivering mountains of pious mumbo-jumbo, am I sure. Oh fathomless oceans of sanctified babble, am I sure. Words cannot express my confidence in the answer to the question whether God cured a nun because she wrote a Pope's name down. He didn't. Mere language does no justice to my certainty about whether God might be waiting for the return to their Biblical lands of the Israelites, before arranging the Second Coming. He isn't.

Shout it from the rooftops. Write it on walls. Carve it into rock. He didn't. He isn't. He won't. ☚



This banishment of morality to the realm of mere subjective fancy.

The nub of the situation is that the materialism in which Darwinian biology is fully embedded is a view that not only excludes the crudely supernatural, but dispenses, as well, with the notion of moral fact. This needs some explication.

Virtually all of us moralize from time to time, if only to ourselves. Typically, our moralizing springs forth with a deep and passionate subjective sense of the hard-and-fast rightness of our position. Yet viewed from the materialist worldview, our moral convictions cannot be accounted facts about the material universe — the only universe there is. Immanuel Kant famously remarked, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe — the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” Of course, Kant understood this to mean that the “moral law” has the status of *a priori* truth whose certainty the undamaged and uncorrupted mind instinctively grasps. Like geometry, it is a fact embedded in the very tissue of the universe, thereby authorizing the objective truth of correct moral judgments. But if we play the deconstructive jokester just for a moment, might we not find in Kant’s pronouncement an opposite and unnerving truth? The moral law exists “within me” because that’s the only place it can exist — within my altogether private, subjective, and idiosyncratic realm of opinions and prejudices. It reposes on nothing more objective than my own subjectivity; it certainly does not encode moral fact in the sense that the periodic table of elements encodes physical fact.

As I say, we judge and act on our moral values reflexively as though we fully accepted their status as fact. We do so because we are human and can do no other, just as we judge and behave in the midst of life as though free will were an unquestionable reality. Literally, we can’t help it. Nonetheless, reflection on the implications of materialism shows us, I think, that the notion of “moral fact” is an oxymoron. Among philosophers, the logical positivists were famous, or perhaps notorious, for insisting on this point. But the logical positivists weren’t original in this respect, merely unusually blunt. Indeed, evolutionary thought, starting with Darwin himself, not only assents to the sweeping implication that materialism renders moral fact illusory, but goes further in that

it accounts, quite plausibly, for the material fact that we deceive ourselves into thinking of morality as factual. We are animals who erect moral codes precisely because we are social animals whose very survival, given our hypertrophied cognitive apparatus, necessitates a degree of altruism, generosity, and honesty.


This idea, of which Darwin was already fully aware, neatly accounts for the commonalities that make one person’s or one culture’s moral truth compatible, to a great degree, with another’s. It also accounts for the disparities among moral codes from one person to another and from one culture to another. We are in some sense hard-wired to produce moral codes, just as we are hard-wired to acquire language, but just as language itself is not hard-wired into us, neither is a specific morality. Moral particulars are contingent and highly variable and we must allow for the fact that supposed moral codes are often bedecked with rather arbitrary taboos and injunctions very specific to an era and to a culture.

For some thinkers, the notion that morality is a behavioral trait not grounded in objective truth, an evolutionary acquisition coeval with a big brain, is an agreeable way to think about things, leaving them scarcely less eager to moralize than anyone else, though perhaps with a faint ironic echo. But many people simply are not built that way. The idea that ethics reduces, finally, to ethology is not consoling to them, but terrifying. Indeed, I have found that what really gives some people the creeps is not the possibility that they are wrong so much as the notion that there is no moral fact-of-the-matter to sustain or refute their view. It is this that constitutes the yawning abyss.

From a book review by Norman Levitt of *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World* by George Levine. Contents are Copyright © 2007 the Skeptics Society and the authors and artists. Permission is granted to print, distribute, and post with proper citation and acknowledgment ☚

Lawyer John has an appointment with the IRS, he is being audited. As a good Catholic, he implores his priest, is there a saint he could pray to in matters taxes and to help with the IRS.

“Well, you could try Saint Bartholomew, he might have sympathy, they flayed the skin off his living body.”





The Baptizing of America: The Religious Right's Plans for the Rest of Us.

By Rabbi James Rudin

(New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2006)

James Rudin grew up in the pre-civil rights, protestant South. He served as a Chaplain in the Air Force. For 32 years he worked for the American Jewish Committee's Interreligious Affairs Department, where his job involved fostering relations between the many faith communities of the United States. Thus, when he writes of the changes taking place in American religious culture, he can speak from personal experience. He also has a good understanding and appreciation for our religious history and the meaning of separation of church and state.

Rudin can compare the religious scandal in the Air Force Academy, in which evangelicals pressured Jews and liberal Christians to "convert to Jesus," to his own earlier experience, when Air Force chaplains strictly respected the multi-religious nature of American society. Yet, he is also aware the military has lost many of the Catholic and liberal protestant chaplains, to be replaced by much more numerous evangelicals.

In the past 30 to 35 years a strain of strict belief has come to prominence among evangelicals, Southern Baptists and other conservative Christians. Rudin calls them—for lack of a better label—Christocrats, people who want to impose a simple, fundamentalist Jesus religion on us, and make America a Christian nation. Multi-culturalism and wall between church and state are explicitly rejected. Christocrats feel something precious has been stolen from them, from America, and from Christians.

Millions of Americans believe that a Protestant Christian conservative hegemony once existed in the U.S, back in the good old days. In their recollections, the United States was then a tranquil, moral nation deeply rooted in the traditional Christian values: the shining city on the hill, an idyllic small-town America anchored to an old-fashioned religion that was overwhelm-

ingly white male-centered and evangelical Protestant.

It is a vision that offers today's Christocrats a fuzzy feel-good moment about history that never happened that way. (pp. 39-40)

The Christocrats have their own historian, David Barton, who describes America as having always been a Christian country and mines the writings of the fathers of the country to show they were all believing Christians. Barton is also vice-chairman of the Texas Republican Party. If the Christocrats have their way, his ideas, along with creationism, Biblical morality, and such will dominate the public school classrooms.

Rudin sees evangelical Christians for much of the 20th century as avoiding political action, partly because they feared humiliation: (pp.148-149)

For generations of evangelical Christians, religion was perceived as a family and church activity. Local congregations, centers, of conservative religious beliefs and practices, were communities of faith that exhibited only limited interest in the political issues of the day and what went on in the nations bedrooms. The focus was on "getting right with the Lord."

When they did venture into the public square they were defeated or laughed at. The Scopes monkey trial was a bad memory. When they did win, such as in imposing prohibition most of the country detested the move, and it took 13 years to rescind it. Opposition to gambling, though successful in the past, has in recent decades been increasingly defeated. Most of all, strong evangelical support for harsh racial segregation laws marked such Christians as bigots in the eyes of the rest of the country. In fact, the Black revolution and the decline of legal racism appears the one cultural change that allowed evangelicals a credible return to the public stage.

Rudin has written a clear and believable book about "today's Religious War" (title Chapter V). It is books like his which will prevent the Christian fascists from winning.

– Wolf Roder





June Pollock:
Sunday June 10, 2007
2:00 PM



May Meeting: "Speak Out!"
Sunday, May 27, 2007
7:00 PM



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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 visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.