

FIG LEAVES

Volume 19 Issue 10

October 2010

October FIG Meeting: Tuesday, Oct. 26 at 7:00 pm Brother Sam Singleton Atheist Evangelist

Join us as we greet Brother Sam Singleton, Atheist Evangelist. He will be performing the first act of his one-man play, "If The Ocean Was Whiskey And God Was A Duck.(500 Questions God Can't Answer.)" PZ Meyers calls him "The Only Honest Evangelist." He has performed across the country for over a year preaching his unique commentary on the atheist state of affairs in America. "Don't look for Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris," says Cari Park, his publicist. "This is comedy. From the subtlest irony to the most flagrant ridicule, it never fails at its purpose, which is to provoke both thought and laughter. Like Brother Sam says, 'If anybody can use some laughs and encouragement, it's atheists.'"

This will be a free event. Sam's books, CD's and other merchandise will be available. After the FIG event Brother Sam has agreed to appear at Slat's Pub for the Cincinnati Atheists Meetup Group. There he will perform part of another play "Patriarchs and Penises." FIG members are encouraged to attend this event as well. It will be a totally different presentation. This promises to be a great evening of entertainment.

In order to keep his expenses down Sam is looking for a generous FIG member who would be willing to provide lodging for Sam and his wife Cari while they are in town. If anyone is willing to provide their extra bedroom please contact John Welte at welte@fuse.net.

Location: Hannaford Suites Hotel; 5900 East Galbraith Rd. in Kenwood.

FIG Elections

FIG Elections will be held at the next meeting - October 26. All FIG members are encouraged to attend and vote. All those currently serving have fulfilled their terms of service. They are as follows:

President - John Welte, Vice President - Donna Loughry, Treasurer - Bryan Sellers, Program Chair - Shawn Jeffers, Board Members - Joe Levy, Wolf Roder, Michele Grinoch, and Phil Ferguson. We have vacancies for the position of Secretary and three board members. The following have volunteered to run for these positions: Secretary - Susan Davis, Pam McKenna, Dennis Davis and Terry Kassler. As it stands we have enough people to have the full compliment of twelve board members total. This will be an uncontested election unless someone comes forward to offer their services. If you would like to run for officer or board positions please contact John Welte at welte@fuse.net. Please include a short description of what you have to offer and what position you would like to fill.

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Events

October Meeting

Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2010, 7:00 PM
Hannaford Suites
5900 East Galbraith Rd.

FIG Community Dinner

Tuesday, Nov. 09, 2010, 6:30 PM
Bronte Bistro, 2692 Madison Rd.
Cincinnati, OH 45208

RSVP by Nov. 07, to dloughry@fuse.net
(Last Fig Community Dinner until
March due to winter weather.)

November Meeting:

*Enjoy the Holiday with
family and friends.*

December Meeting

TBA - Early in the month.



September Meeting/Outing

A Night at the Observatory

On September 28, 2010, FIG held its regular monthly meeting at the Cincinnati Observatory.

Dean Regas, the observatory's Outreach Astronomer, gave a talk to start the evening. It was a great way to spend the time while waiting for dark to look through the telescopes. When Dean started by saying, "You wouldn't believe the phone calls I get," I knew that his talk would be entertaining and perfect for our group. Dean presented a casual program, which was sprinkled with probing questions asked by the members of FIG.

The observatory gets many phone calls about UFO's, the "star of Bethlehem," the 2012 end of the world, and other phenomena associated with the night sky. Dean is very concerned about the lack of science knowledge exhibited by these callers. For instance, a caller will take the time to call the observatory to ask if the star of Bethlehem was a planetary conjunction (two or more planets lining up and appearing much brighter than usual). Dean takes the time to explain, using his expertise and knowledge, that this is not the case. The callers refuse to believe him! It is not the answer that they want to hear. When explaining this problem to an advisor, Dean was told, "Dean, you can't reason where reason doesn't live."

There is also a repeating story that comes around every year on the internet about the planet Mars being the closest it has ever been to Earth. Claims are made in this story that the planet will look as big as the Moon. In fact, this close pass by Mars happened several years ago. At that time, the planet looked as big through a telescope as the Moon does with the naked eye.

When asked about the face on Mars, Dean showed a number of slides taken by Mars orbiters. Depending on the play of light and shadow on the escarpment, sometimes a face is visible but mostly it is not. He showed many images of the red planet that revealed faces, including a smiley face, and structures such as pyramids. These are all the results of our brains helping us to recognize patterns of light and shadow as things that are familiar to us.

There are people who believe that the moon landing in 1969 was a hoax perpetrated by the United States government. Dean illustrated several aspects of the films taken by astronauts on the moon's surface that could not have been faked in 1969. His demonstrations refuting the conspiracy theorists were simple and easy to understand.

Dean fielded questions about the future of manned space exploration. He explained the complexities and problems that would be associated with a manned mission to Mars. It would be many times more difficult than it was sending men to the Moon. If there is a race to Mars as there was to the Moon in the 1960's, the United States currently is far behind the Chinese in development of such a mission. A manned mission to Mars would be an event that would generate patriotism and pride of country in whatever nation could be the first to accomplish it. If you look at the stunning successes of the ➔



FIG Leaves - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to figmessage at gofigger dot org; or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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Vice President: Donna Loughry
Secretary: *Open*
Treasurer: Bryan Sellers,
Program Chair: Shawn Jeffers,
Members: Michele Grinoch,
Philip Ferguson,
Joe Levee,
Jessica Foote
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FIG Leaves Editor: Wolf Roder.



Memberships run from:

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If you join during the year, you receive a \$2 discount for each month that has passed.

We request contributions above membership dues. Contributions are tax deductible.



FIG LEAVES



manned orbiters and rovers that NASA has used in the last few decades, you may wonder if the danger and expense of a manned mission is even justified.

Ethical concerns surround missions to other worlds. What if we were to bring microbes to a planet that had some form of life? We could kill off the alien life forms with our bacteria much as the Europeans killed off a great proportion of Native Americans with smallpox and other diseases. All of our current probes to other planets are now irradiated to kill any bacteria that they might be harboring. Terraforming is another issue that brings up ethical questions. Should we manipulate the surface and atmosphere of another world just to make a second Earth? We have not done a very good job of taking care of our planet and it would be impossible to move billions of people to another world.

Has life been found in a Mars rock? A meteor that landed in the Antarctic was determined to be from Mars. When examined with an electron microscope there appeared to be a microscopic segmented creature inside this meteorite. We viewed a slide that showed the microscopic image in question and it did look very much like a worm. As Dean said, the jury is still out as to whether this is a life form or just a natural formation of rock. We may never know.



What about the expense of the space program and what is the justification for spending ten million a year? The budget of NASA is under one percent of the national yearly budget. Compared to military spending it is a drop in the bucket. For every dollar spent on the program seven dollars comes back in industry, new technology and things we use every day. Modern communications are thanks to NASA. Jobs and infrastructure are created. In addition, we are learning amazing new things. It is a good investment.

Dean recommends *Starry Night*, a sky-simulation computer program that will show a full view of the night sky from wherever you happen to be on the planet. There are others available on line but Dean used *Starry Night* to show us what we would view through the telescopes. We then went into the dome to use the oldest telescope in the United States. It was made in Munich Germany in 1843. It has a mahogany tube with brass fittings and an 11 inch diameter lens. We were also able to use two smaller telescopes, which were set up on the lawn.

We viewed Jupiter with its striped clouds and four of its moons, Io, Callisto, Europa, and Ganymede. We also saw a quadruple star system, made up of two double stars, which are close together and orbit each other. We were able to see the Ring Nebula, the remnants of an exploded star. Next, we viewed another planet, Uranus. Finally, we looked at the Owl Cluster. It is a group of stars in the Cassiopeia constellation that resembles an owl.

Dean made this event not only educational but a lot of fun as well. His dedication and enthusiasm were obvious and contagious. Thanks, Dean for staying late to share the stars with us.

A special program, Jupiter Nights, is coming to the observatory on October 15 and 16. Check the web site for details and find out how you can become a member of the Cincinnati Observatory.

<http://www.cincinnatiobservatory.org/>.

reported by John Welte





Announcing a new Meetup for The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup Group!

What: First Cincinnati Science Café!

When: Tuesday, October 26, 2010 6:00 PM

Where: Slatt's Pub; 4858 Cooper Road; Blue Ash, OH 45242; 513-791-2223

For the night of October 26th there are two atheist friendly events in one convenient location! Check for the "Sam Singleton: Atheist Evangelist" event also scheduled for this night. Cincinnati Science Café October 26th is going to be the very first Cincinnati Science Cafe event!

This will hopefully become a monthly or bi-monthly meeting with scientific/skeptical entertainers, speakers, educators and more. These gatherings will be held at Slatt's Pub in Blue Ash in a private patio area reserved for us. We'll be having dinner at 6:00

Then from 7pm to 9pm will be our first guest, musician Monty Harper. Monty is a singer/songwriter from Stillwater, Oklahoma, who writes songs about science, reading, and creativity. Monty runs a unique summer program called "Born to Do Science", which introduces kids, in a fun and accessible way, to real scientists and their current research. Each scientist involved with "Born to Do Science" inspired a custom song from Monty. Over time, he's made enough songs to create an entire album titled "Songs From The Science Frontier", which Monty is currently producing thanks to generous donations from his fans. Monty visits Cincinnati on his trip back home from performing at the first annual Science and Engineering Festival in Washington D.C. For more information, and to hear some of Monty Harper's songs, visit <http://montyharper.com>.

This event is FREE and it's family friendly environment so please feel free to bring the kids.



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



Announcing a new Meetup for The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup Group!

What: Sam Singleton: Atheist Evangelist

When: Tuesday, October 26, 2010 9:00 PM

Where: Slatt's Pub; 4858 Cooper Road; Blue Ash, OH 45242; 513-791-2223

Sam Singleton: Atheist Evangelist The Cincinnati Atheists are bringing comedian Sam Singleton: Atheist Evangelist to our fair city, from 9pm to 11pm Sam will be performing a few bits from his plays in our reserved area at Slatt's Pub. Sam has been covered by PZ Meyers calling him "The Only Honest Evangelist" and has performed across the country for over a year preaching his unique commentary on the atheist state of affairs in America. He will also be speaking at Scepticon III so for those of you who can't make it to that event, this will be your chance to see his show for FREE.

More information about Slatt's Pub: 4858 Cooper Road Blue Ash, OH 45242 513-791-2223 www.slattspub.com Menu: http://www.slattspub.com/?page_id=4.



The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup Group!

What: Scepticon III: Annual Sceptic Meeting

When: Friday, November 19, 2010 9:00 AM

Where: Missouri State University

901 South National Avenue
Springfield, MO 65897

Scepticon is an annual skeptics convention held in Springfield, Missouri and taking place from November 19 to November 21st. This event will be featuring a long list of big names from both the skeptic and atheist movements. Already confirmed speakers include James "The Amazing" Randi, Joe Nickell, PZ Myers, D.J. Grothe, Dan Barker, Rebecca Watson, Victor Stenger, Richard Carrier, John Corvino, J.T. Eberhard, David Fitzgerald, Debbie Goddard, Amanda Marcotte, Brother Sam Singleton. More info on speakers can be found here: <http://scepticon.org/speakers/>

Further information about the conference can be found at: <http://www.scepticon.org/>

It is important to register early for this conference if you plan on attending, registration is FREE and can be done here: <http://www.scepticon.org/register.php>. Special hotel pricing can be found here: <http://scepticon.org/about/hotel.php>

This is a rare opportunity to see many of the biggest names in atheism for free and Travis should be able to arrange transportation to and from the airport for those who would like to fly. Please register on the scepticon page now if you are considering attending and Travis will publish further updates about this conference as it is announced. RSVP to this Meetup: <http://www.meetup.com/cincinnatiatheists/calendar/14162825/>



Outcast.

The public library in Belchertown, Mass, has banned Lord Jesus Christ. No, not the one in the Bible, but a guy named Lord Jesus Christ III, a local artist who legally changed his name because, he said, God told him to. But librarians say Christ has been a nuisance at the library, cutting in line in front of other patrons to ask questions, ask to borrow scissors, or whatever. "He was very rude," said the library's director, Owen Maloney. Christ, 50, says it's discrimination: "I'm black, I'm transsexual and my name is Lord Jesus Christ," he says, as if that is enough to show bias. Maloney says it was a very big step to ban anyone. "Lord Jesus Christ is the first" person ever banned, he said, "and I suppose I'm going to burn in hell because of it."

(Springfield Republican)

At Least Hawking Got The Right Answer.

An op-ed by Roger Scruton in *The Wall Street Journal* this morning was titled, "Memo to Hawking: There's Still Room for God." An English philosopher, Scruton is a visiting scholar at the ultraconservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC. "Almost no one," he writes, "believes there is a rational scientific theory that tells us how the universe emerged from nothingness." No one, that is, except those that might be expected to know, physicists, who labor to make such a theory possible. In addition to Kant, Scruton invokes Newton and Einstein to make his point, but unlike philosophy, physics is tightly bound to observation.

- *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 24 September 2010



Science Book Club 2010 schedule

All meetings on 3rd Sunday of each month at 2:30 in room 3A of downtown Main Public Library unless otherwise noted.

** Note September change!

Oct 17 - *The Roving Mind*; Isaac Asimov

Nov 21 - *The Little Green Book of Awakening*; James George

Dec 19 - *Physics For Future Presidents: The Science Behind The Headlines*; Richard A. Muller



Nobel Prize For In Vitro Fertilization.

The most essential qualification for a Nobel Prize is often longevity. Now 85 and in failing health; Prof. Edwards was a graduate student at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland when he conceived the idea of in vitro fertilization. His colleague, surgeon Patrick Steptoe, died in 1988. The Catholic Church, which opposes IVF, invented the superstition that, at the moment the haploid male and female gametes intertwine in the womb to form a diploid zygote, the Holy Ghost assigns it a soul, thus making it a person. The head of the Pontifical Academy for Life, which speaks for the Vatican on medical ethics, criticized the choice of Edwards as, "Completely out of order... Without Edwards there wouldn't be freezers full of embryos waiting to be used for research, or to die abandoned and forgotten by everyone." Poor things. But he's not talking about a person or even an embryo; this is a single, undifferentiated cell, human only to the extent that it contains human DNA. So do my nail clippings - but I do not mourn for them. The world needs neither the archaic superstitions of religion, nor more unwanted children. Every IVF child is a wanted child.

- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 8 October 2010

A Request From The FIG President-

I know that FIG members have strong opinions and great ideas. We are a creative collection of people. I would really enjoy, as I think the membership would, a monthly newsletter that would do more to reflect the talents and opinions of our members. I would like to see *FIG Leaves* become a collection of pieces that can't be found anywhere else and showcase the ideas, opinions and needs of our membership. *FIG Leaves* belongs to us all!

So if you have recently read a great book and want to comment or review it, (you could even trash a really bad book), if you have written a poem or taken a photo you would like to share, if you have an opinion or reaction to current events that you just can't keep to yourself, please consider sharing with your fellow FIG members in the newsletter. I know that some of you write your own web pages and/or blogs. We would be happy to reprint something you have written there. A one page article is about 600 words, just to give you a reference point.

All pieces will be considered for content and are subject to light editing. Instructions for how to submit pieces for *FIG Leaves* are always printed on page 2 of *FIG Leaves*.



About The “Ground Zero Mosque”

John Rafferty

(from *PIQUE*, newsletter of the SHS of New York)

There are two problems with that title. First, it’s not a mosque. It’s the Park51 project, to become the Cordoba House cultural center, built for and by Muslims, but open to the whole community. There is to be a large room for “prayer and meditation,” but if the proposed building were a mosque there would be no theater, swimming pool or basketball court on the premises - just as there are none in any church or synagogue I’m aware of. Cordoba House’s purpose is to be the Muslim counterpart of Jewish (and all) New York’s 92nd Street Y.

No matter, the screamers in the streets and their cynical enablers in the right-wing media will continue to call it a “mosque.” And will continue to ignore the facts that: (1) there was a Muslim prayer room on the 17th floor of the World Trade Center south tower; (2) that Muslim staff members of the Windows on the World restaurant used a stairwell between the 106th and 107th floors of the north tower for their daily prayers; and that (3) at least 60 American Muslims working in those towers were among the murdered on 9/11. American Muslims worked, prayed and died on that “sacred ground” along with their fellow Americans.

What’s more, the man in charge, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, is exactly the person who could legitimately raise his hand and say, “Here I am,” when the rest of us demand, “Where are the moderate Muslims to condemn the terrorists?” He has served both the Bush and Obama administrations as an ambassador of American values throughout the Muslim world. Al Qaeda would gleefully decapitate him, but in his own country-*this one*-this enemy of al Qaeda and all it stands for is being treated as *our* enemy by the cultural and political right in order to score cheap political points.

The second problem with “Ground Zero Mosque” is that it’s *not* “Ground Zero,” it’s the World Trade Center. Look at the subway maps and PATH station signage, the building designations and the street signs: “World Trade Center.”

But “Ground Zero” has real *zing* to it, doesn’t it? Forget that it doesn’t make sense, that the phrase has always been used to indicate a starting point from which to mea-

sure outward, and there is no “outward” in this case. But “Ground Zero” and “sacred ground” are so much sexier than “World Trade Center*,” aren’t they?

And that’s what the noisemakers and hatemongers on the religious and political extreme right want to promote - the concept of the “sacred” in “our” fight against a “foreign” religion and, while they’re at it, score a few points off that undercover Muslim in the White House in an election season.

In 2004, Karl Rove and Ken Mehlman sounded the tocsin “*Gay marriage is coming! Your child could be next!*” to drive the Religious Right to the polls; this year it’s the phony “illegal aliens” threat (the numbers are down by *two-thirds* this decade - *what* threat?) and this, the “Muslim insult to our sacred dead.” It’s working, they’re winning - we’re losing.

They’re winning because, as usual, they control the language in a steady drumbeat of half-truths and lies: “Ground Zero,” “mosque,” “monument to Muslim victory,” “ties to terrorism.” Never mind that the local community board approved Cordoba House in open session and the city landmarks commission praised it, as have the district’s congressman, the Manhattan Borough President and the Mayor of New York. Never mind, because Rush Limbaugh of Florida and Sarah Palin of Alaska offer the sweet reason of “compromise” (i.e., “Build it somewhere else, second-class citizens.”), and Newt Gingrich of Georgia wants us to be just like the Saudis and allow Muslims to build here when the Wahhabis allow a church to be built in Arabia. Have *any* of those three ever *heard of* the First Amendment?

I hold no brief for *any* religion, and regular readers of *PIQUE* know that I have railed against fundamentalist Islam, including the threat it poses here at home to basic American freedoms, again and again in these pages. But this isn’t about Muslim intolerance - it’s about *ours*.

On September 6 the *Times* ran a front-page article about American Muslims in this hate-filled season wondering if they will ever be accepted in America. Let me assure you, Abdullah and Soraya, you will. Cordoba House’s problems will go on for months, perhaps years. I expect hard hats to brawl at the construction site and loutish teenagers to make the finished building a target for vandalism on drunken weekends, but those vicissitudes will pass. They’ll pass because the American people are basically decent and tolerant, and will come around. We
⇒



are a composite of our polyglot and multi-ethnic heritage; we're not bred and fed on blood feuds and myths of "sacred ground." We heal, we get over our grudges, and we move on.

I'm old enough to remember World War II clearly, and the suspicion and mistrust of Muslims that some, even many, Americans feel today is nothing compared to the nearly universal racist hatred we all felt then for the Japanese and even Japanese-Americans, whom we didn't count as "real" Americans and whom we shut up in internment- or should I say "concentration" - camps. Ten years after the war we were buying their cameras, then their cars, copiers and computers, and even envying their accomplishments and lifestyle. Sushi, anyone?

In the mid-nineteenth century Irish fleeing the famine were deemed such a threat to bring Papist rule and the end of democracy to America that they were the prime reason for the growth of the nativist Know Nothing party and the nationwide spread of the Ku Klux Klan. At the turn of the 20th century Italian immigrants were all viewed as bomb-throwing anarchists (more than Sacco and Vanzetti were executed for crimes they didn't commit) and then as members or supporters of "Black Hand" (i.e., the mafia). And about the same pre-World War I time, the hundreds of thousands of Jews who arrived here were considered, well, you know, Jews.

But before the century was out all America celebrated names like Kennedy, Reagan, Cagney, Breslin, Buckley and Clooney. Like Scalia, Sinatra, DiMaggio, De Niro, Napolitano and Giamatti. And Brandeis, Gershwin, Salk, Seinfeld, Sagan and Bloomberg. Hell, we even elected a black man (well, half black) President.

So man up, Muslims, your day will come. We'll have changed you in the process, and you will have changed us - both for the better, I'll bet. Meanwhile, build, and invite me to, Cordoba House.

** I can't resist a couple of points about the original WTC towers. First, they were ugly. I have shocked out-of-towners by informing them that most New Yorkers with any design sense considered those standing-on-end cigarette cartons a blight on the city skyline, architectural brutalism at its worst. Also, while I wish the new developers and tenants well, has everyone forgotten that office space in the original towers went begging (too costly, too far from other city centers) until Governor Rockefeller ordered state agencies to rent millions of square feet? I wonder how many firms will sign up for space in the new buildings ("Freedom" Tower? - George Babbitt lives!), and how many of their employees will demur for fear - irrational, but real - of spending every day at the center of what they worry will be the next bull's-eye? - JR*

The Young Mother

© Vivian B. Kline

The twins began tiny -
They ate oh so slowly.
They looked just alike,
A shock to their mom.

They developed a language
Which each seemed to know
And when seen in a mirror
Said the other one's name.

Dressed just alike
From gifts of well-wishers,
When out in the park
In a second-hand carriage,
Folks looked at pink bonnets
And identical features
And foolishly asked, "Are they twins?"

The young mother
Both proud and so tired,
Threatened to answer:
"No, sisters-in-law."

What to do when one gets mad

© Vivian B. Kline

When I was little my mother suggested:
"Go punch a pillow until you feel better."
But really I wanted them to suffer
When someone made me feel that way.

I think of sending a nasty note
Try sticking pins into a doll
Or spread a real bad rumor?

Perhaps if they know how angry I am?
No, that won't solve it either.

I do feel used and cheated.
Oh forget it! Move on!
My grown-up self replies.



Stephen Hawking And The Pope

by Herb Silverman, 8 September 2010

Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

New theories make a creator of the universe unnecessary, says Stephen Hawking in his latest book *The Grand Design*, co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow. Despite Hawking's renowned brilliance, I'm sure this won't end discussions about God's existence. Even if the theory is proved beyond reasonable doubt, most believers will either ignore the evidence or create arguments to make the findings consistent with their god beliefs.

M-theory predicts that the universe in which we live is just one of countless universes, with different physical laws. Most universes wouldn't sustain life, but Hawking believes that many would. M-theory could answer scientifically the question about why there is something instead of nothing. Hawking argues that such a law of gravity would show that the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Where does that place us?

The more we learn scientifically, the less significant humans seem in our natural world. Darwin showed that humans are simply animals, and Copernicus displaced humanity from the center of the universe. If M-theory turns out to be correct, we might be an unremarkable species living in an unremarkable part of an unremarkable universe.

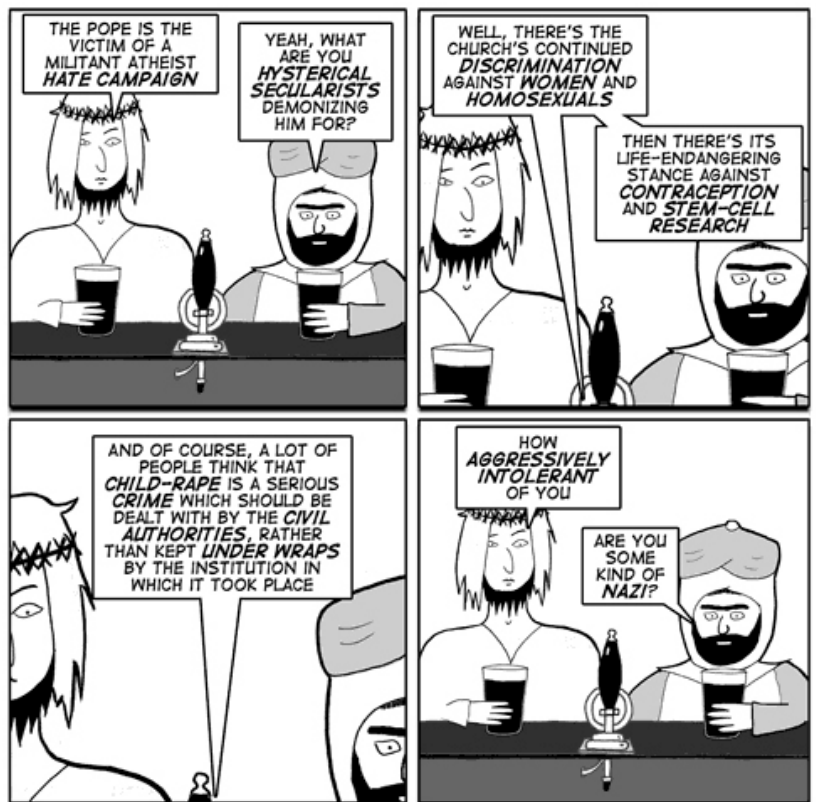
Hawking has not ended the God debate. All he's said is that God is not necessary to explain a spontaneous creation of our universe, humans, or anything else. As accomplished a cosmologist as Hawking is, no scientist would ever declare, "Steven Hawking said it, I believe it, and that settles it." Scientists require evidence, not an appeal to authority. We will likely need decades of investigation and experimentation before cosmologists reach consensus on the origin of the universe. Then again, a scientific consensus may never be reached.

What is important is that we test our ideas, improve our methods of observation, and accurately predict physical phenomena until we reach a scientific consensus. While there is some evidence for M-theory, it sounds incredible to me. But here's a more incredible hypothesis, devoid of any evidence, that many believe: A benevolent deity always existed in nothingness, and then created a universe. Billions of years later, he decided he

was lonely and created human beings. His only interest in humans is in how much they love him and how they worship him. When humans die, they will either be rewarded or punished for eternity based solely on whether they believed this to be true.

Even more incredible to me is the belief of millions of Catholics each Sunday that they are literally eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ, despite chemical or DNA evidence that wafers and wine remain wafers and wine. We can choose to follow evidence wherever it leads, follow only the evidence that confirms our prejudices, or make decisions based solely on faith. Stephen Hawking once met with Pope John Paul II at a cosmology conference at the Vatican. Hawking quoted the pope as saying, "It's OK to study the universe and where it began. But we should not inquire into the beginning itself because that was the moment of creation and the work of God." Pope Benedict, who also briefly met with Hawking at an event hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, described science as the pursuit of knowledge about God's creation.

Such popes fail to grasp the rudiments of scientific inquiry. Science is about asking and trying to solve interesting questions, not limiting or discouraging them. This is quite a contrast to St. Augustine. When asked what God did before making the world, Augustine replied, "He was creating a Hell for people who ask questions like that." ☚



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My Plan Is God's Plan

by Herb Silverman, 4 October 2010

Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

Delaware GOP Senate candidate Christine O'Donnell told the Christian Broadcasting Network last week that that she believes it was God plan for her to campaign and ultimately, to win:

God continued to strengthen and empower us when, you know, His strength is perfected in our weakness. And that's what's exciting because you see, that if it weren't for faith, when all logic said it's time to quit, we pursued. We marched on because we knew God was not releasing us to quit. And now with such an important lame duck session you realize why we were to endure all that stuff.

How should constituents interpret statements by politicians who see their campaigns and causes as part of God's plan? How do you decipher God's intentions for you?

Last week my wife Sharon and I passed an ice cream store and I jokingly told her that God planned for me to go inside and buy a large scoop of pistachio ice cream. (God's plan for me seems always to be the same as mine.) Sharon found my comment mildly amusing and added that a small scoop was God's plan for her.

Not so amusing are people who delude themselves or others into believing the equivalent of my ice cream parable. I'd like to think Christine O'Donnell is just pandering for tea party votes when she says her candidacy is part of God's plan. Unfortunately, she probably believes what she says, and this has the potential of being not just stupid, but dangerous. Any candidate who believes God is responsible for her election is deluded, and deluded people can't be counted on to make rational decisions.

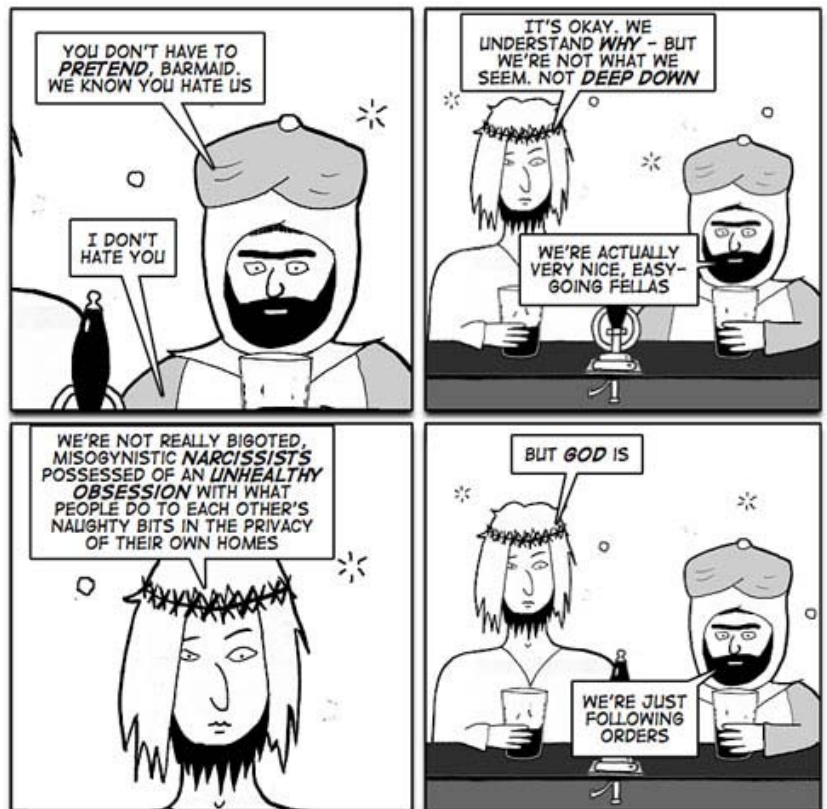
I wonder if anyone else saw the irony of O'Donnell discussing on Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network how God directed her to run for the Senate. Pat himself received a sign from God to run for President in 1988 because his prayers were answered for Hurricane Gloria to move away from North Carolina. As Pat modestly said about his candidacy, "If I couldn't move a hurricane, I could hardly move a nation." Pat never explained why God's plan was to humiliate him in the Republican primaries, where he couldn't capture even one del-

egate in my conservative state of South Carolina.

With as much evidence as O'Donnell had, here's just a short list of the countless people who felt assured they were carrying out God's plan: Fred Phelps ("God hates fags"); Jim Jones (of Kool-Aid fame); Paul Hill (abortion doctor murderer); Crusaders (taking back the Holy Land); Osama Bin Laden (taking back the Holy Land); Ku Klux Klan (taking back white Christian America). I could go on, but you get the point. Let's hope the voters of Delaware do too, on Nov. 2.

I don't give the Senate high marks for recent floor debates on important issues of the day, but that body would sink considerably lower were a senator to rise and announce that God directed her to vote a certain way. Whether a politician is religious or not, I expect to hear good rational arguments for supporting an action. Perhaps I expect too much.

Since Christine O'Donnell believes homosexuality is an identity disorder because people are created in God's (presumably straight) image, God would likely tell her to vote against repeal of "don't ask, don't tell." Here's what the gods told me: "Don't repeal, but extend to heterosexuals." At first I thought the gods must be crazy, but it makes perfect sense to treat gays and straights the same. Anyone who openly talks about being gay or straight must leave the military. I suspect my deity of choice is a pacifist, since we wouldn't have enough qualified personnel to fight unnecessary and unpopular wars. ☘



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Herb Teas Party

Herb Silverman, 21 September 2010

Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston.

Delaware GOP Senate nominee Christine O'Donnell this weekend attended the annual conservative Values Voters summit in Washington, DC. There, she emphasized that although she is backed by the Tea Party, she is also a politician who "toiled for years in the values movement," alluding to her longtime work as a Christian activist.

What is the Tea Party? Is it "a recession-era version of the religious right?" Is it something else? And if the Tea Party is not a religious movement, *why is it raising up candidates like O'Donnell who has a strong background of religious activism?*

I went to the Values Voters website >www.valuesvoterssummit.org, glanced at their positions, and quickly realized, "That's me." They want to protect marriage, champion life, strengthen the military, limit government, control spending, and defend our freedoms. Perfect. Here's what I mean.

Protect marriage: Allow people to marry any adult they want, whether they love someone of the same or opposite sex.

Champion life: I oppose capital punishment and most wars. To reduce the number of abortions, we should promote sex education in schools, contraception for teens and adults, prenatal health care and day care programs, and other support systems for women wishing to give birth.

Strengthen the military: War should be for defensive purposes only, never preemptive. To get the best-qualified men and women in the service, repeal the discriminatory "Don't ask, don't tell" provision. I support a strong national defense, which can be achieved primarily through education and grounding students in critical thinking, not a reliance on pledges and prayers. Our country's strength must be maintained by killing illiteracy and innumeracy.

Limit government, control spending: Legalize all drugs. The war on drugs is as much a failure as the war on alcohol during the prohibition era. Some of the money for taxed drugs could be used for drug prevention and treatment programs. Violence would be significantly

decreased, and we wouldn't waste so much taxpayer money on prisons. For similar reasons, legalize gambling and prostitution.

Defend our freedoms: Rep. Mike Pence won the Values Voter presidential straw poll with a program demanding "religious liberty without apology." That's for me. A high wall that separates religion and government, where people can practice or not practice as they please without government interference or support.

Just as I was about to sign up with the Tea Party, and all it stands for, I read their program more carefully. To my surprise, they oppose whatever I support and support whatever I oppose. They definitely are not my cup of tea.

So I'm toying with the idea of starting my own political party and naming it after myself: the **Herb Tea Party**. I would welcome all freedom-loving promoters of religious liberty, even coffee drinkers. My party would have such a big tent that it likely would include one of the most liberal and one of the most conservative congressional members we've ever elected: Rep. Pete Stark, the only acknowledged atheist in Congress; and the late Barry Goldwater, known as "Mr. Conservative."

Here's a portion of a Goldwater speech, which can be found in the September 16, 1981 Congressional Record:

I'm frankly sick and tired of the political preachers across this country telling me as a citizen that if I want to be a moral person, I must believe in 'A,' 'B,' 'C,' and 'D.' Just who do they think they are? And from where do they presume to claim the right to dictate their moral beliefs to me? And I am even more angry as a legislator who must endure the threats of every religious group who thinks it has some God-granted right to control my vote on every roll call in the Senate. I am warning them today: I will fight them every step of the way if they try to dictate their moral convictions to all Americans in the name of conservatism.

My party platform contains self-evident truths that a modern-day Thomas Jefferson could espouse, which would lead to an age of reason that a modern-day Thomas Paine could promote.





BOOK REVIEW

Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11

by Geneive Abdo
(Oxford University Press, 2006)

This review of Islam in the United States is written by a journalist who is herself of Arab descent, speaks the language, and has extensive experience of covering the Middle East. As a female she also has better access to interview and get to know Muslim women. From this book we can learn many things.

Unlike Roman Catholic Christianity, Islam has no single leader like the Pope, there exists no obligatory, guiding interpretation of the faith. Authority rests with the Koran in the original Arabic text, together with *hadith*, traditions about the actions and life of the Prophet. There is a long history of interpretation and commentary on the meaning of the Koran. Individual Muslims may follow the tradition of their family and ethnic group, read the advice of one or several famous Imams and Ayatollahs, or consult the best interpreter Imam in their community. Thus, Islam in practice is divided into many groups with varying interpretations, ethnic histories, cultural practices and traditions. Individuals may have their own personal understandings. These divisions are reflected among the immigrants to the US.

Abdo starts with an introduction to a very conservative Mosque in south Dearborn, located at the center of Muslim immigration. At this Dix Mosque traditional behavior of the most backward region of the Arabian peninsula, Yemen, are honored by older men. Women are distinctly treated as inferior, marriages are arranged, and a hefty bride price may be expected. Wives may be imported from Yemen, or young girls sent there for the “right” betrothal. This Mosque board is so backward that even fairly conservative Imams have tended to move on after short tenure. Only Yemeni imports can meet the expectations of Dix Mosque.

Most of the rest of the book is devoted to examining more liberal interpreters and their views of Islam. Coming to terms with life in the US is a major problem and objective. Many immigrants were used to living in a country where Islam is the dominant faith, and the civil

power is influenced by and supports the expectation of the *Ummah*, the community of believers. In the United States Islam is a distinct minority, which will have to obey the rules of a secular (or Christian influenced) government. At the same time, the Muslim come from many countries and cultures, from Asia and Africa, and include Black Americans and other American converts. At the present time most Mosques were founded by and are dominated by one ethnic group, Pakistanis, Yemenites, and Somali are the most common, but older Mosques may have Syrian or Palestine antecedents. Many in the immigrant generation tended to play down their foreign and Islamic ways in favor of fitting into American culture. The second generation has a tendency to emphasize their faith, to wear the *hijab* (female head covering) and other distinctive actions, e.g. praying five times a day. Especially since 9/11 young Muslim are not willing to “disavow key aspects of their faith and culture, even at the risk of being lumped together with the radicals” (p. 114).

The key issue in creating a unified American Islam is to interpret exactly what the Koran and the *hadith* has to say. It means distinguishing culture from religion – thus nowhere in Islam is female circumcision enjoined, neither does the Koran say women are to be oppressed, or that men must have four wives. Modern interpreters, highly educated Imams, whom Abdo discusses, emphasize these interpretations, not as new insights, but as re-awakening of the original meaning of the Koran. Abdo comments there is no evidence that a reformation is any more welcome in America’s mosques, Islamic centers, and student associations than it would be in Cairo, Karachi, or Kuala Lumpur (p. 195). Yet, she is describing exactly a process of reformation. Doesn’t reformation always claim a return to original intention of the scripture, not the introduction of something new.

This book is very positive and draws an exceptionally hopeful picture of Islam in America. Only towards the very end, (p. 188) do we learn there are clandestine, radical groups, banned in several countries, who demand a strict reading of the *sharia* (legal interpretation of the Koran). In fact, Abdo describes one radical group being ousted from leadership of a Muslim Students Association by a more liberal group. Abdo expects, or hopes for, the creation of a modern, distinctly American interpretation of Islam, which has a lot to contribute to our diverse country and culture.

– Wolf Roder



FIG Community Dinners
 Tuesday Nov. 09, 2010 6:30 PM
 (Next Dinner will be in March)



Oct. Meeting
 Tuesday, Oct 26, 2010, 7:00 PM
 (Next meeting will be in early December)



If you have a Facebook account, become a Fan of FIG. To join you can type in this long weblink: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Cincinnati-OH/FIG-Free-Inquiry-Group-of-Cincinnati-and-Northern-Kentucky/306015475868> or it is much easier to search for "Free Inquiry Group" and find it the first option on the search page.
 By being a Fan you can receive FIG updates and meeting notices and RSVP for events such as the monthly FIG Community Dinners.

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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 - [figmessage at gofigger dot org](mailto:figmessage@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.