

FIG LEAVES

Volume 14 Issue 12

December 2005

December FIG Meeting: Tuesday, 20 December (Date Change!)

Some Recent Speculations on the Nature and Function of Religion

Speaker: Professor Bill Jensen

Why are humans religious? What is the origin of the religious impulse? Is it biological, psychological or cultural in nature or all three? The talk will summarize some recent attempts to answer these questions by such diverse writers as the Australian philosopher David Stove, the American anthropologist Stewart Guthrie, and the Canadian philosopher Paul Thagard.

The techniques encountered along the way will range from out and out philosophical sarcasm, to comparative anthropology and evolutionary theory, to the use of computer algorithms to quantitatively assess the relative merits of materialism versus supernaturalism.

Professor William B. Jensen is the Oesper Professor of Chemical Education and the History of Chemistry. His previous talks to FIG on such topics as Epicurus, Einstein, and Frankenstein showed his ability to make subjects informative and enjoyable.

January FIG Meeting Tuesday, 24 January 2006

In the March 1997 issue of the magazine *Natural History* the well-known Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould published an essay "Nonoverlapping Magisteria" (=teachings, knowledge, science.) Gould asserted that science and religion are valid, but separate ways of knowing which do not overlap or contradict each other. Under the abbreviation NOMA this essay has been and continues to be widely discussed. Wolf Roder will lead a talk on why Gould is mistaken, and how he is right.

For Good Food and Great Talk - Host a Potluck!

This is an opportunity to open your cherished home for up to 20 people on the second Tuesday (or so) of the month from about 6:30 to about 9 PM. Your guests will provide the food, if you provide plates (paper is ok), silverware (plastic is okay) and drinks with cups (& ice). The first Tuesday we have open is for February, with more potlucks available for 2006.

If you would like to host a potluck and have additional questions or would like to volunteer, please contact Nurit Bowman to discuss dates and place - e-mail:

Enjoy Great Talk & Food - Host a Potluck!

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Events (Watch the dates!)

December Potluck

Wednesday 14 December
6:30 PM at the home of

December Meeting

Tuesday, 20 December
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio

January Potluck

Tuesday 10 January 2006
6:30 PM at the home of

January Meeting

Tuesday, 24 January 2006
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio



November Meeting...

The French Author Jean Paul Sartre

Tim Madigan, Professor of Philosophy at St. John Fisher College

Tim gave a brief summary of his topics on Jean-Paul Sartre.

1. His fiction
2. His philosophy
3. Sartre and Humanism.

He asked how many were familiar with the play *No Exit*. (About half raised their hands). He pointed out that this was Sartre's best known play. For over twenty years now Tim has been using the play in his Introduction to Philosophy classes, but until recently he had never seen it performed. On a recent trip to Portland, Oregon, to his surprise he read in a local paper that the Imago Theater was putting on a performance of *No Exit*. Ignoring the moral dilemma of missing some of the academic conference, he decided to see the performance. Since, according to Sartre, we are nothing but our choices, he jumped into a cab and headed for the Imago Theater.

It seemed fitting to see this play in 2005, the year of Sartre's centenary. Since his death in 1980, interest in his life and work has been on the wane; few of Tim's students have ever heard of him. For previous generations it might have been enough to draw a pipe, a beret and a glass of wine to signify the embodiment of existentialism. The 100th anniversary has revived some interest, as a spate of recent articles and books can attest. For a man who put so much emphasis on the power of theater to bring ideas alive, it is nice to know that his plays are still considered worthy of presentation.

Tim read a review of his own which had appeared in the current issue of *Philosophy Now* magazine. *No Exit*, -- written during the Nazi occupation of France in 1944, -- is a story of three characters: Garcin, Inez, and Estelle, who are dead. They find themselves in a gaudy hotel room furnished in Second Empire style, with an overblown decor that mirrors their own inauthentic styles. They have no idea why they have been thrown together. In life they came from different social classes which meant that their lives had never crossed. Gradually they realize, they are in hell, which they each had expected to enter.

Garcin, a pacifist newspaper reporter was executed by a firing squad for cowardice. His judges thought he was running away from battle, but he was really trying to cross the border to get help, or so he claims. Inez, a postal worker, whose lesbian lover had killed them both by turning on the gas in their squalid apartment, insists that she is a pitiless woman with no concern for others. Estelle, a beautiful woman, who died of pneumonia insists she is a carefree flighty dilettante, who only wants to dance and be loved.

Soon they begin to get on each others' nerves. A strong unfulfilled attraction sets in.



Tim Madigan



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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Estelle wants a to make love to Garcin, primarily because he's the only man around. She despises Inez because she is lower class and a lesbian. Inez wants a relationship with Estelle and despises Garcin as a man, a coward, and the object of Estelle's desire. Garcin wants Inez and despises



Estelle for being shallow, and as becomes apparent, the murderer of her own child and the cause of her lover's suicide.

It finally dawns on Garcin why this unlikely group has been

thrown together; they will be each others' torturers for eternity. "Hell," he famously states "is other people." This is Sartre's core notion of how humans relate to each other. There are no mirrors in the room without exit; the three characters must be each others' mirrors. Inez knowing Estelle's self absorption tells her that she has a pimple on her cheek; which causes Estelle to gasp in horror. But Inez, too, is vulnerable and admits that she cannot deny the power of Estelle's beauty. Garcin remarks that the light in the room is never off, and they no longer have the power of blinking. There will be no escape from each other; this will be hell without a break.

The title *No Exit* is an ironic one, redolent of Dante's *Inferno*: "Abandon hope all ye, who enter here." It is not clear that there is no exit. At one point the door to the room, which they had supposed locked forever, springs open. Garcin who had been beating on it incessantly now hesitates to leave; and Inez laughingly says that this proves he is a coward. But Estelle says to Garcin, that they should push Inez out and slam the door on her. This brings Inez to her knees begging not to be so ill-treated. They compromise by closing the door and remaining together accepting the reality that they will be each other's torturers forever.

Need this really be so? Sartre emphasizes what the point of existentialism is: we are always free, always able to change, responsible for our actions, responsible for our passions. We do not need to go on torturing each other.

Tim moved on to some comments about Sartre's life. Before the war he was known in France as the writer of short

stories, plays and a well-known novel, *Nausea*. After the second war Sartre became known to the philosophical world in general and eventually to a broad public. He was regarded as a public intellectual after 1945 until the time of his death in 1980. Thousands of people attended his funeral. It was major front-page news.

As often happens with philosophers, -- such as John Dewey, Bertrand Russell and others, that Humanists are enamored of, -- after Sartre's death there was a devaluation. Only now people are again looking at Sartre and asking: "What did he say that continues to be of relevance, and what did he think that might have been appropriate for his time only?" Existentialism is one of those 'isms defined in different ways. Most philosophers who have been thus labeled tend distance themselves from the term. Sartre came to prominence by delivering a public lecture: "Existentialism is a Humanism." It was given in a very small room, but much to his surprise it was packed. People were fainting and misheard what precisely he was saying. Sartre spent much of the rest of his life trying to correct the misunderstandings. It is still widely quoted.

Sartre came to prominence because he was a brilliant writer. He coined many good aphorisms and paradoxes to get people thinking. "We are condemned to be free," is an example. We talk about liberty, but in reality most human beings are looking for some sort of answer. What we want to be told is, "Who am I?" This is why religions exist. They tell you what you are, they tell you where you have to go and how you are to act.

Today in addition to religions, we have Marxism, Fascism, other ideologies giving people an identity. We feel guilty. We abjure duty: I am not responsible, others are; others have made me what I am, because of upbringing, genes, environment, etc. According to Sartre, it is the human condition to try to escape confronting our freedom. Existentialism at its very base says freedom is where reality begins.



Sartre became an iconic figure. He was often in the news primarily because of his scandalous behavior. He had a long



term love affair with Simone DeBeauvoir, the feminist writer, author of *The Second Sex*. Sartre was also famous for his many love affairs and his drug taking and his political activism. For a while he had a friendship with Albert Camus, another great writer, often called an existentialist. They had a bitter falling out over the French occupation of Algeria. The breaking up of their friendship got a lot of public attention.



When Sartre was calling DeGaulle a war criminal in the press, as the latter was trying to extricate France from the Algerian war; someone advised DeGaulle: "Let us arrest this man." DeGaulle is said to have responded, "You don't arrest Voltaire!"

On that note we will bring this report to a close.

Reported by George Maurer
⌘

In Kansas schools, "science" is now a search for "more adequate explanations of natural phenomena." Who needs physics? Divine intervention can explain everything without all that math.

But, religion seems to have all the disagreements? Last week, we quoted Cardinal Poupard, head of the Pontifical Council for Culture: "we know the dangers of a religion that severs its links with reason and becomes prey to fundamentalism. The faithful have the obligation to listen to that which secular modern science has to offer." To which we say "amen." We were still trying to find out if atheists could now become Catholics, when the Pope made it clear that he is the guy in charge. The Pope described the natural world as an "intelligent project," to the delight of the Discovery Institute. Meanwhile, televangelist Pat Robertson warned the people of Dover that if disaster strikes them "don't turn to God, you just ejected him from your city!" Note that this influential Christian evangelist has demonstrated that ID is religion. If the case is appealed, as seems likely, Robertson should be called to testify to that effect.

Now the Vatican's Chief Astronomer agrees ID is not science. Earlier today, the Rev. George Coyne, the director of the Vatican Observatory said that "intelligent design" is not science and does not belong in science classrooms. This seemed to put the chief astronomer firmly on the side of Cardinal Poupard, head of the Pontifical Council for Culture and orthogonal to Austrian Cardinal Schoenborn, and perhaps to Pope Benedict XVI, as we saw.

– *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 11 and 18 November 2005

Darwin: American Museum of Natural History opens New Exhibit.

In 1987, Norman Newell, a paleontologist at the AMNH, shared the Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award of the AAAS for his early and persistent campaign to alert scientists to the threat posed by creationism to scientific education. At that time, the Louisiana "equal time" law was before the U.S. Supreme Court. This week, with the Dover School Board ID case before a Federal Court in Pennsylvania, the AMNH opened an exhibit on the life of Charles Darwin, featuring a live specimen of the storied Galapagos tortoise. Corporate sponsors for such educational exhibits are usually easy to find, but the Darwin exhibit reportedly had to rely on individual donors and private charities for the \$3M the exhibit cost. Although the ID controversy frightened off corporate donors, a Creationist



Intelligent Design and other creationist matters.

In Tuesday's election, voters soundly defeated eight members of the Dover Area School Board. The ninth member was not up for reelection. For now, Dover children will learn biology untainted by religious fable, but events in Kansas



should be a warning. Six years ago, the Kansas School Board simply eliminated any mention of biological evolution, or the big bang, from the curriculum. Kansans woke up to laughter and voted them out.

Unfortunately, school board elections don't get much notice until there's a problem. As soon as the voters relaxed, religious zealots were back on the ballot. The religious right again controls the Kansas School Board. And, the Board promptly redefined "intelligent." As expected, the Kansas Board of Education adopted new teaching standards on Tuesday that go beyond merely letting in intelligent design. The board went straight to the heart of the matter and redefined "science." As noted earlier by the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, "intelligent design" isn't "science." No problem. If ID doesn't fit the definition, change the definition.



Museum near Cincinnati, apparently has little trouble raising \$7M for an exhibit featuring Adam and Eve.

– *What's New* Robert L. Park, 25 November 2005

Growing Influence of Evangelical Christianity or Academic Decline?

A front page story in Monday's *Wall Street Journal* describes the spread of college courses questioning evolution. The driving force is the Templeton Foundation, which provides start-up funding for guest speakers, library materials, research and conferences. Between 1994 and 2002 Templeton funded nearly 800 courses. Over a three-year period Guillermo Gonzalez at Iowa State collected \$58,000, for instance. ID should be taught in college, but it should not be confused with science.

– *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 18 November 2005

Paralysis in Space.

NASA has no plans for solving the foam cracks problem. It had been two years since the announcement by President Bush of his "Vision for Space Exploration." Can anybody think of anything that's happened in human space flight? It's been almost three years since the Columbia disaster, and the shuttle has flown only once since. According to the Washington Post today, there has been no decision about how to deal with the foam-cracking problem.

At the same time international exploration with robots thrives. This week the journal *Science* had a report that the European Space Agency's Mars Express orbiter had found a layer of ice near the north pole of Mars to be exceptionally pure and about a mile deep. The advanced radar system on Mars Express has so far found no convincing evidence of subsurface liquid water. Meanwhile on Mars's surface, Spirit and Opportunity haven't seen any either. Nature published reports based on information from ESA's Huygens probe during its descent to Saturn's moon Titan last January.

Japan's spacecraft Hayabusa successfully touched down on a small asteroid, Itokawa, and collected samples. Unfortunately, it has thruster problems and may never be able to return them to Earth.

– *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 2 December 2005

Anti-evolution Legislation in Utah?

Utah state senator Chris Butters is at it again. Over the summer, he threatened to introduce legislation calling for "divine design" to be taught in Utah's public schools, then withdrew the threat after talking to the state superintendent of education, and then reinstated it in response to the adoption

of a firm position statement on the teaching of evolution by the state board of education. In a November 15, 2005, post on the Utah senate majority's blog, Butters wrote, "I'm asked on an ongoing basis if I plan to introduce a bill concerning the Utah State Board of Education's position on teaching evolution. The answer to that question is "yes." I've opened a bill file and I'm currently working on the language. The bill text is not yet public and will remain private until I'm satisfied that 1) the intent of the bill is clear, 2) how it will be administered is also clear, and 3) it can withstand a court challenge."

Subsequently, the *Deseret Morning News* (November 17, 2005) reported that the bill is to be unveiled at the annual meeting of the Utah Eagle Forum, days before the Utah legislature convenes. Butters was cagey about its exact content, telling the *Deseret Morning News*, "I have it confidential" -- that is, shielded from public view -- "and it's prioritized. That means it will be heard," but declined to say whether it would require the teaching of "intelligent design." Explaining that the bill's purpose was to challenge the State Board of Education's position on evolution, Butters said that it might require the school board to revise its statement or require teachers to read a disclaimer about evolution: "We've got two or three different things we're looking at right now."

For NCSE's previous coverage of the threatened legislation in Utah, visit: <http://www.ncseweb.org/pressroom.asp?state=UT>

For the story in the *Deseret Morning News*, visit:

<http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,635161898,00.html>

Vice Versa

A rabbit sits upon the green
believing it can not be seen.

A man, though, with a telescope
and watching keenly on a slope
extending from a near-by knoll
observes the little spoon eared troll.

The man, in turn, from far is seen
by God, reposeful and serene.

by Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914)



A Christmas Sermon

The good part of Christmas is not always Christian -- it is generally Pagan; that is to say, human, natural.

Christianity did not come with tidings of great joy, but with a message of eternal grief. It came with the threat of everlasting torture on its lips. It meant war on earth and perdition hereafter.

It taught some good things -- the beauty of love and kindness in man. But as a torch-bearer, as a bringer of joy, it has been a failure. It has given infinite consequences to the acts of finite beings, crushing the soul with a responsibility too great for mortals to bear. It has filled the future with fear and flame, and made God the keeper of an eternal penitentiary, destined to be the home of nearly all the sons of men. Not satisfied with that, it has deprived God of the pardoning power.

And yet it may have done some good by borrowing from the Pagan world the old festival called Christmas.

Long before Christ was born, the Sun-God triumphed over the powers of Darkness. About the time that we call Christmas the days begin perceptibly to lengthen. Our barbarian ancestors were worshipers of the sun, and they celebrated his victory over the hosts of night. Such a festival was natural and beautiful. The most natural of all religions is the worship of the sun. Christianity adopted this festival. It borrowed from the Pagans the best it has.

I believe in Christmas and in every day that has been set apart for joy. We in America have too much work and not enough play. We are too much like the English.

I think it was Heinrich Heine who said that he thought a blaspheming Frenchman was a more pleasing object to God than a praying Englishman. We take our joys too sadly. I am in favor of all the good free days -- the more the better.

Christmas is a good day to forgive and forget -- a good day to throw away prejudices and hatreds -- a good day to fill your heart and your house, and the hearts and houses of others, with sunshine.

-- Robert G. Ingersoll.

This is the famous Christmas Sermon written by Colonel Ingersoll and printed in the *Evening Telegram*, on 19 December 1891. In answer the Rev. Dr. J.M. Buckley, editor of the *Christian Advocate*, the recognized organ of the Methodist Church, wrote an article headed "Lies That Are Mountainous." The Telegram immediately also published an answer from Colonel Ingersoll that echoed throughout America.

Ingersoll's Reply to Dr. Buckley

Whenever an orthodox editor attacks an unbeliever, look out for kindness, charity and love. The gentle editor of the *Christian Advocate* charges me with having written three "gigantic falsehoods." and he points them out as follows:

First -- "Christianity did not come with tidings of great joy, but with a message of eternal grief."

Second -- "It [Christianity] has filled the future with fear and flame, and made God the keeper of an eternal penitentiary, destined to be the home of nearly all the sons of men."

Third -- "Not satisfied with that, it [Christianity] has deprived God of the pardoning power."

Now, let us take up these "gigantic falsehoods" in their order and see whether

they are in accord with the New Testament or not -- whether they are supported by the creed of the Methodist Church.

I insist that Christianity did not come with tidings of great joy, but with a message of eternal grief. According to the orthodox creeds, Christianity came with the tidings that the human race was totally depraved, and that all men were in a lost condition, and that all who rejected or failed to believe the new religion, would be tormented in eternal fire. These were not "tidings of great joy." If the passengers on some great ship were told that the ship was to be wrecked, that a few would be saved and that nearly all would go to the bottom, would they talk about "tidings of great joy"? It is to be presumed that Christ knew what his mission was, and what he came for. He says: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother." In my judgment, these are not "tidings of great joy."

Now, as to the message of eternal grief: "Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

"And these shall go away into

everlasting punishment; but the righteous [meaning the Methodists] into life eternal."

"He that believeth not shall be damned."

"He that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."

"Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

"And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever."

Knowing, as we do, that but few people have been believers, that during the last eighteen hundred years not one in a hundred has died in the faith, and that consequently nearly all the dead are in hell, it can truthfully be said that Christianity came with a message of eternal grief.

Now, as to the second "gigantic falsehood," to the effect that Christianity filled the future with fear and flame, and made God the keeper of an eternal penitentiary, destined to be the home of nearly all the sons of men. In the Old Testament there is nothing about punishment in some other world, nothing about the flames and torments of hell. When Jehovah killed one of his enemies he was satisfied. His revenge was glutted when the victim



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was dead. The Old Testament gave the future to sleep and oblivion. But in the New Testament we are told that the punishment in another world is everlasting, and that “the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever.”

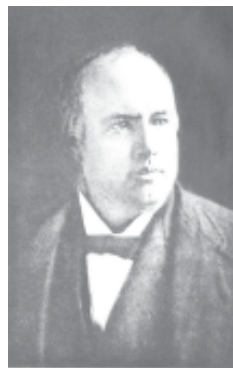
This awful doctrine, these frightful texts, filled the future with fear and flame. Building on these passages, the orthodox churches have constructed a penitentiary, in which nearly all the sons of men are to be imprisoned and tormented forever, and of this prison God is the keeper. The doors are opened only to receive. The doctrine of eternal punishment is the infamy of infamies. As I have often said, the man who believes in eternal torment, in the justice of endless pain, is suffering from at least two diseases -- petrification of the heart and putrefaction of the brain.

The next question is whether Christianity has deprived God of the pardoning power. The Methodist Church and every orthodox church teaches that this life is a period of probation; that there is no chance given for reformation after death; that God gives no opportunity to repent in another world. This is the doctrine of the Christian world. If this dogma be true, then God will never release a soul from hell -- the pardoning power will never be exercised.

How happy God will be and how happy all the saved will be, knowing that billions and billions of his children, of their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, wives, and children are convicts in the eternal dungeons, and that the words of pardon will never be spoken! Yet this is in accordance with the promise contained in the New Testament, of happiness here and eternal joy hereafter, to those who would desert brethren or sisters, or father or mother, or wife or children.

It seems to me clear that Christianity did not bring “tidings of great Joy,” but that it came with a “message of eternal grief” -- that it did “fill the future with fear and flame,” that it did make God “the keeper of an eternal penitentiary,” that the penitentiary “was destined to be the home of nearly all the sons of men,” and that “it deprived God of the pardoning power.”

Of course you can find passages full of peace, in the Bible, others of war -- some filled with mercy, and others cruel as the fangs of a wild beast. According to the Methodists, God has an eternal prison -- an everlasting Siberia. There is to be an eternity of grief, of agony and shame.⌘



Charles Darwin



“Pa, what’s all this talk about Evolution?”

“Son, I’ll have to consult my attorney before I can answer that question. I might be sent to jail for it.”

Cartoonist: Frank Hanley

This cartoon appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine on 27 June 1925, the year of the Scopes monkey trial in Dayton, Tennessee.

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Seasons Greetings & Happy New Year!



Quote

I often get letters, quite frequently, from people who say how they like my programs a lot, but I never give credit to the Almighty Power that created nature. To which I reply and say, “Well, it’s funny that the people, when they say that this is evidence of the Almighty, always quote beautiful things, they always quote the orchids and hummingbirds and butterflies and roses.” But I always have to think too of a little boy sitting on the banks of a river in West Africa who has a worm boring through his eyeball, turning him blind before he’s five years old, and I reply and say, “Well presumably the God you speak about created the worm as well,” and now, I find it baffling to credit a merciful God with that action, and therefore it seems to me safer to show things that I know to be the truth, truthful and factual, and allow people to make up their own minds about the moralities of this thing, or indeed the theology of this thing.

-- Sir David Attenborough interview on the BBC

Unquote



There Is No God

by Penn Jillette

Penn Jillette is the taller, louder half of the magic and comedy act Penn and Teller. He is a research fellow at the Cato Institute and has lectured at Oxford and MIT.



Penn has co-authored three best-selling books and is executive producer of the documentary film *The Aristocrats*.

“I’m not greedy. I have love, blue skies, rainbows, and Hallmark cards, and that has to be enough... It seems just rude to beg the invisible for more.”

Morning Edition, November 21, 2005 ·

I believe that there is no God. I’m beyond Atheism. Atheism is not believing in God. Not believing in God is easy -- you can’t prove a negative, so there’s no work to do. You can’t prove that there isn’t an elephant inside the trunk of my car. You sure? How about now? Maybe he was just hiding before. Check again. Did I mention that my personal heartfelt definition of the word “elephant” includes mystery, order, goodness, love and a spare tire?

So, anyone with a love for truth outside of herself has to start with no belief in God and then look for evidence of God. She needs to search for some objective evidence of a supernatural power. All the people I write e-mails to often are still stuck at this searching stage. The Atheism part is easy.

But, this “This I Believe” thing seems to demand something more personal, some leap of faith that helps one see life’s big picture, some rules to live by. So, I’m saying, “This I believe: I believe there is no God.”

Having taken that step, it informs every moment of my life. I’m not greedy. I have love, blue skies, rainbows and Hallmark cards, and that has to be enough. It has to be enough, but it’s everything in the world and everything in the world is plenty for me. It seems just rude to beg the invisible for more. Just the love of my family that raised me and the family I’m raising now is enough that I don’t need heaven. I won the huge genetic lottery and I get joy every day.

Believing there’s no God means I can’t really be forgiven except by kindness and faulty memories. That’s good; it

makes me want to be more thoughtful. I have to try to treat people right the first time around.

Believing there’s no God stops me from being solipsistic. I can read ideas from all different people from all different cultures. Without God, we can agree on reality, and I can keep learning where I’m wrong. We can all keep adjusting, so we can really communicate. I don’t travel in circles where people say, “Have faith, I believe this in my heart and nothing you can say or do can shake my faith.” That’s just a long-winded religious way to say, “shut up,” or another two words that the FCC likes less. But all obscenity is less insulting than, “How I was brought up and my imaginary friend means more to me than anything you can ever say or do.” So, believing there is no God lets me be proven wrong and that’s always fun. It means I’m learning something.

Believing there is no God means the suffering I’ve seen in my family, and indeed all the suffering in the world, isn’t caused by an omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent force that isn’t bothered to help or is just testing us, but rather something we all may be able to help others with in the future. No God means the possibility of less suffering in the future.

Believing there is no God gives me more room for belief in family, people, love, truth, beauty, sex, Jell-o and all the other things I can prove and that make this life the best life I will ever have.



What is and is not considered decent depends on who is doing the considering. It is all in the eye of the beholder, and in that even Popes differ. Believe it or not, Michelangelo’s efforts on the front wall of the Sistine Chapel by no means met with universal approval from his contemporaries. Pope Paul IV (1555-1559) was horrified by them and ordered their removal on the grounds of obscenity. Fortunately for posterity, there was an outcry against this. A compromise was struck, and Michelangelo’s student Daniel de Volterra was engaged to “dress” all the figures in *The Last Judgement*, including all the angels and the Virgin Mary, whom his master had thoughtlessly left as naked as God had made them – and as they presumably climbed out of their graves.





From the *York Daily Record*, 3 November 2005

by Mike Argento

Did we mention that Dover's clueless?

HARRISBURG — Before I resurrect my effort to get the Dover Area schools to teach the theory that cows think in Spanish, let's take a look at exactly how that particular school district decides what to teach its kids. OK, maybe not teach. Mention. All right, not mention. Make aware. Or whatever it is they do up there in Dover. It's really hard to tell what they're doing because, as testimony in the Dover Panda Trial has demonstrated, we're learning that the people in charge of Dover schools really don't know either.

That's not just some flip remark. They really don't know what they're doing.

Let's consider the issue at hand — intelligent design, the latest incarnation of creationism. Now, when the school board decided to adopt it as part of the biology curriculum, it could have done a few things. It could have checked it out to see what it was all about. Board members could have read some books. They could have had one of the pushers of this stuff come to Dover and tell them about it. They could have done a lot of things. But they didn't.

You want proof? Here's school board President Sheila Harkins. "I still don't have a firm explanation of what intelligent design is, she testified Wednesday." She knows that the two words exist — intelligent and design — and they are sometimes placed next to each other, but that seems to be about it. She can't define it. She really has no idea what it is. But she thought it was a good idea to teach it to the kids. OK, not teach. She said they weren't teaching it; they were merely mentioning it. Or making kids aware of it. Or whatever they're doing up there. Making people aware of things by mentioning them, isn't that what teachers do? Oh, never mind.

It really doesn't matter because Harkins really doesn't know what it is that teachers are, or are not, teaching. Actually, teachers aren't going anywhere near intelligent design and have forced administrators to take the leash of this sick puppy — something that Harkins said made her "sad." I don't know why. She just said it made her "sad." Not sick puppies. The other thing, the one she doesn't know about.

She did do some research on intelligent design. She googled it and learned, well, she didn't learn much of anything because she's still not sure exactly what intelligent design is. She looked at *Of Pandas and People*, one of intelligent design's holy texts. She didn't actually read it. She looked at

it and concluded it was science, apparently because it has a picture of a panda on the cover and we all know that all your best science books have pandas on the cover. That was it.

Of course, checking intelligent design out thoroughly would have defeated the board's whole purpose. Board members would have discovered that intelligent design is merely the latest mutation of creationism and as such, would have to stay 500 yards away from public schools. And since their original intent was to get creationism into the curriculum, they couldn't have let a little knowledge get in the way.

OK, it's one thing for a member of the school board to be clueless and it's another for a member of the administration. Meet Asst. Supt. Michael Baksa. "The only information I have on intelligent design is what I gleaned from reading *Of Pandas and People*," he testified. He said he "would rely on the science teachers and the scientific community" to determine whether intelligent design is a scientific theory. The science teachers, of course, said it wasn't and called it creationism, and the scientific community thinks intelligent design is neither intelligent nor designed particularly well. And the people who accept and promote intelligent design can only call it a scientific theory if, as its leading saint Michael Behe testified, they redefine science, a change that would promote astrology to science.

Baksa, to his credit, thinks the school district shouldn't have put intelligent design in the biology curriculum. Still, it did, and the administration still refers students to *Of Pandas and People*, even though the science teachers told the administration that the book contained bad science, was outdated and was poorly written. But it has that nice picture of the sad panda on the cover.

So returning, for a moment, to the theory that cows think in Spanish. It has as much support in the mainstream (read: sane) scientific community as intelligent design. It has been the topic of just as many peer reviewed articles in scientific journals. And it clearly meets the strict criteria set by the Dover schools for what can get into the curriculum. There's already a controversy regarding it. A reader e-mailed to inform me that cows may think in French. His evidence was a Pepe Le Pew cartoon in which a French cow says, "Le meaux." My reply, of course, is thinking and speaking are separate issues. So if cows thinking in Spanish is too outside the box, maybe I can get Dover to teach the controversy.

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A nation with a Pope of its own

By Andrzej Koraszewski

In the native country of the late Pope John Paul II the cult of his person has acquired forms, which stretch far beyond respect for a religious authority. If we were to look for an idea or a symbol, which unites most Poles, I am convinced that it would be the image of John Paul II.

Poland is not a happy country. In the 18th century it lost its independence, and was divided between Russia, Austria and Prussia. Even before partition it was dramatically mismanaged, and for a long period it was treated by other countries as a no man's land.

After the Reformation, Poland was one of the most tolerant countries in Europe. In the 17th century Catholic reaction began. The Church and the noble class prevented any spread of education among the peasants and other "common" people. Towns either didn't develop or slowly died. The Jesuit order acquired a monopoly on schools, which resulted in education changing into religious indoctrination and teaching of prejudice. Almost all social mobility was blocked and a middle class didn't develop.

One hundred years later the Polish State practically collapsed. It drifted aimlessly for half a century and was then partitioned. Two of Poland's occupying powers were of different religious denominations. Prussia was Protestant and Russia Orthodox. Not surprisingly Catholicism became equated with Polishness.

Poland lost its independence for more than 130 years. After a short break, 1919 to 1939, as a sovereign nation, it became dependent again on communist Russia. Communism acted like a semi-theocracy with loyalty to the leaders as its highest virtue. Neither freedom of speech nor of assembly was permitted; atheism was based on ideology rather than on reason. The dream of independence survived and grew stronger with every year. Religion and the Church were once again important as symbols of national identity.

When in 1978 the Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla became the first non-Italian pope in 400 years, everybody, even nonbelievers, looked to him as a leader and a symbol of resistance. Nobody expected that the collapse of communism would lead from oppression to real theocracy. Party apparatchiks disappeared and their place was taken by the men in black frocks. The Church became not only a strong political factor, but also the most important agent in education, media and other social areas. Any opposition against this new theocracy is very weak.

Poland is a country of packed churches, a country where millions have enthusiastically welcomed "the Polish Pope," a country with a ban on virtually all abortions and with restrictions on prenatal tests, a country in which the Church claims the right of involvement in all legislative processes about laws concerning neither the Church nor religion, a country in which the Church would like to tell scientists what should and should not be a subject of their research. The Church was prepared to set Poland at variance with the EU in order to get God's name into the European constitution.

Four years ago, was founded the rationalist website *Racjonalista*, which became an antidote for young people. There is a great demand for rational thinking in Poland, in spite of the expansion of the Church and of growing clericalism, intolerance and parochialism. In January 2005 people connected with *Racjonalista* created the Polish Association of Rationalists based in Wroclaw, which is organizing an association of people for joint action to promote the growth of individuals and society along rational lines.

-- © *Rationalist International Bulletin* # 148 (12 October 2005)☘

Quote

The fundamental defect in the present state of democracy is the assumption that political and economic freedom can be achieved without first freeing the mind. Freedom of mind is not something that spontaneously happens. It is not achieved by the mere absence of obvious restraints. It is a product of constant, unremitting nurture of right habits of observation and reflection.

Until the taboos that hedge social topics from contact with thought are removed, scientific method and results in subjects far removed from social themes will make little impression upon the public mind. Prejudice, fervor of emotion, bunkum, opinion and irrelevant argument will weigh as heavily as fact and knowledge. Intellectual confusion will continue to encourage the men who are intolerant and who fake their beliefs in the interests of their feelings and fancies.

— John Dewey, "Science, Belief, and the Public" (1924)

.....Unquote

Quote

If men are so wicked with religion, what would they be without it? Benjamin Franklin

.....Unquote



BOOK REVIEW

Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning
by Malise Ruthven
(Oxford University Press, 2004)

What do we mean by the concept of “fundamentalism”? It seems to refer as much to a political stance as to a religious belief? Malise Ruthven is best known as a writer on and interpreter of Islam. In this book he gives us a definition of fundamentalism which includes most religious as well as secular faiths.

One thing fundamentalism clearly is not, is a return to traditional or archaic religious faith. Traditionalist believers, such as the Amish or the ultra-Orthodox Jews, generally tend to be peaceful people who want nothing so much as being left alone in their isolated communities. Fundamentalists in contrast are characterized by wishing and trying to move the entire country in their preferred direction. The similarities we tend to see among Islamic, Christian, Hindu and even Buddhist fundamentalisms, is the radical demand for the entire society to follow the religion as interpreted by these persons themselves. Their interpretation of the scriptures may depart radically from the main stream of received views.

American Christian fundamentalists are generally not characterized by a single religious stance. In fact their highly selective reading of the Bible is easily criticized and even made fun of. They do seem to agree on a love of guns, support for war, occupation of Palestine, and they tend to worship the flag as well as death sentences for criminals. These beliefs are nationalistic, rather than religious. In Ruthven’s analysis, fundamentalisms are national faiths couched in religious language. They are nowhere religious in the classical or traditional sense, but are stripped of those traditional meanings and injunctions able to evoke a multiplicity of meanings. Rather, religious ideas are purposely picked for their usefulness in advocacy, and promoted by all the means of modern propaganda. The religion harnessed to nationalism is claimed as purer and more orthodox than the received mainline faiths. In fact fundamentalisms are statements of secular faiths preached to the religiously motivated under a thin veneer of religion.

Ruthven examines a variety of religious radicalisms. He discusses the evocation of the *umma*, the traditional Islamic

community, to focus the believers on the “enemy,” generally the West and specifically America. Resistance, which in the case of the Palestinians began as a purely secular movement, soon co-opted religion (on both sides) as a fundamentalist interpretation of the nation. A similar co-opting of Buddhism can be described for Sri Lanka, where a long civil war between Hindu and the majority faith has been raging. More recently the ruling BJP party in India made their interpretation of the Hindu faith serve the needs of the secular government. Fundamentalist interpretations helped to fuel the civil war in Northern Ireland for many years. President Bush’s religious claims are not really Christian so much, as convenient assertions supporting his political wishes.

Political activism is not confined to Islam or to any one religion. These newly politicized movements are developing in virtually every major religious tradition. They seriously challenge the academic expectation that with the Enlightenment, with science, and modernization the religious world view would fade away. On the contrary, fundamentalist movements are challenging the secular decision making of the state. Using the most modern electronic tools of propaganda and warfare, the fundamentalisms also question the idea that secularization is integrally necessary to modern industrial development. Soon we may expect a fundamentalist state or movement to possess the means of atomic warfare.

I think Ruthven’s interpretation of fundamentalism is quite true. These are not religious, but nationalist faiths. It is important that every non-religious thinker become familiar with these interpretations.
– Wolf Roder

Quote.....

Jesus Christ

A British Christian charity has spent twenty thousand pounds (US\$350,000) to produce an animated film to teach children about Jesus and to distribute it to 26,000 primary schools in the U.K. “There are over twelve million children in the U.K. and only a quarter of them go to church regularly,” said the film’s creator, Steve Legg. “That leaves a staggering number who don’t and are probably not receiving basic Christian teaching.” He said he came up with the idea for the movie to teach kids Bible basics “when I heard about the boy asking why Jesus Christ was named after a swear word.”

-- Manchester Evening News

Unquote.....



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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 leave a message at (513) 557-3836. Visit our web site at gofigger.org.