

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 16 Issue 2

February 2007

## February FIG Meeting:

Tuesday, 27 February  
7:00 PM At the Vernon Manor

### What Are They Watching in the Middle East?

With the U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the larger “War on Terror,” the potential for Nuclear Weapons in Iran, conflicts in the region between Hamas and Fatah and Hezbollah and Lebanon, and the continued tension between Israel and many of its neighbors, the Middle East is covered more in Western media today than it ever has before. As the media struggle to understand the relationships and the history that shape the region, a Western bias slants the reporting shown in the United States.

By exploring media clips from Middle East television, FIG members will have the opportunity to see how politics and religion are presented. Film clips will provide insight into four major areas. First, the United States and the Middle East will show how the US and its foreign policy are shown on Arab Television. Second, Inter-Arab Relations will focus on issues between Arab and Muslim groups, specifically the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism and the growing divide between Sunni and Shia. Third, we will explore the Arab-Israeli conflict and view how Israel, the Jews and the Peace Process are presented. Finally, we will look at Reformers in the Arab and Muslim World and analyze the debate that is growing about religious, political and social changes in the region.

The majority of the film clips have been collected by The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), which explores the Middle East through the region’s media. MEMRI bridges the language gap which exists between the West and the Middle East, providing timely translations of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish media as well as original analysis of political, ideological, intellectual, social, cultural, and religious trends in the Middle East.

**March Program Meeting:** Sunday, 25 March, 2:00PM (NOTE day, date, and time)

Our speaker in March will be Willow Brugh. She is currently a student at Indiana University and a representative of the World Transhumanist Association. She is researching her thesis on the topic: *Is having an unaltered body a requirement to be considered a human being?* Transhumanism advocates the ethical use of technology to expand human capacities. Willow will provide a background on the history and views of transhumanism.

The World Transhumanist Association (WTA) is an international nonprofit membership organization which advocates the ethical use of technology to expand human capacities. The WTA defines transhumanism in two parts. **First**, as an intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities. **Second**, the study of the ramifications and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations. A full description of Transhumanism can be found at this link: <http://www.transhumanism.org/resources/faq.html>.

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### Events

#### February Meeting

Tuesday, February 27 , 2007  
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH

#### March Potluck

Tuesday, March 13, 2007; 6:30 PM  
Mayerson Hall on Hebrew Union College Campus 3101 Clifton Ave.  
There is a kitchen if you need a microwave or oven. Drinks, plates, and utensils will be provided. We will also show a documentary movie.

#### March Meeting

Sunday, March 25 , 2007  
2:00 PM at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



## January Meeting...

### What Does It Mean to Be a part of the Free Inquiry Group?

Members: Joe Levee, Wolf Roder, Cornelius Weber

**Joe Levee** started the evening's presentation by pointing out that he was substituting for Peter Lloyd who had been called out of town on business. Still, Peter was with us in a recording of his song "When you fail to find Osama, bomb Iraq!" It should be noted that Peter frequently writes his own lyrics but may borrow his melodies from other songs.

Joe related how he had learned from *Free Inquiry Magazine* said that the CFI people were starting a few groups around the country. He went to Amherst for a meeting and met Tim Madigan. He found that groups had been started in Washington and Albany, N.Y. His question was: "How about Cincinnati?" Never-the-less it took three years to finally persuade Amherst to lend a hand in getting a group started here.

A letter to Tri-state readers of the magazine drew seventeen responses. A little more advertising, and the promise of Tim Madigan and Tom Flynn for the inaugural dinner brought thirty people together. So that's how we created an official organization. Five founding members, Carl Bunge, Jessica Barron, George Maurer, Edwin Kagin, and Joe Levee himself signed the organization papers.

"In view of my role there, I believe that I can be credited with being the founder of FIG. Being a founder is only a relatively small part of the organization." It takes a lot of people to get in there and work hard, and a lot of members who come to meetings and raise questions. Right now some of those people are Bill and Margaret O'Kain, Wolf and Donna, George Maurer who writes the reports of our meetings.

An important aspect was the need for getting a tax exemption. This was something that George Maurer and Joe did. We wrestled with the IRS. Perhaps the biggest achievement was our role in the founding of Camp Quest. Edwin came to us with this idea and we formed an organizing committee and the rest is history.

Another early project took a fair amount of work. Each December there used to be a Christmas tree and a Menorah on Fountain Square. Bill Messer came up with the idea of adding a "Wall of Separation;" so we built a big box, and circled it with the Jefferson quotation about the separation of church and state. We had to submit plans and get them approved annually. We continued to do this for about five years.

Then we got involved with the Newsletter, monthly meetings and potlucks and the annual picnic and those things are continuing today. We let people know that secular humanists existed by participating in the Mainstream Network with a number of other organizations. Helen Kagin was our representative to this group for a number of years. For three years Wolf Roder and Joe gave a course on Secular Humanism in the Institute for Learning in Retirement. FIG put on two conferences of a day and a half each. One of these was on Humanism and the Arts and another on the History of Humanism.

Some time back we started a project in Bryant State Park near Yellow Springs, Ohio. The founder, John Bryant was a secularist. When he left his property to the state he specified no public religious ceremony would ever be held there. The authorities took several years before the land was accepted for a State Park. Even today no plaque or marker mentions John Bryant and his wishes. We thought FIG might supply such a plaque.

The next speaker was **Wolf Roder**. He started by claiming he would make three points. Point one, how many atheists are there in the United States; two he will ask if we can prove there is no god, and three he will try to explain why there can not be an atheist society.

The number of unbelievers: Baylor University recently completed a survey of religious believers. Because Baylor is a Baptist University and therefore suspect, the research ➔



Joe Levee



**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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#### Memberships run from:

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# FIG LEAVES



was panned badly by R. Joseph Hoffman in *Free Inquiry*. This survey is a standard well formulated scholarly piece of research. They confirmed the same number of unchurched and unaffiliated respondents as other surveys, about 11 percent. But, unlike all other polls, they probed further, and asked beyond a person's religious affiliation, what is it that you really believe? Do you believe in god, in a higher power, etc.

It turns out, among the 11 percent unaffiliated, only 37 percent don't believe in any god, period. The other "nones" believe in god or some sort of higher power even though they don't belong to a church. The survey probed the "belief in god" questions of all respondents, ie. including all Christians, Jews, and Muslim. One answer choice was "I don't believe in anything beyond the physical world." Among Evangelical Protestants (34% of the total) 0.4% picked this answer, among mainline Protestants a few more, among Catholics 1.1%, and among Jewish respondents 7.2%. If you multiply out these figures, you find about 4 percent of Americans are atheist "nones," plus about another 0.71 percent of American Christians and Jews are atheists. Still, 4.71 percent of Americans are 14 million persons.



Wolf Roder

One reason Wolf doesn't believe that there can be an atheist society is that we can't prove the non-existence of god. Dawkins in *The God Delusion* is very outspoken. He's against religion and thinks religion is more damage than help, has done more bad than good things. He also concludes the scientific probability of god is vanishingly small. But probability is not enough for most people.

Each one of us, I would think, has come to the non-theist alternative through experience, through reason, or through combination of science and reason. My question is "What do you teach kids before they can reason?" What do we teach them in the "magic belief age?" Kids from the age of about 1-1/2 to 6 have a great fantasy life. They make things up. It's the age when we read them fairy tales and Dr. Seuss, and tell them about the tooth fairy and Santa Claus and if you don't tell them, they'll learn it from the other kids in school. Dawkins asserts, teaching children about religion, so as to count them as Christians and making them pray is child abuse.

Of course since you're an atheist, you bring the children up to be unbelievers and if later on someone says "God" to them, they shrug their shoulders and say "We are not religious." So if you try to create a society in which children are taught not to believe in god, it will become like East Germany or the former Soviet Union where people were brought up not to believe and atheism becomes merely another childhood faith. That's why there will never be a society of reasoned atheism.

The last speaker was **Cornelius Weber**. He was introduced [www.freeinquirygroup.org](http://www.freeinquirygroup.org)

to us by John Hoff. Cornelius has looked at our purpose and the goals and was impressed. He learned a lot about us today that he didn't know and suggested that a bit of Joe's history might be written up and given to new members. Still, he senses a disconnect between our meetings and goals. He doesn't see any strong proactive sense in the organization. The printed purpose talks about rational inquiry and creative thinking, about providing a forum for the intelligent exchange of ideas. Specifically he seeks the open discussion to discover the moral basis of a secular society. He wishes that FIG should flesh out and expand on these goals. Inform the public about the activities we're involved in and our point of view.



Cornelius Weber

Some assertions need explanation. Is an ethical secular life any different from any other ethical life. The moral basis of a secular society is that different from the moral basis of a Christian Society? Cornelius thinks all these things need to be spelled out at least to new members.

Getting to the matter of religion. Cornelius grew up in a parsonage. His father was very fundamentalist and so indoctrinated his son. After Cornelius left home, he started reading a lot of ancient history and about early religions. A book by Harvard professor Robert Pfeiffer, *Religion and the Old Testament*, was a turning point. Pfeiffer changed his opinion about the truth of the Bible. To get back at his Dad, he would quote Pfeiffer. But Dad didn't want to hear what Pfeiffer had learned.

Cornelius then disagreed with Wolf about how to deal with religious people and their beliefs. Some things he reads in *Fig Leaves* bother him because they are harsh and abrasive of religion. He thinks religion is a product of evolution but it has to be more than belief. There has to be some empirical evidence. How can we show respect for others even though we don't agree with them. One suggested solution in regard to religion is NOMA. (*Non-overlapping magisteria*, religion and science are different universes of knowledge, keep them separate) But NOMA is a mistake. Another solution is to follow Dawkins. But is it really possible to convince people that they are being illogical or irrational. The solution to the problem may be a demonstration that the human mind misleads people to hold this belief in an all powerful spiritual being. There is an extensive literature on the role of the brain and evolution in supernatural belief.

Convincing people of the error of supernatural belief requires a scientific approach to the study of human behavior at all age levels. Young children before they become indoctrinated with religion may show whether the mind has a natural disposition to belief in the supernatural. He would like to see FIG get involved in this but can't say how. Possibly we could bring in speakers who are expert in this field.



## In Memoriam



On February 6, 2007, the Free Thought, Humanist and Atheist communities lost a dear friend, supporter and wonderful writer. Dr. Dorothy B. Thompson will be remembered for her wit, intelligence and view of the world. She has written essays and many, many poems; a very few we have published in *Fig Leaves*. For a long time she has been a contributing editor to *Free Thought Perspectives*.

Dorothy has lived in Bandon by the Sea in Oregon for many years. During her long life she has been a school teacher, a wife and the mother to four children. After surgery for a brain tumor in the early eighties, she began writing poems about her cats, nature and her atheistic beliefs. She has insisted on living life on her own terms, while writing both poetry and articles which have been published in many places. She illustrated many of her writings with small pen sketches and cartoons.

Our friendship and her support for *Fig Leaves* was mainly through letters, occasional phone calls, and freely contributed poetry. I very much valued every letter she wrote which were full of poems, cartoons, and other decorations, not just on the inside but sometimes on the very outside of the envelopes as well. For me she was a beacon of light in the poetry world. Sadly that light has now gone. I for one will miss her but we will remember her with fondness.

- Donna Sue Loughry

## My Last Goodbye

Don't say that it was suicide,  
Just say I chose to go.  
I planned it well, I really tried,  
My ducks are in a row.  
I did my best to hang around  
Till all the others died.  
I cared for all, I passed the test,  
A million tears I cried.  
Well, now the time has come for me,  
A wheelchair's up ahead,  
And lot's more pain I can foresee,  
And a hospital bed.  
Well, I've said "No" to all of that!  
I'm old, I'm tired, I'm done.  
Be glad for me, I'm unafraid,  
The choice is made, I've won!

By Dorothy B. Thompson in late December 2006

"In my own way, in my own home,  
by my own hand" Judy Brown, Phd.  
*The Choice*

## SCIENCE BOOK CLUB: 2007 Schedule

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

**Feb. 25** - *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* by Wade Davis

**Mar .25** - *The revenge of Gaia : Earth's Climate in Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* by James E. Lovelock

**Apr. 22** - *Eyes on the universe: a history of the telescope* by Isaac Asimov

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





*Newsweek* magazine reports a new trend in unbelief: people don't just not believe in God, but actively proclaim their atheism. "Hi, my name is Lindy and I deny the existence of the Holy Spirit and you should too," says one 24-year-old woman in an Internet video posting. By making the claim online, it's hard to deny later that they said it, say the organizers of the *Blasphemy Challenge* web site. A man who recorded a similar "blasphemy" explained that "We want to show that we really mean it when we say we don't believe a word in this book," referring to the Bible. "God," *Newsweek* concluded, "could not be reached for comment."

[http://www.rationalresponders.com/forum/the\\_rational\\_response\\_squad\\_radio\\_show/freethinking\\_anonymous/4421](http://www.rationalresponders.com/forum/the_rational_response_squad_radio_show/freethinking_anonymous/4421)

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### Bars may but Churches can't.

The Fall Creek Baptist Church in Indianapolis announced plans to set up a video projector to show the Super Bowl to attract people to church on Sunday instead of staying home to watch the game. Super Bowl Fever was strong in Indianapolis, thanks to the home team Colts being in the game to smite thy enemies, the Chicago Bears. But the National Football League spotted the announcement on the church's web site, and sent a letter demanding they cancel the showing since per copyright law, the game may only be shown on one TV per location, and the screen must be limited to 55 inches. "We have contracts with our networks to provide free over-the-air television for people at home," said NFL spokesman Greg Aiello. "Out- of-home viewing is not measured by Nielsen," and therefore cannot be measured for rating purposes. The NFL exempts bars from the rule, but said it won't extend that to churches. Fall Creek Baptist pastor John Newland said he would respect the NFL's copyright, but many other churches vowed to hold similar events despite the NFL's legal claim. (*Indianapolis Star*)

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### Counseling:

**What it did for Ted Haggard** in just three weeks. "Pastor Ted" resigned as president of the National Association of Evangelicals after he admitted buying meth from his male prostitute. He has since undergone three weeks of intensive counseling overseen by four evangelical ministers, and emerged "completely heterosexual." Miracles . . . !?

-- What's New by Robert L. Park, 9 February 2007

### The Domsday Machine.

Why doesn't the world limit population growth? Any program that conserves energy, or protects the environment, or feeds the hungry, or cures disease, will be quickly overtaken by population growth. Simple greed is certainly a factor in opposing population limits, but the fundamental obstacle is fundamental religion. "Be fruitful and multiply," Genesis 1:28, is seen by many as a commandment.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 2 February 2007

### Enforcing population limits?

Several readers last week took *WN* to task over the population question. Should we force abortions, they ask, or jail parents, or take even more stringent measures? That doesn't seem to be necessary. Among affluent and educated nations, native-born populations are stable or shrinking now. Their growth is almost entirely by immigration. All that's needed is to remove legal obstacles to birth control, and raise the standard of living and educational level of impoverished nations. That would probably be enough. If not, reduce tax deductions and other fecundity incentives. A few will still behave irresponsibly, but society can tolerate them in the name of freedom as we do with those who are environmentally insensitive.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 9 February 2007

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### The American Addiction to Alcohol.

"It's in our vital interest to diversify America's energy supply," the President said, "and the way forward is through technology." He's absolutely right, as long as we choose the right technologies. You may recall his 2003 State of the Union speech; he assured us that the Freedom Car, "powered by hydrogen and pollution free," is the answer. This year he did not mention hydrogen. Hydrogen is dead. Last year Bush lamented America's addiction to oil, but the only thing that held down consumption was soaring prices. This year, Bush called for greater use of ethanol. Congressmen from the corn belt applauded wildly, but Mr. Bush didn't mention corn. Ethanol from corn is simply an agricultural subsidy. He was talking about making ethanol from switch grass and wood chips. Cellulosic ethanol has one big advantage: too little is known to say it can't work.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 26 January 2007

### The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Tuesday, 20 February at 8:00PM

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

To see who's coming and to see more event details:  
[http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1\\_ve](http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve)



**The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report** (IPCC) is already out of date. Even as 600 climate scientists were meeting this week to update the IPCC report on climate, the Zurich-based World Glacier Monitoring Service reported that the rate of mountain glacier melt is accelerating. The IPCC report, however, does not incorporate data published after 2005. The IPCC report puts the probability at 90% that human activity is responsible for the observed warming, up from 66% in 2001. It's higher. The report refrains from recommending what actions governments should take.



**Meanwhile in Washington** the Administration suppresses climate findings. On Tuesday, the House Oversight Committee, Chaired by Henry Waxman (D-CA), looked into accusations that the administration interfered in federal climate research. Bipartisan criticism of the White House stance on climate was

prompted by a survey conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists, together with the Government Accountability Project, which turned up hundreds of government climate scientists who had experienced political interference in communicating their findings. Whenever *WN* cites a Union of Concerned Scientists report, there are complaints that UCS is an advocacy group, and so it is. *WN* would prefer that the government police itself. While we're waiting, *WN* will continue to look to UCS to give us the facts. They do it very well.

**In Irving, Texas, Exxon Mobil** reports record profits for 2006. Yesterday, Exxon Mobil announced profits of \$40 billion, its second consecutive annual record. It's also the largest profit ever reported by an American company. If you're that profitable, you can bribe journalists to downplay the importance of global warming.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 2 February 2007

## The Roots of European Civilization?

by A.C. Grayling,  
*The Guardian*, UK; 23 January 2007, [http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ac\\_grayling/2007/01/progress\\_and\\_the\\_roman\\_catholi.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ac_grayling/2007/01/progress_and_the_roman_catholi.html)

It is that Angela Merkel and the Pope are planning to revisit the question of having references to Europe's "Christian traditions" written into the preamble of a redrafted European constitution. This holy endeavour was defeated first time round, but the persistence of the faithful is never to be underestimated. It becomes necessary therefore to be equally persistent, and to repeat the following points.

Seven centuries after the beginnings of classical civilisation in the Greece of Pericles and Socrates, an oriental superstition, consisting of an amalgam of dying and resurrecting god myths and myths about the impregnation of mortal maids by deities, captured the Roman Empire. Such was the beginning of Christianity. By the accident of its being the myth chosen by Constantine for his purposes, it plunged Europe into the dark ages for the next thousand years - scarcely any literature or philosophy, and the forgetting of the arts and crafts of classical civilisation (quite literally a return to daub and wattle because the engineering required for towers and domes was lost), before a struggle to escape the church's narrow ignorance and oppression saw the rebirth of classical learning, and its ethos of inquiry and autonomy, in the Renaissance.

From that point to this day every millimetre of progress in liberty and learning has been bitterly opposed by the organised institutions of Christianity, which at the outset burned to death anyone who disagreed with its antique absurdities - none of its officers ever being arraigned for these vast numbers of murders, or the literally millions of deaths caused by the wars of religion that plagued Europe, especially in the 16th and 17th

centuries. But bit by bit religion was forced back into its own shadows by the new learning and the larger freedoms of mind and action that increasing secularisation brought, liberating individuals and societies to the extent enjoyed today.

But now that toleration and secularity has allowed the cancers of organised superstition to regrow, we see the old story repeating itself: the church battling to stop progress, to return us to the dark of prejudice and irrationality. How sharply true is the implication of Bertrand Russell's remark that "Jesus was not as intelligent as Socrates or as compassionate as the Buddha," for the unintelligent and uncompassionate ethics of the church in its claim to be exempt from laws of justice and inclusiveness say everything that needs to be said about it, whether here in Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor's arrogant and prejudiced exceptionalism, or in the plan of Angela Merkel and the Pope to recycle the old lie that the enslavement of the European mind by the absurdities of Christianity are foundational to what is in truth our secular, free-thinking, classically rooted inheritance. ☚

### Pick Up.

Martha, the church's chief gossip and self-appointed monitor of every member's morals, kept sticking her nose into other people's business. Several members did not approve of her extra curricular activities, but feared her enough to maintain their silence. She made a mistake, however, when she accused Henry of being an alcoholic after she saw his old pickup parked in front of the town's only tavern one afternoon. She emphatically told Henry and several others that everyone seeing it there would know what he was doing.

Henry, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and just turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny. He said nothing. Later that evening, Henry quietly parked his pickup in front of Martha's house...walked home...and left it there all night.





## The Worlds Twelve Worst Ideas: - a 2007 Warning.

Copyright 8 by Fred Halliday, professor of International Relations at London School of Economics

Some errors are products of the unchallenged, the routine, the conventional. Some are new, products of fashion, of novelty, even of globalisation. Everyone has his or her own selection, born of profession, personality, place. The list could be a long one, but like Christ and his disciples, twelve seems a comfortable figure, at once extensive and compact.

### **(12) Human behaviour can be predicted**

In the name of a supposedly "scientific" criterion of knowledge, scholars are berated for not predicting the end of the cold war, the rise of Islam, 9/11 and much else besides. Yet many natural sciences - seismology, evolutionary biology - cannot predict with accuracy either. Human affairs themselves, even leaving aside the matter of human intention and will, allow of too many variables for such calculation. We will never be able to predict with certainty the outcome of a sports contest, the incidence of revolutions, the duration of passion or how long an individual will live.

### **(11) The world is speeding up**

This, a favourite trope of globalisation theorists, confuses acceleration in some areas, such as the transmission of knowledge, with the fact that large areas of human life continue to demand the same time as before: to conceive and bear a child, to learn a language, to grow up, to digest a meal, to enjoy a joke, to read a poem. It takes the same time to fly from London to New York as it did forty years ago, ditto to boil an egg or publish a book. Some activities - such as or driving around major western cities, getting through an airport, or dying - may take much longer.

### **(10) We have no need for history**

In recent decades, large areas of intellectual and academic life - political thought and analysis, economics, philosophy - have jettisoned a concern with history. Yet it remains true that those who ignore history repeat it; as the recycling of unacknowledged cold-war premises by the Bush administration in Iraq has devastatingly shown.

### **(9) We live in a "post-feminist" epoch**

The implication of this claim, supposedly analogous to such terms as "post-industrial", is that we have no more need for feminism, in politics, law, everyday life, because the major goals of that movement, articulated in the 1970s and 1980s, have been achieved. On all counts, this is a false claim: the "post-feminist" label serves not to register

achievement of reforming goals, but the delegitimation of those goals themselves.

### **(8) Markets are "natural" phenomena for the efficient allocation of resources**

Markets are not "natural" but are the product of particular societies, value systems and patterns of state relation to the economy. They are not efficient allocators of goods, since they ignore the large area of human activity and need that is not covered by monetary values - from education and the provision of public works, to human happiness and fulfillment. In any case the pure market is a fantasy; the examples of the two most traded commodities in the contemporary world, oil and drugs, show how political, social and cartel factors override and distort the workings of supply and demand.

### **(7) Religion should again be allowed to play a role in political and social life.**

From the evangelicals of the United States, to the followers of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, to the Islamists of the middle east, the claim about the benefits of religion is one of the great, and all too little challenged, impostures of our time. For centuries, those aspiring to freedom and democracy, be it in Europe or the middle east, fought to push back the influence of religion on public life. Secularism cannot guarantee freedom, but, against the claims of tradition and superstition, and the uses to which religion is put in modern political life, from California to Kuwait, it is an essential bulwark.

### **(6) In the modern world, we do not need utopias**

Dreaming, the aspiration to a better world and the imagination thereof, is a necessary part of the human condition.

### **(5) We should welcome the spread of English as a world language**

It is obviously of practical benefit that there is one common, functional, language of trade, air traffic control etc, but the actual domination of English in today's world has been accompanied by a tide of cultural arrogance that is itself debasing: a downgrading

and neglect of other languages and cultures across the world, the general compounding of Anglo-Saxon political and social arrogance, and the introverted collapse of interest within English-speaking countries themselves in other peoples and languages, in sum, a triumph of banality over diversity. One small but universal example: the imposition on hotel staff across the world, with all its wonderful diversity of nomenclature, of name tags denoting the bearer as "Mike", "Johnny" and "Steve".

### **(4) The world is divided into incompatible moral blocs, or civilisations**

This view has been aptly termed (by Ernest Gellner) as "liberalism for the liberals, cannibalism for the cannibals". But a set of common values is indeed shared across the world: from democracy and human rights to the defence of national sovereignty and belief in the benefits of economic development. The implantation of these values is disputed, in all countries, but not the values themselves. Most states in the world, whatever their cultural or religious character, have signed the universalist United Nations declarations on human rights, starting with the 1948 universal declaration.

### **(3) Diasporas have a legitimate role to play in national and international politics**

The notion that emigrant or diaspora communities have a special insight into the problems of their homeland, or a special moral or political status in regard to them, is wholly unfounded. Emigrant ethnic communities play almost always a negative, backward, at once hysterical and obstructive, role in resolving the conflicts of their countries of origin: Armenians and Turks, Jews and Arabs, various strands of Irish, are prime examples on the inter-ethnic front, as are exiles in the United States in regard to resolving the problems of Cuba, or policymaking on Iran. English emigrants are less noted for any such political role, though their spasms of collective inebriation and conformist ghettoised lifestyles abroad do little to enhance the reputation of their home country. ➡



## (2) The only thing “they” understand is force

This has been the guiding illusion of hegemonic and colonial thinking for several centuries. Oppressed peoples do not accept the imposition of solutions by force: they revolt. It is the oppressors who, in the end, have to accept the verdict of force, as European empires did in Latin America, Africa and Asia and as the United States is doing in Iraq today. The hubris of “mission accomplished” in May 2003 has been followed by ignominy.

## (1) The world’s population problems, and the spread of Aids, can be solved without the use of condoms

This is not only the most dangerous, but also the most criminal, error of the modern world. Millions of people will suffer, and die premature and humiliating deaths, as a result of the policies pursued in this regard through the United Nations and related aid and public-health programs. Indeed, there is no need to ask where the first mass murderers of the 21st century are; we already know, and their addresses besides: the Apostolic Palace, 0120 Vatican City, and 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington DC. Timely arrest and indictment would save many lives. ¶

## Is Hell Exothermic or Endothermic?

The following is an actual question given on a University of Washington chemistry mid-term. The answer by one student was so “profound” that the professor shared it with colleagues, via the Internet, which is, of course, why we now have the pleasure of enjoying it as well.

Bonus Question: Is Hell exothermic (gives off heat) or Endothermic (absorbs heat)?

Most of the students wrote proofs of their beliefs using Boyle’s Law (gas cools when it expands and heats when it is compressed) or some variant. One student, however, wrote the following:

First, we need to know how the mass of Hell is changing in time. So we need to know the rate at which souls are moving into Hell and the rate at which they are leaving. I think that we can safely assume that once a soul gets to Hell, it will not leave. Therefore, no souls are leaving.

As for how many souls are entering Hell, let’s look at the different religions that exist in the world today. Most of these religions state that if you are not a member of their religion, you will go to Hell. Since there is more than one of these religions and since people do not belong to more than one religion, we can project that all souls go to Hell. With birth and death rates as they are, we can expect the number of souls in Hell to increase exponentially.

Now, we look at the rate of change of the volume in Hell because Boyle’s Law states that in order for the temperature and pressure in Hell to stay the same, the volume of Hell has to expand proportionately as souls are added.

This gives two possibilities:

1. If Hell is expanding at a slower rate than the rate at which souls enter Hell, then the temperature and pressure in Hell will increase until all Hell breaks loose.

*The Independent* (Australia) 9 January 2007

## Do not make graven images of God the Creator

By Kate Thomas

Since the Dreamtime, Aboriginal elders have carved, sketched and painted images of their mighty creator, the Wandjina, on trees, pieces of bark and caves. With its striking white face and big black eyes, it serves as an omnipresent spirit force watching over the coastal region of the Kimberley, a land ruled by some of the most ferocious tides in the world. But now the Aboriginal community is anxious about the Wandjina’s presence in the urban jungle. For several weeks, graffitied images of “wandering Wandjina” have appeared along the fashionable cafe strips of Perth - sprayed on walls, in car parks and over trees. One image depicts the mighty creator at the wheel of a hot pink car.



The graffiti are provoking anger among Aborigines. Only a small group of elders have permission to paint the Wandjina, and they are concerned about the recent flood of likenesses. Aborigines are careful to observe protocol when they approach the revered paintings, fearing that if they do not, the spirits might take their revenge. Calling out to the Wandjina from several yards’ distance to warn them that someone is approaching is considered proper behaviour. Spray-painting them on the sides of fences and buildings is not.

“Our culture is very alive and our law is very powerful, so please be careful,” Donny Woolagoodja, a Kimberley elder, remarked. Traditionally, depicting the Wandjina without permission would once have called for spearing or similar serious punishment, he added. Mr Woolagoodja said he wanted to speak with the person behind the drawings to explain that the Wandjina must only be painted by selected members of the five Kimberley tribes. ¶

2. If Hell is expanding at a rate faster than the increase of souls in Hell, then the temperature and pressure will drop until Hell freezes over.

So which is it?

If we accept the postulate given to me by Teresa during my Freshman year that, “It will be a cold day in Hell before I sleep with you,” and take into account the fact that I slept with her last night, then number two must be true, and thus I am sure that Hell is exothermic and has already frozen over.

The corollary of this theory is that since Hell has frozen over, it follows that it is not accepting any more souls and is, therefore, extinct..... leaving only Heaven, thereby proving the existence of a divine being which explains why, last night, Teresa kept shouting “Oh my God.”

THIS STUDENT RECEIVED THE ONLY “A”



## Christianists on the March

By Chris Hedges

Sunday 28 January 2007

Dr. James Luther Adams, my ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School, told his students that when we were his age - he was then close to 80 - we would all be fighting the "Christian fascists." The warning, given 25 years ago, came at the moment Pat Robertson and other radio and television evangelists began speaking about a new political religion that would direct its efforts toward taking control of all institutions, including mainstream denominations and the government. Its stated goal was to use the United States to create a global Christian empire. This call for fundamentalists and evangelicals to take political power was a radical and ominous mutation of traditional Christianity. It was hard, at the time, to take such fantastic rhetoric seriously, especially given the buffoonish quality of those who expounded it. But Adams warned us against the blindness caused by intellectual snobbery. The Nazis, he said, were not going to return with swastikas and brown shirts. Their ideological inheritors had found a mask for fascism in the pages of the Bible.

He was not a man to use the word fascist lightly. He had been in Germany in 1935 and 1936 and worked with the underground anti-Nazi church, known as the Confessing Church, led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Adams was eventually detained and interrogated by the Gestapo, who suggested he might want to consider returning to the United States. It was a suggestion he followed. He left on a night train with framed portraits of Adolf Hitler placed over the contents of his suitcases to hide the rolls of home-movie film he had taken of the so-called German Christian Church, which was pro-Nazi, and the few individuals who defied the Nazis, including the theologians Karl Barth and Albert Schweitzer. The ruse worked when the border police lifted the tops of the suitcases, saw the portraits of the Führer and closed them up again. I watched hours of the grainy black-and-white films as he narrated in his apartment in Cambridge.

Adams understood that totalitarian movements are built out of deep personal and economic despair. He warned that the flight of manufacturing jobs, the impoverishment of the American working class, the physical obliteration of communities in the vast, soulless exurbs and decaying Rust Belt, were swiftly deforming our society. The current assault on the middle class, which now lives in a world in which anything that can be put on software can be outsourced, would have terrified him. The stories that many in this movement told me over the past two years as I worked on *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* were stories of this failure - personal, communal and often economic. This despair, Adams said, would empower dangerous dreamers - those who today bombard the airwaves with an idealistic and

religious utopianism that promises, through violent apocalyptic purification, to eradicate the old, sinful world that has failed many Americans.

These Christian utopians promise to replace this internal and external emptiness with a mythical world where time stops and all problems are solved. The mounting despair rippling across the United States, one I witnessed repeatedly as I traveled the country, remains unaddressed by the Democratic Party, which has abandoned the working class, like its Republican counterpart, for massive corporate funding. The Christian right has lured tens of millions of Americans, who rightly feel abandoned and betrayed by the political system, from the reality-based world to one of magic - to fantastic visions of angels and miracles, to a childlike belief that God has a plan for them and Jesus will guide and protect them. This mythological worldview, one that has no use for science or dispassionate, honest intellectual inquiry, one that promises that the loss of jobs and health insurance does not matter, as long as you are right with Jesus, offers a lying world of consistency that addresses the emotional yearnings of desperate followers at the expense of reality. It creates a world where facts become interchangeable with opinions, where lies become true - the very essence of the totalitarian state. It includes a dark license to kill, to obliterate all those who do not conform to this vision, from Muslims in the Middle East to those at home who refuse to submit to the movement. And it conveniently empowers a rapacious oligarchy whose god is maximum profit at the expense of citizens. We now live in a nation where the top one percent control more wealth than the bottom ninety percent combined, where we have legalized torture

and can lock up citizens without trial. Arthur Schlesinger, in *The Cycles of American History*, wrote that "the great religious ages were notable for their indifference to human rights in the contemporary sense - not only for their acquiescence in poverty, inequality and oppression, but for their enthusiastic justification of slavery, persecution, torture and genocide."

Adams saw in the Christian right, long before we did, disturbing similarities with the German Christian Church and the Nazi Party, similarities that he said would, in the event of prolonged social instability or a national crisis, see American fascists rise under the guise of religion to dismantle the open society. He despaired of U.S. liberals, who, he said, as in Nazi Germany, mouthed silly platitudes about dialogue and inclusiveness that made them ineffectual and impotent. Liberals, he said, did not understand the power and allure of evil or the cold reality of how the world worked. The current hand-wringing by Democrats, with many asking how they can reach out to a movement whose leaders brand them "demonic" and "satanic," would not have surprised Adams. Like Bonhoeffer, he did not believe that those who would fight effectively in coming times of turmoil, a fight that for him was an integral part of the biblical message, would come from the church or the liberal, secular elite.

His critique of the prominent research universities, along with the media, was no less withering. These institutions, self-absorbed, compromised by their close relationship with government and corporations, given enough of the pie to be complacent, were unwilling to deal with the fundamental moral questions and inequities of the age. They had no stomach for a battle that might



cost them their prestige and comfort. He told me, I suspect half in jest, that if the Nazis took over America “60 percent of the Harvard faculty would begin their lectures with the Nazi salute.” But this too was not an abstraction. He had watched academics at the University of Heidelberg, including the philosopher Martin Heidegger, raise their arms stiffly to students before class.

Two decades later, even in the face of the growing reach of the Christian right, his prediction seems apocalyptic. And yet the powerbrokers in the Christian right have moved from the fringes of society to the floor of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Forty-five senators and 186 members of the House before the last elections earned approval ratings of 80 to 100 percent from the three most influential Christian right advocacy groups - the Christian Coalition, Eagle Forum, and Family Resource Council. President Bush has handed hundreds of millions of dollars in federal aid to these groups

and dismantled federal programs in science, reproductive rights and AIDS research to pay homage to the pseudo-science and quackery of the Christian right. Bush will, I suspect, turn out to be no more than a weak transition figure, our version of Otto von Bismarck - who also used “values” to energize his base at the end of the 19th century and launched “Kulturkampf,” the word from which we get culture wars, against Catholics and Jews. Bismarck’s attacks, which split Germany and made the discrediting of whole segments of the society an acceptable part of the civil discourse, paved the way for the Nazis’ more virulent racism and repression.

The radical Christian right, calling for a “Christian state” - where whole segments of American society, from gays and lesbians to liberals to immigrants to artists to intellectuals, will have no legitimacy and be reduced, at best, to second-class citizens - awaits a crisis, an economic meltdown, another catastrophic terrorist strike or a se-

ries of environmental disasters. A period of instability will permit them to push through their radical agenda, one that will be sold to a frightened American public as a return to security and law and order, as well as moral purity and prosperity. This movement - the most dangerous mass movement in American history - will not be blunted until the growing social and economic inequities that blight this nation are addressed, until tens of millions of Americans, now locked in hermetic systems of indoctrination through Christian television and radio, as well as Christian schools, are reincorporated into American society and given a future, one with hope, adequate wages, job security and generous federal and state assistance. The unchecked rape of America, which continues with the blessing of both political parties, heralds not only the empowerment of this American oligarchy but the eventual death of the democratic state and birth of American fascism. ¶

## Religious Restrictions On Women Are Men’s Way of Avoiding Temptation

Posted by Deborah Tannen on 19 January 2007 at 10:39 AM

My grandmother, in a Hasidic household in Warsaw Poland at the turn of the last century, had all the hair shaved off her head the night before her wedding. Her younger sisters, who had begun to turn away from orthodox traditions, gathered outside the room where the deed was being done and called through the door, in vain, for her not to let them do it.

Shaving a woman’s head when she marries is, I presume, a somewhat more drastic way of achieving the same goal as the related tradition of requiring women to wear headscarves: preventing the arousal of sexual interest in men. But it is a less drastic means of achieving that goal than a host of other religious traditions (or cultural traditions formed against the backdrop of religion), like requiring women to cover themselves more or less completely when they venture outside or consigning them to the back rooms of their homes when male guests visit.

Men are everywhere challenged by their sexual attraction to women--an impulse that threatens their autonomy and gives women the potential to harm or even, Delilah-like, to destroy them. I believe this accounts for the notion of witches: This power is so great, its source must be supernatural.

Women are the often-unwitting vessels of such power, though sometimes they wield it intentionally through their dress, speech, makeup, and body language. (I suspect it is intentional rather less often and less consciously than men may think.) If men look to religion to guide them in living right sorts of lives, it seems likely, if not inevitable, that they

will seek to manage their own and other men’s sexual drives by managing the appearance and behavior of women.

At the same time, when men accrue power, they often use it to, among other things, act on their sexual impulses. It’s the other side of the same coin, and it takes a particularly pernicious form when religious gurus, especially cult leaders who cut their followers off from outside connections, incorporate sexual access to female followers into the religious systems they devise.

If the ways in which religious communities try to regulate women’s behavior and appearance are becoming more benign in many places but more extreme in others (and women’s own responses to these efforts vary greatly, some resisting or even rebelling whereas others embrace them), the temptation for some men in positions of authority to use their power to gain sexual access to women seems to have continued unabated.

My grandmother soon regretted having shaved her head, and she let her hair grow back, but she remained orthodox throughout her life. I don’t know what she would have made of the rabbi who married my husband and me; at least one uncle didn’t approve. I am told he muttered audibly throughout the ceremony, “That’s no rabbi!” That the 5-foot-tall woman performing our ceremony was indeed a rabbi is evidence of the astounding changes in women’s relation to religion that have occurred in the century since similar prayers were spoken at my grandmother’s wedding.

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Deborah Tannen is Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University and author of the internationally best-selling books, *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* and *You’re Wearing THAT? Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation*. ¶



## BOOK REVIEW

*Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America. An Evangelical's Lament*  
by Randall H. Balmer  
(New York: Basic Books, 2006)

The author is an evangelical Christian who wants to “reclaim the faith from the Religious Right.” (p. xii) He is also a professor of history at Columbia University. He attacks the religious fundamentalists very much for the same reasons unbelievers and other rational people do. He also insists the Religious Right has lost its way from the teachings of Jesus and the words of the Bible into a morass of narrowness, legalism, censoriousness, and misogyny. He wants to recall them to Jesus’ love of the poor, marginalized, and downtrodden and to the teachings and work of evangelicals of earlier centuries of American history.

The concept of “evangelical” believer differs. Balmer describes her or him as “someone who takes the Bible seriously” sometimes to the point of simple minded literalism, and “who believes in the transformative power of Jesus,” (p. xii). Because definitions and survey questions differ, estimates of evangelicals in the American population vary between nine and 36 percent depending of who designs the survey.

Balmer’s take on Religious Right issues are based on rational assessment and historical interpretation. They run parallel to the insights of other thinkers. That the modern Religious Right organized around the anti-abortion fight after the Supreme Court’s Roe-vs-Wade decision he calls a myth. In fact, in 1971 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution calling for legislation permitting abortion under conditions of rape, incest, or deformity of the fetus. The political awakening of the fundamentalists really dates to 1975. The occasion was the IRS attempt to revoke the tax exempt status of Bob Jones University for racist regulations. “The IRS attempt to deny tax-exempt status to segregated private schools, then, represented an assault on the evangelical subculture,” (p.14).

Most of all, Balmer explains, the Religious Right is contradicting both its historical past and the tradition

of the Bible. He describes Roger Williams as both the first Baptist and the founder of the principle of religious freedom. Williams invented and practiced the idea that religion could only be free by separating from entanglement with the state. It was Baptists who insisted on the first amendment and the Wall between Church and State. Contrary to their ideological forefathers, today’s Religious Right expects the state to enforce their contentions against abortion and gays. Yet, in the New Testament Jesus says nothing about these issues, but plenty against divorce, which the religious have quietly accepted, and don’t even inveigh against any longer. Most of all, Balmer laments that the Religious Right has made a devil’s bargain with guns, war, and capitalism – forgetting their historic care for the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed about whom Jesus had very much to say.

“Scientific” creationism and intelligent design are the fundamentalists quest for academic legitimacy. This merely shows that for fundamentalists “faith is not sufficient in itself.”(p. 134) Balmer is clearly a “two magisteria” believer – faith tells him that God somehow or in some way used evolution to create the world. This teaching belongs into the home and the church, not in the science classroom.

According to Balmer the search for scientific legitimacy, tax finance for religious schools, and political power has led the evangelicals astray and contrary to the best of their historic past. The church is best when separate from the state, promoting its moral vision, not attempting to enforce it on society.

But the leaders of the Religious Right prefer the exercise of political influence to impose their vision of moral order on the nation, a vision with only tangential connections to the scriptures they claim as their authority, an interpretation informed less by the good news of the gospel or the humility of true discipleship than by the ruse of selective literalism dictated by ideological passions. (P. 189)

Ultimately Balmer thinks the leadership of the evangelicals will come to their good senses and return to working for the betterment of all. As a hint in that direction, he sees some evangelicals taking a rational interest in environmental issues and global warming. The scriptures, after all, instruct us to be good stewards of God’s creation and of his creatures. – Wolf Roder





March Poluck:  
March 13, 2007 6:30 PM



February Meeting:  
Tuesday, February 27, 2006  
7:00 PM



FIG Leaves  
P.O. Box 19034  
Cincinnati, OH 45219

# FIG

## 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](mailto:figinfo@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at [gofigger.org](http://gofigger.org) or [freeinquirygroup.org](http://freeinquirygroup.org).