

FIG Leaves

Volume 12 Issue 6

JUNE 2003

June Meeting: on Thursday 26 June

The Case for Physician-Assisted Suicide

Presented by Richard T. Hull

Professor Hull will explain the strong ethical case in favor of physician-assisted suicide. Moreover, he will examine the main arguments against it and show why he believes they are faulty. He will personalize his remarks with illustrations from his own family history.

One of the key contrary arguments he will discuss is that a judgment to terminate life may be made too hastily. Another is that the practice of medicine would be transformed for the worse by making patients distrustful of their doctor's desire to keep them alive. Others say that voluntary euthanasia is incompatible with our obligations to respect the human spirit and human life. Still others argue that doctors can already administer pain-relieving drugs that can have the effect of shortening life.

He will explain for us the reasoning in the 1997 Supreme Court case, *Vacco v. Quill*. He will discuss why physician-assisted suicide is distinguished from the right to withdraw life-sustaining technology.

Richard T. Hull is professor emeritus of philosophy, State University of New York at Buffalo. He has written widely on various aspects of medical ethics, for example, as editor of *Ethical Issues in the New Reproductive Technologies* (Wadsworth, 1990). He recently joined the Council for Secular Humanism as Development Officer.

Inside

Letter to the Editor:
"Religion and Morality" Page 2

On "Fundamentalism"
Massimo Pegliucci Page 3

We Remember Angela Page 4

May Meeting Review
George Maurer Page 5

Why do People Hate America?
Book Review Page 7

Events

June Meeting

The Case for Physician-Assisted Suicide
Thursday June 26th
at 7:00 PM
At the Vernon Manor Hotel,
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

July Potluck

Tuesday July 15th at 6:30 PM

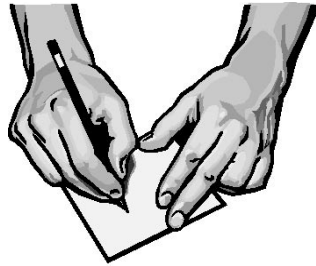
—Joe

With this issue the production of FigLeaves will change. Idelle Datlof and Martha Ferguson who have worked so hard on preparing the newsletter for the past years are stepping down. Wolf Roder will take over the uneasy chair of editor, while Donna Loughry will manage the demanding and difficult work of layout and computer design of the publication. Roder takes over a newsletter that is in good shape and which has been appearing for almost twelve years. There are no immediate plans for great changes in content or layout or number of pages. Some slight changes are dictated by the use of different computer programs. Other innovations may be introduced gradually.

This is a publication of the Group. It is your newsletter. If you don't write for it, if you don't contribute comments, letters to the editor, essays, cartoons, poems, pictures, and what have you, the editor will have to do it all himself. In that case, the publication will slowly starve, gradually get slimmer in pages, until it fades into oblivion. Don't let that happen.

— the new editor

Letter To The



Religion can't replace morality

(Published in the Cincinnati Enquirer, 11 June 2003)

The story ("Dozens delay judge's order in 10 Commandments case," June 10) gives several quotes from the commandment supporters but none from the other side.

The problem with Ten Commandment ethics is that they give the young a false view of ethics, and promote hypocrisy as well.

Note that the commandments give us no reason as to why anything is really wrong, except perhaps that God doesn't like it and will punish us. Often, we hear people defend the posting of the commandments by saying they are good guides against lying, stealing and murder; but we don't need the Bible to tell us this. Human experience taught this long before Moses came down with the tablets. Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and atheists - everyone knows this. These are wrong because they are harmful to human well being. That's what the young need to hear, not that the Bible condemns them.

Note that the Commandments contain much that we reject today. To command us not to covet our neighbor's slaves is to give support to slavery.

And modern ethical problems go far beyond these few wrongs. Our young need sound moral principles, not a few commandments.

Seldom do we hear support for the punishments the Bible prescribes against those who break the Commandments. Death to children who curse a parent. (No matter how bad the parent was?) Death to those who work on the Sabbath. (I recently stopped in a convenience store on Sunday that had the commandments posted.)

Elsewhere, the Bible itself contradicts the Commandments. The penalty for breaking the first commandment is punishment for you, and for your children unto the fourth generation, but elsewhere

we are told not to visit the sins of the fathers on the children.

When our young people discover how selectively we choose among the Biblical commands, and fail to we promote relativism and hypocrisy.

Religion is no substitute for morality, and it is unethical for people who should know better to

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The most serious doubt that has been thrown on the authenticity of Jesus' miracles is the fact that most of the witnesses in regard to them were fishermen

— Arthur Brinstead, Pitcher's Proverbs

I count religion but a childish toy; and I hold there is no sin but ignorance.

— Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) The Jew of Malta

FIG Leaves Volume 12, Issue 6, June 2003 - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in Electronic format via the internet - figleaves@fuse.net; 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. All material printed in FIG Leaves may be reproduced in similar publications of non-profit groups which grant FIG Leaves reciprocal reprinting rights as long as proper credit is clearly attributed to FIG Leaves and the authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the editor or the Free Inquiry Group, inc., its board, or officers.

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Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
Massimo Pigliucci

Department of Botany,
University of Tennessee

No. 38, June 2003

It's the fundamentalism, stupid!

At the cost of oversimplifying an overly complex situation, I propose that the major threat to modern democracies is not terrorism itself, but the ideological fundamentalisms which are the cause of hatreds. Political fundamentalism has now essentially disappeared, at least for now, with Fidel Castro as one of the few pathetic remnants, destined soon to disappear into oblivion, like all mortals.

The real problem is religious fundamentalism, and in particular the one rooted in the twin monotheistic branches of Christianity and Islam (with Judaism ranking as a distant third only because it is numerically much less strong worldwide). This is not because every one or even many of fundamentalist Christians, Muslims and Jews are willing to blow themselves to pieces to achieve a political goal, or because they are all bent on the destruction of everything and everyone that disagrees with them. Far from it. But the fact remains that fundamentalism of any sort, by definition a form of extremism and therefore ill-suited to live within a democratic and pluralistic society, easily breeds intolerance, self-righteousness, and extreme actions, of which the world has experienced the consequences all too clearly during the past few years.

Dismissing the problem as simply a modern incarnation of the old and true observation that political power exploits religious feelings would be a mistake. Surely the greed for power of national leaders who find it easy to manipulate the masses using religious appeals is a part of what is going on. But I for one really think that George W. Bush truly believes that God is on his side, and so do Tony Blair, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Yasir Arafat, and a host of similar characters who are making a mess of the just-born 21st century.

The extremes to which Islamic fundamentalists can go in the name of their version of the divine truth are well known and need not be belabored here. But the New York Times has recently reported some comments by "mainstream" politicians in the US and Israel that should

be chilling to the bone of every rational and compassionate human being. For example, Benyamin Elon, a minister with the current Israeli government, has been quoted as referring to cardinal principles of the Palestinian-Israeli accord including the idea of land-for-peace as "clichés" to be overcome, and has essentially called for ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. As an exponent of the latter group has pointed out, could we imagine what would happen if somebody made the same casual suggestion about moving Jews out of their unhappy land?

On this side of the Atlantic things aren't much better. The extremes of thought of the Christian right are now documented in books and speeches. Presidential hopeful Gary Bauer of Campaign for Working Families was recently quoted in the New York Times, that conservative Christians must accept the Abrahamic Covenant as described in Genesis, by which God personally promised the land of Israel to the Jews, and that's that. House majority leader Tom DeLay referred in the same newspaper the West Bank using the biblical names of Judea and Samaria.

It is simply astounding that our species which has conquered space, split the atom, figured out the essentials of its own evolution and has invented democracy, remains currently in the hands of a bunch of nut cases who still believe in the literal reading of a book written several thousand years ago. How can we continue to vote into office, support, and take seriously a political class that on the one hand uses computers and airplanes, but on the other firmly believes in the actual existence of heaven and hell, concepts obviously invented by primitive humans who slaughtered each other with swords and arrows? How much longer are we going to leave the future of the world in the hands of deluded minds who are so sure of their own viewpoint that they constantly affirm God is on their side, on all of their sides?

I keep hearing of the existence of a "silent majority" of moderately religious people in Western democracies and also among Muslims and Jews, who apparently have a distaste for the outrages of the nut cases that govern them. Where is this silent majority? Isn't it time to wake up and kick these guys out of office, and out of Mosques, Churches, and Synagogues? The recent worldwide anti-war demonstrations may have been a signal that people are in fact waking up. But let's keep the alarm clock ringing loudly, or Bush, Bin Laden & Co. will plunge us all back into the Dark Ages. And we call them "dark" for reasons other than that electricity hadn't yet been invented.

We remember Angela

On Saturday afternoon, May 31, Angela suffered a major stroke. She died yesterday at noon, June 11, at the Hospice of Cincinnati. It was her 83rd birthday. She was surrounded by people she loved.

Angela was born in Ludwigshafen on the Rhine River in Germany on 11 June 1920. For ten years she followed a career as a dramatic soprano, playing in Pforzheim, Freiburg, Hof, and Klagenfurt among other towns. She came to the United States in 1959 to take care of a friend's seven small children who had lost their mother. In time she became a Quaker, and met Peter Seidel at a Quaker Camp in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. They were married on 4 April 1962.

A serious brain injury in 1992, and six months later another event robbed Angela of most of her short term memory. It also left her permanently dizzy and tired.

Yet, these years were also filled with joy. Her good nature, humor, willingness to take on anything, and their love for each other brought them much happiness. In this world which increasingly seems to be filled with various horrors, they considered themselves among the most fortunate. "We enjoyed just being together--eating or drinking coffee on our porch, or she reading on the couch, "krubbling" my head in her lap as I snoozed off," Peter writes. Even last April they traveled across the West starting in Salt Lake City, via Las Vegas, ending up in San Francisco to see family and friends. In the fall of 2001, Angela endured a fifteen hour flight to Shanghai, and next a drive to Wuxi before the Seidels could have supper and go to bed. "In China good friends Jiayin Liu and Jian Liu arranged a wonderful tour with special guides for us. Angela enjoyed this greatly."

Angela was special. We will miss her.

Presidential Arithmetic.

In Washington yesterday, the U.S. Senate approved an authorization bill for \$15 billion over 5 years for global AIDS, beginning in fiscal year 2004. President Bush is taking credit for the bill as indicating new levels of U.S. commitment. As noted below in press reports and in press releases from Africa Action and the Global AIDS Alliance, however, the bill is only potentially a step forward. Several right-wing amendments limiting the use of the funds were maintained intact from the House version. In

addition, the funds will only be available if Congress also overrules President Bush's budget request which provides only \$200 million for the Global Fund in fiscal year 2004.

Conservative amendments to both the House and Senate bills restrict how the U.S. contributes to fighting AIDS in Africa. The funding for abstinence-only programs, and the measure ensuring faith-based groups who are subsidized by the U.S. government are free to oppose and denigrate condom use, represent what Booker described as "the triumph of fundamentalist dogma and ideology over science and public health, with enormous consequences for Africa."

-- Africa Action (an Africa Policy e-Journal) 16-17 May 2003

FIG Meeting, 27 May 2003

Speakers: John Salter, LISW, and Jay Stahl, Executive Director Recovery Resource Center.



Ways to Help Recovering Alcoholics

The speakers started by outlining how they would handle the presentation this evening.

They would start with a brief overview of how they came into existence and what they seek to accomplish in Cincinnati. Then they would engage in a brief role play with Jay being the person with an abuse problem with alcohol and John being a typical counselor such a person would encounter locally. They would then do a second role play with Jay again portraying the person with the problem and John presenting the type of counselor they would like to see in Cincinnati and the type of counselor you might see if you called the Recovery Resource Center.

This organization started as a figment of John's imagination. He read a book by Vince Fox titled *Addiction, Change, and Choice: A New View of Alcoholism*. In this book, the author broadened the terms "alcoholism" and "addiction" and the programs people use to cope with these problems. He talks about Alcoholics Anonymous but he also talks about alternative organizations such as the ones supported by the Recovery Center such as Women for Sobriety, Lifering Secular Recovery, Secular Organizations of Sobriety, etc. John felt that if Vince Fox could do this in a book, he should be able to do it in real life. So he founded Rational Recovery Center. Some of these programs supported by Rational Recovery are similar to AA but others are quite different. The intention, however, is not to bash AA, but to offer programs for those persons who have difficulty accepting the AA program of 12-steps.

John handed out a list of the 12 steps as promoted by AA. Each step was coupled with a biblical reference. As a sidelight he referred to a book about AA that detailed its origin in the Oxford Group which was founded by Frank Buchman in the 1920's. (This man was a Lutheran minister in Pennsylvania who had some disagreement with his denomination and went to England and started this

evangelical group at Cambridge but seemed to find greater acceptance at Oxford, hence the name). The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous adopted the theological underpinnings of the Oxford Group.

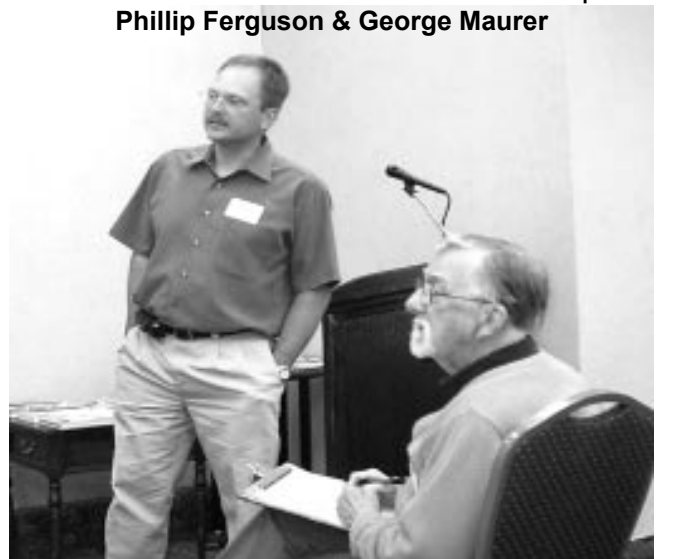
In the first role play the "patient" portrayed by Jay presented difficulty in accepting the 12 step program particularly when it came to the concept of powerlessness and a higher power and also struggled with identifying himself as an alcoholic. Jay portraying the 12 step oriented counselor downplayed the struggle with higher power. He pointed out that some people had started out as atheists and ended up as believers after completing all 12 steps while at the same time minimizing the religious aspects. His emphasis was on taking one day at a time and implied that he would be able to work through the objections so that Jay could wind up in accepting them. There were some objections that Jay had to the meeting concept so John agreed to take him on a one to one basis for a while.

In commenting on the feelings generated in this role play, Jay quoted a statement from Richard Bloomberg, a Vice President of their board, to the effect that:

"When the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to treat every problem you encounter as a nail."

During the second role play, Jay's character remained the same but John's approach changed. As Jay approached the issues that troubled him about AA's stress on "powerlessness" and "higher power," John reassured him that his resistance to these concepts was

Phillip Ferguson & George Maurer



OK. If Jay really wanted to quit drinking as he said he did, John could show him some alternative methods that could help him achieve that goal, and not get hung up on words like powerlessness and higher power. The two words they try to emphasize is "tolerance" and "respect."

If someone wants to quit smoking, they might be referred to zyban, the patch or hypnosis, or a number of other ways but with alcohol or drug addiction they will be referred to only one program, AA. In Ohio, the Department of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services has an annual budget of 300 million dollars. 17 million of these funds come to Hamilton County treatment programs and it all goes to 12 step programs. No other programs are even considered.

One questioner asked what statistical evidence there was to support the statements that said that AA was the most successful program available for the treatment of alcoholics. John responded that he had asked relatively the same question of a professional who was espousing AA and had made a similar statement. The answer to John's question was, "In my opinion." John went on to elaborate that in certain aspects AA had been successful. With an estimated membership of 12 million this can be viewed as a measure of success. They have also been successful in achieving funding. However, its success rate in treating alcoholics does not indicate that it is any more successful than other programs. Even members will admit that their program may not be for everyone.

The speakers passed out a handout that was a grid arranged to show the similarities and the differences between the various programs. There were similarities even with AA. They pointed out that if a person took 20% from each program listed they would achieve 100% of sobriety.

The balance of the presentation was devoted to detailing their experiences in trying to make professionals aware of alternative programs and the resistance they have encountered some of it subtle, some of it passive aggressive but no one has ever told them directly why there was resistance.

There was quite a bit of interactive dialogue between the speakers and the audience.

— George Maurer

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BOOK REVIEW

Why do people hate America?

By Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies
(New York: Disinformation Co. 2002)

The authors of this book are British. From his name, the first author is of Muslim Pakistani or Indian ancestry, and the second author informs us she is Welsh. This provides three sources of bias to consider. Yet it is of course exactly the foreign view or bias we need to understand. And at that, the British might be expected to understand us well and to view the United States quite favorably, or at least more favorably than any other country, except maybe Canada. It is well worth reading, for it contains powerful quotes, valuable information, and insights we might like to know for our own understanding of our and other peoples problems. The book is popular enough to be available from the Quality Paperback Book Club, a division of the Book of the Month company.

The United States is the fourth largest and fourth most populous country, with by far the highest national income in the world. In consequence we have an overwhelming economic and cultural presence in the world matching our military power, which exceeds that of several major countries combined. It is like the fable of the elephant and the mouse sharing a bed. No matter how careful the elephant, the mouse can never feel safe from being smothered. And other countries do not see us as careful, but as an international bully who will always insist on having his way for only his own selfish benefit.

Globalization is seen as an American game to dominate the world. The presence and penetration of American products — from Coca Cola to Big Macs, from blue jeans to genetically modified plants — is overwhelming. U.S. economic power and the pressure of American trans-national corporations essentially control the actions of the World Bank, of the World Trade Organization, and similar international bodies. If they work as we like, we go along, if we consider their work detrimental, we simply ignore them. Whether it is the Kyoto treaty on reducing carbon-dioxide or the convention to ban personnel mines, the United States does not play.

The enormous conglomerates that are the

American media can not be seen as a free press, but represent a selling of "the American Way of Life" a bland, monoculture devoted to promoting consumerism and American products. The world knows America through TV productions, movies, and magazines, all of them viewing the world through American eyes and distorting history in favor of the US and the American way of violence. When rich and highly industrialized countries such as Canada, France, and Australia have to fear for the survival of their film industry and other media, how can the cultural identity of third world nations survive.

All this might not be so evil, if America were a peaceful and just nation. In fact of course we have never hesitated to use force to make our wishes felt. From fighting in the Mediterranean "on the shores of Tripoli" in 1803 to massacring child heroes in the "Halls of Montezuma" in 1847 we have rarely hesitated to use the Marines as our final diplomatic argument. The authors present a table of "A Century of US Military Interventions" (pp. 92-101) to drive the point home.

The media bring foreigners and ourselves a culture of violence. A country which is heavily armed with hand guns and rifles, and which will not take action against forty thousand gun deaths a year. A culture that celebrates the hero as gunslinger, the solution of conflict by violence, the conquest of the West and the American Indian by wholesale murder.

It may well be the hardest thing of all for Americans to appreciate how their most triumphalist national myths inspire doubt and fear in people the world over, how their most characteristic tales fuel concern and provide a rationale for why people distrust America. The fear is that the American political outlook continues to be too readily and uncritically shaped and confined by the myth of the redemptive, regenerative powers of violence. (P. 173)

Are Sardar and Davies right? Of course not. I can cite specific errors, the Big Mac is not literally "junk" (p. 103), no rational scholar has estimated the original American Indian population at 20 to 50 million (p. 158), and the English language is not widespread because the US is a super power (p 127). But the authors do have an accurate understanding about how the world sees



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FIG

Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism and an affiliate of the American Humanist Association. Our members are mostly secular humanists. However, 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.

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