

FIG LEAVES

Volume 20 Issue 6

June 2011

June FIG Meeting: Sunday, June 26 at 2:00 pm

**Beyond the Black Church:
Understanding Trinity Broadcasting Network
and the Word of Faith Movement**

Presented by (Dr.) Katie Hladky

Katie Hladky, a Doctoral Candidate at Florida State University, will be defending her dissertation in the beginning of June, and FIG will be her first presentation as a PhD. Katie's research has focused on televangelism and prosperity theology and how those venues have targeted specific populations, most notably members of the black community and individuals in lower income brackets.

Save this Date -

October 15-16, 2011

FIG 20th Anniversary Celebration

On October 15-16, 2011, FIG will celebrate 20 years with two days of national and local speakers. The event will be held at the Doubletree Hotel at the Cincinnati Airport. Tentative speakers include Tom Flynn and Tim Madigan - the first two speakers to speak at FIG in 1991, Dave Silverman, President of American Atheists, Greta Christina, Atheist blogger, JT Eberhart, organizer of Skepticon, Jamila Bay, journalist, Dr. Darrell Ray, author of the God Virus and PZ Myers. Founders of FIG - Joe Levee, Edwin Kagin and George Maurer are also expected to be in attendance.

To help us pull off this 20th birthday party for FIG, Joe Levee has issued a \$2500 challenge grant, so between now and October donations for the 20th Anniversary Event will be doubled by Joe Levee. Donations can be made by mailing to our PO Box - FIG 20th, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253 or online at Paypal. The PayPal link is on our website - www.gofigger.org and on our facebook page - www.facebook.com/gofigger.

**Directions to The Hannaford Suites Hotel,
5900 East Galbraith Rd.**

- 1) Take Exit 12 onto Montgomery Rd.
- 2) From the off Ramp at Exit 12:
From the North - Turn Left OR From the South - Turn Right
- 3) Continue on Montgomery Rd. to East Galbraith Rd. Turn Left.
- 4) After you go under I-71, turn right into the driveway of the Hotel.

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Events

June Meeting

Sunday, June 26, 2011, 2:00 PM
Hannaford Suites Hotel
5900 East Galbraith Rd.

FIG Community Dinner

Tuesday, July 12; 6:30 PM
Bronte Bistro; 2692 Madison Rd.
Cincinnati, OH 45208
RSVP by July 09, John Welte at
Welte@fuse.net

July Meeting

Details - TBD

August Picnic Potluck

Sat. Aug. 13, at 4 PM
At the home of Bryan Sellers
Details - TBD.

August Canoe Trip

Sun. Aug. 28 - Save this date
White Water River
Details - TBD



Finding Your Inner Fish

The Insights Lecture Series at the Museum Center features scientists at the leading edge of their fields. The lectures are free and open to the public. On May 19, the Reakirt Auditorium was filled to capacity for a talk by Dr. Neil H. Shubin entitled, "Finding Your Inner Fish." Dr. Shubin is a paleontologist and Professor of Anatomy at the University of Chicago. He is the leader of the team that discovered Tiktaalik rosae, which has been called the "missing link" between fish and land animals. The fascinating story of this discovery and Dr. Shubin's lively speaking style made this an interesting and entertaining event.

The talk was based on Dr. Shubin's best-selling book "Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5 Billion Year History of the Human Body," published in 2008. Being a paleontologist who specializes in fish and a professor of anatomy, Dr. Shubin is in a unique position to see and study the evolutionary history of our species that is evident in the anatomical structures of ancient fish. Understanding the fossils, DNA and embryos of the creatures that preceded us is essential to understanding who we are and how we evolved.



Dr. Neil H Shubin

As a college student, Dr. Shubin noticed the huge gap in our understanding at that time of the transition between water-dwelling and land-dwelling creatures. He was inspired to embark upon his own journey that would lead to the discovery of Tiktaalik. He began by studying the fossils representing the periods immediately before and after this gap in the fossil record. He had to find rocks from the period in question, about 365 million years ago. They also had to be the kind of rocks that were likely to preserve fossils, were from an ancient shoreline and they had to be exposed so that they would be easily accessible. He found these rocks in the Arctic Circle in 1998. In 1999 he began his annual summer search among these rocks. The youngest member of his group, Jason Downs, finally found what they were looking for, bones from an early land animal. In 2004 they found the skull of the Tiktaalik.

A plaster cast of the Tiktaalik fossil could be seen on display in the lobby. The features that show this creature to be one of the first land animals are a flat skull with the eyes on top, a neck that allows the head to move independently from the body and shoulder bones that allowed the animal to support its weight on land. Dr. Shubin next described the similarities between the skeleton of the Tiktaalik and the human skeleton, the similarities in our DNA and fish DNA and the similarities in our embryos →



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

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Memberships run from:

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



and fish embryos. His diagrams and descriptions made it obvious that human beings are descended from earlier forms of life. “I’d like to think that as we discover cures for everything that ails us, from Alzheimer’s to different cancers, that the breakthroughs that will extend and enrich our lives will in some way originally be derived from work on flies, worms and in some cases even fish. I can’t imagine a more powerful or more beautiful statement on the importance of our connections to the rest of life on our planet than that.”



Dr. Shubin’s enthusiasm for science and dedication to discovery were evident. The story of his discovery is the story of how science works. He developed his original hypothesis on the evidence provided by earlier science. He put together clues from other disciplines, which showed him where to look. Finally his prediction was verified by the discovery of physical evidence. When asked in the Q and A how to popularize science, he answered that telling these interesting and exciting stories of discovery resonate with people and let them identify with the scientists.

Afterwards at the book signing I asked him if he had been to the Creation Museum. He answered yes and described it as “horrible, just horrible.” He thanked the Free Inquiry Group for taking a stand against those who attempt to negate the evidence that he and his fellow scientists have provided to support the theory of evolution. He signed my book, “Best Fishes, Neil Shubin.” ☘



Heather & Bryan Wedding Poem

You came from starstuff, and you met by chance—
 Perhaps—wasn’t it?—you sometimes wonder;
 For if everything that ever was
 Was, in smallest detail, not done as it was done,
 We would, all of us, and each of us, be elsewhere on this day—
 Nor would you two be here affirming love and joining lives.
 For, of endless other scenes, of this and other worlds and times,
 Unknown, indeed undreamed, this one chose you or you chose it,
 Or both. Does it matter?
 Perhaps each is the same.
 For you this day are here apart, yet one
 You as One are here and one today
 Apart from all that would by plan or fate be otherwise.
 Other balloons have launched from other shores
 And floated into different times and ways.
 And you are here,
 On a new scooter adventure of seek and find.
 With friends and families drawn, by forces poorly understood,
 To be with you, and part of you,
 For now and for all your future days.
 Today the world is magic!
 For the joining of your two lives,
 For what has been, and for what may be,
 We rejoice with you in love’s great mystery.

Edwin Kagin, aka, Father of the Bride.
 May 28, 2011



Sarah Palin Asked God for Guidance Over Alaska State Budget

By Ed Pilkington and Ewen MacAskill, *Guardian* UK (11 June 11)

(Sarah Palin's emails, 24,199 pages, were released Friday, June 10, at 1:00 pm EST. The emails are being uploaded to an online, searchable database, and can be read on the internet.)

Emails reveal pleas for divine inspiration in aiding policies affecting allocation of funds in the state.

Sarah Palin sought advice from an unusual source when she was deliberating over how to frame the Alaskan state budget in 2008 - she called on God for guidance, according to emails released under freedom of information. In an email written in March 2008 she said that she had been praying for direction over the financial negotiations. "I have been praying for wisdom on this ... God will have to show me what to do on the people's budget because I don't yet know the right path ... He will show me though."

The former Alaskan governor's deep religious beliefs are well known. She is an evangelical Christian who belongs to the Assembly of God in her home town of Wasilla, a church whose congregants have been known to speak in tongues. She famously referred to the oil pipeline she had supported in Alaska as "God's will." But rarely has such a direct connection been drawn between her faith and her policymaking. Her call for divine assistance in drawing up the budget is reminiscent of the controversy that followed George Bush's statement that God had advised him to attack Iraq shortly after the invasion.

The email is all the more poignant in that it was sent from Palin's private yahoo account just five months before she was thrown into the national and international limelight when she was chosen by John McCain to be his vice-presidential candidate in the 2008 presidential elections. The McCain campaign played down the extent of her religious feeling. Palin's comments on her religious guidance were made at a time when she was locked in a struggle with the Alaskan state assembly over the size of the budget.

Contrary to her subsequent image as a Tea Party favorite slashing back on public spending, she was in fact at loggerheads with several Republican representa-

tives in Alaska who were demanding she made budget reductions. She made the remarks to Tom Irwin, a close adviser and a senior official in the Alaskan department of natural resources. He replied to the then governor: "Just wanted to encourage you on the budget and let you know I have prayed in Jesus name for you to have wisdom and discernment and that God would bless you and your family."

The Alaskan government released about 13,000 emails on Friday, dating back to Palin's period in office, stretching to 24,000 pages. References to her Christian faith pepper the correspondence. In an another email exchange with Irwin following the birth of her fifth child Trig, she wrote: "It's still pretty surreal ... and we know we'll only be given what we can handle by our good Lord."

On the day in August 2008 that it was announced that she had been chosen by McCain to be his running mate she emailed her staff saying: "He told me yesterday - it moved fast! Pray! I love you." ❧



Stupid & Beautiful

A man asked his wife one day, "I don't know how you can be so stupid and so beautiful all at the same time."

"Allow me to explain," said his wife.

"God made me beautiful so you would be attracted to me; God made me stupid so I would be attracted to you."



FIG Accepting Credit Card/PayPal Donations

FIG now can accept donations online through PayPal - pay with your credit card or PayPal account. All donations will support the FIG 20th Anniversary Conference in October and are currently being doubled due to a challenge grant provided by Joe Levee. PayPal donation information will be available soon on www.gofigger.org soon. You can also donate online by using this web address - <http://tinyurl.com/3dtvpp4> or also find the information on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/gofigger.



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



Volunteer Camp Counselors Wanted

Camp Quest Michigan is still in need of female camp counselors! Freethinking ladies needed! Call 586-707-0898 if you can volunteer the week of July 17-23. Staff applications are available at our website:

www.michigan.camp-quest.org.

Cincinnati Science Cafe

<http://research.uc.edu/Sigma/News/sciencecafes.aspx>

New Venue! - Tuesday June 28th, 6 PM

Dave and Buster's
11775 Commons Drive
Springdale, OH 45246

Come at 6:00 PM for dinner.
Stay for the talk at 7:00.

Tuesday, June 28th: Bev Ketron, Education Director of iSpace Learning Center, will discuss the demise of NASA's shuttle program on the day of the last shuttle launch to space. We hope to convince D&B to make the signature skeptic drink... Buzzed Aldrin Punch!

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Next Meeting

Monday, July 18th: Lee Dugatkin, author of *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose*, will speak about Thomas Jefferson's contributions to natural science and skepticism. He'll be coming all the way from Louisville, KY just to speak to our group!



Cin City Skeptics

<http://www.meetup.com/CinCitySkeptics/>

Friday, June 17, 2011 7:00 PM

Claddagh Irish Pub

5075 Deerfield Blvd Mason, OH

Skeptics in the Pub event. Come drink.. skeptically at Claddagh Pub in Mason. This will be an informal meetup, no speakers, no agenda... Just a chance to meet your local fellow skeptics. If you are new to the group we'd love to meet you. We'll also be discussing how to start a monthly Skeptics in the Pub event and more skeptic/science themed events for the summer. Hope to see you there!



Science Book Club

All the meetings are held at the downtown Cincinnati Library in Meeting Room 3A at 2:30 on the third Sunday of each month with the following exceptions:

June 26 on the 4th Sunday
in Room 3A.

Schedule for 2011:

June 26 - *A Life Decoded: My Genome, My Life* by J. Craig Venter, 2007, 390pp

July 17 - *13 Things That Don't Make Sense* by Michael Brooks, 2008, 240pp



August 21 - *The Dominant Animal: Human Evolution & The Environment* by Paul R. Ehrlich 2008, 420pp

September 18 - *Sacred Geometry* by Stephen Skinner, 2006, 160pp

October 16 - *What Have You Changed Your Mind About? Today's Leading Minds Rethink Everything* by John Brockman, ed, 2009, 387pp

November 20 - *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker, Pulitzer Prize, 1973, 314pp

December 18 - *The Dependent Gene: Fallacy of Nature vs. Nurture*, David S. Moore, 2002



Contradiction Corner

By Dennis Davis



For this edition of Contradiction Corner I will examine the way that the Bible contradicts the real world. For example, in Genesis chapter 1 we are told that the Earth had night and day prior to the existence of the sun, the moon or any stars. Obviously the writer did not know that daylight comes from the sun. This chapter also erroneously states that the moon gives off its own light rather than reflecting light from the sun.

In Genesis 1:29 the Bible states that it is safe to eat all herbs and fruit from fruit bearing trees; however, several plants matching that description are poisonous including hemlock, nightshade, oleander, and the fruit of the buckeye. Notice that taking this verse literally would lead one to conclude that marijuana would be an acceptable food, something that almost no modern Christian would accept.

More contradictions with the natural world include Genesis 3:14 incorrectly stating that snakes eat dirt and dust. Also Leviticus 11 presents a list of birds that are fit or unfit to eat and bats are listed among birds that are unfit to eat. Although they do fly, bats are mammals, not birds. The same chapter (verses 20 & 21 in the KJV) also lists four-footed birds and insects as being unfit to eat; this is just as well since all birds have two feet and all insects have six legs. Other versions of the Bible leave out the birds but still indicate there are four-footed insects.

In Genesis 30:37-43 we are told that Jacob caused the coats of newborn cattle and sheep to be genetically altered by putting striped sticks in front of the livestock during copulation. Jacob did this so he could cheat his father-in-law, not for any noble cause, so it is highly unlikely that god was providing divine intervention to change the outcome; rather the author of this story thought this was a legitimate way to alter genetics. Scientific research has shown that genetic traits are not in any way influenced by visual stimulation of mating animals.

Similarly Deuteronomy 14:6-7 contains lists of forbidden foods and states that only animals that have both split hoofs and chew the cud like a cow are safe to eat. Then as an example the author forbids the eating of rabbits because they do not have split hoofs even though they do chew the cud. In fact rabbits do not chew cud like cows, anyone who raised rabbits can easily verify.

Next we will examine biblical promises and the way they are not fulfilled in reality. By use of these biblical promises we can test the existence of the Christian deity. While we cannot be more than agnostic to the existence of the god of Deism, there is no need for such a stance when dealing with the god of the Bible.

First we will consider one of the most insidious passages in the entire Bible often called The Great Commission in Mark 16: 15-18: "He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." This passage is responsible for condemnation of non-believers, Christian evangelism, belief in demon possession, speaking in tongues, snake handling, congregations drinking poison en masse and faith healers. I used the NIV version for this quote so that we can see that modern versions agree with the KJV used by most fundamentalists.

This passage has become the bane of liberal Christians and the life blood of fundamentalism. From this passage fundamentalists justify practices that appear extreme and radical to nonbelievers. Taken literally together with verses like James 5:14, or John 14:12 where Jesus is quoted to have said "... He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do... If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it" the believer must conclude that through prayer miracles must happen. In their eyes the Bible is promising that the prayer of a true believer for a sick person will cure them of illness. From my own personal experience, loved ones have died trusting in faith rather than medicine because they have a promise that sickness can be overcome by faith. Generally, when the sick do not recover, the situation is made worse because the sick person is blamed for having insufficient faith.

The existence of various Christian owned medical centers and hospitals all over the world are all that is needed to reveal that these "promise" scriptures do not reflect the real world. As you can see from the few examples given here, the Bible does not match up with the real world.

⌘



Seed With Poisonous Fruit

by Valerie Tarico, *Away Point*; 10 May 2011

Valerie Tarico is a psychologist. She is the author of *Trusting Doubt: A Former Evangelical Looks at Old Beliefs in a New Light*. She is also the founder of WisdomCommons.org.

Christian extremists in Uganda's parliament are hoping that hunger and high gas prices will provide the cover they need to finally subject gay men to punishment of biblical proportions. They have introduced a bill, up for vote on May 11, that seeks life imprisonment for gay sex and, for repeat offenders, the death penalty. Last year, similar legislation was averted by international outrage. President Museveni was afraid of losing valuable aid dollars, and after outcry arose across the West, with Barack Obama calling the law "odious," Museveni prevented the bill from coming to a vote.

Stopping the bill was insufficient to save the life of one Ugandan, David Kato, who was beaten to death with a hammer in January. Kato was Uganda's most outspoken gay rights advocate and had received many death threats before he was killed. In the winter months before his death, one newspaper ran a front page photo of Kato with an anti-gay rant and a banner urging "Hang them." Last spring I traveled in Mozambique, where a full-page article in a local paper interspersed Bible verses, exhortations to spiritual living, and similar anti-gay vitriol. Although leading fundamentalists like Albert Mohler appear increasingly resigned "tolerance" here at home, across Africa the marriage of Christianity and homophobia appears to be thriving—thanks in part to an American tendency to take our outdated wares and social movements overseas.

Two years ago, I wrote an article that asked, "If the Bible Were Law, Would You Qualify for the Death Penalty?" It described some of the thirty six causes for capital punishment listed in the Good Book, including cursing parents, witchcraft, being raped (only within the city limits), adultery, and of course, homosexual sex. Mercifully, even the most old school American Christians seem to ignore the Bible on these points. But one of the unfortunate consequences of Americans exporting biblical literalism to developing countries is that people in those countries take the Bible literally—including the parts we all, missionaries included, wish they wouldn't. In Nigeria, American Pentecostalism has fused with lo-

cal animism and resulted in children being beaten and burned as witches, just like the Bible prescribes.

In Uganda, American evangelism may be similarly responsible for Kato's death and the proposed law. In March 2009, frustrated by their inability to block the gradual inclusion of gays in the universal human rights umbrella at home, Evangelical leaders traveled to Uganda and led incendiary workshops seeking to increase Ugandan fear that gay men are a threat to straight marriages and children. It would appear that Uganda's already fractured and restive society is reaping what the American missionaries have sown: further contention and violence.

"I don't want anyone killed," said Mr. Schmierer, one of the Evangelical leaders who traveled to Uganda two years ago. "But I don't feel I had anything to do with that [Kato's death]." Many evangelicals, those who see the Bible as literally perfect, find it almost impossible to imagine that the Bible itself could be responsible for inciting violence or that those who preach biblical inerrancy could be complicit in that violence. And yet other Christians, those who see the Bible as the imperfect record of the imperfect struggle of our spiritual ancestors, find this causal chain quite plausible. According to theologian Thom Stark (*The Human Faces of God*), the biblical record attributes divine sanction in places to some of the worst of Iron Age impulses, including human sacrifice. Unless we understand those writings in their human context we are bound to glorify passages that instead should teach us about the darkness in the human spirit. And glorifying human darkness puts us at risk of enacting it.

It is troubling that of the many offerings that might have been carried by American Christians to Africa in the service of the Great Commandment, what has been carried instead are the seeds of homophobia—fear, hatred, and death. It will take many voices raised together to reverse the damage done by a few misguided missionaries. I hope those voices will be raised this week and again next year, and for as many years as are needed until Uganda's gay community can live in love and peace.

✂





India Would Have Been A Better Place Without Sathya Sai Baba

by Sanal Edamaruku, President, Indian Rationalist Association. Rationalist International: >rationalistinternational@gmail.com<

When Sathya Sai Baba died this morning (24 April 2011) at the age of 85 years, he proved once again that miracles and predictions fail. He had predicted at a public gathering at his head quarters in Puttaparthi, in 2000, and repeatedly many times, that he would die at the age of 96 only. And till the last moment, many of his devotees clung to his word and waited for a miracle. May it be an eye opener for the millions of gullible people whom he misguided and deluded.

De mortuis nihil nisi bene, they say, say nothing but good of the dead. But I think Sathya Sai Baba's case qualifies for an exception. Too great is the damage that he did to India. His devastating influence on reason and scientific temper caused huge setback to the country. At a time, when scientific progress led to great social and economic leaps and scientific awakening started spreading all over India, Sathya Sai Baba launched a "counter revolution" of superstition, supported by irresponsible politicians and other public figures who should have known better. In my judgment, this is his greatest crime. I have succeeded again and again to expose him publicly as a fraud, so did some other rationalists. But due to his political protectors he was never held responsible for his crimes against public reason. Nor was he ever booked for any other crime he was accused of. Numerous cases of alleged sexual abuse and murder are yet to be investigated, not to mention the financial secrets of his empire.

Sathya Sai Baba insisted in all seriousness that he was god, the creator of the universe, and "proved" his divinity with a couple of small "miracles." As son of a village tantric he was familiar with the hand sleights and tricks of the trade. However, he did not only fascinate poor and uneducated villagers with his fraudulent performances. Over the years, he managed to attract a galaxy of India's rich and powerful, among them ministers, prime ministers, presidents, chief justices, top industrialists and superstars.

Sathya Sai Baba had a special *modus operandi* that was the key for his astonishing success and the root of

his enormous clout. Many of his high society devotees came to serve their own vested interests. Some came to rub shoulders with the prominent. Many joined the club because it was working as a powerful syndicate spreading its tentacles all over the political system. It was a way to the top jobs and a way to get things done. Others were seeking financial support or wanted to get rid of ill-gotten black money: The empire, it is alleged, was based on money laundering, using foreign devotees and branches. In fact, the huge foreign donations to Sai Baba stood in contrast to the comparatively modest number of active foreign devotees and the sometimes quite weak foreign branches, some of them residing in private homes. That is no great surprise, when one considers that Sai Baba did not speak any other language than Telugu and traveled only once in his whole life abroad – to visit his friend Idi Amin in Uganda.

On his 80th birthday, Sai Baba's supporters announced that he would turn from a miracle man to a philanthropist. That was, after I had demonstrated his miracles so often in TV shows that many kids in the streets could imitate them. That he since spent a part of the great fortunes, swindled out of the gullible, for social development around his ancestral village, is highlighted now to present him as a saint. But as useful and welcome hospitals, schools and drinking water projects for the poor always may be: this kind of alibi-philanthropy is well known even from mafia-bosses. It cannot be weighed against his crimes and the damage he has done to the Indian society.

In December 2005, I wrote a letter to then President Dr. Abdul Kalam, one of Sai Baba's ardent supporters, which was never answered. I demanded criminal investigations against Sai Baba. If his social development projects are meant to be indulgence to nullify his crimes, this procedure is unprecedented and unacceptable, I wrote. It is a shame for India that well-founded accusations and numerous reputed witnesses against Sai Baba are ignored without any investigation. Do saffron clothes make an offender untouchable for the law? Do we have to tolerate that political protectionism raises its head so boldly, mocking India's democracy?

Sathya Sai Baba caused great damage to India. His irresponsible political patrons corrupted the political culture of India. Encouraged by the clout of Sathya Sai Baba, a new clan of miracle mongers imitated him. India would have been a better place without Sathya Sai Baba. ❧



Banning Circumcision Won't Change Reality For Children

by Herb Silverman, *Washington Post*, 7 June 2011

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

The primary positive outcome I can envision for a ban on male circumcision is that Jews and Muslims would finally have a cause on which they could work together. If it starts with a piece of flesh, perhaps it will one day lead to peace.

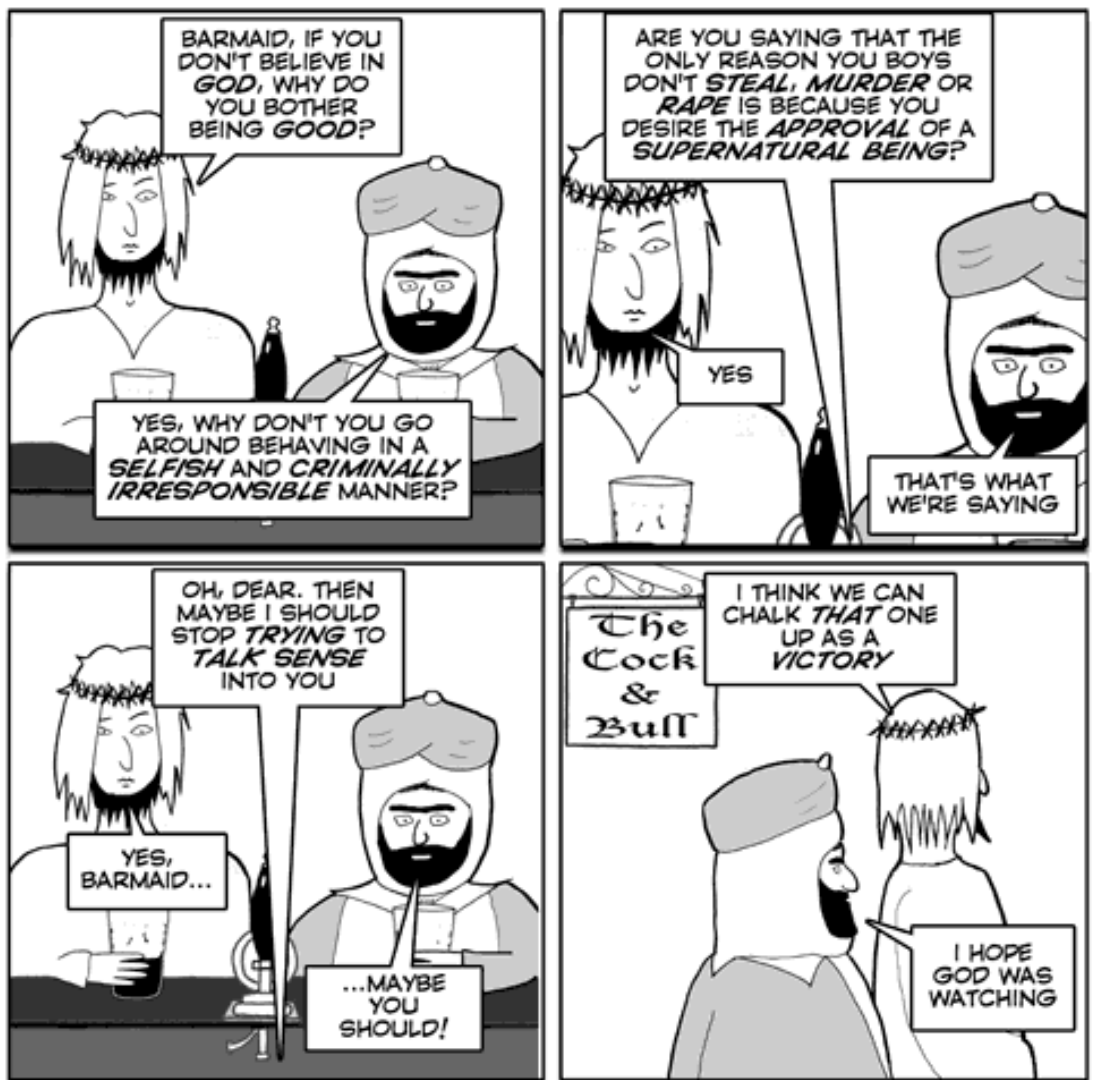
That said, I personally oppose all medically unnecessary operations and circumcision is one such procedure. However small the risks, there are risks. I also personally oppose the use of illegal drugs (and oppose, even more strongly, the use of some legal drugs like tobacco and alcohol in excess). My preventive solution in all these cases is education rather than bans. Alcohol prohibition was instituted in the United States in 1919, by passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. This violence-producing and unenforceable prohibition was wisely repealed in 1933 with passage of the Twenty-first Amendment. President Nixon in 1971 declared a War on Drugs, with the same problems as our war on alcohol. Unfortunately, this losing war continues even after 40 years of increased violence.

Does anyone doubt that a ban on circumcision would lead to more medical problems because the procedure would be performed underground by less qualified cutters? Circumcision, like clean needle exchanges for those injecting illegal

drugs, is far less harmful than passing a law to ban it would be.

The primary difference for me between adult drug use and circumcision on little boys is that adults have more latitude with their own than with their children's bodies. That's why adult Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists are free to refuse life-saving blood transfusions, but are not free to do so with their children. Were there strong medical evidence that circumcision caused considerable harm to boys, I would favor a ban.

In my mind, circumcision is further from child abuse than current, perfectly legal procedures initiated by parents—like teaching children religious fairy tales as fact, and shielding them from evidence-based material that includes evolution and comprehensive sex education. That's where I worry more about the thin line between religious freedom and child abuse. ☞



©Jesusandmo.net



Paranormal America

by Christopher D. Bader, F. Carson Mencken, and
Joseph O. Baker
(New York: New York University Press, 2010)
Review by Anondah Saide

In their recently published book *Paranormal America*, Christopher Bader, Carson Mencken, and Joseph Baker provide informationally rich narratives and a thorough account of the “what” and “who” regarding paranormal beliefs. With their well-balanced methodology (both qualitative and quantitative data) they provide a useful introduction to and overview of the role of paranormal beliefs in individual lives. Unfortunately, they take a mostly descriptive approach, and their overly cautious attempts to legitimize paranormal believers are sometimes exasperating. It may be normal to believe in the paranormal—in the sense that belief is widespread—but that does not mean that there aren’t negative sociological and psychological consequences associated with belief.

Through a sociological lens, the authors use this book to disseminate their research on: (1) what is paranormal, (2) how belief in the paranormal manifests in the lives of believers, (3) the trends in who subscribes to paranormal claims (e.g., 67% of U.S. adults subscribe to at least one and men are more likely to believe in UFOs), and (4) the differences between paranormal and religious beliefs. In addition, the authors share stories of their fieldwork experiences and the different paranormal subcultures they came into contact with along the way. The chapters in *Paranormal America* are a quick read but not always well labeled or organized; for example, the chapter that discusses the compatibility between religious and paranormal beliefs could have been placed much earlier in the book.

The information used to achieve the authors’ goals derive from quantitative data generated by the prestigious Baylor Religion Survey and qualitative data collected through years of fieldwork. The authors share their experiences ghost hunting, attending psychic conventions and

UFO support groups, and tracking Bigfoot. The Baylor Religion Survey is one of the most comprehensive tools used for measuring belief in the supernatural. It not only measures what individuals believe, but what activities (e.g., how often they attend religious ceremonies, what phenomena they research, etc.) they engage in, and the details of their demographic characteristics. Bader, Mencken and Baker include an abundance of very useful charts and graphs in *Paranormal America* to give the reader illustrations of the trends of belief. They compare everything from paranormal beliefs and political views to the compatibility of different supernatural claims.

The authors’ helpfully provide charts that display the demographic indicators for certain beliefs by level of importance. For example, the most powerful demographic determinants (in order of importance) according to the authors’ findings for the interest in “monsters” are: being young, male, having a low income, lower church attendance, and being a religious nonliteralist. It is important to note that this book was written for the layperson interested in a general view of the prevalence of belief in paranormal phenomena in American society along with the subcultures that have been created in response to those beliefs. As sociologists, the authors make it clear from the beginning that they are first and foremost concerned with the lives of paranormal believers and not the validity of paranormal claims. Any reader can appreciate their transparency of purpose, as well as their honesty regarding the difficulty that comes with trying to produce generalizable data.

For readers interested in why individuals subscribe to paranormal claims, the theories provided by the authors weren’t substantial (again, the authors were more descriptive and less theoretical) nor do they add to the existing literature. Some of the hypotheses discussed by the authors to explain paranormal beliefs include: deviance, the marginality/locus of control hypothesis, the small step hypothesis, and socio-economic status. All of these can be found in the academic literature on paranormal beliefs. One of the central premises of theories of deviance suggests that individuals diverge from the norms of society because they lack traditional stakes in conformity (e.g., marriage, involvement in conventional social activities, etc.). Paranormal beliefs are not treated as normative in the same way religious and other beliefs are (e.g., there isn’t a paranormal studies major





at colleges and universities); therefore, when discussing deviance, paranormal beliefs would be treated as outside societal norms.

The marginality hypothesis suggests that individuals who are marginalized (e.g., lacking in resources) will be more likely to adopt supernatural explanations or beliefs in order to feel that they have more control over their lives (i.e., the belief that you can make things happen by just thinking about it). The small-step hypothesis suggests that individuals who already hold a belief in a supernatural phenomenon (e.g., religion) will be more likely to adopt another. An interesting suggestion the authors make is that belief in the paranormal may be a luxury of the wealthy. They hypothesize this because they found that the individuals who took part in paranormal activities had higher incomes (e.g., Bigfoot hunters). The reader should be skeptical of this hypothesis because it may be that individuals with lower incomes would like to take part but do not feel that they have the resources to do so. In this example, socioeconomic status may be a proxy for behavior but not belief.

A particular concern with this book is that the authors' focus much energy on the experiences of the most extreme paranormal believers. I say "extreme" because the people they discuss in the book are not representative of the average paranormal believer. Each of the individuals they discuss would be rated as high-level believer because they engage in social activities that surround their beliefs. An issue that may arise from sharing the experiences of the most devout believers is the perpetuation of the stereotypical image of a paranormal believer. In other words, someone may think UFOs could exist but the average believer who might check a box on a survey indicating such belief probably would not attend a support group for alien abductees.

Another concern with the book results from the authors' reluctance to share anything about paranormal believers that would shed a negative light on them. This brings to me the question of, "is Laura nuts?" Bader, Mencken, and Baker bring up a woman by the name of Laura several times throughout their book. They use her as an example of a paranormal generalist—someone who believes in many paranormal phenomena simultaneously (e.g., UFOs, ghosts, Bigfoot, astrology, psychic powers, and Atlantis). The authors share Laura's stories of being saved by guardian angles, her past lives (including

one where she was friends with Jesus), and her trips on a spaceship where she was taught to be a healer. Readers should be skeptical when they come across areas of the book where the authors make assertions about paranormal believers without providing evidence to support their claim; as they did with this declaration, "paranormal generalists [such as Laura]...are not dangerous or mentally ill, they simply live in a different cultural universe than the rest of us" (p. 157). The authors' do not provide supporting evidence for Laura's mental stability; but more importantly, they just do not talk about the other psychological and evolutionary factors (e.g., personal characteristics, genetics, errors in cognition, etc.) in belief. The book is insufficient without an interdisciplinary discussion. In addition, the authors do acknowledge the social (latent) consequences for belief in the paranormal.

Such an orientation might have worked if the authors stuck to being descriptive, but they didn't. They made judgment calls on the mental, social and emotional states of believers, something that cannot be done without incorporating the work of other academic disciplines. Understanding the demographic predictors of paranormal claims and their relationship to other beliefs (e.g., religious) is important for an overall view of belief in paranormal phenomena. The graphs of data from the Baylor Religion Survey provide a broad perspective of the level of belief among U.S. citizens. The authors' provide great information on demographic/sociocultural factors but that leaves an incomplete story of belief in the paranormal. Readers must keep in mind that this was written from a sociological viewpoint exclusively. I would not call this a comprehensive literature review of the research on paranormalism because that would have required Bader, Mencken and Baker to include the research and approaches to the subject from a number of other academic disciplines. All in all, this book is a good read for the layperson. It's filled with interesting tidbits about the level of belief in the United States and side stories about the lives of the most ardent believers. ❧





FIG Community Dinner
Tuesday, July 12, 2010, 6:30 PM



June Meeting
Sunday, June 26, 2011, 2:00 PM



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Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. (FIG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists.

Though most of our members are secular humanists, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.



To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail - [figmessage at gofigger dot org](mailto:figmessage@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.