

FIG LEAVES

Volume 20 Issue 3

March 2011

Note: We postponed this program last month because we were given the opportunity to hear a talk by Atheist President David Silverman (see page 2)

March FIG Meeting: Tuesday, Mar. 22 at 7:00 pm

Atheist Coming Out Stories

Presented by Shawn Jeffers and FIG Members

Atheist Blogger, Greta Christina, recently created a presentation which she titles, "What Can the Atheist Movement Learn from the Gay Movement?" In her presentation, she analyzes how the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Movement is 35 years ahead of the Atheist movement, but that the two movements share many similarities and can learn much from each other.

While we would not be able to do justice to Greta's entire presentation, we are able to focus on one particular area - Coming Out Stories. Both the LGBT Movement and Atheist/Freethought Movement are invisible minorities; meaning that unless an individual publicly declares he or she is Gay or Atheist, many times their co-workers, friends or family remain unaware. With the recent atheist and humanist sponsored billboards and bus ads, freethought groups have made headlines and garnered publicity throughout the United States more than ever before. These advertisements have enabled us to raise our profile as organizations, but have not placed the same focus on individuals to share their stories.

At the March meeting, FIG Member, Shawn Jeffers, will highlight the components of a Coming Out Story and the role they have played in ending such invisibility. Then a few FIG Members will share their story - highlighting the reality of leaving religion, coming to terms with atheism or humanism, and the potential rejection of families. After a few examples in front of the whole room, we will break into small groups and provide an opportunity for members to share their stories.

Information on Greta Christina - Greta lives in San Francisco and we hope to have her speak in October at our FIG 20th Anniversary Celebration. Her blog is located at <http://gretachristina.typepad.com/> and we thank her for inspiring this month's presentation.

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

March Meeting

Tuesday, March 22, 2011, 7:00 PM
Hannaford Suites Hotel

April Meeting

Tuesday, April 26?, 2011, 7:00 PM
Hannaford Suites Hotel?





February Meeting

The Marines Of Free-Thought

David Silverman, president of American Atheists (AA), spoke to the Free Inquiry Group at our February meeting. His talk, "Getting the Movement Moving," presented the strategy that American Atheists will use to promote the national organization and the ideas and acceptance of atheism.

Mr. Silverman compared AA to the marines, a military group that leads the way by taking control of an area and establishing a forward position from which to advance. The marines are a serious and dedicated branch of the military. American Atheists is likewise dedicated and devoted to presenting non-theistic ideas and principles in a serious and outspoken way in order to establish



David Silverman

a forward position from which all free thought groups can advance. Therefore, Mr. Silverman calls AA the "Marines of Free-thought." He also made the analogy of the "Naked Emperor Atheist." Like the boy in the famous story, AA will provocatively point out religious delusions and advocate that people think for themselves.

Dave made the following very clear. Unlike the marines, AA does not advocate the use of violence. Promoting free-thought ideas is going to involve publicity, supporting local free-thought groups and taking legal action to preserve the separation of church and state. The publicity aspect began in November when AA placed the first of its billboards in the "You Know" campaign. It was placed at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel in New York City. Showing a "nativity scene" and the words, "You Know It's a Myth," the billboard garnered millions of dollars worth of publicity. News stories appeared all over the world in print and on television and radio. That billboard was followed by "You Know It's a Scam." It was placed in Huntsville, AL in conjunction with an AA conference, the South East Regional Atheist Meet. It led to an appearance for Mr. Silverman on the Bill O'Reilly show on Fox News. This segment can be viewed on YouTube at-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BCipg71LbI&feature=related>

or search for "O'Reilly" plus "Silverman" on YouTube.

During the Q and A session, a woman asked Dave about the appearance on O'Reilly's show. He mentioned being able to converse with O'Reilly off-camera before the segment. During this conversation, O'Reilly was articulate and intelligent. Then shortly after the cameras started to roll, O'Reilly made his case for the existence of God. "Tide goes in, tide goes out. Never a miscommunication. You can't explain that." At first, Dave was incredulous. He couldn't believe that the intelligent person with whom he had a decent conversation before going on the air, was making this statement. Then, his shock turned to a realization that O'Reilly was playing a character for the camera and trying to get Dave distracted. Dave decided not to let



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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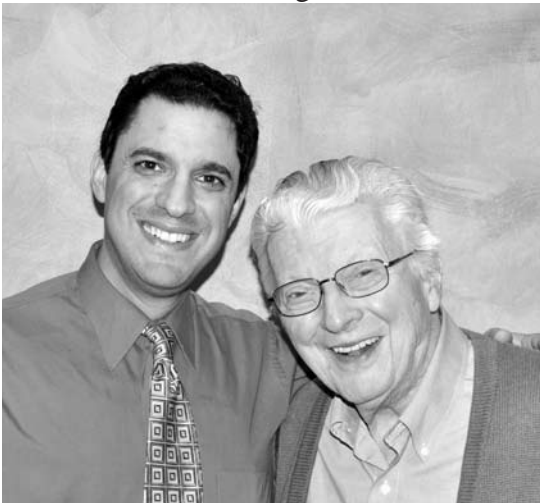


the host take him off his message and so refused to take the “tide goes in” bait. He got back on the topic of promoting AA. Dave stressed that the billboard was not an insult to believers as O’Rielly claimed, but targeted “in the closet” atheists, many of whom are churchgoers. In *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett’s excellent book, he acknowledges and defines “belief in belief.” The closeted, churchgoing atheist is not convinced that the dogma of religion is accurate but is convinced that it is better to go through the motions of belief in order to live a good life. American Atheists

is reaching out in these ad campaigns to such people. Their membership grew by 25% after this publicity. Their next billboard, to be placed in Des Moines, IA in conjunction with the national convention, was unveiled at the FIG meeting. It will say, “You Know There is No God, We Know You’re Right.” These provocative billboards will establish the forward position of non-theists and so make milder messages seem more in the mainstream.

An important part of the strategy of AA is the promotion and assistance they will provide for local affiliated groups under their new Local Partners program. A certain amount of activism and membership in the national organization is required for local groups to be included in this program.

The South East Regional Atheists Meet (SERAM)



David Silverman & Joe Levee

was the first of three regional conferences this year to feature the cooperation of AA and their local affiliates. AA provided speakers and financial assis-

tance in addition to the Huntsville billboard. Speakers included nationally known atheists including author Dr. Darrel Ray, Sean Faircloth of the Secular Coalition for America, and comedian Paul Provenza in addition to local atheist activists and leaders. The event was a sellout. Over 200 people attended the weekend conference. California and New York groups will host the two remaining conferences this year.



On the legal front, AA will concentrate on the issues that affect the separation of church and state. They will concentrate on the cases

that they have a good chance of winning. Edwin Kagin, the National Legal Director of AA, contends that some cases recently taken to litigation by other organizations and individuals have hurt the movement due to their inability to win these cases. Precedent has then been established contrary to the desired result of the lawsuit. The legal actions that AA will take will be “hills worth dying on” as Edwin says. In other words, these will be actions on issues that, in good conscience, AA would be unable to ignore.

In conclusion, Mr. Silverman asked for help to get the movement moving. He asked that closeted atheists come out. The more that do so, the easier it is for others to do the same. He asked that atheists join local and national groups. If AA does not seem like the right group for you, explore other organizations. When donating money consider sending all of your donations to groups in the movement. All money donated to AA and to local groups such as FIG goes towards advancing the movement. Also, consider social networking to share your ideas and promote events. Networks such as Twitter and Facebook are valuable tools.

For more information on American Atheists go to www.atheists.org. You can donate on their web page. Currently the Uhl Challenge is a matching challenge that doubles donations to the legal fund. You can also find out more about the “Local Partners” program and examine the “Legal Philosophy” in detail.

– reported by John Welte





Thane Maynard at the Science Café

(Wednesday, 23 February, 2011)

Thane Maynard was surprised, impressed and happy that there was such a good turnout in a sports bar to hear a presentation about science and conservation. One of the greatest problems faced by conservationists and scientists is getting the word out to the public. Often conservationists are characterized as radical leftists and scientists are characterized as the mad scientist type. The Science Café gives the public a chance to meet and interact with working scientists and see them as fellow humans who share the same concerns and goals. Being the Director of the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Gardens and host of the 90-Second Naturalist radio show on NPR, Thane could be wrongly characterized as an elite radical mad scientist type. The group quickly saw judging by the corny animal jokes he began with, Thane is a regular guy who enjoys laughter and good times. There was a lot of laughter to be had during the night. Thane sprinkled his talk with amusing anecdotes and fascinating facts about animals.



Thane Maynard's goal is to tell the story of biological diversity, natural history, and wildlife conservation to the public, which he does as director of the zoo, writer and star of the 90-Second Naturalist and the author of thirteen books on wildlife. His most recent book is

Hope for Animals and Their World, which was co-written with Jane Goodall. This book takes a novel approach to the topic of conservation. Instead of the doom and gloom stories usually presented in books on endangered animals, this book examines the instances where humans have helped to

restore species to viable populations. As Thane said, "It is way too soon to declare defeat." This is because nature is very resilient, and if there is enough biodiversity in an area species can come back. He used the example of wolves coming back to Yellowstone National Park as an example. Another factor is the tenacity of human beings. Humans are capable of amazing accomplishments because once engaged they don't give up. Climate change, alternative fuels and sustainable energy sources are issues that humans can address and resolve. As an example, he used the zoo's green program. Even though the zoo has expanded greatly in the last five years, it is using less energy and resources than it was five years ago. It is now a model of conservation for zoos all over the world. The other reason to maintain hope for the future of biodiversity and conservation is that more young people are getting involved. As an example of this involvement, Thane mentioned a web site started by a group of Cincinnati teenagers, myactions.org, which explores simple ways that everyone can cut down on their carbon footprint and help to conserve energy.



Thane introduced the group to a couple of his small friends. He said he drives a small car so he couldn't bring a rhino. The first was a three-banded armadillo from the Amazon basin in Brazil named Tank. The second was a five-month-old American alligator named Cruncher. The American alligator is one of the species that was brought back from the verge of extinction by activists.

After considering the main points of Thane's talk, it is understandable that Thane was so excited about the concept of the Science Café. It is an event that makes scientists accessible to a concerned public group that is not afraid of discussing and tackling the important issues that affect our world.

– reported by John Welte





THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...

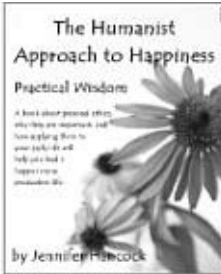


Free Telephone Presentation on the Humanist Approach to Happiness.

Join Jennifer Hancock, Humanist author and speaker, on March 15th 2011 at 9 pm eastern (6 pm pacific) for a free telephone presentation and discussion on the Humanist approach to happiness. In this presentation you will learn about the Humanist philosophy. Why Humanists are so concerned with happiness. What the Humanist approach to finding happiness is all about. How the Humanist pursuit of happiness can help make the world a better place. And why this matters. Registration is free, just call in and join the conversation.

<http://www.jen-hancock.com/register.html>

Jen's Bio: Jennifer Hancock is a writer, speaker, and Humanist. She is the author of the new book, *The Humanist Approach to Happiness: Practical Wisdom*. She is the Tampa Humanism and Freethought Examiner for Examiner.com and writes a monthly freelance column about Humanism for the *Bradenton Herald Newspaper*. She also has her own blog and podcast about the Humanist Approach to happiness.



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:

May 15 meeting in the Huenefeld Tower Room
June 5 and 26 on the 1st and 4th Sundays in Room 3A

Schedule for 2011:

March 15 - *The Rational*

Optimist: How prosperity evolves by Matt Ridley, 2010, 438pp

April 17 - *You Are Not a Gadget* by Jaron Lanier, 2010, 209pp

May 15 - *On The Take : How America's Complicity With Big Business Can Endanger Your Health* by Jerome Kasirer, 2005, 251 pp

June 5 - *Wrong: Why Experts Keep Failing Us - and How to Know When Not to Trust Them* by David Freedman, 2010, 295pp

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



One of our members is blogging unbelief:

Ben Doublett has: FoolofPsalms.blogspot.com

It opens with the Motto:

The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good - Psalms 14.1





Does The Templeton Foundation Make You Uneasy?

It certainly makes me uneasy. An excellent News Feature in this week's *Nature* by Washington editor Mitch Waldrop gives some of the reasons why it should, but something important was left out.

Much of what follows was drawn from my book *Superstition: Belief in the Age of Science* (Princeton, 2000)). As Waldrop points out, the Templeton Prize was not originally created "to pursue Templeton's goal of building bridges between science and religion." Indeed, the first Templeton Prize winner in 1973 was a fanatic Catholic nun who founded the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta and wore a *cilice*. A bridge to science, Mother Theresa certainly was not. But then, neither were the next 26 winners of the prize, most of whom had founded religious movements that few scientists have ever heard of; except for Billy Graham who founded the Evangelistic Association, and Charles Colson of Watergate fame who founded the Prison Fellowship.

Later, the nicety of a prize committee would be added, although Templeton seems to have remained in total control. The first notable exception was Paul Davies in 1995, a theoretical physicist who authored *the Mind of God*, and numerous other popularizations of cosmology.

Templeton wrote little and we know almost nothing first-hand about what was going on in his head during this period. He appears to have had an *epiphany*. In 1999 the prize went to Ian Barbour, a physicist who had been Enrico Fermi's student at the University of Chicago and who played a major role in building the first nuclear reactor. Certainly the most interesting winner of the Templeton Prize, Barbour was disillusioned by the atomic bombing - without warning - of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After finishing his doctorate at Chicago, Barbour dropped out of physics and took a degree in theology from Yale. At Carleton College he taught both physics and theology and is generally credited with having created the *Dialogue Between Science and Religion*.

Sir John Templeton saw Ian Barbour's "dialogue between science and religion" and he coveted it. There is no point in being one of the richest men in the world if you can't buy the things you want. So the Templeton

Foundation bought a magazine, *Science and Spirit*, and devoted it to publicizing the dialogue, but who reads *Science and Spirit*? So next, Templeton went to the American Association for the Advancement of Science with an offer of one million dollars to create the AAAS Dialogue between Science and Religion. That still sounds like a lot of money to scientists. The AAAS later backed out, but it serves to remind us that, however obtained, a disproportionate share of the world's wealth, even in the hands of the well-intentioned, is a threat to us all.

Barbour marked a sharp change in Templeton prize recipients. From that point on, recipients have been, almost without exception, physicists or cosmologists who, as Dawkins put it, "say something nice about religion." Sir John died in 2008, but things have changed little under his son. The 2009 prize went to a physicist; 2010 to biologist Francisco Ayala.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 18 February 2011

How Templeton bought the American Association for the Advancement of Science:

Last week I made a serious error. The final sentence said, "The AAAS later backed out, but it serves to remind us that, however obtained, a disproportionate share of the world's wealth, even in the hands of the well-intentioned, threatens us all." The sentiment was right-on, but the AAAS had not backed out of the deal with Templeton; the terms were merely altered. It is now called the AAAS Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion. I have been a Fellow of the AAAS for most of my adult life and have no plans to resign. I will gladly work with other AAAS scientists to terminate this program. Science, with its insistence on openness and physical evidence, has a responsibility to inform the world of what has been learned even when people would prefer not to hear. This is not easy in a world carved into 193 sovereign nations, but political boundaries can be penetrated far more easily than the superstitious barriers that make up of the world's religions. The result is a planet in crisis; religion is a major part of the problem.

What's New, Robert L. Park, 25 February 2011





Atheists: No Dependence On God In War On Terror

by Jessica Karmasek

FRANKFORT, Ky. (Legal Newsline) - The Kentucky Court of Appeals was expected to hear oral arguments Thursday over a state law that an Atheist civil rights group says violates state and U.S. constitutions. Statutes passed after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks ordered the state Office of Homeland Security office to display a plaque citing dependence on God as an essential tool in fighting terrorism, and to incorporate that theme in its training materials. In 2008, the American Atheists and 10 Kentucky residents filed a lawsuit challenging the law. According to its website, American Atheists is a nationwide movement "that defends civil rights for Atheists; works for the total separation of church and state; and addresses issues of First Amendment public policy." In 2009, a circuit court judge rejected a state request to dismiss the case and ruled in favor of the Atheist group, saying that the law was an endorsement of religion by the government. According to the *Courier-Journal*, Special Assistant Attorney General Tad Thomas was to defend the law on behalf of the Attorney General's Office. Edwin Kagin, the national legal director for American Atheists, was to argue on behalf of the plaintiffs. Ed Buckner, president of American Atheists, has said that the suit is being watched closely across the country. "The outcome could determine if, and how far, states can go in promoting belief in a deity and sectarian religion," Buckner said in a statement. "Saying that 'God is on our side' in the war on terror sends the message that millions of non-religious people -- Atheists, Freethinkers, Humanists and anyone else who does not believe in a god or attend church (roughly half of all Americans) -- is a slacker when it comes to being patriotic." He added, "As a military veteran, I resent that, and so do other non-believers who have worn the uniform and fought for this country." From *Legal Newsline: Reach Jessica Karmasek by e-mail at jessica@legalnewsline.com.*

Homeland Security Case Appeal in KY

A 2006 act of the Kentucky Legislature created the Office of Homeland Security and required its executive director to publicize a "dependence on Almighty God" in training and educational materials and display a permanent plaque at the entrance to its emergency operations center stating the same. On February 24, 2011 a three-judge panel heard arguments in the appellate court in Frankfort, KY to determine whether it is constitutional for the legislature to require that the Commonwealth Department of Homeland Security rely on the

assistance of Almighty God to insure the safety of its citizens. The appeal was brought to court by the state in response to the decision of Franklin Circuit Court Judge Thomas Wingate. In 2009, he responded to a suit brought by ten KY residents and American Atheists by ruling that the law "created an official government position on God." This, he said, was in violation of the Kentucky and U. S. constitutions.

Special Assistant Attorney General Tad Thomas claimed that past court decisions have given the right to government to reference God in documents. American Atheists Legal Director Edwin Kagin contended that there was religious intent in making this law and that practice was ruled against in a KY Supreme Court decision in 2005. He cited a friend-of-the-court brief signed by 96 of the state's representatives and 35 state senators supporting the belief that the U. S. is a "Christian nation" as evidence of the motivation behind the law.

"The court is struggling with a difficult decision," Senior Judge Ann O'Malley Shake said. Earlier she had asked the most pertinent question of all the questions asked by the panel of judges. Since the states' emergency management laws carry a misdemeanor charge for anyone violating them, what would happen if an atheist were to become executive director of the office and refused to post the plaque or make references to God in written materials? Judge Shake promised to consider the case carefully and return a decision as quickly as possible.

A video of the entire proceedings has been made available by American Atheists Kentucky State Director Ed Hensley at <http://www.photoshop.com/users/edwinhensley/selectAAvsKY>

For more on this important lawsuit-
http://www.atheists.org/Kentucky_Homeland_Security_Lawsuit_Court-weighs_God_in_homeland_security
http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2011/02/24/Court-weighs-God-in-homeland-security/UPI-69021298587516/
 Atheists: No dependence on God in war on terror
<http://www.legalnewsline.com/news/231357-atheists-no-dependence-on-god-in-w>



Ed Kagin

Photo Courtesy of Ed Hensley



Hate Your Neighbor, But Don't Forget To Say Grace

by Herb Silverman, *Washington Post*, 22 February 2011
Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

Former Arkansas governor and 2012 presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee found himself in hot water this week after he called Islam the “antithesis of the gospel of Christ” and said that churches that share worship space with Muslims are caving to a religion “that says that Jesus Christ and all the people that follow him are a bunch of infidels who should be essentially obliterated.”

In an analysis of how Islam may shape campaign politics, Politico’s Bryon Tau wrote: “As Republican candidates define their national security stands in the 2012 elections, conservative discomfort with Islam in America will be a feature of the debate.” Should Islam be debated on the campaign trail? Are religious issues in danger of being exploited?

The Barry McGuire song “Eve of Destruction” was my favorite protest song during the 1960s. It described human frailties that led to wars, a nuclear arms race, segregation, a handful of senators who blocked key legislation, and the disintegration of human respect. Mostly, though, the song was about various forms of hypocrisy. Mike Huckabee’s comments reminded me of a line in the last stanza of that song, “Hate your next-door neighbor, but don’t forget to say grace.”

Huckabee demonstrates perfectly why people of different religions argue and sometimes even go to war. The self-righteous certainty by Huckabee that his religion is the only “right” religion even leads him to consider himself an authority on what Muslims supposedly believe, though Muslims, themselves, deny Huckabee’s charges. Of course, as Huckabee asserts, there are some Muslims who consider Christians infidels; some Muslims and Christians, alike, would understandably consider me an infidel, since I doubt the tenets of both (and all other) religions.

We need to distinguish between peaceful infidels who simply have different theological views from ours, and infidels whose love of a god trumps any love they may have for fellow human beings. I expect many Muslims would like everyone in the world to become a Muslim,

just as I expect Mike Huckabee would like everyone to become a Christian. I mostly fear fundamentalists of all religions who believe that their god condones bigotry and even force to bring about such change. It’s no coincidence that we continue to have Middle East wars, where people are willing to die and kill in order to hasten the first coming of a Jewish messiah, or the second coming of a Jesus messiah, or who knows what other comings necessary for an alleged messianic age.

Maybe this is a time for people like Huckabee, whose religious pomposity just makes this troubled world worse, to simply be quiet. Maybe we should all look, instead, for ways we can better love our neighbor, which all philosophies (religious or otherwise) claim to espouse. Instead of waiting for a messiah to solve our problems, maybe we should listen to the advice in John Lennon’s song, “All we are saying is give peace a chance.” And it isn’t hard to imagine how much easier we could do this with no religion, too.



A Sad Tale

Housework used to be a woman’s job, but, one evening, Janice returned from work to find the children bathed, one load of laundry in the washer and another in the dryer. Dinner was on the stove, and the table set.



She was astonished! It turned out that her husband, Chuck, had read an article that said, “Wives who work full-time and have to do their own housework were too tired to make love.”

The night went very well.

The next day, Janice told her friends all about it.

“We had a great dinner. Chuck even cleaned up the kitchen. He helped the kids with their homework, folded all the laundry and put it away. I really enjoyed the evening.”

“But what about afterward?” asked her friends.

“Oh, that ... Chuck was too tired.”





The Myth of Militant Atheism Why are atheists vilified? What is a militant atheist?

by Dave Niose, President, American Humanist Association
17 February 2011, *Psychology Today Blog*

Nine bullets fired from close range ended the life of Salman Taseer last month, making the Pakistani governor the latest high-profile victim of religious violence. Taseer had the audacity to publicly question Pakistan's blasphemy laws, and for this transgression he paid with his life.

Taseer joins a list of numerous other high-profile victims of militant religion, such as Dr. George Tiller, the Kansas abortion doctor killed by a devout Christian assassin in 2009, and Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch filmmaker whose provocative movie about Islam resulted in his being brutally murdered in 2004.

With this background, it is especially puzzling that the American media and public still perpetuate the cliché of so-called "militant atheism." We hear the disparaging term "militant atheist" used frequently, the unquestioned assumption being that militant atheists are of course roaming the streets of America.

In fact, however, while millions of atheists are indeed walking our streets, it would be difficult to find even one who could accurately be described as militant. In all of American history, it is doubtful that any person has ever been killed in the name of atheism. In fact, it would be difficult to find evidence that any American has ever even been harmed in the name of atheism. It just does not happen, because the notion of "militant atheism" is entirely fantasy.

When the media and others refer to a "militant atheist," the object of that slander is usually an atheist who had the nerve to openly question religious authority or vocally express his or her views about the existence of

God. Conventional wisdom quickly tells us that such conduct is shameful or, at the very least, distasteful, and therefore the brazen atheist is labeled "militant."

But this reflects a double standard, because it seems to apply only to atheists. Religious individuals and groups frequently declare, sometimes subtly and sometimes not, that you are a sinner and that you will suffer in hell for eternity if you do not adopt their supernatural beliefs, but they will almost never be labeled "militant" by the media or the public. Instead, such individuals are called "devout" and such churches are called "evangelical."

The lesson here is clear. If you're an atheist, shut up about it. If you are open or vocal about your athe-

ist worldview, you are a "militant atheist." Be silent, even though that same standard does not apply to those who passionately disagree with you.

This, to be sure, explains why so few Americans openly identify as atheist. The American Religious Identification Survey conducted by Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, indicates that only about

81 percent of Americans affirmatively believe in a god (about 69 percent believe in a personal God, while about 12 percent believe in some kind of "higher power"), meaning about 19 percent do not. Yet despite the fact that almost one in five Americans don't affirmatively believe, only a tiny fraction of those dare to identify openly as atheist.

Analyze those numbers all you want, but the inescapable conclusion is that millions of Americans are in the closet about their religious skepticism. This, in turn, only serves to validate and legitimize the religious right, because it suggests that there is something wrong with a secular worldview. By keeping atheists closeted, the religious right can claim the moral high ground and influence public policy more than it should.

Therefore, maybe it's time to end the myth of militant atheism?





Contradiction Corner

by Dennis Davis



For this edition I'd like to focus on contradictions dealing with doctrine and the intricacies of what is perceived as Christian doctrine. Often in discussions with Christians about the Bible you will hear admissions that the most blatant errors (like the ones from my last article) do exist but are unimportant. They will assure you that this is nothing but allowing ourselves to be distracted by trivia while the message of the gospel comes through without distortion. Now we will examine that claim in detail.

First of all, we will examine Biblical claims as to the nature of God himself, is he trustworthy? Proverbs 30:5 says that "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him." In the New Testament we are similarly told that Paul wrote "in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised before the beginning of time" (Titus 1:2). So both testaments agree that God does not deceive people.

Yet in 1 Kings 22:23 we are told "So now the *Lord* has put a deceiving spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The *Lord* has decreed disaster for you." Likewise, Paul's epistle (2 Thessalonians 2:11:12) also says, "For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness." We have verses from both testaments that simultaneously imply that it against God's nature to deceive, yet he happily sends lies to deceive those he has not chosen to save. This leaves us with a profound question for any believer who thinks they hear the voice of God, namely, "how do you know if you are the favored individual whom God is being truthful with, or the poor soul who is being deceived?"

The same questions we just applied to God himself could be applied to the Bible as well. For example, let's look at what we can learn about the scriptures. In 2 Timothy 3:16 we find a very commonly quoted verse, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." This is often used to justify the doctrine of inerrancy as though the entire Bible were handed to Moses on a mountain. However, in Ezekiel 20:25 we find this outstanding statement: "So I gave them other statutes that were not

good and laws through which they could not live." Here God is supposedly telling the prophet that some parts of the Law of Moses were intentionally faulty. So we have confirmation that some of the Bible was incorrect from the beginning. Problem is, how would you tell the difference between the good scripture and the not so good? You would think an all-knowing, all-powerful God could communicate better.

What about simple matters of religious life? Is there any confusion as to how Christians are to live? In Matthew 5:19 Jesus speaks about the importance of obeying the rules laid down in the Old Testament, "Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Anyone well read in the Old Testament will be familiar with several dietary laws, such as Leviticus 11:1-8 or Deuteronomy 14:31 where the righteous are forbidden to eat pork and shellfish. But in 1 Timothy 4:2-3 Paul says "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." If you choose to be a Christian you are then left in a position to decide if you listen to Jesus and eat Kosher or listen to Paul and have a ham sandwich.

The contradictions and errors within the Bible are not a few nit-picky scriptures you have to search for, but are inherent to the deepest fundamentals of biblical doctrine. ☚



Knowing the Intention of the Almighty

"As you well know, Mr. President, railroad carriages are pulled at the enormous speed of fifteen miles per hour. The Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speed."

*Then governor of New York and future president
Martin Van Buren in 1829.*

Comment: Horses run 15 mph at a fast canter or 25-30 mph at a gallop.



The Infernova: An Infidel Reinvents Dante's Hell

by S. A. Alenthony

(Bloomington, MN: Blackburnian Press, 2009)

A review by Donald Havis,

San Francisco Atheists newsletter, August 2009

S. A. Alenthony has presented to all of us freethinkers, of whatever stripe, a truly masterful work of literary achievement. *The Infernova*, as you have probably already guessed, is a parody of Dante Aleghieri's (1265 - 1321) time honored classic, *The Inferno*. The reader does not need to be familiar with the nearly 700 year old original in order to greatly enjoy this new and remarkable 'take-off.' Perhaps the only thing that it would be helpful for the reader to know is that Dante was the scion of a well-to-do Florentine family and a real toady to the Catholic Church. Dante's imaginary Hell is richly populated not only with ordinary sinners, but is packed with enemies of the Church both real-often identified by name-and imaginary, such as the mythological gods of paganism. Dante's nine circles, or levels, of Hell are filled with suffering souls who range from those who were simply guilty of doubt, to those who led thousands or even whole nations to-the worst sin of all-disobedience of the Church's teachings. Just as Dante was guided on his journey through Hell by a celebrated writer, so too here-but it is the irreverent Mark Twain taking the role of Virgil. What a perfect choice!

In *The Infernova*, as in any good parody, the situation is reversed. In Alenthony's Hell, it is the religious who receive their just desserts at various levels of severity. Names are named, from early snake-oil salesmen such as Mary Baker Eddie and L. Ron Hubbard to those who lead larger movements such as Jim Jones, and Charles Taze Russell. In deeper levels of hell, the founders of national and international religions such as Joseph Smith, Abraham, and Moses are "called out." Finally, in Canto XXX, our boy J.C.-simply referred to as "Christ"-and the Islamic "Mohammed" are not spared.

The descriptions of each succeeding level of Hell are, like Dante's original, one of the most fascinating and engaging features of the book. Although Alenthony thankfully does not quite share Dante's fascination for sheer blood and gore, the depictions of each level dramatically involve

the reader's senses of vision, hearing and even smell. Each dreadful circle of Hell is eloquently drawn for the reader to clearly imagine. In addition, the exact punishment chosen for the particular offender is often cleverly devised to perfectly fit the offense. For example, one large group of former humans on earth was transformed into plants and animals, and as Mark Twain explains in Canto XXI, "But their awareness kept intact. They've been/ transformed to live in a primitive state,/ and to first-hand witness the origin/ of new species. That is the timeless fate/ for Creationists. I laughed when I heard/ all this, as the irony was so great."

Perhaps the most amazing feature of Alenthony's book is his skill and use of the particular narrative poetic form that he employs. The poetic pattern used is the rather difficult form of three line stanzas where the first and third lines rhyme, and the middle line forms the model for the first and third lines of the succeeding stanza. In other words, the rhyming pattern is as follows: ABA, BCB, CDC, etcetera (see above). Each Canto, or chapter, of approximately the same length as was Dante's-thirty-four Cantos in all-contain a long series of triplet stanzas ending with a dramatic rhyming couplet. All of this is done in such a subtle way, with many rhymes often occurring at mid-sentence, so that the reader is often only dimly aware that there is a regular rhyming pattern at all. The story just flows in a very natural story-telling way. Incidentally, Alenthony chose this more rigorous route because it was the exact pattern that Dante followed, even though most translations of *The Inferno* rhyme only the first and third lines of each stanza. Translation from the original old-Italian is just too difficult for the translator to retain both the meaning and the complex rhyming pattern.

It is difficult for this reviewer to come up with even one slight criticism, which I know is somewhat traditional for reviewers to do. If absolutely pushed to the wall, I would say that I might have enjoyed the naming of a few more names of religious rapsCALLIONS, and a few less naming of extremely obscure ancient Aztec gods and/or the names of millennia-old water-spirits featured particularly in Canto XXXI.

I may be playing personal favorites here, but I'd like to be reassured that the likes of Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, Garner Ted Armstrong, Tammy Fay Baker, and Aimee Semple McPherson, to name just a few, are down there somewhere. However, judging from the books otherwise inclusivity of religious sinners, I can rest assured that they have not escaped Alenthony's Hell.

In summary, I highly recommend this truly remarkable modern day masterpiece.





April Meeting
Tuesday, April 22, 2010, 7:00 PM



March Meeting
Tuesday, March 22, 2011, 7:00 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.