

FIG LEAVES

Volume 13 Issue 4

April 2004

April Meeting: Tuesday, 27 April

Tuesday, 27 April, Brant Abrahamson of The Teachers' Press,

"History of the Hebrew Bible: Current Academic Understandings."

How can secular people effectively respond to the religious fundamentalism that's undermining church/state separation, especially in regard to public schools? What does one do when creation stories from Genesis distract teachers in science classes? When public school educators must fend off efforts to post Old Testament "Commandments"? When world history teachers find their texts paraphrasing the Hebrew Bible in chapters dealing with the ancient Middle East?

Brant Abrahamson, a career world history teacher, will be our April speaker. He entered the biblical "wars" more than a decade ago when it became apparent that fundamentalists were using schools to promote their beliefs. His topic is "The History of the Hebrew Bible," the title of a series of lessons for adolescents that he and a colleague authored in 2002. He says, "If secular people became familiar with recent archaeological finds and academic interpretations--know how the Christian Old Testament came into being--they'd have tools they could use to stem the current drift toward fundamentalism."

His academic degrees are from Augustana College and the University of Iowa with post MA work in World History at the University of Chicago. He was a textbook editor at Laidlaw Brothers and a longtime world history and social science teacher at Riverside-Brookfield High School (Chicago suburban area). In 1986 he was selected as an Illinois Master Teacher, the same year he established The Teachers' Press. He continues as Director, and in 2003 apparently was the only pre-college teacher to participate in the National Science Foundation's multiyear project to refocus the nation's social science programs.

May Meeting:

Sunday, 23 May 2004, Tim Madigan

Tim Madigan will return to take us on a humorous and informative trip into the world of the irreverent Mark Twain. Tim, one of FIG's favorite speakers, will illustrate how Twain's criticisms of religion provide some of the best fodder for his humor. The program will take place at 7 PM at the Vernon Manor Hotel, 400 Oak Street in Cincinnati.

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Events

April Meeting

Tuesday, 27 April

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

May Potluck

Tuesday, 11 May 6:30 PM
at the home of 5

May Meeting

Sunday, 23 May
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street,
Cincinnati, Ohio

June Potluck

Sunday, 8 June 6:30 PM
at the home of the

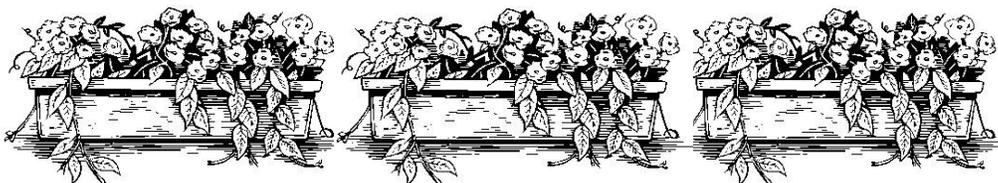




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March Meeting:

Humanism, The Emotions, and Counseling.

James W. Worth, Ed.D. Clinical Psychologist, Washington & Lee University

Dr. Worth began by telling how he and Joe Levee, our Program Director, had met on a plane coming back from a conference in California. During the first part of the flight they didn't have much conversation but reaching half way, they began to talk and this conversation revealed that they had much in common. It was then that Joe invited him to come and talk to our group.

Among the topics he intended to address was whether counseling humanists necessitated a different approach from treating people with a religious orientation. Another issue was whether the humanist emphasis on rationality would enable humanists to put aside this emphasis to enable them to deal with the emotional dimensions of psychological issues. Finally he will deal with spirituality. Is there a naturalistic spirituality, which would be appropriate to raise when, counseling humanists?

I will take a look at the relationship between feelings and rationality in the counseling relationship and try to answer your questions about how rationality can be brought into it. The concept of spirituality is important to me. I do believe that there can be a naturalistic concept of spirituality that could be compatible with humanist beliefs. I presume that anyone who emphasizes rationality would be suspicious of emotions and even of spirituality. I want to honor those suspicions; although I think that skepticism might be a better word because without that kind of skepticism, we're consigned to work with superstition, misinformation, and distortion. The scientific method, which is empirical and demands absolute rationality, is our best tool for knowing. However, I believe that emotionality and even spirituality do have a role to play. I think that you should know a little bit about me and what my values are.

I founded the counseling service at Washington and Lee University. I've never really addressed myself as a secular humanist in the sense that you might say you're a Democrat or a Catholic, on the other hand I see myself as operating out of a humanist perspective and have been strongly influenced by the thinking and writing of Humanistic Psychology.

There in a division of the American Psychological Association for Humanistic Psychology. Joe sent me a copy of the Affirmations of Humanism and there isn't a single one that I can't identify with. In fact, I believe that the majority of psychologists would agree with all or most of them; some devoutly Jewish or Christian might not, but the majority would.

There are many schools of psychotherapy both in terms of theory and practice. Most likely you've heard of the most famous ones: Freudian, Jungian, Rogerian, Gestalt, and the current Behavioral. I think that these different therapies can be divided into two large groups. There are those that focus on the overt behaviors of their clients and employ various methodologies for changing that behavior. The other type pays attention to what you might call psychodynamics, unseen but inferred variables such as unconscious motives or drives of which the client may be very much unaware.

Rational Emotive Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy are of the first sort. They focus on eliminating negative, maladaptive behavior or enhancing the likelihood of improving or adapting behavior.

The dynamics of Psychoanalysis or Gestalt Therapy focus on insight. They see their role as enabling their clients to see how connections between how they feel and how they act. Dynamic therapists believe that their clients are



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often blind to these connections maybe not even recognizing the feelings that are causing the behavior to take place. Insight, then, is delving into the unconscious or at least the preconscious and bringing recognition of these feelings and connections to external behavior to the light of day.

When psychologists and counselors get together in meetings, etc., it's quite common for one to ask the other, "What's your bias?" by that they mean, "to what school, theory and practice do you belong? The answer frequently encountered is "I'm Eclectic." By that they mean "I don't hold to just one theory or practice or school; I choose from a variety."

That is the answer I would give. I was trained as a dynamic therapist and I am still alert to the unconscious variables that might be influencing my clients' behavior. I don't use the term "unconscious" very much. I talk about behavior below the level of awareness and impulsiveness they may not realize they have. Insight for me is a matter of learning to recognize these feelings, these impulses and self-defeating behavior patterns that are repeated over and over again.

He cited an example from his own practice to illustrate a dynamic approach to therapy. A student came to him for therapy. He was doing well in all his classes except the one he needed to graduate. He could not bring himself to attend classes. He had aspirations to enter medical school strongly influenced by his mother. Using a technique called "paradoxical intent", Dr. Worth pointed out that there were successful people who were not doctors and perhaps he should think in terms of an alternative profession. But he said he really wanted to be a doctor. The reason for failing the one course he needed to graduate was to sever his ties to his mother's apron strings. Once that was recognized he could find other ways to accomplish this.

That's the dynamic theory approach. If there is anything I've learned in my thirty-five years of practice is that insight without behavior change is sterile. If a strong therapeutic alliance exists between the counselor and the counselee, almost any of the therapies would do some good. But if there isn't a good therapeutic alliance, the result is unlikely to be successful. The

feelings that lay at the start of a therapeutic relationship impact the relationship. If the client does not sense, compassion, commitment and competence on the part of the counselor, there will not be a good therapeutic alliance.

As a therapist I am constantly monitoring how I feel as I work with my client. If I become aware of feelings, I try to analyze and understand where they are coming from. To me that's always an indication that something has gone out of the relationship and probably, the client is experiencing it too. The feelings we have inside can tell us something about what is happening outside. As the years have gone by I've come more and more to rely on my feelings. If I get scared, I don't care how reassuring the student might be (in a suicidal context); I am going to take other steps.

I want to say something about the role of suffering. Jung talked about neurosis getting in the way of legitimate suffering. I want to make a distinction between the suffering a person exhibits who is coming in for counseling and what I think Jung was referring to as legitimate suffering. Neurosis as he meant it (he was a dynamic therapist) is a disconnect between feelings and behavior. Legitimate suffering has to do with human existence. Malcolm Muggeridge, the British humorist and Editor of Punch, said that almost everything important he had learned in life he learned through suffering. When we're suffering we have to look inward. We ask ourselves "Why is this happening to me?" and "What can I do to get out of it?" So the suffering my clients feel is important to me.

Let's come back to rationality in the counseling situation. First of all we see feelings as important but also can be obscuring to rationality but can also compel us to serve rationality. I think humanism recognizes this. As I looked over your statement they're all couched in feelings. It's not that feelings are bad but they need to serve rationality just as rationality can serve the emotions. I also would like to discuss the role of intuition in counseling.

As I see it, intuition is more closely allied to emotions, perhaps even spirituality, than it is to rationality. For example in a counseling situation, things come out of my mouth and I'm not sure where they came

from. And my client finds them helpful. They are important but I didn't say them as a result of a step-by-step sequential process as a thought that came into my head and leaped from my mouth. I think that what we call intuition is a combination of conscious and unconscious feelings that are organized around specific problems and we access these in a different way than analytical thinking. I think of it as analogous to our vision. Think in terms of our vision, full field and peripheral. Rational thinking is like full field vision and intuition is like our peripheral vision. People who have lost their peripheral vision are handicapped. We catch something out of the corner of our eyes, but we need the full field vision to determine what it is. So too, we need rationality to get to that adaptive behavior change.

And to the final question. It is hard to talk about spirituality because it is so hard to define. I think spirituality exists at a conscious and at an unconscious level. I think it is universal and is highly developed in a few people but in some it is hardly developed at all. The latter are antisocial types like Hitler and Saddam Hussein. At the same time I have known people with rather limited intelligence who have had a simple spirituality, a reverence for life, respect for the world. I see the Affirmations of Humanism as a spiritual document because they offer a way to come to terms with existence. This is a spiritual argument. The Secular Humanist can say I find meaning in enhancing the lives of my fellow human beings, the ones

Quote
• From the Constitution of the
• State of Texas:
• Article 1 (Bill of Rights), Section 4
• (Religious Tests)
•
• No religious test shall ever be
• required as a qualification to any
• office, or public trust, in this State;
• nor shall any one be excluded from
• holding office on account of his
• religious sentiments, provided he
• acknowledge the existence of a
• Supreme Being.
• *Unquote*



Letters To The



Published in the Cincinnati Enquirer on 28 March 2004.
Freedom of millions is at stake in pledge

I disagree with the Enquirer's position stated March 25 that including the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance harms no one's freedom. It harms the freedom of every person who wants to pledge loyalty to the United States of America with his or her fellow citizen's but who does not believe in monotheism.

I am an atheist. I cannot in good conscience pledge my loyalty or faithfulness to the notion that the United States is subject to the oversight of an unspecified supernatural entity. Roughly 15 percent of the population of the United States reports itself godless. Millions more believe in multiple gods. These are the people – your friends, neighbors and family – whose freedom is harmed every time the pledge is said.

– Virginia H. Jergens
Hyde Park

Published in the Charleston Post and Courier on 6 March 2004.
http://www.charleston.net/stories/030604/let_06letters.shtml

Biblical authority

According to White House press secretary Scott McClellan, President Bush favors a constitutional amendment to prohibit gays from marrying because "He has always strongly believed that marriage is a sacred institution between a man and a woman."

If, indeed, marriage in this country is "sacred," then President Bush has not gone far enough. He needs to propose a more explicit amendment that would recognize and give benefits only to couples whose marriages are sacred.

If such an amendment were enacted, no longer would I be allowed to perform secular (godless) marriages, which I do regularly as both a notary public and a Humanist Celebrant.

A church may impose any marital limitations on its members it chooses, free from governmental interference.

My wife, a former Catholic, is still married to her first husband according to the Catholic Church even though she received a civil divorce over 25 years ago. Both she and her former husband, also happily remarried, are adulterers in the eyes of the Church because it does not recognize or permit such second marriages. While I may think this position is ludicrous, I defend the right of the Church to espouse such religious views.

President Bush certainly has the right to proclaim Jesus as his favorite philosopher. But it is both wrong and dangerous for him to suggest that biblical authority is the right basis for deciding about everyone else. This country is and must remain a society governed by secular, not religious, laws if we are to keep the

Council for Secular Humanism rejects the term "Brights"

Their rejection is clearly stated in "The Council's Position," an article by David Koepsell, the Council's Executive Director, in the current issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine. A principal reason he gives for rejection of "Brights" is that the CSH prefers the relative transparency of the terms "secular humanism" and "secular humanist."

David writes: "Besides the potentially alienating, hierarchical tone of the name, the term is just not very descriptive. While those who are secularists and accept nonreligious, humanistic values could realize on their own that they are secular humanists, how does one realize that one is a Bright without elaborate marketing literature?"

He also notes that the AHA has not rejected use of the term. "Recently, the American Humanist Association has declared 'Bright Rights' to be an official project under its banner."

In a companion article, "Turning Down the Brights," Tom Flynn states that "*Free Inquiry* will not be adding 'Brights' to its lexicon." Tom, the Editor of *Free Inquiry*, points out that he gave FI's readers ample information about "Brights" in prior issues, including reprints of articles by Dawkins and Dennett. Nevertheless, readers' support was nonexistent. Most expressed concern that we would appear to be "claiming to be smarter than everybody else."

You can find both of these articles in the April/May 2004 issue of *Free Inquiry* and online at http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/flynn_24_3.htm

By way of background, at FIG's December 2003 meeting Edwin Kagan and George Maurer debated the value of using the term "Brights" to describe atheists, agnostics, humanists, etc. George Maurer's report on that debate is contained in the January 2004 FIG Leaves. The Bright website is at



The Passion As a Political Weapon

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The Culture War

The Passion of the Christ is not simply a movie but a political club; at least it is being so used against secularists by leading conservative Christians. TV pundit Bill O'Reilly clearly understands that Mel Gibson's film is a weapon in the cultural war now being waged in America between traditional religionists and secular protagonists—such as the New York Times, Frank Rich, Andy Rooney, and the predominant “cultural elite.” Newt Gingrich chortled that the movie may be “the most important cultural event” of the century. James Dobson of Focus on the Family and a bevy of preachers herald it as “the greatest film ever made.” Busloads of devoted churchgoers were brought daily to view the film, which portrays the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death of Jesus with graphic brutality. It is used to stir sympathy for Jesus, who, half naked, suffers violent sadomasochistic whippings at the hands of his persecutors; and it has engendered hostility to Jews, secularists, and separationists who have dared to question Gibson's allegedly scripturally accurate account.

The Passion of the Christ reinforces a reality secularists dare not overlook: more than ever before, the Bible has become a powerful political force in America. The Religious Right is pulling no punches in order to defeat secularism and, it hopes, transform the United States into a God-fearing country that salutes “one nation under God” and opposes gay marriages and the “liberal agenda.” The interjection of religion into the public square (which in fact was never empty) by powerful religious and political forces has ominous implications. James Madison, framer of the Constitution, rightfully worried about factions disrupting civil society, and religious factions can be the most fractious.

Movies are a powerful medium. Film series including Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Trek, The Terminator, and The Matrix all draw upon fantasy; and these have proved to be highly entertaining, captivating, and huge box office hits. The Passion of the Christ, however, is more than that, for it lays down a gauntlet challenging basic democratic secular values.

It also presents fantasy as fact, and for the unaware and the credulous, this is more than an exercise in poetic license; it is artistic and historical dishonesty.

A Distorted Version of the Bible

According to Mel Gibson, The Passion of the Christ is “a true and faithful rendition of the Gospels.” This is hardly the case. For there are numerous occasions when it presents extra-Biblical material not found in the New Testament, and when it distorts the Biblical account. Gibson uses poetic license with abandon.

Commentators have pointed out that Gibson distorts the character of Pontius Pilate, making him seem to be a tolerant, benevolent, and fair-minded judge—when independent non-Christian historical texts indicate that he was a mean-spirited political opportunist. The film also portrays Pilate's wife Claudia as a kind of heroine. She is sympathetic to Jesus and thinks his punishment is unjust; there is some textual basis for that in the Bible. But Gibson goes beyond this in his portrayal, for Claudia acts kindly to Mary and Mary Magdalene at one point in the film, approaching them with a gift of linen cloths. Gibson has Mary use them to wipe pools of blood from the spot where Jesus was flogged by the Romans. Nowhere are these scenes found in any of the four Gospels. Church historian Elaine Pagels has said that it is “unthinkable” that Jewish women would have sought or received any sympathy or succor from the Romans.

Nor do the Gospels provide any support for the severe beatings of Jesus by the Jewish soldiers and guards who arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to those inflicted by the Romans. In one gruesome scene, as Jewish troops bring Jesus back to Jerusalem heavily bound, they constantly beat him and at one point, even throw him off a bridge. There is no account of this in the Gospels. It is tossed in to underscore the brutality of the captors.

All the Gospels say is that a large crowd sent by the priests came to the garden to arrest Jesus. There was a scuffle and Jesus told his Disciples to lay down their swords. (Here as elsewhere, Jesus does not seem to

be a part of his own cultural and religious Jewish milieu; both he and his followers are consistently characterized as renegades and “other” than their social environment.) Matthew 26:57 states: “Jesus was led off under arrest to the house of Caiaphas the High Priest.” Mark 14:53 reads: “Then they led Jesus away to the High Priest's house.” Luke 22:54: “Then they arrested Him and led Him away.” John's version in 18:12: “The troops with their commander and the Jewish police, now arrested Him and secured Him. They took Him first to Annas... the father-in-law of Caiaphas.”(1)

If Jesus' abuse by the Jewish guards did not come from scriptures, where did Gibson borrow it?—from the supposed revelations of a Catholic nun and mystic, Anna Katherina Emmerich (1774-1824). Indeed, much of Passion is taken from Emmerich's book first published in 1833, known in English as The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The current edition proudly asserts on its jacket that it is “the classic account of Divine Revelation that inspired” the Mel Gibson motion picture.(2) Emmerich, a passionate devotee of the practice of meditating on the “sacred wounds of Jesus,” described how after Jesus was arrested, he was tightly bound, constantly struck, dragged, and made to walk with bare feet on jagged rocks. Let us focus on a bridge, which they soon reached, and which Gibson depicts in the film. Emmerich states, “I saw our Lord fall twice before He reached the bridge, and these falls were caused entirely by the barbarous manner in which the soldiers dragged Him; but when they were half over the bridge they gave



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full vent to their brutal inclinations, and struck Jesus with such violence that they threw Him off the bridge into the water.... If God had not preserved Him, He must have been killed by this fall" (p. 71).

I refer here to this scene only to show that Gibson went far beyond the texts of the Gospels and inserted nonscriptural events mostly drawn from Emmerich. Remember that these are the subjective visions of a psychic-mystic rendered over 1800 years after the events they concern. I went to see the movie a second time to see if any credit line is given to the Emmerich book at the end of the film. I could find none, a glaring omission.

A good deal of the focus of The Passion of the Christ is on the flogging (scourging) of Jesus. Two Gospels state simply that Pilate "had Jesus flogged and handed over to be crucified" (Matthew 27:26, Mark 15:15). John's description agrees (19:1-2): "Pilate now took Jesus and had Him flogged." Luke's account (23:16) has Pilate saying: "I therefore propose to let Him off with a flogging."

What the Gospels state matter-of-factly and without narrative elaboration is luridly expanded by Emmerich: First they used "a species of thorny stick covered with knots and splinters. The blows from these sticks tore His flesh to pieces; his blood spouted out..." (p. 135). Then she describes the use of scourges "composed of small chains, or straps covered with iron hooks, which penetrated to the bone and tore off large pieces of flesh at every blow" (p. 135). Moreover, nowhere do the Gospels describe who watched the flogging. Emmerich states that "a Jewish mob gathered at a distance." Gibson has the high priests watching the brutal flogging (with a feminine incarnation of Satan looking on with them). Nowhere is this described in the Bible. Gibson thus goes far beyond the New Testament account, implying that the Jews and their leaders were complicit in the brutal beatings of Jesus.

The New Testament account next states that the high priests and crowd in the square before Pilate called for the crucifixion of Jesus, and when given the choice, selected Barabbas to be freed over Jesus. This is fully depicted in Gibson's Passion.

The film, however, is silent about the fact that Jesus, his mother Mary, Peter, James, and the other Disciples and supporters in the crowds were themselves Jews. In Emmerich and Gibson the Jews come off as the main enemies of Jesus, provoking the Romans not only to crucify him, but to torture him and inflict maximum suffering. I think the point in the film is even more anti-Jewish: it's that Pilate tries to placate the Jews with the beatings, but they won't be satisfied-some real blood thirstiness here!

Is The Passion of the Christ anti-Semitic? Yes, flagrantly so, in my judgment. The Passion repeats the description of the Jews portrayed in medieval art and Passion Plays, which provoked in no small measure anti-Semitic pogroms and persecutions suffered by the "Christ killers" for centuries.

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: Paul Kurtz is the founder of the :
: Center for Inquiry and the organi- :
: zations of public education head- :
: quartered there, such as CSICOP, :
: the Council for Secular Humanism :
: and the Campus Freethought Al- :
: :

Much has been said about the fact that Mel Gibson's 85-year-old father Hutton Gibson is a Holocaust denier. He has been quoted as saying that Vatican II was "a Mason plot backed by the Jews." Mel Gibson removed from the subtitles of the original version of his film the statement from Matthew (27:25-6): "The blood be on us, and on our children," though apparently it remains in the spoken Aramaic text.

To his credit, Pope John Paul II in 2000 made an historic apology, declaring that the Jews of today cannot be held responsible for the death of Christ. Still, the Passion film debuts at a time when anti-Semitism is growing worldwide, especially in Europe and throughout the Islamic world.

According to scripture (especially the Gospel of John), Christ died on the cross because God sent His only begotten Son to die for our sins; thus, all sinners are responsible, not simply the Jews of ancient Israel. Mel Gibson has himself blamed all sinners for the crucifixion. If this is the case,

the crucifixion of Christ had to happen, and was for that matter foretold by Him. Why God was willing to allow His only beloved Son to suffer a horrible death is difficult to fathom, but according to Christian apologetics it was preordained so that those who believed in Christ could be saved. Thus it was God-not the Jews alone or the Romans-who was responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. One might even say that if this was part of a divine plan, the Jews should get the credit for carrying it out.

Is the Biblical Account Reliable?

Is the account of Jesus as described in the New Testament-in this case of his trial, crucifixion, and death (let alone his birth, ministry, and resurrection) - an accurate account of historical events? I doubt it. This negative appraisal is drawn from careful, scholarly, and scientific examination of the New Testament account.

The key point is the fact that the authors of the Gospels were not themselves eyewitnesses to the events described in these documents. If Jesus died about the year 30 CE (this is conjectural, since some even question whether he ever lived(3)), the Gospel according to Mark was probably written in the 70s of the first century; Matthew and Luke in the 80s; and John anywhere from 90 to 100 CE. They were thus written some 40 to 70 years after the death of Jesus. The Gospels are based on an oral tradition, derived at best from second- and third-hand testimony assembled by the early band of Jewish Christians and including anecdotal accounts, ill-attributed sayings, stories, and parables. The Gospels' claims are not independently corroborated by impartial observers-all the more reason why some skepticism about their factual truth is required. They were not written as history or biography per se-and the authors did not use the methods of careful, historical scholarship. Rather, they were, according to Biblical scholar Randel Helms, written by missionary propagandists for the faith, interested in proclaiming the "good news" and in endeavoring to attract and convert others to Christianity.(4) Hence, the Gospels should not be taken as literally true, but are a form of special pleading for a new ideological-moral-theological faith.

In writing the Gospels the authors evidently looked back to the Old Testament and found passages that were suggestive



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of a Messiah who would appear, who was born of a young woman (or a virgin), and could trace his lineage back to David-which is why Matthew and Luke made such a fuss

about having Jesus born in Bethlehem. Accordingly, the Gospels should be read as works of literary art, spun out of the creative imagination, in order to fulfill passionate yearnings for salvation. They are the most influential form of fiction that has dominated Western culture throughout its history. Whether there is any core of truth to them is questionable; for it is difficult to verify the actual facts, particularly since there is no mention of Jesus or of his miraculous healings in any extant non-Christian literature.(5)

Tradition has it that Mark heard about Jesus from Peter. Eusebius (260-339 CE) is one source for this claim, but Eusebius wrote some three centuries after the death of Jesus. In any case, Matthew and Luke most likely base their accounts on Mark.(6) The three synoptic Gospels are similar, though they contradict each other on a number of significant events. Scholars believe that some of these were derived from still another literary source (Q or quelle in German, or "source") that has been lost.

Another historical fact to bear in mind is that the Gospels were written after a protracted war between the Romans and the Jews (66-74 CE), which saw the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple (70 CE). Hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed in these wars and were dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world. Jerusalem was eventually leveled in 135 CE. The synoptic Gospels were influenced by the political conditions at the times of the various authors who wrote the Gospels, not during the years of Jesus. John's Gospel, written somewhat later, reflected the continuing growth of Christianity in his day. The other book attributed to John, Revelation, which is so influential today, predicts the apocalyptic end of the world, the Rapture, and the Second Coming of Jesus. This book in the view of many scholars reflects the ruminations of a disturbed personality. We have no reliable evidence that these events will occur in the future, yet hundreds of millions of people today are convinced that they will - on the basis of sheer faith.

Let us consider another part of the

historical context in the latter part of the first century, when most of the New Testament was composed. Two Jewish sects contended for dominance. First was Rabbinic Judaism, which followed the Torah with all its commandments and rituals (including circumcision and dietary laws). Drawing on the Old Testament, Rabbinic Judaism held that the Jews were the "chosen people." Once slaves in Egypt, they had escaped to the Promised Land of Palestine. Someday after the Diaspora

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the Jews would be returned to Israel, and the Temple would be rebuilt. The second sect was early Jewish Christianity, which attempted to appeal not only to Jews but to pagans in the Roman Empire. It could do so effectively only by breaking with Rabbinic Judaism. This is the reason for increasing negative references in the Gospels to "the Jews" (especially in John), blaming them for the crucifixion of Jesus. Christianity was able to make great strides in recruiting converts and competing with other sects, such as the Mithraic religion. But it could only do so by disassociating itself from Rabbinic Juda-

ism. It developed a more universal message, which, incidentally, was already implicit in The Letters of Paul (written some 15 to 20 years after the crucifixion of Jesus): The new Christians did not need to be circumcised nor to practice the dietary laws.

Thus, the Biblical texts drawn on in The Passion of the Christ should not be read literally as diatribes against the Jews per se, but rather as the record of a dispute among two Jewish sects competing for ascendancy-between traditional and Christianized Judaism.

If one reads the four Gospels side-by-side, as I have done numerous times, one finds many omissions. Evidently their writers never knew Jesus in his own lifetime. Each Gospel was crafted post hoc to satisfy the immediate practical needs of the new Christian churches then developing. They were contrived by human beings who were motivated by the transcendental temptation to believe in Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. The Gospels thus are historically unreliable, and insofar as The Passion of the Christ used them this is also the case. But Gibson goes even beyond the Gospels, as I have indicated.

The Establishment of Christianity

I submit that there are two important inferences to draw from this analysis: First, the union of a religious creed with political power can be extremely destructive, especially when that creed is supported by the power of the state or the Empire. It was the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (around 312 CE) that led to the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, some three centuries after the crucifixion of Jesus. The "Nicene Creed," which was the product of the counsel of Nicaea (convened in 325 CE), said that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. It also declared Jesus the divine son of God "in one substance" with the Father. The decision which books should be included in the New Testament was political, determined by the vote of the bishops attending the council of Nicaea. At this and other church councils, various apocryphal books revered by particular Christian communities were omitted from the canonical scriptures. So much for historic objectivity.

The Emperor Julian (331-363 CE), a



FIG LEAVES



nephew of Constantine and a student of philosophy, became skeptical of Christianity and was prepared to disestablish the Christian church, which he probably would have done had he not been murdered, most likely by a Christian soldier in his army. In any case, Christianity prevailed and the great Hellenic-Roman civilization of the ancient world eventually went into decline. But this occurred in no small measure because of political factors: the grafting of the Bible with the sword, and the establishment of an absolutist Christian creed, intolerant of all other faiths that disagreed, and willing to use any methods to stamp out heresy.

By the fifth century more and more of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire became members of Christian churches, which replaced pagan religions. Christianity reigned supreme across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The latter two were overrun by the Muslims in the seventh and eighth centuries, but feudal Europe remained stolidly Christian as it entered into the so-called Dark Ages. Only with the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the development of science and the democratic revolutions of our time was the hegemony of Christianity weakened. The secularization of modern society brought in its wake naturalistic ideas and humanist values.

The union of religion and political power has generated terrible religious conflicts historically, pitting Catholics against Protestants, opposing Jihadists versus Crusaders, and triggering constant wars among Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and others. God save us from God-intoxicated legions which have the power to enforce their convictions on those who disagree! All the more reason to laud the wisdom of the authors of the American Constitution who enacted the Bill of Rights, including the First Amendment, prohibiting the establishment of a religion.

Freedom of Inquiry

The second inference to be drawn is that the origins of the Christian legend have for too long lain unexamined, buried by the sands of time. The New Testament was taken by believers as given, and no one was permitted to question its sacred doctrines allegedly based on revelations

from On High. But skepticism is called for—the same skepticism that should also be applied to the alleged revelations by Moses on Mount Sinai and other prophets of the Old Testament. Orthodox Jews who accept the legend of a “chosen people” and the promise that God gave Israel to the Jews likewise base this conviction on uncorroborated testimony. Today, we have the tools of historical scholarship, Biblical criticism, and science. This is based on two centuries of sophisticated scholarly and scientific inquiries. These enable us to use circumstantial evidence, archaeology, linguistic analysis, and textual criticism to authenticate or disconfirm the veracity of ancient literary documents. Regrettably, the general public is almost totally unaware of this important research. Similarly for the revelations of Muhammad and the origins of Islam in the Qur’an. Since they are similarly uncorroborated by independent eyewitnesses, they rest on similarly questionable foundations. There is again a rich literature of skeptical scrutiny. But most scholars are fearful of expressing their dissenting conclusion.

The so-called books of Abraham—the Old and New Testaments, and the Qur’an—need to be scrutinized by rational and scientific analyses. And the results of these inquiries need to leave the academy and be read and digested more widely. Unfortunately, freedom of inquiry had rarely been applied to the foundations of the “sacred texts.” Indeed, until recently severe punishment of religious dissenters was the norm in many parts of the world.

Given the tremendous box office success of Mel Gibson’s film, there are bound to be other Jesus movies produced—for Jesus sells in America! The Passion of the Christ unfortunately may add to intolerance of dissenters; and this may severely endanger the fragility of social peace. It may further help to undermine the First Amendment’s prohibition of the establishment of religion, which has been the mainstay of American democracy. This indeed is the most worrisome fallout that the Gibson film is likely to produce.

Endnotes:

1. These translations are from *The New English Bible*, Cambridge University Press, 1961.

2. Anna Katherina Emmerich, *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, Ed. Clemens Brentano. El Sobrante, Calif.: North Bay Books, 2003. I am indebted to my colleague Joe Nickell for pointing the book out to me.
3. George Wells, *Did Jesus Exist*, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 1980.
4. Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions*, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 1988.
5. R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Jesus Outside the Gospels*, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 1984.
6. John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*, San Francisco, Harper, 1995.

Quote

All of this treatment of the turning points in the evolution of Christianity is well done. The book is particularly good on the development of the biblical canon: it is always a useful reminder, and not just for fundamentalists, to see how happenstance and politics determined the shape of what many now take as immutable holy writ. Freeman is judicious, too on the origins of early Christian asceticism and abhorrence of sex.

He is right to emphasize the colossal ignorance of the Christian West in the second half of the first millennium. By the year 1000, all branches of science, and indeed all kinds of theoretical knowledge except theology, had pretty much disintegrated. Most classical literature was largely unknown. The best-educated people (all of the monks) knew strikingly less than many Greeks 800 years earlier. And the few mathematical writings from the time were for the most part downright stupid.

— from a review of Charles Freeman *The Closing of the Western Mind* (2004) in *The New York Times Book Review*,

. Unquote



23 March 2004 (off the internet)

by Chuck Baldwin

(Chuck Baldwin is the Founder and Pastor of Crossroad Baptist Church in Pensacola, Florida and host of the Chuck Baldwin Live radio show.)

Traditional, Biblical marriage is under an all out assault in America, and unfortunately, there is virtually no difference between the two major parties in the effort to preserve it. Both President George W. Bush and Democrat John Kerry would stand back and allow militant homosexuals and their supporters destroy the institution of marriage in this country.

Kerry says he opposes homosexual marriage but supports "civil unions." Bush says the same thing. Bush is also on record as saying he believes that states should have the power to define marriage. Then again, Bush also supports giving the federal government power to define marriage by supporting a constitutional amendment on the subject.

Both Kerry and Bush seem to be woefully ignorant of the fact that marriage has already been defined—by God! Once again, big government politicians are attempting to seize a God-ordained institution and place it under the authority of Caesar. This time it is the most basic institution of all: marriage. It appears that neither Republicans nor Democrats will be happy until government controls institutions that are exclusively the property of The Almighty.

So what is Biblical marriage.

Constitutional Marriage Amendment.

The Presidential Prayer Team is currently urging us to "Pray for the President as he seeks wisdom on how to legally codify the definition of marriage. Pray that it will be according to Biblical principles. With many forces insisting on variant definitions of marriage, pray that God's Word and His standards will be honored by our government."

Any good religious person believes prayer should be balanced by action. So here, in support of the Prayer Team's admirable goals, is a proposed Constitutional Amendment codifying marriage entirely on biblical principles:

- (1) Marriage in the United States shall consist of a union between one man and one or more women (Genesis 29:17-28; II Samuel 3:2-5).
- (2) Marriage shall not impede a man's right

to take concubines in addition to his wife or wives (II Samuel 5:13; I Kings 11:3; II Chronicles 11:21).

(3) A marriage shall be considered valid only if the wife is a virgin. If the wife is not a virgin, she shall be executed by stoning. (Deuteronomy 22:13-21).

(4) Marriage of a believer and a non-believer shall be forbidden (Genesis 24:3; Numbers 25:1-9; Ezra 9:12; Nehemiah 10:30).

(5) Since marriage is for life, neither this Constitution nor the constitution of any State, nor any state or federal law, shall be construed to permit divorce (Deuteronomy 22:19; Mark 10:9).

(6) If a married man dies without children, his brother shall marry the widow. If he refuses to marry his brother's widow or

deliberately does not give her children, he shall pay a fine of one shoe and be otherwise punished in a manner to be determined by law (Genesis 38:6-10; Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

(7) In lieu of marriage, if there are no acceptable men in your town, it is permitted that you (a female) get your father drunk and seduce him. (Noah's story, Genesis 19:31-36).

If you think other Biblical injunctions should be added to this list, please share them with the Presidential Prayer Team: <<http://www.presidentialprayerteam.org>>

Fig Editor's Comment: I approve particularly of item 2, but I think item 7 may go too far.

One billion tax dollars for religious charities

According to a recent White House Report, the Bush administration has distributed more than 1.1 billion dollars in competitive grants to religious charity organizations in the fiscal year 2003. The amount may be far higher, officials say, as the list is not yet complete. So far, five agencies have been asked to review 140 grant-giving programs.

The Department for Health & Human Services accounted for the amount of 568 million given to 680 faith based groups. Compared to 2002, this was an increase of 19% in the dollar amount and 41% in the number of benefitted organizations. The first timers among the supported organizations increased by 50%, reaching 129.

The other agencies so far included in the report were the Justice Department, the Labor Department, the Education Department and the Department for Housing and Urban Development.

The grants were given on the basis of an Executive Order, as the bills for the proposed legislation have been stalled in Congress. President Bush's decision to shift a major part of state funded social work to faith based organizations was one of his first political acts after assuming office.



FIG LEAVES



Post the Ten Commandments

by Edwin Kagin (September 2003)

Let us post the Ten Commandments so everyone can see
That we all love and worship our Lord G_d our Deity.

Haul those statues from our courthouse, those paintings from
our museum
Burn all photos in our albums so no forbidden likeness causes
sin.

Break up those Virgin Marys, those icons our G_d has banned
Take G_d's name from off our money. It's time good Christians
take a stand.

Post those Ten Commandments, but do not let them be en-
graved
For such would be an idol that's forbidden to the saved.

Do not strive for filthy money or yearn for good things work
can give
For one should never covet and, as birds and lilies, simply
live.

Abolish social workers for they Heaven's G_d disgrace
When they prosecute those parents who beat their children in
the face.

Children must honor parents, no matter how perverse
Even if they only leave their home inside a hearse.

Punish those who will not place our G_d who made these
rules

Beside, or before, all other gods and call non believers fools.

You must not abuse G_d's Holy Name and only against strang-
ers may you lie
Even if a spoken truth might cause the innocent to die.

The Seventh Day, the Sabbath, is hallowed by Commandment
number Four
So Saturday sports and shopping must now be banned for ev-
ermore.

Be certain these Commandments are in every small child's
school
Teach children about adultery and about how one breaks this
rule.

No matter what the motive or the reason or the end
Stealing for every purpose has been made by G_d into a sin.

How can we learn how to behave if G_d does not tell us so?
No matter what the situation, G_d's rules apply we know.

If those we love are starving at the hand of enemies we dread
We must not profane the law of G_d by stealing them some
bread.

Because of the Ten Commandments we do not each other kill
Unless G_d makes exceptions in accordance with G_d's will.

So let us post this moral code, this basis for all law
And if we do not know them, still worship them with awe.

They are the very laws of G_d given by our G_d above

Spending on Iraq and Taxcuts.

The real problem is that America cannot afford this orgy as it approaches the retirement of the baby-boom generation. When he was Treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill asked two economists at the Federal Reserve Bank in Cleveland to estimate what changes it would take to actually be able to pay for the government's commitments, including Social Security and Medicare. Their answer: either increase income taxes by 69 percent, increase payroll taxes by 95 percent or Social Security and Medicare by 56 percent. No wonder O'Neill was skeptical about tax cuts.

Many things about the future are uncertain. But demographics are not. The baby boomers will age and these bills will come due starting in 2008, four years from now. In fact, it's a puzzle as to why the bond market has not reacted to this deep and certain crisis. Ferguson¹ says the only possible answer is that "the magnitude of the problem is such that most Americans find it quite literally incredible. The main reason why America's crisis remains latent is precisely because people refuse to believe its existence."

At some point denial will stop working, the markets will react, interest rates will rise and the budget will be under severe pressure. Then Congress will begin searching for cuts, and spending on foreign affairs, even military spending, will get the ax. And America's grand new engagement in the world will turn out to be short-lived indeed.



BOOK REVIEW

Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror
by Jason Burke
(London: I. B. Taurus, 2003)

The author explains up front that “al-Qaeda does not exist.” (p. 7) At least, if you think of al-Qaeda as a terrorist organization headed by Osama bin Laden with a network of trained and motivated men ready to carry out the orders of their leaders. There is no hierarchical organization which could be destroyed by eliminating bin Laden and his closest henchmen based in Afghanistan.

Rather, al-Qaeda is a basis or foundation of a world view, a radical religious fundamentalist call for violent jihad. There is a battle going on between good and evil, between Islam and western secularism, between justice and injustice. It is an explanation of recent history, an explanation why the West can and does oppress the community of Islam. It is a war, in which we are all soldiers on the frontline, there are no civilians and no innocents.

Jason Burke is a journalist. For the past decade he has covered the Middle East and Southwest Asia for the London newspaper, The Observer. The book describes many of the events of the recent past from first hand observation, to explain how he arrived at the insights he records. Burke speaks several of the languages of the region. He mentions Urdu, the language of Pakistan, and speaking in Kurdish, as well as in Arabic. Not every word written in the haste and pressure of the information business is likely to be true and accurate, but I think his analysis of change in the Islamic community rings true. Similar observations have been recorded by other writers.

The twentieth century era of colonialism has had a powerful secularizing and modernizing influence in the lands of Islam. English and French have become important second languages, science and technology have reshaped education. A capitalist economy, oil, and democratic ideas have shaped countries created by the European powers. So why have most people in the Islamic lands remained so desperately poor?

A number of important Islamic thinkers have advocated a return to the rules and society of Islam. A number of “Islamist” movements arose in the fifties and sixties,

which tried to dominate government, and in some cases succeeded. But in the seventies and eighties an increasingly more radicalized movement arose intent on returning to the “way of life” and order of the Prophet Mohammed. These movements were largely fighting local issues in the various countries of the region. The Iranian government is one country dominated by such Islamic government. Saudi Arabia is another. Egypt and Algeria have so far resisted a take over by Islamic primitives. The Taliban government was another example of fundamentalist Islam in charge of a country.

Bin Laden, and men like him expanded the Islamic revolt from national conflicts to a vision of an international enemy. It is Europe and the United States which holds Islam in thrall, debases the culture, and controls their economies. A great historic injustice cries for rectification, and America must be defeated.

It is difficult to describe the various people, conflicting motives, diverse backgrounds, experiences and cultures involved in this Islamic awakening. Burke writes about the “intellectual activists,” men who can justify their radicalism with sophisticated arguments. This group includes bin Laden and his immediate henchmen. It also includes Mohammed Atta, the leader of the 9/11 attack, who had a degree from a German university. Many of these activist, radical believers are drawn from relatively secular families with middle class incomes or at least aspirations. Many were recruited in Europe, Canada, or the United States. Burke mentions specific “radical” mosques in London, Toronto, New York, and Detroit. Increasingly the muscle, the fighting forces, the suicide bombers are drawn from less well educated members of the Islamic public.

Burke looks at many aspects of this history. Islam is a much more political and communal religion than Christianity. It is a religion without a modern, reformist theology. In consequence, the financing of charity and politics can not always be clearly separated — some donor funds may not be clearly identified for helping the poor, and supporting religious institutions, versus political activism, including terror.

One clear insight emerges from this book: war and the weapons of war will not control or end religious radicalism. There is a continuous stream of new recruits for attack, willing to sacrifice their lives for ideals of national and international justice. Now and after bin Laden



April Meeting: Tuesday 27th 7 PM

May Potluck: Tuesday 11th 6:30 PM



FIG Leaves
P.O. Box 19034
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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 as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists. Our members are mostly secular humanists. However, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our

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 figleaves@fuse.net, or leave a message at (513) 557-3836. Visit our web site at gofigger.org