

FIG LEAVES

Volume 16 Issue 4

April 2007

April FIG Meeting: Tuesday, 24 April 7:00 PM At the Vernon Manor

Humanity vs. Environment:

Looking down the road, how we are likely to deal with it.

By Peter Seidel

In August I was asked to develop a scenario on the demise of the human species, which I did. While I have thought and read a lot about environmental problems, I had never carried my thoughts this far. To do this, I had to consider how various environmental problems interact with each other, and also how humanity, as individuals and as a society, react to threats. The consequences of the problems when put together, are often far more serious than the sum of the parts.

There is plenty of evidence that we are in serious trouble. With this knowledge, individuals and governments should be moved to action. However, as we can see, our response is poor. Nevertheless, when things get bad enough, nations can wake up and be decisive. Pearl Harbor showed that. The question is, will so much damage already have been done, and the momentum resisting a rapid turn around be overwhelming? We don't know, but of this I am certain, at best we can expect a world that is far more degraded than the one we have and that there will be tremendous human misery.

It is not hard to see our own failures. We evolved to think and live as hunter gatherers. Specialization has enabled us to develop the society we have today. But, as we see the world as pieces, rather than a whole, we are unable to do deal with it responsibly.

At the same time I was working on this scenario I was reading James Lovelock's, *The Revenge of Gaia*. * I found his depressing conclusions convincing. To avert the worst, he advocates closing down fossil fuel plants switching to nuclear energy as quickly as possible. As much as I shudder, I see his point.

And, what does all this mean for humanists? If we are clearheaded, and care, we should be at the forefront of setting things right. This means first informing ourselves about what is going on, and then doing all we can to get us moving in the right direction.

Peter Seidel was educated, worked, and taught as an architect and urban planner. He was a student of the inventor of the "glass box," and for awhile was a designer for the firm most responsible for spreading glass high-rises around the globe. After reading a book about how we are damaging the environment, he switched and became a rather unsuccessful environmental architect/planner, and more recently has devoted himself to writing about problems related to the environment.

* James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia: earth's climate in crisis and the fate of humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006)

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Events
April Meeting Tuesday, April 24, 2007 7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor 400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH
May Potluck Tuesday, May 8, 2007 6:30 PM at the home of
May Meeting Tuesday May 22, 2007 7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor 400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH





March Meeting...



World Transhumanist Association

presented by Willow Brugh

An introduction to the ideas and concepts of *transhumanism* and to the work of the World Transhumanist Association (WTA) was presented to us by Ms. Willow Brugh, a student of sociology at the University of Indiana. Transhumanism may be described as a philosophical and cultural movement to promote technology for change and betterment of the human condition. Transhumanism affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving human beings and bod-

ies through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to ease the aging process and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical and psychological capacities. Clearly, transhumanists are enthusiastic about the development and the use of all kinds of technology to improve the human body, the length of human life, the enjoyment of life, and the performance of many kinds of human activities, from love and tenderness, to mathematics and science. Transhumanism considers the potential benefits of all kinds of technologies, biological technologies to enhance the senses and feeling, mechanical technologies to improve the functioning of the human body, and electronic technologies to better the work of the human mind. No ethical use of any technology is denied or forbidden.

Ms Brugh pointed out that medicine has already tripled the human life span. In general, she asserted, many medical therapies which are already being used to heal the ill, could improve the functioning of the well. In fact, transhumanism could be described as aiming at "better than well" for all people. She took us through many means already in widespread use for changing and improving the human body. New therapies open doors to enhance appearance, strength, and aging of the body.

The simplest technology to change body parts is coloring the hair, and Ms. Brugh herself sported a "Mohawk" colored deep blue. Glasses and hearing aids are another means long in use to enhance body functions. Ms. Brugh pointed to medicines which are used to treat anemia or ALS or to improve muscle mass of athletes (steroids). These could improve ordinary humans. The WTA would support legal arguments in favor of such uses. Indeed the WTA may endorse use of many kinds of pills, or temporary or permanent gene therapy for the extension of life and for a higher quality of life.

We already use many instruments to enhance our minds. Caffeine and nicotine may be thought of as such enhancements. Many other legal and illegal drugs could be used for moderate and careful mind improvement. Medicines used to treat Alzheimers or ADHD could be modified to act as cognitive enhancers. Cures for some negative personality traits (pedophilia, sociopathy) would be of great worth. The question is which medical treatments can be modified to apply to healthy people. The aim would be to alter some personality traits and social activities. Our speaker was aware that these actions raise major questions of ethics. What exactly may be the physiological ramifications of of gene therapy and other enhancements of the body.



FIG Leaves - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to:

figleaves@fuse.net;

or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 19034, Cincinnati, OH 45219. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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Beyond this, the intentions and visions of transhumanism appeared to this reporter to wander off into the world of science fiction. Apparently, the WTA is not adverse to broad speculation, but has the aim of raising consciousness about a future in which these technologies will not only be developed, but will become widely available. The WTA looks at legal and economic ramifications arising from the propagation of technology. One aim is to provide equal access to new technology based strictly on free individual choice. Other aims are to counter any development of a Black Market in technology. Further, the WTA intends to lower the interference from regulatory bureaucracies. The WTA develops an audience for technology and will back legal action with money if possible.



Ms Brugh ended by providing some references for follow up: <www.transhumanism.org> is the WTA's website. Here are some readings:

- Michael Chorost, *Rebuilt: how becoming part computer made me more human* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005)
- Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near: when humans transcend biology* (New York: Viking, 2005)
- Ramez Naam, *More Than Human: embracing the promise of biological enhancement* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005)
- Gregory J.E. Rawlins, *Slaves of the Machine: the quickening of computer technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997)

— Reported by Wolf Roder ☚

Quote So much for the Anthropic Principle.

First: the universe is not so finely tuned for life. The vast majority of the universe is empty space, and the vast majority of what little matter there is, is completely inhospitable to life, including most planets. For most of its 13.7 billion year history, the fine-tuned conditions for life were nonexistent.

Second: our universe is not finely tuned for us, we are finely tuned for it, which is what the theory of evolution predicts. It is entirely possible that a completely different form of life could be based on another type of physics.

— Michael Shermer, *The New York Sun* (25 October 2006)

Unquote:



... and then in Winter Hell freezes over.

Officials in Livingston County, Mich., have had it. The annual Run Thru Hell race has grown to ...uh... Biblical proportions. The unincorporated hamlet of Hell, is in the Pinckney Recreation Area of the county. Hundreds of participants in the footrace, and even more spectators, brings heavy crowds and heavier traffic. But what really did things in was the 666 Party to celebrate the date of 6 June 2006, which crammed about twelve thousand people into the area. To help plan for future crowds, local officials have passed a law requiring any event which expects 750 or more participants to get a permit. Hell's honorary mayor, John Colone, who hosted the 666 Party, promises to cooperate. (*Livingston Press & Argus*)

The No Science Zone . . .

Political Animal by Kevin Drum, 20 March 2007
http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/archives/individual/2007_03/010968.php

House Republican Leader John Boehner (R-Oh) would have appointed Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md) to the bipartisan Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming -- but only if the Maryland Republican would say humans are not causing climate change, Gilchrest replied: "John, I can't do that," Gilchrest, reported on the interview. "He said, 'Come on. Do me a favor. I want to help you here.'"

Gilchrest didn't make the committee....He expressed his interest in the committee several times to Boehner and Minority Whip Roy Blunt of Missouri, telling them the best thing they could do for Republican credibility was to appoint members familiar with the scientific data.

Rep. Roscoe Bartlett, a research scientist from Maryland, and Michigan's Rep. Vern Ehlers, the first research physicist to serve in Congress, also made cases for a seat, but weren't appointed, he said.

"Roy Blunt said he didn't think there was enough evidence to suggest that humans are causing global warming," Gilchrest said. "Right there, holy cow, there's like 9,000 scientists to three on that one."

Familiarity with the scientific data? Sorry no. We're the GOP.

Unparalleled Growth at the Center for Inquiry/ Transnational in 2006.

The year 2006 was an extraordinary period for the Center for Inquiry (CFI), which is dedicated to science, reason, and free inquiry in every area of human interest. Many new programs were launched in the past year, a sign of the rapid growth of secularism, humanism, and scientific rationalism. Of special significance is the publication of books critical of religious claims by noted scientists and philosophers who are affiliated with the activities of the Center for Inquiry.





Of great importance is the fact that CFI opened an Office of Public Policy (OPP) and a Center for Inquiry in Washington, the nation's capital. Also in 2006 the Center launched a new Journal, the *CSER Review*, devoted to the careful appraisal of religious claims sponsored by the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion. CSER is headed by Professor R. Joseph Hoffmann.

We are pleased that CFI/Amherst opened its splendid new research wing named after benefactor Charles W. Jess. The Center initiated the Naturalism Research Project under the directorship of Professor John Shook. The project will seek to defend naturalism as a philosophical, scientific, and practical program of research. The library of American Philosophical Naturalism now holds over 160,000 books, monographs, and journals.

In addition to the center at Amherst, CFI now has a Center for Inquiry West in Los Angeles, and centers in New York City and Tampa.

 "We have renounced"

Central Council of Ex-Muslim founded in Germany

Mina Ahadi, Iranian-born Human Rights campaigner in Germany, has founded the "Central Council of Ex-Muslims." Together with 29 other apostates from Muslim countries, many of them women, she wants to give a hand to those, who wish to come out of Islam. The organization is headquartered in Cologne. The name was chosen as a play on the Central Council of Muslims, which is with about 800,000 members the largest Islamic group in Germany. There are currently more than three million people in Germany, who were born in Islamic communities. Many of them are secular-minded, says Mina Ahadi. But they have no voice in the country. Muslim organizations claim to speak in the name of all immigrants from Muslim countries and want to enforce their policies on their personal lives, even if they are not members. And the German authorities accept them. Ahadi wants to give them a voice and to form a counterweight to the Muslim organizations.

In February, the Ex-Muslims launched a courageous campaign with the motto "We have renounced," publishing photos and personal statements of their members. This brought in more than hundred membership applications within a few days. Meantime, Mina Ahadi had to be put under police protection. She received death threats since she founded the council. Renouncing Islam still carries the death penalty in countries like Saudi-Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Sudan. And even in Europe, there are enough fundamentalists out to kill apostates in the name of Allah. But death threats don't spoil Ahadi's optimism. "We want to create a new movement," she says, "in other European countries too. We hope that soon there will be 10,000 of us representing many more people."

Mina Ahadi is also the founder of the International Committee against Stoning and the International Committee against Execution. She fled to Europe after her husband, a political activist, was executed in Iran on their marriage anniversary.

Vice-president of the council is the Turkey-born Arzu Toker, writer and former member of the West-German Radio Council. The



Central Council of Ex-Muslims is supported by the atheist Giordano-Bruno-Foundation in Germany.

- Rational Internationalist Bulletin no. 165 (19 March 2007) <http://www.rationalistinternational.net>

 From *The Florida Times-Union*; 25 March 2007

Secular Muslims: Does Islam need reformation?

Over the last two decades, we have seen a vast number of efforts to reform Islam so it would be more compatible to Western values. Several small, proclaimed reform movements are trying to correct the assumed wrongness of Islam and call for an Islamic reformation. These self-proclaimed secularists represent only a small minority of Muslims. The majority of Muslims, not only in the United States but worldwide, have different opinions.

Yet, the media, governments and neoconservative pundits pay more attention to the secular minority. The secular Muslim agenda is promoted because these ideas reflect a Western vision for the future of Islam. Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, many people, including high-ranking officials in the Bush administration, have prescribed to a preferred remedy for Islam: Reform the faith so it is imbued with Western values - the privatization of religion and outsourcing democracy. The rulers in Muslim countries who are secular are labeled good Muslims.

The problem with this prescription is that it is far from reality. Consider the facts: Islamic renaissance has spread across the globe in the past sixty years from the East to West. In Egypt, it is hard to find a woman on the street who does not wear a head scarf. Islamic political groups and movements are on the rise. Even in the United States, more and more Americans are curious about Islam, particularly the young. Some are embracing Islam.

In Europe and the United States, where Muslims have maximum exposure to Western culture, they are increasingly embracing Islamic values. In Britain, a growing number of Muslims advocate creating a court system based upon Islamic principles. What all this means is that Western hopes for full integration by Muslims in the West are unlikely to be realized, and the future of the Islamic world will be much more Islamic than Western.

Instead of championing the loud voices of the secular minority who are capturing media attention with their conferences, manifestos and memoirs, the United States would be wise instead to pay more attention to the far less loquacious majority.

Mohammad Ilyas, MD, Jacksonville

This story can be found at http://www.jacksonville.com/tu-online/stories/032507/opl_8824729.shtml.

New Zealand reemphasizes: no state religion

A revised national statement on religious diversity has retained the principle that New Zealand has no state religion. Race Relations Commissioner Joris de Bres told that point was kept in the updated draft, released at a national inter-faith forum in Hamilton. "We start with the state seeks to treat...all faith communities and those who profess no religion equally before the law. New Zealand has no state religion." Prime Minister Helen Clark expressed the same





position as Mr De Bres on Newstalk ZB: "There is no state religion, there will be no state religion. We are very diverse peoples these days we simply couldn't agree on a state religion -- this is not like a Scandinavian country where people are virtually born into the Lutheran church, and have to resign from it at a later age."

"It's a statement of fact as far as I know," De Bres said, "it was also a fact there was diversity in New Zealand." The purpose of this statement is basically to set out some very simple ground rules about tolerance and respect for human rights and that means the human rights of people who are religious and the human rights of people who are not." Prime Minister Helen Clark is to present an agreed statement to an Asian inter-faith dialogue in Waitangi in May.

The statement was drafted for the Human Rights Commission by Victoria University Religious Studies Professor Paul Morris. The public consultation process has been conducted by the Race Relations Commissioner and the Human Rights Commission, and has involved city councils, interfaith councils and individual faith and community groups across New Zealand. There have been submissions from interfaith meetings and groups, from the Exclusive Brethren, the Destiny Church, Catholic Bishops, the evangelical Vision Network, Rationalists, Humanists, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Baha'is, Jews, Sikhs, Quakers and many others, he said.

Rationalists have been raising the issue of the more than one million New Zealanders who profess no religion.

- rationalistinternational.net, Bulletin 164, 24 February 2007

In Spain the Catholic Church fights a legal battle to stop mass exodus.

Thousands of Spaniards wish to quit the Roman Catholic Church. But the church does not want to let them go. In Madrid and Valencia, the bishops have gone to court to fight a legal battle against the mass exodus.

This is the last step in the ongoing fight between the Catholic Church and the growing anticlerical movement in Spain. It started, when 47 former Catholics decided to leave the flock and seek formal termination of their church membership. Since there is no bloody Inquisition any more to force apostates into submission, the church authorities tried to stop them by pure arrogance. They blatantly refused to delete their names in the church records. The would-be-apostates alerted the national Data Protection Agency, which classified entries in baptism records as private data under the protection of the law that have to be deleted on demand. The church did not move. This obstinate refusal to respect people's decision to quit became the rallying point for all those, who were unhappy with the church. When the Pope visited Spain in July 2006, 1500 people took to the streets and demanded that their names be deleted from church records.

Meantime the Spanish Data Protection Agency has won a high court ruling against the church. But rather than accepting the limits of their power, the bishops went for a legal battle against apostasy and filed an appeal. Their hair-splitting argument: baptism records are historical documents that cannot be changed!

The Catholic Church is losing ground in Spain. Though offi-



cially 82 per cent of the population are Catholics, only 48 per cent are practicing the faith. And believers or non-believers: according to recent surveys by the government, 75 per cent of the population are convinced that the church hierarchy is out of touch with today's reality and want to see their influence curbed. The great majority supports the social referendum introduced by the Socialist government under Prime Minister Zapatero, that paves the way for stem cell research, faster and easier divorce, same sex marriage and adoption by gays.

- rationalistinternational.net, Bulletin 164, 24 February 2007

Freedom from Religion Foundation takes on the "Faith-Based Initiative"

Freedom From Religion Foundation, a large group of atheists and agnostics will soon fight its most high-profile legal battle. The U.S. Supreme Court will hear arguments on its lawsuit against President Bush's faith-based initiative. The "initiative" helps religious organizations get government funding to provide social services. The court will decide whether taxpayers can sue over federal funding that promotes religion.

The message of Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Foundation, is clear: Keep God out of government. "What's at stake is the right to challenge the establishment of religion by the government," Gaylor said. The case in front of the high court claims White House conferences to promote the faith-based initiative turn into unconstitutional pep rallies for religion. "There was a feeling that there was almost a near religious-right takeover of our government and that we better speak up now," Gaylor said. Annie Gaylor and husband Dan Barker, a former fundamentalist minister who turned against religion, are co-presidents of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Her mother, Anne Nicole Gaylor, founded the group in 1978 to counter religious influence in government after clashing with religious leaders over abortion. Among its victories, the group has stopped funding for a Milwaukee charity that Bush visited during the 2000 campaign and an Arizona group that preached to children of prisoners.

Freedom From Religion Foundation has 8,500 members in 50 states, with the most coming from California. Members consider themselves freethinkers who form opinions based on reason, not faith. Gaylor is hoping an advertising campaign on progressive talk radio, the Internet and in liberal magazines will help the group reach 10,000 members this year.

The American Religious Identification Survey in 2001 estimated that 29 million Americans claimed no religious affiliation, double the number from 1990. The survey, which was conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, estimated that 1.9 million identified themselves as atheist or agnostic. Before its battle against the faith-based initiative the Freedom From Religion Foundation stopped prayers during the University of Wisconsin's commencement and overturned Good Friday as a state holiday in Wisconsin.

- rationalistinternational.net, Bulletin 164, 24 February 2007





What is more important: the right to free speech, or the right not to feel insulted? This question is splitting the UN Human Rights Council, the world's top human rights body, in two at the moment.

European countries are arguing forcefully that free speech is the basis for the enjoyment of all other cultural and political rights, and Islamic countries are taking the line that protecting religious sentiments is the most pressing task of our time.

The choice would almost seem to be a moot one, given the daily acts of torture, extrajudicial killing, imprisonment and denial of basic rights going on around the world every day, but certain countries not usually considered the greatest defenders of liberty have made the problem of "defamation of religion" a central issue of debate in the Council. Thanks to Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Tunisia, among others, resolutions urging a worldwide ban on "defamation of religion" have become a regular feature on the one-year old council, the most recent attempt coming on 23 March of this year.

The Organization of the Islamic Conference, whose 14 members in the 47-nation council tend to vote as a bloc, already draw on the "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine" basis, preventing condemnation of Sudan's record in Darfur, for example. But when their numbers aren't enough, the OIC resorts to a series of standard rebuffs which sees complaints from America (which is not a member of the council) dismissed with a reference to Guantanamo, and European initiatives blocked with a barrage of accusations about religious discrimination (and by extension racism).

This situation, which has led even some of the council's staunchest defenders to question whether it can ever be an effective forum for the protection of human rights, simultaneously highlights a fundamentally different understanding of the concept of rights, and shows how fragile the UN's instruments are when autocratic states are put on an equal footing with democracies on a one-country-one-vote basis. Numerically outgunned by the OIC, European diplomats have to work overtime just to maintain the status quo and give the



council a semblance of respectability. Their victories often rely on the intervention and expertise of non-governmental organizations, and the occasional opportunistic support from countries whose record on freedom of speech isn't always stellar but who have their own reasons for opposing a worldwide blasphemy ban.

U. S. Drowning in Ignorance

By Brian Braiker

Newsweek

March 30, 2007 - A belief in God and an identification with an organized religion are widespread throughout the country, according to the latest *Newsweek* poll. Nine in 10 (91 percent) of American adults say they believe in God and almost as many (87 percent) say they identify with a specific religion. Christians far outnumber members of any other faith in the country, with 82 percent of the poll's respondents identifying themselves as such. Another 5 percent say they follow a non-Christian faith, such as Judaism or Islam.

Nearly half (48 percent) of the public rejects the scientific theory of evolution; one-third (34 percent) of college graduates say they accept the Biblical account of creation as fact. Seventy-three percent of Evangelical Protestants say they believe that God created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years; 39 percent of non-Evangelical Protestants and 41 percent of Catholics agree with that view.

Although one in ten (10 percent) of Americans identify themselves as having "no religion," only six percent said they don't believe in a God at all. Just 3 percent of the public self-identifies as atheist, suggesting that the term may carry some stigma. Still, the poll suggests that the public's tolerance of this small minority has increased in recent years. Nearly half (47 percent) of the respondents felt the country is more accepting of atheists today that it used to be and slightly more (49 percent) reported personally knowing an atheist. Those numbers are higher among respondents under thirty years old, 62 percent of whom report knowing an atheist (compared to just 43 percent of those fifty and older). Sixty-one percent of the under-30 cohort view society as more accepting of atheists (com-



SCIENCE BOOK CLUB: 2007 Schedule

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dec. 16 (3rd Sunday) - *The Republican war on science* by Chis Mooney





pared to 40 percent of the Americans 50 and older).

Still, it is unlikely that a political candidate would serve him or herself by declaring their atheism. Six in ten (62 percent) registered voters say they would not vote for a candidate who is an atheist. Majorities of each major party -- 78 percent of Republicans and 60 percent of Democrats -- rule out such an option. Just under half (45 percent) of registered independents would not vote for an atheist.

More than a third (36 percent) of Americans think the influence of organized religion on American politics has increased in recent years. But the public is still split over whether religion has too much (32 percent) or too little (31 percent) influence on American politics. Democrats tend to fall in the "too much" camp (42 percent of them, as opposed to 29 percent who see too little influence) as Republicans take the opposite view (42 percent too little; 14 percent too much). In the poll, 68 percent of respondents said they believed someone could be moral and an atheist, compared to 26 percent who said this was not possible.

The *Newsweek* Poll, conducted March 28-March 29, has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points for questions based on all registered voters and plus or minus 6 percentage points for results based on registered Republicans and Republican leaners. In conducting the poll, Princeton Survey Research Associates International interviewed 1,004 adults aged 18 and older.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17879317/site/newsweek/?from=3Drss>, ©2007 MSNBC.com



which will allow schools to ban paranoid forms of religious dress, including the mask, or "niqab", worn by some Muslim girls. I'm sure this will have wide public support, because the last thing most people want is a Talibanisation of relations between men and women in the UK.

At the same time, some of the country's most senior Anglican prelates were roundly defeated in the House of Lords when they made the idiotic error of supporting the Catholic Church in its attempt to discriminate against gay couples who want to use its state-funded adoption agencies. "What do we want? Discrimination! When do we want it? Now!" has never seemed to me a persuasive platform for any religion to fight on, especially when the public has warmed to gay weddings such as that of the singer Sir Elton John (who, by the way, is celebrating his 60th birthday with an eloquent blast against gay-bashing worldwide).

In a dramatic sign of the times, the Archbishop of York and two Anglican bishops found themselves criticised by peers who wanted to know what had happened to the notion of Christian love. Baroness Howarth and the former Culture secretary, Lord Smith, spoke as practising Christians and were supported by Lord Alli and my friend Baroness Massey, easily winning the debate. The Anglican hierarchy needs to do some soul-searching about why they joined this doomed cause, placing themselves on the same side as monstrously prejudiced bishops from Latin America and Africa.

Meanwhile in Paris, in a ruling welcomed as a robust assertion of the right to free speech, a French court acquitted Philippe Val, editor of the weekly satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, who was taken to court by Muslim organisations after publishing three cartoons deemed offensive to the Prophet. And the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled against Poland, which has one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, after a Polish woman lost most of her sight when she was denied a legal abortion on medical grounds.

The Enlightenment, in other words, is back with a bang. Of course people have a right to their religious views, but they aren't entitled to exercise them in ways that trample on the rights of women, children, gay people and freethinkers. Wake up and smell the coffee: God doesn't rule, OK? ☩

Lightning has hit the church; the steeple is damaged and the roof has burned down. The minister is soliciting for repairs and reconstruction. "Well, your Reverence," says Farmer John, "a landlord who lays fire to his own house, such I shall not support."



Sorry, God. You're not on the guest list. This was the high point of a fantastic week for secularism in Europe.

Joan Smith, *The Independent*: 25 March 2007



When the leaders of 27 countries meet in Berlin today to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the EU, there will be one significant absence. To the annoyance of many Poles, who have what is arguably the most crackpot right-wing government in Europe, God has not been invited to the party. Neither Christianity nor the deity feature in the declaration which Europe's leaders will sign to mark the occasion, signaling the high point of what has been a fantastic week for secularism.

I would think that, you might say, given that one of the jobs I most fancy is poster-girl for a strictly rational approach to human affairs. But recent events show that it isn't just sceptics who are worried by the inroads which other people's imaginary friends have been making in secular states. The politician behind the decision to exclude any reference to religion from the Berlin declaration is the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a pastor's daughter, who recognises the crucial importance for most modern societies of a separation between church and state - and of not providing ammunition to critics who accuse the EU of being a Christian club.

In this country, in a blow to the Islamophobia industry which has tried to silence critics of Islam through strident accusations of racism, the Education Secretary Alan Johnson issued guidelines

The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

When: Tuesday, 17 April at 8:00PM

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

To see who's coming and to see more event details:
http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve



Creation “Science” Is the Christian Right’s Trojan Horse Against Reason

By Chris Hedges

Truthdig; posted on 28 March, 2007

Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations. The force possessed by totalitarian propaganda -- before the movements have the power to drop iron curtains to prevent anyone’s disturbing, by the slightest reality, the gruesome quiet of an entirely imaginary world--lies in its ability to shut the masses off from the real world.” -- Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

In the middle of the lobby of the 50,000-square-foot Creation Museum in Petersburg, Ky., a 20-foot waterfall tumbles. Two life-size figures of children with long black hair and in buckskin clothes play in the stream a few feet from two towering Tyrannosaurus Rex models that can move and roar. The museum, which cost \$25 million to build and has a sea of black asphalt parking lots for school buses, has a scale model of Noah’s ark that shows how Noah solved the problem of fitting dinosaurs into the three levels of the vessel--he loaded only baby dinosaurs. And on the wooden model, infant dinosaurs cavort with horses, giraffes, hippopotamuses, penguins and bears. There is an elaborate display of the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve, naked but strategically positioned so as not to display breasts or genitals, swim in a river as giant dinosaurs and lizards roam the banks.

Before Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise, museum visitors are told, all of the dinosaurs were peaceable plant-eaters. The evidence is found in Genesis 1:30, where God gives “green herb” to every creature to eat. There were no predators. T-Rex had such big teeth, the museum explains, so it could open coconuts. Only after Adam and Eve sinned and were cast out of paradise did the dinosaurs start to eat flesh. And Adam’s sin is a key component of the belief system, for in the eyes of many creationists, in order for Jesus’ death to be meaningful it had to atone for Adam’s first sin.

The museum has a theater equipped with seats that shake, and gadgets that spray mist at the audience as the story of God’s six-day creation of the world unfolds on the screen and the sound system rocks the auditorium. There are 30-foot-high walls that represent the cliffs of the Grand Canyon, floors that resemble rocks embedded with fossils, and rooms where a “Christian” paleontologist counters the claims of an “evolutionist” paleontologist. It has the appearance of a real science museum, complete with a planetarium, a gift shop and plaques on the wall with quotes from creationist “scientists” who have the title doctor conspicuously before their names. It has charts, timelines and graphs with facts and figures. It is meant to be interactive, to create, like Universal Studios, a contrived reality with an array of costly animatronic men and women as well as moving dinosaurs.

The danger of creationism is that, like the pseudo-science of Nazi eugenics, it allows facts to be accepted or discarded according to the dictates of a preordained ideology. Creationism removes the follower from the rational, reality-based world. Signs, miracles and wonders occur not only in the daily life of Christians but in history, science, medicine and logic. The belief system becomes the basis to understand the world. Random facts and data are collected and made to fit into this belief system or discarded. When facts are treated as if they were opinions, when there is no universal standard to determine truth, in law, in science, in scholarship, or in the reporting of the events of the day, the world becomes a place where people can believe what they want to believe, where there is no possibility of reaching any conclusion not predetermined by those who interpret the official, divinely inspired text. This is the goal of creationists.

Other creationist museums are going up in Arkansas, Texas, California, Tennessee and Florida. Museums are part of a massive push to teach creationism in schools, part of a vast Christian publishing and film making industry that seeks to rewrite the past and make it conform to the Bible. The front lines of the culture wars are the classrooms. The battle is one we are slowly losing. Twenty states are considering changing the way evolution is taught in order to include creationism or intel-

ligent design. Only 13 percent of Americans in a 2004 Gallup poll, when asked for their views on human origins, said life arose from the strictly natural process of evolution. More than 38 percent said they believed God guided evolution, and 45 percent said the Genesis account of creation was a true story. Courses on intelligent design have been taught at Minnesota, Georgia, New Mexico and Iowa State universities, along with Wake Forest and Carnegie Mellon, not to mention Christian universities that teach all science through the prism of the Bible.

The museum is an illustration of the movement’s marriage of primitive and intolerant beliefs with the modern tools of technology, mass communication, sophisticated fund raising and political organization. Totalitarian systems usually start as propagandistic movements that ostensibly teach people to “believe what they want.” This is a ruse. This primacy of personal opinion, regardless of facts, destabilizes and destroys the primacy of all facts. This process leads inevitably to the big lie. Facts are useful only if they bolster the message. The use of mass-marketing techniques to persuade and convince, rather than brainwash, has led tens of millions of followers to accept the toxic totalitarian line by tricking them into believing it’s their own. Ironically, at the outset the movement seemingly encourages people to think “independently” or “courageously.”





At first, all have, in the totalitarian belief system, a right to an opinion, or, in short, a right to believe anything. Soon, under the iron control of an empowered totalitarian movement, facts become worthless, kept or discarded according to an ideological litmus test. And once these movements achieve power, facts are ruthlessly manipulated or kept hidden to support the lie. Creationism is not about offering an alternative. Its goal is the destruction of the core values of the open society--the ability to think for oneself, to draw independent conclusions, to express dissent when judgment and common sense tell you something is wrong, to be self-critical, to challenge authority, to advocate for change and to accept that there are other views, different ways of being, that are morally and socially acceptable. We are beginning to see the growing intolerance that comes with the empowerment of these ideologues. There is a bill in the Texas Legislature to strip all mention of evolution from Texas school textbooks and institute mandatory Bible classes for all students. This is just the start.

And yet, coming from the modern age, these Christo-fascists cannot discount science. They employ jargon, methods and data that appear to be science, to make an argument for creationism. They have created

parallel research and scholarly institutions. They pump out articles in self-published journals to provide "evidence" that homosexuals can be cured, that global warming is a myth, that abortion can cause breast cancer, that something they call "post-abortion syndrome" leads to deep depression and suicide, and that abstinence-only education is an effective form of birth control. This pseudo-science has seeped into the public debate. It is disseminated by nervous and timid media anxious to give both sides in every argument. Those who have contempt for facts and truth, for honest research and inquiry, are given the same platform by the press as those who deal in a world of reality, fact and rationality.

The movement desperately needs the imprint of science to legitimize itself. It achieves this imprint by discrediting real science and claiming creationist science as true science. All attempts to argue the creationists out of their mythical belief, to persuade them with logic, evidence, scientific inquiry and fact, will fail. They have created a "fundamentalist science." They know they cannot return to the pre-Darwinian innocence that let them believe the Bible alone was enough. They need, in the midst of their flight from reality, to reassure their followers that science, science not contaminated by secular humanists

and nonbelievers, is on their side. In this they are a distinctly modern movement.

They seek the imprint of science and scholarship to legitimize myth. This is a characteristic they share with all modern totalitarian movements, which co-opt the disciplines of law, science, medicine and scholarship to give a modern veneer to their primitive and superstitious belief systems, systems that allow the rulers to dictate reality and truth. The "paraprofessional" organizations formed by the Christian right, organizations of teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers and scientists, mimic the activities of real professional groups. They seek to challenge the legitimacy and the power of the traditional organizations. The duplication of the structures and methods employed by the non-totalitarian world, the use of pseudo-science to dress up fantasy, is slowly undermining our legitimate scientific and educational institutions. It is destroying the foundations of our open society. It is ushering us into a world where lies are true.

Chris Hedges is the former Middle East bureau chief for *The New York Times* and the author of *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. © 2007 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved. View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/49811/>



I Think, Therefore I am an Atheist

by Dorothy B. Thompson

Dedicated to *FigLeaves* and written in iambic pentameter (as used by Shakespeare and the Blues)

I think, therefore I am an atheist;
 And left behind the role of conformist.
 It was Thomas Paine first planted the seed,
 He taught me religion's nothing I need.
 How lucky I once read *Age of Reason*.
 Thinking will lead me in every season.
 No need to swallow those big ol' god pills,
 Begging for mercy to deal with life's ills.
 Get rid of the guilt, and weed out the fears,
 No god up somewhere is causing you tears,
 Or sometimes throwing you a mercy bone.
 There is no hell where in pain you will groan,
 Fluffy white heaven where you'll be a drone,
 Stop striving to be a sanctified clone!
 Well, I kept on reading histories of gods.
 All of them are alike. What are the odds?
 They're all concocted to make one conform,
 Rely on your brain to think and inform.



Because *Survivor* shows have become so popular, the Southern TV Network decided to put on their own: *Surviving the South*. The contestants will start in Montgomery, Alabama, travel east to Georgia, continue north to South and North Carolina.

There they will turn west through Tennessee. Then they will travel down the Mississippi River through the state of that name and on to Louisiana, to continue east, ending up where they started. The rules require an overnight stay in a small town in each state visited.

Contestants will have long hair and drive a pink Volvo with New Jersey license plates. The car will be adorned with bumper stickers reading: *Support Gay Marriage; only Vegetarians know what to eat; NASCAR sucks; Jesus was a Failure; Smoking is for idiots; Hunting is murder; Hillary in 2008; and finally Outlaw Guns!*

The first one to make it back to Montgomery alive, wins. For their own safety no Black contestants will be selected.

- modified from Phil Proctor, *Funny Times* (August 2006) p. 20



Going to extremes

Terry Sanderson; 20 March 2007

http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/terry_sanderson/2007/03/why_fanatics_need_liberals.html

There's an argument in religious circles that goes: in order to undermine the fanatics we have to encourage the liberal elements of religion. If you want to stop suicide bombers, you have to encourage the more moderate voices in Islam to speak up. The same argument surfaces regularly in Christian circles - yes, there are fundamentalists out there doing horrible things, but you can't judge all Christians by the activities of the minority at the extremes, it goes. Why not support the good guys who are doing their best and being ever so nice?

It's a seductive argument and I used to subscribe to it myself. But I've changed my mind.

As president of the National Secular Society I am constantly approached by religious groups wanting to engage us in their pursuit of "interfaith dialogue". They want, they say, to "break down barriers", and who doesn't? But once involved in these groups, it soon becomes clear that they are all from the liberal tradition. One set of moderates talking to another. The people who really need to engage - the jihadis and the literalists - are off practising the sectarian warfare they are so fond of. Let's talk? No, let's abuse human rights, persecute infidels and preach hate.

I've come to realise that the delusions of the liberals are not qualitatively different from those entertained by the Pat Robertsons or Abu Hamzas of this world. The danger that these apparently harmless liberals pose is that of enabling the fanatics, who happily use them as human shields. Just as the terrorists of the Middle East will hide out in schools and hospitals to avoid being targeted by enemy bombs, so the ideological terrorists hide behind the liberals and the good-natured in order to spread their doctrine of intimidation and terror.

The poor, bleating liberals who are constantly complaining that their faith is not only misunderstood by its non-adherents, but also perverted by the fanatics who share it. There they stand, having spent a lifetime reinforcing in their heads the childhood brainwashing that they will never overcome, and making excuses for the same beliefs that motivate bombers and theocrats, misogynists and homophobes. This hinders the rest of us getting a clear run at the villains.

The liberals pave the way, open the doors and give succor to the very people they say bring their faith into disrepute. But it's no good the liberals trying to dissociate themselves from their wilder compatriots

in faith. They promote and praise the same holy books that the fanatics use as justification for their murderous activities. "But the terrorists and the bigots are not true Christians/Muslims" say the liberals, while the bigots and the terrorists say exactly the same thing about them. Or, as Sam Harris said in a recent essay:

The problem is that wherever one stands on this continuum, one inadvertently shelters those who are more fanatical than oneself from criticism. Ordinary fundamentalist Christians, by maintaining that the Bible is the perfect word of God, inadvertently support the Dominionists, men and women who, by the millions, are quietly working to turn our country into a totalitarian theocracy reminiscent of John Calvin's Geneva. Christian moderates, by their lingering attachment to the unique divinity of Jesus, protect the faith of fundamentalists from public scorn. Christian liberals 'who aren't sure what they

believe but just love the experience of going to church occasionally' deny the moderates a proper collision with scientific rationality. And in this way centuries have come and gone without an honest word being spoken about God in our society.

I am now accustomed to being accused of practising "fundamentalist secularism" and "atheist extremism" by religious reactionaries, but now the terms are being eagerly embraced by liberals. But a moment's thought would tell the liberals that democratic secularism is their best friend. Not only does it protect those of no belief from being persecuted by over-mighty and ruthless religious regimes, but it offers protection to the smaller religious groups who have become used to being stamped on by their holier-than-thou big brothers (try being a Christian in Saudi Arabia, for instance).

Liberals in religious traditions may not have evil intentions towards their fellow men, but they provide cover for their fellow believers who do. ☩

Quote

Never mind that Voltaire probably never said exactly what is so often attributed to him: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." That famous quotation seems to have originated in an early 20th-century paraphrase. But this was indeed the spirit of Voltaire.

The order of phrases is vital. Too many recent responses in such cases - from the Rushdie affair onward - have had this backhanded syntax: "Of course I defend his/her freedom of expression, but..." The Voltaire principle gets it the right way round: first the dissent, but then the unconditional solidarity. Now we are all called upon to play our part. The future of freedom depends on words prevailing over knives.

Unquote:



Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why
by Bart D. Ehrman
(New York: HarperCollins, 2005)

This is truly a message from the proverbial horse's mouth. Bart Ehrman is one of the experts on the period and languages of the gospels, the early church fathers, and related Christian writings. He starts with a long introduction of his own development and over thirty years of scholarship. He grew up in a religious family, and earned his first degree from the Moody Bible Institute; a place so primitive it made Wheaton College look progressive. He eventually went on to Princeton to study Greek, Latin and other needed languages, to become one of the foremost researchers on the Bible and its times.

Ehrman gives us a clear outline of the history of the Christian scriptures. He relates what it means to call Christianity a "religion of the book;" for books, bound pages made of papyrus, instead of long rolls were invented by the early Christians. They were cheap, easy to carry, but did not last a long time. Hence, we have virtually no manuscripts predating the third and fourth century. What we have are copies of copies made by scribes who carefully drew them letter by letter.

Who these scribes were is of crucial importance. Ehrman spends a chapter on the copyists of the early Christian centuries. They were amateurs, not trained scribes, who often had an agenda, that is ideas about what the text should read. And, they made common copying mistakes of fatigue, misreading, skipping lines, etc. The final insight is that we have really no clear idea what the original writings of the New Testament may have been. Ehrman points out, that if Paul or the other early letter writers did not pen their own script, but dictated their letters, even the first copy may have had errors. The scribe may have misheard or misspelled what Paul said.

All we can reconstruct is the earliest or best manuscript, and that is what scholars aim for. The errors or disagreements found among the manuscripts are neither few, nor are they unimportant. Ehrman writes that the number of errors have not been counted but are in the hundreds of thousands. In fact, he recites a widely used comment, there are more errors

in the New Testament than there are words. Most are mere slips of the pen, but some are absolutely overwhelming, with major doctrinal points hanging on them.

In the first centuries there was no agreed on New Testament, which became agreed on only after 395, when Christianity became the official religion of the empire and the orthodox could enforce their views. Before that there were many gospels, letters, acts, and apocalypses having very different perspectives from what eventually was accepted.

The New Testament itself emerged out of these conflicts over God (or the gods), as one group of believers acquired more converts than all the others and decided which books should be included in the canon of scripture. During the second and third centuries, however, there was no agreed-upon canon, and no agreed-upon, theology. Instead, there was a wide range of diversity: diverse groups asserting diverse theologies based on diverse written texts, all claiming to be written by apostles of Jesus. (p. 153)

Ehrman analyses some of the confusion prevalent in early writings. Many of the scriptures accepted today, reflect the orthodox combating various heresies, at least as they saw them. Writings against the Ebionites, who were Jewish "adoptionists," accepting Jesus as a human only. Against the Docetists, who say Jesus was purely divine, a god; and the Gnostics, who interpreted Jesus as a human inhabited for a time by god. Some interpolations in Paul are directed against uppity women, who should not speak in Church, yet the same letter praises a woman sponsoring a church. Much has been added to the original manuscripts that is directed against the Jews and against the pagans, both groups at times opposed to the growth of the Christian community.

This book is indispensable for anyone wishing to understand the New Testament as a very human document. Nothing in Ehrman convinces me these scriptures represent the will or word of any god. Ehrman himself tells us what he believed as a youngster, and how he became a scholar. He does not inform us what he believes now. Having read about his research, I find it difficult to think he remains a believing Christian of any kind.

- Wolf Roder



May Poluck:
May 8, 2007 6:30 PM



April Meeting:
Tuesday, April 24, 2007
7:00 PM



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

FIG

Our Purpose

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

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



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

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

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

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail figinfo@gofigger.org, or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.