

FIG LEAVES

Volume 19 Issue 4

April 2010

April FIG Meeting:

Saturday March 24, 2010
2:00-5:00 PM

A Celebration of the Life of Helen Kagin.

Saturday, April 24th at 2:00 PM
Lakeridge Hall (Map & address below)

Come help us celebrate the extraordinary life of a freethought leader, co-founder of Camp Quest, and an all around wonderful person.



Helen Smith Kagin
January 31, 1934-February 17, 2010

This will not be a freethought only event. Included will be friends and family of Helen and all the people who cherish her and her memory.

It is an all inclusive celebration. Master of Ceremonies will be the Reverend Mendel Adams, a liberal retired minister and friend of the Kagins. This is going to be a casual fun celebration in the spirit of potluck. If you can bring a dish (something more finger food, veggies, crackers, drinks etc) let us know. We are planning on a lot of folks so we are encouraging RSVP's here.

Hosted by: **Edwin Kagin and Caroline(Caeli) Good**
Please RSVP by emailing Caeli at caeling@fuse.net.

Saturday, April 24, 2010
Lakeridge Hall,
7210 Pippin Road,
Cincinnati, 45239,
Phone: (513) 542-1244.



May Meeting, Sunday, May 2, 2010 - 3 PM

The Sharonville Convention Center,
11355 Chester Road, Cincinnati, OH 45246.

We are co-sponsoring a presentation by Dr. Darrel Ray, author of *The God Virus: How Religion Infects Our Lives and Culture*. This provocative book explores the role of religion as it enters the lives of countless individuals, beginning in childhood and infecting their behavior, professions, sex lives, and virtually every aspect of living. Dr. Ray is also the founder of Recovering From Religion, an organization dedicated to helping people navigate the path out of religion. A review of the book by John Welte is on page 11.

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Events

April Memorial for Helen

Saturday April 24 2:00-5:00 PM
Lakeridge Hall
7210 Pippin Road,
Cincinnati, 45239,
Phone: (513) 542-1244.

May Meeting

Sunday, May 2, 2010, 3:00 PM,
Sharonville Convention Center,
11355 Chester Road,
Cincinnati, OH 45246

FIG Community Dinner

Join the FIG Gang for Dinner!
Tuesday, May 11, 2010, 6:30 PM
Bronte Bistro, 2692 Madison Rd.
Cincinnati, OH 45208
RSVP by 5/8 to Donna Loughry
961-7331 or dloughry@fuse.net.



March Meeting

Talking About Atheism and Humanism

Shawn Jeffers and John Welte spoke to the Free Inquiry Group concerning the ways that we as freethinkers can and do talk about ourselves and our world views. The goal of this meeting was to exchange ideas and have a conversation to determine how we represent ourselves to the public, co-workers, friends, relatives and the media.

Shawn spoke first about the internal differences in how we label ourselves. Whether you call yourself an atheist, agnostic, secular humanist or describe yourself using another label, the point to remember is that we all have similar goals. The Secular Coalition for America is an organization that has the support of ten groups of non-theists that have banded together to lobby lawmakers on behalf of their members. Their common goals are to keep religion out of government, stop the privileging of religious groups and ensure that our country retains freedom of religion while allowing freedom from religion. This organization allows the groups to effect change and reach goals by working together, despite our differences and other group goals.

Shawn mentioned the power of coming out stories, and how this time is usually difficult for a freethinker. When you have distanced yourself from religion, it is natural to want to share your new freedom and sense of relief. It must be remembered that friends and family are not able to share these feelings with you since you have changed and they have not. Greta Christina is a popular blogger who compares the coming out stories of atheists to the coming out stories of gays. A long process of reflection is followed by a strong sense of empowerment that often must be restrained in conversations with people who are close. The atheist/humanist movement can learn from aspects of the LGBT movement. We can learn about the power of inclusion, how to find and form community and work together towards common goals.

Todd Stiefel, founder of the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, recently donated money so that a Mississippi community could hold a senior prom. A high school had cancelled their prom because a lesbian student wanted to bring her girlfriend as her date. In a statement issued by Mr. Stiefel and his wife, who is a Christian, they said, "We believe values of love, tolerance and equality should trump the fundamentalist teachings of hate, discrimination and prejudice. We both long for the day when the majority of theists and non-theists join forces to oppose fundamentalism and put reason-based ethics above scripture and dogma. We hope our offer for the prom is a step in the right direction." This is a great example of theists and non-theists working together to resolve a situation and achieve a positive result for all concerned. It is also a great example of a non-theist reaching out to help others.

Shawn concluded his part of the talk by showing two video clips. The first featured Richard Dawkins and was shown to illustrate that while Dawkins is a great speaker within the non-theist community, he may not be the best choice to speak to theists about our thought. The second video was a clip from the Michael Shermer interview with Georgia Purdom, a molecular geneticist who works at AIG's Creation Museum. Shermer showed a lot of patience and restraint when interacting with this fundamentalist and creationist. He is probably a better choice to speak to religionists on behalf of non-theists.



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

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Memberships run from:

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If you join during the year, you receive a \$2 discount for each month that has passed.

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



John Welte began the second part of the talk by acknowledging the example set by the LGBT movement and comparing that to the civil rights movement of the 1960's. James Brown sang a controversial song then; "I'm Black and I'm Proud." We should be proud of our non-theism especially since in most cases we arrived at that conclusion through long introspection, study and rational thought. Coming out as a non-theist challenges religion without being confrontational. By joining organizations, we can gain the benefits of community and show our growing numbers.

The promotion of science and reason is another way to talk about our non-theism. Challenging superstition and supernatural beliefs, especially in government, will help to open a conversation about how we can live without religious faith. Books, some TV shows, websites, blogs, and podcasts can illustrate our positions and entertain at the same time. Share them with others. Online polls and petitions are becoming good ways to express our opinions.

It is important to consider whom you are talking to about your atheism. Pick your battles. An online chat room is anonymous, so you don't have to worry about how you relate to people. But if you are speaking to a co-worker you may have to change tactics. Sometimes you may agree to disagree and avoid the topic of religion in future conversations. Sadly, you may have to keep quiet to keep your job.

In his book, *The God Virus*, Dr Darrel Ray relates what I think is good advice when speaking to friends and family with whom you want to maintain a good relationship. Openness and acceptance encourage discussion. Be honest and willing to listen. You can listen without agreeing. Try not to attack and put people on the defensive. "Defensive people do not learn or change because they cannot listen," says Dr. Ray. They become more entrenched. Learning to communicate with those infected with the god virus without causing defensive-

ness and entrenchment is important.

Dr. Ray's list of four principles of interaction are shown in the box on this page.

We are often in positions of influence and are leaders in thought. We need to show that non-theism is a viable life stance. One way to do that is by providing the example of doing good. A 2000-year-old proverb says, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." Religion will be with us for a while and non-violent resistance will be necessary regarding some issues. But, in *Good Without God*, Greg Epstein says, "Most religious people are not anti-humanist just as most humanists are not anti-religion. We can work together on common secular goals. We share common secular values." The best way to communicate about non-theism is to be positive and concentrate on what we do believe, establish respect from others, and show ourselves to be caring, contributing members of society. We should strive to establish a world where governments and the general public favor liberty over dogma, and freethinkers are overt, united and influential. ☘

- reported by John Welte

Dr. Ray's list of four principles of interaction :

- * Be respectful.
You can respect someone without respecting their religion.
- * Recognize that they are in a trap of their own making.
They are the ones addicted to religion. You cannot lecture them out of their trap.
- * Be an active listener.
They will be more likely to listen to you.
- * You have nothing to convert them to.
If you try to convert them, you will likely be disappointed. Also, remember the process by which you became a secular humanist was not a "conversion."



In the true spirit of the season.

Pastor Bill Cornelius of the Bay Area Fellowship, the largest church in Corpus Christi, Texas, really wanted good attendance at Easter services this year. The church plans to give away 15,000 gift bags, each with about \$300 worth of goods and gift certificates. But wait! That's not all! There will also be flat-screen TVs, skateboards, electric guitars, bicycles, furniture and 15 cars. In all, about \$4.5 million worth in the gift bags and around \$2 million more in other swag. The church had to cut an opening in the chapel wall so the cars can be pulled in Easter morning. "Imagine how great heaven is going to be if you feel that excited about a car," Cornelius says. (Corpus Christi *Caller-Times*) Now folks you know why religion is better than atheism. You unbelievers surely can't match God's bounty.



FIG LEAVES



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



Hear! Hear! *Answers in Atheism* at

<www.answersinatheism.net>

JOIN US! - We are live on the internet Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 8 pm EST. Our shows are also available as archived audio files, so you can listen later at any time. Please tune in at www.answersinatheism.net.

The Answers in Atheism crew

FIG Is Now On Facebook!

If you have a Facebook account, become a Fan of FIG. To join you can type in this long weblink: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Cincinnati-OH/FIG-Free-Inquiry-Group-of-Cincinnati-and-Northern-Kentucky/306015475868> or it is much easier to search for "Free Inquiry Group," it is the first option on the search page.

By being a Fan you can receive FIG updates and meeting notices and RSVP for events such as the monthly FIG Community Dinners.

The Cincinnati Atheists April Meetup

Monday, 19 April 2010, 6:30 pm
at Molly Malones, 6111 Montgomery Road
Pleasant Ridge, OH 45213, Phone: 513-531-0700

Meetup Description

Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists and Freethinkers meet here. Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics.

This is a purely social gathering. No agenda, no speaker, no rules of order. If you'd prefer a bit more structure, please check the calendar for lectures, FIG meetings, and other events.

<http://www.mollymalonescincinnati.com>

They have wheelchair ramp. Good menu - Great food. Best selection of single malt scotches in town. Equal distance from Milford - to the Levee - to West Chester. Located in Pleasant Ridge (Silverton Area) on Montgomery Road.

Parking can be a pain - but they have a standing agreement with the church behind them to use their parking lot after Church hours.



Science Book Club 2010 schedule All meetings on 3rd Sunday of each month at 2:30 in room 3A of downtown Main Public Library unless otherwise noted.

Apr 18 - *What's Next : Dispatches on the Future of Science* : [original essays from a new generation of scientists]; ed. Max Brockman

May 16 - *Power, Sex, Suicide: Mitochondria and the Meaning of Life*; Nick Lane

June 13 - (2nd Sunday) *How to Build a Dinosaur: extinction doesn't have to be forever* ; Jack R. Horner

July 18- *Logicomix: an Epic Search for Truth*; Apostolos K. Doxiadis, Christos Papadimitriou

Aug 15 - *Unscientific America* ; Chris Mooney

Sept 19 - *The Evolution of Consciousness: of Darwin, Freud, and cranial fire : the origins of the way we think*; Robert E. Ornstein

Oct 17 - *The Roving Mind*; Isaac Asimov

Nov 21- *The Little Green book of Awakening*; James George

Dec 19 - *Physics for Future Presidents: The Science behind the Headlines*; Richard A. Muller





Imaginary Science, The Great Drug War South Of The Border, But No Penalties.

The United States and Mexico are separated by a 3000 km border that stretches across the most forbidding desert in North America. Mexican drug traffickers, for whom the US drug market is El Dorado, are fighting a bloody war with the democratically elected government of Mexico over control of the border. According to Monday's New York Times, outgunned Mexican officials spent more than \$10 million to purchase high-tech dowsing rods to detect caches of drugs, or weapons or anything else you have in mind.

The first application was as a golf-ball finder sold in Golf-Pro shops. The Mexican army says the devices are extremely helpful. Made in the UK by Global Technologies Ltd., the GT 200 has no sensors. Priced at more than \$20,000, it's a plastic rod attached to a hand grip by a swivel, allowing the rod to point in any direction depending on the orientation of the handle. That also describes the ADE 650 sold by ATSC Ltd., another UK company which recently sold 1,500 imaginary detectors to the Iraqis to search for explosives at checkpoints. Could Global Technologies and ATSC be the same company, switching names and locations to avoid exposure?

The British government took action, notifying Mexico and other countries that the GT 200 "may not work." Of course it "works;" it just doesn't detect anything. That's not its purpose. Human Rights Watch is worried that people are actually being arrested and charged solely on the basis of readings from the device. That could happen; in the United States, however, local law enforcement agencies use these devices to justify probable-cause for searches. Whether it's done with a willow branch or a GT 200, dowsing falls in a special category of voodoo science, along with homeopathy and prayer, that we might call "pretend science." We treat pretend science much too lightly. It ignores the most basic principle of science: cause and effect. Causality should be stressed in the education of every child.

The British government is said to be considering legislation to stop exports of the GT 200 and similar devices, but a British diplomat in Mexico said of the GT 200, "It's now up to the Mexican authorities." Why is it that the people who market imaginary science never seem to go to jail? I served several State Attorneys General as a expert witness in cases involving charges of fraudulent science. Every case ended with a consent decree in which the perpetrator agreed to stop cheating residents of that state.

- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 19 March 2010

The Believer Who Bought Science, Twice.

Sir John Templeton was born into a middle-class family in the Bible-belt town of Winchester, TN. His parents, devout Presbyterians, emphasized the virtues of thrift and piety. Templeton learned both lessons so well that in 1968, he renounced his US citizenship and moved to the Bahamas, becoming a British citizen to avoid the US income tax. Having become one of the richest men in the world, he was knighted by the Queen. While Templeton may have genuinely believed the Christian myth, he also respected science. Why shouldn't he? After all, the scientific revolution led to the fantastic growth in the world economy that made him a billionaire. Believing that science and theology are two windows onto the same landscape, he set out to persuade scientists to delve into religion. He went directly to the American Association for the Advancement of Science with an offer of \$1 million to create the AAAS Dialogue between Science and Religion. Not everyone was happy about the AAAS selling part of its soul to Templeton. Two years ago Templeton died, but the monster he created carries on without him.

A Bigger Prize: The National Academy Of Sciences.

Francisco Ayala, an evolutionary geneticist and molecular biologist at the University of California, Berkeley was awarded the 2010 Templeton Prize in a ceremony yesterday at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC. A genuinely good person, Ayala authored *On Being a Scientist*, a NAS pamphlet on scientific ethics that should be part of the education of every scientist. Ayala is a staunch opponent of Intelligent Design.

The first recipient of the Templeton Prize was Mother Theresa in 1973; in 1982 it was Billy Graham, and in 1993 Charles Colson of Watergate fame, but his award was delayed until he got out of prison. Most of the others who won the prize are not household names. In 1999, however, Templeton had an epiphany. Every recipient since has been a scientist or philosopher, including one Nobel laureate, Charles Townes. News accounts put the cash value of the Templeton prize at \$1 million, but it's now closer to \$1.5 million, making it the largest cash prize for intellectual accomplishment in the world. The endowment for the prize stipulates that the cash value shall always be larger than the Nobel Prize. It's awarded annually for "spiritual progress." How did the NAS get into this? Having once sought to buy the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Templeton foundation must have set its sights on a bigger prize.

- *What's New* Robert Park, 19 March 2010



IRS examiner to victim: "Sir, praying now can only be applied to next year's taxes."





Cell Phones, Again!

They certainly have an effect on the human brain. Whether the effect has anything to do with cancer is another matter. The ubiquitous presence of cell phones only started about a decade ago. If there is a more lengthy incubation period associated with cell-phone radiation we could be headed for a virtual epidemic. Just in

case, the media have now taken to reporting the relative intensity levels of various models. That sort of listing does not put people's minds at rest, but so far there is nothing to implicate the cell phone in brain cancer. To the observation that microwave photons are not energetic enough to break a chemical bond in DNA, several readers observed that microwaves can heat tissue, which is certainly true. However, the very large blood flow in the brain serves as an effective coolant.

- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 19 March 2010

The Maine Problem With Cell Phones Is Scientific Ignorance.

The use of cell phones has become ubiquitous in modern society. There is also a lot of brain cancer. This has led a lot of people to suggest that the two are connected, and the state of Maine is considering legislation that would require cell phone manufacturers to print a warning on the product. But has the incidence of brain cancer increased at anything like the numbers of cell phones. It is a troubling issue for most physicists who recognize that cell phones almost certainly can't cause cancer. All known cancer agents act by breaking chemical bonds in DNA, creating mutant strands that may multiply to become cancers. Microwave photons are orders of magnitude short of being able to break chemical bonds. The Federal Communications Commission, the Food and Drug Administration and the American Cancer Society recognize this, but for most Americans the words "quantum mechanics" are simply an announcement that you won't understand what follows. Even a very bright high school student probably won't have any idea what you're talking about.

- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 12 March 2010

Where Is The Deep Space Climate Observatory?

You've seen the snapshot of the sunlit face of Earth, taken by Apollo 17 astronauts on 7 Dec 1972, more than 100 times. It's the "blue marble," one of the most widely distributed photographic images in existence. It always moves us, but never changes. Al Gore dreamed of a continuous live image transmitted from a solar satellite located at the L1 point between the Earth and the Sun. Gore chose to call it Triana after Rodrigo de Triana., the crew member on the Pinta who first sighted the New World. But it has a far more important scientific purpose in the climate debate: is Earth's climate

determined entirely by the Sun, or is there a component of anthropogenic warming? Built and paid for, Triana's launch was delayed into the Bush administration by the Challenger disaster. Bush didn't want anything to have Gore's initials on it, so the name was changed to the Deep Space Climate Observatory. But Bush didn't like that either, so the mission was canceled. But Triana, or DSCOVR, thankfully was not destroyed. It was locked up in its own Guantánamo, a warehouse in Greenbelt, MD. A year ago Congress voted the money to refurbish DSCOVR, but we've heard little since. *WN* finds it's getting an extreme makeover. The opposition to DSCOVR is based on the fact that the L1 is a retro-reflection (hotspot) point. And so it is, but DSCOVR will not be exactly at the L1 point. It will orbit the L1. In any case it is possible to analyze hotspot reflections.

- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 12 March 2010

Science Board Hides American Ignorance.

The National Science Board, established by Congress as a national science policy body, oversees NSF and provides independent science policy advice to the President and Congress. It issues a huge biennial report, *Science and Engineering Indicators*, which is a compendium of quantitative data on the science enterprise around the world. The results are disturbing. In their understanding of science, polls found, most Americans are falling behind, even though much of the progress was made by American scientists and engineers. Congress needs to hear these facts. Instead, poll questions dealing with the origin of the universe and evolution were simply excised from the report. The board member who took the lead in removing the text was John T. Bruer, a philosopher with close ties to the Vatican. I hope that Science will publish the apocryphal text so we may judge its relevance for ourselves.

- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 9 April 10

Borlaug's Two Contending Powers.

As told by Kieron Humphrey on *BBC News*, Zambian farmer Elleman Mumbia broke with local custom to practice scientific "conservation farming." His tiny farm flourished. Some neighbors muttered about juju (magic), but he has become something of a hero on national media. The BBC story stops there, but a sadder chapter is being written. In his 1970 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Norman Borlaug said, "We are dealing with two opposing forces, the scientific power of food production and the biologic power of human reproduction." K.H. von Hoffmann, who called my attention to the BBC story, points out that Mr. Mumbia has six children (about average in Zambia). The farm is too small to be subdivided. Most of his children will look for jobs in the city and end up in the slums, as young people are doing all over Africa.

- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 9 April 10



The Night A Guru Tried To Kill Me On Tv

When Surender Sharma said he could kill me with magic, I had to put him to the test. The result was a triumph for rationalism

by Sanal Edamaruku, *Rationalist International Bulletin* http://www.twitter.com/Sanal_Edamaruku

In different cultures, sense of humour varies. In the south Indian state of Kerala, from where I come, many people have great fun with this arguably shortest joke anywhere in circulation: A dog tried to open a coconut. And what happened? you may ask. Well, nothing; that's the joke. It did not work, of course.

1. My encounter with Pandit Surender Sharma had something of a Kerala joke stretched out for hours. Nobody laughed, though, when he tried to kill me with tantric rituals on live TV. Except me, of course.

It was in March 2008. The tantra master and I were studio guests on a popular TV show to debate on the subject of "Tantric power vs science". He boasted that he was able to kill anyone by mantra and tantra within three minutes. I grabbed my chance to put him in check and offered myself for a test. Caught on air, he couldn't escape without losing face - and his high-profile clientele. So our unprecedented experiment began. The master started chanting his trade mark "killer" mantra that has become quite hit on the internet since: "Om lingalingalinga, kilikilikili!"

After several rounds of chanting failed to knock me out, he tried the whole arsenal of his tantric gimmickry on me, obviously without any result either. I was just laughing. In his embarrassment, he proposed I was protected by a supreme god whom I served - never mind that I am an atheist! Finally, he resorted to foul play, pressing his thumbs against my temples, hard enough to kill me the conventional way, but was cautioned by the umpiring anchor. With no way to escape, he upped the stakes and agreed to perform the "ultimate destruction ceremony" that would kill me dead sure. With ratings soaring, the programme overran, rolling on and on in "breaking news" mode. The channel announced another round of our epic battle for the night show.

Same game, this time in proper style: open night sky, the auspicious hour before midnight, me sitting on the tantric altar, blazing flames, white smoke, voodoo doll, peacock feather, mustard seed and all that. The master, besmirched with ashes from the cemetery ground and after the prescribed ritual consumption of sex, meat and alcohol at his tantric best, was assisted by a chorus of vigorous mantra chanters: "Om lingalingalinga, kilikilikili!"

Well, the pig still didn't fly. But the mere idea of it kept millions and millions of viewers all over India glued to their TV sets. I was laughing throughout. Not just because it was a scene of superb absurdity, but mainly because I felt that so many people out there in front of their screens urgently needed a signal from me that there was nothing to be worried about. In fact, I laughed the tantric out of power. After hysteric escalation and a dramatic countdown, it all ended as you would well have anticipated, with the defeated tantric silently quitting the field - down, out and over. Reason had won the day, as James Randi later happily commented.

Life is not always like that. But this TV show turned the tables. It influenced the climate in public debates inside and outside Indian TV studios far more deeply than I expected when I caught hold of Sharma. Our experiment became a textbook example for the hollowness of tantra-mantra power.



Prick a pin in the great balloon and it comes crashing down, that was the message. But make no mistake; it's not always as easy and rarely as amusing. Recently, we were able to put behind bars, with the help of a TV documentary, a tantric who used to make his living with a dangerous stunt of rare brutality: he trampled on the bodies of little infants brought to him in hundreds by their illiterate parents to benefit from

the godly powers of his feet. A local politician and high priest, to whom I talked during the programme, defended the holy man in the name of religion. This shows the complexity of the problem.

For several decades, rationalists in India have been working quite successfully on different levels to educate people against spiritual fraudsters of all denominations and ranks. In earlier years limited to (still important) village campaigns, the television revolution has opened up new dimensions. Last year, I personally attended some 240 programmes on various channels. Some of them made an enormous impact.

While Saibaba celebrated a recent birthday, as usual surrounded by India's high society including top politicians, one TV channel gave me an opportunity to perform and explain his trademark tricks for any kid to try at home - a landslide success, but the king kept sitting on his throne. However, these kinds of superstitions are slowly coming into the firing line of a courageous new media force supporting the rationalist line. The next generation of India's top godmen are already starting to appreciate the shift. Recently, one of them threw away the mike and fled with bodyguards and armored cars when I came into a TV studio. Pity.



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Declaration of the Free

by Robert G. Ingersoll, 1889

We have no falsehoods to defend
 We want the facts;
 Our force, our thought, we do not
 spend
 In vain attacks.
 And we will never meanly try
 To save some fair and pleasing lie.

The simple truth is what we ask
 Not the ideal;
 We've set ourselves the noble task
 To find the real.
 If all there is naught but dross,
 We want to know and bear our loss.

We will not willingly be fooled,
 By fables nursed;
 Our hearts, by earnest thought, are
 schooled
 To bear the worst;
 And we can stand erect and dare
 All things. all facts that really are.

We have no God to serve or fear,
 No hell to shun,
 No devil with malicious leer.
 When life is done
 An endless sleep may close our eyes.
 A sleep with neither dreams nor sighs.

We have no master on the land --
 No king in air --
 Without a manacle we stand,
 Without a prayer,
 Without a fear of coming night,
 We seek the truth, we love the light.

We do not bow before a guess,
 A vague unknown;
 A senseless force we do not bless
 In solemn tone.
 When evil comes we do not curse,
 Or thank because it is no worse.

When cyclones rend -- when lightning
 blights,
 'Tis naught but fate;
 There is no God of wrath who smites
 In heartless hate.
 Behind the things that injure man
 There is no purpose, thought, or plan.

We waste no time in useless dread,
 In trembling fear;
 The present lives, the past is dead,
 And we are here,
 All welcome guests at life's great feast
 --
 We need no help from ghost or priest.

Our life is joyous, jocund, free --
 Not one a slave
 Who bends in fear the trembling knee,
 And seeks to save
 A coward soul from future pain;
 Not one will cringe or crawl for gain.

The jeweled cup of love we drain,
 And friendship's wine
 Now swiftly flows in every vein
 With warmth divine.
 And so we love and hope and dream
 That in death's sky there is a gleam.

We walk according to our light,
 Pursue the path
 That leads to honor's stainless height,
 Careless of wrath
 Or curse of God, or priestly spite,
 Longing to know and do the right.

We love our fellow-man, our kind,
 Wife, child, and friend.
 To phantoms we are deaf and blind,
 But we extend
 The helping hand to the distressed;
 By lifting others we are blessed.

Love's sacred flame within the heart
 And friendship's glow;
 While all the miracles of art
 Their wealth bestow
 Upon the thrilled and joyous brain,
 And present raptures banish pain.

We love no phantoms of the skies,
 But living flesh,
 With passion's soft and soulful eyes,
 Lips warm and fresh,
 And cheeks with health's red flag
 unfurled,
 The breathing angels of this world.

The hands that help are better far
 Than lips that pray.
 Love is the ever gleaming star
 That leads the way,
 That shines, not on vague worlds of
 bliss,
 But on a paradise in this.

We do not pray, or weep, or wail;
 We have no dread,
 No fear to pass beyond the veil
 That hides the dead.
 And yet we question, dream, and
 guess,
 But knowledge we do not possess.

We ask, yet nothing seems to know;
 We cry in vain.
 There is no "master of the show"
 Who will explain,
 Or from the future tear the mask;
 And yet we dream, and still we ask

Is there beyond the silent night
 An endless day;
 Is death a door that leads to light?
 We cannot say.
 The tongueless secret locked in fate
 We do not know. -- We hope and wait.





God is Love

The Evolution of God

by Robert Wright

(New York: Little, Brown, 2009)

a review by P.J. Rooks

God is love. The god of the twentieth century, that is. The god of colored Easter eggs and reasons for the season, intercultural naivety, rampant xenophobia and rose-tinted salvation lies, and according to many scientists on the deathbed of his twilight years, a burnt offering on the altar of progress.

Or is God merely evolving? From the days of religion's infancy when primitive shamans stepped forward to answer questions such as "What is going on when we dream?" or "Why do bad things happen?" right up to the modern era of globalization and the waning idea of a personal savior, Robert Wright asserts in his new book, *The Evolution of God*, that religion acts as something of a mirror to social Darwinism, reflecting not only our personal bonds with the all-powerful, but also the relationships of our communities to one another through such mediums as trade and conquest. As he did in his previous bestselling book, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, Wright brings game theory and economic principles to bear on our tattered human history and finds that what unfolds is the childhood of an evolving god taking the next step on the road to maturity.

You Got Your Chocolate in My Peanut Butter...

Back in the day, says Wright, religion wasn't about the pursuit of a moral good, the establishment of a communal value system, or the hope of personal salvation; religion's first steps primarily involved explaining the unexplainable, with thunderstorms, natural disasters, and disease ranking high on the list of metaphysical concerns.

The social order grew, however, and the sphere of the divine shrank as skirmishes and syncretism led the way toward a snowballing monotheism. Once-distant tribes and communities faced one another and, with each encounter, they wrangled with the question: friend or foe? The beauty of polytheism was that since there was no One True God, many societies — when it came to celestial figureheads — were happy to mix and match. Sometimes the results were delicious, sometimes not.

Israel's tragic adoption of a step-god, according to Wright, provides an early example of the political acrobatics that defined the times. In a marriage arranged by their fathers, the union of Jezebel and Ahab mutually benefited both sides through increased Phoenician port access for Israel (Ahab's side of the equation) and increased trade opportunities for Phoenicia (Jezebel's side). The trouble was that back then the kingdoms of the wedding party didn't just lose a royal son or daughter, they gained a whole new

menagerie of gods. Wright speculates that while the marriage probably hiked the gross national product of each country, the increased competition was bad news for the Israeli merchants and Jezebel's Canaanite god-head, Baal, carried the burden of blame. What followed was a bloody showdown in which Baal and some 450 of his followers were summarily (or in Baal's case, metaphorically) executed.

Sometimes, however, it was better to make nice with the new neighbors. Close encounters among nations might bring business opportunities and those looking to capitalize were quick to erect monuments to the new gods and even to merge the deities. It was a convincing way of saying, "See, we're not so different, you and I — and hey, while you're here, wanna buy a widget?" It even worked well for conquering empires who wanted to rapidly bury the hatchet with their conquerors — not to mention that the newly oppressed were less likely to incite rebellion when they were allowed, at least, to keep their own gods.

"People are more likely to be open to foreign gods when they see themselves playing a non-zero-sum game with foreigners — see their fortunes as positively correlated with the foreigners' fortunes, see themselves and the foreigners as, to some extent, in the same boat," explains Wright. Shunning the obvious cynicism here, he also points out that it's pretty standard for most people to be more critical of enemies and more forgiving

of friends, so treating new nations similarly is no big leap. "The link between self-interest and tolerance needn't be a matter of *conscious* calculation," Wright continues. "The law of religious tolerance grows organically out of human nature."

And for Those Who Cannot Rule or Trade, Vengeance

Or to put it more simply, "Our god's on his way and boy, are *you* gonna get it!" The history of Israel is long on strife, slavery, and submission. Wright quotes Second Isaiah, who savagely drafts the due solace of the nationally humbled with, "I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the Lord your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob." Amusingly, Wright calls this fearsome big brother the "empire-wielding god of reprimand," and points out the "ironic logic that the more massively your nation is menaced, the more powerful your god must be."

Then, as now, prophecies of doom and glory served the downtrodden, and Jesus, an apocalyptic Jew and street preacher, picked up the "Our god's bigger than your god" message where the Old Testament left off. He believed that the end times were nigh and that the kingdom would be arriving on earth any time soon, like next Tuesday. Packing your spiritual bags was a good bit



of advice for the faithful and the saved, which, by the way, only included Israelites. Although most of his teaching was based on writings already in place, Wright points out that what Jesus may have done differently was to take a message intended to be applied on the international stage — that Israel will rule while neighboring empires grovel and fall — and spin it toward personal justice. The idea that the last will be first which had, prior to Jesus, always meant “among nations,” now took on the new meaning of “among Israelites,” giving the earliest hints of the personal salvation and brotherly love concepts that Paul would later muscle into a widespread Christian mission.

Any God Will Do

As the years went by, though, and the kingdom of God’s arrival on earth became increasingly tardy, followers began to express concerns. Like, for example, what about those who died before God’s return? How were they to be saved? Explanations emerged in later gospels, particularly Luke, who, according to Wright, may have leaned heavily on the tales of Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld, and placed Jesus in a heavenly position of judging the living and the dead. Throw in Paul’s brotherly love, which backhandedly invoked personal morality as a method of social control during a period of massive population influx, and all things came together for a moral code that acted as a one-way ticket to end-times salvation. *Sin* quickly came to be the word for any activity that detracted from the health and happiness of the group or individual, and in theorizing that Jesus died in forgiveness of sin, Paul tidily explained why any father worth his salt would have allowed his son to be murdered (a loophole which had plagued Christian proselytizers for years) and paved the way for worldwide expansion with a savior who loved his earthbound flock and offered infinite time off for good behavior.

Yet in spite of Paul’s efforts (or perhaps because of them), Christians weren’t terribly popular in the first 300 years or so of the post-Jesus Roman empire. It was not until the polytheistic Constantine carried the cross into battle on a whim and won, that his sympathetic attitude toward Christians became pivotal in the movement away from the pagan gods of the Roman empire and

toward what would become the Christianity we know.

According to Wright, however, this probably would have happened anyway because the progress of the world was poised to embrace a new social order and Christianity filled that role. Other versions of the Jesus movement were in place that could just have easily stepped forward if not for Christianity having suddenly found itself with a celebrity spokesperson in Constantine.

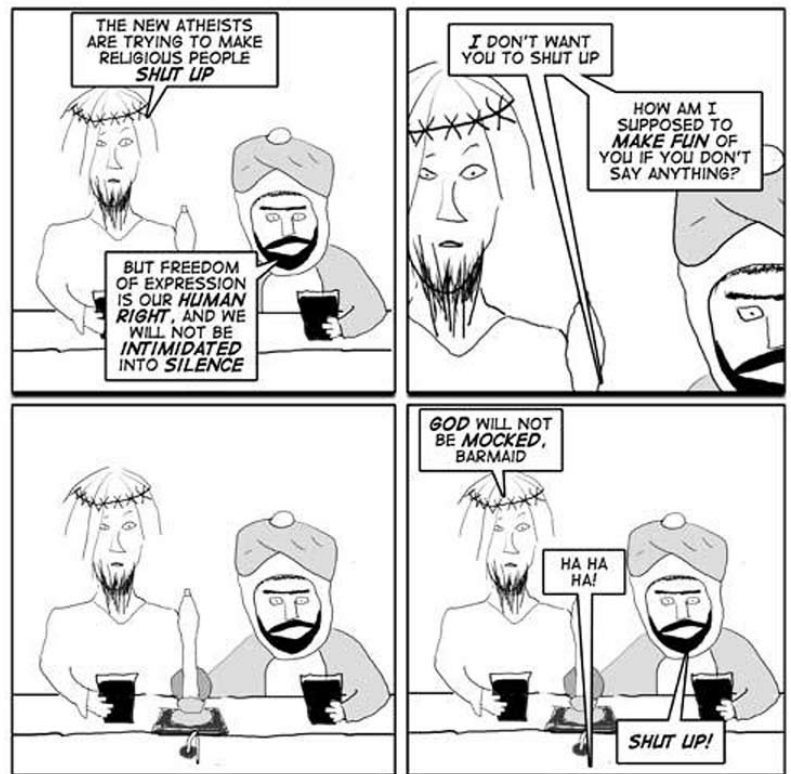
As Christianity grew, so too did the advantages of membership. What economists today cool-headedly call *positive network advantages*, merchants of Roman times called *trade organizations*. Wright says that in the era of blossoming Christianity, there were still numerous religious cults. It was business as usual for merchants and craftsmen, however, to align their industries with one or two and to tolerate their god as a cost of doing business. Mergers among these groups were a common practice for businesses looking to expand their client base and eventually, as Christianity grew, its sheer size made it the guild of choice for many.

God is Love... Still

Building from his previous work in *The Moral Animal*, Wright concludes *The Evolution of God* with an interesting afterword in which he sets out to illustrate how basic empathy — our ability to understand one another as a means of social survival — evolved into a very human sort of love that pings off every far-flung

corner of our rapidly globalizing planet. That so many cultures have written upon the pages of Christianity, and that humanity, through the survival of its fittest ideas, grows and improves as it moves forward, is where Wright finds meaning in the mayhem. For him, the evidence of a higher purpose is not so much in the fading image of a personified, Santa-like god, but in the epic coalescence of human struggle and human beauty that may, in its own right, be reason for awe and wonder. Needless to say, Wright’s opinion here is bound to make strange bedfellows of both the believing and the skeptically inclined, uniting the two in mutual offense.

Tracking our immortals from the days of whittling rocks to the days of trading stocks, *The Evolution of God* rides a razor’s edge between perfectionism and pathology. Wright’s dizzying and sometimes tangled succession of historical abstractions may, at times, feel like an extended mathematical proof. His noble, albeit lengthy, pursuit of complete understanding, however, unveils the historic tale of a beloved spiritual ideal. An ambitious work that eventually nails its target with panache, *The Evolution of God* is an extraordinary tour of our shared human heritage.



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BOOK REVIEW

The God Virus: How Religion Infects Our Lives And Culture

by Dr. Darrel W. Ray

(Bonner Springs, Kansas: IPC Press, 2009)

The power of this book is its ability to reveal the influences that religion has on our civilizations. Written in a very clear and concise manner that is very readable, it shakes the religion tree until the rotten fruit drops down. The God Virus is a great follow up to Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, which states that religion is a meme, an idea that spreads from one brain to another. The God Virus expands upon the idea of religion as a viral meme. Dr. Ray draws on his experience and research to build the metaphor of religion as a virus, which he explains in simple and understandable language and illustrates using quotations from many varied sources.

The God Virus begins by establishing the similarities between religion and a virus. For example, the virus (religion) will take over and control the host for its own benefit without regard for the host. The god virus controls the mind of a suicide bomber just as the rabies virus would control the behavior of an animal. Childhood indoctrination provides an antidote to keep other god viruses out of the infected mind, by driving home the idea that the religion being taught is the only "true" religion. This causes rejection of other faiths and creates a blind trust in contradictory ideas. Rituals, prohibitive lifestyles and diet are tools that the virus uses to reinforce itself.

The virus binds to culture and mutates to fit the social attitudes of the day. Government, the economy and politics are affected negatively by the infusion of a religious virus, which only creates an irrational discussion of problems. Our country's founders refused to allow religion a place in government for just this reason. How much does religion help with social problems? Dr. Ray cites studies that have estimated that 95 percent of the money that churches receive goes to propagate the virus. This leaves little for actually curing society's ills.

Guilt is a powerful tool of control that the virus uses

well. This is especially obvious when you think about sexual prohibitions mandated by religion. A circular pattern of behavior- guilt- tension- religious forgiveness- relief- behavior- guilt, etc. emerges when people are commanded to forego their natural needs. People feel guilty about their behavior or desire when it is unsanctioned by the church. This leads to tension about repercussions such as going to hell. They seek religious forgiveness, which makes them feel relief until they feel they are once again guilty of a religious transgression. This repeated pattern gives religion a strong hold on most people.

Religious services have built upon this cycle. The service combines group hypnosis, trance induction and post-hypnotic suggestion facilitated by charisma, music, vocal rhythm of the preacher, and group participation to take churchgoers on an emotional roller coaster ride. The desired result is a congregation that is willing to donate money, is more addicted to the virus and is willing to participate in the spread of the virus.

Dr. Ray offers advice on dealing with the virus. Science education is the best prophylactic. By teaching comparative religion, we can combat contradictions and delusions. We must identify viral behavior and challenge its encroachment into our public systems. "Our liberal democracy works despite religion, not because of it." Finally, we need to talk about and teach religion-free ethics. Non-theists need to be vocal about their non-belief and their morality. "Religion provides little or no guidance that a rational person could not determine without religion."

This educational and enlightening book is a worthwhile read for the theist as well as the non-theist.

– John Welte

The God Virus is available at <http://www.thegodvirus.net/>

See Dr. Ray on YouTube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=damon132#g/u>

Dr. Ray will speak to the Free Inquiry Group on 2 May 2010.



today?"

Two youngsters were walking home from Sunday School, each deep in his own thoughts. Finally one said: "What do you think about all this devil business we studied

The other boy replied thoughtfully: "Well, you know how Santa Claus turned out. This is probably just your Dad too."



FIG Community Dinner
 Tuesday, May 11, 2010 6:30 PM
 Bronte Bistro (RSVP Needed by 5/8)



April Memorial Celebration
 Saturday, April 24 at 2:00-5:00 PM
 Lakeridge Hall
May Meeting
 Sunday, May 2, 2010, 3:00 PM
 Sharonville Convention Center



FIG Leaves
 P.O. Box 53174
 Cincinnati, OH 45253

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 - figmessage at gofigger dot org, or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.