

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 17 Issue 12

December 2008

December FIG Meeting: *Tuesday Dec. 16, 7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor*

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## *God and the Philosophers,*

by Paul Edwards

Discussed by Timothy J. Madigan

We are pleased to welcome our longtime friend, Tim Madigan, to tell us about *God and the Philosophers*. This book is a witty and learned exploration of critical views on the nature and existence of God, as expressed by major philosophers of the Western world from the medieval period to the present day. It is the last work of noted philosopher Paul Edwards. He addresses how the concept of God has changed over the centuries, in large part due to the analyses of such skeptical thinkers as David Hume, Thomas Paine, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Bertrand Russell.

Timothy J. Madigan (Rochester, NY) is an assistant professor of philosophy at St. John Fisher College and a member of the editorial board of *Philosophy Now* magazine. For many years he was editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine.

January FIG Meeting *Tuesday, 27 January 2009 at 7:00 pm at the Vernon Manor*

## What does the Free Inquiry Group stand for?

We gather every month for conversations about religion, science, history, or literature. But what are we working towards? Is the group happy and satisfied with monthly meetings and potluck parties, or does the Free Inquiry Group need or wish to set other goals.

For our January meeting, we will explore the mission and vision of FIG through the perspectives of different members. We shall engage in a general, structured discussion. Program chairman Shawn Jeffers, with the help of the program committee, will lead the discussion. We shall ask, "where are we going with this group?" At the least we shall explore the possibility of creating a theme for 2009 to guide our work.

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## Can you give a lift to a new member in Fairfield?

Recently, I received a call from a charming lady in Fairfield. She lives alone, her son being in California temporarily, and is lonely. She is an atheist, living in the midst of people who talk often about their Christian faith and who want to know about her religion.

She has asked to join and have FIG Leaves sent to her. But, because our meetings are so far from where she lives, she wonders if there is a member in her general area who would be willing to bring her to our meetings. She lives in Today Homes which is on Winton Road in Fairfield. If anyone can accommodate her, call me at 513-321-4824 and I'll give you pertinent details.

Barbara Levee

## Events (note date/time changes)

### December Meeting

Tuesday, Dec. 16, 2008, 7:00 PM  
at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH

### January Potluck

*Canceled* - Panera Bread no longer  
accepts reservations for their  
Community Room.

### January Meeting

Tuesday, January 27, 2009, 7:00 PM  
at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



## Zoo pulls Creation Museum promotion

By Dan Horn • dhorn@enquirer.com • 1 December 2008

The Cincinnati Zoo and the Creation Museum launched a joint promotional deal last week to draw attention to their holiday attractions. It worked, but not the way zoo and museum officials had hoped.

The zoo pulled out of the deal Monday after receiving dozens of angry calls and e-mails about the partnership, which offered reduced prices to anyone who bought tickets to the zoo's Festival of Lights and the museum's Christmas celebration, Bethlehem's Blessing. Most of the protests echoed the same theme: the Creation Museum promotes a religious point of view that conflicts with the zoo's scientific mission. Some complained that the zoo, which receives public support through a tax levy, should not become involved with a private museum dedicated to the teachings of the Bible's Book of Genesis. Others said a scientific institution shouldn't link itself to a place that argues man once lived side by side with dinosaurs.

"They seem like diametrically opposed institutions," said Dr. James Leach, a Cincinnati radiologist who e-mailed zoo officials about his concerns. "The Cincinnati Zoo is one of this city's treasures. The Creation Museum is an international laughingstock."

Zoo officials said they considered the promotion – dubbed "Two Great Attractions, One Great Deal" – a marketing deal no different than other cross-promotions they do with institutions like the Newport Aquarium or the Cincinnati Reds. Instead, they found themselves mired in a heated debate between creationists and evolutionists over the origins of mankind. Thanks to the Internet, the opposition needed only a few days to organize a worldwide e-mail campaign and to set up a zoo boycott through blogs and a Facebook page. "It's not about us endorsing them or them endorsing us," said Chad Yelton, a zoo spokesman. "That wasn't the intention of anything we were doing."

The Creation Museum's founder, Ken Ham, said the Petersburg, Ky., museum and the zoo spent months preparing the cross-promotion package. He said the zoo's decision to cut ties after two days was disappointing and a missed opportunity to boost regional tourism. Ham said he was "personally saddened" by the negative response. "It's a pity that intolerant people have pushed for our expulsion simply because of our Christian faith," Ham said in a statement. "Some of their comments ... reveal great intolerance for anything having to do with Christianity."

The museum, which opened in May 2007, has been praised by supporters as a bulwark against evolutionary teachings. It also has been ridiculed by critics who say its displays, including a triceratops with a saddle on its back, are based on pseudo science.

The ticket deal first appeared on web sites for both institutions Friday, offering a price of \$25.95 for one ticket to both the Festival of Lights and Bethlehem's Blessing, which features a live nativity and a recreation of the streets of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. But Yelton said the uproar became such a distraction by Monday morning that zoo officials decided to pull it from the web site. No package deals had been sold, so no refunds will be necessary. "When we partner with the Reds, we don't get these kinds of e-mails," Yelton said. "It's pretty clear this is more of a distraction."



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

fignotes at(@) gofigger.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:

1 January to 31 December.

One year: \$25

Family: \$35

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.



**THINGS TO DO....**

**THINGS TO SEE...**



## Media Events/Programs

### The Humanist Perspective

Show times on Time-Warner Cable:

Channel 15: Tuesday 3:30 am and Saturday 7:30 pm

Channel 24: Friday 12:30 pm.

#### Programs:

**9-12 Dec:** *The Immorality of Religious Ethics*, Pt. 2, with R. Joseph Hoffmann

**16-19 Dec:** *The Immorality of Religious Ethics*, Pt. 3, with R. Joseph Hoffmann

**23-26 Dec:** *Humanism and Community*, with Judy Walker

**30 Dec-2 Jan:** *Secular Study of Religion*, Part 1, with Robert M. Price

**6-9 Jan 2009:** *Secular Study of Religion*, Part 2, with Robert M. Price

### Hear! Hear! *Answers in Atheism* at

<[www.answersinatheism.net](http://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](http://www.answersinatheism.net).

The Answers in Atheism crew

### The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Monday, Dec. 15 at 7:00PM - 10:00 PM

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

#### Meetup Description

Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays from 7:00 - 10:00 PM. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics.

To find us: Go in the front doors of the bookstore and turn left. Enter the Bistro and walk straight back as far as you can go. We're all freethinkers, so we'll look just like you.

The Bistro has a full menu, including vegetarian options. If you like, enjoy dinner, dessert, tea, or a brewski. Restaurant direct line: 513-396-8970

### Free Courses on Humanism.

The Institute for Humanist Studies has made its online e-learning materials on *Humanism* freely available to all. Starting now, anyone with an Internet connection anywhere in the world can learn about Humanism for free.

The Continuum of Humanist Education (COHE) is the world's first online, interactive Humanist educational program. The Institute for Humanist Studies founded COHE in 2004. Previously, only the introductory courses on Humanism were free. Level two classes used to cost users \$10, and advanced level courses used to cost users \$25. Now, thanks to the generous support of a donor, all levels of COHE courses are free for all.

So far, more than 1,200 people from over 50 countries have registered as COHE students. Hundreds of these students come from the developing world, yet only a handful have signed up for the higher level courses which until now cost money. "Even though \$10 or \$25 is a bargain for these high-quality courses, it's a significant barrier for people in the developing world," said Larry Jones, IHS president. "I'm therefore delighted that IHS can now make these courses available free to everyone. This reflects the Institute's commitment to remove as many barriers as possible from the advancement of Humanism."

Using twenty-first century technology, COHE strives to explore and advance Humanist thought in fresh and stimulating ways. Interactive exercises, student-controlled glossary options, and a community bulletin board are just a few of the innovative tools COHE students will use to enrich their Humanist education experience. The COHE motto is *Sapere Aude* -- Dare to Know.

COHE courses explore Humanist thought in history, philosophy, psychology, religion, science, ethics, activism and politics. COHE course authors include notable Humanist activists such as evolutionary biology professor Massimo Pigliucci, Ph.D. and former Humanist lobbyist Tim Gordnier, Ph.D.

Courses are immediately accessible to anyone, anywhere in the world, with an Internet connection. You can sign up now, using COHE's free, automated, no-obligation registration procedure. To explore the Continuum of Humanist Education, visit: [HumanistEducation.com](http://HumanistEducation.com).





THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



## Scorched Earth

Op-Ed by Robert L. Park, *New York Times*, 15 January 2006

NASA has quietly terminated the Deep Space Climate Observatory (DCOVR), citing "competing priorities." The news media took little notice. Few Americans, after all, had even heard of the program. But the

entire world may come to mourn its passing.

Earth is growing warmer. Even the most strident global-warming deniers have taken to saying that a little warming is a good thing. If the trend continues, however, it will have catastrophic consequences for life on this planet. Correctly identifying the cause could be the most important problem facing humanity.

Most scientists link global warming to unrestrained burning of fossil fuels, which shrouds Earth in a blanket of carbon dioxide, trapping the Sun's energy. Others, backed by industries that spew pollutants into the atmosphere, insist that greenhouse emissions are not the problem. They prefer to attribute warming to natural variations in solar output. Scientists are skeptical, but they don't deny the possibility. The issue cries out to be resolved. Even in a world wracked by wars, battles are not fought over scientific disagreements. In science, nature is the sole arbiter. Disputes are resolved only by better experiments.

The better experiment when it comes to global warming was to be the climate observatory, situated in space at the neutral-gravity point between the Sun and Earth. Called Lagrange 1, or L1, this point is about one million miles from Earth. At L1, with a view of the full disk of the Sun in one direction, and a full sunlit Earth in the opposite, the observatory could continuously monitor Earth's energy balance. It was given a poetic name, Triana, after Rodrigo de Triana, the sailor aboard Christopher Columbus's ship who first sighted the New World.

Development began in November 1998 and it was ready for launching three years later. The cost was only about \$100 million. For comparison, that is only one-thousandth the cost of the International Space Station, which serves no useful purpose. Before Triana could be launched, however, there was a presidential election. Many of the industries favored by the new Bush White House were not anxious to have the cause of global

## O.F.A.

### It's The Holiday Season & Operation Foxhole Atheists Needs Our Help!

Created by Blair Scott of the North Alabama Freethought Association (NAFA), OFA sends packages to troops in Afghanistan and Iraq who have identified themselves as atheists or humanists. You may not agree with the war but the soldiers aren't responsible for starting it and they need our support. I'm asking you all to **bring some of these goods to any meeting** and I will see that they get to OFA and from there to the troops.

The soldiers have requested: **Beef Jerky, Poptarts, Granola Bars, Breakfast Bars, Pringles, Cookies, Cheetos, Canned soup with poptop lids, Crystal Light on-the-go drink mix, Powdered Gatorade drink mix, Travel pillows (U-shaped).**

**Any magazines or books** (atheist or humanist materials can be sent but some of the soldiers choose to remain unknown as such in their companies). **DVD's,**

Any kind of snack food or reading material would be appreciated. If you would prefer, their website takes PayPal donations. <http://thenafa.org/ofa/>

Let's rally behind our fellows in uniform and show them some support!

Thank you, John Welte



**SCIENCE BOOK CLUB 2008 Schedule** - all meetings will be held on the 3rd Sunday of each month at the downtown Cincinnati Public Library in Room 3A at 2:30 PM.

**Dec 21** Randy Weaver: *Into the cool energy flow, thermodynamics, and life* by Eric D. Schneider

**Jan 18, 2009** - Dr. Richard Bozian: *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* by Antonio Damasio





warming pinned down. The launching was put on hold.

The disdain of the Bush White House for Triana goes much deeper than just a desire to avoid the truth about global warming. Triana began life in early 1998 as a brainchild of Al Gore, who was then the vice president. Mr. Gore, the story goes, woke up one morning wondering if it would be possible to beam a continuous image of the full Earth back from space to inspire people with the need to care for our planet. The 1972 portrait of the full Earth, taken from the Moon, had inspired millions with the fragile beauty of our blue planet. Why not beam the image live into classrooms, allowing students to view weather systems marching around the globe?

Scientists had dreamed of such an observatory for years. They hoped Mr. Gore's influence would make it happen. Mr. Gore's support would end up destroying it. Those who hated him, hated Triana. His dream of inspiring environmentalists and schoolchildren served only to trivialize the project. It was ridiculed as "Gore's screen saver."

Triana is terminated, but global warming is not. Someday, there will have to be an observatory at L1. Perhaps the most important lesson from our exploration of the solar system is that the most terrible place on Earth is a Garden of Eden compared to the best place anywhere else. We must find out how to keep it that way.

**Triana: the administration still hates it.** Could it be because Al Gore's initials are on it? They changed the name, but the initials wouldn't rub off. Three years ago while Congress was out of town for the Christmas break, I heard NASA was quietly terminating Triana, a.k.a. DSCOVR, How could this happen? The \$100 million observatory was already built. It was meant to answer the most fundamental question of climate science: what is the energy balance between solar radiation falling on Earth and reflected or reradiated energy? Global warming deniers all claim solar variation is the major factor in global climate change. Is it? Well, Triana is the only experiment that can unequivocally answer that question. But I couldn't find a single global warming denier who wanted it tested. So I wrote an op-ed for the NY Times; but maybe nobody read it, It's still timely; the NY Times should feel free to reprint it without change.



## A Dick Cheney blast blinds the world.

The Nov 19, 2008 online Nature news, reported that the NASA reauthorization bill ordered the agency to come up with a plan for DSCOVR. The article quoted Francisco Valero of Scripps, the mission's principal investigator, who estimated that it would take \$117 million to refurbish and launch DSCOVR. The Air Force offered to launch it, but incredibly, only if all

Earth observation equipment is removed. This led me to wonder if there could be a national security reason. No, Dick Cheney just doesn't want to hear about global warming. DeSmogBlog, the best of the environmental blogs, quotes an unnamed source within NASA who spoke on the condition of anonymity, saying Cheney was the hatchet man, intent from the beginning on killing DSCOVR, and keeping Bush's fingerprints off the axe. And why did I have to learn about this from a UK science magazine and a Canadian blog? The only major U.S. paper that mentioned it was the *Houston Chronicle*.

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Robert L.Park, a professor of physics at the University of Maryland, is the author of *Voodoo Science: The Road From Foolishness to Fraud* and of *Superstition: Belief in the Age of Science*. The last two items are from *What's New*, (5 December 2008) ☚

## Correcting a Supreme Error?

The city of Pleasant Grove, Utah has a Ten Commandments monument in its public park. The Summumu religion is suing the city for the right to erect a monument bearing its sacred principles, called the *Seven Aphorisms*, beside the Ten Commandments. The case has reached the United States Supreme Court. The Court should not be surprised; in 2005 on a complaint by a destitute homeless man, it ruled that a monument on the grounds of the Texas state capitol could stand because it "conveyed a historic and social meaning rather than an intrusive religious endorsement." On the same day, however, on a complaint by trial lawyers, the court ordered displays of the Ten Commandments removed from court house walls lest they influence jurors. Arguments in the Summumu appeal were heard on Wednesday and a decision is expected in the Spring. It's an opportunity for the court to do what it lacked the courage to do in 2005: forbid all religious displays on public property.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 14 November 2008



## Maybe The Whole World Needs A First Amendment.

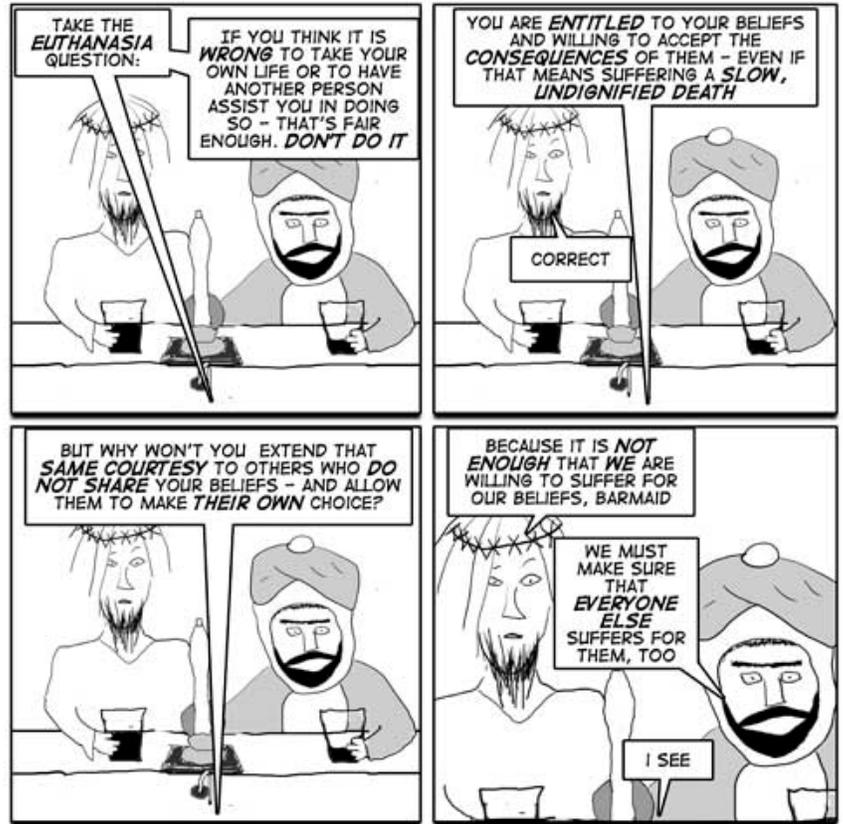
The Faith Forum, a U.N. conference on religious tolerance this week, was a personal initiative of Saudi King Abdullah. He's not exactly a champion of women's rights, but to demonstrate his credentials in the field of tolerance he agreed to dine in the same room with the Israeli President; of course, not at the same table. Elsewhere, a Catholic priest faces excommunication for his part in an ordination ceremony for a, gasp, woman. I suggest a world law patterned after the "establishment clause" of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." It reflected the dominant concern of the colonists who came to these shores to escape government-imposed religion. This single phrase sets the U.S. apart from every other country in the world. It is the American gift.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 14 Nov. 2008

## Schoenborn's Folly: There Is A Gap In His Thinking.

Many scientists think of the modern Catholic Church as enlightened on the question of evolution, but that's because they compare it to the intelligent design movement. A conference at the Vatican this week provided a little reality therapy. The first talk was by Cardinal Schoenborn who wrote a 2005 *New York Times* op-ed backing intelligent design. This week's meeting was closed to the press but John Abelson, quoted in yesterday's *Science*, said Schoenborn believes God did his stuff during gaps in the fossil record. When another fossil is found in the gap, of course, that creates two gaps.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 14 Nov. 2008



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## Is Belief in God Essential for Moral Virtue?

By Paul Kurtz, 20 November 2008

A growing sector of world civilization is secular; that is, it emphasizes worldly rather than religious values. This is especially true of Europe, which is widely considered post-religious and post-Christian (with a small Islamic minority). Secularist winds are also blowing strongly in Asia, notably in Japan and China. The United States has been an anomaly in this regard, for it has suffered a long dark night in which evangelical fundamentalism has overshadowed the public square, with its insistence that belief in God is essential for moral virtue. This is now changing and secularism is gaining ground.

The “new atheists” have attempted to balance the scales, for religious dissent until now has been largely muffled. They have appealed to science to criticize the unexamined claims of religion. This has shocked conservative religionists, who respond that atheists are “too negative.” Perhaps, but this overlooks the fact that there are varieties of unbelief and that secular humanists (the bete noire of fundamentalists during the Reagan years) define their outlook affirmatively in the light of positive ethical values, not by what they are against but what they are for.

Secular humanists are generally non-religious, yet they are also good citizens, loving parents and decent people. They look to science, the secular arts and literature for their inspiration, not religion. They point out that religious belief is no guarantee of moral probity, that horrendous crimes have been committed in the name of God, and that religionists often disagree vehemently about concrete moral judgments (such as euthanasia, the rights of women, abortion, homosexuality, war and peace).

The ethics of secular humanism traces its roots back to the beginnings of Western civilization in Greece and Rome, through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the scientific and democratic revolutions of the modern world. Secular humanists today affirm that every person should be considered equal in dignity and value and that human freedom is precious. The civic virtues of democracy are essentially humanist, for they emphasize tolerance of the wide diversity of beliefs and lifestyles, and they are committed to defending human rights.

But, “how can you be ethical if you do not believe in God?” protests the believer. Perhaps such a person should enroll in an elementary course in ethics, where there is a rich philosophical literature dealing with this question. The good is usually defined as “happiness” though there are differences between the eudemonistic, emphasizing enriched self-development, and the hedonistic, particularly American, brand of intemperate consumption. Perhaps a harmonious integration of the two theories can be achieved. I would call it rational exuberance. Philosophers have emphasized the importance of self-restraint, temperance, rational prudence,

a life in which satisfaction, excellence, and the creative fulfillment of a person’s talents is achieved. It does not mean that “anything goes.” Humanist ethics focuses on the good life here and now.

Secularists recognize the centrality of self-interest. Every individual needs to be concerned with his or her own health, well-being, and career. But self-interest can be enlightened. This involves recognition that we have responsibilities to others. There are principles of right and wrong that we should live by. No doubt there are differences about many moral issues. Often there may be difficulties in achieving a consensus. Negotiation and compromise are essential in a pluralistic society.

However, there is now substantial evidence drawn from evolutionary biology that humans possess a moral sense (see Marc Hauser, Steven Pinker, and David Sloan Wilson). Morality has its roots in group survival; the moral practices that evolved enabled tribes or clans to survive and function. This means that human beings are potentially moral. Whether or not this moral sense develops depends on social and environmental conditions. Some individuals may never fully develop morally--they may be morally handicapped, even sociopaths. That is one reason why society needs to enact laws to protect itself.

There is also of course cultural relativity, but there are, I submit, also a set of common moral decencies that cut across cultures--such as being truthful, honest, keeping promises, being dependable and responsible, avoiding cruelty, etc., and these in time become widely recognized as binding. Herein lie the roots of empathy

and caring for other human and sentient beings. Such behavior needs to be nourished in the young by means of moral education. In any case, human beings are capable of both self-interested and altruistic behavior in varying degrees.

Secular humanists wish to test ethical principles in the light of their consequences, and they advise the use of rational inquiry to frame moral judgments. They also appreciate the fact that some principles are so important that they should not be easily sacrificed to achieve one’s ends.

To say that a person is moral only if he or she obeys God’s commandments--out of fear or love or God or a desire for salvation--is hardly adequate. Ethical principles need to be internalized, rooted in reason and compassion. The ethics of secularism is autonomous, in the sense that it need not be derived from theological grounds. Secular humanists are interested in enhancing the good life both for the individual and society.

Today, a new imperative has emerged: an awareness that our ethical concerns should extend to all members of the global community. This points to a new planetary ethics transcending the ancient religious, ethnic, racial, and national enmities of the past. It is an ethic that recognizes our common interests and needs as part of an interdependent world.

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Professor Paul Kurtz is the chairman and founder of the Center for Inquiry-Transnational, Editor-in-Chief of *Free Inquiry* magazine, and professor emeritus of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo. For 40 years, Kurtz has remained the leading organizational and intellectual figure in the humanist and skeptical movement. His new book, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Secularism* is published by Prometheus Books. ☞



## Broader Medical Refusal Rule May Go Far Beyond Abortion

By David G. Savage, *LA Times*, 2 December 2008, David.Savage@latimes.com

The Bush administration plans a new 'right of conscience' rule that would allow more workers to refuse more procedures. Critics say it could apply to artificial insemination and birth control.

Reporting from Washington -- The outgoing Bush administration is planning to announce a broad new "right of conscience" rule permitting medical facilities, doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other healthcare workers to refuse to participate in any procedure they find morally objectionable, including abortion and possibly even artificial insemination and birth control.

For more than 30 years, federal law has dictated that doctors and nurses may refuse to perform abortions. The new rule would go further by making clear that *healthcare workers also may refuse to provide information or advice* to patients who might want an abortion. It also seeks to cover more employees. For example, in addition to a surgeon and a nurse in an operating room, the rule would extend to "an employee whose task it is to clean the instruments," the draft rule said.

The "conscience" rule could set the stage for an abortion controversy in the early months of Barack Obama's administration. During the campaign, President-elect Obama sought to find a middle ground on the issue. He said there is a "moral dimension to abortion" that cannot be ignored, but he also promised to protect the rights of women who seek abortion. While the rule could eventually be overturned by the new administration, the process might open a wound that could take months of wrangling to close again.

Health and Human Services Department officials said the rule would apply to "any entity" that receives federal funds. It estimated 584,000 entities could be covered, including 4,800 hospitals, 234,000 doctor's offices and 58,000 pharmacies. Proponents, including the Christian Medical Assn. and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, say the rule is not limited to abortion. It will protect doctors who do not wish to prescribe birth control or to provide artificial insemination, said Dr. David Stevens, president of CMA. "The real battle line is the morning-after pill," he said. "This prevents the embryo from implanting. This involves moral complicity. Doctors should not be required to dispense a medication they have a moral objection to."

Critics of the rule say it will sacrifice patients' health to the religious beliefs of providers. The American Medical Assn. and the American Hospital Assn. in October urged HHS to drop the regulation. The Planned Parenthood Foundation and other backers of abortion rights condemned the rule as a last-gasp effort by the Bush administration to please social conservatives. It's unconscionable that the Bush administration, while promising a smooth transition, would take a final opportunity to politicize women's health," said Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood.

Despite the controversy, HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt said he intends to issue the rule as a final regulation before the Obama administration takes office, to protect the moral conscience of persons in the healthcare industry. Abortion-rights advocates are just as insistent that the rights of a patient come first.

If the regulation is issued before Dec. 20, it will be final when the new administration takes office, HHS officials say. Overturning it would require publishing a proposed new rule for public comment and then waiting months to accept comments before drafting a final rule. Abortion-rights advocates think it might be easier to get Congress to reject the rule. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.), before being nominated Monday for secretary of State, and Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) have said they would move to reverse it.

The HHS proposal has set off a sharp debate about medical ethics and the duties of healthcare workers. Last year, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology said a "patient's well-being must be paramount" when a conflict arises over a medical professional's beliefs. In calling for limits on "conscientious refusals," ACOG cited four recent examples. In Texas, a pharmacist rejected a rape victim's prescription for emergency contraception. In Virginia, a 42-year-old mother of two became pregnant after being refused emergency contraception. In California, a physician refused to perform artificial insemination for a lesbian couple. (In August, the California Supreme Court ruled that this refusal amounted to illegal discrimination based on sexual orientation.) And in Nebraska, a 19-year-old with a life-threatening embolism was refused an early abortion at a religiously affiliated hospital.

"Although respect for conscience is important, conscientious refusals should be limited if they constitute an imposition of religious or

moral beliefs on patients [or] negatively affect a patient's health," ACOG's Committee on Ethics said. It also said physicians have a "duty to refer patients in a timely manner to other providers if they do not feel that they can in conscience provide the standard reproductive services that patients request."

Leavitt said ACOG threatened to brand as "unprofessional" those who do not share its attitudes toward abortion. In August, he criticized "the development of an environment in the healthcare field that is intolerant of individual conscience, certain religious beliefs, ethnic and cultural traditions and moral convictions." In its announcement, HHS said the proposed rule was needed because of an attitude "that healthcare professionals should be required to provide or assist in the provision of medicine or procedures to which they object, or else risk being subjected to discrimination."

In a media briefing, Leavitt said the rule was focused on abortion, not contraception. But others said its broad language goes beyond abortion. Since the 1970s, Congress has said no person may be compelled to perform or assist in performing an abortion or sterilization. One law says no person may be required to assist in a "health service program or research activity" that is "contrary to his religious beliefs or moral convictions." The HHS rule says that law should be enforced "broadly" to cover any "activity related in any way to providing medicine, healthcare or any other service related to health or welfare."

Judith Waxman, a lawyer for the National Women's Law Center, said Leavitt's office has extended the law far beyond what was understood. "This goes way beyond abortion," she said. It could reach disputes over contraception, sperm donations and end-of-life care. "This kind of rule could wreak havoc in a hospital if any employee can declare they are not willing to do certain parts of their job," she said. ☞



## Exportable Saint

Sanal Edamaruku in *Outlook* (India), 13 November 20-08

Sixty-two years after her death, an unknown village girl has suddenly become the center of the world's attention. Was it just a political move on the part of the Vatican to satisfy the Syrian Malabar Church? Or was it also aimed to stem the tide of the world wide dramatic decline in the number of nuns?

Even in her wildest dreams, Annakutty from Bhananganam village near Kottayam in Kerala may not have imagined that one fine day more than hundred thousand people would throng her tiny village to honour her. Sixty-two years after her death, this unknown village girl has suddenly become the center of the world's attention – at least of the Roman Catholic part of it.

All throughout her short and eventless life Annakutty, who later became Sister Alphonsa, looked a picture of misery. After disabling herself at the age of 13 to escape forced marriage, she suffered from extreme weakness and various severe illnesses as well as from the cruelty of the sisters of the Franciscan Clarist convent in which she silently vegetated till her death at the age of 36. There were only 12 participants at her funeral, most of them ex-officio. This shows that she was not very popular then.

Four decades later, John-Paul II, the most prolific saint-maker among all the popes, travelled to Kottayam and beatified her. When he died, leaving behind a stunning 482 new entrants in the annals of sainthood, she was among the 'blessed ones' in the pipeline. There were many of them, most prominently Mother Teresa, believed to be on the "fast track". But Annakutty, meantime Blessed Alphonsa, who had no spectacular deed whatsoever to her credit, overtook the heavy weight from Calcutta. What prompted the Vatican to elevate this unlikely candidate to the rank of a saint?

The poor girl's canonization may look like poetic justice -- however, she got in with bad company. It is a dubious honour to be lined up with the likes of Alojzije Stepinac, archbishop of Zagreb and key collaborator of Ante Pavelic's fascist Ustasha regime. During the Second World War they massacred hundreds of thousands who happened not to be Catholic (he was beatified in 1998). Of course, not all in this motley crowd are sinister figures of this calibre. There are also some rather harmless psychopaths and small time tricksters among them. Take for example the Italian Saint Pio of Pietrelcina, revered for

bearing what he claimed to be Jesus' bleeding wounds - but what stands exposed by documented testimony of his pharmacist (till recently neatly tucked away in the Vatican archives) to be nothing but self-inflicted needle work. Indeed, Blessed Alphonsa, the blank slate, stands out as one of the purest and least tainted members of the controversial club. But what brought her in? A miracle?

Her official "ticket" to canonization was the alleged healing of a boy's club-foot in 1999. But there is a history to this story. Shortly after her silent demise in 1946 a rumour was spread that Sister Alphonsa, who had once crippled her own feet in a pit of burning chaff, had post-humously healed a child's deformed foot upon prayer at her tomb. Over the years, she established her presence in the popular rubric of "favour received" advertisements in the Christian press of Kottayam for allegedly curing hundreds of troubled little feet. That was when the Church authorities discovered her. The deposits at her modest tomb grew so impressively that the Vatican appointed a special vicar in 1952 to send them to Rome. It is said that he had already sent some 14 million dollars, when Pope John-Paul decided to beatify her, multiplying the revenue. But there is far more to Alphonsa's canonization than her handsome "dowry".

Alphonsa belonged to the rich and powerful Syrian Malabar Church that rules Kottayam district. This Eastern Catholic denomination is part of the Vatican empire since Vasco da Gama's time, but has kept its traditions intact and never completely succumbed to the "latinization". Till 1968, their clergy held mass in a Syrian language, and till today, they can't agree with the Vatican on the question whether the clergy should face the people or the altar during mass.

They own many institutions, real estate and big plantations. Consequently they have enormous economic and political clout, more than the far bigger Latin string of Catholicism that evolved out of the poor coastal fisher communities, converted in 16th century by the Portuguese. Alphonsa's canonization is a political move to satisfy the Syrian Malabar Church and to strengthen its ties with the Vatican. To serve this purpose, she has been styled as a symbol of harmonisation. Official church reports speak about the "great oriental and western traditions, Roman and Malabar, which Sr. Alphonsa lived and harmonised in her saintly life". It is obvious that the





unity of these two wings of Catholicism is of immense importance now.

Kottayam district has by far the highest Christian population in the country (46%) and is often called the Vatican of India. It is the center of recruitment of Catholic nuns and priests. Most of the nuns belong to the poorer section of the rich Syrian Malabar community. Some parents cannot think of raising the fabulous sums that the well-off families give their daughters as dowry. If they cannot afford the other established option either -- to pay for their education as professional nurses -- they are left with no socially accepted solution other than forcing the young girls -- too young to decide for themselves -- into convents.

Nuns from Kottayam make up 95% of the "soldiers of proselytism" who keep Catholic institutions like schools and hospitals running throughout India. In fact, Catholic nuns (and priests) from Kottayam are exported to Europe and the USA to fill the gap that the dramatic fall in the numbers of western recruits has torn in the fabric of the Roman Catholic Church. In February 2008, the Vatican's official mouthpiece, *L'Osservatore Romano*, rang the alarm bells. According to new statistics, the decline of the number of nuns worldwide was accelerating as never before. During the Pontificate of the late Pope John-Paul II, it had already fallen by one fourth, then by another ten percent. Now it had come down to just 750,000. (Consecrated men worldwide were even down to 192,000 - including monks, priests and vicars). With nearly no new recruits who could replace those who die, or decide to abandon their vows, Catholic nuns seem to be moving toward extinction. The average age of nuns in USA is 70 years. And only five percent of them teach in Catholic schools, so that the main source of recruitment is out of reach. In this situation, the Vatican's only hope is India, which means Kottayam. With the canonization of India's first female saint, Pope Benedict hopes to apply the emergency brake to stem the tide of the world wide dramatic decline in the numbers of nuns.

Alphonsa is being presented as a role model to young girls. During the celebrations, thousands of little school girls are dressing up as nuns and play Alphonsa. She has become the patron saint of many schools. Her life is dramatized in books and on CDs, in documentary films, plays and a weekly TV serial. What is highlighted is always Alphonsa, the teacher, the darling of all little

children, though she was all throughout her convent life so bedridden that her attempt to work as a teacher was limited to less than one year. The glorification focuses on her special character that makes her a suitable new idol for young nuns: an example in humility, obedience and forbearance, desiring to be unknown and hidden and to suffer all pain and ill-treatment that was in store for her without any complaint. "Humiliate me until I am almost nothing; until I become a spark in the fire of the love burning in Thy Divine Heart," is one of the most talked about words attributed to Saint Alphonsa. If the Vatican's plan works out, the psychopathy of a helpless, tortured individual could become epidemic. ❧

### Intelligent Designer??

Intelligent Designer,  
God of Mercy and love  
Watchful from high above;  
What could be finer?  
Well, let's take a look.  
Earthquakes, winds and fire,  
Accidents and diseases dire;  
Just a few things from His book.  
Does He love a crying child  
In pain from His disease?  
Does He enjoy those on knees,  
Begging Him to be less wild?  
Tell me, tell me please,  
How were we so beguiled?

### Open Season (11/11/2004)

Physics, geology, astronomy  
Are readily cast aside.  
The religious right can't abide  
These, as well as chemistry,  
Biology or anything of reason.

Thousands of years of myth outweigh  
Anything scientists have to say.  
For the right, its always open season  
On those who rationally think.  
Creation trumps evolution  
In their pious revolution.  
Beneath their weight, politicians sink  
To levels that arouse revulsion  
As they pander to every religious blink.

From <www.dnagle.info> Dan Nagle, secular humanist doggerel verse



*Who Speaks for Islam:  
What a Billion Muslims Really Think*  
by John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed  
(New York: Gallup Press, 2007)

This study draws heavily on the Gallup World Poll, a multi-year survey in some 35 nations. The authors are a Georgetown University professor of international affairs and Islamic studies; and a senior analyst and director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies. In essence these two authors interpret what the respondents tell us. They take up a number of topics: what does democracy and theocracy mean in the Muslim world, how do we distinguish radicals from moderates, and how do Muslims regard the women questions. Ultimately, will there be clashes between religious civilizations or will we be able to co-exist in a shrinking world.

Until the early sixties the peoples of the Middle East looked to a relatively secular nationalism as their guidance for the future. When governments were or became increasingly seen as corrupt and dictatorial many among the educated turned to Islam and *sharia* for ideology and guidance. Islam differs from Christianity in its relation to politics. In principle Christians are expected to turn to Jesus as an individual decision. While they are expected to obey government, Christian individuals and whole communities can isolate themselves from politics and rulers. Mohammed, in contrast was a ruler, law giver, and leader in war. Islam defines a community ruled by just leaders following the *sharia*, and advised by the *ulama*, – the body of the learned in the law of the Quran.

*Sharia* means many things, and different things to different people. It refers to the principles of the Quran and the prophetic tradition. Like the US Constitution it requires interpretation, and four schools of learning are followed. There is no central religious authority binding on all believers, though individual countries have such high courts. If there is no clear, definitive text in the Quran individual decisions (*fatwa*) can differ substantially. Some things are difficult to question, the rules of marriage and polygamy for instance, or that the head of state must be a Muslim. Other issues, female circumcision for instance,

are by no means carved in stone or written in the Quran. To a considerable extent then, “Muslims participate in a *free market* of religious thought – a flexibility that may account for both the resilience and diversity of Islam across time and geography.” (p. 55)

Muslims differ on the compatibility of democracy and Islam. A minority rejects democratic ideas as a foreign, western concept. Laws passed by a legislature are idolatry, because God’s supreme power has given mankind the laws of *sharia*. Clear is, that many free elections in Muslim countries will vote for rule by Islam and *sharia*, and possibly applying a quite primitive interpretation. This explains why some progressive, educated people fear and reject electoral democracy.

The Gallup polling identified some seven percent of respondents as accepting the 9/11 attacks as fully justified and as regarding the US unfavorably. The authors call these the “politically radicalized,” (p. 70) and surmise the individuals ready to commit violence are recruited from this section. The radicalized on the whole do not come from the poor, illiterate, and unemployed of the society. On the whole, the radicalized are better educated, and come from intact middle class families, and often occupy responsible professional positions.

Among the others, the moderates, some sixty percent view the West in general and the US specifically unfavorably. They share with the radicalized the wish for more respect, consideration, and understanding of Islam and for Muslim countries. They also expect the West to be fair and less prejudiced. When asked about the future of their countries, both the radicalized and the moderates wish for improved economic conditions, greater security, and an end to civil tensions. While moderates will emphasize improvements to the educational system, the radicalized are more likely to promote democratic ideals, freedom of speech, and their country’s international status.

The authors conclude that the Muslim moderates deplore and despise the violent minority as criminals. There is no Islamic majority in support of the 9/11, the London 7/7, or the Madrid murderers. Islam is not the cause, but merely the context of these events. There is no clash of civilizations and coexistence is possible. This book is important because it is based on measured data.

– Wolf Roder





No January 2009 Potluck



December Meeting  
Tuesday Dec. 16, 7:00 PM  
January Meeting  
Tuesday Jan. 27 2009, 7:00 PM



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 fignotes at (@) gofigger.org, or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.