

FIG Leaves

Volume 10 Issue 8

August 2001

August Meeting

Date: Monday, August 13 at 7:00 p.m.

Location: Vernon Manor Inn

Topic: What's Happening in Humanism

Abstract: Molleen Matsumura will report on exciting developments in humanist organizations around the country, including the just-completed annual conference of the Secular Students Alliance. There will be plenty of time for questions and answers.

Bio: Molleen Matsumura has been a church-state activist for over fifteen years. She worked for seven years as Network Project Director for the National Center for Science Education, the only national organization that specializes in defending the teaching of evolution in public schools. She is completing her third term on the National Advisory Council of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. As a member of AU's San Francisco Bay Area Chapter, she was a plaintiff in a lawsuit to end city ownership of a monumental cross. She was founding president of Secular Humanists of the East Bay, and is a frequent contributor to freethought publications and conferences. She recently joined the advisory board of the California 3Rs Project, and is Vice-President of the Internet Infidels, an online community of nonbelievers.

July Meeting Review

Richard Ganulin, an assistant solicitor with the City of Cincinnati, spoke to the Free Inquiry Group on July 24th, 2001. As a private citizen he challenged the legislation that makes Christmas a federal holiday.

Mr. Ganulin describes himself as a radical rationalist. Growing up, his family observed Jewish holidays and paid little attention to Christmas and other Christian holidays. As a young adult he traveled extensively and noticed various forms of prejudice and injustice everywhere he went. Over time his interest gravitated toward constitutional law.

Mr. Ganulin contends that Christmas is not a secular holiday, no matter how banal it becomes. He is personally unable to celebrate the holiday, and feels that he must challenge the governmental promotion of Christmas in order to be true to himself. He wrote to the Department of Justice three years ago regarding his belief that the law was unconstitutional, but received no response. He then filed suit in federal court.

The local papers quickly reported on the lawsuit. Suddenly the story was the lead on the national newswire, and people were calling him at work and at home. Some of the calls were vitriolic and threatening.

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Events

August Meeting
What's Happening in Humanism
Molleen Matsumura
Monday, August 13, 7:00 p.m.
Vernon Manor Inn,
Continental A Room

August Potluck/Pool Party
Saturday, August 25, at 1:00

September Potluck
Tuesday, September 11,
at 6:30 PM

Ahh, the wonderful taste of humble pie.

Recently, a friend of mine sent me an Internet link, to a site which grabbed my attention and ruffled my feathers. The site is purportedly run by a group called Americans For Purity (AFP). Their agenda? A "War on Masturbation," comparable to America's War on Drugs. The site decries the ungodly evils of masturbation, and then goes on to cite tired old admonishments, both Biblical and otherwise.

The site seems to espouse the farthest-right of fundamentalist agendas. It calls for the outright illegalization of masturbation, and even goes so far as to suggest forced (but "clean and safe") clitoridectomies on infant girls. It contains a large page of links that point you to other internet sites with similarly far-right agendas. They provide links which allow you to write your senator, congressman or congresswoman, or even the President of the United States, and show your support for their agenda.

"They must be joking," I thought to myself as I read. But the punch line never came. "Maybe not," I thought.

The skeptical thing to do would have been to ask questions, and do more research, and determine whether or not such a group as AFP actually exists. Critical thinking demands further research. Alas, I did none of these things. Instead, I climbed atop my High Horse, and issued a flame e-mail, via the feedback link provided. The site proudly posts a large cross-section of the hate mail it receives, much of it profane and downright rude. "I'm not like *those* people," I thought. "I'll send a *rational* message."

What I sent wasn't even original, but rather a minor retooling of the old "Open Letter to Dr. Laura" that went around the Internet a year or so ago. If the site is serious, the satire of this message would likely be lost on its creator(s), but why not send it? If the site is satirical, as an embarrassingly small part of me suspected it might be, I'm merely responding with more satire.

Of course, the site is indeed intended to be satirical; presumably the intent is to expose the silliness of the War on Drugs and perhaps ruffle some Christian feathers along the way. The site creator's response to my message called me an "ignorant, gullible sheep," (not worded quite that nicely), and I realized he or she was right. At least 200 others sent some version of the "open letter" I sent long before I ever did. And a look at the site's "hate mail" archive gives a glimpse into just how frustrating it must be that such a large percentage of readers take the site 100% seriously and at face value. It's no wonder the site's creator is so bitter.

There are several lessons to be learned here. First and foremost, critical thinking is a full-time job. It's so easy to lapse into credulity, one has to keep one's guard up at all times, or risk the embarrassment I just experienced. Second, the arguments we skeptics so often use against the "tired, old" fundamentalist dogma are every bit as old and every bit as tired. When we parrot these arguments, we play right into the hands of those who accuse us of being every bit as dogmatic as they are. Last, before charging into battle against the "credulous," one should take a long, hard look in the mirror. I certainly should have done so.

I'll enjoy my humble pie. I've earned it. And hopefully I will have learned these lessons and taken them to heart. Before I charge into battle, I'll think back on this episode and remember how I became just as judgmental those I so dislike. I have met the enemy, and it is I.

- Tom Girsch

For those of you who are morbidly curious, the AFP site can be found at http://www.geocities.com/for_purity/. Be warned, however, that much of the contents are potentially offensive, even when viewed in the context of satire. This is made all the more true by the fact that everything is presented with such a straight face, it's very easy to take it seriously.

It doesn't matter if it's written in the Bible, even if Jesus the Christ said it himself, or if the State of Ohio has it carved in granite: "With God all things are possible" simply is not true. Some things even an all powerful god can't accomplish. He, or she, can't draw a flat map of the earth to scale. No way, never, it's a mathematical impossibility.

Franz Bibfeldt, theologian

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Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
Massimo Pigliucci
Department of Botany,
University of Tennessee

N. 13, August 2001: "Frankenfoods vs. the neo-Luddites"

This column can be posted for free on any appropriate web site. If you are interested in receiving the html code, please send an email (pigliucci@utk.edu).

Ned Ludd was a man who fought against the change of his time. He saw the industrial revolution and mechanization of the 19th century as a threat to the way of life of many people, and took action to prevent the catastrophe. He failed, of course, but to this day if someone is anti-technology and innovation, she is still likely to be branded a Luddite.

Actually, Ludd is probably a legendary figure. What we do know is that the movement started in 1811 near Liverpool, England, and was directed against the textile machinery that was displacing the local workers. It spread rapidly to other parts of England, but was brutally arrested by a bloody repression. In 1812 a band of Luddites was shot because of the complaints of a factory owner (who was then killed in reprisal), and a trial in 1813 ended in mass hangings. The movement had a second peak in 1816, following the Napoleonic wars, but this time a combination of violent repression and of ensuing better economic times determined its final end.

Yet, at the turn of the 21st century more and more people consider themselves "neo-Luddites": there are alternative music bands by that name, there is a folk opera dedicated to Ned Ludd, and - oddly enough - plenty of Web sites dedicated to Luddism. Even some prominent contemporary writers such as social critic Neil Postman can be counted as exponents of this informal movement.

One of the targets of neo-Luddism is a category of food products that the protesters have dubbed "frankenfoods," with obvious reference to Mary Shelley's 1818 novel (written at the end of the Luddite movement) depicting the catastrophes that ensue when science goes too far in its quest for knowledge. Frankenfoods are, of course, genetically engineered foods, a category that includes a large and increasing variety of both plant and animal products.

The question I wish to briefly discuss is this: what is the most rational approach to the frankenfood controversy as an example of the real or imagined dangers of

technology? The answer is obviously not simple, a truism when complex problem are considered.

We can effortlessly dismiss both extreme views on the topic as irrational. On the one hand, there is nothing magical or even unnatural about genetic engineering. Anybody who takes the time to study a bit of molecular biology will easily understand the relatively straightforward (in principle, though not always in practice) technology of recombinant DNA, which is at the base of genetic engineering. As for the naturalness of it all, evolutionary biologists have discovered plenty of natural examples of "horizontal gene transfer" between species. This is the technical term for when a gene that evolved in one organism (let's say a bacterium) is acquired by a different organism (for example another species of bacterium, a plant, or even an animal). Genetic engineering is simply an accelerated (and consciously directed) version of horizontal gene transfer. In that, it does not differ from plenty of other "unnatural" technologies, such as flying above the earth's surface on machines heavier than air, or exploiting the properties of radio waves to talk into a cell phone.

On the other hand, the claim by multinational companies such as Monsanto that genetically engineered foods are absolutely safe is also nonsense. Research in evolutionary biology shows clearly the dramatic effects of horizontal gene transfer on certain organisms (for example, some bacteria can become extremely resistant to antibiotics) and the fact that humanly modified species can interbreed with their natural cousins to produce offspring whose characteristics are impossible to guess. Furthermore, no matter how many tests are carried out on a new genetically engineered product, there is always the possibility that some allergic reaction or other side effect has been neglected and that it will cause disease or even death in a minority of people.

The real question, therefore, is not weather the technology is "good" or "bad," but what is its appropriate use and what kind of safeguards should be put in place to use it. This is why the answer is actually complex. We are now talking about a trade-off between benefits and dangers. I am not referring here to the obvious benefits to the corporations that produce genetically engineered foods. Those are irrelevant from a social point of view. I am speaking of the benefits to farmers and consumers of those products. These range (potentially) from crops that are resistant to pathogens to the availability of a wide variety of foods with interesting properties such as different flavors or unusual time of availability on the market. But are these advantages worth the risk of putting farmers at the mercy of a few and often unscrupulous companies? And what about the possibility - however small - of health risks or environmental damage caused by the new products?

Since there is no yes/no answer to the problem, we are left with the much more thorny issue of estimating

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Only then did he realize the danger to himself and his family.

Despite some of the characterizations in the press, Mr. Ganulin was not attempting to 'outlaw Christmas'. He only wanted to eliminate the government endorsement of a particular religion. Many well-known personalities commented on the case, with thoughtful opinions both pro and con. Yet the first consideration of the case by U.S. District Court Judge Susan Dlott was disappointingly misguided. Judge Dlott declared that the law did not create a sectarian preference, and thus the suit could be dismissed.

Mr. Ganulin then appealed the case to the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. His oral arguments described the way in which he was personally offended by the law. Even though the judges were impressed by the arguments, they knew that they would not overturn the law. The three judges on the panel summarily affirmed Judge Dlott's decision with little explanation.

The Beckett Fund for Religious Liberty entered the case as counsel for three federal employees who were defendant-intervenors. This religious group wanted a Supreme Court affirmation of the Sixth Circuit decision so that it would be the law of the land. Mr. Ganulin filed a petition for writ of certiorari, but Supreme Court declined to hear the

case. This leaves the door open to challenges in the 11 other circuits. With a more receptive judge there may yet be a chance to affirm the rights of the non-religious.

Philip Ferguson

Is the US a religious nation?

The data portray a nation that is comfortable with religion but not particularly committed to spiritual growth. "Most people who are aligned with a Christian church really make a rather minimal investment in religious activity. There are those who are completely committed to spiritual growth and invest themselves quite heavily in such development, but they constitute less than one out of every five adults in America. Similarly, relatively few adults have completely negated the role of faith in their lives -- again, perhaps one out of five. Most people describe themselves as religious, describe their faith as being very important in their daily life, but make only a half-hearted effort to truly master the foundations of their chosen faith and live a life that is determined by that faith."

-- Data from the Barna Research Group (9 July 2001)

"I do not believe that any type of religion should ever be introduced into the public schools of the United States."

Thomas Alva Edison, *The Great Quotations*, George Seldes, ed., *2000 Years of Disbelief*, James A. Haught

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probabilities. There is a certain likelihood that a newly released genetically engineered food will become a health hazard. But the same is true for any new drug aimed at fighting a human disease. There is a given probability of environmental impact of the new product, but this is also true for just about any technology we use, with apparently "innocuous" technologies (such as cars) carrying an already demonstrated much higher burden on the deterioration of our environment.

As the rapid demise of the original Luddite movement demonstrated, it is difficult to change the direction of history once certain forces have been set in motion. However, the rational person should still be able to discriminate between the pros and cons of any new development, and such knowledge should be used to inform others and to change things slowly by changing people's vision and habits of thinking.

Further reading:

Technopoly: the Surrender of Culture to Technology, by Neil Postman, a manifesto of neo-Luddism.

Understanding DNA and Gene Cloning: a Guide for the Curious, by Karl Drlica.

Web links:

Even Luddites have web sites... , a site including links to Luddites on line, the origin of Luddism, a "Luddite purity test," great Luddites in history and of course the ballad of Ned Ludd. (<http://www.webpointers.com/luddites.html>)

Mary Shelley and Frankenstein, with several essays on the book and how it came about. (<http://www.kimwoodbridge.com/maryshel/maryshel.shtml>)

Genetic Science Learning Center, a wonderful resource with material and activities for students, teachers, parents, and the general public. Learn about genetics, molecular biology and their impact on society. (<http://gslc.genetics.utah.edu/>)

**Next Month: "The dark side of philosophy"
(part of the 'Pizza & Philosophy' series)**

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FIG Leaflets

Italy's Patron Saint of Volcanoes: "Our-Lady-of-there's-only-so-much-I-can-do-when-you-live-under-a-friggin-volcano."
John Stewart, *The Daily Show*

In America

In America there is of course serious and well-organized opposition to Darwinism, just as there is a serious and well-organized movement to ensure that teenage children have ready access to automatic weapons and ammunition, and a large body of opinion that holds that all useful science originated in Africa. The sanity or historical plausibility of a message has no necessary correlation with its political importance in American culture. Despite the succession of crushing court victories which have kept "Creation Science" out of publicly funded classrooms, there is a steady quiet pressure which has kept explicit Darwinism out of widely sold textbooks, too. Not all of this can be put down to the malign influence of American Protestantism. As much, it seems to me, comes from the profoundly democratic and capitalist nature of America, which holds that everyone has a right to believe what pleases them, especially if there is money to be made out of this belief.

Andrew Brown, *The Darwin Wars*, 1999, p. 174

Author Taslima Nasreen convicted

Taslima Nasreen, Honorary Associate of Rationalist International, has been convicted in absentia by a court in Bangladesh on charges of blasphemy. The verdict ends a criminal case, filed by an Islamic cleric against the author for "hurting the religious sentiments of Muslims" with her novel *Shame* and her criticism of the Quran. Taslima had to leave her country in 1994 because Islamic fundamentalists threatened her life. In September 1998 she returned to see her dying mother, but had to flee once again from the wrath of the fanatics.

-- *Rationalist International Bulletin*. No. 73 (17 July 2001)

Bush on stem cell research:

In 1960 John Kennedy went from Washington down to Texas to assure a conference of Protestant preachers that he would not obey the Pope. In 2001 George W. Bush came from Texas up to Washington to assure a group of Catholic Bishops that he would.

Anna Quindlen, *Newsweek* (16 July 2001) p. 62

Pray, n. To ask the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner confessedly unworthy.

-Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

About a year ago a friend of mine said, "You spend way more time thinking about religion than I do...and I'm a Christian! You think about it more, you talk about it more, and you obsess about it more."

She was right. Granted, at that time she was one of the only Christians with whom I felt comfortable discussing religion. So I tended to bring the subject up with her fairly regularly because I could. But her statement was a wake up call. If I was so sure that I do not want to be a Christian or Buddhist or New Age Guru, then why was I thinking, talking, and obsessing about religion so much.

It was understandable that I had to give it some serious thought when I was coming to terms with my lack of belief. But after 20 years, shouldn't I finally have it all figured out and given religion a smaller share of my psyche? If I claim that religion is unimportant to me, doesn't it deserve relatively less of my time and attention?

So I have consciously tried to do two things in the past year: more openly share my lack of beliefs and scale down on my need to discuss it with them. Somehow it has worked. Once I told people that I am a humanist/agnostic/whatever-it-is-that-I-am-this-week, it greatly decreased my need to discuss it. They know that I'm not a Christian and seem remarkably comfortable with that notion. I know that they are Christians and am very comfortable with their beliefs. I told one friend that I was amazed that she and others are so tolerant of different beliefs and lacks thereof. She said that I shouldn't be...that I should give people a chance. I'm not naive enough to believe that everyone would be completely accepting, but I've come to believe that many are. And I know that they and I firmly believe that we have made the right choice and secretly wish that everyone agreed with us. But that's just a part of life.

It's nice to discover that religion doesn't matter to many of my friends. Perhaps the reason I did not give people a chance sooner is because intolerance was a large part of my childhood religious experience. Perhaps it was not intentionally taught, but it was a message that I received loud and clear. I'm delighted to find so many who either were not taught intolerance or else have rejected it as I have. And I am very proud of the fact that I have tried to put religion in a different perspective and have somewhat succeeded.

Thank you for the quotes, Wolf.

BOOK REVIEWS

Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America

by John H. McWhorter
(New York: The Free Press, 2000)

The author tries to answer a specific question. Why, after rapid and brilliant advances in education, income, and jobs over three decades, are Black Americans stuck in mediocrity? Why do we still need "affirmative action" laws and procedures? Why do Black admissions drop precipitously when universities admit students strictly on merit, such as expressed in SAT scores? McWhorter rejects the universal explanation of racial discrimination. To be sure, whites who dislike or hate Blacks are still around, but a declining, unimportant species. Cops still pull over Blacks in preference to other Americans, but this is more annoyance than discrimination. "This book is written in the belief that the idea that white racism is the main obstacle to black success and achievement is now all but obsolete." McWhorter as well explicitly discredits the alternative idea that Blacks are simply stupid.

Blacks have created three obstacles to their own advancement: a cult of victimology, which is related to a separatist obsession, and a virulent undercurrent of anti-intellectualism. The American past of pervasive racism has created a Black culture which no longer treats victimhood as a problem to be overcome, but as an identity to be nurtured. Blacks living in the slums or in decrepit public housing may be explained as victims of the past. But this population is by now a mere one-fifth minority among Blacks. As the author reiterates repeatedly, most Black Americans today have joined the middle class and live in the suburbs. Yet, the least antagonism encountered from whites, is generally met with a proud, unreasoning fury which never permits the questioning of victimhood. In contrast, most middle class whites, especially at universities "are absolutely marinated in racial sensitivity workshops and talks from the minute they hit campus." (P. 38) Most Black students have experienced very little racism, because only the very occasional jerk strays from the PC line.

A natural consequence of victimology encourages black people to see themselves as a separate entity, "within which the rules other Americans are expected to follow are suspended out of a belief that our

victimhood renders us morally exempt from them." (P.xi) The misadventures of O. J. Simpson, Tawana Brawley, and the Reverend Al Sharpton are simply examples. Rules of scholarly evidence can be ignored. McWhorter compares the pseudo-history of Afrocentric myth-making explicitly with the pseudo-science of "creationism."

Victimology and separatism have spawned a strong tendency of anti-intellectual attitudes at all levels of the Black community. To excel in school or academia, to be intellectually knowledgeable, or to read books for the simple pursuit of learning are a "white thing." Success in school leads to accusations of "wanting to be white," and is to be discouraged. This is why black students do poorly in school and college, although they often can and do well enough to get the degree, the credential which leads to a middle class job. This is pervasive in the race: "... Anti-intellectualism is a central component of black identity. Like a virus, it sets in early, it has no regard for status in society, and once settled, it almost never lets go." (P. 99)

McWhorter condemns Black and white pundits who condone victimology, separatism, and anti-intellectualism in the Black community as an understandable response to the horrors of the past. He is even harder on opportunist politicians, identity politics mavens, and sensationalist cultural demagogues. Worse are rap singers, journalists, and other Blacks who play at being slum dwellers, yet hail from solid middle-class suburbs.

According to McWhorter's these defeatist thought currents have become so deeply ingrained in Black American culture "they are no longer perceived as points of view, but rather as simple logic incarnate." (p. xiv) Some of his most telling evidence lies in the fact this is an American cultural phenomenon. Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean and their children generally do not carry this cultural virus, often they do much better in school and life than native Americans.

McWhorter is black; any white saying what he writes would be excoriated as a racist. He is a professor of linguistics. His discussion of black English and the Ebonics controversy alone makes the book worth reading.

Wolf Roder

Boy Scout explaining his merit badges: "...and this one is for homophobia..."

BOOK REVIEWS

Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America

by Stephen G. Bloom
(New York: Harcourt, Inc. 2000)

Postville really exists. It is not the creation of a novelist, and neither is the dilemma of the two cultures. The author, a professor of journalism at the University of Iowa, recounts the story in the context of his own experience. The facts are simple. In the mid-eighties a Hasidic Jewish entrepreneur invested in a small defunct slaughterhouse in a dying northeast Iowa town of 1465 inhabitants. In order to pack first rate *kosher* meats, the work necessitated creating a Hasidic community of about fifty families in the middle of Lutheran Iowa. It also brought a minimum wage foreign labor force to Postville. The industry proved a success. Not only is product shipped all over the world, including to Israel, the town and its economy, its businesses, and its real estate revived.

Bloom is Jewish himself, but a thoroughly secularized, pork eating, Reform Jew. He begins the book by telling us about his own culture shock when transplanted into small town Protestant Iowa from metropolitan New York and San Francisco. Here his family experienced a thoroughly Christian world. "Most Iowans were so accustomed to everyone else being Christian that they couldn't possibly imagine anyone not believing in Christ, or at least, reared to believe in Christ." (P. 18) Although rarely attending Temple services, Bloom considers himself through and through Jewish. "Religious culture and devotion to faith are two different things," (p. 21). It is thus in a sense of examining his own cultural roots that Bloom set out to write the story of Postville and its Hasidic invasion.

As it turns out, the Hasids have no interest in the people of Postville and want no social intercourse with them. They openly and outright reject every overture, every attempt at friendliness, every open hand of invitation and neighborliness. In fact they have no interest except to live their own separate life, and to observe the six hundred plus commandments of the Torah. If anything, they show a lively contempt for the gentiles and try to trump them in any trade or business transaction. The Hasids do invite Bloom to their homes, but only for the purpose of converting him, as a born Jew, to their fundamentalism.

Bloom encounters some very amiable people. But they gradually reveal themselves as narrow minded,

intolerant, and downright racist. Like Christian or Muslim fundamentalists there is no talking with them, their interpretation of God's will is the only right one, and nothing else matters.

Ultimately, I discovered, carrying on a conversation with any of the Postville Hasidim was virtually impossible. If you didn't agree, you were at fault, part of the problem. You were paving the way for the ultimate destruction of the Jews, the world's Chosen People. There was not room for compromise, no room for negotiation, no room for anything but total and complete submission. (P. 198)

As Bloom becomes better acquainted he becomes aware that the Hasids' behavior towards the townspeople is often atrocious. This is part and parcel of the utter contempt they feel not only for Christians, but for all gentiles. There is a tendency to deliberately delay paying their bills, sometimes to stiff a merchant all together. There is even a willingness to stoop to theft or outright cheating. Bloom recounts a notorious case in which the Hasids rescue one of their own from a long prison sentence, while his fellow in crime takes a fall of many years punishment.

The author is eventually led to take sides, and finds himself on the side of tolerant unbelievers, open-minded Christians and liberal Jews. This book is well written, a good story, and a quick read. We learn much about the American heartland, conflicting religious cultures, and what makes an American. I recommend it.

Wolf Roder

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