

# FIG Leaves

Volume 10 Issue 12

December 2001

## December Meeting

Warren Allen Smith, Author of "Who's Who in Hell"

For our meeting on Sunday, December 16, we are pleased to welcome one of the most charming and colorful humanist activists ever to speak to FIG, Warren Allen Smith. He will tell us the saga of how he wrote "Who's Who in Hell" (Barricade Books, 2000), a kind of encyclopedia of humanists, freethinkers, and non-theists past and present. He will also tell us about some of his favorite people in that book.

Wolf Roder's favorable review of this book for our October issue is reprinted below in this issue for your convenience.

Warren has led a varied life. As an acting First Sergeant, he led his troops ashore on Omaha Beach in Normandy in 1944. At Columbia University, he founded a Humanist Club and secured educator-philosopher John Dewey as the first dues-paying member. (He still has Dewey's uncashed check).

He taught English in high school for over three decades in New Canaan, Connecticut, while also founding a major Manhattan independent recording studio (recording Liza Minnelli's first demo). Warren was the book review editor of the AHA's Humanist magazine in the 1950s and, until 2001, an editorial associate of Free Inquiry magazine.

Warren is also active internationally. He helped to secure a court order in Costa Rica requiring government-paid medication for patients with AIDS. He continues to help Taslima Nasrin, the Bangladeshi humanist living under fatwa, in part by editing her publications. Under the pen name Allen Windsor, he regularly writes "Gossip from Across the Pond" for London's Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association journal. Warren's Web site is [www.wasm.ws](http://www.wasm.ws)

A declared sybarite living in Greenwich Village not far from Ground Zero, he is an activist freethinker whose "Celebrities in Hell" (containing the latest dish) will be published as a paperback in the spring.

Joe Levee

***Who's Who in Hell: A Handbook and International Directory for Humanists, Freethinkers, Naturalists, Rationalists, and Non-Theists***

compiled by Warren Allen Smith  
(New York: Barricade Books, 2000)

They are all here, from Jeppe Aakjaer, a Danish non-theist, to Randall Zwing, better known as The Amazing Randi, 1238 pages of biographical and factual entries for the denizens of hell. Persons known for their independence from supernatural nonsense are not the only entries. Add extensive descriptions of subject matter, organizations and publications of

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## Events

### December Meeting

Sunday, December 16, at 7:00  
Warren Allen Smith,  
author of "Who's Who in Hell,"  
Vernon Manor Inn

### January Potluck

Tuesday, January 8, at 6:30 PM

### "WHO'S WHO IN HELL" Raffle

Warren has contributed a copy of "Who's Who in Hell" to FIG so we can raffle it off at the meeting and help defray the costs of transporting him here from Greenwich Village. Tickets will go for \$5 each, a reasonable price for a book of 1264 pages that sells for \$125 and in a good cause. If you can't make it to the meeting send a check to our PO Box (which we will return if we don't get it before the meeting). The book, of course, is bigger than the Bible and far funnier.

(Continued from page 1)

interest to unbelievers. Further, some people are entered in distinct type for what they have said or written of interest, although they themselves may not have been free thinkers. Print size distinguishes between major entries and items of only peripheral interest. In this way the author manages the problems of identifying matters of unbelief versus issues of a merely secular nature.

How do we assess a specialized encyclopedia? One way is to compare entries with a standard source. A look at the listing for Philip Freneau (1752-1832) in the *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia* provides an entire thumbnail sketch of the Revolutionary era poet. This includes his middle name, which is missing in *Hell*. But *Encarta* lacks the information that he was an unbeliever, or at least a deist who accepted the need for a prime mover but not the Christian God. *Who's Who in Hell* gives us not only that information, but cites a six stanza poem to illustrate the case. Entries in this work differ from standard sources in information, in size, and in emphasis, making it clear that *Hell* fills a specialized need. Many standard biographical sources simply do not inform the reader if the entry represents a free thinker, an unbeliever, a Unitarian, or a deist. This one does, or, where there is doubt, at least discusses the issue.

So who do we find in this compilation? Many very famous and well known people. Our first four presidents along with many Enlightenment thinkers definitely did not believe in the standard Christian Deity. There is a long list of Nobel Laureates in *Hell*, peace winners: Angell and Nansen: literature: Shaw, Camus, and Hemingway: science, Weinberg, Curie, and Pauling, among many others. Many other scientists, artists, writers, and philosophers have made the cut. Mark Twain (p. 220) truly had it accurately: "Heaven for the climate, hell for the company." We would also meet some rather unwholesome types. Revolutionary thinker Karl Marx, a converted Jew was an atheist; and some would claim he invented his own religion. Also present Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili generally known as Stalin. Not, however, Adolph Hitler, who despite many believers' claims to the contrary remained a Catholic to the end of his life. Also missing are Idi Amin, because he was a Muslim, and Pol Pot, who probably should be in the real Hell.

Any author who characterizes persons by their degree of unbelief or doubt about god faces enormous problems. In the first place he has to have some definition of god and religion to identify those who deny them. In the second, persons may say and write many different things over a long life, as well as change their beliefs or attitudes over time. Finally,

many important persons had reasons to keep their doubts to themselves. Thus, some biographers have denied that Darwin or Mark Twain were agnostics. Some persons were quite critical of religion, without however denying god or stating clearly where they stood. Not many modern American politicians will admit to unbelief. The English novelist Kingsley Amis is listed as having written some devastating criticisms of Christianity, without ever being involved in freethought. A similar argument applies to the Nobel laureate in literature Selma Lagerlöf.

Smith struggles with these problems, and many will be the criticisms leveled at him, but it is not useful to dwell at length on errors. The book must be regarded as a valiant pioneering effort, which will improve with revision. Where else could you find the case for John Lennon's atheism, Doris Lessing's progress from religion to Marxism to unbelief, or that Joe Levee "is one of the more forward-looking secular humanists" (p. 664).

Wolf Roder

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Expect some real changes to FIG Leaves in the coming months. This will be my last issue as editor. Idelle Datlof has graciously agreed to take over. We may be collaborating on the next few issues until Idelle makes it her very own. I cannot wait to see what changes she has in store for us. I have enjoyed the last two and a half years but find that family activities had encroached upon my computer time. So I am eager to hand the reins over to Idelle and she is equally excited to take FIG Leaves into a new era. FIG Leaves will be in very capable hands.

Our website is a few months behind on the newsletter. We hope to have that problem corrected soon.

Martha Ferguson

FIG Leaves Volume 10, Issue 12, December 2001 - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in electronic format via Internet to [figeditors@fuse.net](mailto:figeditors@fuse.net) or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 8128, Cincinnati OH 45208. Contributions received before the first Tuesday of the month will be considered for publication that month. All material printed in FIG Leaves may be reproduced in similar publications of non-profit groups which grant FIG Leaves reciprocal reprinting rights as long as proper credit is clearly attributed to FIG Leaves and the author. Opinions expressed in FIG Leaves are those of their authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the editor or the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., its board, or officers. © 2000 The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. FIG Board of Directors: President Philip Ferguson, Vice President Michele Grinoch, Secretary George Maurer, Treasurer Joe Levee, Members: Nurit Bowman, Idelle Datlof, Michele Grinoch, Helen Kagin, Tim Kelly, Gary Weiss, and FIG Leaves Editor: Martha Ferguson.

## Letter to the Editor :

When I read George Maurer's article reporting on the October Meeting program of the playreading and discussion of *Traveler in the Dark*, I was appalled, and then furious.

In reporting on this program, Mr. Maurer should have limited the scope of his reporting to the ideas in the play and the discussion of those ideas by the members after the play. He had taped the entire 30 minute discussion, but his article gave no indication that he ever went back and listened to the discussion on tape. And his comments on Bob Allen's portrayal of Sam showed he had no idea what was really going on in the play with Sam's character.

When Joe Levee called and asked me to put together a playreading program (first *Copenhagen*, then *Traveler in the Dark*), he emphasized to me that we would be 'just reading' the play for its ideas, not for a quality performance you might expect from a downtown or even good community theater play rehearsed 4 to 6 weeks. The purpose was to be a credible reading elucidating the ideas of the play for discussion of those ideas afterward. Mr. Maurer's article in November *Fig Leaves* completely ignored that stated purpose.

Unfortunately, I have since learned that that purpose, promised to me, was not communicated to Mr. Maurer. It certainly should have been. And I thought that FIG was all about reporting objectively on the evidence! ("...improve the human condition through rational inquiry...") George did not report objectively on the program as a whole; he did not report on the comments and discussion afterward; he did, instead write a biased critique centering on the actors and performance. The tone of Mr. Maurer's article was petty, personality based, and negative, not the usual high quality rational, objective, and intellectual approach to material I have always expected and received from *Fig Leaves* articles. George centered on the personal; for example, Mr Freeman's appropriate and understandable unwillingness to reveal the details and ending in his analogy between his personal life experience with his mother and that in the play. George, where or what was the idea in the play that everyone might use from this example? You had the complete transcript of the discussion on tape; why didn't you use it?

Much was made of Bob Allen being a 'professional actor', but not one word was mentioned that I, too, am a professional (now mostly retired) in the field. I have a Masters degree from Northwestern University in Oral Interpretation of Literature - the format we used to 'reveal' the play and its ideas to the audience - and additional study in Theater, Acting and Directing toward a Ph.D with the same professors that trained Paula Prentiss, Richard Benjamin, and Charlton

Heston. This has been my 'profession' for 50 years. As such, I was producer of this program and was director of the play. 5 people gave up 3 hours of their valuable time on a lovely Sunday afternoon to have one single rehearsal to insure a smooth reading. Critiquing performances based on a single rehearsal/run thru is totally inappropriate.

I will agree with one observation: "Robert Allen...sometimes seemed to be mumbling his lines." I gave Bob a director's note both at rehearsal on Sunday and between acts on Tuesday, asking him to energize and clarify his articulation. However, the criticism that the actor "seemed to be otherwise preoccupied" was totally off base; and ascribing the cause to the fact that he had to leave early was not only inaccurate, it was rude and ingracious. We were lucky to get an actor the caliber of Mr. Allen to do this difficult role. Mr. Allen, the entire cast of a play, students, and other people had to go to great inconvenience to make this program happen. FIG should be thanking them all profusely, not carping that a guest performer could not make a FIG program the center of his existence. (And by the way, did anyone on the FIG Board or program committee even bother to so much as send a Thank You note to our three guests).

Mr. Maurer states "Bob Allen seemed to be otherwise preoccupied...". GOOD! That is exactly the impression that I, as director, and Mr. Allen, as actor, wished to convey! What Mr. Maurer perceived was accurate characterization of the role, not a personal problem of bad acting. In the script, the author states that the character of Sam is..."a brilliant loner...can seem preoccupied, impatient and condescending." Specific stage directions in the play, as well as actual lines in the play stated by Glory, Everett, and even Sam himself reveal and reinforce this characterization. So that distant, preoccupied quality conveyed by Bob Allen was an accurate reading of the author's intent and had nothing to do with his having to leave early.

Almost half the discussion time after the play reading was devoted to the symbolism of the Geode to the ideas, characterization and the intent of the play. Yet none of the astute comments and observations of the audience on this point was even mentioned. Sam, the brilliant surgeon/scientist, was in conflict with his father, the preacher of entrenched, if not fundamentalist, religion -- the very basis of our FIG purpose and reason for the program. Where was the reporting of that idea and our discussion of it?

Mr. Maurer blew it when he tried to critique actors and their performances as if it were a rehearsed play instead of reporting objectively on a reading of the the play for its ideas. George, stick to what you know best and are good at: objective, intellectual reporting and analysis of rational ideas.

Carolyn Ruth Hunt



## *Rationally Speaking*

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

N. 19, December 2001: "The great unicorn debate"

**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](mailto:pigliucci@utk.edu)).**

"I will give you one hundred dollars if you can demonstrate that there is no such thing as an immaterial unicorn in this room." When I said that to my class of Honors students engaged in a course on science and pseudoscience, they looked at me in disbelief. I suspect that the incredulity wasn't generated by the obvious impossibility of the task at hand, but by the idea that their professor would put a hundred bucks of his own money on the table to prove a point. So started the great unicorn debate which lasted for several weeks, until the intellectual energy of the participants was exhausted.

The first attempts at solving the problem were generated simply by a misunderstanding of the question: one of the students claimed it was really a straightforward matter; just flood the room and the body of the unicorn would displace a certain volume of water, which would reveal the presence or demonstrate the absence of the beast (apparently, ethical concerns about the possibility of drowning the unicorn did not enter in the proposal). "I said 'immaterial', not 'invisible,'" I remarked. Water, as everyone knows, just goes through an immaterial body without being displaced. "Oh!" Successive attempts were crafted more carefully.

A particularly clever effort—which clearly got the point of the exercise—was: "There are no immaterial unicorns in our classroom, because in our classroom exists an atmospheric condition, undetectable by any tools we might have today, that causes immaterial unicorns to materialize, thereby making them visible to the naked eye." Talk about beating you at your own game. But I wasn't about to let my hundred bucks go that easily. I replied that the person in question obviously did not understand the mysteries of unicornism, or she would realize the foolishness of such an attempt.

Another student came up with a more challenging

philosophical solution to the problem. It went like this:

*Fact one:* Immaterial is defined as the absence of matter.

*Fact two:* Matter cannot be created or destroyed.

*Conclusion One:* Something that is immaterial cannot be created or destroyed.

*Fact three:* Thought exists only as something immaterial.

*Fact four:* Thought exists only in one's own mind.

*Conclusion Two:* Something immaterial exists only in one's own mind.

*Conclusion Three:* The presence of something immaterial can be created or destroyed only in one's mind.

*Conclusion Four:* The creation or destruction of something immaterial in one's own mind is determined by belief.

*Final Conclusion:* There is not an invisible, immaterial unicorn if one does not believe it in her own mind.

Damn! I wish more theologians displayed such a keen sense of reasoning.

Yet, this still wasn't good enough, and I asked the whole class to go through the proposed proof, pick it apart, and see where the flaws were. Sure enough, half an hour of discussion revealed several problems.

First, modern physics no longer maintains that matter cannot be created or destroyed. In fact, according to quantum mechanics, such processes go on all the time. The only reason we normally don't detect them is because they are very fast and balance each other perfectly, so we don't expect a chair to suddenly appear from or disappear into nothingness. (Although, according to superstring theory, this sort of quantum fluctuation may have been responsible for the origin of the universe, which would have literally popped into existence from nowhere. Spooky.)

Second, who said that thought is immaterial? Some leftover Cartesian dualists might still think that, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is becoming more acceptable to consider thought an aspect of very physical activities going on inside one's brain. Indeed, we can now measure which parts of the brain are involved in which sort of thinking and even feelings. This doesn't mean that we have a full understanding of what thought is. Far from it. But the chances that it will turn out to be immaterial (in the sense of not depending on matter) are pretty slim.

Mind you, I completely agree with the final conclusion: there is no immaterial unicorn unless one believes in it in his own mind. But the only justification I (or anybody else, as far as I know) can give for such conclusion is my own intuition.

The same student also presented another clever argument, this one based on the laws of physics. She

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correctly maintained that an immaterial unicorn could not be affected by or take advantage of the laws of physics, by the definition of being immaterial. Therefore, we should think of the unicorn rather as an immaterial point with no extension (*pace* Euclid). Such an immaterial point could not *stay* in the room because the room itself—along with the earth and the whole solar system—is moving fast through space. The core of this demonstration depends on Descartes' own intuition of the trouble he got himself into by proposing a dualistic conception of the human body: if the mind is not corporeal, how does it affect the body? Descartes "solved" the problem by positing that the pineal gland was the seat of the soul. But, as every philosopher since him has immediately realized, just because you make the point of contact between material and immaterial as small as possible (the pineal gland is the smallest gland in the endocrine system), the paradox of an immaterial entity acting on matter (or *vice versa*) doesn't go away. Indeed, that is what's so unbelievable about ghosts, ectoplasms and out of body experiences: if you are out of your body, how do you manage to *see* yourself lying in bed? With whose eyes? What brain is there to process the visual signal? And, given that your sense of self depends on having a properly functioning brain, who is *you*, when you are out of the body?

But of course, in order to save my money, all I had to reply was that—once again—the mysteries of unicornism tells me that not only the immaterial unicorn is not a point; it also stays in the room with no trouble, it's a male, five feet tall and of white color (how do I know that it is white if it is immaterial and invisible? Well, you should know by now: it's a mystery...).

By the end of the day, my students agreed that there was no way to demonstrate the inexistence of the phantom-like unicorn. After having secured my hundred bucks, I then asked if they believed in the existence of the

unicorn, nonetheless. There was a unanimous negative response. "Why?" I asked affecting surprise. "Because it's silly to believe in something for which there is no evidence," was the equally bewildered response. After a few seconds, somebody asked: "Then what's the difference with belief in god?" But class time was over, and I left them to discuss theology with the satisfaction of a job well done.

#### **Quote of the month:**

*"He hoped and prayed that there wasn't an afterlife. Then he realized there was a contradiction involved here and merely hoped that there wasn't an afterlife."* (Douglas Adams)

#### **Web links:**

Critical thinking of the web: a directory of quality online resources. (<http://www.philosophy.unimelb.edu.au/reason/critical/>)

California Academic Press, specializing in resources on critical thinking. (<http://www.calpress.com/>)

#### **Further reading:**

How to Think About Weird Things: Critical Thinking for a New Age, by Theodore Schick, Lewis Vaughn. Step-by-step procedures for evaluating the New Age claims that permeate our culture.

Next month: "Is philosophy useless?"

© by Massimo Pigliucci, 2001

Many thanks to Melissa Brenneman and Bob Faulkner for patiently editing and commenting on *Rationally Speaking* columns.

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## **The CFI Conference in Atlanta on the Compatibility of Science and Religion**

The Center for Inquiry Conference on the Compatibility of Science and Religion was held in Atlanta from November 9-11. It was an enlightening experience for humanists and skeptics. All of the sessions were presented in discussion panel format with each speaker discussing the topic from his or her perspective. Members of the panels included some of the leading experts who have extensively investigated religious claims supposedly supported by scientific studies. These panel discussions dealt with some of the major religious issues highly publicized by the media, including prayer at a distance, intelligent design, near death experiences,

and new cosmologies advocating the anthropic principle, which claims the universe had to be perfectly designed for life to exist. At the end of each panel discussion ample time was allotted for members of the audience to ask any questions of any of the panel discussants.

Proponents of the religious perspective on each issue were invited to be on the panels but only one who supported the anthropic principle came to the conference. Perhaps it was because they were worried they would be in hostile territory facing opposing experts without a credulous audience that unquestioningly accepts everything they say. It brought a refreshing feeling to be a spectator to the reversal of the usual media coverage where claims are ballyhooed on national television as though they

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have been fully verified and are vouched for by supposed authorities with little if any time given to skeptical experts expressing opposing views.

This conference was especially relevant to the Cincinnati humanist group with the creation museum just across the river in Kentucky. One panel discussion presented a devastating critique of Intelligent Design. Michael Behe, a leading proponent of Intelligent Design, was scheduled to appear on the panel but declined because he supposedly did not want travel by airplane. There was no one else present to defend Intelligent Design. As explained at the conference, Intelligent Design does not provide support for the religious doctrine of creationism, but only attacks evolution by natural selection. Furthermore, Intelligent Design does not even qualify as a viable scientific theory. Only a few maverick scientists who want to push their religious views into the arena of science support it. Its leading proponents only present general ideas and cannot be pinned down to specific details, which would open them to scientific refutation. Intelligent Design assumes that what science cannot now prove to its proponents' satisfaction must therefore be beyond physical explanation, a 'God of the Gaps' approach.

Many of the speakers at the conference are major players on the intellectual scene and some are also best selling authors often appearing on television news shows and science documentaries. Susan Blackmore discussed the evolution of religious beliefs from the perspective of memes - catchy words and phrases and ideas that struggle in the arena of human culture for survival and propagation - while Steven Pinker discussed religion from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, where natural selection favored the survival of certain traits that later manifested themselves in religious beliefs.

Hector Avalos was an especially dynamic and humorous speaker who discussed studies on the effects of prayer at a distance. He had an insightful perspective. He is a Mexican-American who was brought up as a child faith healer who later became an atheist and obtained a doctorate in religious studies from Harvard and now is a professor of religious studies at Iowa State. He revealed some of the major flaws in the experimental studies purporting to demonstrate that prayer brings about faster healing as an aid to normal medical intervention. He showed that some of the statistics actually contradicted the effects of prayer. What was especially insightful about his presentation is that he has a knowledge and understanding of religion far surpassing that of those making religious-based claims. Citing passages from the books making

claims about the effectiveness of prayer, he revealed that the authors not only made major mistakes through lax experimental controls that allowed their own biases to influence the results and misinterpret slight statistical differences, but he also pointed out major errors in the theology of these researchers, who often lace their writings with biblical passages.

The Nobel Prize winner in literature Wole Soyinka spoke at the luncheon banquet. He was a humanist in Africa who was persecuted and threatened with death for his beliefs and now is working for humanism in Africa. He sets an example for all skeptics and humanists.

One very surprising revelation occurred during the discussion of near death experiences. Dr. Raymond Moody, who gave a hint of scientific respectability to this whole idea in the early 1970's with his book "Life After Life," has now become skeptical that these experiences actually represent glimpses of life after death. In some of his earlier books, he seemed to be certain in his conviction these actually represent after death experiences. However, during his discussion he compared near death experiences and other psychic phenomena to wrestling matches staged solely for entertainment where fans nevertheless become emotionally involved in the show. According to all members of the panel, not a shred of scientific evidence indicates the near death experience is a portal into another realm.

I would encourage every skeptic and humanist to attend one or more of these conferences. In contrast to the media coverage, these conferences reveal that much is occurring on the skeptical front lines to combat irrationality in spite of the fact that very little of this skepticism percolates up to the national media and the general public. Hearing from the many experts about their investigations which counter all the psychic and religious claims gives one hope that superstition and ignorance will never completely prevail as long as there are free thinkers and skeptics who are combating the rampant irrationality so widespread in modern cultures.

Bryan Sellers

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Strange is our situation here on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men -- above all for those upon whose smiles and well-being our own happiness depends.

-- **Albert Einstein**, quoted from James A. Haught, ed., *2000 Years of Disbelief*, p. 241



# FIG Leaflets

that even Osama bin Laden could be saved, if he converted to Christianity. "I had a student ask me, 'Could the savior you believe in save Osama bin Laden?' Of course! We know the sacrifice of Jesus Christ can save even him," he told the assembly. And then what? "And then he must be executed."

(Lakeland Ledger)

## The source of the hijacker courage:

Jews, Muslims and Christians accept Abraham as their common ancestor. It is only the civilized who would be ashamed to have him in their family. Abraham's readiness to obey the order of a jealous, not to say psychopathic, God "take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering" is divine justification for murderous servility. A servant who will slaughter his son on the whim of the Lord will do anything.

Mohamed Atta had no qualms. Before he flew American Airlines Flight 11 into the World Trade Centre he left a will and instructions to his fellow hijackers. . . . he then suggested the story of Abraham would inspire his family and friends. His parents should be "fearful of almighty God. In remembrance of me, they should act according to the example of Abraham who, as a good Muslim, offered up his son to die.'

Nick Cohen, *The Observer* (UK), 7 October 2001

## Faith and Hope

It is characteristic of atheists to overestimate the comfort that religious belief is supposed to bring to believers. Partly, of course, this is because it allows us to pose as heroic, clear-sighted, and able to dispense with all those pathetic fictions. But when I look at them as dispassionately as possible, Christians, in my experience, do not really believe in heaven or hell. They would not be so often enjoined to have hope if hope were easy or even always possible.

I never see the ones I know behaving like people who really believe that once they have died, an eternity of bliss awaits them and everyone they love.

Andrew Brown, *The Darwin Wars*, 1999, p. 193

The 11 September terrorist attack presents an "opportunity" for churches to evangelize. So says the Rev. Jerry Falwell, of "it's our own fault" fame. Addressing a Baptist Pastors' Conference in Florida, he urged churches to "strike while the iron is hot. Whatever we can do to reach people that doesn't violate the scriptures, let's do it." Falwell also thought

It is now quite lawful for a Catholic woman to avoid pregnancy by a resort to mathematics, though she is still forbidden to resort to physics and chemistry.

H. L. Mencken, (1880-1956) *Minority Report*, H. L. Mencken's Notebooks (1956)

## Religious extremism must not be put beyond criticism

The only good religion is a moribund religion: only when the faithful are weak are they tolerant and peaceful. The horrible history of Christianity shows that whenever religion grabs temporal power it turns lethal. Those who believe theirs is the only way, truth and light will kill to create their heavens on earth if they get the chance. Tolerance only thrives when religion is banished to the private sphere, . . . .

Wherever religion burns, it seeks power: Israel has become ever more dangerous (to itself and others) as religious parties gain power over secular ones. Religious politics scar India, Kashmir, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Sudan ... the list of countries wrecked by religion is long. But the present danger is caused by Islamist theocracy.

There is no point in pretending it is not so. Wherever Islam either is the government or bears down upon the government, it imposes harsh regimes that deny the most basic human rights. Religions never accept universal human rights because their notion of rights derives from a higher revealed truth. Hundreds of e-mails from Muslims around the world flooded in this week claiming that UN human rights are a western construct, alien to their culture. A moderate one wrote: "Islam has its own understanding on human rights and the social order and the relationship between men and women established 1,400 years ago." Islam does have as wide a spectrum of interpretation as Christianity's long stretch from Ian Paisley to the Pope to the Quakers -- but their Paisley element is alarmingly powerful.

Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian* (UK) 5 October 2001

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the quotes.

## ***The Dragon Hunter***

Charles Gallenkamp

As the dark, cold days of winter roll towards us, allow me to recommend a book of warm adventure. *The Dragon Hunter*, by Charles Gallenkamp, recounts the life of explorer-scientist Roy Chapman Andrews, a very focused and impassioned individual who rose to both professional and popular acclaim by leading one of the greatest paleontological expeditions of all time, during which he discovered and cataloged the remains of many unknown dinosaurs (including the first example of Velociraptor, the now well-known creature from Jurassic Park fame.) Andrews' life became the inspiration for several subsequent fictional characters and stories of adventure. Some believe that Andrews may have served as some inspiration for the character of Indiana Jones. (There are amazing parallels!)

The book tells the story of Andrews' life, but focuses primarily on his famous adventures into China and the Gobi Desert. It is a story of personal vision, scholarly passion, and cultural adventure set in the early part of the twentieth century when travel and communication were slow, many regions were still unmapped and unexplored, Asian cultures still retained much of their original color and distinctiveness (China was not yet a communist country), and the powerful and eccentric individuals of old wealth were still alive. It was a time when many of the sciences were still relatively young, there was still much to be discovered, and an individual of vision, passion, and learning could readily distinguish himself.

Of particular interest is the book's recounting of the fierce resistance to Andrews' discoveries from the religious fundamentalists of the day who saw him as a "peril to youth" and a man who "insults our intelligence and our God by claiming to act as an authority for the age of the earth, which is written in the upper left hand corner of my Bible as 4004 B.C." (186) This was the time of the Scopes Monkey Trial (1925) and the famous Osborn-Bryan debate (1922). (I learned a great deal about the controversy from this period that I did not know.) Another point of interest was the fact that the Chinese would not let Andrews use airplanes in his explorations because

they "associated [them] with military activities and espionage." (105) --a humorous aside for those who remember the airplane trouble the US had with China earlier this year.

If you are at all interested in dinosaurs, paleontology, Chinese culture, early twentieth century history, or just a good story about personal ambition and adventure, you will enjoy *The Dragon Hunter*.

Tim W. Kelly  
November, 2001

## ***The Universe Unveiled: Instruments and Images through History***

by Bruce Stephenson, Marvin Bolt,  
and Anna Felicity Friedman

(Cambridge University Press and, Chicago: Adler  
Planetarium & Astronomy Museum, 2000)

Make no mistake about it, this is a coffee table book. Slick paper, colorful photographs and pictures on every one of 150 pages. The subject matter are the instruments, the images, the diagrams, and other devices which scholars and scientists have used through the ages to explore and map the heavens. The book thus reviews telescopes from their invention in the Renaissance until the end of the eighteenth century. But that is by far not all, many earlier instruments were invented and used to measure the angles of moon, sun and stars with the horizon. To measure the location of stars is to measure time, so that the many instrument invented for keeping track of time must be examined.

To know the location of stars in the heavens, enables us to determine where we are located on earth. This incidentally, is one of the more salient rationalizations used by pseudo-scientists for the validation of astrology. As sea faring captains explored the oceans of the world, they needed to map and measure the earth. Many of the instruments invented for this purpose had a very immediate and practical application in way finding across the trackless oceans. More than anything, this book demonstrates the intimate connections among astronomy, geography, and keeping track of time.

The authors introduce us to a number of useful instruments no longer used. We learn about the

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# BOOK REVIEWS

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Jacob's staff, cross staff, and back staff to measure angles between the heavens and the horizon. These were considerable advances on estimating elevation with plain eye, and forerunners of the astrolabe, which in its turn led to the design of the sextant and related instruments. Modeling the universe and the solar system required the construction of armillary spheres, orreries, and volvelles (models of the solar system and instruments for measuring or calculating). Keeping time involved the design of sand and water clocks, before the pendulum clock and marine chronometer were invented. The discovery of time further needed a clear understanding of the solar system, and the earth's periods of rotation and revolution.

Many of the traditional instruments were complex to work and to read. The authors provide an astronomical appendix to instruct us in the use of the horse, rete, and alidade of the astrolabe, as well as in the gnomon, the shadow casting rod, and latitude scale of the sundial. They further endeavor to teach us the difference between reflecting and refracting

telescopes and their working parts.

Many of the early instruments were beautifully designed and decorated, and the images of globes and maps embellished with animals and beings from mythology and religion of their time. For much of history our understanding of the earth and universe was dictated by faith and superstition. The history of unveiling the universe is at the same time a journey from religious interpretation to mechanistic understanding. As instruments changed and made possible new discoveries and a deeper view of the stars, theories about our place in the universe changed. In the beginning the earth was seen from a central, four cornered, flat plain surrounded by the eternal bitter ocean. It was the discovering of space, time, and the earth that allowed an understanding of the heavens, with the end result of the earth as a small, blue pebble, revolving around a minor star, in a remote arm of an undistinguished galaxy, in an unimaginably enormous cosmos. This is how we arrived there.

The authors have given us an excellent book for appreciating the labor, the imagination, and the

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## A Secular Humanist Message by Herb Silverman

During this time of mourning and remembrance, the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry call on all people to respond with thoughtful reason and compassion. We pledge our best efforts to help one another, and to defend the rights of all citizens and residents of our nation, regardless of their philosophical or religious beliefs or national origins.

Some in our own secular community have suffered prejudice and exclusion because we do not share the religious beliefs of the majority. At this time, we feel particular compassion for those Muslim Americans who are being mistreated. We must all remember that the acts of terrorism were the work of individual extremists and that no racial, ethnic, or religious group is responsible for them. We must not react with personal acts of hate and violence. In the words of Martin Luther King, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

As we struggle to cope with the consequences of attack, and possible further attacks, there will be great temptation to restrict freedom of speech and other freedoms in the name of national security. This would also be a great tragedy. Governments and guns alone cannot maintain freedom. Nor can the tactics of terrorists destroy it. The truest defense of a civilized society is a culture that respects each

person while taking into consideration the needs of all.

Some individuals with absolutist views often demonize people simply because they are different. Rev. Jerry Falwell recently stated that certain groups he disapproves of, including secularists, evoked God's anger against America and must therefore share the blame for this devastation. These words could just as easily have come from the lips of Osama bin Laden. It is precisely this kind of righteous finger pointing that we hope people of conscience everywhere will repudiate.

Rather than focusing only on who is to blame, let us address root causes. Rather than being dragged down to the level of others, let us rise to the height of our own ideals. The way we react to the challenges before us will shape our world far more than the recent acts of terrorism.

We are gathered today, both religious and secular members of our community, with the shared belief that we must treat our fellow human beings with respect and dignity. This provides evidence of something more important than the creeds that all too often divide us. It is our common humanity, which unites us.

*The Separationist*, Newsletter of The Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry,  
<http://www.atheistalliance.org/lowcountry/sep-10->