

FIG Leaves

Volume 11 Issue 12

December 2002

December Meeting

Speaker: Timothy J. Madigan
THE ANIMAL/HUMAN BOUNDARY

How do humans differ from other animals, and does this make a difference when it comes to morality? What might a Darwinian argument have to say about such topics as animal experimentation, xenotransplantation (putting non-human organs into humans), vegetarianism and a host of other topics? Tim Madigan will discuss these and related issues, using H. G. Wells' classic novel "The Island of Dr. Moreau" as a starting-point.

Timothy J. Madigan, Ph.D., is editorial director of the University of Rochester Press and an adjunct instructor of ethics at the University of Rochester Medical School, where he is presently teaching a seminar on "The Animal/Human Boundary."

Tim spoke at FIG's first meeting eleven years ago and has become one of our favorite speakers. We have welcomed him back many times over the years because of the way he imparts his broad knowledge of the subject with humor and humanist warmth.

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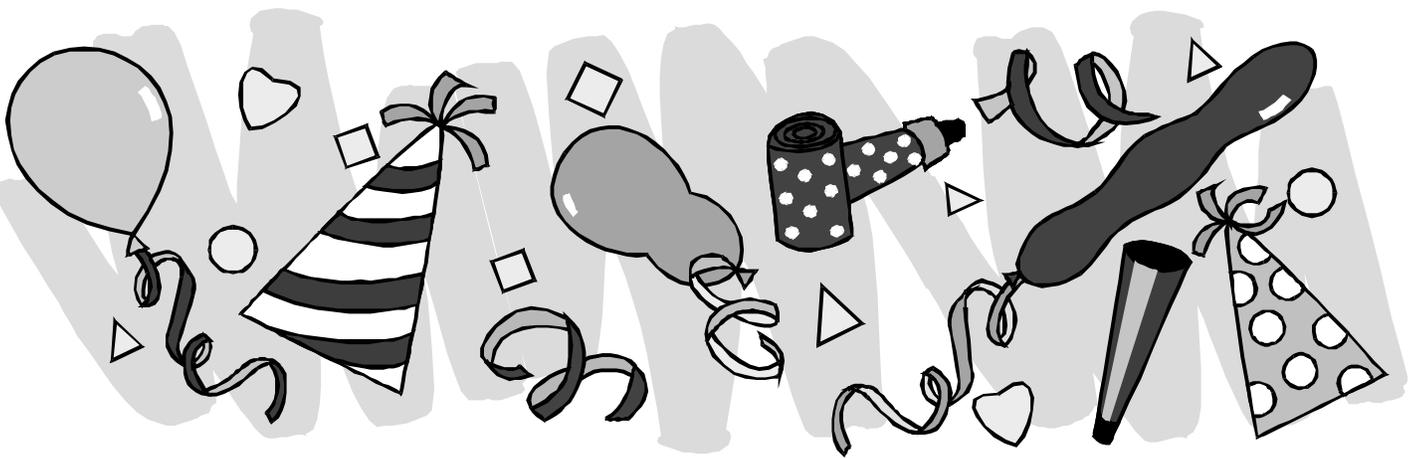
December Meeting

Tim Madigan

Sunday, December 15th at 7:00
Vernon Manor Hotel

December Potluck

Tuesday, January 14th
at 6:30 pm



Have a Happy New Year!

November 8, 2002

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Frank Zindler read Madalyn Murray O'Hair's definition of an atheist aloud at the last FIG meeting. (Please see George Maurer's summary on p. 7 for the complete text).

I had not attended the meeting, and was not familiar with this document. I read it with interest and pleasure. I like what I read; it made me feel proud of the values and behavior described, proud to have high standards to try to emulate. At the same time, I will wager large sums of money that outside of a teeny number of people, most of whom went to the "Godless" march in D.C., not one of the many points made about our "beliefs" would be presumed when the word "atheist" is heard in the wider world. We've got a big P.R. problem.

What do we do each day to live an ethical secular life, a life in which decisions are not made based on the teachings of a long ago guru or the prescriptions and proscriptions of the self-appointed contemporary interpreters of those teachings? If we haven't lost control of our basest impulses, what then keeps us in line? If not fear, then what? Which brings us to the basic question of the true essence of human nature: the Blank Slate, (experience is all) the Noble Savage, (we are pure and innocent until corrupted by society) or some as yet-to-be clarified interplay of the two. (Perhaps you can tell that I've just started reading Stephen Pinker's The Blank Slate which is an investigation into man's historical reluctance to credit our biologic nature with responsibility for [some of] our behavior.)

What do you teach your children? How do you know what is right or wrong? Is it so obvious and simple that you've not given it much thought? Why then has the rest of the world had to deny earthly wisdom and construct powerful mythologies that reach to the heavens in order to figure this out? Why are they so afraid of our earth-bound wisdom? Will we ever be accepted or competitive without the immortality card? Probably not; but until we celebrate our morality and ethics with gusto, we're likely to be misunderstood and reviled. If we wait for the scientists to save us, we've got a long lonely road to Nirvana waiting for us.

I.D.

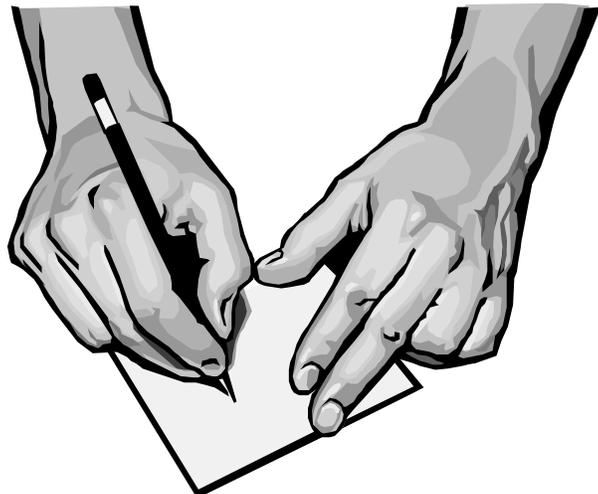


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**FIG MEETING NOVEMBER 17, 2002:
SPEAKER : FRANK ZINDLER
SUBJECT: AMERICAN ATHEISTS: PAST
AND PRESENT**

The speaker began by tracing the founding of the group by Madalyn Murray- O'Hair through several name changes before it became the organization we know today as American Atheists, Inc. It began after the successful suit filed by O'Hair which resulted in the Supreme Court's finding forced Bible reading and prayer in public schools unconstitutional. The first organization she started was taken over by Christians posing as atheists. This had a profound effect on O'Hair in the new organization she ultimately founded. The State of Maryland would not allow the incorporation of any group with the word "atheist" in its title, so O'Hair called her group the Society of Separation. When Frank Zindler joined the organization that was still the name, although the DBA (doing business as) American Atheists had been added and the group became popularly known as American Atheists.

When he moved from New York to Ohio, O'Hair asked Zindler to start a local Chapter. He did so and he started it in Columbus, Ohio. He also started a weekly cable show which used the A word in its title. The program became well known in the community with all sorts of people watching it.

In 1982, it became necessary to disband all the local chapters (some 30 in number) because of a suit by Truth Seekers, the oldest atheist group in the country. This group was a stock company, was profit making and had amassed a sizable amount of money by sales of books and other merchandise. The president of the organization had an advisor who was an Episcopalian and an interest in a woman who was a Mormon. O'Hair owned a share of the stock as did a black scholar named Johnson. They both felt that the money would fall into Christian hands. They demanded an investigation into the accounting practices and in the failure of the group to live up to principles in the original charter. In retaliation Truth Seekers filed suit against American Atheists under the RICO law. The first case ended in a hung jury and the retrial was settled in favor of American Atheists but by this time the money was lost (\$23 million).

Zindler then shifted his emphasis to his experience with Madalyn Murray O'Hair. He offered his appraisal that she was a very intelligent woman. He said that she "didn't suffer fools gladly." She was straightforward and expected others to be also. She was a grandmotherly type with a strong sense of family but when backed into a corner she could

become a formidable adversary. When the Supreme Court decision was announced, she was probably the most vilified woman in the country. She and her family were harassed. Her sons Jon and Bill were stopped by the police and interrogated regardless of what they were doing. A pet cat of Jon's was strangled and left on their front porch with a threatening note. Bill became enamored of a Susan Abramowicz. Her parents became aware of who Bill was in reality and got a court order to prevent Susan and Bill from having any contact but by the time the order was served the two had married. When the police came to compel compliance, O'Hair resisted and they beat her so badly they broke her wrists; they also struck her frail mother with a Billy club. O'Hair's father, who had a heart condition died shortly thereafter of a heart attack. When O'Hair was released from the hospital she and her remaining family fled to Honolulu before the trial.

Since the police had charged her with 32 counts of assault against 16 police officers, she chose to flee rather than face trial. She chose Hawaii because of the presence of so many Buddhists who were basically atheists. Upon arrival she entered a hospital for treatment of her injuries. A telephone call from an overseas operator warned her of a telephone call from the Archbishop of Baltimore to the governor of Hawaii requesting that he extradite the O'Hairs to Maryland.

The family then fled to Mexico where O'Hair got a job at a "hippy" university teaching a course. This lasted until she was arrested by the Mexican police and placed in a Mexican jail. They were to be flown from Mexico to Baltimore but direct flights did not exist so they had to be sent via Texas. When they set down in Texas, it was then necessary to get clearance to extradite from the governor who happened to be John Connelly. When he asked what the charges were he was told that there were 32 counts of assault against 16 policemen. The Governor is reported to have refused to sign the extradition saying " We need women like that in Texas." Perhaps the story is apocryphal. In 1995, David Waters, Gary Carr, and Daniel Fry posing as repairmen entered the headquarters of American Atheists in Austin, Texas and held hostage, O'Hair and Jon. They telephoned for Robin, the daughter of Bill and Susan, whom O'Hair had adopted at her birth. She then came to the headquarters building and was also taken hostage. O'Hair and Jon were held together but Robin was kept separate and her capture was used to compel compliance from Jon and O'Hair.

(Continued on page 7)



Rationally Speaking

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

N. 31, December 2002

What do you mean, “rationally speaking”?

This column can be posted for free on any appropriate web site and reprinted in hard copy by permission. If you are interested in receiving the html code or the text, please send an email (skeptic@rationallyspeaking.org). Or, you can subscribe (free) to the Rationally Speaking announcements list.

From time to time I receive a letter in response to this column that accuses me of being an intellectual snob. Often the writer refers to the very title of the column, “rationally speaking.” The argument of my correspondents goes something like this: (unstated premise) since rationality equals truth, and (obvious statement of fact) you call your columns “rational,” then (first conclusion) you are so arrogant as to claim that what you write must be the truth, and (second conclusion) therefore imply that anybody who disagrees with you is wrong.

Let’s carefully analyze the unstated premise and the two conclusions (no sense in denying the fact that the column is, indeed, called “rationally speaking”), because I think this will shed some light on both my goals in writing these pieces and, more importantly, on some common misconceptions about rationality and truth. First off, the unstated premise that rationality necessarily leads to truth is clearly false, and acknowledged by philosophers since the time of Plato. Don’t get me wrong, Plato did think that the best path to the truth is indeed rational thought, but he also acknowledged that one can arrive at the truth by other means (e.g., by sheer luck, as in guessing). More importantly for our discussion, Plato’s dialogues are full of examples of people rationally arguing different positions, of which at most one can be correct!

Since there is no necessary equation between

rationality and truth, this takes care of the second conclusion from the above piece of reasoning: I cannot possibly be implying in my columns that those who disagree with me must be wrong. At best, these columns present an argument in favor of a particular conclusion or position. Their value is in laying down that argument as clearly as the writer can manage, to then let the reader decide how that argument measures up against others. It is all part of the ongoing discourse among human beings that is such a central part of any desirable society.

As far as the first conclusion of the above reasoning is concerned (I am arrogant enough to think that I am right), surely that is a straw man. Anybody defending a particular position, in writing or in person, must be doing so because they think they are right (okay, perhaps with the exception of sophists and some lawyers and politicians). It simply makes no sense to accuse somebody who disagrees with you of being convinced of being right. You are too, or you would not argue with them! Of course, just because people are convinced of being right, it doesn’t follow that they are. But that is precisely the value of continued rational discourse: I present my best arguments, you read them, think about them, come up with your best counter-arguments, and so on.

Quote of the month:

"Always take the short cut; and that is the rational one. Therefore say and do everything according to soundest reason." - Marcus Aurelius, 121-180CE.

Does this back and forth actually lead somewhere? Do people ever change their mind? Of course they do. Why, I’ve changed my mind more than once just this year! What may seem to make the enterprise of rational dialogue a desperate one is that people seldom acknowledge their change of mind. There are good reasons for this, other than simple

human pride. To begin with, if you have thought hard about something, and have formed an opinion over years of reading and listening, you will not change your position overnight, and you probably shouldn’t. Instantaneous conversions are the stuff of religious experience, not of rational discourse. Second, research on critical thinking and human cognition has shown that the human brain is naturally resistant to changing its patterns, and does so only after repeated exposure to contrasting information (which increases the so-called “cognitive dissonance” between one’s own beliefs and the reality that one perceives). That is why one rarely wins debates with other people, and yet debates—along with other forms of dialogue—are useful because they can stir people to reconsider some of their conclusions.

So, rationally speaking does not (necessarily) mean “truthfully” speaking, though of course if I write something in good faith, I do think that I am correct

FIG Leaflets

SOME CHRISTIAN VIEWS

We are in a cultural war in this country, and there are two world views one built on the writings of man and one on the writing of God, the Bible. Those two views of what is going to help America and the world are 180 degrees in opposition.

We're in a religious war and we need to aggressively oppose secular humanism; these people are as religiously motivated as we are and they are filled with the devil. Secular humanism explains why we are losing our culture of morality and decency.

Tim LaHaye "Christian Science Monitor" (29 Aug. '02)

Faith Be With Them: -

The President's so-called "faith based initiative," which would offer millions of federal dollars to church groups doing good works with the poor, the hungry and drug addicts, is among the many legislative proposals that have been going nowhere in Congress.

But now we learn that the White House is convening a series of one-day conferences to train religious groups on how to apply for grants from federal agencies. Without Congressional review, the Bush administration has been rewriting agency rules on grants to community service programs, loop holing them to allow church-connected groups to receive financial support.

"The Washington Spectator" (1 Nov. '02) p. 4

Faiths:-

Oh, they believe all right. It's just that what they believe has become irrelevant. I don't mean the moral teaching: the Judaeo-Christian heritage has created Western civilization and we should be grateful to it. But the Church they serve is dying. When I look at the "Doom" I try to have some understanding of what it meant to fifteenth-century men and women. If life is hard and short and full of pain, you need the hope of heaven; if there is no effective law, you need the

deterrent of hell. The Church gave them comfort and light and pictures and stories and the hope of everlasting life. The twenty-first century has other compensations. Football for one. There you have ritual, colour, drama, the sense of belonging; football has its high priests, even its martyrs. And then there's shopping, art and music, travel, alcohol, drugs. We all have our own resources for staving off those two horrors of human life, boredom and the knowledge that we die. And now God help us there's the Internet; pornography at the touch of a few keys.

P. D. James, *Death in Holy Orders*, (2001) p. 281

It is raining bombs on the house of the Lord. I go in fear and trembling lest one of these terrible bombers gets into difficulties.

Denis Diderot (1768)

If ignorance of nature gave birth to gods, knowledge of nature is made for their destruction.

-- Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Necessity of Atheism*

"I've developed a new philosophy... I only dread one day at a time."

-Charlie Brown



"The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit."

-Nelson Henderson

I do not believe in any revealed religion. I will have nothing to do with your immortality; we are miserable enough in this life, without the absurdity of speculating upon another.

-- Lord Byron, letter to the Rev. Francis Hodgson (1811), quoted from James A. Haught, ed., *2000 Years of Disbelief*

Thanks to Wolf Roder for some of the quotes.



BOOK REVIEW

Forbidden Truth: U.S -Taliban Secret Oil Diplomacy and the Failed Hunt for Bin Laden

by Jean-Charles Brisard
and Guillaume Dasqui

(New York: Thunder Mouth Press/Nation Books,
2002)

"This important book delves into the aftermath of the blowback of the United States and Saudi Arabian policy of creating an Arab Islamic force to bring down the Soviet Union by miring it in a war in Afghanistan. "Forbidden Truth" is the story of how that force turned against its creators with a vengeance."

Thus opens the introduction to this volume written by two Frenchmen, who researched it over the past three years. It was originally published in 2001, revised, updated, and translated after the attack on the World Trade Towers. The organization, the language, and the repetitions show the effects of haste and urgency. Despite these shortcomings it is an important book about contemporary history and the problems this country and others are having with Islamists.

The United States turned repeatedly to the rulers of Saudi Arabia for help fighting our wars in the Islamic world. At our request and to aid us in ejecting the Russians from Afghanistan the Saudi Secret Service chief in 1978 recruited Osama bin Laden to raise an Islamic Legion. In the eighties Bin Laden acted as financial manager of this force. Much of the finance for the war in Afghanistan came from the Saudis, and most of the weaponry from the United States. According to the authors bin Laden continued to enjoy the support of leading Saudis until very recently. The Saudis have been backing bin Laden and his organization financially and logistically even after he left his exile in the Sudan in 1994. This means he continued to receive support after the various attacks on U.S. interests, the bombing of the East African embassies and of the SS Cole in Yemen harbor. The authors doubt that even today every member of the extensive bin Laden family has abandoned him. The chapter on him is titled: "The Myth of a Renegade" (p. 97)

The details of support for bin Laden are complex. There is first of all his own part of the bin Laden family fortune. An appendix shows a chart of Osama bin Laden's own investments and holdings. Other appendices show the major members of the family,

and the Saudi Bin Laden Group's major holdings. The authors further cite his in-law family's cooperation, joint business enterprises, and various supporting players. These interlinked Saudi companies operate and cooperate on the international stage. Much of the interest is focused on oil.

Until September 2001 American oil business had major interests in the Taliban. For the United States the best route to bring Central Asian oil to the sea is via a pipeline through Afghanistan to the Pakistan coast on the Indian Ocean. The Russians and other Europeans might prefer a route through their lands. Iran and Turkey would likely prefer yet other routes. To build this pipeline the American search was for a stable government in Afghanistan, which the Taliban supplied, with international and UN recognition, which the Taliban never achieved. The authors trace a complex web of interests continuing to try doing a deal with the Government of Mullah Omar long after it became clear this regime was harboring Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leadership figures. Among the American partners in various oil ventures the book discusses The Carlyle Group which featured George W. H. Bush and several prominent leaders from his administration among its Board of Directors. The labyrinth then continues to the Harken Energy Corporation of which the younger Bush was a director.

Bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and their associates represent a genuine Islamic religious revival largely financed by Saudi oil money. The Saudi state, the Royals, and many Arabs follow the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) a fundamentalist religious reformer. His ideas are supported by a wide variety of Islamic religious charities, which provide another network of support for resisting the inroads and cultural dominance of the United States. The intention is to combat the corrupting influence and behaviors of the West. The authors look at some length at the World Assembly of Muslim Youth founded in 1972 in Riyadh. In the late nineties this organization had its American headquarters in Falls Church, Virginia, a few blocks from the apartment of four of the 9/11 hijackers. The FBI found it very difficult to discern the difference between a genuine religious and educational organization and one devoted to attacking the United States. Perhaps there is no real difference.

At one point this story is labeled "the greatest foreign policy blunder of the past thirty years." (p. ix) Maybe we should all read it, although the labyrinthine relationships of players, investments, and politicians are difficult to follow.

Wolf Roder

(Continued from page 3)

David Waters had worked as a typesetter and then as an office manager for O'Hair and he was aware of the financial situation and office procedures. When O'Hair had been in California he had managed to clear out all the bank accounts and max out all the credit cards. When she returned she filed charges against him. The result of this was probation and a suggestion from the magistrate that it would be nice if he made restitution.

There was a trust fund in a New Zealand Bank, which was close to a million dollars. The correspondent bank was in New Jersey. Any money to be deposited into the trust fund would be sent to the New Jersey bank for transmission to New Zealand. Withdrawals took the reverse route. Jon Murray was taken to New Jersey by one of the group of kidnapers and he signed the papers to withdraw the trust fund, which would then be sent to a gold dealer in Texas and converted to gold coins. Once the gold coins were collected the group was free to terminate the lives of O'Hair, Jon, and Robin. Frank concluded his talk with the statement that Madalyn Murray O'Hair made before the Supreme Court to explain what an atheist was and stood for. It is worth repeating here as a conclusion to this review.

"Your petitioners are atheists and they define their beliefs as follows:

An atheist loves his fellow man instead of a god,

An atheist believes that heaven is something

for which we should work now here on earth for all men together to enjoy,

An atheist believes that he can get no help through prayer but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it and to enjoy it.

An atheist believes that only in the knowledge of himself and in the Knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will help to a life of fulfillment. He seeks to know himself and his fellow man rather than to know a god.

An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church.

An atheist believes that a deed should be done instead of a prayer said.

An atheist strives for involvement in life and not an escape into death.

He wants disease conquered, poverty banished, war eliminated, wants men to understand and love man.

He wants an ethical way of life. He believes that we cannot rely on a god or channel actions into prayers, nor hope for an end to troubles in the hereafter.

He believes that we are our brothers' keepers but more important

We are the keepers of our own lives, that we are responsible persons and that the job is here and the time is now."

This seems an appropriate quote with which to end this review.

George Maurer

(Continued from page 4)

in what I am saying (and so do you, whenever you write a letter to me arguing against my writings). The rational way to attack people's arguments, therefore, is not simply to accuse them of the arrogance of thinking they are in the right, but in pointing out exactly where we think they went wrong.

The irony is that rational discourse is so entrenched in the human way of thinking that even people who allegedly reject it as a way to the truth do, in fact, use it. Not long ago a couple from a county in rural Tennessee complained that they did not want their child to be exposed to critical thinking and argumentation in the public school he was attending, because that was contrary to their religious belief. Apparently oblivious to the obvious contradiction, the parents hired a lawyer to argue their case in court! We just can't do without logic and rationality, even when we consciously attempt to reject it.

I can't wait to read the arguments I will get against the position defended in this column!

Further readings:

Rationalism, by John Cottingham, a brief guide to the philosophy of rationality.

Web links:

The Radical Academy guide to Rationalism.
(<http://radicalacademy.com/adiphilrationalism.htm>)

Next month:

Human instincts and virtue ethics

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