

FIG Leaves

Volume 12 Issue 1

February 2003

Woman's City Club Speaker

FIG is cosponsoring the Woman's City Club Speaker again this year.

Woman's City Club National Speaker Forum 2003 Presents...

Barbara Ehrenreich
Distinguished Journalist
Accomplished Author

"NICKEL AND
DIMED"

Tuesday, March 18, 2003 7:30 p.m.
Plum Street Temple downtown

A political essayist and social critic, Barbara has tackled a brave and diverse range of issues in books and magazine articles. She is the author or co-author of twelve books including *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, and *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*. She has written for dozens of magazines, including *Ms.*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and the *New York Times Magazine*. She has also appeared on the *Today Show*, *Good Morning America* and the *Charlie Rose Show*.

In Barbara Ehrenreich's most recent book, she turns her eye on the view from the workforce's bottom rung in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Determined to find out how anyone can make ends meet on \$7 an hour, she left behind her middle class life as a journalist to try to sustain herself as a low-skilled worker for a month at a time. Despite the advantages of her race, education, good health and lack of children, Ehrenreich's income barely covered her month's expenses.

The Woman's City Club of Greater Cincinnati, founded in 1915, supports the exchange of ideas and information to encourage involvement in the community. The National Speaker Forum is the annual fundraiser for the club and raises the majority of the annual operating capital. Tickets are \$15 purchased in advance by calling the WCC (or seeing Helen Kagin), \$20 at the door.



For more information contact:
Barbara Hogan, WCC Admin. (513)
751-0100
Angie Portune, WCC Publicity Chair
(513) 315-1023

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Events

February Meeting

We already had the February
Meeting celebrating Darwin's
Birthday on February 12th.
See next month's FIG Leaves
for the March Meeting
announcement.

February Potluck

Tuesday, March 11th



Sunday, February 17, 2003

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



What is so evident to me, is invisible to many others. And of course the truth that speaks loudly to others is clearly a fraud to me. I am used to being a minority, quietly smug in the superiority of my difference, but I am increasingly impressed by the power that belief in God confers on those willing to accept it. Recently, a friend described a visit she made to a service at a huge Baptist church in North Carolina. She attended to provide emotional support for her sister-in-law whose son, raised Jewish, was now embracing a fundamentalist brand of Christianity with great enthusiasm. There was a new grandchild, who was being "dedicated" to the church, and this grandmother, gritting her teeth, was determined to share in the event.

She described the enormous building, more like a hockey arena than an ancient sanctuary of stone and glass, filled with hundreds of people, people mesmerized by the drama of the minister's cadences, his repeating "Yes, Yes", after every question, the automatic responses of the congregation. (I almost said "audience"; certainly this was a performance, not a presentation.) Every moment was scripted and controlled, including the movements of the vast group of people from one room to another. I grew more and more uncomfortable as she recounted the experience, feeling smothered and intimidated by the impact of the messages on the assembly. "You are bad, and it is only through Jesus that you can be redeemed and saved."

Scary stuff? Yes, but they like it. I'll go so far as to say that they need it. Another friend, during another conversation, was discussing the idea that certain needs are built in to our species, part of the genome, if you will. The need for a powerful leader, perhaps even the need for an all-powerful being to protect

ourselves from our knowledge of our smallness, our mortality: this makes a lot of sense to me! Humans are very adaptive; if we don't have what we need, we either build it, or imagine it, to accomplish what we need, which primarily involves feeling safe in a dangerous world. I think it is more likely that the ability to relinquish this concept is a recessive genetic trait, not yet clearly linked to the race's survival.

When I hear all the learned and logical discussions about the existence of God I become bored, disinterested. The search for truth, the scientific method, is not what is driving this. It's the emotions, stupid! (To paraphrase someone with lots of wayward impulses nestled in his formidable gray matter.) Do you think that assemblage in North Carolina and similar ones throughout the world, are worrying about whether God exists? No, they're sold, because they are working their 12 step program to salvation. This keeps them very busy because it is designed to be perpetual: you never get there but if you stop trying, the journey will be longer and more hazardous than ever. And they can't figure us out, but will necessarily obliterate anyone who gets in their way.

So here's the problem: how do you stay safe in a world run by people who are making it more dangerous because they are trying to be safe?

I.D.

FIG Leaves Volume 12, Issue 2, February 2003 - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in electronic format via Internet to figeditor@choice.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: Frank Bicknell, Nurit Bowman, Martha Ferguson, Edwin Kagin, Helen Kagin, Tim Kelly, Inez Klein, Bryan Sellers and FIG Leaves Editor: Idelle Datlof.

FIG MEETING , JANUARY 28, 2003
SUBJECT: RACE AND THE CINCINNATI POLICE
FORCE

Speakers: Leslie Blades, UC and Freelance Reporter at City Beat
Inez Klein, FIG Board Member
Scott Seidewitz, Past President of SmartMoney Community Services and FIG Member, Moderator.

The Moderator started by presenting the subject of the evening's discussion:

"You can support the job that police do in that they put their lives on the line daily to protect the citizens of this city."

"And, you can still expect them to conduct themselves at the highest level of personal conduct, to uphold the law, and to respect the citizens they serve."

Are these two positions compatible? Or do we have to accept one and reject the other? He feels that the theme of tonight's discussion will be that you can support both.

He then outlined the three perspectives the speakers would be presenting. He will start with his personal experiences, which opened his eyes to the difficulties faced on a daily basis by most members of the African American community. Inez Klein will share some incidents she witnessed as a participant in the Citizens Police Academy training, and lastly, Leslie Blade will recount her article in City Beat in which she reported on her research of the court records in the trial of Police Officer Robert Jorg in the death of Roger Owensby Jr.

Scott started off by relating how, as a new employee of P&G he was exposed to diversity training. He recounted how the program involved middle management executives, well educated, middle class, well dressed persons who related how they had been pulled over repeatedly while driving and from their point of view, unfairly. Scott whose own experience had been mostly positive began to get a different picture. He has been a mentor for a young African American male, Smitty. This young man admitted being from "the Hood" and had the swagger that many of these young men exhibit. In any case they developed a positive relationship and a condition of trust between them. Scott permitted Smitty to use his driveway to wash cars and he developed some regular customers in the neighborhood. Then a number of break-ins occurred in the neighborhood. A few people associated these break-ins with Smitty.

The Police assigned a patrolman to the neighborhood. One day Smitty was washing cars while a police officer met with a few of the neighbors. When the officer emerged from the house he noticed that Smitty was moving one of the cars to be washed closer to the driveway, He approached him , asked

him what he was doing , did he live there, and then told him to get out of the neighborhood. Scott noticed what was happening , approached the officer and pointed out that it was a public street and that any citizen had a right to be there as long as he wasn't doing anything illegal. He further said that Smitty was there at his invitation and was his guest. Upon hearing this officer backed off. This incident happened four years ago and Smitty still refers to it as an example of why he dislikes police. In conclusion Scott said he did not doubt that the officer thought he was doing his duty after having met with persons in the neighborhood; that by ordering him to leave he might be discouraging a potential crime. But it did have an effect upon this young African American male that still rankled four years later.

The next speaker was Inez Klein. She related her experiences with the Cincinnati Police over the last four years, which in her estimation were positive. She lives in College Hill. People on her street were experiencing some problems in the neighborhood. She had read about Citizens on Patrol and she attended a group meeting, which did not meet her expectations, so she organized a block watch in her neighborhood. When they had their first meeting, 36 people showed up. It impressed the officer who attended as a representative from the Police Department that they really must have a problem. Inez did not elaborate on the outcome. Subsequently, she read an item in the local newspaper about the Citizens' Police Academy. She applied for this and was accepted. It is a six-week program meeting once each week for 3 hours. It covers such things as: drugs in the city and their effects, peoples' rights in an arrest, and firearms training.

In the latter, they present different computerized scenarios to which the trainee must react in one second using a laser light instead of a gun. In this short space of time, the officer must react, analyze the situation and act accordingly.

As part of this training she was permitted to spend an evening at the 911 Center and listen to incoming calls. She chose a Saturday evening, which started at 9:00 PM and lasted until 4:00 AM the next morning. During that time over one hundred calls were received and most of the calls were non-emergencies. She was able to move from one 911 operator to another to sample the individual methods of handling the incoming calls.

As part of this training she was also able to ride in a patrol car with a police officer. The first call

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involved a peeping Tom in the Clifton area. When they investigated they found that the perpetrator had attempted to force a back window. They searched the area but were unable to locate the culprit. Another call reported that a man had been hit with a baseball bat. They followed up and arrived to find the life squad resuscitating the victim. The police officers questioned the eyewitnesses but almost all were reluctant to tell what they had observed because of fear of reprisals. The perpetrator was later apprehended in Delhi. He demanded that the police shoot him; they maced him instead and took him to the Psych ward at University Hospital. The last call reported two people having sex in a car in Clifton. When they arrived on the scene, the officer separated the two people and questioned them apart. The female turned out to be 14 years old and the male 25. The female said the sex was consensual. The male had \$5000 in his shoe; since he didn't have a job it made his possession of that much cash suspicious. However, the officer let him go. They took the girl to the police station and called her mother. When she arrived she started to beat on the girl so that the police had to separate them. The mother's complaint was that the girl already had one child.

Inez concluded that, in her experience that night, race did not seem to be an issue. She counted her total involvement with the police in a positive way.

In introducing Leslie Blade, Scott noted that she would present her perspective from the standpoint of what happens when things go wrong in the police department, the prosecutor's office, and other local institutions. He said it was a story that needed to be told but was not being addressed by the local mainstream media

Leslie presented her position as a life long Cincinnati resident who felt that the city was coming apart over the race issue. She added that this was an issue she didn't look for; it found her and she couldn't turn her back on it. When she first got involved in her research, she was appalled when she discovered that when police officers got into trouble, they were treated completely differently in court than the private citizen. She felt that they should be held to a higher standard than the private citizen.

When Timothy Thomas was shot the daily newspapers reported that he had 14 outstanding warrants but little else. Leslie researched the web site started by the Clerk of Courts and discovered that the 14 warrants were traffic citations. She downloaded all 14 and laid them out on the floor and

in doing so, she perceived what she took to be a pattern.

For a year she attempted to locate someone to investigate further or at least to make the situation public. She tried City Council, the law committee, the daily newspapers, but no one wanted to touch this issue. Finally she went to City Beat, and they agreed to publish what she had uncovered.

That article was published in August, 2001 and that established her relationship with City Beat. Her focus is on the Criminal Justice System, which is her primary interest.

Leslie next turned her attention to the Roger Owensby Jr. incident. Officer Robert Jorg was tried for one count of assault and one count of involuntary manslaughter. The jury acquitted on the assault charge and deadlocked on the manslaughter charge. The prosecuting attorney, according to the Owensbys, said he would retry if the jury deadlocked on the manslaughter charge. He, however denied that he had told them that. There was no retrial.

There were other troubling factors that the investigation of the trial records revealed: multiple witnesses who were never called to testify at the trial; conflicting testimony among the officers that were never explored at trial; and conduct by prosecutors that led to a weakening of the criminal case against Jorg. A questioner asked if she thought the prosecutors sabotaged the case. She replied, "Yes, I do." She cited instances when prosecutors misled the judge about the number of witnesses available. She also said that using the chokehold as the method of asphyxiation instead of the number of officers piling on the victim, may have weakened the case.

Another commentator suggested that there were alternatives to guns and Billy clubs. Martial arts training would enable a slight practitioner to bring down a much larger person without resorting to a weapon. Leslie answered that ironically Officer Jorg was a martial arts expert in that he trains other police officers outside this county in martial arts. Why he did not resort to this method of control in this case is an open question.

The people present asked a number of questions and engaged in commentary about their own experiences or that of friends or relatives. Many were interested in learning what they could do as individuals to prevent such things as they have heard about from happening in the future. The answer seems to be by demanding equal enforcement of the law through letters to the editor, and by voting in their own best interest on Election Day. If we keep returning the same people to office time after time, we deserve the government we get.

George Maurer



Rationally Speaking

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

N. 33, February 2003
Gays, in the military and outside of it

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I never understood what the “gay problem” is all about. As far as I am concerned, the moral aspect is simple: as long as the people involved are consenting adults, what they do in their bedrooms is only and exclusively their own business, end of story. Alas, plenty of people who are otherwise adamantly against any interference of the government in the private life of its citizens (e.g., when it comes to business practice or guns control), cry out loud for a government-imposed “morality” that extends from the treatment of gays to that of abortion practices and school prayer.

It was therefore no surprise that last November the US Army dismissed nine of its linguists—all experts in crucial languages for the “war” against terrorism, such as Arabic, Korean and Mandarin Chinese —invoking that most unfortunate Clinton doctrine, the “don’t ask don’t tell” policy that has regulated dismissal of gays from the military over the past few years.

As readers may remember, President Clinton started out his first term with a couple of bold moves, one of which was an executive order that would have made it as normal for gays as it is (now) for blacks to be in the army (the other bold move was the call for a universal health care system, which ended in total catastrophe despite Democratic control of both the House and Senate, but that’s another story). Soon came immediate criticism from the far right, coupled with the obvious fact that the gay community can’t muster more than a limited number of votes which usually go to the Democrats

anyway (ah, the beauty of a two-party system with essentially no choices!). The predictable result was that Clinton “moderated” his stance and ended up proposing his infamous “don’t ask don’t tell” compromise.

From a moral perspective, the new policy makes no sense: one either thinks that a gay lifestyle is incompatible with the “values” of the military, in which case allowing gays to stay just because they don’t declare themselves is simple opportunism; or one thinks that the sexual habits of one’s soldiers matter not to the functionality of one’s army, in which case the policy is an example of moral cowardice. Either way, Clinton, gays, and rationality lose, while bigotry scores points.

From a practical viewpoint, furthermore, not only there is absolutely no evidence that the presence of gays in the military has any negative effect on troops morale (remember, the same was said of blacks and women, before those issues were settled), but we have at least one glaring example—the Netherlands—of an army which openly embraces gay culture and doesn’t seem to be any worse for it.

But the more interesting point one can take from this and similar discussions (e.g., those about abortion and school prayers) is that the standard distinction between “liberals” and “conservatives” in terms of being respectively in favor and against a large role of government in our lives just doesn’t cut it. In reality, we need to consider at least two major axes along which political positions and public opinions can be distinguished: on the one hand, there is the “economic” axis, on the other hand, the “social” axis.

One can call for little governmental interference in economic matters while at the same time cry out for a large role of big brother in people’s bedrooms and public schools. Such person would be a religious conservative. But it is also possible to be a libertarian and favor little or no government influence in any sphere of life (except perhaps national defense). A third position is occupied by people who would want a large role of government in the control of the economy (to balance the natural tendency of big business to act amorally and with reckless disregard for the public good), but little in the sphere of personal life. That would be a progressive liberal, such as myself. Then there is the strawman “pink” liberal that most people in America seem to love to hate, the guy who wishes for governmental control

Quote of the month:

"If we were to wake up some morning and find that everyone was the same race, creed and color, we would find some other cause for prejudice by noon."

-George Aiken

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of everything, communist-style. Needless to say, this fourth corner of our logical space of political positions is essentially empty in this country (though certainly not throughout the world).

Reality, of course, is more complicated than this simple classification may hint at, but thinking along the two axes of economy and social issues at least brings us beyond the simplistic dichotomy of "liberal vs. conservative." It also strongly suggests that we should have at least three, and possibly four, parties to represent the four corners sketched above. Instead, we are forced to choose between two alternatives that don't quite fit what a growing number of Americans actually thinks. I therefore propose to split the Republican party into one of economic conservatives but social moderates, and one of economic and social conservatives (the latter mostly populated by the Christian right). Democrats could split into social and economic liberals on one hand, and social liberals but economic conservatives on the other. But who is going to force such healthy multiplication of political choices: the people, or the government?

Further Reading:

The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life, by Michael Warner

Web Links:

Gays and lesbians in the military, a collection of links.
<http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs.cmu.edu/user/scotts/bulgarians/military-pg.html>

Next Month:

America, Europe, and the rest of the world

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THANKS!

Thanks to all who have sent in their FIG dues for 2003! Additional thanks to those who sent in contributions to help us meet operating costs.

Philip Ferguson



BOOK REVIEW

The Ghost in the Universe: God in the Light of Modern Science

by Taner Edis

(Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002)

Anyone who would like to know why he can not believe in god or is an agnostic ought to read this book. The author examines the "God exists" question from all sides. Science in this context means not only physics and biology, but includes the social sciences, historical scholarship, and any other modality by which humans have examined the god question. Edis is a professor of physics at a mid-western University, an unbeliever and skeptic. He grew up in Turkey, so that he shares an intimate knowledge of Islam.

Edis quickly reviews the philosophical proofs of God. These have been demolished since classical antiquity, so he can make short shrift. There is no necessity for God, neither in reason, nor in experience, nor in logic, but neither can philosophy show us the absence of God, only the absence of overambitious Divinities who are all powerful, all good, and all knowing. Lesser gods, as Epicurus allowed, may rule in the interstices between good and evil.

Physics has shown us that no gods are needed to crank the axle of the Universe. Isaac Newton's theory of gravity found a cosmos in which mechanical laws alone moved the stars and planets. Modern physics profoundly forged our view of the cosmos, and at the same time shrank the places where god could actively intervene. Eventually, in the words of the mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace the God hypothesis was no longer needed. Modern physics has moved beyond rigid physical law to see an underlying microscopic substratum where random events are dominant. The basic randomness of quantum mechanics appears necessary to allow unpredictable action, including the freedom of human choices.

Next Edis looks at related random acts of trial and error, which make biological evolution possible. The evolutionary explanation of life makes rejection of the argument for design possible. Edis explanations are simple and clear.

"But when God vanishes from physics, indeed, from all natural science, it begins to look like there is no God after all." (p. 107)

What about history then, which plays such a major role in the monotheistic religions? The holy books describe a divine drama with a beginning,

meaningful progress, and an end when Judgment will be passed on the good and the evil. Rational history has found no place for God, his actions or his intervention. Like biological evolution and atomic physics, human history appears driven by random accidents. Neither religious transcendence nor divine guidance seem built into the fabric of history. Critical assessment in the writing of history is continuous with science in that similar logic and reason are required. No Biblical pattern of tribal loyalty and divine retribution has been discovered.

The historical events in first century Palestine, which are of such immense importance to the Christian religions, fell apart on first rational examination three centuries ago. It is plausible that some events of execution and resurrection underlie the fable of the risen Jesus. But if so, whatever happened is lost to us.

Modern Christians today no longer appear to believe in the Bible, nor do they act eager to find their way into another world or to God. If knowledge no longer comes from the Bible, where do liberal Christians obtain their God information?

Edis looks into the question of miracles of the soul. Is there a spiritual science, does parapsychology point to the supernatural? Can statistical tests at least tease out a reality of extra-sensory knowledge? Do near-death-experiences point a way? Can we rely on the words of the great mystics or miracle workers?

The evidence is negative or absent all around. What then, and finally, about ethics and action? Is there, or can there even be, a morality beyond pragmatism and the needs of a social animal? Is there nothing but this accidental world, no justification beyond what works in the market. In his conclusion Edis asks why we insist on faith. He examines the god of song and story, the mythology of divine falsehoods. Ultimately we like the consolation of a good story, in which the just Hobbit wins out over the powers of darkness and the good manage to banish evil at least for a short while. Religion seems a necessary myth because it works for human society.

Wolf Roder