

FIG Leaves

Volume 12 Issue 1

January 2003

January Meeting

"Race and the Cincinnati Police Force"

Do Cincinnati police routinely use excessive force against African American citizens? Or are they just taking reasonable actions to protect their own safety? We'll get three perspectives on race relations in Cincinnati at the next FIG meeting.

The featured speaker will be Leslie Blade, a University of Cincinnati professor and freelance reporter for City Beat. Leslie will speak about her groundbreaking article published last October about the suffocation death of Roger Owensby while in police custody. Her article is at: <http://www.citybeat.com/2002-10-03/cover.shtml>.

Leslie's article provided evidence refuting police testimony and identified several key witnesses the prosecution failed to call in the trial of Officer Robert Jorg. Ms. Blade will review the circumstances of the trial and recent developments concerning it. She will also discuss the broader concerns of the African American community about their treatment by the police.

FIG Board member Inez Klein will provide another perspective, describing her experiences in the Citizens on Patrol program. This program, which includes classroom sessions, a tour of duty in a patrol car, and listening in on 911 calls, is designed teach citizens what a police officer's duties are like.

The discussion will be MC'ed by Scott Seidewitz, a 1999 candidate for City Council who served for six years as President of SmartMoney Community Services in Over-the-Rhine. Scott will also share his observations of police-community relations in Cincinnati.

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Events

January Meeting

Race and the Cincinnati Police Force

Tuesday, January 28th at 7:00 at the Vernon Manor Hotel.

February Meeting

Darwin's Birthday

Wednesday, February 12th at 7:00 at the Vernon Manor Hotel.

February Potluck

Tuesday, February 25th at 6:30 pm

Fred Edwords to speak to FIG on February 12, Darwin Day

We are indeed fortunate that Fred Edwords will speak to FIG on Darwin Day, Wednesday, February 12. His topic will be "The Impact of Darwin on Religion and Humanism." He will discuss the various meanings and ramifications that evolution holds for humanists, and the problems it poses for Christian and other fundamentalists.

Fred Edwords is the editor of The Humanist magazine published by the American Humanist Association. He is also the Chairman of Camp Quest, Inc. and has been a member of its staff for several years.

Sunday, January 12, 2003



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Members:

I think a lot about the role religion plays in our world. Over much of recorded history and across many different cultures, religion has, again and again, been the solution for many human problems. Feel weak and scared? Create a powerful figure and make friends. Don't like the idea of dying, no second chances, you've bought the store? Invent heaven and make the rules for getting in. Your neighbors are noisy, out of control and maybe a little dangerous? Scare them with threats of eternal problems with heat and scary guys with pitchforks, and maybe they'll be more respectful.

Those of us unable to subscribe to the delusion of the supernatural are left with the satisfaction (and yes, sometimes the smugness) of knowing that we are dealing straight up with facts, with reality. We are standing on solid ground, after all. Unfortunately, sometimes we are left without some of the "creature comforts" that religion can offer, and find it pretty hard to talk to adults, and extremely difficult to explain to children about the finality of death, illness or fate, without feeling the impulse to sugarcoat things just a tad.

Where are the writings, the ancient wisdom to help us face the ebb and flow of life with dignity, with grace? I know there must be some out there and I appeal to the English majors or historians among us to search for and gather what readings you have found to be helpful. I will be glad to publish a list of any that are sent in (Idelle@choice.net).

I am a member of a committee at Congregation Beth Adam (Humanistic Judaism) charged with the task of writing liturgy for the members that addresses needs while omitting the deity or similar devices. What a daunting task! And yet, slowly, it's been possible to put words to paper that stir emotions, which comfort and teach, gently and without illusion. The group has completed a booklet called "Benediction for Life" to be used when someone has died, and now is working on a second group of readings for times of crisis. I am proud to be part of this effort, and in a small way to demonstrate that while living a secular life, the warmth and compassion of our natures, the presence of loved ones, can ease the way through life's dark moments. Standing on solid ground and relinquishing delusion doesn't have to leave you out in the cold.

I.D.

Separating the Sheep from the Goats

How can you tell a Christian from a secular humanist? It may be harder than you think. Unlike some secret societies, these two groups do not have a special handshake to know when they are among like-minded individuals. Instead, many Americans just assume that every other person they meet is a Christian. Yet this is far from the truth, as recent surveys have shown.

First, to set the ground rules, we are referring to the way that people identify themselves. We cannot observe what people believe, only what they do. Also, to keep things simple, we are not concerned with minutiae such as distinguishing a Baptist from a Pentecostal, or an agnostic from an atheist.

One obvious way to identify a Christian is to catch one of them attending church. Of course, this is an unlikely proposition if you do not attend church yourself. You may even be misled if you stake out their houses on a Sunday morning, since many people who call themselves Christian do not regularly attend services.

Perhaps you could take a look at their car. There are some obviously religious bumper stickers out there, such as 'In case of rapture, this vehicle will be unoccupied', but these are in the minority. Many other bumper stickers appear to be secular, but it may just be a Christian with a sense of humor. You may have more luck spotting a Jesus Fish or a Darwin Fish, or perhaps a Jesus Fish eating a Darwin Fish. Yet in most situations, you are just dealing with a person, and you don't know whether they drive Toyota or a Cadillac, let alone a pink Fleetwood with a crucifix dangling from the rear-view mirror.

Speaking of crosses, these are a pretty reliable indicator of Christianity. But the popularity of crosses in jewelry comes and goes, so this clue is not pervasive enough to be useful. And other than habits or priestly garb, other clothing tends to be neutral where religion is concerned. I suspect that plenty of well-to-do atheists wear Christian Dior clothing, the name notwithstanding.

No, you need to be much more clever to separate

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FIG MEETING, DECEMBER 15, 2002

SPEAKER: TIM MADIGAN

TOPIC: THE ANIMAL/HUMAN BOUNDARY

The speaker began his talk by showing a film clip from the 1980 film, *The Elephant Man*. The scene selected showed a train station with "the elephant man" surrounded by curious onlookers. He cries out plaintively "I am not an elephant; I'm not an animal; I am a human being."

Tim said that what sparked his interest in this topic was a book published by his own Rochester University Press titled, *The Animal/Human Boundary*. This book represented the deliberations of a conference at Princeton University that explored how humans tended to differentiate themselves from animals.

He went on to relate how in ancient times a group of philosophers met at Plato's Academy in Athens for the purpose of defining man as a human being. After much wrangling they managed to come up with a definition that seemed to satisfy everyone present, namely, that man was a "featherless biped." Upon hearing about this, Diogenes, the Cynic, came before the assembly waving a plucked chicken, shouting, "here is Plato's man!"

So this definition proved unworkable. Then Aristotle came up with a definition that "Man is a rational animal." The differentiating factor between man and other animals was that man possessed the ability to think (i.e. to reason). He then postulated the Great Chain of Being progressing from the lower animals to the gods. At the level just below the gods, man shared some behavior with the animals by reacting instinctually (emotionally) and behavior with the gods by exemplified by rational thinking. When Christianity came along it was relatively easy to substitute soul for reason. This concept lasted for hundreds of years until the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. The widely held scientific view then became that humans are not as fundamentally different from other animals as we like to believe. Earlier David Hume had expressed similar ideas by saying that humans were not so rational most of the time anyway because most of their reactions were emotional.

The boundary between animals and humans has particular relevance now in the 21st century when we have engaged in xenotransplantation and other experimentation that raise a number of ethical questions. To illustrate this he turned to a sci-fi story by H.G.Wells called *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, published in 1896. The story has been made into a movie three separate times: a 1932 version starring Charles Laughton called *The Island of Lost Souls*; a second version in 1977 starring Burt Lancaster; and a third version, the most recent, starring Marlon Brando. Briefly the story has to do with a shipwrecked sailor, Prendick who is washed up on an island where the mad Dr. Moreau experiments with animal mutations to change them into human beings. He

then showed a film clip from the third version in which these quasi-humans rebel and kill Dr. Moreau and burn the laboratory, In the final scene Prendick is about to be rescued and the quasi-humans beg him to stay but he promises to return.

In addition to the story of Doctor Moreau, there is another story by a Russian writer, Mikhail Bulgakov called *The Heart of a Dog* in which the scientist was trying to create, if not another human, at least a thinking type of being from an animal. In this story, the Doctor implants a human pituitary gland in the brain of a dog and a pair of human testicles in place of the dog's. Because of the implants, the dog becomes a human but incorporates the worst human characteristics. He becomes a whiner, demanding special treatment and so irritates his creator that the doctor reverses the procedures. Bulgakov's treatment of the story was humorous and it was published just about the time that Stalin was coming to power. He was told to change his style which was deemed by the authorities to be critical of the state

From the standpoint of science both books pointed out that the objectionable feature of their experimentation was not necessarily what they did but that it was done in secret. In Moreau's case he worked on an island separated from most human contact, and in the Bulgakov story, the scientist worked in his apartment and kept his work secret until neighbors complained of the noise and demanded to know what he was doing.

These two books have a relevance to our own time. There have been transplants of a baboon's heart and pig's valves into humans. We live in age of blood transfusions as a surgical routine. We call ourselves humanists so we should be able to differentiate what makes us human.

The question of ethics arose during the discussion period. One questioner asked whether ethics played a role in scientific goings on? There is a need for public discussion of these issues and ethics plays a role in bringing this about. The commenter went on "but doesn't ethics draw a line?" Some do and some don't. Ethical principles change from time to time.

There is something in Ethics called the YUK factor, which in effect states that when something strikes us as "yucky" we probably shouldn't be doing it. But the definition of what's yucky changes. At one time transferring blood from one person to another was considered yucky and still is by some religious groups.

Another comment was made that technology has outstripped ethics, There were other comments and questions some of which were inaudible and so can not be included here.

George Maurer





Rationally Speaking

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

N. 32, January 2003
Human instincts and virtue ethics

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 (skeptical@rationallyspeaking.org). Or, you can subscribe (free) to the Rationally Speaking announcements list.

Americans are reasonably happy people. This is one of the findings of a recently published survey of self-reported happiness worldwide (see Scientific American November 2002). Interestingly, however, they are not the most happy people on earth. That distinction goes to the populations of northern Europe, despite the harsh winters and lack of sunshine. The rest of Western Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, report levels of happiness similar to that of the United States. Intermediate happiness can be found in most Asian countries (including China), while lower levels are typical of South American countries, and lower still is the self-appraised happiness of most Africans (though the absolute minimum is found in Russia and in some of its former satellites).

Philosophers have discussed what makes humans happy or unhappy at least since Aristotle wrote his Ethics, but it seems most obvious to ask the people themselves (Aristotle was famous for not thinking of such simple solutions to complex problems: he once claimed that women have a different number of teeth than men, but it didn't occur to him to open Mrs. Aristotle's mouth and count them!). As you might imagine, financial security is crucial to happiness. Astoundingly, however, the level of income above which more money doesn't seem to matter for most people is low: only about \$13,000 / year, or circa half of the median American income! Above that, more importance is carried by factors like health, attitude, professional occupation, and relationships (married or divorced people are happier than single ones), which explains why people living in countries with lower income but better social health indicators (such as Scandinavian nations) report that they are significantly happier than the highly capitalistic US.

Aristotle, however, seems to have gotten much

right in his analysis of happiness and how to achieve it. First off, he realized that we are constantly trying to overcome an innate "weakness of the will" (the Greek word is akrasia), a natural tendency we seem to have to simply satisfy our basic instincts (food, sex, and power). Modern biology gives us important clues as to where akrasia comes from: for most of our evolutionary history, we lived in environments in which it was difficult to procure food, hard to find a mate (and especially to have offspring), and where getting to be the alpha male was the best way to insure both. Natural selection has therefore built into us powerful instincts that drive us to constantly seek such things even today. The difference, of course, is that, in our modern environment, food is usually plentiful (at least in Western societies); you can find dates on the Internet or scanning a newspaper, and neither of these requires you to be the President of the United States to be successful.

Aristotle realized (and the modern survey confirms) that true happiness—while requiring a certain amount of food, sex, and control over one's destiny—is a much more sophisticated affair than just meeting the basic needs. That is why he attempted to explore how we can reach the goal of "eudaimonia," a word that, while normally translated as "happiness," in fact implies more than low-grade contentment. Aristotle suggested that we need to cultivate virtue, because virtue is like a good acquired habit: it requires constant reinforcement to oppose our natural tendency to yield to akratic temptations. So, for example, most of us feel a natural attraction toward that double cheeseburger, because of its amount of fat and proteins, both hard to find in our prehistoric environment. But our rational self, knowing about cholesterol and heart attack, can make a strong case that our eudaimonia would be increased by not walking into a fast food place at all times of the day. Such cases need to be made with ourselves every time we are faced with the same choice, which is why keeping a reasonable diet is such an ordeal. According to Aristotle, you also don't want to go to the other extreme (sorry for the vegetarians

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.

among you), and deprive yourself of life's pleasures altogether. That would be erring on the other side of his famous golden mean: for every virtue there are two opposite vices, though one may be more easily avoided than the other.

Aristotle's system is often referred to as "virtue ethics," because it is based on a theory of what it means to be virtuous in general, and does not provide specific suggestions or rules of conduct for particular instances (unlike, say duty-based ethics, of which most religious and some secular systems are examples). That is why virtue ethics both appeal strongly to some people (historically, especially the ancient Romans), and it is completely repulsive for others (most religious fundamentalists, be they Jewish, Christians, or Muslims). Virtue ethics is not about following somebody else's idea of what is right and wrong, it is about a continuous,

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difficult, and uncertain process of self-discovery, during which one slowly comes to terms with human nature and how it can be ameliorated.

Regardless of your favored system of ethics, I find consolation in Aristotle every time I concede a cheeseburger to my akrasia, and I feel ecstatic when I manage to feed my eudaimonia with a healthy portion of grilled fish. Our search for happiness continues, and I suspect that its very pursuit has much to do with what it means to be human.

Further Readings:

The Nicomachean Ethics, by Aristotle, check out what the Master said.

Web Links:

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on ethics. (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/e/ethics.htm>)

Next month:

Gays, in the military and outside of it

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



It is now both well known and acknowledged that people have experiences in which they assign an equal degree of credibility to their imagining as to veridical perceptions. When religious figures and theologians say that God spoke to them and told them to spread His word, few church members and believers consider such reports hallucinations. Oddly enough, the same report coming from a street person or a drunk would quickly lead to a diagnosis of schizophrenia from a psychiatrist.

Robert A. Baker, "Mind Games" (1996) p. 203

Sources of Significant Influence

A brief section of the article alluded to Barna's future thrust: understanding and impacting the "sources of significant influence," which Barna consistently refers to as SSI. While he is still conducting research regarding the identity and impact of those sources, he revealed that the early returns from a year of research show the leading influences in American society to be movies, television, the Internet, books, music, public policy and law, and family. The Christian church, his research shows, is not among the top dozen influences these days a far cry from the way things used to be. He hopes to provide information to be used for developing a strategy that will enable Christians to have greater effect on society through those sources of influence.

George Barna (17 September 2002)

Creationism: Ohio Plan is not very Intelligently Designed

A committee of the Ohio Board of Education has recommended that science classes emphasize both evolution and the debate over its validity. Individual school districts would decide whether to include intelligent design in the debate. The plan would imply that creationism in whatever guise is a scientific alternative.

From: "What's New" by Robert L. Park (18 Oct 02)

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the quotes.

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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

Friends of FIG in the DAYTON area:

FIG has a number of members and subscribers in the Dayton area. Recently several have asked that we be put in touch with each other so we could gather at places in and around Dayton to discuss humanist and skeptical issues.

We could meet monthly to discuss current topics and articles of interest from Free Inquiry, Skeptical Inquirer, The Humanist, and Skeptic magazines. Each of these magazines has a website with a variety of articles from current and earlier issues. We could agree on one or two articles to discuss at our next meeting.

Anyone interested in participating in such a group should contact me at home at (937) 433-4212 or rbstreifthau@juno.com.

Bob Streifthau, Centerville, Ohio

(Continued from page 2)

the sheep from the goats. Perhaps you could fake a sneeze and see who says 'Bless You!' Unfortunately, old habits die hard and many secular humanists lapse into their religious upbringing. Many atheists still exclaim "My God" and "Jesus", so those indications can be confounding.

One would expect a Christian to pay more attention to the Ten Commandments than a secular humanist does. Any rational person who believes in Hell (if that is not an oxymoron) would be careful not to do something that would cause him (or her) to spend eternity there. Yet self-proclaimed Christians violate the Commandments every day, so God's gift of forgiveness must be more compelling than the threat of Hell.

Specifically, many Christians violate the third Commandment every day by using the name of God in a casual manner. As many, if not more, violate the fourth Commandment by performing some type of work on the Sabbath, whether you consider the Sabbath to be Saturday or Sunday. Of course, those Commandments are not as serious as the prohibitions against murder, adultery, and theft. Yet our prisons are full of murderers who consider themselves Christian, although their judgmental brethren may disagree. And I suspect that our prison population (both Christian and otherwise) would double if adultery laws were strictly enforced.

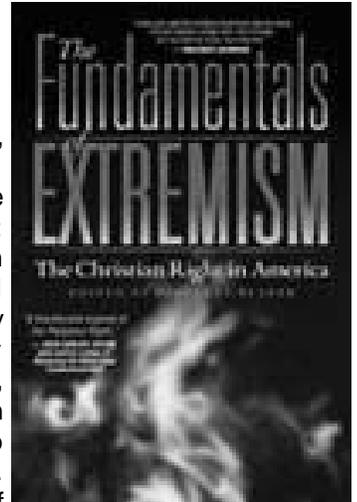
But let's get back to the original question. When you meet someone at work or a neighborhood party, can you tell if they believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior? In short, unless they feel compelled to spread the Gospel with everyone they meet, the answer is no. Some Christians drink alcohol, smoke tobacco, and swear like sailors. Some secular humanists detest those vices and appear to be as pious as a monk.

In conclusion, I keep an open mind regarding the orthodoxy of another's beliefs, whether religious or not. Most people are willing to learn from experience, and may change their stripes entirely under the right conditions. There is a continuum of belief, and in many cases the secular humanist's is not so different from the Christian's. So let us reach out to our neighbors and not be too enamored with the seemingly obvious rationality of our own philosophy. Perhaps one day secular humanism will be trendy.

Philip Ferguson

FIG member, Edwin Kagin, Contributor to New Book

New Boston Books, Inc. announces its prepublication sale for *The Fundamentals of Extremism: the Christian Right in America*, edited and coauthored by Kimberly Blaker with chapter contributions by Blaker, Edward Buckner, Edwin Kagin, Bobbie Kirkhart, Herb Silverman, and John Suarez.



The Fundamentals of Extremism: the Christian Right in America is not just another book on the Religious Right. John Shelby Spong retired Bishop of the Diocese of Newark, New Jersey and best-selling author of *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* calls Blaker's book, "a blockbuster expose of the activities of the Religious Right."

In this stark and troubling account of the Religious Right's vision for America, readers come face-to-face with fundamentalist goals and tactics that have long been under way. *The Fundamentals of Extremism* is an in-depth look at the causes and characteristics of Christian fundamentalism and its effects on women, children, African-Americans, gays and lesbians, politics, education, and American society.

The Fundamentals of Extremism has received other endorsements by such celebrities and scholars as Richard Dawkins, Nadine Strossen, John M. Swomley, and Gerald A. Larue.

Orders placed through February 12, 2003 will be autographed by editor and coauthor, Kimberly Blaker. (Prepublication orders will be shipped by February 14, 2003). For details visit <http://wwwNewBostonBooks.com> or contact New Boston Books, Inc., P.O. Box 195, New Boston, MI 48164.

Credit card orders accepted by calling toll free (866) NEW-BOSTON. The price is \$24.95 (hardcover) and \$15.95 (paperback) plus \$3.50 shipping/handling. *The Fundamentals of Extremism* debuts in bookstores February 28, 2003.



BOOK REVIEW

What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response

by Bernard Lewis

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

It is important to understand that Islam was the leading civilization for several centuries. In the seventh century after Christianity had taken over and destroyed the Roman Empire and classical civilization, the hosts of Islam conquered and converted much of Christendom in North Africa and southwestern Asia. Eventually the rule of Islam extended from the Iberian Peninsula to northern India. In the twelfth century Muslim armies were successful in extending the rule of Islam over Asia Minor and in 1453 Constantinople and much of southeastern Europe to the very gates of Vienna fell under their domination. The Ottoman Turkish Empire was dominant in the Mediterranean until after Columbus, and ruled over the Arab Middle East until defeated in the First World War.

The early Muslim empire was an enlightened and progressive world which had inherited the science and thought of classical antiquity. The seventh to the twelfth centuries saw a blossoming of science, medicine, and philosophy in Muslim lands, as well as a tolerance for the advances in knowledge made by Jewish and Christian minorities. This is the period of the early Middle Ages in Europe, with justice often called "The Dark Ages." In contrast the community of Islam was justified in perceiving themselves for much of their history as the central and leading world civilization. Little did they want or need to learn from the European tribes outside Islam. This began to change during the Renaissance and the age of discovery. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries European and American Imperialism inflicted a rude awakening as victorious powers gradually occupied the lands of Islam. "What went wrong?"

In this superb short (180 page) volume Bernard Lewis lays out the interaction between western Christendom and Europe ascendant after the Renaissance, and the world of Islam in decline after the naval battle of Lepanto (1571). By 1920 all Muslim countries were either European colonies or otherwise dominated by Europe. Western wealth, prosperity and technology had become infinitely greater than theirs, and reluctantly they had to see and learn from the infidels.

Bernard Lewis is generally considered the

foremost American expert on the history and present culture of Islam. A scholar of enormous erudition, he has mastered most of the languages of the Muslim world, so that he can quote from Turkish, Arab, and Persian sources directly. He explains much about the working of the Muslim world. In Islam there is no such thing as civil law, the only law book is the Quran as interpreted by the Ulema, the council of theologian and legal scholars schooled in the scripture, and administered by a Qadi or judge. Only the intrusion of the West with its need for commercial and trade law created the lawyer as a professional separate from the theologian.

An early Moslem observer described the British parliament with wonder. "These poor people, he commented, who lack the divine law of the Quran, try to write their own rules amid the bickerings and disagreements of politicians. No wonder people do not act right when they can not know what is right." The tolerance of Islam compares favorably with the Inquisition and persecution of the Christian west. Christians and Jews are understood to have an incomplete book. Even polytheistic believers could be accommodated under the unquestioned rule of Islam. "Only the total unbeliever — the agnostic or atheist — was beyond the pale of tolerance," (p. 114).

Self-satisfaction with their own world went hand in hand with ignorance and rejection of the new. Subject peoples, the Jews, Armenians, and Greeks were permitted to learn and print in their own languages, but the first book in Arabic script in the Ottoman Empire was not printed until 1729. No wonder the despised subject peoples, helped by their counterparts in the West, advanced beyond the Muslims in their own lands. Over and over Lewis comments on the successful opposition from the wise men of the Ulema to any proposed change or modernization. If it can't be found in the Quran and is not approved by the Prophet, it must be rejected. To answer the question: what went wrong? In a word, the obstruction of fundamentalist religion.

Wolf Roder

REMINDER:

Dates for FIG meetings in January AND February are on Page One of this issue. (Your Feb. issue will arrive after the program.)