

FIG Leaves

Volume 10 Issue 3 March 2001

March Meeting

"Epicurus and the Origins of Western Humanism"

William B. Jensen, Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati

The term humanism covers a broad spectrum of beliefs, ranging from deism to atheism and from libertarianism to socialism. The author's personal position corresponds to that of atheism and a belief in scientific naturalism. The talk will trace the author's personal search for the historical origins of these beliefs in the life and work of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (342-270 BC). Like his modern counterpart, the ancient Epicurean found himself in a universe devoid of supernatural guidance and protection and profoundly indifferent to the hopes and needs of mankind. Given this view of nature, how does one find meaning and happiness in life? The speaker will argue that the answers given to these questions by Epicurus more than 2300 years ago are still relevant today.

Camp Quest Camper

To: Institute for Humanist Studies

I have lived in northeast Louisiana for most of my life. Here in Franklin Parish, the landscape is dotted with churches and the vast majority of the population is either Baptist or Pentecostal. The views of most of the people here are the very worst forms of fundamentalism and superstition. We actually know a family who thought a demon, brought into the house by way of a latex balloon, had possessed their four-year-old little girl. After a brief exorcism, the demon, looking for its next host, possessed their family pup. The dog had to be shot. We were once behind a customer in Wal-Mart whose bill came to \$6.66. The cashier insisted she not write a check for that devilish amount and demanded she add some gum to the ticket so as to change the final total. These are just a few examples.

My parents did not like the crumbling public schools in Franklin Parish, so they sent me to a small private school named Franklin Academy from first through fifth grade. It, just like everything else in the region, was geared toward religion. The "Abeka" curriculum taught creationism and bashed science. The teachers made everyone pray in the morning and before lunch. Since we never prayed to God in our home, for the first three years I thought "God" was something like the school mascot. By fourth grade he appeared in more and more books, taking credit for everything. It began to become uncomfortable in the fifth grade when evolution was taught as an absurd theory. An example used to "explain" evolution was, "A cat just can't have puppies", and some of the theories were named the "ding-dong" theory of evolution and the "pooh-pooh" theory. I eventually dropped out of the academy and have been studying at home for the past six years.

Most social activity in Franklin Parish revolves around three things: school, sports and church. Since I had little social contact due to the fact that I didn't go to school or church, I tried to become involved in some sports activities. I signed up for Tai kwon Do. I was very excited about the thought of mentally and physically challenging my body but

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Events

March Meeting
William B. Jensen,
"Epicurus and the Origins of Western Humanism"
Tuesday, March 27, 7:00 PM
At the Vernon Manor Hotel,
the Vernon Room,
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

April Potluck Dinner
Tuesday, April 10, at 6:30 PM,

February Speaker
Ed Buckner

The Free Inquiry Group had expected to host Jerry Reiter at the February 27th meeting. When Jerry canceled his appearance, the Council for Secular Humanism graciously arranged for its new executive director, Ed Buckner, to appear instead. Ed led a discussion on 'The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in the Bush Administration.

Ed noted that religious conservatives such as Pat Robertson have expressed displeasure with the Bush plan, leading him to wonder if that implies that secular humanists should automatically support it. But assuming that we do not want to encourage government involvement with religion, what should we do about it?

While acknowledging that many religious organizations provide valuable community services, Ed described how a diversion of tax dollars to those organizations will serve to further erode the separation of church and state. The simple endorsement of Religion as a valid agent of our government sets a dangerous precedent.

Ed also surmised that government funding could destroy the voluntary support that makes religious organizations effective. Regulations attached to the funding would likely prohibit the proselytizing that many churches consider to be their primary objective.

Another concern is that the debate over the distribution of funds will exacerbate the ideological warfare between certain religious groups, possibly leading to violence. Indeed, some Christians oppose the plan because sects they find offensive stand to benefit.

Ed then outlined several alternative courses of action that the Council could take regarding the issue. One approach would be to join the fundamentalists in publicly opposing the plan. Of course, our opposition could be repugnant enough to make them reconsider their position.

A second approach is to publicly express our desire to obtain funding, thus providing additional fuel for the religious opposition to the plan. Alternatively, we could discreetly apply to fund serious proposals that address social needs that we feel are neglected. The Council has experience with



and interest in charitable services, and need not let religious groups monopolize the money.

The final option that Ed outlined was benign neglect. The religious groups may kill the proposal themselves without any help from Council. This option, like the others, has an element of risk because the religious proponents currently seem to be stronger than their opponents.

Having concluded his presentation, Ed opened the floor to comments on the various options. One member of the audience noted that replacing social workers with church employees on the government payroll could translate into more Republican votes. Another theorized that the joining of state and religion would essentially kill religion as evidenced in a number of European countries. Ed countered that the United States was sufficiently different to question this outcome.

Other members of the audience noted that religious institutions such as Catholic hospitals already receive a lot of public money while restricting access to medical procedures or drugs that they oppose on religious grounds. And since many churches feel that they already have an obligation to perform charity work, some wondered if the public funding would simply allow them to divert more of their tax-deductible contributions into proselytizing. It is difficult to know what course to take because the current proposals have not yet taken the form of legislation. Unless and until that happens, we cannot gauge whether the proposals are likely to be enacted, or if they can stand up to judicial scrutiny. But we can and must remain vigilant.

Philip Ferguson

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Rationally Speaking

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

N. 8, March 2001: "Game Theory, Rational Egoism and the Evolution of Fairness"

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

Is it rational to be ethical? Many philosophers have wrestled with this most fundamental of questions, attempting to clarify whether humans are well served by ethical rules or whether they weigh us down. Would we really be better off if we all gave in to the desire to just watch out for our own interests and take the greatest advantage to ourselves whenever we can? Ayn Rand, for one, thought that the only rational behavior is egoism, and books aiming at increasing personal wealth (presumably at the expense of someone else's wealth) regularly make the bestsellers list.

Plato, Kant, and John Stuart Mill, to mention a few, have tried to show that there is more to life than selfishness. In the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates defending his philosophy against the claim that justice and fairness are only whatever rich and powerful people decide they are. But the arguments of his opponents—that we can see plenty of examples of unjust people who have a great life and of just ones who suffer in equally great manner—seem more convincing than the high-mindedness of the father of philosophy.

Kant attempted to reject what he saw as the nihilistic attitude of Christianity, where you are good now because you will get an infinite payoff later, and to establish independent rational foundations for morality. Therefore he suggested that in order to decide if something is ethical or not one has to ask what would happen if everybody were adopting the same behavior. However, Kant never explained why his version of rational ethics is indeed rational. Rand would object that establishing double standards, one for yourself and one for the rest of the universe, makes perfect sense.

Mill also tried to establish ethics on firm rational foundations, in his case improving on Jeremy Bentham's idea of utilitarianism. In chapter two of his book *Utilitarianism*, Mill writes: "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." Leaving

aside the thorny question of what happiness is and the difficulty of actually making such calculations, one still has to answer the fundamental question of why one should care about increasing the average degree of happiness instead of just one's own.

Things got worse with the advent of modern evolutionary biology. It seemed for a long time that Darwin's theory would provide the naturalistic basis for the ultimate selfish universe: nature red in tooth and claw evokes images of "every man for himself," in pure Randian style. In fact, Herbert Spencer popularized the infamous doctrine of "Social Darwinism" (which Darwin never espoused) well before Ayn Rand wrote *Atlas Shrugged*.

Recently, however, several scientists and philosophers have been taking a second look at evolutionary theory and its relationship with ethics, and are finding new ways of realizing the project of Plato, Kant, and Mill of deriving a fundamentally rational way of being ethical. Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson, in their *Unto Others: the Psychology and Evolution of Unselfish Behavior*, as well as Peter Singer in *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Cooperation*, argue that human beings evolved as social animals, not as lone, self-reliant brutes. In a society, cooperative behavior (or at least, a balance between cooperation and selfishness) will be selected in favor, while looking out exclusively for number one will be ostracized because it reduces the fitness of most individuals and of the group as a whole.

All of this sounds good, but does it actually work? A recent study published in *Science* by Martin Nowak, Karen Page and Karl Sigmund provides a splendid example of how mathematical evolutionary theory can be applied to ethics, and how in fact social evolution favors fair and cooperative behavior. Nowak and coworkers tackled the problem posed by the so-called "ultimatum game." In it, two players are offered the possibility of winning a pot of money, but they have to agree on how to divide it. One of the players, the proposer, makes an offer of a split (\$90 for me, \$10 for you, for example) to the other player; the other player, the responder, has the option of accepting or rejecting. If she rejects, the game is over and neither of them gets any money.

It is easy to demonstrate that the rational strategy is for the proposer to behave egotistically and to suggest a highly uneven split in which she takes most of the money, and for the responder to accept. The alternative is that neither of them gets anything. However, when real human beings from a variety of cultures and using a panoply of rewards play the game the outcome is invariably a fair share of the prize. This would seem prima facie evidence that the human sense of fair play overwhelms mere rationality and thwarts the rationalistic prediction. On the other hand, it would also provide Ayn Rand with an

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TOM FLYNN CAMPAIGNS FOR RESPECT FOR NONRELIGIOUS

Rodney Dangerfield laments "I get no respect," and makes a joke of it. It's no joke for Tom Flynn when he campaigns for greater respect for the nonreligious. He urges this respect in his role as editor of Free Inquiry magazine. And this was one of the key themes of his talks to members of FIG and the UC Skeptics on March 1. Tom came to Cincinnati on short notice after Jerry Reiter had resigned the preceding week.

At a 6 PM meeting, Tom spoke to the UC Skeptics on the University of Cincinnati campus concerning "Humanist Consciousness Raising." He noted President Bush's efforts to bring religion – especially the Christian religion - more into American public life through references in his speeches and by actions such as his creation of a White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. While publicly the President has said that this organization is designed to foster social-service activities, he told a group of Catholic Church leaders that such aid would help Catholic agencies to "change the culture" and fight abortions. He didn't know his words to the Catholics were being broadcast to reporters.

Tom noted that reinvigorating conservative Christianity was not being promoted by the majority of the American public. "That is rather the agenda of well-funded, well-organized minorities on the right – admittedly, minorities which have done a superb job

of raising money and playing the games of special interest politics. We should be concerned about their successes, but we needn't fear that they'll turn every American into a fundamentalist bigot."

He noted that "much has been made of the August Gallup poll showing that fewer Americans would vote for an atheist presidential candidate than for a woman, a Jew, an African American, a gay or lesbian. What's forgotten is that 49 percent of respondents said they *would* vote for an atheist candidate – and that number is the highest it's been since Gallup started tracking that question in the 1950s."

Moreover, there are many more nonreligious people in America than the 5% reflected by the broad wording of the Gallup poll which since 1976 asks whether people believe in God or a universal spirit. A 1995 poll commissioned by Free Inquiry magazine found that 11.4% do not believe in the classical idea of a personal God who answers prayers. A 1999 Scripps-Howard study found that over 11 % reported no religious preference. These percentages mean roughly 30,000,000 nonreligious people in America.

Tom stressed that humanist consciousness raising is needed to help gain the respect that these numbers deserve. Black activists achieved important goals in the 1960s and so did homosexuals some years later by making their groups aware of their power to do something about their marginalization. On the other hand, since most nonbelievers make

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argument that most humans are simply stupid, because they don't appreciate the math behind the game.

Nowak and colleagues, however, simulated the evolution of the game in a situation in which several players get to interact repeatedly. That is, they considered a social situation rather than isolated encounters. If the players have memory of previous encounters (i.e., each player builds a "reputation" in the group), then the winning strategy is to be fair because people are willing to punish dishonest proposers, which increases their own reputation for fairness and damages the proposer's reputation for the next round. This means that—given the social environment—it is *rational* to be less selfish toward your neighbors.

While we are certainly far from a satisfying mathematical and evolutionary theory of morality, it seems that science does, after all, have something to say about optimal ethical rules. And the emerging picture is one of fairness—not egotism—as the smart choice to make.

Further reading:

A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation by Peter Singer

Unto Others: the Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior by Elliot Sober & David Sloan Wilson

Web links:

John Stuart Mill on the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/m/milljs.htm>)

The Republic by Plato, complete text online (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>)

Game theory and evolutionarily stable strategies, an interactive website (http://science.holycross.edu/departments/biology/kprestwi/behavior/ESS/ESS_index_frmset.html)

Next Month: "Red or Blue? What kind of life would you choose?"

Secular Student Alliance

In the past nine months the Secular Student Alliance has gone through many growing pains in its attempt to provide young people who happen to be non-religious and proud of it a voice in the ongoing national dialogue. Darwin Day. The Advisory Board. The Secular 100. The Council of Campus Group Leaders. Shareware and Educational resources. We are constantly striving to provide secular students with the best resources available to the freethought movement.

However, for all the attention, resources, and

time we spend on those secular students who live on our college and university campuses, there is another group, equally important, whose voice often isn't as well represented in the student secular movement: high school students. Until now, that is. Since the summer of 2000 the SSA High School program has slowly and surely been building a safe, stable and competent haven for secular high school students. Thanks to the hard work and organizational talents of Stephanie Kirmer, the SSA High School Director, the program now provides a growing and productive discussion list and has resulted in the creation of five

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themselves almost invisible in our society, they have no one but themselves to blame for their lack of influence.

Tom noted: "This doesn't mean we all have to snarl in people's faces all the time. It does mean that if atheists were merely **as** vocal, **as** prickly sensitive, **as any other recognized minority in this culture**, more Americans would know that humanism exists. Average Americans' ideas about where the centerline ought to be drawn on issues of religion and society might change markedly."

Following a spirited period of questions and comments, many of the UC Skeptics joined a number of FIG members for a dinner at Lenhardt's Restaurant. There Tom discussed "Living Without Religion in the Bush Years." This was in some ways a continuation of the themes he discussed at UC, but here he emphasized both historical aspects and a potential future of religious conflict in the United States.

Tom gave an interesting sketch of the history of church-state separation in the United States. "In the early 1800s various Protestant sects clashed for dominance of the public square. By, say, 1837, an uneasy peace had broken out among the Congregationalists and Methodists and Episcopalians and Calvinists and so on. Reformer Horace Mann launched common schools, better known today as public schools, in which religious expression was restricted to reading from the King James Bible, reciting the Lord's Prayer, and studying the Ten Commandments." By sticking to agreed beliefs and avoiding discussion of differences, peace reigned in the public schools.

Just a few years later, the immigration of millions of Catholics upset this doctrinal truce. As Tom explained: "In 1844, New York and Philadelphia Catholics dared ask that their children be exempted from Protestant Bible readings in school. Violence flared: rioters burned two Philadelphia Catholic churches and a convent, torched fifty residences of

Irish immigrants, and shot victims trying to escape the flames. Thirteen died. In New York, armies of Catholic vigilantes surrounded the churches, facing down Protestant mobs armed, in one instance, with a brace of cannon. Across the northeast, the death toll in 1844's 'Bible Wars' reached eighteen, mostly Catholics."

By the 1930s, Catholics and Protestants were avoiding religious conflict in public schools by reciting only "non-denominational," but often Christian, prayers. Around 1950, important Supreme Court decisions ended religious education in public schools. In 1962 and 1963, the Court ended teacher-led prayer and Bible reading in public schools. The momentum toward secularization resulted in removing Christmas and other religious pageants from public schools.

The momentum was halted in the mid-1990s by President Clinton's repeated statement, "freedom of religion doesn't mean freedom from religion." In July 1995, he directed Attorney General Reno and Education Secretary Riley to send an advisory to school districts spelling out what schools may or may not do with regard to religion.

As he looks toward the future, Tom is concerned that the growing number of immigrants professing other than Christian beliefs may lead to serious conflicts with Religious Right policies, with results potentially worse than the Protestant-Catholic "Bible Wars" of 1844.

Tom espouses a reasonable preventive for such potential future conflict. Let us return, he suggests, to the "naked public square," removing religion from public life and public schools so there can be a religion-free buffer zone for people of all religions - and of none.

We are grateful to Tom Flynn for coming to Cincinnati on short notice and for giving us some important ideas to think about and work to achieve.

Joe Levee

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high school freethought groups to date, with more on the way.

A student herself, Kirmer, a 16-year-old junior at Shawnee Heights High School in Topeka, Kansas, saw the SSA as an opportunity to help other high school students like herself. "I went through a lot of crap being a high school freethinker and I felt like kids my age with the guts to be different deserved better than I got," states Kirmer. "I wanted to be accepted by an organization of people like me and I wanted to help other students my age find like-minded people too."

"When the SSA was becoming less of a dream and more of a realistic idea, I decided if it was going to happen I was going to be a part of it... I wanted to get in there and do what I could." She adds, "I knew it was going to be a tough thing, designing the programs from scratch, but in the end I knew it needed to be done. It was the same inspiration that got me into organized freethought in the first place, I wanted to make things better for the kids coming after me."

While she has done much of the work herself in the High School Program, Kirmer is by no means alone. "The college SSA members and board have been very supportive," she states, "have offered all the resources they have, and helped with laying out the foundations of the SSA HS in the very beginning. Fred Edwards of [the] American Humanist Association, Rob Boston of Americans United, Stacy Irwin with CommonSense, and Michael Shermer of [the] Skeptics' Society all donated magazines and materials for the benefit of the students. I mailed them out to the kids and continue to send them whatever new shipments of things I get.

"Edwards is also a regional representative and has done an exemplary job with that. Many college SSAers have been regional reps as well, including Kate Martin, DJ Grothe, Deidre Conn, and Bill Bishop." Kirmer is a board member of the SSA and has been a powerful force in the creation and implementation of its Regional Representatives program, in which adults mentor and advise young student freethought leaders as they begin their involvement in the secular movement.

A great example of what young people have to offer the secular movement, she is not alone. Others involved with SSA High School echo Kirmer's sentiments about the difficulties of being a student freethinker. "Both of my parents are Jewish," starts David Poppers, a 16-year-old sophomore and founder of an SSA HS group at Newport Harbor High School. "My mother has always been rather religiously eclectic, studying Eastern religion, meditation, and the like. My father, however, is a Deist, which I did not know until quite recently."

"My mother was not very pleased when I 'came out' as an atheist and freaked out. This was plainly nonsensical, because our family never was the ideal Jewish family. My mother spoke to the cantor, and he said that there's really nothing she can do about it, and to just go with it." Poppers adds, "Then, my mother thought that my father somehow turned me atheist. I told her that he did no such thing, I found my own lack of religion on my own personal path.

Only then did I realize why my father almost never went to any sort of religious service with the rest of the family. I began to keep him company. Now, three years later, we're not even members of our local temple."

Wallace Lee, a student at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, California (near San Francisco and San Jose) seems to have had a fairly easy time with his non-belief. "My family has never been very religious, so I've been an atheist for most of my life without knowing it." He continues, "[W]ith the diversity of religions in my area, I realized that not every religion can be right, and got interested in other people's religions. Before long, I got pretty confused and decided that I didn't want to choose a particular affiliation."

For Allison Smith, a 17-year-old junior and founder of an SSA HS group at Westmont High School in Campbell, California, living as a freethinker hasn't been quite as difficult. "I've always been a freethinker/atheist. I like the idea of logic above faith. Not to mix up faith with hope; hope is fine, and probably a good thing that everyone needs, but I fail to see the benefits of faith. Both my parents are atheist as well."

That doesn't mean that she hasn't had problems with her lack of faith. According to Smith, "My sophomore year in high school I was questioned on whether or not I was religious and if I attended church. Fortunately I live in one of the most diverse and liberal places in the world, Silicon Valley, California. So when I mentioned that I was atheist, very shyly and very uncomfortably, the reaction wasn't so bad, except [for] a few people trying to convert me."

"To make a long story short," she concludes, "I had grown up knowing that logical thinking etc was a good thing, but it was not accepted and I felt like I was doing something wrong; I didn't fit in. It turns out though, there are a *lot* of atheists at my school, and it's nothing at all to be ashamed of."

"I have probably been agnostic all my life," declares Tommy Kolat, a 16-year-old in the 11th Grade at Millikan High School in Long Beach, California, and vice-president of its atheist club *The Reality*, "but just recently made the... switch to atheist. In my very earlier life," he adds, "I believed in god because I did not know better...I think people believe in god because it [is] the easiest answer to any question... so human nature give[s] it a god."

What motivates high school students to start freethought groups anyway? For many, it is a combination of frustration and outrage. At David Popper's school, "any club can have their meetings announced daily. Christian Club is one of the only clubs that decides to do such a thing. In partial retaliation, I started my own branch of the SSA." He adds, "There are also many highly religious people at my school, and I wanted to be able to empower the few non-religious students on campus."

Lee started his group in response to a religious group that started at his high school. "At the beginning of this year, some of my friends and I were joking about a Christian club at school called 'Water Walkers.' It's kind of like FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes), but the students at our school only recently established one of those, so it's pretty small. It came to me that there were quite a few freethinkers/atheists at my school, and I thought that it would be interesting to create a club and share

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FIG Leaflets

The Humanist Family Welcomes Spring

One man's atheism ...

Hence I came to define atheism in Pagan antiquity as the point of view which *denies the existence of the ancient gods*. In the sense in which the word is used here we are now all of us atheists. We do not believe that the gods whom the Greeks and the Romans worshiped and believed in exist or have ever existed; we hold them to be productions of the human imagination to which nothing real corresponds.

A few words remain to be said about the two monotheistic religions which in the days of the Roman Empire came to play a great ... part. ... the adherents of both were designated and treated as atheists --- the Jews only occasionally and with reservations, the Christians nearly always and unconditionally.

A. B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (Copenhagen, 1922) p. 1-2, 126

Nature of Religion?

Rorty says that the need for myths hasn't changed, only the stories themselves. In order to explain a frightening world to themselves, primitive humans spun tales of godlike creatures that were part human, part animal.

After formalized religions gained a foothold in society, atheists contended that religion was just another form of myth telling, one that helped us deal with the unknown quantity of death.

Ethel Diamond, Aristotle would have liked Oprah (1999) p. 161

Sea Fairies has a satirical section in which a school of "holy" mackerel express their conviction that when they are jerked out of their element by a hook, they "go to glory" to an "unknown, but beautiful sea."

Martin Gardner describing a novel by L. Frank Baum

"Christians tell me that they love their enemies, and yet all I ask is—not that they love their friends even, but that they treat those who differ from them with simple fairness. We do not wish to be forgiven, but we wish Christians to so act that we will not have to forgive them."

Ingersoll

Robert

quoted in Dan Barker's *Losing Faith in Faith*

Spring, oh glorious spring! No, it's not just the flowers and general renewal of life that makes me sing. It's the fact that once again I can throw the kids out of the house and say those words that mothers have long held dear, "Go out and play!"

I think it is basically cruel to lock the kids out of the house when there is six inches of snow on the ground and icicles hanging off the eaves of the house. But surely no one can question a parent's right to oust the little ones from the couch, pry the game controllers from their little hands, turn the television firmly off, and throw them out into a balmy spring day.

Every year spring comes as a great surprise to me. In order to preserve my sanity, I seem to forget how claustrophobic it is to have all of us locked into the house for an eternity. Over the winter, I slip into a stupor, ignoring the 400,000 toys and books strewn about the house, as the children create fortresses and great battles ensue encompassing every available object. Spring cleaning for me is more than washing windows. We have to gather all the fallen foes of winter and clean up the accompanying destruction before we can get close enough to the windows to see if they are dirty.

It slips my mind how quiet the house can be when three boys are out in the woods conquering all their enemies. One of the advantages of living on a farm is that our children really do have a great outdoors in which to play. They climb so far up in the trees that I'm dizzy watching them, hoping that their little hands hold on tightly in spite of their exuberance. They search the round for all the treasures nature can provide, every half-rotten nut, slippery frog, and angry snapping crayfish proudly presented to their comrades. We discuss the animals' habitats and their survival techniques that have served them well throughout the long winter months. Some especially dear finds are put aside to discuss with Dad at the end of the day. They research the fossils from the creek and talk about the ocean that once thrived here eons ago.

Spring is all about freedom and exploration. The world becomes a hands-on science experiment, in which our sons are joyful participants. No, they don't just participate, they lead the way with their natural curiosity. So let's celebrate! We have survived another winter and welcome another glorious spring!

Martha Ferguson
this first appeared in *Family Matters*

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was greatly disappointed when it became apparent that the instructor required us to memorize and recite Bible verses before and sometimes after class. It was hard for me to respect an instructor who imposed his beliefs on his students like that. Another event I became interested in was tennis. My first day of lessons proved again to be a disappointment when the young male instructor showed up with a “Hooked On Jesus”

t-shirt. He knew I didn’t go to church, and as he preached of his missionary work in Mexico, my interest waned. I gave up on instructors and have been running, playing tennis and exercising with my family.

Some of my homeschool “buddies” have frequently asked me to go to certain social events, but unfortunately for me they were all youth groups organized by their churches. When one of my friends asked me why I didn’t want to go, I said that I wasn’t a Christian and didn’t agree with what was being taught at the youth groups. (I had been to one once) His immediate response was, “Are you a Satanist?” I said no, that I was an atheist, but he saw little difference. Another homeschool acquaintance’s seemingly sole reason for inviting me over was to convert me to Jesus. When he realized that he was getting nowhere, he said that “all things will be revealed in the end,” and we went to bed. When I woke up I heard him talking to another friend, saying, “Hamilton is smart, but he doesn’t understand that some things exist that are unseen and don’t need evidence. Let’s pray for him.” That was the last time I stayed there.

Because of these circumstances, I had (and still have) very little social activities in Franklin Parish. One day, I was looking for a summer camp I could go to when I saw a website for a humanist camp in Ohio called *Camp Quest*. Since this was just what I was looking for, I decided to go. Although I was very excited about the camp, I was a little concerned about what the experience would be like. The past three camps I had gone to had been a little disappointing, and I was afraid that something like a humanist camp might not be well funded or kept up. For some reason, though, I felt it would be much better than any previous camp experience; how could being with a bunch of freethinkers for a week be anything less than great?

On July 22, I traveled to Monroe, Louisiana where I boarded a plane to Cincinnati. I was picked up by a staff member and was at the camp within about an hour. I was greeted by other staff members and campers, and was given a groovy *Camp Quest* t-shirt. During the next hour I met more people as I walked about the campground. The people I met were the coolest and greatest people I have yet to meet. They had interesting things to say and didn’t judge or belittle me for being an atheist. They also had perspectives on religion that were wonderfully fresh to hear after years of living around fundamentalists. The campers at *Camp Quest* 2000 were from many different states across

the country, and there were even a few from Europe.

The activities offered at camp were excellent and covered a wide range. Most of them were typical summer camp activities, such as canoeing, archery, crafts, wood burning, fossil hunting, and swimming. Mixed in with the traditional camp activities were lectures and discussions by the staff and even a few campers on humanism, famous humanists, and science in general. These were very enjoyable to listen to and participate in. With most camps, any time spent talking about religion is spent standing around a flagpole praying, but having the opportunity to actually discuss it in such an intellectual way was a big plus to the experience.

All of the people I met at *Camp Quest* were just normal individuals who happened to believe in one less god than most. Many people who doubt religious teachings are often isolated in their views, mainly because the idea is so unheard of in our overwhelmingly religious country where popular culture embraces the supernatural and ignores the scientific. They think they are the only ones who feel the way they do, but all that can and must change. This camp allowed those who attended to grow stronger in each other, which will prepare all of us to stand up for what we believe in. This is of great importance as we go out on our own. My future plans after finishing high school in 2002 are to attend a college that either has an established humanist group, or to perhaps start one myself. One of the most important goals we face is to have humanism and freethought accepted, understood, and respected nationwide as an alternative to religion. The way to accomplish this is to set an example, educate and enlighten as many people as possible. We need more camps like *Camp Quest* for our young people to go to because it is they, after all, who build the future.

I cannot wait to return to *Camp Quest* this summer. I am looking forward to seeing the friends I met last summer, and I’m sure I’ll make some new ones as well. I’m glad that I can contribute to humanism and all it stands for and hope to be a counselor at this camp one day. Then I can give back some of what it has given to me.

Hamilton Leeper, age 16
Camp Quest 2000 camper

No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.

President George H. W. Bush, 27 August 1987
(He was still Vice-President then, but running for President.)

BOOK REVIEWS

Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution
by Kenneth R. Miller
(New York: HarperCollins, 1999)

Dawkins and Dennett have shown us that the science of evolution and the ideas of Charles Darwin are incompatible with a belief in a creator god. Now here comes Professor Ken Miller, who makes no bones about his own faith in a quite traditional religion and a god who created the universe. This biologist is determined to show us that evolution in no way contradicts belief in god. On the contrary he aims to show that a knowledge of evolution validates and confirms the existence of divine power.

Miller pulls no punches. He accepts the whole and entirety of science, the materialist universe, and the insights provided, from cosmology to the smallest particle. Miller has often debated creationists. In fact, three chapters are devoted to a refutation of their claims as both anti-science and anti-religion. God is not a charlatan who creates a world with the appearance of age to fool us. Nor is god a magician, as Philip Johnson would have it, who intervenes at will in the workings of the universe. Finally, Miller shows the mechanical claims of Michael Behe, which locate god in the smallest living unit, to be wrong every step of the way.

Miller holds that God created the material universe for a reason. It is a universe in which chance, necessity, and contingency play major roles. God created not only time and space and material, he equally created chance and indeterminacy. The world is arranged as random quanta and random molecules, in such a way, that chance rules mutations, chance works the union of egg and sperm, so that your and my existence, and the existence of every animal and plant is strictly contingent on what went before. History too, is strictly contingent and no future is predictable. The consequent material universe, then, permits us to exercise free will and thus freely love and worship the Deity. Or not.

The God in question is the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, and the Koran, without denying any other godly literatures. For his reasons this God wants us to have faith and worship him freely. In a deterministic universe, we could not have the freedom to deny god. For some reason this is what God wants. The material universe, the process of evolution, the changing earth make

genuine freedom possible. A static world "would leave a Creator's creatures with neither freedom nor the independence required to exercise that freedom." (p. 291). It is the only way in which we can have authentic and meaningful free moral and spiritual choices.

Finding Darwin's God is addressed to Christians who have difficulty accepting evolution as a fact. Miller is not trying to convert atheists. He does confront "The Gods of Disbelief" in chapter six because so many of his colleagues have used science in general and evolution in specific to deny god. It is a carefully thought out part of the book, and unbelievers owe it to themselves to confront a biologist who can not find the absence of god in science. He finds that various moderns have made not only language, but also music and art, in short the whole of culture a product of our genes. In this view the whole of religion and our capacity of imagine god is merely another expression of our genes. Miller comments that we really don't know enough to justify the "merely" of this concept. Even if we accept that all human capacities for culture are an expression of our genes, which they surely are, we can not aver that god is incapable of expressing himself through our genes. Thus, our capacity for beauty, for music, for faith, are as much an expression of god, as are our genes. "God's physical intervention in our lives is not direct. But His care and love are constants, and the strength He gives, while the stuff of miracle, is a miracle of hope, faith, and inspiration." (p. 291)

Perhaps Miller's thought can be summed up in saying it is as foolish trying to disprove god with science, as it is to thus try to prove his existence.

Wolf Roder

Extinct Humans
by Ian Tattersall and Jeffrey H. Schwartz
(New York: Westview Press, 2000)

For all its appearance this is not a coffee table book. It is oversize, printed on very slick paper, and full of color photographs. However, the pictures are excellent, clear, technical photos of prehistoric, fossil skulls, often front and side views, for the evidence in

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BOOK REVIEWS

(Continued from page 9)

this discussion is important. The text makes no concessions to the uninformed, but presents a reasoned argument about the present state of our understanding of human ancestry and evolution. Of the two major hypotheses going at this time, this book defends the recently "out of Africa" thesis. This would be contrasted with the alternative theory of multi-regional evolution on all old world continents.

In the past there has been a strong tendency to expect human evolutionary ancestry to be a linear development without extinct side branches or human species not ancestral to man. The authors describe especially Ernest Mayr and Theodosius Dobzhansky, two highly influential and accomplished paleontologists as promoting and defending this unilinear view. In fact, the authors see a ghost of the nineteenth century pre-Darwinian concept of the Great Chain of Being influencing earlier assessments of human ancestry. One consequence has been that pre-human and early human fossils have been judged mainly on where they were found, and by their geologic age. This has resulted in shoe-horning the fossils into a single ancestral line.

If, so argue Tattersall and Schultz, pre-human fossils were assessed like any other animal bones, then descent would be looked at strictly on the basis of the fossil's structure, and how the features of one fossil differ from that of related fossils. In the course of their discussion the authors incidentally introduce us to the scientific analysis procedure called *cladistics*. This amounts to a very careful examination of every feature of a fossil, and placing relationships into the order indicated by the derivation of each feature from an earlier ancestral feature. An important final conclusion of the book is "a cladogram showing suggested relationships among the various hominid species.."(Fig. 123, p. 243)

The majority of *Extinct Humans* is devoted to a detailed examination of the fossils from these viewpoints. We learn about the many differences among the various fossil finds of *Australopithecus* and early *Homo*. These old bones differ in the structures of the face, skull, teeth, jaws, and many more, which can not be placed into a single descent line. In fact, the fossils differ so much one from the other that Tattersall and Schwartz argue there are many different species of pre-human. They further accept

one additional genus, *Paranthropus* with three species, and consider more genera need to be identified and named. Far from a single line of ancestry, the authors see a complex bush of descent with many dead end, extinct species of human or near-human species.

Homo erectus who has been long accepted as a direct ancestor, is interpreted as a separate species which was confined to eastern and southern Asia. None of the fossils found elsewhere can be accepted as a member of this species. Another extinct branch is *Homo neanderthalensis* a European species, who died out after modern *Homo sapiens* invaded the continent about fifty thousand years ago. Neanderthals differed too radically from modern humans in derived bone structures to be accepted as human ancestors. They also differed greatly in culture and accomplishment from the human beings who displaced them.

In the end Tattersall and Schwartz leave the transition from *Australopithecus* to early *Homo* and from early *Homo* to *Homo sapiens* open. At this time we simply do not yet know what the detailed descent line is. A very interesting book, indispensable read if you care strongly about human ancestry and evolution.

Wolf Roder

World Wide Web

The tension between science and religion is about to get tenser, for some scientists have decided that religious experience is just too intriguing not to study. Neurologists jumped in first, finding a connection between temporal lobe epilepsy and a sudden interest in religion. As V. S. Ramachandran of the University of California, San Diego, told a 1997 meeting, these patients, during seizures, "say they see God" or feel "a sudden sense of enlightenment." Now researchers are looking at more-common varieties of religious experience. Newberg and the late Dr. Eugene d'Aquili, both of the University of Pennsylvania, have a name for this field: neuro-theology.

Sharon Begley

"Searching for the God within", Newsweek

(Continued from page 6)
experiences.”

“A lot of people seem to think that ‘atheist’ means someone that goes around bashing God or gods,” He continues, “but I still enjoy learning about other religions from religious friends...People shouldn't think that atheists are out to convert them, just as they usually aren't actively trying to convert atheists.”

For Kolat, he and a fellow atheist friend “were just plain sick of all the religious clubs. The religious clubs are just so specific. Such as male and female and athlete bible studies. So we decided to start our own club.”

“I'm part of the GSA (Gay-Strait Alliance, I'd be the strait part),” recalls Smith, “and I thought hey, people are discriminated against for being atheist/agnostic a lot, and that's not right either. Also, I liked the idea of promoting thought and logic. So I questioned some people and we thought it would be a good idea.”

Starting freethought groups has not always been easy for high school students. According to Kirmer, one of the biggest challenges faced by these students has been “bigoted school principals who will blackmail their students rather than allow a peaceful group of freethinkers to meet.” For Kolat it's been “getting approved and getting the principal to take us seriously, which” he adds, “is still not happening.”

The story of David Poppers' experience forming his group is a classic example. “I had a little bit of trouble... starting up my club; every club at my school needs a faculty advisor, and I had some trouble rounding one up. My first choice was my biology teacher. I gave him some information on the SSA, and he looked over it, then said ‘David, I'd love to do it, but I don't want to shake things up too much. If I had tenure and was near retirement, I'd do it in a second.’ That was not very encouraging, to say the least.”

“My second choice was my freshman English teacher, who, by the way, is nearing retirement. He declined, because he was already the advisor for two other clubs. He suggested my history teacher, [who] went to a seminary for eight years. When I was a freshman, we would argue vehemently about religious issues in class...He didn't go into the priesthood—instead, he went into teaching. In our classes, he is rather critical of religion at times, but he professes religious belief. I went up to him before my AP European History class, and asked him if he'd be my advisor. He said, ‘Of course, David. I'd do anything for you,’ which is true.”

Poppers goes on. “[Then] there was the second problem of getting my club's constitution ratified. I was lucky, though. The faculty advisors for the Associated Student Body (our student government) knew that I knew about the Equal Access Act, so there was basically no way...that the ASB could deny the SSA. My sister having a seat in ASB certainly didn't hurt, either. She told me about what went on in the meetings, and what people said about the club. One person said that [a] Christian club is acceptable, but the SSA isn't, because ‘Our education system is secular. We don't need more secular things like the SSA. Christian club is a way to bring God back to school.’ However, their objections didn't work.”

All of the students agree that the biggest success

they have had with their groups has been getting them started, getting people interested, and having a place where high school freethinkers can feel welcome. For Poppers, a goal for his group includes “getting more members! I had 20-plus people in for a discussion on censorship, and I'm still trying to achieve such high attendance consistently.”

The high school students also have good things to say about the SSA's involvement. Smith states that “the SSA has sent me lots of material which I'm very thankful for.” Poppers enjoys the “free magazines.” Lee adds, “Recently, we've received some interesting literature....Most of us have never read religious magazines before, and they were an interesting read.” Kolat is enthusiastic as well. “I can't thank the SSA enough” he gushes, “they provide our group with materials that lead to good discussions and good meetings. I also know that SSA was always there to back my club up and to be there when I needed it.”

A national program that provides security and community for high school freethinkers is important to Kirmer and her goals for the High School program. “We have a secure system for group-starting. We have a web of acceptance through and for all the students who are active. We have an effective regional representative system that is providing benefits to students. We have an active listserv to distribute information. We have five active and working groups who are spreading the SSA message in their communities, and we have individuals who are doing the same thing.”

In the end, it seems that what these high school students want is respect for their philosophy and a voice to express their thoughts and feelings about the world in which they live. When asked the question “What would you like people who aren't in the freethought movement to know about you and what you believe?” Smith seems to provide the most succinct answer: “That we're not evil. In fact, we're probably the best thing that's happened to humanity since ..the invention of ice cream.”

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