

FIG Leaves

Volume 12 Issue 3

March 2003

March Meeting

Tuesday March 25 – 7 P.M.

Tom Flynn, Editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine, on

SECULAR HUMANISM DEFINED -- AND DISTINGUISHED

Tom Flynn's talk to us will be based on his article "Secular Humanism Defined," published in the Fall 2002 issue of *Free Inquiry*. This article explains how he derived his incisive but brief definition of secular humanism. Perhaps as important, in arriving at the definition, he distinguishes secular humanism from similar theoretical concepts such as atheism, agnosticism, and religious humanism. He tells why he believes that secular humanism stands out as uniquely superior to other nontheistic viewpoints. His position may lead to controversy and will help provide for an interesting program.

Tom's talks to FIG have never disappointed. He has spoken to us many times since he spoke at our very first meeting almost twelve years ago.

Tom Flynn is a journalist, novelist and author of such books as The Trouble With Christmas. A graduate of Cincinnati's Xavier University with a B.S. in Communications, he was the founding co-editor of the Secular Humanist Bulletin, founded the First Amendment Task Force of the Council for Secular Humanism, and has made hundreds of radio and television appearances as the curmudgeonly "anti-Claus."

Inside

Letter From the Editor

Idelle Datlof Page 2

FIG Leaflets

Page 3

GOD.com: A Deity for the New Millennium

Book Review Page 4

Rationally Speaking: America, Europe, and the rest of the world

Massimo Pigliucci Page 5

February Meeting Review

George Maurer Page 6

Events

March Meeting

Tom Flynn

Secular Humanism Defined

— and Distinguished

Tuesday, March 25th

at 7:00 p.m.

At the Vernon Manor Hotel,
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

April Potluck

Tuesday, April 8th at 6:30

March 16, 2003

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



Dear Fig Members:

I have been thinking a lot about life and death. It's hard not to, when the war machinery revs up as the diplomacy efforts founder. I can't help wondering if our leaders would be less cavalier about putting citizens in harm's way if they believed that the graveyard was the last stop after mortal battle wounds, not heaven.

I have a straightforward idea to reduce the frequency of fatal military "accidents", for example in places like Israel and the Palestinian territories. A U.N. sponsored mandate, that whenever an innocent person (usually a woman or child but could be any non-combatant) dies while one power is rooting out terrorists, "mopping up", extending perimeters, reinforcing security or similar activities, instead of wasting time with apologies and investigations, we should accept that war is messy and simply require the leader of the country, for example, Sharon or Arafat to dig the grave or graves. Alone, preferably on a hot day, with a shovel: after a few hours of digging perhaps they would reconsider supporting a public policy that results in many civilian casualties. Sweating in the sun, smelling the pungent earth, feeling their skin chafing against the handle of the shovel while committing a body to an earthly end, these are humbling and possibly, even persuasive experiences. Such a policy might even influence the

decisions of those thinking about running for office. Each candidate would have to demonstrate his or her skill digging. Stamina, technique, it all could be evaluated.

I also think we could be planning the location and design of the next war memorial. Why wait until after it's all over? Gulf War II: the competition could start now! Let's put Rumsfeld in charge of the committee. After all, there isn't much land available and delay might risk losing a prime location.

Well, I guess you've figured out that I'm against the war. I am against Saddam Hussein and I don't think these two positions are at odds. I am for higher gas prices, which may not prove to be a popular stance. But it does offer some benefits: cleaner air, more efficient automotive technology, improved public transportation, soldiers staying home.

What I don't understand is that the "right-to-lifers" are talking only about their lives and not the ones who will soon operate or face the great machine of war. Shouldn't they make that more clear to everyone? Or maybe it is and I just haven't been paying attention.

I.D.

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FIG Leaflets

Schoolmaster Bush?

So what is the war about? As described by some officials, the administration's drive to take on Saddam began after 9-11 as a genuine fear of what this longtime U.S. enemy could do with weapons of mass destruction. Saddam's ouster and the presumed Iraqi democracy to follow will be a two-part message to other autocrats who turn a blind eye to terrorism. First, that no pursuit of WMD will be tolerated; and second, that these leaders need to open up and reform their systems and societies. This was the subtext of Bush's speech last week touting a grand vision for the Mideast. As one official puts it, "an ice-breaker" is needed in the frozen mass of dysfunction of the Islamic world. Its autocratic and backward regimes, like Saudi Arabia's, only spur Islamist radicalism.

"This is the crucial element that no one can talk [to the countries] about," concedes one Bush official. "The President can't say we want to scare all these other dictators, even the ones who have been 'friendly' to us."

Michael Hirsh, "The Iraq showdown is not over petroleum."

in Newsweek (10 Mar.'03) p. 38

Happenings in the village of Sharps Chapel, Union County, TN.

It is pretty rare that I get truly angry over a story. Outspoken and direct, sure, which some readers sometimes take for anger, but actual anger is quite infrequent. A subscriber, Dave in Colorado, sent me a story earlier this week that has me seething: a young lady in Tennessee has sued her school because she can't stand the continual humiliation of verbal and "physical" abuse by teachers and other students because she's not a Christian. Apparently, she's the only non-Christian in the class. The school sponsors annual field trips to a religious revival, and this straight-A student has been sent to the principal's office because her parents allowed her to opt out of the trip. The fact that in a country that's founded on religious freedom there are some people who think it's OK to deny others the very same freedom that allowed them to worship the way "they" choose is sick. That it happens in a government-sponsored institution is even more outrageous. The girl was taunted so severely her parents were afraid she would commit suicide -- which

has happened before. I consider her treatment just as abhorrent as the way some non-Christian countries treat Christians, but I consider it even worse here considering our Constitutional guarantees; the hypocrisy is truly ugly.

When I wrote about this on Monday, it spurred a lot of feedback. Some of the letters I've received on the story -- and a link to the original article from the Knoxville News Sentinel, is at:

<http://www.thisistrue.com/bravegirl.html>

-- Randy Cassingham, This is True (16 February 2003) Copyright 2003 www.thisistrue.com

Prayer is like a rocking chair.
You get something to do,
And yet you never go somewhere
And prayer's a pastime too.

No gods or saviors hear you speak.
You're talking to yourself,
So if there's some supply you seek
Ask Santa or an elf.

Nothing ever fails like prayer;
It's just a fantasy.
There is no mighty god out there
And that's just fine with me.

Dorothy B. Thompson

Freethought Perspective (Oct. 02) p. 6

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the quotes.

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BOOK REVIEW

GOD.com: A Deity for the New Millenium by John A. Henderson (Pittsburgh: Dorrance Pub. Co. 2002)

This hundred-page paperback is a simple, very common sense refutation of the claims for god. Henderson has detailed the objections to the claims of the Christian religion and of other supernatural beliefs. The author is not a professional philosopher or theologian, but a retired medical doctor who speaks from life long thinking and experience of human folly.

Henderson's thesis is fairly straightforward. The gods and goddesses of the world are not real but were created by humans, who invented not only modern but also the most ancient religions. Religions tend to be simple, dogmatic, and vague enough so most people, even the most ignorant can understand them and be convinced. Henderson thinks such beliefs may have served a purpose in the primitive past to hold the various tribes, bands, and other communities together. "In those simple and rudimentary social groups the dogmatic, easy to understand rules of the old God may help to control a society where might and brute force would otherwise prevail." (p. ix)

Modern knowledge of science and technology has forced a certain degree of updating the ancient dogmas, and have called into being some weird new religions. But, on the whole religious teachings do contradict in many ways the current state of knowledge, or else is out of tune with the logic of modern rational thinking. It is time to jettison all these ancient superstitions.

The book asks many questions of god and about religion to which there seem to be no answers satisfactory to unbelievers. Henderson suggests a modern god would be able to give rational answers to queries. Such new and improved god he has termed "God.com" a perfect website which should contain and exhibit all the moral attributes accepted by society without the need for a fictitious supernatural overseer.

In 41 brief chapters the author lays out objections to religion, especially to Christianity. All religions urge us to pray, although there never is any evidence of results. Religions preach peace but support war. God cannot be seen or heard. When advisors told Lincoln that god wanted him to do this or do that, he maintained in that case god ought to speak to him directly. If god is good, why do floods, hurricanes, earthquakes and tornados wreak havoc and destruction on the believers. Newspapers should headline airliner crashes as: god kills 200, allows none to survive. Or, god feeds millions of fat Americans, starves drought stricken Africans. Does it make sense for any god to send his son to be crucified to redeem mankind? Can't he do it on his own?

Doc Henderson lives in the Bible Belt, where they like to post the Ten Commandments in schools and courthouses. Like most unbelievers he points out half of these have nothing to do with morality, but with the worship of a very jealous, evil tribal god. Challenged to write better commandments, he replies: sure. Here they are, (p. 37)

1. You will accept responsibility for all your actions.
2. You will honor and respect those individuals who have nurtured, cared for, taught, and been kind to you.
3. You will not commit murder.
4. You will not steal.
5. You will not lie.
6. You will be charitable with those assets which are not necessary for your health and well being
7. You will use your sexuality in such a manner as not to hurt yourself or others.

The doctor suggests we criticize them and we improve them.

Unbelievers will in general have heard or thought out many of these questions and oppositions about god themselves. The book is a apt kind of summary of all the objections to the god idea voiced by thoughtful people. Here is a paperback to lay into the hands of any young person or teenager who seriously asks about god belief and unbelief, a short, common sense brief against the superstitions of the common person.

Wolf Roder



Rationally Speaking

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

**N. 34, March 2003
America, Europe,
and the rest of the world**

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.

How deep is the current divide between Europe and the United States in terms of how to conduct international affairs? Alarming notes have been sounded on both sides of the Pond to the effect that the rift risks breaking up NATO and rendering the United Nations "irrelevant" (to use the rhetoric of the Bush administration). Usually, the French are being singled out for leading the rebellion against the US hegemony, even though an overwhelming majority of European citizens have been voicing their opposition to the current US policy on Iraq, even in "pro-American" countries such as Britain and Italy.

As it is often the case in complex matters, one cannot form a reasonable opinion just by listening to alternative ways of spinning the same stories in the media (assuming that one bothers to check directly what the French or British press say, since American media are becoming more and more homogeneous thanks to their ownership by an increasingly smaller number of multinationals). It was therefore refreshing to see actual data from a large survey of American and European attitudes conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR). The picture emerging from the study is more complex and nuanced than what we tend to hear trumpeted by talking heads and media pundits.

It comes down to the following: Europeans are inclined to agree with Americans on more issues than either of them agrees with the rest of the world

(this is good news for people who are worried about the collapse of the West). However, there are major areas of disagreement that might make for a very interesting upcoming decade in geopolitics (and this is the good news for those who are interested in a more open discussion of international issues). Let's take a look at some of the details.

First off, Americans and Europeans really like each other, and this goes even for the French. On a scale of 0 to 100, Americans rate European countries between 61 (Germany) and 76 (Great Britain), which is much higher than they rate any other country except Canada. Conversely, the Brits rate the US at 68, and the rest of Europe doesn't go any lower than the Dutch's 59. Furthermore, Europeans and Americans see the same threats in the world, with terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism ranking the highest. And, both sides agree that war on Iraq would be justified, if backed by the United Nations (complete opposition to the war run at only 13% in the US and 26% in Europe at the time the survey was conducted).

However, worldviews start to diverge when one digs a bit deeper. Generally speaking, Americans find the world a much more threatening place than Europeans do. Most importantly, the two also differ on their analysis of why some threats are there to begin with. For example, 55% of Europeans think that US foreign policies have directly contributed to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (and I would add that a good case can be made that they are not far off the mark).

Americans and Europeans also sharply disagree on how to fix the problems they face. Only 19% of Europeans would like to increase their country's military spending, as opposed to 44% of Americans (and one need to notice that the US already allocates significantly more money to the military than European countries do). On the other hand, Europeans are much more willing to spend their resources on foreign aid, since a large majority of them sees that as a much more effective key to long-term planetary peace and prosperity. This divergence has major consequences for the whole concept of "superpower": Americans think that the key to superpower status is a strong military, while many Europeans want a united Europe to become a superpower in the sense of cultural and economic interaction with the rest of the world, opposing more military spending by either their own countries or the

Quote of the month:

"It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried." - Winston Churchill

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

European Community as a whole.

If one broadens the horizon beyond the immediate concerns of war and terrorism, other interesting similarities and differences emerge: Americans are only slightly more supportive of globalization than Europeans, and about half of both Americans and Europeans think that global warming is a high-priority threat. However, 66% of Europeans are opposed to some degree to biotechnology, against only 45% of Americans. Perhaps the largest divergence of opinions manifests itself on immigration: 66% of Americans consider it a threat of the highest level, while only 38% of Europeans agree with that assessment (of course, there are differences among European nations themselves, with Italy being on the most worried about immigration).

What are we to make of all this? On the one hand, declarations of an insurmountable divide between the US and Europe are obviously blown out of proportion: we are not witnessing the big schism of Western culture just yet. On the other hand, it would be foolish for anybody (and especially for rather single-minded American politicians) to underestimate the areas of divergence between the two major blocks of world democracies. And please, stop telling the Europeans that they should get in line because America saved them during World War II: gratitude is an important value, but wishing to translate it into perennial and unquestioning allegiance is a bit insulting. And one thing nobody needs is to add any additional insult to the dialogue between the two major democratic blocks of the world.

Further Readings:

The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things, by Barry Glassner.

Web links:

The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations' complete survey. <http://www.worldviews.org/>

Next Month:
Animal rights?

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Many thanks to Melissa Brenneman and Bob Faulkner for patiently editing and commenting on

FIG Meeting, February 12, 2003

**Speaker: Fred Edwards, Editor
The Humanist**

Topic: The Impact of Darwin on Religion and Humanism

Fred Edwards started by briefly reviewing Darwin's metamorphosis from a divinity student to the author of *The Origin of Species by Natural Selection*, mentioning along the way how he had been more or less forced into publishing his findings by the advent of Wallace's presenting similar conclusions from his own separate research.

Darwin's work caused quite a firestorm among the religionists of his day. One of the reasons he held back from publishing his findings until forced to do so was that he was aware of what had been done to the reputations of others in the past who had held similar ideas. In speaking of the type of reaction Darwin's work received, Edwards quoted from Andrew White's *A History of the Warfare of Science and Theology in Christendom*, published in 1896, where he stated: "Darwin's *Origin of Species* had come into the theological world like a plow into an anthill. Everywhere those thus rudely awakened from their old comfort and repose had swarmed forth angry and confused. Reviews, sermons, books, light and heavy, came flying at the new thinker from all sides."

A dozen years later another firestorm erupted when Darwin published *The Descent of Man*. In *The Origin of Species*, he did not refer to human evolution but only to the formation of animal species. He got into human evolution in detail in *The Descent of Man* and that caused a big reaction. The idea that we were related to the apes was just too much for the Victorians to handle. However, a number of scientists looking at Darwin's evidence concluded that his evidence was overwhelming and couldn't be resisted and eventually the scientific community came around to accepting evolution.

With the Copernican revolution, it took a number of years before people accepted the idea that the earth was not the center of the universe. So with the concept of evolution it is possible that not enough time has elapsed for that idea to gain universal acceptance.

In none of this was the idea of teaching evolution in the public schools an issue. At issue was the teaching of science at all. The English educational system

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

was based on a classical concept, the teaching of Latin language and the humanities. Thomas Huxley, known as "Darwin's Bull Dog" for his tactics in promoting Darwin's ideas, had his hands full in uprooting the classical model in education to make room for the teaching of such liberal studies as science, geography, grammar, composition, drawing and physical education. It wasn't until the Scopes trial in this country in the 1920's that the teaching of evolution in the public schools became an issue. There was a myth created in this country as a result of the trial. The myth was that the trial resulted in the defeat of creationism and evolution was being taught in the schools. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

What happened was that between 1922 and 1969, 46 pieces of legislation were introduced into state legislatures but only 3 were enacted. What caused the controversy to disappear for a time was the fact that evolutionists retreated to a certain extent. The term, "evolution" disappeared from textbooks and the substitution of euphemisms like "change over time" were substituted or the concept was omitted from the text book altogether.

The space race with the Soviet Union in the late '50's and early '60's brought about a greater emphasis on the teaching of science in the educational system. However, what the general public had in mind about science education was space science, physics and engineering. Because of all the emphasis on teaching science, educators then thought that is was OK to reintroduce the teaching of evolution.

Meanwhile there were some textbooks written that were sponsored by the National Center for Science Education, which received a government grant so the controversy was reborn. This time, however, the creationists were a little more sophisticated. They pitched their arguments on the concept of equal time. They pitched their arguments as a matter of fairness and demanded equal time for the teaching of creationism. This phase of the evolution/creationism controversy is where we are today. At least 25 pieces of legislation were introduced between 1964 and 1980 resulting in some court decisions unfavorable to the creationism cause.

What happened subsequently was the textbook battle. This was primarily centered in Texas but had widespread ramifications for the textbook publishing industry. Since that state purchases the greatest number of textbooks, publishers are likely to accede to the demands of the Texas constituency. They did so in this case by eliminating references to evolution and Darwin in their textbooks.

The National Center for Science Education again entered the fray and through a lot of hard work managed to reinvigorate the teaching of evolution in the public schools. This was aided by two decisions in the federal court system favorable to the teaching of evolution and unfavorable to the teaching of creationism.

The creationists used the equal time argument and rather than attacking evolution as evil began to present their creationism as an alternative. They couched their creationism in scientific sounding language and called it "creation science." Using these tactics, they exerted influence on individual school boards to adopt their "two model" program. They began to pose as open-minded, fair proponents being persecuted by orthodoxy. They claimed analogy to Galileo.

These general approaches continue to this day. They are aided in this stance by one simple sentence enunciated by the founder of the Institute for Creation Science when he stated: "Creation is just as much a science as evolution and evolution is just as much a religion as creation." This statement serves 3 purposes. It declares that creationism is an alternative scientific theory to evolution; secondly it criticizes evolution for being a belief held only on faith; and third, it confuses school boards and legislators, which is probably its main purpose. The effect of these arguments is they create doubt and once doubt has been created, the tendency is to say that since we can't tell which is right; the best approach is to let both views be taught. And so creationists have won a few victories.

The question arises as to why the fundamentalists are so antagonistic to evolution. The real issue comes down to this: if human beings evolved from animals, when did the soul emerge; when did original sin happen? If there is no original sin, there is no need for a redeemer and Christianity itself becomes unnecessary.

(Since Fred Edword's presentation was so interesting, and this reviewer wanted to include practically all of what he said, I have used up my limited space and so could not include any of the questions and answers from that part of the presentation.)

George Maurer