

FIG Leaves

Volume 10 Issue 5

May 2001

May Meeting

TOM FLYNN on "The Trouble With Marriage"

Christian right leaders sometimes blame secular humanism for the collapse of marriage and the family. Should we accept the credit for that ... and work even harder to undermine the family? Tom Flynn, editor of Free Inquiry Magazine, looks back at the 19th century free love movement, in which freethinkers (among others) attacked marriage as "legalized prostitution." Then he looks ahead, urging secular humanists to work for reform -- or replacement -- of matrimony and the traditional family. A controversial presentation is assured.

Tom Flynn has been a frequent and welcome speaker at FIG meetings, ever since he spoke at our first meeting almost ten years ago. Those who have heard him speak on his book, "The Trouble with Christmas" will know we can count on interesting ideas, presented humorously and energetically.

Besides being Editor of Free Inquiry, Tom has other responsibilities at the Council for Secular Humanism. Among them, he is the curator of the Robert G. Ingersoll Museum in Dresden, New York. In addition, he founded the Council's First Amendment Task Force and co-founded the Secular Humanist Bulletin.

Tom is the author of a novel, "Galactic Rapture," published by Prometheus Books. He says that it's an anti-religious science-fiction black-comedy thriller. He is working on a sequel.

Joe Levee

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Events

May Meeting Tom Flynn

"The Trouble with Marriage"

Monday, May 14th, 7:00 PM

At the Vernon Manor Hotel,
Continental A Room

400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

June Potluck Dinner

Sunday, June 10th,
1:00



KAGIN'S COLUMN



Sunday Morning Service At Office Depot, or Might As Well Have Gone To Church.

April 29th, 2001.

My son recently removed his wife and my grandchild from Kentucky to Kansas to seek his fortune.

This Sunday morning, he telephoned to tell of a new business opportunity recently made available to him. This Better Business Bureau cleared venture seemed sound and workable. To the end of setting up his new career, a fax machine was required. Thus, it came to pass that he telephoned me to inquire if such a device might be provided in fulfillment of certain birthday representations heretofore made unto him. The request seemed reasonable and was approved.

Said son had already selected an inexpensive fax machine from the "Office Depot" interstate chain store in Lawrence, Kansas. He felt, and I agreed, that it should be a relatively simple matter for me to go to the local "Office Depot," store, existing under the same corporate control, located ten minutes from my home in Northern Kentucky, and to pay for such a machine there. He could, it was reasoned, then pick up an identical

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Northern KY Independent District Health Dept.
Distr. Office, Health Edu. and Environ. Center
610 Medical Village Drive
Edgewood, KY 41017-3416

Members of the Board:

As a citizen and parent of two children in Campbell County, I am before you to discuss the problems of sex education in Northern Kentucky and the responsibilities of this board. You promise to "...protect and promote the health of the community..."(superscript: 1) Your current proposal for Sexuality Education Programs includes:

Eliminate the "Reducing the Risk" (RTR) program:

The Center for Disease Control describes RTR this way: "After 18 months, students who had not had sexual intercourse before the intervention reported significantly less initiation of intercourse and fewer instances of unprotected sex than those in the comparison group. The curriculum increased the proportion of students who reported talking with their parents about abstinence and contraception."

Implement the "Directive" method of Instruction:

The directive method "...establishes adults as the authority to impart knowledge." This means that adults will describe sexual activities as wrong and induce a sense of guilt to obtain compliance. Such an approach was studied by the Institute of Medicine report "The Hidden Epidemic." In the Science News discussion of this report we find: "The (Institute of Medicine) report asserts that a moralistic approach to (sexually transmitted diseases)---viewing them as symbols of sinful behavior---deters people from seeking information and treatment, 'directly hindering' control efforts in the United States."

In this district the rate of gonorrhea is 82.9/100,000, well within your stated goals of 140/100,000. This is an indication that the program functions well---for a US program. Compared to Sweden's rates of 3/100,000, it is a disaster. It is common knowledge that Sweden takes a much stronger, more open, approach to sex education than the US, more in line with the RTR program than with "Character Based Abstinence Education." There is a lesson to be learned here.

You are a medical and scientific body. Yet contrary to scientific evidence that the current program functions and that the proposed program is counter productive, you are asking the community to accept a moral dictate with limited appeal to many citizens. It will risk the lives of our children which

you claim to protect. But the true nature of this community problem will be provided by the STD statistics. A significant increase in STD incidence will be clear evidence that you ignored public warnings and chose instead to heed those great medical authorities: the clergy.

It is not your task to save souls. Rather, it is your task to save lives. Please stop reading holy books on the public dime; instead review the scientific literature and implement programs which are supported by the scientific community. Save the lives of our children.

Thank you,
Bob Riehemann

World Wide Web

Teaching about Religion with a View to Diversity:

WWW.TEACHINGABOUTRELIGION.ORG

Our Long National Nightmare Of Peace And Prosperity Is Finally Over: www.theonion.com/onion3701/bush_nightmare.html

Christian Right Lobbies To Overturn Second Law Of Thermodynamics: www.theonion.com/onion3631/christian_right_lobbies.html

The Book of Genesis, Revised:
<http://church.freethought.org/9701.creation.html>

Secular Student Alliance:
<http://www.secularstudents.org/>

FIG Leaves Volume 10, Issue 5, April 2001 - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in electronic format via Internet to figeditors@fuse.net or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 8128, Cincinnati OH 45208. Contributions received before the first Tuesday of the month will be considered for publication that month. All material printed in FIG Leaves may be reproduced in similar publications of non-profit groups which grant FIG Leaves reciprocal reprinting rights as long as proper credit is clearly attributed to FIG Leaves and the author. Opinions expressed in FIG Leaves are those of their authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the editor or the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., its board, or officers. © 2000 The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. FIG Board of Directors: President Bob Riehemann, Vice President Edwin Kagin, Secretary Philip Ferguson, Treasurer Joe Levee, Members: Nurit Bowman, Michele Grinoch, Helen Kagin, Tim Kelly, Inez Klein, Gary Weiss, and FIG Leaves Editor: Martha Ferguson.



Rationally Speaking

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

N. 10, May 2001: "The many faces of anti-intellectualism"

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 (pigliucci@utk.edu).

Universities should not subsidize intellectual curiosity. This oxymoronic statement was uttered by none other than then candidate for the governorship of California Ronald Reagan in the late 1960s. The astounding thing is not that somebody like Reagan would actually say something so outrageously stupid, but that this helped him winning the election and ushering a new era of official anti-intellectualism in America. This is continuing to this day, witness the fact that the current president, George W. Bush, has run a campaign as the (Yale-educated!) champion of the everyday man against the "pointed-head" intellectualism of rival Al Gore.

Anti-intellectualism has always been a powerful undercurrent in American culture, and it will probably play a major role in our society for a long time to come. Regardless of how depressing such thoughts might be, the first rule to win a war is to know thy enemy; which is why I'd like to discuss the major types of anti-intellectualism and how they threaten the very existence of a liberal society.

Richard Hofstadter, in a classic book on anti-intellectualism, first described the phenomenon in its entirety, and what I succinctly propose here is an elaboration on his main categories and on the more recent work of D. Rigney. The first kind of anti-intellectualism can be termed "anti-rationalism." This is the idea that rational thinking is both cold (as in lacking sensitivity) and amoral (which is apparently a bad thing, in some people's mind not sufficiently distinct from im-moral). The perception that scientists and philosophers—the very paragons of rationalism—are cold and insensitive is as widespread as it is false. If you know any individual belonging to these professions, you surely realize that they can get as emotional as the guy next door. The idea that rationality and emotions, science and poetry, cannot mix is simply unfounded. As Richard Dawkins has pointed out in *Unweaving the Rainbow*, science simply

expands your ability to experience awe and wonder, it does not constrain it. As for a-morality, this view is best summarized in the words of John Cotton (back in 1642): "The more learned and witty you bee, the more fit to act for Satan you bee." I honestly never understood why God would not appreciate humor and culture. Then again, there is that story of Eve and Adam stealing the fruit of the tree of knowledge...

One can be anti-intellectual also by rejecting intellectualism because it is elitist. Anti-elitism is very peculiar to the American psyche, and it is virtually unknown in the rest of the universe. Most other people recognize that in matters of the intellect, as in any other human activity, there are people who do it better and others who are not quite as good. That does not—and should not—imply anything about the intrinsic worth (or lack thereof) of such people. Astonishingly, Americans don't have any problem with elitism per se: just watch the adoring crowds at a basketball game and the recursive tendency to set up athletes as "role models" for our youth. The underlying assumption seems to be that everybody can become an Olympic athlete, but that the way to science and letters is only reserved to the lucky few. Ironically, the truth is quite the opposite: while the chances of making it in professional sports are almost nil, a country with a large system of public education and some of the best schools in the world can give the gift of intellectual pursuit to millions of people.

Suppose you are a mathematician and you are attending a cocktail party. Somebody approaches you for small talk and asks: what do you *do*? Chances are you'd rather answer that you are a traveling salesman than that you spend your time contemplating problems in set theory. This is because you are afraid of a third form of anti-intellectualism, unreflective instrumentalism. This is the idea that if something is not of *immediate* practical value it's not worth pursuing. Hence, most of science and all of philosophy should be thrown out the window. The root of this attack on the pursuit of knowledge is to be found in capitalism at its worse. Andrew Carnegie, for example, once quipped that classical studies are a waste of "precious years trying to extract education from an ignorant past." But the very idea of a liberal—not politically, but as opposed to practical—education is that it is far better to train somebody to think critically than to give her specific skills that will be out of date in a few years. Yet, captains of industry are not interested in your mental welfare; what they want is a bunch of mindless robots who are especially adept at carrying out whatever tasks will turn the highest profit for the stockholders. In this sense, intellectualism is a very subversive enterprise, which explains its persecution by rogues of the caliber of McCarthy and Reagan.

I recently had the pleasure and honor of attending a

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lecture by Kurt Vonnegut. He asked the audience to remember one thing from his visit: start calling your TV "the tantrum" and for God's sake, turn it off and start talking to each other. Or reading. The idea that intellectual pursuits are a lot of work and that it is far easier and more pleasurable to watch TV is the fourth kind of anti-intellectualism, unreflective hedonism. While I do not suggest to *kill* your TV, as some radical friends of mine would want you to do, do try to read a good book. I bet that the experience will be much more pleasurable than you thought. A novel by Vonnegut might be a good place to start.

We have met the enemy, and it is us, as Pogo concluded in the famous comic strip. The most pernicious kind of anti-intellectualism comes from other intellectuals. In recent years a movement called post-modernism (or deconstructionism) has made headway in humanities departments throughout the US and has been given a sympathetic hearing by major media outlets. The idea is that knowledge is relative because it is a cultural construct. So, you are equally fine if you believe in evolution or creation, because these are both narratives "constructed" by pockets of our culture. Of course, if everything is relative and no theory has any particular claim to truth or reality, then why should anybody believe deconstructionists? Postmodernism has actually been imported in this country from France, and as philosopher Ted Honderich has remarked, one can think of it as "picking up an idea and running with it, possibly into a nearby brick wall or over a local cliff."

What do we do about all this? Once again, the only available road is the long and tortuous path to education. But it should help knowing what we are dealing with before engaging in battle. Contrary to what a postmodernist might say, Napoleon really did lose at Waterloo, and it was because of poor intelligence on what the other side was doing.

Further reading:

Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, simply a classic.

Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion, and the Appetite for Wonder*.

Web links:

The Renaissance of anti-Intellectualism, by Todd Gitlin, published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. (<http://chronicle.com/free/v47/i15/15b00701.htm>)

A potentially controversial article: The cult of anti-intellectualism amongst blacks, by Walter Williams, published in *Capitalism Magazine*. Beware of your emotional reactions while reading this one! (<http://www.capitalismmagazine.com/2000/november/>)

[ww_black_cult.htm](http://www.black_cult.htm))

If you want to get a kick about religious groups accusing each other of anti-intellectualism go to Pentecostals are anti-intellectual! And have some fun... (<http://www.bible.ca/tongues-anti-intellectualism.htm>)

Next Month: "God on the highway"

© by Massimo Pigliucci, 2001

Temptation of the Devil

Saint Michael Archangel protect me, because for the edification of future readers and the flaying of my guilt I want now to tell how a young man can succumb to the snares of the Devil, that they may be known and evident, so anyone encountering them in the future may defeat them.

So, it was a woman. Or, rather, a girl. Having had until then (and since then, God be thanked) little intimacy with creatures of that sex, I cannot say what her age may have been. I know she was young, almost adolescent, perhaps she had past sixteen or eighteen springs, or perhaps twenty . . .

I knew her vernacular very slightly; it was different from the bit I had learned in Pisa, but I realized from her tone that she was saying sweet words to me, and she seemed to be saying something like "You are young, you are handsome . . ." It is rare for a novice who has spent his whole life in a monastery to hear declarations of his beauty; indeed we are regularly admonished that physical beauty is fleeting and must be considered base The girl, in saying this, had extended her hand until the tips of her fingers grazed my cheek, then quite beardless. I felt a kind of delirium, but at that moment I was unable to sense any hint of sin in my heart.

Suddenly the girl appeared to me as the black but comely virgin of whom the Song of Songs speaks. She wore a threadbare little dress of rough cloth that opened in a fairly immodest fashion over her bosom, and around her neck was a necklace made of little colored stones, very commonplace, I believe.

Then the creature came still closer to me . . . and she raised her hand to stroke my face, and repeated the words I had already heard. And while I did not know whether to flee from her or move even closer, while my head was throbbing as if the trumpets of Joshua were about to bring down the walls of Jericho, as I yearned and at once feared to touch her,

FIG Leaflets

Prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels with bricks of Religion. --William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Proverbs of Hell"

An entire Amazon review of *Mind Siege* Tim LaHaye's attack on "secular humanism":

Great- Opens the mind, February 20, 2001
(Five Star rating) Reviewer: Andrew from MI, USA

This book is great! It opens your mind to the plots of huminitsts and there true intentions. I didn't know what huminists were untill i read this. Well written.

Electromagnetic frequencies and Cancer: cutting Papal speeches!

As noted (*What's New*, 23 Mar 01), Vatican Radio, which broadcasts papal speeches in forty languages, is under fire from environmentalists, who insist its high-powered transmissions contribute to a cancer cluster around the radio tower. To appease its critics, who are close to having the station shut down under Italy's radiation laws, VR has offered to cut the time devoted to broadcasting papal speeches in half. But it's not clear whether the station would do this by cutting the number of speeches or the number of translations.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, (13 Apr 01)

Would you seriously believe, if you were asked to, that Emperor Alexander had a three-hour piss one afternoon in the sands of Arabia? This exactly is the level of expectations of Christian belief, feels Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, who has experienced a "seismic event in his thinking" since he ceased to be a bishop in last October. "You have to get into your head certain convictions about historical events, that are in a sense irrelevant." For example the Jesus story: Holloway no longer believes that Jesus was the son of God, literally or biologically.

The former Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church expressed his disillusionment with Christian faith in an interview in the spring issue of the magazine "Lesbian and Gay Christians". He has been a member of the Lesbian and Gay movement for several years (without being homosexual himself, as he says) and campaigned for homosexual church weddings and for the ordination of practicing homosexuals. This led to clashes with the Archbishop of Canterbury and other conservative bishops, and in the consequence to Holloway's early retirement. He still likes the "stateliness and theatre of English Christianity", but believes it was completely "out of synch" and bound to "go down the tubes". There is no reason to doubt his judgement.

Rationalist International Bulletin

Filipino women are trapped in a vicious circle. While on one hand the Catholic Church strictly prohibits contraception, poverty on the other strictly prohibits more children. The result is an extremely high abortion rate. An estimated 320,000 to 480,000 women resort to abortion every year, that are 20 to 30 out of every 1,000 women of childbearing age; in the metro Manila it is even 50. Another statistic says that 16 per cent of all pregnancies ends in induced abortion (source: the recently published State of the Philippine Population Report 2000).

Abortion is not only illegal in Philippines. Due to the influence of the Catholic Church it is as well a very strong social taboo. Women forced to discontinue pregnancy have to do this clandestinely and would not even admit having done it, if they suffer severe medical complications, because they are afraid of ridicule, criminal liability and social stigma. The methods of abortion are horrifying: for example insertion of sharp objects into the uterus or drinking of chemicals or toxic substances. Abortion is the fourth leading cause of death among Filipino women and causes many permanent disabilities.

Despite the steady rise of abortion, the population keeps growing at a rate of 2.3 per cent every year, and if not stopped, the country's 75 million people will double within the next 35 years.

It has been one of former Philippine President Joseph Estrada's merits that he made up his mind to propagate birth control. In an interview in May 1999, he announced that he was ready to defy the Roman Catholic Church's ban on contraception, because he felt responsible for the welfare of the population of his country (see Bulletin # 11). The wrath of the Catholic Church against him has been the major factor for Estrada's forceful ouster from power in January this year.

Rationalist International Bulletin

In 1953, Denis Plunkett and his meanwhile deceased father Edgar founded the *British Flying Saucer Bureau*. The bureau collected reports about UFO appearances worldwide, often more than 30 a week, and had once about 1,500 members. But those great times are over now. After nearly 50 years of compiling the alien's activities on earth, Denis Plunkett closes down. Reason: there are no more UFOs. "I am just as enthusiastic about flying saucers as I always was, but the problem is that we are in the middle of a long, long drought", the retired civil servant (70) told the Times. Plunkett believes that there must be some rational explanation for the disappearance of the UFOs. Perhaps the aliens had completed their survey of the earth, he proposed.

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machine from the store in Kansas. There was a certain symmetry to this reasoning, reflecting the marvels of the brave new world technology had provided us, and the congenial flexibility generated and found in great corporate structures. The plan seemed sound.

So, acting thereupon did I travel unto the "Office Depot" near my home. I stated the proposal to the assistant manager, who checked with the manager, who told of a method of so doing by calling a toll free number and of paying by credit card. Ah, so far so good, thought I, pleased with the plan of my child, who is so bright I call him son.

I, the only customer in the store, was then referred to a young man who was to show me the fax machines. He led, I followed. We went to copiers, to scanners, and to other things that seemed to confuse him. Finally, we found fax machines, which he seemed unable to distinguish from washing machines. Rather than waste my time and his in education, I told him I could look them over for myself and that he would thereby be free to repair to other duties.

From the offered array, I selected a "Panasonic KX-FP80 Plain Paper Fax Machine," store number 374-981, for \$99.99, truly a fair price for a miracle. I then sought to find additional "ink film," used to make the miracle machine turn electrons into words on a page of paper. The young man was again summoned. I showed him my selection and asked for the whereabouts of additional fax film for this device. After minimal searching, he took me to a shelf full of boxes of various fax replacement films. When he had searched unsuccessfully for some time among the "Brothers" fax products, I compassionately suggested our errand might be better served if we looked among the "Panasonic" offerings. This was done. A Panasonic ink film box was found that contained one roll of film. Another displayed box contained two rolls. He opined that the first box actually had two rolls as well, in that the picture on the box showed two cylinders. I did not have the heart to explain that a single roll of ink film actually has two ends, and that it feeds from one spool to another, like an ancient scroll. At least, he is working.

Armed with both manufacturer's and store's numbers and prices, it was time to make the toll free call. By now, my conditioning was such that it came as no surprise to be informed that I (still, if not the only, at least one of the few customers in a store filled with idle employees) was required to make this call myself to try to achieve the mission upon which I had originally journeyed to this for-profit business, a mission whose successful completion could only inure

to the greater earnings of this corporate vendor of officeabilia.

Upon being directed to the telephone and shown the posted number, I, in rapt anticipation, dialed.

The now universal and obligatory Calling Tree was kinder than most, and I was soon connected with that rarity of corporate America, a seemingly living human being of female persuasion. She asked if I had an account. I said I did not. She said I would have to give some information to proceed, which I did, not wanting to confuse her by saying that first it might be desirable to see if the project could be done at all. I gave her name, address, phone, etc. Then I told her I wanted a Panasonic Plain Paper Fax, number KX-FP80.

She said that Panasonic Plain Paper Fax KX-FP80 had been discontinued.

Calling upon long training in Zen meditation, I explained I had taken the name and number from an extant widget of that very description living in the Northern Kentucky store. Incredulous, she asked for the number of the store in Kentucky, something I might in simpler times have thought might be within the collective knowledge of the corporation's National Toll Free Customer Service Line Department. Nonetheless, I asked this information of the assistant manager in Kentucky, who, to her great credit, actually knew it. The entity on the phone at Corporate Central then asked if I knew the store number of their corporation's store in Lawrence, Kansas. I said that I did not, but that I could provide the address and telephone number given me by my son when this longest day had started back with his call of innocent inquiry and request. The contact information for their Lawrence, Kansas store was taken by the entity. Hopefully, it was recorded in some file that holds corporate knowledge--never know when that sort of thing might be handy to know.

The Lawrence store was called by the entity, and I could hear the conversation. Another entity, presumed to be in the Lawrence, Kansas store answered. The corporate entity (CE) then asked the Kansas entity (KE) if the Kansas store had a Panasonic Plain Paper Fax KX-FP80. The KE told the CE that he would check and that we should please hold.

A long time passed. How long I cannot say, but I have spent less time listening to political speeches. A female KE then came on line. The initial KE had been male. The female KE asked if she could help. I waited for the CE, who I thought waited with me, to respond. When no answer came from the National Toll Free Customer Service Line Department, I explained that there was a male KE who was checking to see if the Lawrence, Kansas Office Depot had a Panasonic Plain Paper Fax KX-FP80. The female KE said that

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she guessed the male KE was still on that mission and would be back in good time. Guess so. But with the CE seemingly having gone south, of what good would such information then be? I could not even fantasize starting over.

I waited a right smart piece on the voiceless line. Then I hung up. And I left the Northern Kentucky Office Depot.

"Hope you found everything alright," the assistant manager said.

Edwin Kagin
April 29, 2001

Edwin:

Thank you for taking the time to write to us about your recent visit to the Office Depot store on . I am very disappointed to learn of your unpleasant shopping experience, for that is certainly not our intention. Mistakes do sometimes happen, but our associates should have been more responsive and acted immediately to rectify the problem. What you have described is unacceptable, and is not the level of service Office Depot customers have come to expect.

It is our policy to employ associates with a proven record of outstanding customer service and a commitment to excellence. If you are still in need of a fax machine, I would be happy to look for a similar one. Please advise.

Thank you for letting me know about your unfortunate experience. Please be assured that your comments have been shared with , our Manager of that particular location in . If you have any future problems, please feel free to contact at , or our Customer Relations Department on our toll-free number of 800-944-3340, as they will be happy to assist you in every way possible.

All of us at Office Depot value your business, and we will do our best to restore your confidence in us in the future. If I may be of help to you at some later date, please feel free to call on me.

Sincerely,

Sara L. Martinie
Customer Relations Assistant
Office Depot, Inc.

Sara,

Thank you for your attempt to appear understanding of the needs of a mere customer of Office Depot. Thank you further for your effort, reproduced below, to bring some appearance of competence and concern to your corporation's rapidly growing contrary image. My sister Mary,

upon reading the account of my visit, said that, on her last visit to an Office Depot, she asked an Office Depot employee, with a presumed, as you say, "... proven record of outstanding customer service and a commitment to excellence...", the difference between two copy machines under consideration.. The employee told her that one was cream colored and the other was black.

I do have one small suggestion, and I do hope that you are not offended thereby. Here it is. Your email might have been made stronger, and more reassuring, if you had filled in the blanks provided by its drafter. There are only four (4) of them, and inserting the information contemplated would have given your email a bit of a personal touch that is now unfortunately lacking.

I do grant, however, that the blanks are not readily discernible. To find them, it is necessary to read the message.

Again, thank you for your concern and interest. If you have any thoughts on how the matter might be resolved, please advise. I would rather deal with you than with the toll-free number. At least you have a name.

Looking forward to hearing back from you, I am

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she smiled with great joy, emitted the stifled moan of a pleased she-goat, and undid the strings that closed her dress over her bosom, slipped the dress from her body like a tunic, and stood before me as Eve must have appeared to Adam in the garden of Eden . . . whether what I felt was a snare of the Enemy or a gift of heaven, I was now powerless against the impulse that moved me . . . I was in her arms, and we fell together onto the bare floor of the kitchen, and whether on my own initiative or through her wiles, I found myself free of my novice's habit and we felt no shame at our bodies and *cuncta erant bona*. . . .

Who was she, who was she who rose like the dawn, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners?

From *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco
(Trans. by William Weaver)

"Religion is a mere question of geography."

Edward Gibbon,
Ira D. Cardiff, *What Great Men Think of Religion*

"In matters of religion, it is very easy to deceive a man, and very hard to undeceive him."

Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire Historique*
James A. Haught, *2000 Years of Disbelief*

BOOK REVIEWS

Origins of Life, 2nd Edition

by Freeman Dyson

Cambridge University Press, 1999, 100 pages

The cleverness and point of this slim book is the 'S' which appears in the title. From an historical perspective, Dyson discusses three different theories of the origin of life. They are the Oparin, Eigen, and Cairns-Smith theories; each named after its theoretical founder. Dyson has contributed to the Oparin theory a mathematical model. It is based on the idea that life arose in two stages: an initial establishment of metabolism followed by the establishment of replication. This is the second sense in which the 'S' above is significant.

Dyson reviews previous attempts to understand life scientifically beginning with Erwin Schrodinger's book, *What is Life*. This book influenced many people, among them Francis Crick. Crick and Watson received the Nobel prize for elucidating the structure of DNA. Crick remarks in his autobiography, *What Mad Pursuit*, and Dyson quotes Max Perutz's discussion of *What is Life*, that Schrodinger was seriously ignorant of chemistry, the correct ideas in the book were already known, and that the new ideas were known to be incorrect at the time of writing. So why was the book a major influence? Because, Dyson says, "...he knew how to ask the right questions." Dyson, being a physicist like Schrodinger, and also writing outside of his area of expertise, is worried about producing a book with the same fate. He is hoping to save himself by at least asking the right questions.

Dyson believes that Schrodinger missed some of the right questions because of an historical accident. Initial experimental studies were on the bacteriophage, "...a purely parasitic creature in which the metabolic function has been lost and only the replicative function survives." Schrodinger, familiar with this work, focused on replication and asked questions pertinent to it.

But the mathematician John von Neumann discovered that metabolism and replication were distinct logical functions. Dyson states that metabolism is primarily due to the activity of proteins and that replication is due to nucleic acids. He also says that proteins function as hardware and nucleic acids as software. Bacteriophages and viruses are

essentially software and require hardware to run, hence they are parasites. Is it possible that there are purely metabolic creatures which do not have the ability to replicate? Von Neumann showed that it is logically possible and Dyson has created a mathematical model of such a biological system. It may be true that evolution has eliminated all such systems in nature because they are much more inefficient than replicating systems. This would be a deeper sense in which Schrodinger was misled by historical accident: there were no purely metabolic systems with which to experiment.

Von Neumann's work is consistent with the first theory of the origin of life Dyson examines: Oparin. Proposed in 1924, before clear understanding of the chemical structure of DNA, and hence of genes. Oparin proposed: cells, enzymes, then genes. Once little bags of chemicals are formed, if some enzymes are later included in the bags, metabolism can begin. At this stage life can be considered to have begun, reproduction would occur when the bags are mechanically broken up. If the probability is greater than 1/2 that daughter bags contain chemicals necessary for metabolism, the population will grow. Note that the reproduction is not replication since it is statistical and not exact. This is the reason Dyson clearly distinguishes reproduction from replication throughout the book. Late, replication could develop. This is consistent with the idea of Margulis that "...parasitism and symbiosis were the driving forces of evolution." RNA is considered a parasite on the original primitive cells which could not replicate. As Dyson notes: it is "...a poetic fancy, and not yet a serious scientific theory."

Yet Dyson takes this theory the most seriously for 3 reasons:

1. It is consistent with the idea that hardware is more fundamental than software.
2. The synthesis of amino acids from a reducing atmosphere was shown by Miller in 1953 and this is consistent with the recent discovery of life near underwater volcanoes. (See the 13 April 2001 NASA article on this topic: http://science.nasa.gov/headlines/y2001/ast13apr_1.htm?list31217).
3. It is experimentally testable via microfossils. It is important to observe that we no longer believe that the atmosphere of the earth was ever reducing, as once thought, and so Miller's experiments cannot

BOOK REVIEWS

(Continued from page 8)

account for the appearance of amino acids due to atmospheric conditions.

The second theory of life discussed is the RNA world proposed by Eigen. The fundamental observation is that RNA functions both as an enzyme and a nucleic acid, so that it could be responsible for both metabolism and replication. Because genes, stretches of DNA, are simpler than enzymes, and because of experimental work of Eigen and Orgel, this is the preferred theory. Dyson says of the experimental work, "To summarize, Eigen made RNA using an enzyme but no template, and Orgel made RNA using a template but no enzyme. ...If we suppose that RNA was the original molecule with which life began, then to understand the origin of life we have to make RNA using neither a template nor an enzyme. Neither Eigen nor Orgel came close to achieving this goal." So Dyson doesn't feel too bad in moving contrary to the current flow of opinion.

A third theory is the clay hypothesis of A. G. Cairns-Smith. Some sheets of clay crystals have regular arrays of ionic sites with irregular distributions of metals sitting in the sites. For example, magnesium (Mn) and aluminum (Al). Hence information can be stored on these sheets using varying patterns of molecules, just as computers use zeros and ones. Because crystals copy the layers of the sheet as they grow, replication is possible. Dyson accepts the possibility, in principle, for these mechanisms, but he notes the absence of experimental evidence. This theory has no firmer foundation than his preferred theory, the Oparin theory.

Dyson's now explains his model of purely metabolic life without replication. The problem is that metabolism has no fundamental chemical definition. The trick to his theory is that he manages to avoid using an exact definition. The model suggests that it takes 8 to 10 species of amino acids, an enzyme discrimination factor typical of simple inorganic catalysts, and an active surface with a reasonable number of active sites. This contrasts with needing all 20 amino acids for the RNA world and discrimination factors 100 times larger. Because the model is error tolerant and can accommodate errors as large as 25%, it is much more likely than the error intolerant RNA world. The RNA world jump to order from disorder requires the number of active sites to be fewer than 100. Using this information it is possible to

determine for values of the number of initial amino acids and values of the discrimination factor, the likelihood of metabolism beginning. This is the phase diagram on page 65. Dyson notes that once metabolism begins and initial resources are used then Darwinian selection will begin. The model ends at this point.

For Dyson, the main question to ask is, Why is life so complicated? Why are so many different kinds of molecules needed? Looking at bacteria, he suggests a few thousand and notes that if fewer sufficed, there would be evolutionary pressure to simplify. Dyson notes that his model uses fewer, but that it assumes no Darwinian competition. He believes that the answer can be determined experimentally.



Edwin and Helen Kagin spoke at the Athiest Alliance Convention recently in Atlanta:
<http://www.atheistalliance.org/convention2001/conv-speakers.htm>

BOOK REVIEWS

The Skull Measurers Mistake: And Other Portraits of Men and Women Who Spoke Out Against Racism

by Sven Lingqvist, trans. Joan Tate
(New York: The New Press, 1997)

Lindqvist created 22 thumbnail sketches of individuals who spoke or wrote against racism between 1764 and 1899. These are men and women who opposed the all pervasive thought of "scientific" racism during the age of imperialism. In this period Americans occupied a continent, Russians conquered further Asia, and Europeans the rest of the world. An age when "lesser breeds without the law" (Kipling) were pushed aside, confined to reservations, enslaved, or simply exterminated. Murder and mayhem were justified with claims that these other people were inferior races, not quite human, and destined to die out anyway.

Much of the interest of the book derives from the many quotations the author needs to set the scene in the nineteenth century. We learn how all pervasive racist thought placed "the other" into inferior categories. The superiority of the white, Anglo-Saxon and related peoples was accepted as "scientific fact." Scholarly journals, standard works, and school textbooks accepted it as beyond doubt. In his major work on *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin accepted "the extermination of native peoples a natural element in the process of evolution" (p. 77). David Hume, the key figure of unbelief in the Enlightenment took the inferiority of the colored races for granted. Alexis de Toqueville, who could so clearly see the American struggle between black, red, and white became a racist in later life when he served as Minister for the Colonies.

Lindqvist's search for anti-racists in the nineteenth century is exceptionally difficult. Few of his characters are pure, most backslid or defended racism at times and under circumstances. Ben Franklin saved the lives of some Indians, but viewed them through racist lenses at other times. Although a few of the writers are well known, most of Lindqvist's anti-racists are obscure. Most of their writings are unknown. Eight among protagonists are British, five are American, four French and three German. One, Olive Schreiner, is a South African.

Two others were women. Helen Hunt wrote *A Century of Dishonor* in 1881. She has been called the Harriet Beecher-Stowe of the Indian. Mary Kingsley defended west Africans in her numerous publications.

Among his anti-racists, eleven spoke up for Black people, against slavery in the Caribbean, in the United States, or elsewhere. Five defended the Indians, who were expected to die out quietly or else be murdered violently. "The Indian race of Mexico must recede before us is quite certain as that that is the destiny of our own Indians" (p. 62 quoting American ambassador to Mexico, Waddy Tompson.) Three countered the "yellow peril" as it was known at the time, by pointing out the ancient Chinese civilization or the contributions made to American life by Chinese immigrants. Three Europeans found themselves defending the Jewish people against aspersions of racial inferiority. And one William D. Babington found himself constrained to inveigh against the idea that the Irish were some inferior white chimpanzee kind of human species.

We learn two things from this volume. One, the utter pervasiveness of racist thought. Neither scientist nor scholar denied the inferiority of other races. Even missionaries, who tried to convert them, described the African, Indian, and Asian as backward, a child, inferior, never to be accepted as equal, even after he or she had become a Christian. The second insight, despite the all but universal racist ideas, there were some, a few, often obscure writers who knew and said that racism was mistaken, ethically wrong, not in accordance with the facts, or otherwise unacceptable. They were of course voices crying in the wilderness.

NEW PROVERBS:

If you're too open minded, your brains will fall out.

Age is a very high price to pay for maturity.

Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in his shoes.

That way, if he gets angry, he'll be a mile away - and barefoot.

Artificial intelligence is no match for natural stupidity.

A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.

A closed mouth gathers no feet.

If you must choose between two evils, pick the one you've never tried before.

It is easier to get forgiveness than permission.

Bills travel through the mail at twice the speed of checks.

Eat well, stay fit, die anyway.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Road to Reason: Landmarks in the Evolution of Humanist Thought

by Pat Duffy Hutcheon

(Ottawa: Canadian Humanist Publications, 2001)

Pat Hutcheon is a sociologist with degrees from Canadian universities and a doctorate from the University of Queensland in Australia. She has taught and written about the sociology of education at various universities in the United States and Canada. The eighteen essays collected in this volume, she tells us, were written at various times for a variety of purposes. They have all been previously published in different magazines and journals, including *Free Inquiry*, *The Humanist*, and *Humanist in Canada*. Dr. Hutcheon was named Canadian Humanist of the Year in 2000 and received the Humanist Distinguished Service Award from the American Humanist Association the following year.

In this book humanist thought spans two-and-a-half millennia from the present back to the Buddha (563-483?? BCE). The Buddha you say, didn't he start a religion, how does he get to be a landmark of humanism? Buddhism is generally considered a religion without gods. His thought can be interpreted as "a world view in profound opposition to the Animistic, mystical and absolutist beliefs prevailing throughout human history, not only in Asia but in Western cultures as well."(p. 1) Still, some of Hutcheon's selections strike me as odd. Was Confucius (551-479 BCE) really a "Pioneering Humanist" even though he recommended the worship of the traditional Chinese deities. He was an ethical philosopher, who emphasized the concrete rather than the abstract, and most of all provided a practical guide for everyday behavior.

The Roman Lucretius (98-55 BCE) and the Greek Epicurus (341-270 BCE) surely were important humanists. So was Omar Khayyam (1050-1122) a worldly unbeliever. Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) is praised as a clear thinker who applied rational inquiry against the mysticism of the sixteenth century. The Unitarians have deep roots in the thought and philosophy of classical antiquity. They can also look back on a long history of many martyrs and religious persecution since the beginning of the Renaissance.

In the modern period two selections astonished me. I had never heard of Harriet Martineau (1802-1876). Hutcheon describes her as "an early nineteenth-century novelist, journalist, social reformer,

educator, children's writer, philosopher of naturalism, environmentalist, social scientist, and pioneering feminist who published over fifty books and almost two thousand articles and newspaper columns."(p. 59) I would think the theologian and missionary Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) does not qualify as a humanist. Hutcheon includes him as a humanistic philosopher who emphasized the ethical teachings of Jesus rather than the religious strictures of Christianity. A man who strove throughout his life to reconcile scientific and scholarly insight with religious beliefs. Even as his own scholarly insight destroyed any historic meaning of the New Testament.

Many of Hutcheons selections are major figures of humanist thought and well known to us. David Hume (1711-1776), the beacon of enlightenment philosophy is there. So is Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), Darwins German bulldog, John Dewey (1859-1952), Julian Huxley (1887-1975), Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus.(1913-1960). She provides sketches of some of our contemporaries, Carl Sagan (1934-1999), Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), Edward O. Wilson (1929), and Richard Dawkins (1941). A feast of humanist thought and history. I recommend it.

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"As I understand the Christian religion, it was, and is, a revelation. But how has it happened that millions of fables, tales, legends, have been blended with both Jewish and Christian revelation that have made them the most bloody religion that ever existed?"