

FIG Leaves

Volume 10 Issue 11

November 2001

November Meeting

Terrorism: The Few and the Material Capability to Harm

Richard Harknett recently moderated a program at the University of Cincinnati on terrorism and its impact on foreign policy and civil liberties. He is a professor of political science at UC. We are pleased that he has agreed to speak to FIG at our November 27 meeting. He has provided the following summary of his topic.

I will offer a view from international relations theory concerning the near-term and future trends in world politics and the ebb and flow of state power in the context of the September 11th attacks on New York and DC. How should we conceive of the capability for great devastation possessed in the hands of small groups?

FREE SPEECH

Most of the time I'm willing to accept the arrangement to keep peace. I keep quiet when others talk of God, Heaven and reliance on the Divine, as long as they don't start throwing around epithets about lost souls and the immorality of the "godless". I try to remember my manners and say tactful things, and especially to avoid mentioning the divisiveness that religion has encouraged, the intolerance and outright violence that the mythmakers have fomented through their actions.

I understand that humankind has needed, almost from the inception of self-awareness, the tools to ward off fear and helplessness. The world is a dangerous place. Over the eons we have learned to build stronger shelters, protect our food and water, and even cure some of the ills of the body. But we know in our bones when we hear the howling of the storm, that safety is precarious, that mortality comes without a warranty and may not be renewable. I try not to intrude on the coping strategies of other people, but I feel less respectful of others' space when mine is ignored at best or defamed when the pious get nervous.

So, when everyone (even the players) at Yankee Stadium is singing "God Bless America" at a time of national crisis I share the impulse to come together and raise voices in unison, but I feel left out. When we are told by our leaders to find comfort in prayer, I wonder if I'm the only one who doesn't find that a useful suggestion, and am surprised and annoyed by the presumption that prayer is in the repertoire of all Americans. It appears that the "godless" haven't been very forthright about what they are "full" of, and collude with one another to not mess with the message of the mythmakers. What drives this

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Events

November Meeting
Tuesday, November 27, 7:00
Richard Harknett
Terrorism: The Few and the
Material Capability to Harm
Vernon Manor Inn

December Potluck
The December Potluck has
been canceled because we
could not find a home in which
to hold it

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surfeit of discretion? Are we stumped to name the source from which we draw sustenance, that organizes our lives and provides a moral conscience, so we remain tongue-tied? Is it self-doubt? Or is it fear of raising the ire of the holy, those who have demonstrated repeatedly over history that endangering their worldview can unleash a torrent of arrogance, the impassioned need to quash the voices of dissent so the comforting stories can continue uninterrupted? The children will be told that God watches over them, that Grandma is in heaven and that all is well in the world, so that the adults can sleep without bad dreams and awake feeling righteously safe.

Is it true then that the mass appeal of religion requires the silence of rational thinkers so that the distinction between belief and fact stays blurred? That we acquiesce out of fear, not politeness? Darwin and encyclopedias of information can't seem to touch this reservoir of human need, the need to be free from fear while on earth and to anticipate eternal life after death. Natural selection has produced all of us, but hasn't yet shown us how to live together in peace.

Idelle Datlof
November 6, 2001

October FIG Meeting

Our October meeting was somewhat of a departure from our usual format. Although dramatic readings and play scenes have been presented before on several different occasions, this is the first time that an entire two-act play has been performed as a reading.

The play was *Traveler in the Dark*. The author, Marsha Norman is a contemporary playwright who won the Pulitzer Drama Prize in 1983 for her play *night, Mother*. This play, *Traveler in the Dark*, has been produced professionally in New York and locally by the Drama Workshop.

The cast of *our* local production assembled by FIG member, Carolyn Ruth Hunt, consisted of *Sam*, a world famous surgeon, played by Robert Allen, a local professional actor and teacher at CCM; *Glory*, Sam's wife, played by Carolyn Ruth Hunt; *Everett*, a preacher and Sam's father, played by Peter Freeman; and *Stephen*, the 12-year old son of *Sam* and *Glory*, played by Frank Hull, a CCM Prep School student and pupil of Robert Allen. Since the production was a reading and lacked props and scenery, Bob Riehemann, FIG immediate past

president, read the stage directions.

While most of the actors read their lines with some degree of conviction, Robert Allen seemed to be otherwise preoccupied and sometimes appeared to be mumbling his lines. This failure of attention can perhaps be excused since he was also due at a rehearsal of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* at the Black Box theater at the Aronoff Center that same evening and he ultimately had to leave before the Question and Answer Period. Others in the cast acquitted themselves very well.

The play itself was a substitute for the one originally hoped for, *Copenhagen*, unavailable at this time because of copyright restrictions.

The reaction to the play was widely varied from one person who flat out did not like it to others who saw some relevance to our humanist perspective. The play indicated a strong attachment between *Glory* and *Stephen*, which resonated that between *Sam* and his own mother. This evoked a startling revelation from Peter Freeman that as a child he had a similar attachment to his mother which he had to live down in adulthood. He did not amplify this and so more or less like the play itself left it open-ended and not tied up in a nice and comfortable bow. Regardless of how one felt about this particular play, this kind of presentation has merit and one hopes that something similar can be done from time to time in the future.

George Maurer

The reason why so many sects hang around airports looking for converts: they know that people there are at their most vulnerable and perplexed, and ready to accept any kind of guidance.

-- Douglas Adams, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*
(book two of the *Dirk Gently* series), p. 5

<http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/qframe.htm>

FIG Leaves Volume 10, Issue 11, November 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 Philip Ferguson, Vice President Michele Grinoch, Secretary George Maurer, Treasurer Joe Levee, Members: Nurit Bowman, Idelle Datlof, Michele Grinoch, Helen Kagin, Tim Kelly, Gary Weiss, and FIG Leaves Editor: Martha Ferguson.



Rationally Speaking

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

N. 17, November 2001/a, Beer and circus in American education - *pars destruens*

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).

Francis Bacon wrote in 1620 that any fair criticism has to have two parts: a *pars destruens*, where one attacks, and a *pars construens*, where one advances constructive suggestions. This month, *Rationally Speaking* readers will therefore receive a two-part column in the spirit of Bacon. What I wish to tear down is the myth that large universities can impart a decent undergraduate education. The charge against the sham that is undergraduate education in the United States today has perhaps never been as effective as in a book entitled *Beer and Circus: How Big Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education*, by Murray Sperber. Sperber is a professor of English who has studied the phenomenon of college athletics for years, and who received death threats and was unable to teach or receive students in his office at Indiana University because he dared speak out against the degrading behavior of then basketball coach Bobby Knight (who, among other things, threw chairs at and choked some of his athletes).

Sperber started with the common observation that there is a very strong inverse relationship between excellence in undergraduate education and performance in athletics among American schools. More specifically, and almost without exception, schools that belong to the NCAA Division I football or basketball programs are among the worst in the nation in undergraduate education, while Division III schools tend to be the best.

The correlation is attributable to a vicious triangle involving athletics, the party scene, and the excessive emphasis on graduate training and research at most of these schools. At what Sperber calls "big time U's," one of the major attractions for students is provided by the party scene, not the possibility of academic achievement. A significant

percentage of undergraduates spend more time partying (typically from Thursday afternoon until the end of the weekend) than holding part-time jobs or studying. If drinking is not allowed on campus, a vibrant bar scene exists just outside of it, and the fraternities of the "Greek" system are at the very center of it all. Schools are ranked nationally for their opportunities to party, and what is the best excuse for revelry for most of our undergraduates? But the football or basketball game, of course! And schools themselves, together with the NCAA, encourage and directly profit from this situation by allowing beer ads to run during broadcast time when their team is playing.

The morale of the faculty is not helped by seeing semi-literate coaches getting huge salaries and bonuses, and barely academically proficient athletes being glorified to the point of naming campus streets after them. A few years ago a chemistry professor working at the University of Colorado won the Nobel Prize, which was big news for the school, since it was their first faculty to achieve that honor. At the press conference, a journalist asked the professor what he would like to ask of the President of the university, who was sitting smiling nearby. The professor said he would like to have the same salary as the football coach, at which the President smile faded and an embarrassed "Now, c'mon, let's be serious" comment was heard over the microphone.

Big time U's are also scams because, while claiming to aim for academic excellence, they in fact admit almost every applicant in a never-ending quest for more students, and therefore for more funds, even though many students seriously need remedial courses and are crammed into huge classrooms where they need a pair of binoculars to see the instructor. Interestingly, since the 1980s, higher education officials have been referring to students as "customers," an image that brings to mind car salesmen and giant malls, rather than an environment conducive to education.

To add insult to injury, big time U's trumpet their honors programs as examples of the excellent care that students get, with state-of-the-art computer labs, one-on-one research experiences with faculty, and small classes based on inquiry and discussion, rather than passive lecture formats. Yes, the honors program students do get exactly what every undergraduate student should demand of their school, but of course they are the exception—not a model, but only a smokescreen to maintain a façade of high quality. And how could tens of thousands of students get a decent education when the student/faculty ratio is so abysmal, when State legislatures keep cutting

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the alleged “fat,” and when school administrators put their effort into building newer sports facilities and recruiting better athletes with a reckless disregard for academic standards?

The so-called “student” athletes themselves, of course, are not much better off. They work almost full time like professional athletes for essentially no pay (all the money goes to the coaches and the athletic departments), and in the process cannot get an education worth a dime. And so few of them make it to professional teams that their chances are not much better than winning the lottery (not to mention, of course, the always-present possibility of injuries).

Another component of the fraud is the myth of the ‘good researcher = good teacher’ mantra that big time U’s keep propagating. While there are indeed some faculty who excel at both activities, there isn’t a single study that supports the naïve assumption that if one is adept at running a research lab (and at getting the large sums of extramural funding that administrations are really after) he is also capable of teaching. Furthermore, most of our faculty justly recoil in horror from the idea of “teaching” large introductory classes where it is next to impossible to motivate students, let alone establish a meaningful relationship with them. The result is that such crucially formative classes are farmed out to temporary instructors or graduate students, most of whom are inexperienced, paid very little, and are abysmally unskilled at teaching.

Large public universities are becoming big businesses whose mission is to make enough money to survive, keep losing their best faculty because of the conditions under which they are forced to work, turn to professional business consultants instead of educators to decide what to do next, and rely on the beer and circus atmosphere to prop up the pathetic state of their undergraduate education. Enough said for the *pars destruens*. Now, what are we to do about all this? The solution, as we shall see, is astonishingly simple.

N. 18, November 2001/b (double feature!), Beer and circus in American education - *pars construens*

Since I just attacked undergraduate education at big-time sports universities in the United States, a fair question is: what could be done to solve the problem? My answers are an elaboration on those suggested by Murray Sperber in his *Beer and Circus* and those outlined in a highly influential report on what works and doesn’t work in American colleges, known as the Boyer Commission report.

Modest proposal 1: Big-time U’s should slim down by thousands of undergraduates until the student body is of a size that can be handled by the faculty. The only other alternative is to increase the size of the faculty by an order of magnitude, which is much more inconceivable.

Modest proposal 2: Universities should separate undergraduate teaching from the graduate training and research activities. Here I part company with Sperber in that I do not propose having a few universities devoted exclusively to research and many more to undergraduate education, though that is certainly a viable model. But it is time to stop hiring faculty on the pretense that they be good teachers when everyone knows that they are tenured and promoted because of their research and in spite of their teaching. Let’s hire good teachers to do the teaching and good researchers to do the research. If a few individuals can do both, so much the better.

Modest proposal 3: Hire at least some faculty whose research is in pedagogy. It is astounding that a lot is known about how the brain learns, and on what works and doesn’t work in teaching, but that most faculty and teaching assistants are wholly ignorant of this field of work. Having at least a few colleagues who know what they are doing might actually help.

Modest proposal 4: Abolish passive teaching methods that turn undergraduates into zombies: no more lectures (with or without PowerPoint™) and increased emphasis on inquiry-based learning, small class discussions, open-ended research projects and the like.

Modest proposal 5: Raise the standards of acceptance into four-year colleges: require a minimum (high) score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test or equivalent exam. Despite the fact that standardized tests have their limitations, scores on college entrance exams actually correlate much better than grades with students’ abilities at critical thinking because of rampant grade inflation. We need to acknowledge that while equal opportunity to go college is a right, acceptance into university must be based on readiness. Community colleges exist to bridge the gap for those whose performance indicates that they would not be best served by the university experience.

Modest proposal 6: End athletic scholarships. They encourage the exploitation of athletes, cause resentment among other undergraduates who had to work harder to get where they are, and in general defeat the whole point of a “scholar”-ship. It is not by chance that the Ivy League universities do not award athletic scholarships and prohibit their teams from playing bowl games.

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Modest proposal 7: Shut down the NCAA. We don't need an organization whose only purpose is to exploit youths through the encouragement of a beer and circus atmosphere (March "madness" comes to mind as an example) and that does absolutely nothing to further the only legitimate goal of a university: providing the best education possible. Playing sports is a great thing and should be pursued at colleges, but intramurally as a recreational activity and extramurally only as a relaxed pastime to which no high stakes are attached. Let the professional teams pay to raise their future stars, as in every other civilized country in the world (did you realize that in 2000 the NCAA was looking at allowing athletes to seek loans based on future professional earnings? Do these people have no shame?).

Modest proposal 8: Treat coaches as regular faculty, with tenure track and salaries comparable to those of any other faculty in any other discipline. And tell them they are lucky to get that much, given that their job is far less important than the one done by the rest of the faculty.

Modest proposal 9: Educate university administrators that the university is not a for-profit business, it is a community service. Ergo, it makes no sense at all to call in business marketers to improve the school's image or to devise strategies to increase the "customer" base, while the true needs of students (and, by extension, their future employers) go unmet. Schools that provide a good education don't need to present a spin-doctored façade.

Modest proposal 10: Vote only for legislators who pledge to provide acceptable levels of State funding of education at all levels, including college. Education, together with health care, is among the most important rights that Americans still have to fight for, which are taken for granted in other industrialized countries.

Is all of this going to happen? Probably not, unless the current demographics and economics change significantly, or a grass-roots movement takes hold to really take our schools back. I give it a chance in a thousand, which is not much worse than the likelihood of getting a good education at a big-time U anyway. Think about it.

Further reading:

Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports is Crippling Undergraduate Education, by Murray Sperber, the muse that inspired this double essay.

Web links:

Critical thinking resources from the California Academic Press, the way teaching *should* be done. (<http://www.calpress.com/>)

The Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, publishes original undergraduate academic papers in the humanities and social sciences. (<http://learning.berkeley.edu/buj/>)

The complete report of the Boyer Commission on undergraduate teaching. (<http://notes.cc.sunysb.edu/Pres/boyer.nsf>)

"My season in exile," the story of Murray Sperber's odyssey after he dared criticizing beastly coach Bob Knight at Indiana University. (<http://www.salon.com/news/2000/09/12/knight/index.html>)

Next Month: "The Great Unicorn Debate"

by Massimo Pigliucci, 2001

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

The True Believer Revisited

by Tim Madigan

After the initial horrified reaction I experienced on September 11th, my first question was: How could the terrorists have sacrificed their own lives, and taken the lives of thousands of others, as well as causing such colossal destruction? What could lead them to justify in their own minds committing mass atrocities? This goes far beyond a debate over religious beliefs, to the very heart of human nature: what allows certain people to override any sense of community with their fellow human beings, and willfully cause death and destruction for the sake of a higher cause?

I was reminded of a book I hadn't read in over fifteen years, and its observations on the rise of mass movements and the leaders of them, who called upon their followers to annihilate all who differed with their worldviews. The work, entitled *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* was written by Eric Hoffer (1902-1983), a very unconventional man and a freethinker. The son of Alsatian immigrants to the United States, he was born in New York City. Orphaned at the age of 5, he went blind at 7. Mysteriously, his sight was restored at the age of 15 - this period of blindness perhaps affected his own perceptions on the world, and made him appreciate the capriciousness of human existence.

Hoffer worked in various odd jobs and drifted throughout the country (including Los Angeles' famous Skid Row), until becoming a longshoreman in 1943, a job he kept until his mandatory retirement at the age of 65. Completely self-taught, after he became a noted author he would fit his lectures and writing into his work schedule. When asked once "Are you an intellectual?", Hoffer proudly responded, "No, I'm a longshoreman." But his works ably demonstrated that the two are not mutually exclusive.

Hoffer was to write several books throughout his career, but it was first book, *The True Believer* which, published in 1951, made his name and fame. Aphoristic in style (his later books would be even more in this vein, some having only a single sentence on a page), it was based upon years of reflection, and his own observations of the rise of fascism, naziism and communism as reactions to the Great Depression. The main point Hoffer stresses in his book is that, for the "true believer" (someone so committed to a cause that he or she is willing to unthinkingly die for it) ideologies are interchangeable. It is the frustrations of life which lead the believers to join a cause that gives meaning to their own existences, and the more frustrated they feel, the more attracted they are to extreme revolutionary solutions to their problems. Such frustrations can be the basis for positive social change, but usually mass movements have less beneficial effects. The message that self-sacrifice is needed for the good of a cause can often justify the most heinous of endeavors, and followers are treated as interchangeable cogs in a machine rather than as flesh-and-blood humans. Abstractions and atrocities often go hand-in-hand.

Hoffer is very perceptive in his criticisms, and much of what he has to say is relevant to the present situation. For instance, he points out that we often imitate what we hate. "Every mass movement", he writes, "shapes itself after its own specific demon." And it can then become the very demon it denounces. Christianity in the Middle Ages became so obsessed with devils and witchcraft that it justified mass slaughter and the very sorts of atrocities one would normally attribute to satanic forces. The Jacobins who overthrew the French Monarchy because of its tyranny ended up becoming far greater tyrants themselves, and unleashed The Great Terror upon the populace. The Bolsheviks in Russia denounced capitalism yet amassed a monopoly, and Lenin took over the Czar's secret police apparatus without a moment's hesitation.

This reminds me of the paradoxical reality that contemporary religious fundamentalist movements, while claiming to be bringing back an idyllic past, nonetheless utilize the most modern up-to-date

technologies to spread their messages. The Ayatollah Khomeini, for example, used tape recordings of his sermons to keep his Iranian followers informed of his views during his long exile in France. And the September 11th terrorists not only learned to fly sophisticated aircrafts, they no doubt used the internet, cell phones and other means of communication to plan their deeds and keep their conspiracy a secret.

Hoffer also offers some insight into why the September 11th terrorists committed such horrific acts. "All the true believers of our time", he wrote in 1951, "communist, nazi, fascist, Japanese, or Catholic - declaim volubly about the decadence of the West." One can add "islamic" to this list without any trouble. It is the weakness of the West, and its moral decay, which enemies of America often intone. Ironically, this is very similar to the views expressed by the Reverends Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson just days after the bombings, when the former stated that secularism, homosexuality, abortion and feminism had weakened the moral fiber of the nation and made it vulnerable to attack, as well as to God's wrath. As Hoffer so well understood, fanatics think alike, regardless of the content of their thoughts.

True Believers of all kind share certain characteristics, including contempt for those who don't have a holy cause themselves, and respect for fellow fanatics. Hitler and Stalin, for instance, admired the techniques each had used to gain and maintain absolute power, and both expressed contempt for the democratic leaders Churchill and Roosevelt. Most of all, Hoffer writes, "A rising mass movement attracts and holds a following not by its doctrines and promises but by the refuge it offers from the anxieties, barrenness and meaninglessness of an individual existence." The less control people feel they have over their lives, the more attractive the message of mass movements will be.

How then does one combat True Believers? Can one make a love of democracy and the advocacy of individualism a holy cause itself? "Though hatred is a convenient instrument for mobilizing a community for defense," Hoffer warns, "it does not, in the long run, come cheap. We pay for it by losing all or many of the values we have set out to defend." The best way to fight is to encourage individualism, contrary thinking and a disinclination to follow blindly the teachings of any leaders, no matter how seemingly benign.

What motivated Hoffer to write *The True Believer*? In later interviews, he confessed that he saw himself as a potential mass leader - he had charisma, a way with words, and a cold heart towards his fellow human beings, all essential elements for

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leading large numbers of people and not caring what ultimately happens to them.

Hoffer withdrew from the limelight in the early 1970s, after the bad experiences he had on the UC-Berkeley campus where, as a visiting scholar, he felt the student movement's growing advocacy of violence only verified the claims he had made about the dangers of True Believers. He faded from the limelight, saying "Any man can ride a train. Only a wise man knows when to get off."

As we near the 100th anniversary of Hoffer's birth, it is good to reflect upon his unique work - a

is not why we elected you. [or something to that effect]
To find your senators (if you do not already have their numbers/e-mail addresses), simply:

1)call the Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121, OR
2)use a fundamentalist website! go to www.citizenlink.org and access the Legislative Action Center (simply type in your zip code)!

If you live in Ohio:

Sen. Mike DeWine at senator_dewine@dewine.senate.gov
and Sen. George Voinovich at senator_voinovich@voinovich.senate.gov

THANKS FOR YOUR INTEREST AND PARTICIPATION!

Tim W. Kelly

The Two-Minute Activist for Nov. 19, 2001

Welcome to the third edition of the Two-Minute Activist. Thanks again for your help and support.

TODAY'S ACTIVISM: I realize that the country is looking for solace and understanding in light of Sept. 11th. And I realize that sometimes it is more important at a certain moment to foster peace and unity than it is to make a point. Certainly timing is everything. I have certainly bitten my tongue a lot in the past couple of months with all the "Pray for this" and "God Bless that." But I believe a line must be drawn when our government starts using "company" time and "company" facilities to hold a prayer meeting. House Concurrent Resolution 184 (passed by the House and presently in the Senate) allows for both Houses to come together in the Hall of the House of Representatives to "humbly seek the blessings of Providence for forgiveness, reconciliation, unity, and charity for all the People of the United States...." Granted, this to occur when the Houses are not in session, but they are still using state time and state facilities to hold a religious service. (The next thing you know, Bush will have a religious office in the...no, wait...he's already done that!)

THE REQUEST: Contact both of your senators and ask them NOT to pass House Concurrent Resolution 184. Let them know that it is perfectly okay for them to worship, pray, and gather with like-minded individuals, but that it is entirely inappropriate for them to do so on "company" property, or to work out the details of this on "company" time. The halls of our government are for reason, justice, and pragmatism--not for the fleshing out of superstitious belief. What they do there should represent the interest and good of all. We want them to work on issues of pragmatic security and logistics. Praying to Jesus, Yahweh, or Allah is no more acceptable or pragmatic to our national security, now or later, than bringing in Ouija boards, wearing crystals, or writing letters to Santa Claus. These are personal matters that should be worked out in personal places on personal time. This is not your job, this

PURELY PERSONAL: According to the Bible (Book of Genesis), Yahweh cursed man with difficulties in working the soil and cursed women with difficulties in the birth process because of their disobedience in the garden [I always thought it was just showing initiative]. Fundamentalists often use the fact that women go through intense labor pain to brace their arguments for God, the Bible, creationism, etc.--"Women have the pain of labor, and no other animal does!! Why? Well, it's right there in God's Word in the Book of Genesis! Man and woman sinned against God, and they were punished by God even to this day! Therefore to overcome this state of sin and be reconciled to God, you must accept JESUS and blah, blah, blah!" If you want a wonderfully rational and scientific explanation of the evolutionary reasons why human women have difficulty in labor, read the article in this month's Scientific American magazine. Equip yourself.

Do you want to receive the Two-Minute Activist through email? Contact: Tim Kelly [uss_darwin@yahoo.com].

Wrong Song to Unite a Nation 'God Bless America' makes nonbelievers feel excluded By Tom Flynn

AMHERST, N.Y., Nov. 6 — If you watched the World Series, you might think "God Bless America" had become the national anthem. I admit it's easier to sing than "The Star-Spangled Banner." But it begins with the word "God," and in a land of unprecedented religious diversity that is exclusionary language.

America is digging in for what may be a long war and people are clutching elements of their traditional

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identities closer, including the Christianity most Americans share. Most, but not all.

A new City University of New York study finds that a record 14 percent of American adults have no religion. America's Jewish minority holds steady at about six percent. Meanwhile Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious groups are rising sharply. Given that, it's astonishing that anyone can seriously expect all Americans to unite around "God Bless America." As the war against terrorism grinds on, America seems poised to shut out the non-religious and members of non-mainstream faiths. After 40 years of improving the way the nation treats religious outgroups, now is no time to turn back the clock.

LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION

More than 30 million Americans live without religion. We felt no less devastated by the national tragedy than anyone else. If anything our sense of loss was greater, since we envision no next-worldly existence in which the victims might be made whole for what was torn from them. Yet what opportunities did we have to join with fellow Americans to express our anguish? After Sept. 11, religious services spilled out of the nation's houses of worship and onto the steps and rotunda of the Capitol, into municipal sports arenas, public parks, and civic buildings. Where were the secular memorial or remembrance events that all Americans could share?

A PUBLIC SQUARE FOR ALL

In time of anguish Christians, Jews, and Muslims naturally yearn for the solace of their faiths. But when they gather in the public square they should not remember that they are not alone there. On Sept. 11, Rep. David Bonior (D-Mich.), spoke of "all Americans — Christian, Jewish, and Muslim," excluding the non-religious and also millions of minority believers. Sorry, Rep. Bonior, they're Americans too. In October, the House of Representatives voted 404-0 to encourage public schools to go on using "God Bless America" in the face of religious diversity concerns. Rep. Henry Brown, (R.-S.C.) who introduced the bill, cited lawmakers' singing of "God Bless America" on the Capitol steps as precedent. Sorry, Rep. Brown, two wrongs don't make a right.

NO CRUSADE Administration officials insist we're in a war against terrorism, not a crusade of Christians against Muslims. Some Americans seem to think it's a crusade of Christians against everybody else.

I hope our nation can relearn the lessons of inclusiveness. To say "Christians, Jews, and Muslims" is not to speak of all Americans. To say "people of every faith" still is not enough. America includes people of every faith, and of none. The

vocabulary, the music, and the allusions public officials choose when they address the nation should reflect that diversity.

Non-religious Americans have money and energy to contribute, blood to donate, and emotional (if never "spiritual") support to offer. If you insist on freezing us out of the fight against terrorism, we'll understand. But next time the call goes out for "all hands on deck," forgive us if we assume you're talking to somebody else.

Tom Flynn is editor of Free Inquiry, the quarterly journal of the Council for Secular Humanism.

That notorious exchange:

During a September 13 appearance by Jerry Falwell on the Christian Broadcasting Network's TV program "700 Club," hosted by Pat Robertson, the following exchange occurred:

JERRY FALWELL: And, I know that I'll hear from them for this. But, throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way - all of them who have tried to secularize America - I point the finger in their face and say "you helped this happen."

PAT ROBERTSON: Well, I totally concur, and the problem is we have adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government. And so we're responsible as a free society for what the top people do. And, the top people, of course, is the court system. The story was covered in the next day's *Washington Post*, and a partial transcript of the broadcast was published on the web site of *People for the American Way*.

In a disingenuous attempt to put a good face on this one, Pat Robertson and CBN subsequently issued a press release in which they maintained that the whole thing was Jerry Falwell's fault, claimed that they didn't understand what he was saying, and blamed People for the American Way for "taking statements out of context and spinning them to the press for their own political ends." (If Mr. Robertson truly didn't understand Mr. Falwell's remarks, one has to wonder why he responded to them by saying "I concur totally" and then elaborating on the remarks he supposedly hadn't understood.)



FIG Leaflets

The Darwinian Equations of George Price

For though his equations showed that truly self-sacrificing behavior can exist among animals, and even humans, it also seemed to show that there is nothing noble in it. Only behavior which helps to spread the genes that cause it can survive in the very long term. Since man, too, is an animal, the human capacity for altruism must be strictly limited: and our capacity for cruelty, treachery and selfishness impossible to eradicate. Through algebra, George Price had found proof of original sin.

Andrew Brown, *The Darwin Wars*, 1999, p. 2.

Nothing will be solved by searching for "true Islam" or quoting the Quran. The Quran is a vast, vague book, filled with poetry and contradictions (much like the Bible). You can find in it condemnations of war and incitements to struggle, beautiful expressions of tolerance and stern strictures against unbelievers. Quotations from it usually tell us more about the person who selected the passages than about Islam. Every religion is compatible with the best and the worst of humankind.

In the Quran you can find justification for keeping women in seclusion or for allowing them to work and have full participation in public life. In the Quran you can find limitations on education to reading the Quran, or to get as wide and broad learning as is possible. In the Quran you can find instructions to smite the unbeliever, or to welcome people of other faiths and creeds.

Is it any wonder that rational people consider the Quran, like other holy scriptures, mere human documents without any evidence of the existence of any god.

Newsweek (15 October 2001)

Anti-Immigration, Know-Nothing Movement:

In the 1850s the main charges against the Germans were that there were so many freethinkers, rationalists, atheists, and desecrators of the Puritan Sabbath in the German-American community. Indeed, it was before the Civil War that proponents of the Anglo-American Puritan Sabbath fought a losing battle with those who advocated the Continental Sunday. The latter held that Sunday was a day of enjoyment for the whole family and a time to celebrate with picnics and festivities. This was

contrasted sharply with what German-Americans called the Puritan Sabbath, which frowned on all such festive frolic.

Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience* (2000) p. 200

Last Supper!

Animal researchers in Peru are working on breeding "supermale" guinea pigs. "One enclosure can be used for breeding--a single male services a group of seven or eight females," one on-line site reports.

The reason the researchers want to breed supermales is to increase guinea pig production--in Peru people eat guinea pigs for dinner. According to the International Development Research Centre (www.idrc.ca/adventure/guipigs.html), "In the cathedral of the city of Cuzco, the 'navel' of the Inca Empire, hangs a huge painting of the Last Supper. Surrounded by his 12 apostles, Jesus Christ sits at the table with a well roasted guinea pig in front of him which he is sharing with his guests."

If you're going to get eaten, you might as well get eaten by the Son of God.

The Straight Dope Digest, 2001,
<www.straightdope.com>

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the Quotes.

I don't wave the flag, I wave principles. More than a swath of fabric, our country is represented by a set of ideas that have been culled from the best of the Enlightenment. So for me, patriotism is most profoundly exhibited by calling the government to the carpet anytime it defies the principles upon which our nation was founded: When it denies unpopular groups freedom of speech or religion, doesn't respect limits on police powers or fails to treat every person equally under the law. (Of course, it's hard to sell a car with that.)

...The flag should be a symbol of America, land of liberty, pluralism and tolerance. But too often it has been hijacked by commercial interests to hawk goods, by politicians to hide behind and by bullies to justify violence against those who are different. To avoid any confusion, I'm sticking to principles.

Robyn Blumner, "Patriotism isn't only by the flag,"

St. Petersburg Times, November 11, 2001

http://www.sptimes.com/News/111101/Columns/Patriotism_isn_t_only.shtml

BOOK REVIEWS

Nickel and Dimed: on (not) getting by in America

by Barbara Ehrenreich
(New York: Henry Holt & Co. 2001)

"Something is wrong, very wrong, when a single person in good health, a person who in addition possesses a working car, can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow. You don't need a degree in economics to see that wages are too low and rents too high."(p. 199) so concludes the author about the empirical side of economics. And experience she did. In an experiment as a journalist Barbara Ehrenreich worked three jobs in different parts of the United States. Waitress in Key West, household worker in Portland, Maine, and sales clerk at Wal-Mart in Minneapolis. In each job she earned about seven dollars an hour, or a little over a thousand dollars a month. She undertook this study to learn how the minimum wage worker in this country gets on.

The short answer is they don't. It is not food or clothes that break the budget, but the rent. If the simplest one bedroom apartment demands 400 to 500 dollars a month, the rest simply does not stretch very far. At seven dollars an hour, you think twice about buying a seven dollar shirt. Minimum wage pushes the worker into special living arrangements, making a commute an absolute necessity, which in the modern American city demands a car. Smoking old clunkers, which are costly to maintain are one result.

Living with parents or other relatives is one solution, not open to all workers. Doubling up with a room or bed mate is a widespread choice. These arrangements tend to falter, especially since poverty loads life with extra emotional problems. Throughout America, old motels have become rooms for rent by the day or week. Old trailer homes fill the same role in many parts. Both solutions are not adequate, and may be available only seasonally not year round.

The poor pay for the privilege of being poor. If you can't put up the month's rent as a security deposit plus another month's you pay through the nose for a room by the day or week. With only a room and perhaps a hot plate, you can't save by cooking or keeping food for several days. You eat fast food or whatever can be gathered and microwaved in a convenience store. Few of these jobs carry health

insurance, so you march on to manage pain with aspirin and cigarettes. A large proportion of the poor smoke, a way to go without food whenever. Entertainment is whatever comes free. Ehrenreich describes attending an old fashioned tent revival, attractive because no money is charged up front.

Much of the work has the worst kind of boring sameness, punctuated by occasional emergencies when equipment doesn't work, or a fellow worker fails. In the American workplace, and double in these minimum wage jobs, the "associate" checks his freedoms and rights at the door. Speech, strength, and time belong to the boss, and he, or she, will let you know it, forcefully and clearly. Not even toilet breaks may be at will of the worker. Remarkably, Ehrenreich found much commitment to the job, and workers who like to take pride in their accomplishment. A deep desire for achievement, to do the job well and right, even if it is cleaning toilets. There is even sometimes praise for the boss.

One resource is a congregation. As one fellow worker told her about landing in a strange town: "Always find a church" (p. 132) especially if you have children. People from the church may help with food, but more important drive you around to the various help agencies, rental possibilities, and job prospects. They may care for a child, while the mother runs these errands. Most of all a congregation can be instant friends, and show her the ropes.

Ehrenreich does not mince words, her book is written with acid. She cites data that 67 percent of adults requesting food aid have jobs. When poverty persists even in times of full employment, when anyone can get a minimum wage job, the fabric of the economy has rent, the social contract is broken.

Wolf Roder

One Aryan Nation under God: Exposing the New Racial Extremists

by Jerome Walters
(Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000)

The author came by his experience with the racial extremists by happenstance. A fairly liberal pastor of the Lutheran Church he served in Roundup, a small town in Montana. Soon after taking up his position, he was approached by racists, considering themselves "true Jews," that is of the "white race" and members of the biblical tribes of Israel, the true

BOOK REVIEWS

(Continued from page 10)

chosen of god. They invited him to join their belief system, or even to pastor them. Walters, of course, refused. Roundup is only a hundred miles from the small town of Jordan, where in June of 1996 the racist militia men ended an 81 day long stand-off with the FBI and other forces of the law. Roundup was one of the places the militia persons came from.

Walters recounts for us his experiences with the racists, which was not extensive. By and large he avoided them, but remained a close observer of their actions and antics. What makes the book valuable and worth reading, is Walters' explication of their religion and other beliefs. Most, but not all, of the organized racists in this country are Christians. Their churches have various names, and these change. Church of Israel is one label, Church of Jesus Christ, Christian is another. Essentially, all follow what has been called "Identity" theology, because it explains that white Europeans are the true Jews, the chosen of god, who will inherit the Kingdom. Walters explains the biblical and other sources and arguments of this religion.

Identity theology starts with Genesis, and specifically Eve. The sin was Eve's sexual intercourse with Satan in the form of the snake. This gave birth to Cain, who was literally the Devil's seed, and the ancestor of the Jews. Or, according to the racists, the "so called" Jews, since the "real Jews" are the European whites, specifically American whites. Identity theologians neatly solve the question whom Cain married, it was from among the earlier creation of animals, more specifically the non-whites of the world. These are "mud-people" to the Identity Christians, and not really human. Thus, the original sin in the Bible was Eve's sin of race mixing. As a result, god's chosen white race must face an everlasting war with the seed of the serpent, and this is the division god has decreed among the races. And so on.

Identity theology does not seem to make any more sense than creationist interpretations of the book of Genesis. But like the creationists, the racists do have a coherent world view. Walters explains it thus: (p. 21)

This racial interpretation of Genesis is the lens through which Identity reads the rest of the Bible and sees all of faith and life. Religious racists are often accused of pulling one or two verses out of the Bible

and basing their whole world view on them, but this is not really the case with Identity theology. Although these racial extremists do read certain verses out of context, they interpret and operate from a center. They have a hermeneutic, a lens through which to read the Scriptures. And based on this hermeneutic, their interpretation has some coherence ... Who is left that thinks the end of the aberration of racism that blossomed in the 1930s and 1940s has finally been reached? The ideology, indeed the theology, of modern racism has developed and gone further in its incorporation of the pieces and people of the Bible in our world.

Like other fundamentalists the Identity believers denounce the usual sins, drugs, liquor, gambling, humanism, revolutionary literature and sexual perversions, but add to that race mixing, "Jewish" news media, and government (p. 42). Any kind of amity between Christianity and Judaism is a perversion of the true faith, the work of the serpent's seed. The race mixers, the Jews, the liberals bring in a "dreadful and soul-destroying ideology behind Judeo-Christianity designed to bring in a godless new age with a new morality based on secular humanism (p. 39).

All this might be considered funny, if these idiots had not committed so many destructive and terroristic crimes. For an understanding of racist theology this book is indispensable.

Wolf Roder

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