

# FIG Leaves

Volume 11 Issue 11

November 2002

## November Meeting

**Speaker: Frank Zindler**

**Topic: "AMERICAN ATHEISTS: PAST AND PRESENT"**

American Atheists Inc. coalesced out of Madalyn Murray's 1963 victory in the U.S. Supreme Court that identified forced prayer and bible-reading in the public schools as unconstitutional. A brief history of the organization will be given. The 1995 kidnapping and murder of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, her son Jon Murray, and her granddaughter Robin Murray-O'Hair will be discussed. The election of Ellen Johnson as president of American Atheists and the subsequent activities of the organization will also be covered. The American Atheists "Statement of Purpose" will be examined.

Frank R. Zindler has been a member of American Atheists since 1977 and a member of the Board of Directors since the middle 1980s. After the disappearance of the Murray-O'Hair family, he became managing editor of American Atheist Press, publishing the quarterly magazine AMERICAN ATHEIST, the monthly newsletter AMERICAN ATHEIST NEWSLETTER (now edited by Carl-Eric Boberg, of Minnesota), numerous new books and reprints, and a large number of ephemera. Although this volunteer position is a full-time job, he also works for pay as a senior editor and biochemical information analyst for a scientific publisher in Columbus, Ohio.

His latest book, THE JESUS THE JEWS NEVER KNEW: SEPHER TOLDOTH YESHU AND THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS IN JEWISH SOURCES, is expected to be released in several months. The book shows that the ancient Jews knew nothing of any historical Jesus and that the historicity of the Christian's god-man cannot be defended on the basis of available evidence.

**FIG Members Michele Grinoch, Philip Ferguson, and Frank Bicknell at the Godless Americans March on Washington.  
Photo by Edwin Kagin**



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### Events

#### November Meeting

**Frank R. Zindler**

Sunday, November 17th at 7:00

Vernon Manor Hotel

#### December Potluck

Tuesday, December 10th at

6:30 pm **Tim Madigan**

Sunday, December 15th at 7:00

Vernon Manor Hotel

November 8, 2002

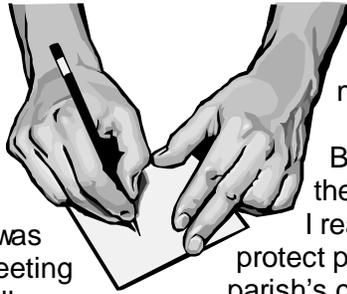
## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

This past month has been rich with opportunities to stand with others and be counted. The "Godless March" was a great success and the October Fig meeting with Taslima Nasrin as speaker was well attended. How can concepts, like the absolute rejection of the notion of a supreme deity, and support for separation of church and state in all political entities, which make such sense to me and many others, not be obvious wisdom to everyone? And why am I so often reduced to using vague terms and tactful suggestions about these core ideas?

Recently, I was describing to a friend, more like a new acquaintance, my worldview, when I noticed her expression change from patient politeness, to awkwardness, to downright discomfort. I was saying that the promise of immortality is hard to compete with, and its inherent power to attract us mortals makes it a convenient tool to coerce blind obedience. That those who anoint themselves the messengers and interpreters of divine law, are usually human, and thus possessed of great virtue and great vice. That attributing power and wisdom to supernatural beings only debases our respect for humanity, and infantilizes us, helping us to avoid, should we choose to, responsibility for what we do to each other and to our planet.

I was definitely on a roll, and started to slow down only when I noticed the distress in her eyes. What to do? I have faced this dilemma, often, as I am sure most of you have as well. In the past, I would just keep quiet, trying not to be disrespectful of others' deeply held beliefs. Then I began asking people not to wish me a "Merry Christmas" or say "God Bless You", (except when I sneezed because even I said that, I noticed).

But to actually speak up, when I was pretty sure the listener did not share my ideas, when I was not merely looking for a kindred spirit ("spirit": is that OK to say?) but wanted the freedom to express my own deeply held beliefs. Faced with interfering with someone else's worldview, their plan for eternal life, I start to hedge. This doesn't feel good. I am not interested in convincing or converting others, because I sense their vulnerability and desperate need to avoid subjecting their beliefs to sensible



scrutiny. I want to be considerate of their need for delusion, but not at the price of my silence.

But their delusions cause a lot of trouble in the world, in people's lives. I listen to Taslima, I read about the Catholic bishops preferring to protect priests from scandal than to protect the parish's children, I think about the role of religion in Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine. I am beginning to think that respect and consideration for individuals' need for religious views may have to be secondary to respect for humanity's birthright to live together without violence and coercion. So I am talking more, risking more, and appreciating the importance of spreading the word.

I.D.

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### The Blind Men and the Elephant

So oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I ween  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
*And prate about an Elephant  
Not one of them has seen!*

John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887)

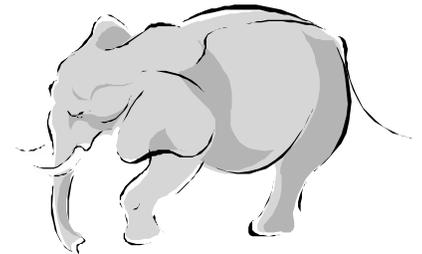


FIG Leaves Volume 11, Issue 11, November 2002 - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in electronic format via Internet to figeditor@choice.net or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 8128, Cincinnati OH 45208. Contributions 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: Frank Bicknell, Nurit Bowman, Martha Ferguson, Edwin Kagin, Helen Kagin, Tim Kelly, Inez Klein, Bryan Sellers and FIG Leaves Editor: Idelle Datlof.

**Address Delivered at Godless Americans  
March on Washington, Washington, D. C.  
on November 2, 2002  
by Edwin Kagin**

My name is Edwin Kagin. I am Director of Camp Quest, the first residential summer camp in the history of the United States for the children of the godless. I am honored to be an Eagle Scout. The concept of Camp Quest was inspired by the outraged awareness that the Boy Scouts of American had somehow become so un-American that its leadership had started denying admission to those "dirty little atheists," to those American boys who did not share the supernatural world view of those now making the rules. Camp Quest was founded in 1996 in response to this exclusion, and, for its seven years of continuous operation, has been a night light in a scary room for our children. Our campers and all-volunteer unpaid staff become, for 8 days, an international secular community. Camp Quest is a unique and unqualified success in the battle for the minds of our children in what I call "The American Religious Civil War."

The American Religious Civil War, treasonously declared and waged against our Constitution by those who do not understand, or do not like, our American system of separation of government and religion, has already produced a frightening body count, and more casualties are yet



to come. We must strengthen our children in their quest to live meaningful lives in a society where many wrongfully and incorrectly characterize them, marginalize them, and then reject them—where they are made taboo because they do not believe the "right" way or in the "right" things, as those traitors who would have our free land governed by their ideas of religious truth want them to believe.

At Camp Quest, our children learn they are important human beings with a right to believe, or not, as they choose; that they have a right not to be defined by others. Our motto is, "Camp Quest. It's Beyond Belief." "Quest" stands for: "Question; Understand; Explore; Search; Test."

When asked what she had learned at Camp Quest, one little girl replied, "I have learned it is okay not to believe in god." Please note she didn't say she had learned not to believe in god. We never teach that there is no god. She said she had learned it was okay not to believe in god. She didn't know that before coming to Camp Quest.

At Camp Quest, our children are taught the principals of reason, critical thinking, logical fallacy, ethical behavior, and the methods of science and evidence. We teach our campers there is a difference between Righteousness and Self-Righteousness. They learn that the invisible and the non-existent look much the same. At Camp Quest we have two invisible unicorns, and there is a prize, as yet unclaimed, of a godless \$100 bill, for any camper who can prove that the invisible unicorns aren't there.

We teach them the difference between belief and proof; between faith and fact; that they are part of a great historic tradition of bringing light unto darkness; that there is a difference between that which is ethical and that which is expedient; a

*(Continued on page 7)*



# FIG Leaflets

## In the Beginning ...

... by 1991 some astronomers and press reports suggested that the entire theoretical edifice of inflation to blow up the universe and cold dark matter to fill it, not to say the Big Bang itself, might have to be junked. So it was with a sigh of relief that cosmologists greeted the announcement in April 1992 that NASA's Cosmic Background Explorer, or COBE, satellite had succeeded in discerning faint blotches in the primordial cosmic radio glow. These were the seeds from which, inflation predicted, large cosmic structures would eventually grow.

"If you're religious, it's like seeing God," said Dr. George Smoot, a physicist from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory who led the COBE team.

"Inflation, our boldest and most promising theory of the earliest moments of creation, passed its first very important test," Dr. Turner said at the time.

Dennis Overbye, *The New York Times*  
(23 July 2002) p. 19

## Wonders of Science

Dirac had imagined that every atomic particle had an antimatter twin. He further thought that antimatter particles could combine and form antiatoms. Antiatoms could further combine to form all kinds of antiobjects: antistars, antigalaxies, and even antipeople. If a person shook hands with an antiperson, both would be annihilated in a shower of gamma ray greetings. The explosion would be powerful enough to destroy a small city. It's best that the CIA not be made aware of this.

Roy A. Gallant, *Meteorite Hunter* (2002) p. 44  
Note: Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac (1902-1984;  
Nobel prize in physics 1933)

Modern medicine, we are told, has made such gargantuan strides in creating pills, potions, and panaceas both physical and mental to placate and ease the pain of human anxiety, we should all consider it an honor and a privilege to become mentally ill. The medical priests and the psychological shamans backed up by their concrete temples of curative wonders (the hospitals) daily

defeat the demons of death and human destruction and stave off madness with their powerful potions. Got a pain or problem in this day and age? Pop a pill! With the help of the pharmaceutical industry our contemporary shrinks have managed to mute human misery by inventing a pill for every problem or pain, physical or mental. Hovering over our heads from the moment we pop from the womb until we sink into the tomb is the caring, concerned (and expensive), visage of the medicine man slapping us into the world and reminding us that physical and mental maintenance is an expensive proposition. This is a lesson we cannot forget we are reminded much too often.

Robert A. Baker, *Mind Games* (1996) pp. 58-59

## Theological Gynecology: Purging Science Advisory Committees.

Every administration seeks to load advisory committees with like-minded experts, but the practice seems to have reached a new level. In a particularly controversial case, W. David Hager, an obstetrician-gynecologist who strongly opposes abortions, has been asked to serve on the FDA panel that reviews reproductive health drugs. Hager is the author of *As Jesus Cared for Women*, in which he promotes the healing power of faith in Jesus.

-- From *What's New* by Robert L. Park (18 Oct 02)

## On The Bell Curve.

The main concept I took away from *The Bell Curve* is how pervasively harmful sheer stupidity is. If you look at an undesirable tendency say, inability to hold a job, unusual likelihood of injuries, likelihood of having children at a very early age, likelihood of living in dire poverty just about every one of them is closely correlated with low IQ or low performance on some other measure of intelligence. Never mind who performs badly on intelligence tests, which as we know are neither infallible nor perfect instruments for measuring intelligence. Let us talk about the fact that a small but tragic percentage of people do perform badly on those tests because their intelligence is low and it affects their entire lives and our whole society negatively. What are we going to do about it?

Pat Shipman, (author of *The Evolution of Racism*)  
interviewed in *RNCSE* (May/June 2002) p. 14

**Thanks to Wolf Roder for the quotes.**



# BOOK REVIEW

## **Meybela: My Bengali Girlhood. A Memoir of Growing up Female in a Muslim World**

by Taslima Nasrin, (trans: Gopa Majumdar)  
(South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1998)

The author recounts her childhood from first memories at the time of the civil war that separated Bangladesh from Pakistan to her adolescence at age fourteen. It is not a linear narrative in order from early days to now, rather the story is episodic with chapters on the family, the culture, the religion and such.

A consequence is that we often don't know just what her age is at a given incident, nor what event came before and which thought after. For the foreign reader the book could use a graph of family relationships and table of names, and a much more extensive glossary of Bengali words and concepts. All this said, I found it an absorbing story about a world unknown to me.

There is no doubt that females are held in low regard in Muslim society, and oppressed in the choices they have in life. Her mother, like most adolescent girls, was married off at puberty to be a servant to her husband and to bear his children. She had been a promising student in seventh and eighth grade, but was made to quit school because her father could not see any value in educating a female. Although her husband was initially willing to send her to further schooling, the father-in-law forbade it.

In Islam females are the property of men, at marriage they are passed from the authority of their fathers to that of their husbands. Yet, I can think of no traditional religion which holds women in high regard or allows them the freedom to make their own decisions. Neither Judaism nor Christianity sees the female as anything but the property of the man; neither Hinduism nor Shinto value women. Wherever women have achieved autonomy and rights, this has been despite rather than because of religion.

The Islamic attitudes and forms of worship Taslima Nasrin describes impress me as very much like primitive Christianity. For example, both share a similar insistence on constant and formal prayer, as

well as a conflict with the modern world: nothing is important but faith in God, not modern medicine, not technology, not science. This on her science school book: (p. 184)

Ma wrinkled her nose, as if a bad stench was coming from the book, and said, "Get out of here, go! Every word written in that book is a lie. What Allah has said is the only truth. Nothing else matters. I had to go away. It was impossible to raise the matter with Baba, for I invariably lost my voice if I went anywhere near him. Who was right? Which was true Allah or science? Who was going to tell me?"

The author does not convince me her experience is typical of Islam. The family she describes is quite simply dysfunctional. Love and regard for one another are missing. The father started as a poor farm boy who by dint of sheer grit and good luck was able to earn a medical qualification. But he never learns to interact with humans, except with their animal nature. He works a full medical career in the day, then starts his own practice at night. Despite growing income, he is reluctant to spend any on his family. He can never accept that anyone, his wife, his children, his servants may want to do other than he commands. He nearly beats one son to death trying to make him do his will. Taslima's mother's reaction to this marriage is a flight into irrational fundamentalism and worship of a living holy man. Surely there are Islamic families within which the members, even husband and wife cherish each other, or at least work together for common goals.

A driving force for cruelty in Bengali society - other than religion - is poverty. Taslima Nasrin writes of the class divisions between rich and poor, between masters and servants, those who have made it and those who have not. There is little doubt her father is haunted by the fear of falling back into the poverty from which he escaped. Hence his need to amass money and to invest in land in his home village.

It is the hated father who saved Taslima from her mother's fate of being married off at puberty. The unbelieving, secular father flatly insisted she pursue her studies until she qualified as a medical doctor. Her own wish, to be a writer, poet, and artist he disregarded, as such work would be without profit.

Wolf Roder

**FIG MEETING OCTOBER 22,2002**  
**SPEAKER: TASLIMA NASRIN**

Taslima Nasrin recounted that she had been born in a small village in East Pakistan. This area is now Bangladesh after having separated from Pakistan in 1971.

Her childhood was very much like that of other girls in the country. She attended a coeducational school through age 7. At 8 years of age she had to transfer to a girls school because there were no coeducational schools from grade 6 through 10. After the 10<sup>th</sup> grade she attended a girl's college. When her father decided she would study medical science, he had no alternative but to send her to a school that was attended by males.

As a child Taslima like other children would read the Quran in Arabic. The language of Bangladesh is Bengali. Being a questioning child, she wanted to know what she was reading. When she asked her mother to explain what it was that she had read, her mother replied that the meaning was not important. It was sufficient that she be happy that she was reading the Quran in its original language. However when she was 13 or 14, She discovered a book that translated the Quran from Arabic to Bengali.

She learned from this translation that men are superior and women are inferior; men can have 4 wives; men can divorce their wives whenever they feel like it; that men can beat women; that women are supposed to wear a veil; she also discovered that women are not allowed to inherit the property of their fathers before their brothers. She further discovered that the sacred book said that the sun moved around the earth. That the moon had its own light and the purpose of the mountains was to hold up the sky so that it wouldn't fall down.

Since these views conflicted with what she had learned from her scientific studies, she began to suspect that this book had not been written by Allah at all but by selfish, greedy men. When she read the *habith*, which gave the traditions and details about Muhammad's life, she discovered that whenever Muhammad encountered a problem Allah would solve it for



Photo by Edwin Kaglin

him. Thus when his daughter-in-law sexually aroused him, Allah gave him permission to marry her. He married thirteen times and one of his wives was 6 year old Aysha. Muhammad was very jealous and to make sure that other men could not look upon his wives he made them wear veils, a requirement that was later extended to all Muslim women. He also made it illegal to marry any of his wives after his death.

After she began to understand that Islam was oppressive to women she came to the conclusion that she no longer could believe in Islam. When she shared this information with her mother, her mother became upset and told her she was going to hell and began to pray for her. Her father as a physician had a scientific outlook but he was very domineering. He beat the children claiming that they became spoiled otherwise.

Her mother was for Taslima a typical example of the treatment of women in the society. Although the mother was intelligent and had been a good student, she was not permitted to go further with her education. Her marriage was arranged and it was the intent of her father and her husband that she become a good housewife and mother. She was unhappy from the first day of her marriage.

Taslima began writing poetry and prose. She addressed the status of women. Because of this people either loved her or hated her. There were demonstrations for her and against her. The government entered the fray and although they

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difference between being truly moral and being a follower of religious rules.

Our children learn that science is based on facts, not on fairy tales. That evolution is a fact and that "Creationism" is a fairy tale. That there is a difference between coincidence and causation. A difference between potential and actual. That an egg is not a chicken and that an acorn is not an oak tree.

At Camp Quest, while enjoying all of the childhood fun of any summer camp, our children who are our future learn that what happens to each of us and to our world is based on cause and effect—not on faith and miracles. They learn that behavior has consequences. If you run on a wet trail you can slip and be hurt. If you let fools be your rulers, then you will be ruled by fools. We teach them to live—not for life after death, but for life before death. They learn we all share the mystery of having been born human.

We teach our children there are many races and religions and the meaning of our nation's historic motto, "E Pluribus Unum," and that we Americans are truly, "Out of Many, One." For their own safety's sake, we try to help them to learn to distinguish between logic and fallacy; between science and superstition; between real and pretend; between the wonder of discovery and magical thinking. We want them to grow up knowing the difference between doing and dogma; between imagination and mythology.

Most importantly, we try to teach our children to be competent. They will be competent when they can survive, thrive, create, empathize, and interact justly with others, free of pain, fear, and guilt—without gods, without religion, and without us. If they can be thus brought to self-reliant adulthood, they will not need the gods or the religion, and they will not miss them. If we have done it right, they will not need us either. But they will miss us.

All we want, and all our children want, and all we want for ourselves and for our children, is to live as Americans in an America where it is "okay not to believe in god." To do otherwise is to defile the graves of our martyrs.

All we want for ourselves and for our children is to live as free people in a free America, where all Americans can join together, in the words of our patriot ancestors, in pledging our allegiance to: "One nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all."

Edwin Kagin  
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allowed her to continue working, they confiscated her passport and did not return it to her for a year. She was eventually forced to go into hiding because the fundamentalists proclaimed a *fatwa* against her. It was through the good offices of the Western democracies that she was given asylum and managed to escape the country.

Since the purpose of her visit was a book tour, during the intermission Taslima graciously signed the books that the members purchased.

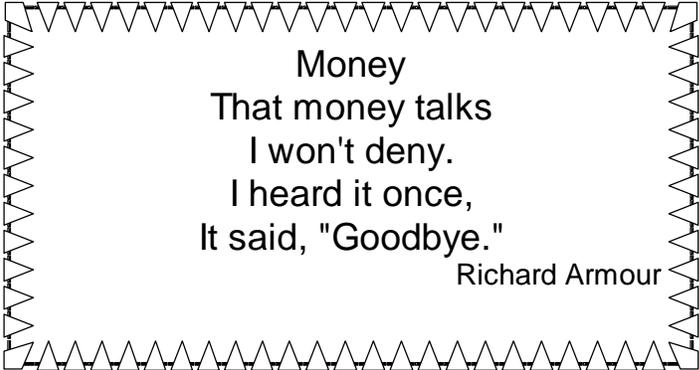
After the intermission the Question and Answer period brought forth a number of interesting questions. The first asked how she was able to attend medical school in view of the limited opportunities for women. She replied that her father wanted her to attend medical school and it was through his influence that it happened.

Another questioner asked if it is possible that Islamic countries can be democratic. She said she believed that to be the case and pointed out that Turkey has had a secular government for many years.

Another questioner wanted to know what was her present relationship with her family. She replied that her mother had died. Her father is very sick and wanted to see her but she can't go. She can go to West Bengal (India)

Do the clerics issue *fatwas*? The reply was, "yes and they have issued three against me". Once the *fatwa* is issued, it cannot be withdrawn. It is a paradox because Islam permits the *fatwa* but in Bangladesh it is illegal because the civil law comes from the British civil law.

George Maurer



Money  
That money talks  
I won't deny.  
I heard it once,  
It said, "Goodbye."

Richard Armour



## *Rationally Speaking*

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

**N. 30, November 2002**

**Is the US the ultimate rogue nation?**

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As often when I begin a column that I think might be particularly offensive to some readers (apparently, some readers will find a way to be offended by almost anything I say each month, but I can do little about that), I will begin this one with a couple of disclaimers. You are about to read some disturbing things about the United States of America. This does not imply: a) that I don't appreciate the US as the only experiment in history of a country established on the rational principles of the Enlightenment; nor: b) that I have any sympathy whatsoever for tyrants and dictators, be they Saddam Hussein or Augusto Pinochet.

This said, let me make a case for the idea that the United States is, in fact, the ultimate "rogue" state and that it—therefore—cannot use the label on other nations as an excuse to attack them (at least, not rationally). Let's start from the basics: the Oxford dictionary defines rogue (first meaning) as: "Dishonest or unprincipled person; mischievous child." I assume we can transfer this definition to the level of state, though that raises interesting philosophical questions about the "character" of a nation which we will need to set aside for now.

Here, then, is my evidence for the conclusion that the US is the mother of all modern rogue states. First, arguing for a pre-emptive strike against another sovereign nation is in direct violation of the United Nations charter, and therefore puts the US outside of the international community. To vow to abide by a certain code of conduct and then refuse

to do so when it is inconvenient for oneself surely qualifies as "mischievous" behavior.

Second, the US has consistently avoided joining the international community in a number of treaties that have—ironically—seen it side with "rogue" states such as Libya, Iran, and Iraq (in other words, seen from outside, we look a lot like part of the "axis of evil"). Examples include: back-pedaling on the Kyoto accord on the environment; refusing to join the anti-land mine treaty; refusing to join and actively sabotaging the international tribunal. It is "dishonest" and "unprincipled" to ask for other people to respect international law and then arrogate for one self the right to violate it.

Third, the US has recently announced that it will allocate funds to train anti-Iraqi militias recruited among the many dissenting minorities harassed by Saddam Hussein. How, exactly, is this not equivalent to setting up a terrorist training camp? Is it just because these people will be doing the dirty work for and not against the US? Because we are right and they are wrong? I am reminded of a Star Trek—Next Generation episode (one of the highest sources of my enlightenment) in which an otherwise seldom judgmental Captain Picard is reproaching a defecting Romulan general for his past military actions against the Federation. The general reminds Picard that one people's butch is another people's hero. What should distinguish the US as a democracy are not only its principles, but the way they are defended. If the end justifies the means, then the US is moving perilously close to the sort of behavior that it condemns in others.

Which brings me to the fourth point: surely our impending aggression of Iraq cannot seriously be framed as a defense of democracy. Doing so would be another example of dishonesty and lack of principles. If the US is really interested in democracy, why on earth is it attacking puny Iraq while at the same time give permanent most favorite nation status to China? Have we forgotten Tien An Mein? Do we really think that the Chinese leaders threat their people better than Hussein? And don't we know for sure (as opposed to speculating) that the Chinese do have plenty of weapons of mass destruction? I am not, of course, suggesting that the US declare war to China, just that it be a bit more consistent (principled, not rogue) in its foreign policy.

Now, being a rogue state in the sense in which the US surely is can, and has been, defended on rational principles. Robert Kaplan, for example, has written a book entitled *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*, in which he makes the argument that the US, as the only superpower in the world, should behave outside of

(Continued from page 8)

international law. Indeed, Kaplan criticizes most American politicians for being held back (ironically, I would add) by their Christian ethos. Instead, he claims, they should embrace Machiavelli's "pagan" attitude and do what needs to be done.

Kaplan's dichotomy is, I think, the real conundrum that the US has to resolve during the 21st century. Does the US want to be seen by the rest of the world as a principled nation, fighting fairly for what it sees is right, or as a Machiavellian entity willing to lie and cheat to get whatever it feels is due it? Think about it really hard, because this will determine how history will see the US and, more importantly, is already affecting the lives of millions of people on this planet.

Further readings:

*What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, by Bernard Lewis.

Web links:

The Guardian columns, a liberal (oh no!) British paper that often rationally criticizes US foreign policy. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/columnists/>)

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Next month:

What do you mean, "rationally" speaking?

© by Massimo Pigliucci, 2002

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



Taslima Nasrin and Michele Grinoch at GAMOW



Camp Quest at GAMOW



Frank Bicknell and Michele Grinoch at GAMOW

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# FIG Members at Godless Americans March on Washington.



Freethought history was made on November 2, 2002 in the nation's capitol. Led by the organizational efforts of American Atheists, the first ever large public presence of those without a belief in a deity occurred on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in the form of a march and speeches and song. The purpose of the March, as stated by American Atheists' President Ellen Johnson, was to mark the dawn of a new era in which atheists and secular humanists and others without a religious belief are recognized as a political force in the United States.

It was called the "Godless Americans March on Washington" or GAMOW for short. The project had been announced some six months previously, over the Easter weekend at the annual meeting of the American Atheists. Some had said such a plan was doomed to fail, and that the effort would be embarrassingly poorly attended. But it was a success beyond all expectations. Ellen Johnson is to be commended for her courage and dedication in putting on this seemingly impossible event, which attracted participants from all over the United States. FIG, together with the Council for Secular Humanism and Camp Quest,

**Godless Americans March on Washington to mark the dawn of a new era in which atheists and secular humanists and others without a religious belief are recognized as a political force in the United States.**

**Ellen Johnson**

was among the many groups that had formally and publicly endorsed the march. And FIG was well represented. Six members attended: FIG's President Philip Ferguson, Vice-President Michele Grinoch, and FIG members Frank Bicknell, Edwin Kagin, Helen Kagin, and Bob Riehemann. Bob's two children also attended.

Camp Quest was also well represented. Four of the new national board of directors were featured speakers at the march: August Brunsman, Edwin Kagin, Larry Darby, and Jim Strayer. Bob Riehemann of FIG is also a Camp Quest, Inc. board member. He is also a Camp Quest veteran staff member, as were the four speakers and Philip Ferguson and Helen Kagin. Bob's two daughters are also Camp Quest alums, and they, together with other former Camp Quest campers, helped carry the Camp Quest banner and flag in the March. A total of eight children who had been to Camp Quest were spotted.

The March itself was relatively brief, going from near the Washington monument to the U.S. Capitol. Signs were everywhere—clever signs that denoted the depth of feeling of the participants. Among them were: "Religion is Myth Information;" "We Have Faith in People;" "What Schools Need is a Moment of Science;" "Only Reason Can Bless America;" "Secular Humanists for a Secular America;" "The Sun Also Shines for the Godless;" "Reason Is Not Treason;" "Teach Science Not Superstition;" "Atheism is Myth—Understood;" "Ungodly is not UnAmerican;" "Bush Was Sworn In, Not Ordained;" "Real Patriots Support Constitutional Rights;" "No Public Funds For Religious Schools;" "Reason Not Religion;" "Evolved Beyond Belief;" "America Is Not a Theocracy;" "I Believe in Reality;" "Do Adults Really Need an Imaginary



Helen Kagin at GAMOW



Friend;" "You Don't Need God to be Good;" "No Public Funds for Religious Schools;" "Their Religion Our Money No Way" There were lots more, including a favorite, "Don't Pray in My School and I Won't Think in Your Church." Many groups had their own banners, as did Camp Quest.

We had been asked to use signs without sticks to present a less provocative image, and no sticks were in sight among the marchers. Not so for the professional protestors who had come in from California with big signs with big sticks saying the usual uncomplimentary things and condemning the marchers to eternal torment. Representative of these sentiments were: "These Filthy Dreamers Defile the Flesh," "Judgement is Coming," "Without God You Get ... A Wasted Life Judgement and Hell," and numerous other equally meaningless observations.

There were, however, no incidents. The officials in place did an excellent job and kept the demonstrators to the sides and away from those who had reserved the use of the national Mall that day to have their say. And have their say they did! There were over twenty speakers and two musical groups. Many of the speakers were associated with national organizations or groups. They included Ed Buckner, Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism, who praised the unity of the March and the efforts of the American Atheists in getting it organized. August Brunsman, head of the Secular Student Alliance spoke, as did Frank Zindler, editor of the American Atheist Magazine. High Humor was provided by Chris Harper of the Landover Baptist Church. If you are not familiar with this great satiric web site, it is commended to your attention at:

<http://www.landoverbaptist.org/>. To view the full list of speakers, and the organizations and individuals who supported this effort, see: <http://www.godlessamericans.org>.

A surprise speaker on the program was Taslima Nazrin, who had only days before spoken to FIG. Apparently her appearance was not announced, as it had not been at FIG, to deter the religiocrazies who would like to kill her for being a rational human being. Think there are "no atheists in foxholes," as some fundamentalists like to maintain? You should have heard speaker Kathleen Johnson, the active duty founder of Military Atheists & Freethinkers. She called for those in the audience who had worn the uniform of the United States armed forces to join her on the stage. Over one hundred men and women came forward. The platform would not hold them all. No atheists in foxholes indeed!

The program lasted over four hours. It was thrilling! Wish you could have seen it. If you would like to, a video tape of this happening can be ordered from C-Span, who filmed the whole thing. The show would be great to play for a local group, for friends and family who don't understand what not believing is all about, or for Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who drop by to try to save you. You can find out how to order a copy here: <http://store.yahoo.com/c-spanstore/173662.html>.

A week previously, the weather report had predicted a rainy dreary day for the March. A few days before the March, a sniper was at large in the area. A fundamentalist web site had implored its readers to pray to god to stop the Godless Americans March on Washington. Saturday, November 2, 2002, was a beautiful sunny day. The sniper was in custody, and between two and three thousand rational people made a brave statement to the nation with good natured humor and dignity.

Nothing fails like prayer.

Edwin Kagin

**Thanks to Frank Bicknell and Edwin Kagin  
for the Photographs.**

**Mark Your Calendars!**

**Tim Madigan will speak to FIG at 7 PM  
at the Vernon Manor on Sunday,  
December 15. His topic will be "The  
Animal/Human Boundary."**