

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 19 Issue 1

January 2010

## January FIG Meeting:

*Tuesday 26 January 2010 at 7:00 PM*  
at the Hannaford Suites Hotel

### What's New in the Right to Die Movement

by Judith Snyderman, Final Exit Network

Judith Snyderman will speak to FIG about recent events from what is happening abroad and in the US. She will speak to the two cases pending against volunteers from Final Exit Network in AZ and GA and the raid on her house by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation last February.

The Final Exit Network's Guiding Principle is that "Mentally competent adults have a basic human right to end their lives when they suffer from a fatal or irreversible illness or intractable pain, when their quality of life is personally unacceptable, and the future holds only hopelessness and misery. Such a right shall be an individual choice, including the timing and companion, free of any restrictions by the law, clergy, medical profession, even friends and relatives no matter how well-intentioned. We do not encourage anyone to end their life, do not provide the means to do so, and do not actively assist in a person's death. We do, however, support them when medical circumstances warrant their decision."

### February FIG Meeting - **Note Date/Time Changes!**

Sunday, February 28 at 3pm at the Hannaford Suites Hotel

### What's Going on with National Freethinking Organizations?

by Amanda Metskas and August Brunsmann

Amanda Metskas, Executive Director of Camp Quest Inc, and August Brunsmann, Executive Director of the Secular Student Alliance, will update FIG on the activities going on with the Freethought Movement. There has been a lot of activity locally with the billboard campaign and Amanda and August's talk will be able to put the local work into the context of the national scene through their perspective. Additionally, the work of Camp Quest and the Secular Student Alliance focuses on the youth and the next generation of Freethought, so there will be an opportunity to hear about the innovative work happening with young people in high schools and college campuses.

### Inside

### Page

December Meeting.....	2
Things To Do, Things To See.....	5
Science Book Club.....	5
In The News.....	6
More Taxes = More Democracy .	7
A Disaster For Atheism.....	8
Everybody's A Blasphemer.....	9
<i>Render Unto Darwin: Philosophical Aspects Of The Christian Right's Crusade Against Science</i> by James H. Fetzer. Book Review by Dr. Harriet Hall, MD .....	10
<i>Welcome To The Homeland: A Journey To The Rural Heart Of America's Conservative Revolution</i> by Brian Mann. Book Review by Wolf Roder.....	11

### Directions:

The Hannaford Suites Hotel,  
5900 East Galbraith Rd.

- 1) Take Exit 12 onto Montgomery Rd.
- 2) From the off Ramp at Exit 12:  
From the North - Turn Left  
From the South - Turn Right
- 3) Continue on Montgomery Rd. to East Galbraith Rd. Turn Left.
- 4) After you go under I-71, turn right into the driveway of the Hotel.



## Events

### January Potluck

*No potluck is scheduled.*

### February Potluck

*No potluck is scheduled.*

### January Meeting

7:00 PM, Tuesday Jan. 26, 2010  
Hannaford Suites Hotel,  
5900 E. Galbraith Rd.

### February Meeting

3:00 PM, Sunday Feb. 28, 2010  
Hannaford Suites Hotel,  
5900 E. Galbraith Rd.



## December Meeting

### What's So New About The "New Atheism?"

Tim Madigan spoke to the Free Inquiry Group on December 15, 2009 about the "new atheism." His excellent talk generated an engaging question and answer session. Since Mr. Madigan is writing an article on this topic for *Philosophy Now* magazine, he was delighted to get feedback from an intelligent and enthusiastic crowd of FIG members and visitors. He began and ended his program with humor. The beginning featured his Schopenhauer finger puppet and the end featured his parody, "Yes Virginia, There Is A Santayana."

Recent books which have made the best-seller lists by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and others have helped to create an environment where atheism is gaining more public attention and generating more conversation than it did even twenty five years ago. When The Council for Secular Humanism was founded it was originally titled, "The Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism" to avoid the then common notion that an atheist must also be a communist. It was almost impossible to get newspaper, television or radio coverage if you were an atheist who wanted to share your opinion that people can lead good, meaningful lives without religious beliefs. Many books existed which related the atheist viewpoint but none were bestsellers. Beginning with Sam Harris's book *The End of Faith* in 2004, dialogue about these ideas erupted in every form of media. The fact that concepts and ideas that are associated with atheism have reached and continue to reach many more people is something that can be called "new."



Several reasons for this recent change in the attitudes concerning atheism are as follows. One is a possible backlash against the theistic character of the regime of George W. Bush while he was President of the United States. Our country came closer to a theocracy during his time than possibly any other time in the history of our nation. Our leaders seemed to ooze Christianity at every turn. Many people were frightened and appalled by such behavior from our nation's highest officials and recognized the need to speak out about this atrocious method of governance. Another reason reflected the re-examination of fundamentalism after the September 11, 2001 attack and the overtly religious response by many to that event. The shocking acts of religious fundamentalists brought the evidence that such beliefs are dangerous to a great many people and caused a backlash against religion in general. The reaction by opposing fundamentalists, though not as violent, was just as shocking. This reaction drove many away from the fundamentalist platform. Dawkins noted that these reasons were a factor in writing his book, *The God Delusion*. Would he or the other authors mentioned above have sold as many books if these events had not occurred?

The internet has also played a large part in the dialogue about and advertisement



**FIG Leaves** - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to figmessage at gofigger dot org; or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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# FIG LEAVES



of atheism. Never has there been so much information available to so many people. The “new atheists” are taking



advantage of this powerful new method of spreading information and sharing resources. Local and national groups are very active on their websites. When they hold conferences featuring

freethought speakers and authors the word spreads quickly by these internet connections and these events are becoming much better attended than in the past. Speakers such as Robert Ingersoll and Clarence Darrow were popular in their day but were never able to reach the wide audience that the “new atheists” reach today. Even individuals can post videos about atheism on sites like youtube. Groups are now advertising themselves on billboards and busses and saying, “Look, here we are and we’re godless!” People are reaching out and connecting; using these new tools in new ways.

Philosophically speaking, Tim Madigan sees no new arguments in favor of atheism from the “new atheists.” Some of the positions that refute religious assertions and promote an atheist or humanist point of view are the same as were espoused by ancient Greek philosophers. There are philosophical arguments that are more sophisticated now, but they are for the most part variations and extrapolations of these well-known and much discussed basic arguments.

The critics of the “new atheism” often claim that the views of atheists are intolerant towards religion and display a form of fundamentalism. Madigan refuted these claims by referencing Bertrand Russell’s book *Why I Am Not A Christian*, which was written in 1957 and very critical of the Christian religion. This is certainly not a new book. Throughout history, writers

have expressed doubts about and criticisms of all religions. It is important to remember here that criticism does not equal intolerance. But in parallel to the many scientists who seem reluctant to debate or even publicly discuss pseudoscience, many proponents of mainstream religions are reluctant to take on extreme conservatives and fundamentalists. If the trend continues, eventually the field is theirs; they can win the debate by default. The claim of atheist fundamentalism is obviously absurd. The definition of fundamentalism is “a religious or political movement based on a literal interpretation of strict adherence to doctrine.” As Tim said, “Atheists advocate questioning everything, even the new atheists.” Since atheism is not a belief system, there is no place for dogma among atheists.

Tim Madigan enjoys the study of Victorian era atheists such as T.H. Huxley and W. K. Clifford. He compares them to Dawkins because they advocated relinquishing useless superstitions while promoting science. They, as Dawkins and Hitchens, were very well spoken and great at debating. One difference between their time and ours is that we have much more scientific evidence of evolution, physics and astronomy along with other disciplines that bolster the standard atheists’ arguments. As we progress and discover more about the natural world, there is less and less room for a “god of the gaps” who fills in the vacant areas of our knowledge. The arguments against the existence of a god have thus become stronger.

Edwin Kagin began the Q and A part of the program by stating that it is his belief that the term “new atheism” was coined by the religious right to set up a straw man, forcing us to defend the “new athe-





ism.” That idea has some merit in that the Christians in this country seem to set themselves up as victims in order to gain an emotional appeal. If they can say, “Poor us, these new atheists are persecuting us,” then they think that they need not respond to rational criticism. They think that they can detour around the argument and still win it by claiming to be victims. Others seemed to think that the media coined the term. It would be interesting to find the origin of the term. The earliest use I found was an article on CNN’s web site from November 9, 2006. The article said this about the topic, “What the New Atheists share is a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.” Our group seemed to agree that it is our

without a god belief and not the vile, despicable and evil people that the religious once claimed them to be (some religionists still do). By advertising their humanity and participation in altruistic and charitable endeavors, the “new atheists” are proving that they are a force for good and that a rational approach to problems will improve everyone’s situation. Could it be that moderate religionists have more in common with the “new atheists” than they at first perceive? If so, they should also feel obliged to critique religion. As Carl Sagan said in his essay, *Does Truth Matter? Science, Pseudoscience, and Civilization*, “But in parallel to the many scientists who seem reluctant to debate or even publicly discuss pseudoscience, many proponents of mainstream religions are reluctant to take on extreme conservatives and fundamentalists. If the trend continues, eventually the field is theirs; they can win the debate by default.”

With the popularity of these “new atheist” books, the growth of atheist groups, the willingness of more individuals to admit their atheism, and the outreach and connection that we see in the media and internet, we seem to be on the crest of a wave that is propelling us into a more rational future.

Thanks to Tim Madigan for a wonderful presentation!

– Reported by John Welte ☚



obligation to criticize irrational thought and dogma. No matter where the term “new atheism” originated, it is fortunate that discussion of these ideas is prominent in today’s society.

Another valid point discussed is the proliferation of celebrity atheists that are willing to come out and talk about their lack of belief today. Even in fictional shows on prime time television, the ideas of atheism and humanism are addressed. The main characters in the dramas “House” and “Bones” are upfront atheists. Shows such as “The Simpsons” and “South Park” often feature criticism of religion. This treatment of non-belief is not only new to TV but also acceptable and popular judging by the high ratings of these programs.

As one of our members mentioned, atheists are slowly losing the stereotypes forced upon them in the past. More people are realizing that atheists are just people



## The Philosophy Of Ambiguity...

- *If man evolved from monkeys and apes, why do we still have monkeys and apes?*
- *What if there were no hypothetical questions?*
- *If someone with multiple personalities threatens to kill himself, is it considered a hostage situation?*
- *Is there another word for synonym?*
- *Where do forest rangers go to ‘get away from it all?’*
- *What do you do when you see an endangered animal eating an endangered plant?*
- *Would a fly without wings be called a walk?*
- *Can vegetarians eat animal crackers?*



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



## Hear! Hear! *Answers in Atheism* at

<[www.answersinatheism.net](http://www.answersinatheism.net)>

**JOIN US!** - We are live on the internet Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 8 pm EST. Our shows are also available as archived audio files, so you can listen later at any time. Please tune in at [www.answersinatheism.net](http://www.answersinatheism.net).

The Answers in Atheism crew

**2010 Partial SCIENCE BOOK CLUB Schedule** - All meetings will be held on the 3rd Sunday every month at 2:30 pm at the downtown Cincinnati Public Library in Room 3A.

We have not yet established a final schedule beyond February 2010.

**Jan. 17, 2010** - *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* by John Cacioppo

**Feb. 21, 2010** - *In Search of Memory: Emergence of a New Science of Mind* by Eric R. Kandel



## Interview On Our Website:

[www.freeinquirygroup.org](http://www.freeinquirygroup.org)

An interview by Michael Shermer of Georgia Purdom, PhD; Research Scientist at Answers in Genesis Creationist Museum in Petersburg, KY. Michael Shermer has a long background in fundamentalist religion, he is the publisher of *The Skeptic* magazine and founder of the Sceptic Society, he holds a doctorate in psychology. His website is [www.sceptic.com](http://www.sceptic.com).

Georgia Purdom has earned a doctorate in molecular genetics from The Ohio State University. She has taught at Nazarene College for six years, and now is a full time researcher at AiG. Their website is [www.answersingenesis.org](http://www.answersingenesis.org). Dr Purdom comments about her studies: ". . . Darwinism, evolution, it never entered the picture. It wasn't even a major part of the class I took . . ."

The interview ranges over several topics, from evolution to Jesus Christ. It provides considerable insight into the thinking of a highly trained creation scientist. Because it is about seven pages long, it is too large for *FigLeaves*. It will be found in the news section of our website, [www.freeinquirygroup.org](http://www.freeinquirygroup.org) as a pdf.

## Cincinnati Atheist Group

Monthly Meetup Announcement

**Monday, 18 January 2010, at 6:30 pm**

at: Joseph-Beth Booksellers, 2692 Madison Road in the Rookwood Pavillion, Cincinnati, OH 45208 (513) 396-8960

### Meetup Description

6:30 - 9:00 \* Please note time \* The bookstore is now closing at 9 PM, so we've shifted the meeting a bit.

Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists and Freethinkers meet here. Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics.

This is a purely social gathering. No agenda, no speaker, no rules of order. If you'd prefer a bit more structure, please check the calendar for lectures, FIG meetings, and other events.

To find us: Go in the front doors of the bookstore and turn left. Enter the Bistro and walk straight back as far as you can go. We're all freethinkers, so we'll look just like you.

The Bistro has a full menu, including vegetarian options. If you like, enjoy dinner, dessert, tea, or a brewski. Restaurant direct line: 513.396.8970 The Bookstore / Bistro is not associated with this meetup group, and will not be able to answer questions. Please use our Message Board to connect with fellow group members. [info@meetup.com](mailto:info@meetup.com).

## Announcing a second new Meetup for The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup Group!

**Sunday, 24 January 2010 at 11:00 AM**

Sunday Brunch at China Town Buffet

1015 State Route 28 Milford, OH 45150

**A place for us to meet** on Sunday mornings and be heathens. At 11a.m. we can all still sleep in late or attend an early mass. It will be at China Town Buffet in Milford. They have good Chinese food with an open atmosphere and plenty of space for us to spread out and eat. Plus we won't be forced outside at 9:30pm to continue our conversations and debates in the snow. Learn more here: <http://www.meetup.com/cincinnatiatheists/calendar/12256403/>



## A Family Adopted!

Thank you to everybody who supported FIG and Cin CoR's Adopt a Family. Through Project Connect, we were connected to the Hunter Family - Gail, Briantennae (13), Brittany (9), and Br'nya (5). For our first service event, we had a huge impact, collecting over \$350 in donations for the family and finding a humanistic way to observe the many end of year celebrations.

With the donations we were able to purchase several outfits for each member of the family picking up a pair of jeans and a mix of shirts and sweaters, socks and underwear. We also purchased some items requested such as the blanket, bath gel and hair ties for Briantannae, and we had books and toys donated for all of the girls. If you check out the picture, you will see all of the items and several of the larger packages have a few pieces of clothing, so we ended up with over 40 different items for the family.

Project Connect, an affiliate of Cincinnati Public Schools, works to keep the child's school situation stable, in spite of the many disruptions that accompany homelessness. In the world of chaos experienced by homeless children, Project Connect helps maintain stability by keeping kids in school. Their family adoption program allows individuals or organizations to adopt a family for the holiday season and provide clothing and household items needed for families that have experienced homelessness in the past year.



### Quote

**Future Old Codger:** "When I was a kid, we had to slave over a microwave for popcorn. It didn't just float into our mouths while we watched movies on our iPhone!"

*Unquote:*



### Quote

The "house of credit cards" economy based on trickle down has gone belly up, and we must face another sadder truth. - Swami Beyondananda

*Unquote:*



## Cell Phones Are Found To Emit Nonsense.

From San Francisco to Maine there is a campaign to require cancer warning labels on cell phones. *Fact:* cell phone radiation doesn't cause cancer. Cancer agents break chemical bonds, creating mutant strands of DNA. Microwave photons cannot break chemical bonds. This is not debatable. In 1989, Paul Brodeur, a staff writer for the New Yorker, claimed in a series of sensational articles that electromagnetic fields from power lines cause childhood leukemia. Brodeur, however, understood none of this and when virtually every scientist agreed that it was impossible, Brodeur took their unanimity as proof of a massive cover-up. Other anti-science know-nothings followed Brodeur's lead, shifting their attack to cell phone radiation. Cell phones have since spread to almost the entire population, but with no corresponding increase in brain cancer. Case closed.

- *What's New* by Robert Park, 25 December 2009

## Maine Legislature To Take Up Nonsense Cell-Phone Warning Labels.

State Rep. Andrea Boland (D) is pushing for the state to become the first to require cell phone makers to put warnings on packaging like those on cigarettes. The bill was filed in October but is on a fast track. It's considered "emergency legislation" because there are 900,000 cell phones in the state. Rep. Bolden's concern was based on a 2006 study in Sweden showing a correlation between brain tumors and heavy cell phone use. However, a Danish study that came out in December found that the rates of brain cancer in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden had remained stable from 1974 to 2003. Such studies are possible in Scandinavia where record-keeping is an obsession. If the effect is real, the frequency of brain cancers should have turned up sharply in 2000. An estimated 277 million people use cell phones in the US. I doubt if such a label would reduce that number significantly. Scientific truth becomes something to be negotiated.

- *What's New* by Robert. Park, 8 January 2010





## More Taxes = More Democracy

by: Christian Chavagneux | *Alternatives Economiques*;  
8 December 2009, translation: Leslie Thatcher

For conservatives who go around repeating that more taxes are always equivalent to less individual freedom, two researchers recall Montesquieu's opposite teaching. And demonstrate, with the support of the numbers, that the French philosopher's observation still holds true two and a half centuries later.

In Book XIII of his work, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu explains the following principle: "General Rule: one may raise higher taxes in proportion to subjects' freedom; and one is forced to moderate them to the extent that servitude increases." In other words, only democracies may allow themselves to raise significant taxes and high levels of taxation are a sign of democracy.

Wanting to have a clear conscience, André Barilari and Thomas Brand collected statistical data on the levels of compulsory taxation (from the IMF) and the level of individual freedoms (from Freedom House) for a group of 130 countries to see whether the correlation held. The study is published in the latest issue of the *Revue française de finances publiques* (No. 108, October 2009).

The result is that Montesquieu's rule still holds: the greater the share of taxation in GDP, the more democratic a country is. The authors sort the countries into three groups:

- Those in which the fiscal share of national wealth is relatively weak, less than 12-15 percent, are often dictatorial countries.
- Those in which the fiscal share is relatively more significant, between 12-15 percent and 25 percent of GDP, are semi-democratic.
- Those in which the share of taxes is at least 28 percent of GDP are almost always democratic.

To introduce the recognition of criteria for social equity and equality of opportunity, the two researchers subsequently resorted to the United Nations Development Program's index of human development. There also, the correlation holds perfectly and one finds more or less the same three country groupings.

How is one to explain these connections between

the level of taxation, development and democracy? The two authors take off from an early article by Joseph Schumpeter on "The Crisis of the Fiscal State," originally published in 1918 and reprinted in *Impérialisme et classes sociales* (republished in the Champs Flammarion collection; an article, let me say in passing, in which Schumpeter shows that he was aware of tax havens! A subject he unfortunately did not cover, since he was concerned with the capitalist system as a whole "and not with the concrete problem of the state per se, we can, in fact, not take into account the tendency of capital and labor to migrate towards countries or sectors where fiscal pressure is lightest." And that's how one sidesteps an important subject!).

Reinterpreting the Austrian economist, the two researchers emphasize that taxation "materializing the separation between the individual and the state is also the indicator of a social system that allows the individual to exist ... Objectively, taxation is the clearest sign of the preservation of a space for individual freedoms." Once his taxes are paid, each person is free to organize his life as he proposes - which is not the case for those who practice fraud and tax evasion ... This reasoning makes the connection between taxes and individual freedom, but says nothing about the connections between the level of taxation and the level of democracy. Could one say, for example, that a country with a compulsory tax rate of 80 percent is more democratic than a country with a 40 percent tax rate? No, the authors respond. The state needs resources to finance "existential" public spending (defense, security, justice) development spending (infrastructure, education, research, environment ...) and the spending that allows it to assure social cohesion. Beyond that, according to the two researchers, "a layer of obesity" of unproductive expenses (inconsequential redistribution and bureaucratic inefficiencies) develops. As the study wisely states, an estimate of the respective shares of the different kinds of spending "may result only from an analysis by country combining appraisals of public policies with audits of institutional performance, informed by sufficiently detailed performance comparisons."

There is nothing obvious about the definition of an optimal tax threshold from economic, social and political perspectives. Nonetheless, it is certain that the more a country embarks on a race to the fiscal bottom, the more it distances itself from the democratic norm. ☞



## A Disaster For Atheism

Dick Gross, *Sidney Morning Herald*, 10 December 2009

Dick Gross is an atheist. His latest book, *A Secular View Of The Crucifixion* could paradoxically make a great Christmas present.

Richard Dawkins and his comrade in atheistic arms, Christopher Hitchens, are my intellectual heroes. They write brilliant tomes full of coruscating wit and insightful wisdom about religion and atheism. Their books sell by the truckload and they have had a significant influence on the intellectual landscape of their day.

Their books are scary both because their cerebral fires burn so brightly and because they are so mean and vituperative. When I say mean, I really mean it. Dawkins damns religious belief as a “delusion” and Hitchens says faith “poisons everything”. Atheists I meet adore them. They lap up the abuse and repeat parts verbatim, as if intoning a divine prayer, with vengeful smiles on their dials. They are part of the so-called “new atheism” but in reality these authors are not that new. Their intellectual ancestor, the utilitarian John Stuart Mill, was lampooned by Charles Dickens as Mr Thomas Gradgrind in *Hard Times* in 1852. Atheism is not novel. It is venerable. And that is the point.

Atheism, tentatively founded in the 18th century Enlightenment, has been hitherto a bit of a fizzer. Don't be fooled by the public stature of Dawkins and Hitchens, the world is still a deeply religious place. On any measure, 85 per cent of the world believes in some faith or other. So what is wrong here?

There are four main problems which the Dynamic Duo either ignore or exacerbate. The main one is summed up by my mantra: “The truth, though interesting, is beside the point.” There are many situations where the human animal doesn't appreciate or seek the truth. Examples go from bad news stories, to political reality or the eternal uxorial question “Does my bum look big in this?” No one really appreciates the honest answer, “Yes, you look like an obese heifer whose carcass could feed three continents.” The universal answer given is, “You look sublime”. Dishonesty is marital glue.

*Atheists, like me, bang on and on about truth and evidence when humanity quite blithely could not care less. For we humans hunger after many things other than the truth. We crave consolation in the face of death. We desire solace for our suffering. We need communities in which to belong. We yearn for involving ritual. Does a repudiation of God deliver on these needs and desires? No, for such*

*tedious arguments of disparagement do nothing to assist humanity with these issues.*

But religions do and often do it quite well. Faith is social glue. Sometimes bizarre and destructive glue but glue nonetheless. So really Dawkins and Hitchens work is a distraction and an irrelevance to those ensconced in a cozy faith. It probably just entrenches the faith.

The second issue is related to the first. It is easy to destroy something but harder to build it up. We don't need yet another rebuttal but a positive tract, which, in a fun accessible way, creates a beguiling alternative to supernatural faith. I have had a go at writing a godless gospel and it is very hard. It is a far more intellectually demanding task that repudiation. We need them to do more of this sort of intellectual grunt. Adulterating the words of the great frog philosopher, “It's so easy being mean.” What is much harder is being constructive.

The third issue is organisational. More difficult than writing yet another book is building and nourishing an establishment that serves the people who don't believe but still have needs. Any drop-kick can write a book. Even I have done that. But to set up, maintain and grow an international alternative organisation to faith is much more intellectually difficult. Atheism has no infrastructure or corporate entities. It is bereft and organisationally bankrupt. We want our heroes not to waste their time pontificating in yet another book but do the real hard yards in establishing our infrastructure. John Wesley understood this. The Jesuits understand this. The New Atheists don't or can't.

Finally, if we can't create our own, then we have to merge with the enemy. Within the broad church of faith are many who are sympathetic and quite godless. This issue is deserving of a blog of its own but let me quickly assert that there are many God-bothering atheists in churches, synagogues and mosques. They belong to religions not for some supernatural God. They are there for the three C words, to wit, continuity, community and culture. They are our natural allies. So we have to grow out of just bashing faith.

We have to mature beyond criticism and work with tolerant people of diluted belief to see what we have in common and share infrastructure and ideas. That whole process is utterly undermined by the belligerence of New Atheism. Dawkins and Hitchens, and other warriors, are actually an impediment to the growth of unbelief in large parts of our community. Counter-intuitive though it may be, our best and brightest advocates may be our main bulwarks to progress. What do you think? Is this fair to the Dynamic Duo? ☘



## Everybody's A Blasphemer

4 January 2010; Herb Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

Atheists and others are protesting a new law in Ireland, under which a person can be found guilty of blasphemy if “he or she publishes or utters matter that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion.” The penalty is a fine of up to about \$35,000. Should Ireland or any nation have a law against blasphemy?

I'm certainly no fan of that old time religion, but I do prefer that old time blasphemy to the new version that purports to be more tolerant. The old kind criminalized critiques of the one True religion, with a capital T. The new Irish kind criminalizes critiques of any religion.

Those of us who point out that emperors of all religions have no clothes continue to be considered blasphemous by any standard. But what are we to do about those poor believers required by their religion to blaspheme against other religions? Those who believe that the New Testament is to be taken literally blaspheme against Jews when they recite Mathew 27:25: “The blood of Jesus will be on all Jews and on their children.” Those who endorse the First Commandment, “You should not have any gods but Yahweh,” are blaspheming against those who promote Jesus, Allah, or one of the 7000 other god candidates. In fact, I'm blaspheming against Orthodox Jews by violating the Third Commandment, the one against taking the Lord's name in vain. Technically, I should only write G-d.

By such criteria, I doubt there's a writer on this panel who's not a blasphemer. But wait, there's an out! You are only guilty of blasphemy when thin-skinned religionists display bad manners. The crime of blasphemy has little to do with what you say, and lots to do with how others feel: so insulted and outraged by it that they want you silenced and punished. In other words, those uncivil libertarians opposed to free speech determine what is blasphemy.

Who among us believes that every Sunday people literally eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus Christ, that the angel Moroni led Joseph Smith to a magic stone which helped him translate gold plates from Egyptian

hieroglyphics into English, and that the Qur'an was given to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel? Some may believe one of these stories, but nobody believes all three. Everyone thinks at least two of these three religious stories are foolish. And speaking of foolish, I've often been given a biblical explanation from Psalm 14:1 for why I am: “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.” I'm not outraged by such a comment, but I would be outraged were someone punished for telling me what they believed to be true. Atheists don't insist on the right not to be insulted, just on the right to be treated as others.

Many new religions sprang from blaspheming old religions, from questioning or criticizing the “sacred.” The dominant religion in this country was a protest religion, reflected in its name, Protestant. If I said we would be better off if we had no sacred cows, that could be construed as a criticism of the Hindu religion. And if I said that blasphemy shouldn't be punished because it's a victimless crime, well that, too, could be considered blasphemous.

### CFI Blasphemy contest winners and honorable mention:

Faith is no reason

(Ken Peters)

There is no religion like no religion

(Daniel Boles of Thailand)

I wouldn't even follow your god on twitter

(Michael Hein of South Carolina)

The reason religious beliefs need protection from

ridicule is that they are ridiculous

(Michael Nugent)

I survived the god virus

(Perry Bulwer of Brit. Columbia)

Think outside the pew

(Gerry Stearns)

GodLess is more

(Harout Markarian)

A fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” A wise man shouts it from the rooftops

(Mark Palmer)

Jesus has all the answers to your vague, non-specific questions to which you already know the answer.

(J. Laudig; George Tipton)

God is incredible

⌘



## BOOK REVIEW II

*Render Unto Darwin: Philosophical Aspects Of The Christian Right's Crusade Against Science,*

by James H. Fetzer  
(Chicago: Open Court, 2007)  
Review by Dr Harriet Hall, MD

This book starts out well but ends badly. It is an awkward compilation of three different subjects: evolution science, morality, and politics. The science is well done. Fetzer begins by explaining the difference between science and religion, the difference between testable, modifiable hypotheses and untestable, rigid beliefs. He explains evolution and shows why it is not in conflict with religion but only with limited fundamentalist interpretations of religion. He shows why "intelligent design" is not science. So far, so good.

He is on shakier ground when he gets into morality. He says we are morally entitled to hold a belief only if we're logically entitled to hold it. I agree, but there are two problems: (1) he simply presents this as a given, without trying to justify it philosophically and (2) different philosophers frequently disagree about what beliefs we are logically entitled to hold. Fetzer seems certain that he is logically entitled to beliefs that support the legalization of a wide variety of practices including abortion, stem-cell research, cloning, prostitution, pot-smoking, and flag-burning. Other philosophers might argue against those practices, thinking they are logically entitled to a different opinion.

He evaluates eight different theories of morality: subjectivism, family values, religious ethics, cultural relativism, ethical egoism, limited utilitarianism, classic utilitarianism, and a deontological theory according to which an action is right when it involves respecting others and treating them as ends, never merely as means. Deontology holds that some acts are intrinsically immoral in themselves, regardless of their consequences. Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative is an example of deontological ethics.

He asks if there are criteria of adequacy that might be employed to evaluate moral theories akin to those of inference to the best explanation for empirical theories. Then he pulls three criteria of adequacy out of his hat. For instance, the first criterion is that an acceptable theory must not reduce to the corrupt principle that *might makes right*. I agree that might doesn't make right, but a philosopher

should know that he can't just declare something like this without showing arguments to justify it. This criterion amounts to an assumption that one of the possible theories it is intended to evaluate is *a priori* wrong.

He concludes that the deontological theory of morality is the only justifiable one. Then he uses that theory to show that the Christian Right's position on issues like abortion is immoral. His purpose is to criticize one small branch of religion, not to evaluate the moralities of all world religions.

I found Michael Shermer's scientific approach to morality far more satisfying. In his book *The Science of Good and Evil* he suggests that an innate moral sense evolved in humans because it offered a survival advantage. We instinctively feel that certain things like murder are wrong; then we try to justify our feelings by reasoning about moral theories. While there is no "absolute morality" there is a transcendent morality, a joint endeavor of humanity that elevates our moral instincts into a greater project. He offers a modified Golden Rule: don't just do unto others as you would want to be done unto, but do unto others as they would want you to do unto them. He has a pyramid of morality showing that we become more moral as we extend our moral sphere to include larger groups, from individual to family to strangers to society to biosphere.

The last part of Fetzer's book was a big disappointment to me. He descends into a diatribe against the Bush administration, big corporations, and other alleged demons. He sees an alliance between "the rich" and religious fundamentalism that is turning America into a fascist state with the goal of world domination. What started out as an objective look at science, evolution, and religion is corrupted into a platform to express personal political opinions. I found this an offensive intrusion that I could not have expected from the title and subtitle of the book.

Science can do much to inform political decisions. We should base public policy on scientific knowledge, not on religious beliefs. We should indeed "render unto Darwin" the respect that science deserves. Fetzer might have written a very valuable book to further that goal. He didn't.

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Dr Harriet Hall, MD is a retired family physician and Air Force Colonel living in Puyallup, Washington. She writes about alternative medicine, pseudoscience, quackery, and critical thinking. She is a contributing editor to both *Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer*, an advisor to the Quackwatch website, and an editor of ScienceBasedMedicine.org, where she writes an article every Tuesday. She recently published *Women Aren't Supposed to Fly: The Memoirs of a Female Flight Surgeon*. Her website is [www.skepdoc.info](http://www.skepdoc.info).

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Welcome To The Homeland:  
A Journey To The Rural Heart Of  
America's Conservative Revolution*  
by Brian Mann  
(Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2006)

The major political division in the United States is not between white and black, or between men and women, or between affluent and poor, but between urban and rural sections of the nation. Brian Mann explains to us the life of the traditional, rural, religious folks he calls homelander, who are conservative in outlook and mostly vote Republican, and contrasts them to the mixed population of urban folk, who tend to be liberals and vote Democratic. The author describes homelander as a separate minority. They are mostly white, predominantly Christian, and pride themselves on their independence, which makes them quintessentially and traditionally the center of our political landscape. Yet, they really represent the American past. The country has been changing since Roosevelt and the Second World War, so that traditional Americans have created a kind of second, parallel culture. "Millions of Americans simply stepped out of the mainstream and watched the rest of the culture go roaring off." (p.8) They are the innocents described by Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser, and satirized by Sinclair Lewis.

According to Mann, homelander and metros tend to look at each other across a broad and baffling chasm. They have different takes on reality, on tax cuts, public prayer, abortion, gun ownership, hunting or the environment, alcohol and marijuana and other drugs. It is like we're living in different countries, getting news from different sources, and believing and liking different people. Metros are apt to tolerate gays and support same sex marriage, while homelander would consider the tradition of marriage only for men and women, and a cornerstone for family and American society.

Homelander have supported Bush who took his support very much from rural districts and from the ex-urban suburbs to which traditional minded folks have fled. Republicans have advanced tradition-minded politi-

cians to leadership roles. Metros tend to hate the fiery culture warrior type politician like Arme y or DeLay. On the whole the Republicans have adopted the small-town conservatism of the homelander.

Mann points out that homelander values were American cultural values until the depression and certainly in the nineteenth century. "Ranking civil order above freedom, propriety and restraint over self-expression, and faith over intellect were ideals that defined the broader American culture until quite recently." (p.16) This was "an America where divorce, abortion, unwed mothers, homosexuality, integrated schools, and interracial dating were all simply unthinkable, well outside the pale of civilized behavior."(p. 16) And homelander do not appreciate the urban media, novelists, movies or TV making fun of them or holding their behavior up to ridicule.

How can the Republicans build a majority by relying on the rural areas, small towns, and ex-urban suburbs? Mann goes into the numbers, the history, and constitution in some detail. Start with the fact that neither the first Clinton, nor the first Bush II election gave the winner a majority of the votes cast. Clinton was elected with a minority because Perot drew votes from the Republican President. The same can be said about Nader throwing Florida to Bush. He also had fewer votes than Gore; but won in the electoral college, because the Constitution favors the states with smaller populations, which are mostly rural. This discrepancy is most extreme in representation in the Senate, as every State gets two Senators regardless of size or population. In consequence States with only 18 percent of the population control half the Senate. The author also examines how redistricting and gerrymandering has favored Republican victories in the House. But, cities growing by immigration, and the increasing activism of African-Americans and Hispanics, who don't share the rural, white, protestant myths, make the Republicans face a rising demographic tide, which eventually will sweep them from office.

– Wolf Roder ☚

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Quote

The four horsemen of the modern apocalypse:  
Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin,  
Sigmund Freud.

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. *Atheism Remix:*  
*A Christian Confronts the New Atheists* (2008) p. 19.

Unquote  
.....



No Jan. Potluck is scheduled  
No Feb. Potluck is scheduled



January Meeting  
Tuesday Jan. 26 at 7:00 PM



**FIG Leaves**  
P.O. Box 53174  
Cincinnati, OH 45253

# FIG

## Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. (FIG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists.

Though most of our members are secular humanists, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.



*To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.*

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail - [figmessage at gofigger dot org](mailto:figmessage@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at [gofigger.org](http://gofigger.org) or [freeinquirygroup.org](http://freeinquirygroup.org).