

FIG LEAVES

Volume 15 Issue 7

July 2006

July FIG Meeting: Sunday, 23 June 2:00 PM (note date change)

The Saga of Freethought and Its Pioneers-- Religious Critique and Social Reform

Fred Edwords is the Director of Communications at the American Humanist Society and serves as Board Chair for Camp Quest.

Drawing from ancient Greek and Roman writers who had boldly criticized the religions of their day, and drawing as well from Elizabethan era authors in Great Britain and on the continent, the French *philosophes* and other eighteenth century Enlightenment thinkers launched the modern freethought movement. As with the Enlightenment itself, freethought wasn't merely about critique of religion but also about social reform. Freethinkers challenged the divine right of kings, sought an end to cruel and unusual punishment, and advanced civil and social rights--efforts which reached their peak, and excess, during the French Revolution. This tradition of critique and social reform continued through the nineteenth century in ways that led to modernism in religion and to a broad range of social reform movements including those for liberal studies in public schools, sex education, birth control, women's rights, anti-slavery, animal protection, child protection, poverty relief, and improved labor conditions. In this context, the social reform work of a leading Virginia Ethical Culturist, Moncure Conway, was notable, leading to a famous Ohio community of former slaves. One prominent freethought cause was anti-censorship--an effort which has extended from the late eighteenth century to the present time. But there were downsides and absurd offshoots as well: including eugenics, utopian experiments, Bolshevism, and even spiritualism and Theosophy.

August Meeting: *PICNIC & SWIM PARTY!*

Our annual Picnic & Swim Party will be at the Kagins during the weekend of August 25 or 26. Exact date & time will be in the next issue of FIG Leaves. Mark your calendars! Plan to bring a dish to share and don't forget to bring your swimsuit and towel. The pool will be open!

September Meeting: Tim Madigan will come in September and speak during the weekend of Oktoberfest - September 16th & 17th.

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Events

(Watch the dates!)

July Meeting

Sunday, 23 July 2006
2:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio

August Picnic

At the home of Edwin & Helen
Kagin - TBD - weekend of
August 25/26 - Bring a dish! and
don't forget your swimsuit!

September Potluck

At the home of - TBA
If you are interested in hosting a
"Potluck," September is available!

The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

When: Tuesday, July 18 at 8:00PM

Where: Joseph-Beth Booksellers; 2692 Madison Rd. Rookwood Pavillion
Cincinnati OH 45207, Phone: 513-396-8966

To see who's coming and to see more event details:

http://atheists.meetup.com/90/events/4939320/t/cv1_ve



June Meeting...

The Errors, Contradictions, and Fallacies of the Bible.

by Dennis McKinsey

Dennis started his talk by recounting how he got involved. He was teaching High School in the 1960's and he had a student who was a fundamentalist and questioned everything he was being taught and he used the Bible as his source. After a little of this Dennis finally lost interest. But about 1975 he decided to read the Bible in its entirety. He secured a Parallel Bible, which contained a number of different versions in parallel sequence. He started off with the King James version of 1611. This version is written in Shakespearean English and was sometimes difficult to understand. He could then switch to the Revised Standard, which used later, more modern language. If he still couldn't understand a particular passage he could go to a Modern Language version or to *The Living Bible* which is nothing but a paraphrase and not a translation.

In doing this reading and research he filled six large notebooks with notes and references. In looking at this accumulation, he thought, "I should do something with this." So he began to call the radio stations. Several of them gave him an opportunity to give short talks about his research. They initially thought that an atheist probably didn't know too much about the subject. Listeners began calling in and soon the switchboards lit up like a Christmas trees. The callers for the most part were not atheists or agnostics but religious fundamentalists. That piqued his interest even more. He began to call other stations and soon found himself debating several ministers on the radio. Some ministers would show up with a Bible in one hand and a cigarette in the other and indicate dismissively, "Give it your best shot."

In 1983, he started a periodical newsletter with subscriptions from all over the country. One subscriber was Paul Kurtz, the founder of the Council for Secular Humanism, and head of Prometheus Publishing, who suggested Dennis write a book. Prometheus published *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* and *Biblical Errancy: A Reference Guide*.

The *Reference Guide* is like a debater's handbook, subjects are arranged alphabetically, errors, fallacies, whatever you want are in there, and it virtually drains the Bible empty. When missionaries come to my door-- Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons-- I don't turn them away, I invite them in and lock the door. Then we begin to discuss any topics which appear in the Reference Guide. Turning these people away does not win a great victory, rather it misses an opportunity to give these people valuable insights into their own scriptures. Call it a Sunday school lesson in reverse. It may be the only opportunity they will ever have for a rational discussion.

Let me give some examples of the topics we discuss. From teaching I have learned it is best to "keep it simple." The more complicated you allow an argument to become the more people you are going to lose. I rarely go outside the Bible, or bring information into the Bible. Thus, I avoid any discussion of historical evidence, or get involved in the evolution debate, or other extraneous issues. I find outside issues are resisted by believers, who will say: "I've got the Bible, what else is there?"

I use the Bible against the Bible and this ties the arguers in knots. I cite something in Deuteronomy saying that something in Exodus is a lie or something in Mark or John saying that something in Matthew is false. One thing I learned about the Bible is that the book is horribly repetitious. Deuteronomy repeats Exodus, 1st and 2nd Chronicles repeats Samuel and Kings, Proverbs is repetitious, the Gospels are nothing but stories redone. Some



FIG Leaves - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to:

figleaves@fuse.net;

or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 19034, Cincinnati, OH 45219. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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examples are (2 Sam 8:4) David took 700 men vs. 7,000 (1 Chron.18: 4); David slew the men of 700 chariots and 40,000 horsemen (2 Sam. 10:18) vs. David slew 7,000 Syrians who fought in chariots and 40,000 footmen (I Chron.19: 18).

On the cross Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me." (Matt.27:46). These are not the words of a man who went to the Cross willingly to die for our sins. These are the words of a man who can think of a hundred places he would rather be. They certainly are not the words of someone who has the situation under control. How could Jesus be our Savior when he couldn't even save himself? What does that have to do with justice? It's a magnanimous act. But, He didn't commit the crime, so why did he have to pay the penalty?

Biblical language can be gross. Here are a few examples: from Deuteronomy 23:1-2 and this is a direct quote from the Bible:"He that is wounded in the stones or have his privy member cut off shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord. A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord."

With respect to life after death we refer to Ecclesiastes 9:5 "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten." But this is even stronger Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 "For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth the beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go into one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth downward and the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth?"

Among beliefs crucial to Christianity few are of greater importance than that of the Resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15:14 "And if Christ be not risen, then our preaching is vain and your faith is also vain." Thus Paul went so far as to allege that the very foundation of Christianity rests upon its occurrence. Yet other people were raised from the dead before Jesus. And Adam was never born he came into being as an adult. Elisha never died but was drawn up to heaven alive. So by the time that Jesus arose from the dead this was a rather common occurrence.

The way the Bible handles the treatment of women is close to shocking. Dennis said the one of the things that irritates him most is to hear women defend the Bible. It is like

a slave talking about how great slavery is. 1 Corinth.34 "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church."

In conclusion Dennis made was a list of things that God does taken from "his book" God does all the following things:

- * He creates evil
- * He makes false statements
- * He rewards liars
- * He rewards the fool and the transgressor
- * He rewards indecency
- * He spreads dung on people's faces
- * He makes false prophecies
- * He changes his mind
- * He kills people
- * He's often jealous
- * He repents
- * He practices injustices
- * He sanctions slavery
- * He punishes bastards for being illegitimate
- * He punishes children for their fathers' deeds
- * He punishes people for following his orders
- * He supports human sacrifices

This is only a partial list. Dennis insisted he will back every statement on this list with quotes from the actual book.-

Reported by George R. Maurer

Quote

The latest snack fad in Quebec: bags of communion wafers. "My son can eat a whole bag while he's watching TV," said one man. "He's had more of them outside of church than he ever did inside."

Not everyone likes the trend, of course. "They're not distinguishing between the body of Christ and something you nibble on at home," complained a former Catholic missionary. "We don't respect anything. Nothing is sacred." But sales are still growing. "They melt in your mouth, and they're not fattening," said one woman. "Since I'm Catholic, this reminds us of mass." Of course, she could go to mass instead. Next they will be drinking wine! (*Toronto Globe and Mail*)

.....**Unquote!**



In Memoriam - Nurit Bowman

Nurit Bowman had a wonderful and fulfilling life. After making sure her three daughters matured into strong independent young women, she started a new journey of her own. Nurit looked around Cincinnati to see what it had to offer her. She chose to spend her time with numerous diverse groups including the Association for Rational Thought, where she could challenge everyone's ideas from the paranormal to the scientific method; the Sunday Night Singles of Hyde Park, where she lounged on houseboat trips and dined in various restaurants exploring Cincinnati cuisine; the Free Inquiry Group where she could let loose, even walking on hot coals; she was always up for anything. She helped form a new congregation, giving it its name: Beit Chavarim, meaning "House of Friends".

Nurit was born in Israel and raised in Springfield, MA where she lived with her father Walter, mother Lotte, and younger sister Deena. She spent her free time as a young woman cleaning chickens on a Kibbutz in Israel and taking photos for the student Newspaper at UMass Amherst. After marrying Steven Bowman the couple moved frequently to various locations including Israel, Greece, and England. Nurit touched many lives around the globe. She was someone who could turn a bad time around and find something good in everything.

In the summer of 2000, Nurit gave away her middle daughter Yael at her wedding on a beach on Cape Cod. Shortly thereafter she was diagnosed with breast cancer. During her battle with breast cancer she never skipped a beat with family, friends and work. Two years passed, and Nurit found herself hopping a 6am flight in order to help Yael give birth to her first grandchild, Sofia. Just a year and a half after that joyous occasion, she learned of her diagnosis of Urothelial Cancer.

Nurit moved to St. Petersburg Florida in November 2005 to live with her eldest daughter, Aviva and her boyfriend Bryan. Her youngest daughter Daphna also moved to St. Petersburg to be close to her mother. While Aviva made sure that she was cared for and happy, Daphna was there to keep her spirits up and explore the beaches and architecture in St. Pete. Although she was in St. Petersburg to undergo treatment, Nurit continued to enjoy life and took many photos of her surroundings. In April, she went on a cruise to Mexico where she enjoyed the on-board comedians, musicals, and people watching. Yael and Sofia continued to visit often; as did Nurit's sister Deena. On Memorial Day weekend Nurit traveled to Massachusetts to visit her father, stepmother Ruth, and attend her cousin David's 60th birthday party.

In June, her dearest friends from Cincinnati-Dottie, Holly, Ruthie, and Nancy came to visit. She had just been released from St. Anthony's hospital but insisted that they all go out to dinner at her favorite burger restaurant, Chattaway's.

Up until the very end of her life Nurit was surrounded by people who loved her dearly. On July 4th 2006 Nurit died at home with her three daughters and sister at her side. Always the fighter, she battled her cancer until the very end. We will always love and remember her forever as a friend, mother, grandmother, sister, and daughter (and dare-devil). Even though she is gone, her spirit will live on in each and every one of us.



Nurit, we will miss you!



Letters To The Editor



Dear Friends,

I want to thank you sincerely for publishing my poem "Blunder" in the last *FIG Leaves*, as well as the others you've published. It brings me great happiness to share my work (thoughts) with any who care to read them!

I enjoy your publication greatly! Thanks for all you've done and are doing to help people think and weed out the myths and superstitions that cause all the misery in life!

My heart is broken since my mom died. She was my dearest friend and biggest fan! Eight of us came to Oregon in 1990: Frank, Mila, Dorothy, 3 cats and two dogs. I'm the only one left of those. But I still have 4 cats (old) who found me in OR. I've decided that when they are gone, I will go too. As John Keats said, "I'm half in love with easeful death."

Sincere Thanks, your friend
Dorothy B. Thompson
June 23, 2006



Being in Love with Easeful Death
by Dorothy B. Thompson with help from John Keats

I wish to die before I wake,
And hope I do, for my own sake.
I've lived quite long, and done my best.
And now I seek a long, long rest.
Not lightly do I think this way.
It's foremost in my thoughts each day.
My heart is broken, body too.
Should I not decide what to do?
I tell my plans to but a few.
But I'm alone in what I do!
"I'm half in love with easeful death,"
John Keats has said with earnest breath.
It's rich to die, my heart compels.
No priests, no prayers, or tolling bells.
At last when on my bed I've lain,
I'll "cease the midnight with no pain."

Plan your year end visit to India now: Fourth International Rationalist Conference (26-29 December 2006)

Towards the end of the year, on 26-29 December 2006, we are planning to hold the fourth International Rationalist Conference at New Delhi.

The 1st International Rationalist Conference was held at New Delhi in 1995, the 2nd at Trivandrum in 2000 and the 3rd at New Delhi in 2002. Delegates and speakers from all over the world participated in these conferences - among them Paul Kurtz, Lewis Wolpert, Jim Herrick, Jean Claude-Pecker, Rob Tielman, Fons Elders, Indumati Parikh, Lavanam, Jan Loeb Eisler, Bill Cooke, Levi Fragell, Roy Brown, Rob Buitenbergh, Pekka Elo, Kjartan Selnes, Richard Lead, Nehal Karim, V.K.Madhavankutty, Richard Saunders, Jane Winnie Wilson, Lorentz Stavrum, Iain Middleton, Ajoy Roy, Amardeo Sarma, Lasse Siren, Mikael Goransson, Lars Gunnar Lingas, Arild Stensland, Jaana Yrjonsuuri, Bjorg Haaland, Tove Beate Pedersen, Abu Abraham, Raja Mohan, Roberto La Ferla, Perti Holopainen, Patricia Lopez and others.

More details about the 4th International Rationalist Conference will follow in the next bulletins. Reserve the dates 26-29 December 2006 and ensure your participation in the forthcoming New Delhi conference. Please contact: <Conference@rationalistinternational.net>

Quote

Islam and Democracy.

Democracy is a stranger in the House of God. Guard yourself against those who say that the notion of democracy exists in Islam. There is no democracy in Islam. There exists only the *shura* [consultation] with its rules and constraints . . . We are not a nation that thinks in terms of majority-minority. The majority does not express the truth. . . .

Multi-partyism is not tolerated unless it agrees with the single framework of Islam . . . If people vote against the Law of God . . . this is nothing other than blasphemy. The *ulama* [religious scholars] will order the death of the offenders who have substituted their authority for God.

- Sheikh Ali Belhadj as quoted in *The Fate of Africa* by Martin Meredith, p. 453

Unquote



Spare the Rod and Spoil the Child.

After a 12-year-old girl in Elgin, Ill, told her mother that she had been molested by an older man, the woman took her daughter to see the pastor of the First Missionary Baptist Church. The minister, the unnamed mother says, said the girl was lying and tried to get the girl to recant by beating her buttocks with a three-foot wooden stick, the mother says. The girl's beatings continued for several months until the mother finally decided she must be telling the truth and went to police. Investigators say DNA evidence proves the girl's allegations.

The minister has been charged with battery; Matthew E. Resh, 33, the alleged perpetrator, was charged with five counts of predatory criminal sexual assault. The mother says she went along with the beatings because the preacher was a "man of faith" and a former police officer. He is still being backed by church members, and he wrote on the church's web site that the Bible is "pure, perfect, inerrant and infallible." (*Chicago Tribune, Elgin Courier News*)

A quick note about the story: "Spare the Rod" and "Spoil the Child;" quite a few people think this is a saying from the Bible; I'm not one of them. The closest is Proverbs 13:24, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him," and Proverbs 23:13/14, "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. If you beat him with the rod you will save his life from hell."

Indeed, "Spare the rod and spoil the child" is a line by the 17th century English poet Samuel Butler. In his *Hudibras*, which was first published in 1663 (part 2 in 1664), he wrote:

If matrimony and hanging go
By dest'ny, why not whipping too?
What med'cine else can cure the fits
Of lovers when they lose their wits?
Love is a boy by poets stil'd;
Then spare the rod and spoil the child.

That doesn't sound much like a religious tract giving advice to parents, does it? Rather, *Hudibras* is an epic satire deriding competition in religion, and especially belittling the Protestant fundamentalists (aka "Puritans") of the time. *Wikipedia* notes "the work remained popular for several centuries as a warning against the zealotry during the Civil



War period of English history although it has lately gone out of fashion." Um, yeah: I guess the world no longer needs any warnings about zealous fundamentalism, eh?

<http://bulfinch.EnglishAtheist.org/hud/HudibrasIndex.html> has the full (and illustrated) text of *Hudibras*. If you want to see the "spare the rod" portion in fuller context, the above portion is from Part 2, Canto 1.

-- © Randy Cassingham in *This is True*, 11 June 2006

Let us excommunicate stem cell researchers!

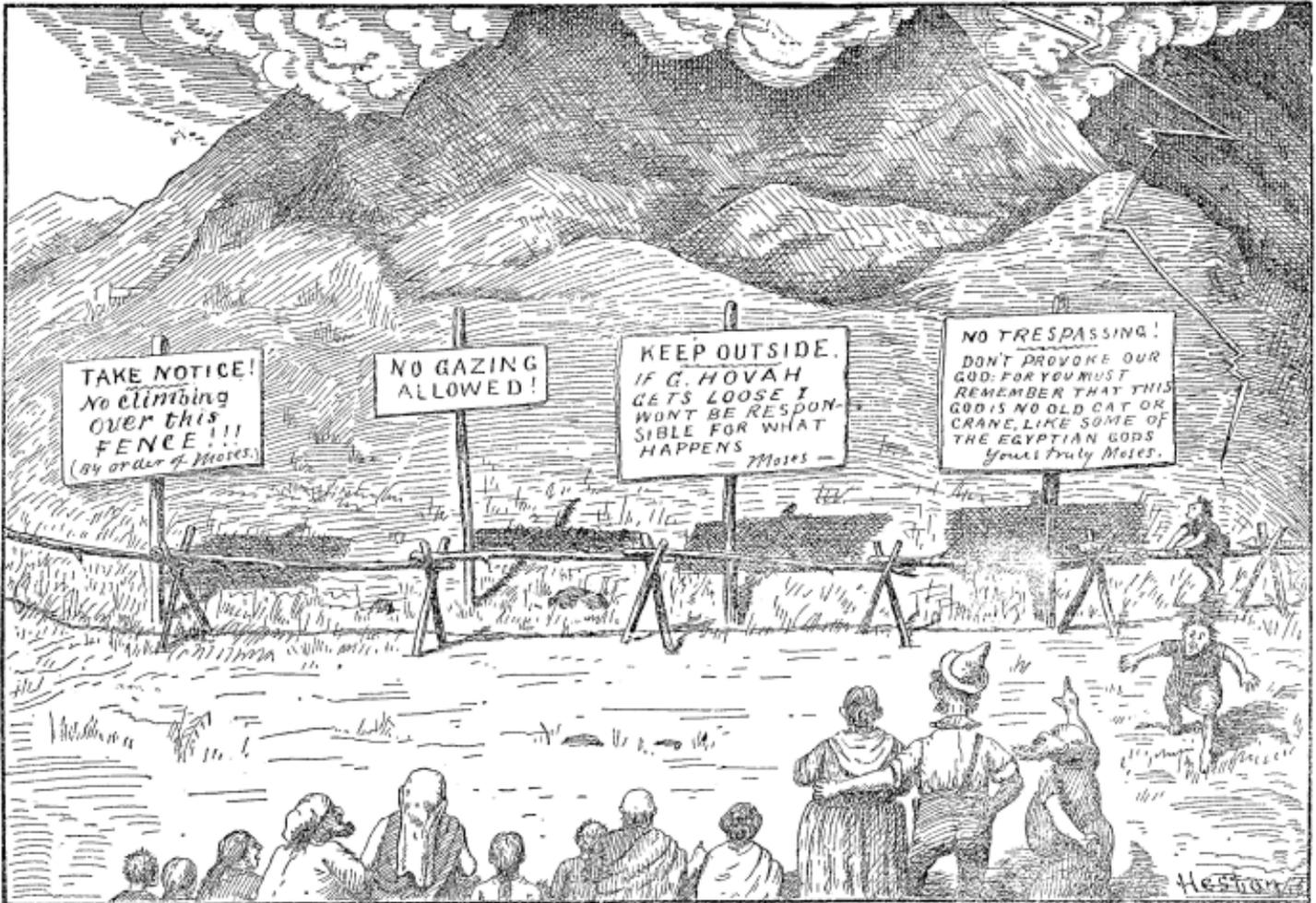
Destroying an embryo is equivalent to an abortion, according to Cardinal Trujillo who heads the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family. Pope Benedict XVI has not commented. As quoted in news@nature.com, Cesare Galli of the Laboratory of Reproductive Technologies in Cremona, Italy, the first scientist to clone a horse, said: "I don't think scientists involved with embryonic stem-cell research would care if they are excommunicated or not." He may be right, but the question of when life begins has serious legal implications. Conservative Christians believe that the instant the male and female gametes fuse to form a single zygote cell a soul is assigned. Presto! Evidence of the soul is lacking, but a soul is said to be the essence of a person that survives the body. Our DNA can survive the body, but a person is more than their DNA. We are defined by memes as well as genes. Scientists argue that without a central nervous system to register pain and record memories, an embryo is not a person.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 7 July 2006

Federal Advisory Panel recommends vaccine against cervical cancer.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted disease. By protecting against four strains, Gardasil prevents most cervical cancer. The vaccine is expensive, however, and the disease is most prevalent among the poor. Still, vaccinating girls from 11-18 would cost less than the flight of Discovery. The recommendation was unanimous, but the vote to make Plan B available over the counter was also overwhelming. Why would anyone object? "Because," a spokesperson for Focus on the Family snarled, "You don't catch it, you have to go out and get it."

-- *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 30 June 2006



And Moses said unto the Lord, the people cannot come up to Mount Sinai; for thou chargedest us, saying Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it. -- Ex. xix, 23.

Watson Heston, *Old Testament Stories Comically Illustrated: The Stories being Humorously Told and Hard Facts Given Concerning the Origin and Authenticity of the Old Testament.* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1892)

Some firm arguments proving the existence of God.

1. We know that God exists, because He has said that He exists.
2. The universe exists, and God created it. Therefore God exists.
3. You must have faith in God, and then you will know He exists.
4. It is God's will that all men should obey Him. You can not obey a non-existent being.
5. God is all-powerful and thus can do anything; including existing in a state of non-existence.
6. God is far beyond our understanding, and thus our arguments are irrelevant to His existence.
7. For believers, God has manifested Himself in history, thus proving His existence.
8. God is a great mystery and we are not meant to understand Him.
9. If an invisible, immaterial Unicorn exists, so must God exist.
10. Denying the existence of God is heresy, and heretics should be imprisoned, tortured, and executed. That finally should settle the matter.

— adapted from John Radford in *The Skeptic* (19,2; Summer 2006) p. 26



Heaven Can Wait

By Susan Jacoby

Dissent (Spring 2006)

In his call for left-wing moral revivalism as a counterweight to the ascendancy of the religious right in American politics (“A Difficult Marriage: American Protestants and American Politics,” Winter 2006), Michael Kazin cites the historian D.G. Hart’s argument that religion is “inherently useful in solving social problems because it yields moral guidelines that inevitably generate both a concern for justice and the welfare of all people.”

Inherently? Inevitably? Does the quote refer to an American religion that fought slavery over the opposition of many orthodox churches or to a religion that upheld slavery in the South and profiteering from slavery in the North? Are we talking about a minority faith that insisted women should have an equal voice in the house of God and man or a majority of clerics who denounced feminists, well into the twentieth century, as unnatural female infidels? Are Hart and Kazin referring to a religion that makes room for secular knowledge or a religion that refuses to listen to anything science has to say about the origins of life?

There is no such thing as generic religion or, for that matter, generic evangelical Protestantism, and most ecclesiastical leaders, whether evangelical or not, are interested in the welfare of all only insofar as welfare is defined in accordance with their particular faith. That is the fatal flaw in all proposals, whether from the left or the right, for a stronger religious voice in the public square. No one would deny that some religious spokesmen are capable of framing moral issues in transcendent fashion; the civil rights leadership provided by black churches is the prime twentieth-century example. But the voices of African American preachers spoke to a broader public morality precisely because they emanated from outside the government and the political establishment. Most southern white Protestant churches, by contrast—churches that helped spawn the present generation of Dixiecrats who invoke the name of Martin Luther King in order to push the Republican faith-based political agenda—were closely allied with segregationist politics-as-usual and had no interest whatever in the welfare of blacks.

The absence of any common religious definition of welfare becomes evident in every political battle over “values issues.” Both supporters and opponents of ham-handed, faith-based attempts by the U.S. Congress to intervene in the case involving removal of the comatose Terri Schiavo’s feeding tube, for example, would have said (and did say) that they were concerned about the welfare of Schiavo and those similarly situated. But the two groups defined welfare in irreconcilable ways,

largely attributable to religious convictions about whether human beings have the right to “play God” with their own lives.

The limited, and often conflicting, definitions of welfare promulgated by various religions were very much on the minds of the framers of the Constitution when they deliberately omitted any mention of God from the document and instead ceded supreme authority to “We the People.”

The framers did not write, as they might have, “we the people under God”—a phrase that would have prevented angry debates in state ratifying conventions over the Constitution’s unprecedented failure to acknowledge a divinity as the source of governmental power. They did not, as a group of ministers would unsuccessfully propose to Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War, write a preamble that declared, “Recognizing Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, and acknowledging the Lord Jesus Christ as the Governor among nations, His revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government...”

Americans have always been a predominantly Christian people (overwhelmingly so at the time the Constitution was written), but the founders established a secular central government. Today, religious conservatives are wreaking havoc with that glorious paradox, and they are aided by liberals intimidated by the vilification of secularists over the past twenty-five years. Still worse, many liberals have thrown in the towel and accepted the

right-wing premise that there can be no morality, and no exposition of moral issues in the public square, without reference to religion.

Kazin, whose new biography of William Jennings Bryan should be a major corrective to the cartoonish stereotype based entirely on Bryan’s role in the Scopes “monkey trial,” is absolutely right in his contention that “evangelical Protestantism has always been an integral part of American political history.” But he fails to make a crucial distinction between eighteenth-century evangelicals, who supported the godless Constitution because they regarded any government involvement with religion as an insult to God, and later evangelicals, who, as their numbers grew, did everything they could to write their religious views into law, on matters ranging from Sunday postal service to the outlawing of alcohol. Former president Jimmy Carter, who spoke out against attempts to excise evolution from the Georgia state biology curriculum, is a spiritual descendant of the early evangelicals. President George W. Bush is an heir of the later evangelicals, who wanted nothing so much as to Christianize the Constitution.

The Eighteenth Amendment, which criminalized the sale of alcohol from 1919 until its repeal in 1933, is a cautionary tale of what happened when government, in the name of religious morality, outlawed an activity regarded by much of the public as harmless or beneficent. Kazin argues that movements “imbued with a revivalist ethos” have been most effective in forcing the American government to “do the right



thing.” He might have noted that such movements are equally effective in forcing politicians to do the wrong thing.

Two distinct, though not entirely novel, approaches to church-state issues have recently been advanced by the evangelical activist Jim Wallis in *God’s Politics* and by legal scholar Noah Feldman in *Divided by God: America’s Church-State Problem and What We Should Do about It*. Each formula offers a different recipe for civic disaster.

Feldman, a professor at the New York University School of Law, suggests that more religious activities and expressions of faith should be permitted in public institutions but that no public money should be used to support religious institutions. In other words, let public school prayer alone but don’t spend public money on religious charter schools. What Feldman fails to recognize is that the Christian right’s drive for more publicly enshrined religious expression is inseparable from its demand for public financing of explicitly religious activities: the first is a stalking horse for the second.

Feldman also espouses the peculiar idea that religious minorities should not be bothered by explicitly Christian activities in tax-supported venues, say, the recitation of a prayer before a football game or the use of school facilities for Bible classes. He argues (a quote Kazin cites approvingly) that “there is nothing shameful or inherently disadvantageous in being a religious minority, so long as that minority is not subject to coercion or discrimination.”

There is something bizarrely ahistorical about the eagerness of certain Jewish

intellectuals to proclaim their lack of discomfort in the presence of Christian symbols in public institutions. Their great-grandparents from Minsk and Pinsk knew better: the hairs on the backs of their necks would have prickled when they were invited to join public school classmates in singing carols about the birth of the little Lord Jesus. It is no coincidence that anti-Semitic quotas began to disappear as the Supreme Court began to interpret the establishment clause more strictly after the Second World War.

Wallis’s solution to the “church-state problem” is even worse than Feldman’s. In *God’s Politics*, he makes the stunning assertion that Bush is guilty of “bad theology” in his attitudes about war and social justice and that “the answer to bad theology is not secularism; it is good theology.” God help us all, for reason will not save us, if religious progressives like Wallis get their wish and manage to turn the next presidential campaign into a duel of theologies.

With reverends-manqués on the stump, voters will be offered their choice of the Jesus who said, “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy” or the Jesus who said, “I came not to send peace but a sword.” And let us not forget the Old Testament God who inflicted unspeakable tortures on the Egyptians—an argument for a free hand for U.S. intelligence agencies if ever there was one.

I could not agree more with Kazin that the left needs to present its case in unapologetically moral terms. But those moral terms should be grounded in reason, not in pandering to the supernatural beliefs

of Americans. Indeed, American presidents in the past—and not only the distant past—have had great success in combining reason with moral passion. Perhaps the most outstanding example is John F. Kennedy’s June 1963 American University commencement speech, now regarded as the beginning of détente with the Soviet Union. Kennedy spoke of peace as “the necessary rational end of rational men” and declared, “Our problems are manmade—therefore they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man’s reason and spirit often solved the seemingly unsolvable—and we believe they can do it again.” Then Kennedy memorably observed that “our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”

Could there be a more reasoned yet passionate statement of secular morality than the assertion that we owe our children a peaceful world not because we are immortal but because we are mortal?

Call me crazy, but I have a feeling that a great many Americans, including religious Americans, are sick of hypocritical politicians who pretend that their policies deserve support because they are the work of a Higher Being. The question is whether there are any political leaders left with the courage to appeal to voters as reasoning adults, with arguments based not on the promise of heaven but on the moral obligation of human beings to treat one another decently here on earth.

Susan Jacoby is the author of *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. ☞

Science Book Club - Schedule for 2006

Science book club as in past years plans on meeting at the Cincinnati Downtown Library on the 4th Sunday of each month at 2:30pm in Room 3A, except on the 3rd Sunday where conflicts with holidays occur as noted below and in May in Room 3B because of a room schedule conflict.

July 23 - *Ohio Archaeology an illustrated chronicle of Ohio’s ancient American Indian cultures*: Bradley T. Lepper

Aug 27 - *On Intelligence* Jeff Hawkins

Sept 24 - *Economics in Perspective, A Critical History*: John Kenneth Galbraith

Oct 22 - *The “God” Part of the Brain*: Matthew Alper

Nov 19 (third Sunday)- *Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein’s outrageous legacy*: Kip Thorne

Dec 17 (third Sunday) - *Science of Aliens*: Clifford Pickover

– Bryan Sellers






BOOK REVIEW

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon
by Daniel C. Dennett
(New York: Viking, 2006)
a book review by Michael Shermer

In a 1997 episode of the animated television series *The Simpsons*, Lisa Simpson discovers a fossil angel. Suspecting a hoax, she takes a piece of the fossil to the natural history museum where Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould (playing himself) analyzes it. The age-old conflict between science and religion then plays out in this *ne plus ultra* of pop culture. The town evangelical Ned Flanders bemoans: “Science is like a blabbermouth who ruins a movie by telling you how it ends.” When Gould announces that the test results are “inconclusive,” Reverend Lovejoy boasts: “Well, it appears science has failed again, in front of overwhelming religious evidence.” Marge counsels Lisa’s skepticism with motherly wisdom: “There has to be more to life than just what we see Lisa. Everyone needs something to believe in.” Lisa’s rejoinder is classic skepticism: “It’s not that I don’t have a spiritual side. I just find it hard to believe there’s a dead angel hanging in our garage.” The Scopes-like trial that ensues ends when the judge issues a restraining order: “Religion must stay 500 yards from science at all times.”

This is, in fact, Gould’s conciliatory solution he called NOMA (Non-Overlapping Magisteria)¹, and it is the primary target of Tufts University philosopher Daniel C. Dennett in his latest book, *Breaking the Spell*. All restraining orders are off, as Dennett calls for “a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many.” The spell to be broken is the taboo that science will render incapable “the life-enriching enchantment of religion itself.”

So sensitive is he to the potential reaction on the part of his readers (which Dennett maintains is the general public, over 90 percent of which believe in God) that the first 55 pages of the book are an apologia for why it is okay for religion to be studied scientifically. Readers familiar with such publications as *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* can skim this section, since the field has been around for over a century. My concern is that religious adherents will take offense at his rationale before they get to the heart of the

book, where Dennett really shines. In one passage, for example, he tells believers that their repugnance to science is misdirected, but admits that his attempt to convince them otherwise “is a daunting task, like trying to persuade your friend with the cancer symptoms that she really ought to see a doctor now, since her anxiety may be misplaced and the sooner she learns that the sooner she can get on with her life, and if she does have cancer, timely intervention may make all the difference.” The deeply devout will not take kindly to their beliefs (about either science or religion) being equated with cancer. Or to cigarettes, as in this subsequent passage: “Sure, religion saves lives. So does tobacco — ask those GIs for whom tobacco was an even greater comfort than religion during World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam.”

Breaking the Spell is really written for scientists and scholars who have thought little on the subject of religion as a natural phenomenon. Dennett’s starting point is the “rational choice” theory of religion, proffered by sociologist Rodney Stark and his colleagues, which holds that the beliefs, rituals, customs, commitments, and sacrifices associated with religion are best understood as a form of exchange between believers and gods or God. Where resources and rewards are scarce (e.g., rain for crops) or nonexistent (e.g., immortality) through secular sources, then religion steps in to act as the exchange intermediary². To an evolutionist like Dennett, such exchanges demand that we look for a deeper causal vector:

Any such regular expenditure of time and energy has to be balanced by something of ‘value’ obtained, and the ultimate measure of evolutionary ‘value’ is *fitness*: the capacity to replicate more successfully than the competition does.

What is the value of religion to evolutionary fitness? In two books, I have outlined at least four such values:

mythmaking to explain apparently inexplicable phenomena in the world, **redemption** (forgiveness in this life) and **resurrection** (immortality in the next life), **morality** (reinforcement of pro-social behavior and punishment of anti-social behavior), and **sociality** (encouragement of within-group amity and between-group enmity).³

Do such values explain religion? We don’t know yet, Dennett admits, but the rest of his book presents a plausible explanation that I summarize as follows.



Humans have brains that are big enough to be both self-aware and aware that others are self-aware. This “theory of mind,” or what Dennett calls “adopting the intentional stance,” leads to a “hyperactive agent detection device” (HADD) that not only alerts us to real dangers, such as poisonous snakes, but also generates false positives, such as believing that rocks and trees are imbued with intentional minds, or spirits. “The memorable nymphs and fairies and goblins and demons that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us.” This is animism that, in the well-known historical sequence, leads to polytheism and, eventually, monotheism. In other words, God is a false positive generated by our HADD.

Around these animistic entities our ancestors created folk religions, which, between the Neolithic revolution and the rise of cities, evolved into the organized religions we recognize today. During this transition there was competition among the countless god memes (each of whom were believed to control some tiny part of the world), out of which emerged the winner: a single God meme believed to control everything. Concomitant with God’s triumph was a corresponding *belief in belief*—not just belief in God, but belief in belief in God. This, says Dennett, was the coup de grâce: religion no longer had to depend on uniformity of belief, only uniformity of *professing* belief.

Through his many provocative books⁴ Dan Dennett has emerged as the *advocatus diaboli* of science, and his *belief in belief* concept is his most dangerous idea to date. It is dangerous because it is a two-edged sword that cuts for and against. On the one side, it not only grants believers some elbow room for doubt (as long as you still believe in belief in God), it allows atheists like myself (and Dennett) to profess that I believe in God; that is, I believe in the God that exists in the minds of people who themselves believe in the existence of an omniscient and omnipotent deity. That God is so powerful that He can get believers to bomb abortion clinics and fly planes into buildings.

On the flip side, perspicacious believers may perceive that an ontological trap is being set: belief in belief implies that the God in your head doesn’t actually exist. I predict that in the competitive memescape that is the human mind, the belief in God meme will beat out the belief in belief meme, as much as I would like to believe otherwise.

References & Notes

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Helen Kagin & Michael Shermer



Do You Want To Go To Heaven?

Father Murphy walks into a pub in Donegal, and says to the first man he meets, “Do you want to go to heaven?”

The man said, “I do Father.”

The priest said, “Then stand over there against the wall.”

Then the priest asked the second man, “Do you want to go to heaven?”

“Certainly, Father,” was the man’s reply.

“Then stand over there against the wall,” said the priest.

Then Father Murphy walked up to O’Toole and said, “Do you want to go to heaven?”

O’Toole said, “No, I don’t Father.”

The priest said,

“I don’t believe this! You mean to tell me that when you die you don’t want to go to heaven?”

O’Toole said, “Oh, when I die, yes. I thought you were getting a group together to go right now.”



August Picnic: TBD -
Weekend of August 26 & 27

July Meeting: Sunday 23th 2:00PM
No August Meeting



FIG Leaves
P.O. Box 19034
Cincinnati, OH 45219

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 figinfo@gofigger.org, or leave a message at (513) 557-3836. Visit our web site at gofigger.org.