

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 17 Issue 3

March 2008

**March FIG Meeting:** *Tuesday March 25 7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor*

## **Developing Antibiotic Resistance: Poster Child for Evolution in Real Time.**

Dr. David Fankhauser

FIG is excited to welcome Dr. David Fankhauser, Professor of Biology and Chemistry at UC Clermont at our March meeting. Every day, we witness around us an important example of Darwinian evolution in action: the evolution of bacteria to antibiotic resistance. The implications are serious. Antibiotics are becoming useless against an increasing number of diseases such as staph (MRSA), tuberculosis (MDRTB), gonorrhea (PPNG), etc. Using the Darwinian model of evolution, Dr Fankhauser will explain how these resistant strains come about, and why they are ever more common in our environment. Steps to slow down the appearance of resistant strains of bacteria will be presented.

Dr. Fankhauser earned his PhD from John Hopkins University in 1971 and joined the staff at UC Clermont in 1973. He has served as a Visiting Scientist to conduct research on three continents, most notably serving in Costa Rica, Italy, and Germany. His distinguished career has earned him esteem from his professional peers - he was elected three times to serve as Chair of the Faculty at UC Clermont. Dr. Fankhauser has also received the excellence in teaching award displaying the respect he has garnered among students. He is an advocate for social justice attending the Freedom Rides through Alabama and Mississippi in 1961. He lives in Cincinnati with his wife and three children. If you are interested in learning more about Dr. Fankhauser's research prior to the presentation, please visit his website at <<http://biology.clc.uc.edu/Fankhauser>>

**April Meeting: Sunday 27 April 2008 at 2:00 pm**

### *The Myth of Nazareth*

by Rene Salm

Frank R. Zindler, editor American Atheist Press

In April, FIG will welcome Frank R. Zindler, editor of the American Atheist Press (AAP). Frank will discuss *The Myth of Nazareth*, a new book by Rene Salm that is being published by AAP. The book explores archaeological and historical data that shows Nazareth was not inhabited at the time Jesus, the Nazarene, was supposed to have been living there. Frank muses, "Can the Wizard of Oz be real if there never was a land of Oz?" Frank lives in Columbus and FIG members may remember him from his participation in last May's Rally for Reason Speak-Out.

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## **Events**

### **March Meeting**

*Tuesday, March 25, 2008, 7:00 PM* at the  
Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH

### **April Meeting**

*Sunday, April 27, 2008, 2:00 PM* at the  
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## February Meeting

### Atheists in Gutland

In celebration of Darwin's birthday, FIG departed from its standard monthly meeting and took a field trip to *BODIES ...The Exhibition* at the Cincinnati Museum Center. We were guided by our fearless program director, Shawn Jeffers, who proved that coordinating the actions of a group of atheists is even more difficult than herding cats.

Twenty-three members and non-members gathered to see the opening OmniMax film, *The Human Body*, which portrayed the various organ systems in real-life situations. Highlights included a full-color, larger-than-life trip down the digestive system, complete with fountains of bile; an x-ray view of a dog running alongside a bicyclist; British pre-teens giving their honest thoughts about puberty, body odor, and hair growth; and several six-foot-high pimples popping.

As for the exhibit itself, what is there to say? It's wicked cool. Go see it.

And make sure you touch the liver. Even if it is just a plasticized liver.

Rather than rehash each finely detailed exhibit, from the skeletal system to the reproductive system, I thought that this article would be more interesting – and less like a biology textbook – to look at various situations and events surrounding the exhibit. To explore different contexts, if you will.

The exhibit, and the similar (but unrelated) exhibit, *Body Worlds*, has raised questions about the origins of the bodies and the ethical considerations of the public display of human remains since its creation. Concerns have been raised about the origin of the bodies, and whether the people that were dissected consented to becoming museum displays, if they even had the opportunity to do so. This argument has been particularly potent for *BODIES*, since the cadavers came from China, a country rife with human rights violations. Religious groups have contended that publicly displaying human remains objectifies the body, separating the human from the remains in a way that devalues one's humanity. Governmental entities have objected to the lack of oversight they have been afforded, since the exhibit was created overseas. Scientists and ethicists have questioned the morality of paying money to view human remains, and of profiting from showing them to the public. Diverse groups have wrestled with these issues across the globe.

While these objections were assumed to be local concerns and dismissed with an eyeroll by most of our group, I think that these issues are worth thinking about. It's easy to dismiss the objections of others when the matter in question agrees with one's own worldview. But what happens to our remains after we die has generally been a human concern; cemeteries, burial grounds, mausoleums, and other types of resting places can be found in nearly every culture. For atheists, the primary concern has been what to do in a society in which death and burial rituals are steeped in religious tradition. Some choose to donate their bodies to science, partly in an effort to maintain one's secular status and usefulness after death; others choose cremation. The website for the American Atheists even has a step-by-step guide on dying while atheist. Clearly, the disposal of one's body is an issue facing the religious and non-religious alike.

Next, the exhibit in the context of its live audience. I took a particular inter- ➔



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figinfo@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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est in observing the other patrons of the exhibit. For a time, I viewed the exhibit amongst a group of medical students who, from their conversations, had taken plenty of anatomy courses, but hadn't had the opportunity to see actual specimens. As they moved from display to display, they recapitulated to each other precisely which part was which, and what each did, all the while expressing astonishment and fascination at seeing the real thing.

Then there was the family of four. Two girls, probably in middle school, excitedly moved from display to display, relating the exhibits to their science studies. The mother went along with them, occasionally asking questions. The father attempted to be authoritative in his knowledge, until the following conversation:

Girls: "Oh, cool, check it out!"

Father: "What the heck is a jejunum?"

Girls (with an air of "you moron"): "It's part of the digestive system, duh."

Father: "Where did you learn *that*?"

Girls (annoyed that their father apparently just fell off the turnip truck): "Um, at school?"



Crowds were thickest around the displays of reproductive organs. I thought, briefly, that the audience was taking some sort of perverse pleasure in being "allowed" to look at private parts.

Which is okay with me; perhaps if people are (stream-of-consciousness confession: I keep wanting to say "exposed" but am desperately trying to avoid the pun!) able to spend more time with reproductive systems in a desexualized environment, we, as a society, will be more comfortable treating body parts as body parts, be they armpits or ovaries, toes or testicles. But in listening to the conversations, I realized that many of the viewers were looking for specific organs, which they stereotypically attributed to specific people with specific disorders.

Drawing in closer, members of FIG followed the exhibit with a dinner discussion at the Vernon Manor; unfortunately, I was unable to join them. Perhaps those that were there would be willing to share highlights from the evening's discussion in future editions of *FIG Leaves*.

Finally, my own perspective. While I believe that the concerns and objectives noted earlier in this piece are valid and excellent fodder for discussion and debate, the exhibit is done and here, and there is much to be gained from viewing the artfully scientific displays. So often we are conscious of our bodies when something goes wrong, but hardly notice them when everything is normal. As a non-scientist, it is quite difficult for me to see live anomalies, much less normal biological specimens. Viewing *BODIES* has given me a unique perspective inside my own self as a living organism as well as a human being. Hopefully others have had a similarly enlightening experience.

*BODIES ...The Exhibition*: wicked cool.

Go see it.

Reported by Jessica Foote, FIG board member ☚

## The French Revolution

Long has the giant on France's plains  
Ingloriously slept, unconscious of his chains.  
Round his large limbs were wound a thousand  
strings

By the weak hands of confessors and kings.  
O'er his closed eyes a triple veil was bound  
And steely rivets locked him to the ground.  
While stern Bastille with iron cage entrails  
His folded limbs, and hems in marble walls.  
Touched by the patriot-flame, he rent amazed  
The flimsy bonds, and round and round him  
gazed;

Starts up from earth, above the admiring throng  
Lifts his celestial face and towers along.  
High o'er his face his hundred arms he rears,  
Plowshares his swords and pruning hooks his  
spears,

Calls to the Good and Brave with voice that  
rolls

Like Heaven's own thunder round the echoing  
poles,

Gives to the winds his banner broad unfurled  
And gathers in its shade the living world!

– Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802)



# FIG LEAVES



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



## Media Events/Programs

### The Humanist Perspective

Show times on Time-Warner Cable:

Channel 4: Tuesday 9:30 am and Thursday 7:00 pm

Channel 24: Friday 11:30 pm

#### Programs:

11-13 March: 245 Campus Outreach in a Faith-Saturated Era, with Sarah Jordan

18-20 March: 246 A New Medium, with D. J. Grothe and Thomas Donnelly

25-27 March: 267 Naturalism and Ethics, with Arthur Caplan and John Shook

1-3 April: 268 The Naturalism of Laura Purdy, with Laura Purdy and Laureen Becker

### 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 of your choice.

Please tune in at [www.answersinatheism.net](http://www.answersinatheism.net).

The Answers in Atheism crew

### The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Tuesday, 17 March at 7:00PM

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

To see who's coming and to see more event details: [http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1\\_ve](http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve)

.....  
Society for Evolution Education (SEE Life)

## 2008 Spring Lecture Series

The 2008 Spring Lecture Series is presented on eight Saturday evenings, from 7 to 9 PM. An hour-long lecture is followed by an hour of discussion.

Members: \$8 per person for each lecture

Non-Members: \$10 per person for each lecture

### Reservations required.

Email: [ftraina@sunrockfarm.org](mailto:ftraina@sunrockfarm.org)

OR Call (859) 781-5502

### We will have eight lectures this year:

March 8: (canceled due to the weather) "**Hurricanes in the Rocks: The Bedrock of the Cincinnati Region**" Dr. Arnold I. Miller, Professor and Head of Geology Dept. University of Cincinnati

March 15: "**Darwin's Finches: Stories of Evolution in Our Time**" Dr. Kenneth Petren, Associate Professor, Dept. of Biological Sciences University of Cincinnati

March 22: "**Sexual Selection and the Evolution of Communication Signals**" Dr. Bernard Lohr, Assistant Professor in Biological Sciences Northern Kentucky University

March 29: "**Descent by Modification: Discoveries Supporting Evolution**" Mr. Jack Berninger, M.S., Retired Science Teacher Elder High School

April 5: "**Evolution of Ears in Invertebrates and Vertebrates**" Dr. Elke K. Buschbeck, Assistant Professor of Biology University of Cincinnati

April 12: "**Kin Selection and Altruism: The Evolution of Cooperation**" Dr. Denice Robertson, Lecturer in Biological Sciences Northern Kentucky University

April 19: "**Plants and Pollinators: Co-evolution of a Beautiful Relationship**" Dr. Maggie Whitson, Assistant Professor in Biological Sciences Northern Kentucky University

April 26: "**The Darwin Menagerie**" Dr. Gene Kritsky, Professor of Biology College of Mt. St. Joseph.



# FIG LEAVES



## O.F.A.

**Operation Foxhole Atheists** needs our help. Created by Blair Scott of the North Alabama Freethought Association (NAFA), OFA sends packages to troops in Afghanistan and Iraq who have identified themselves as atheists or humanists. You may not agree with the war but the soldiers aren't responsible for starting it and they need our support. I'm asking you all to bring some of these goods to our March meeting and I will see that they get to OFA and from there to the troops. The soldiers have requested:

- |                                   |                |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| Beef Jerky                        | Poptarts       |
| Granola Bars                      | Breakfast Bars |
| Pringles                          | Cookies        |
| Cheetos                           | DVD's          |
| Canned soup with poptop lids      |                |
| Crystal Light on-the-go drink mix |                |
| Powdered Gatorade drink mix       |                |
| Travel pillows (U-shaped)         |                |

*Let's rally behind our fellows in uniform and show them some support!*

Any magazines or books (atheist or humanist materials can be sent but some of the soldiers choose to remain unknown as such in their companies)

Any kind of snack food or reading material would be appreciated. If you would prefer, their website takes PayPal donations. <http://thenafa.org/ofa/>.

Thank you, John Welte



Judy Wallman, a professional genealogical researcher, discovered that Hillary Clinton's great-great uncle, Remus Rodham, was hanged for horse stealing and train robbery in Montana in 1889. The only known photograph of Remus shows him standing on the gallows. On the back of the picture is this inscription: "Remus Rodham; horse thief, sent to Montana Territorial Prison 1885, escaped 1887, robbed the Montana Flyer six times, caught by Pinkerton Detectives, convicted and hanged in 1889.

Judy e-mailed Hillary Clinton for comments. Hillary's staff of Professional image adjusters sent back the following biographical sketch:

Remus Rodham was a famous cowboy in the Montana Territory. His business empire grew to include acquisition of valuable equestrian assets and intimate dealings with the Montana railroad. Beginning in 1883, he devoted several years of his life to service at a government facility, finally taking leave to resume his dealings with the railroad. In 1887, he was a key player in a vital investigation run by the renowned Pinkerton Detective Agency. In 1889, Remus passed away during an important civic function held in his honor when the platform upon which he was standing collapsed.

And **that** is how it's done when you're a politician, folks!

**SCIENCE BOOK CLUB 2008 Schedule** - all meetings will be held on the 3rd Sunday of each month at the downtown Cincinnati Public Library in Room 3A at 2:30 PM.

- Mar 16** Rick Davis: *The Female Brain* by Louann Brizendine
- Apr 20** Eric Otto: *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* by Edwin Black
- May 18** Bert Bruce: *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* by Oliver W. Sacks
- June 15** Jerry Wiles: *In the Beginning* by Isaac Asimov.
- July 20** Bryan Sellers: *Under a Green Sky: Global Warming, the Mass Extinctions of the Past, and What They Can Tell Us About Our Future* by Peter Ward
- Aug 17** Bob Streifthau: *World Without Us* by Alan Weisman
- Sept 21** Bob Riehemann: *Doubt and Certainty* by Tony Rothman and George Sudarshan
- Oct. 19** Pauline Smolin: *In Search of Memory: the Emergence of a New Science of the Mind* by Eric Kandel
- Nov 16** Gary Weiss: *What we believe but cannot prove: today's leading thinkers on science in the age of certainty* ed. by John Brockman
- Dec 21** Randy Weaver: *Into the cool energy flow, thermodynamics, and life* by Eric D. Schneider
- Jan 18, 2009** - Dr. Richard Bozian: *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* by Antonio Damasio





## “Unaffiliated” Show Biggest Change Among U.S. Faith Groups

by Lilly Fowler, Religion News Service,  
25 February 2008

Americans who aren't part of a religious organization or who identify as an atheist or an agnostic represent the biggest change among

U.S. religious groups, according to a study released Monday (Feb. 25) by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey estimates that about 16 percent of America's 225 million adults are unaffiliated with a religion. When “childhood religion” is compared against “current religion,” the unaffiliated show a net increase of 8.8 percentage points, compared to a 7.5 point loss among Catholics, for example, or a 2.6 percent loss among Protestants. The study, however, also makes it clear that the “unaffiliated” aren't necessarily living out a strictly secular life. “There is a sizeable number of Americans who are not affiliated with any particular religious group but who nonetheless have religious beliefs or engage in a variety of religious practices,” the study said. Among the “unaffiliated,” only about a quarter identified themselves as non-believers (atheists or agnostics). The remaining three-quarters were those who reported “nothing in particular” when asked about their religious affiliation.

Barry Kosmin, director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture in Hartford, Conn., said many Americans are unaffiliated simply because they are dissatisfied with the current religious offerings. Kosmin also said the diversity among the unaffiliated isn't necessarily a surprise. “I have no religion, but I believe in angels and miracles” is just one example of the kind of belief people included in this group may hold, said Kosmin.

According to the study, younger adults are more likely to be unaffiliated, as are men and those living in the Western U.S. Those who are unmarried or living with a partner are also more likely be included in the group. “Almost every study of religion in North America has found that men are less religious than women. Men just don't buy into religious instruction as little boys as much as women do as girls,” said Robert Altemeyer, a professor of psychology at the University of Manitoba.

“It carries over throughout life.”

Kosmin said those who are unaffiliated are more likely to be found in the West because the region lacks the religious infrastructure of the more traditional East, South and Midwest, or longstanding family ties “that will lead you to be tied to a congregation,” said Kosmin. He also said marriage and religion frequently go hand-in-hand, and noted that previous studies have found that those who are divorced are the most likely to become unaffiliated.

The Pew study also found that more than half of those who are unaffiliated as children do eventually adopt a religion. About 7.3 percent of Americans are born into no faith, and 3.9 percent eventually join one. But since nearly 13 percent of Americans later drift into the “unaffiliated group,” that leaves about 16 percent of Americans who are not tied to any faith group.

Looking ahead, Kosmin believes the United States will follow the Western model of becoming less and less religious over time. But that's not a change that's going to happen overnight. “I can tell you that you're not going to call me in ten years time and tell me that forty percent of the population are atheists,” he said. “It's not going to happen.”

### ----- Pew study confirms

### Non-religious are significant bloc

Survey shows Those Choosing No Religion Outnumber Those of Every Single Faith (But One)

The most detailed estimates to date of Americans' religious affiliations reports that a significant portion of U.S. citizens claim “none of the above,” placing the unaffiliated second only to Roman Catholics in number. Monday's release of the 35,000-respondent U.S. Religious Landscape Survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life shows that 16.1 percent of Americans have no particular religion at all, while 23.9 percent identify themselves as Catholic. The next largest “belief group” is Evangelical Baptist at 10.8 percent. All other denominational groupings show in the single digits or less.

The study also shows the number of Americans who identify as atheist or agnostic has risen from 3.2 percent to 4 percent, while “remarkably high” 44 percent have rejected the religion placed on them in childhood. “People are finding out that what they've been handed in youth doesn't work, or isn't important enough to →



defend when confronted with marriage or some other life situation that forces them to examine it," said Paul Kurtz, founder of the Council for Secular Humanism. "But when the shuffling is done, this study shows that three people are dropping religion altogether for each one gaining a faith."



## Theory

Is Florida teaching the whole country? As *WN* has been reporting, the compromise on science standards approved by the Florida Board of Education calls for replacing the word "evolution" with the phrase "scientific theory of evolution." This gives teachers an opening to explain to students how science works. Now,

The study also confirms the previous 2004 Pew Forum-University of Akron study findings that those who identify as strictly secular comprise more than 10 percent of the population, only on a much larger scale. "The breakdown is interesting, in that it distinguishes between the vaguely religious and those who fall squarely in the secular camp," Kurtz said. "But I would venture to say that there is a significant number of Americans who sympathize with secularism, but who may still be nominal members of religious organizations. It's apparent that a significant percentage of the population identifies with secularism, and I trust politicians will bear this in mind."

according to an editorial in yesterday's *New York Times*, school officials have inserted "scientific theory of" before every major scientific consensus in the standards, such as the "scientific theory of electromagnetism". Thanks to a free press doing its job, what began as an attempt by religious conservatives to impose their superstitious beliefs on Florida students is now a lesson to people around the country on the openness of science.

Will the Florida Legislature intervene? A Republican State Senator filed a bill she calls the *Academic Freedom Act*. It would disallow actions against students for taking a position on evolution and ban penalties for teaching alternatives to evolution. The "scientific theory" rule should take care of that; there is no "scientific" alternative to Darwinian evolution.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 7 March 2008

## The Bad News from Texas.

A strong editorial in today's issue of *Nature* warns that the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), which moved from San Diego to Dallas last year, has applied to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for the right to grant online master's degrees in science education. An advisory board has recommended acceptance. Founded by Henry Morris in 1972, the ICR regards the Bible as an inerrant source of scientific and historical fact. The Board had been expected to vote on the application in January, but requested additional information. The vote is now expected at the boards 24 April meeting. Steven Weinberg, Physics Nobel 1979, who five years ago defended the rights of Texas school children to learn the natural laws that govern our existence has urged the board to deny accreditation to the Creation Research Institute. Every Texas scientist should do the same.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 29 February 2008

## The Golden Compass

The movie is based on a series of books by Philip Pullman. Some religious groups claim the books are full of Pullman's atheist, humanist rejection of all religion. And that the movie makers took all that stuff out so the movie would sell better. You'd think that would make the atheists mad and the religious people happy, but it's the other way around, because the religious people worry that children will like the movie and read the books and decide God does not exist. Because children are shallow and untrustworthy, and you can't rely on them to just watch the movie and not go sneaking off to the library later on.

- Colin McEnroe, *Funny Times* (March 2008) p. 20

## At The Revival

Bubba listened to the preacher at the revival, and when the preacher asked those with needs to come forward for prayer, Bubba got in line.

When it was his turn, the preacher asked, "What do you want me to pray about?"

Bubba said, "Pray for my hearing, preacher."



The preacher put one hand over Bubba's ear and his other hand on top of Bubba's head and prayed a while. Then he removed his hands and asked, "Bubba, now how is your hearing?"

Bubba answered, "I don't know, preacher. It's next Wednesday at the courthouse in Baton Rouge!"



## Taslima Nasreen's Visa Extended

New Delhi, India, 14 February 2008. (via Google)

“The government of India has decided to extend the visa” of Taslima, External Affairs Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna said but did not specify the duration of her fresh visa. Ending uncertainty over controversial Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen’s stay in India, government on Thursday night decided to extend her visa, which expires on February 17. Though there’s a word of caution, that she remain “sensitive” to India’s traditions and not “hurt” its secular ethos. The six-month visa of the author expires on Sunday. There was speculation whether she will get another extension to stay here in the wake of demands by radical Muslim groups that she be thrown out of the country for allegedly hurting their religious sentiments through her writings.

Taslima said, “I’m very grateful to the Indian government.” But Taslima is weary of the cautionary guidelines, “The curbs on freedom of my movement and expression would remain,” she said. Taslima said she would like to return to Kolkata and expressed the hope that the restrictions on her movement and expression would go in course of time.

Taslima, 45, was bundled out of Kolkata in November last year following widespread violent protests by a little-known Islamic group and has been living in an undisclosed place in Delhi for security reasons. The author has been living in exile abroad since leaving Bangladesh in a cloak of secrecy in 1994 after fundamentalists in her home country issued a religious edict to kill her for writing the novel *Lajja* which was alleged to be blasphemous.

Noting that India has had a tradition throughout history of offering hospitality to those who seek it, Sarna said it has also “afforded protection to those who have come as our guests”. Taslima is “our guest and in keeping with our traditions, we have offered her the same privileges”, the spokesman said.

### From Warren Allen Smith, author *Who's Who in Hell*

My delay in responding is because Taslima has asked me to edit seven of her poems, plus I’ve had numerous deadlines. Here’s the latest news:

In short, since November she has been confined in an undisclosed place that even she is unaware of where it is. If

they agree to her meeting anyone, she is taken in a car with darkened windows to some unspecified place where she meets the interviewer, who also has been brought in a car with darkened windows, neither knowing where they have been taken. They’re then returned in separate cars to wherever they had come from.



She is far from her desk, her files, her bed, and Minu (the cat she misses most). It’s quite difficult to write with only a laptop and Google – in other words, she learns about herself only by using the internet for news.

West Bengal is communist-run, but its politicians kowtow to its large Muslim population of voters. India is a secular state with a constitution that allows freedom of religion, but it’s touchy with extremist Muslims who are demanding sharia law, not Indian law developed over the years. The bottom line: Taslima claims she has no trouble walking in Kolkata (Calcutta) from the various mullahs, that her problem is the politicians. She is their pawn.

She is happy in Kolkata because her language of Bengali is spoken there. She insists upon returning to where she has been happily living there.

Meanwhile, if forced to move she tells me she would not want to live in Europe or Scandinavia or my choice (the Netherlands). She’s not even interested in getting a scholar-in-residence status in, say, a Minnesota college. Only New York City, she insists, where her sister lives and where many speak Bengali.

I’ve arranged with a New York University prof who could get her a scholar-in-residence status almost anywhere in the world, but he naturally demands to know the date at which she could arrive – colleges need the information for their catalogs and schedule-making. Until Taslima learns for sure that India will not let her stay, I cannot provide such a date.

So she is living in a room where government servants bring her food, magazines, books, clothes, etc. But she cannot leave the room. (In Sing Sing, at least she could go out into a yard and exercise, even speak with other human beings!) I don’t know about her finances – she once had German bonds that paid her interest and seemed secure until the dollar kept going up; now that the dollar is at a new Bush low, I’ve no idea where any royalties are invested. At least, she pays nothing for where she is confined. . . .



## The Awful Squeal of Fundamentalism

Nick Cohen in *The Observer*, 2 March 2008

Authoritarians seeking to extend repression have always drawn innocents into manufactured crises. None was more innocent than Jacques Barrot, who, in 2005, helped trigger a wave of death when he entered France's annual pig squealing contest at the Pyrenean village of Trie-sur-Baïse. Barrot didn't win: that honour went to Yohann and Olivier Roussel for delivering an impressive impersonation of pigs mating. However, history remembers Barrot rather than the Roussels because an Associated Press photographer snapped him wearing a plastic snout standing at the microphone and put it on the news wires.

The next time it appeared, someone had doctored the picture and added the caption: 'Here is the real image of Mohammed.' Two radical imams, whom Denmark had foolishly welcomed as asylum seekers, included it in a dossier they were hawking round the dictatorships of the Middle East, on how Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten had insulted Muslims.

After at least 100 deaths and the storming of Danish embassies in Syria and Iran, journalists pointed out that the newspaper hadn't included a picture of M Barrot among the innocuous cartoons it had run to uphold the right to mock religion. The clerics then said an anonymous poison pen writer had sent the wounding picture to a Danish Muslim. It was, they added, an insult to their faith as great as Ayaan Hirsi Ali's championing of the rights of Muslim women.

Too many people forgot too quickly that the violence of 2005 did not have as its 'root cause' the decision of a small Danish newspaper to satirise the godly. For three months after Jyllands-Posten published, there was no rage from the 'Arab street' or any other street. Only after lobbying from the imams and sly political calculation from the powerful did the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) unleash the protests by demanding that the UN impose sanctions on Denmark. Like the Reichstag fire and Sergei Kirov's assassination, the cartoons controversy most suited those who affected to be most outraged.

The mayhem continues. Last month, Danish police arrested suspects allegedly planning to attack a cartoonist. Danish papers reprinted the cartoons as a gesture of solidarity. (As no British editor has had the nerve to run them, I should say nearly every issue of *Private Eye* has more 'provocative' jokes about Christianity.) The Sudanese government threatened to expel Danish aid workers in retaliation. Sudan is one of the

largest recipients of aid from Denmark. If that stops, more will die.

In language filled with the optimism of the struggles against 20th-century totalitarianism, Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' But faced with a conflict between high principle and a reactionary stunt, the UN Secretary General chose the side of the hysterics. A spokeswoman for Ban Ki-moon said that he thought that the new cartoon controversy showed that 'freedom of expression should be exercised responsibly and in a way that respects all religious beliefs'.

All religious beliefs, that is. Even if they do not respect each other. Even if by the normal standards of intellectual life, they make no sense. Even if the behaviour of their followers does not inspire respect, but fear. If the UN were to order us to 'respect all political beliefs', conservatives would say they weren't prepared to respect communists, leftists would say they weren't prepared to respect fascists and everyone else would burst out laughing. Yet the UN Human Rights Council is proposing in all seriousness to protect religion by doctoring its universal defence of freedom of expression.

The OIC is pushing it to approve a super-blasphe-my law that would make it an offence to 'defame' any religion. Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society said attending the discussions was an Orwellian experience, with speakers using the language of liberalism to justify oppression. 'Anyone seeking to draw attention to the capital offence of apostasy in Islamic countries will be lucky to be heard,' he reported. 'Anything deemed the slightest bit critical of Islam is immediately jumped upon.'

To the bafflement of outsiders, communist China and Cuba have joined the states of the Islamic conference. Both are officially atheist and China persecutes its Muslim minority. But what unites dictatorships is more important than what divides them and no one should be surprised that communist elites will use any weapon available to assault principles which threaten their power.

Sitting in Britain, it is easy to feel superior. We can dismiss the UN as a club without rules that negates its own standards by granting membership to countries that break every article in the declaration of human rights. You need only look around to realise that complacency is unwarranted. Last week, Channel 4 launched a libel action against West Midlands Police and the Crown Prosecution Service, which had accused its film-makers of inventing all-too-real scenes of clerics preaching misogyny, anti-semitism and homophobia. They must have found accurate investigative reporting disrespectful. The government seeks to deny us the very language we need to describe religious terror and insists civil servants don't call Islamic extremists Islamic extremists but 'anti-Islamic extremists'.

He isn't alone in succumbing to obfuscation and appeasement. The past five years have been among the most shameful in BBC history. It presents tiny groups of extreme right wingers as the authentic voice of Islam while shunning liberal-minded Muslims or asking hard questions of those who would oppress them. Meanwhile, it is not only authoritarian states at the UN which want a universal blasphemy law. The Archbishop of Canterbury is as keen on criminalising criticism.

AP reported that Yohann and Olivier Roussel triumphed after unleashing a 'cacophony of oinks and grunts'. Why go to Trie-sur-Baïse when you can hear them at home.



**Secular Conscience:**

**Why Belief Belongs in Public Life**

Prometheus Books is pleased to announce the publication of *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life* (Hardcover, \$24.95, March 18, 2008) by Austin Dacey. Dacey is a philosopher with the Center for Inquiry in New York City, where he serves as the United Nations representative and a contributing editor to *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry* magazines.

In *The Secular Conscience*, Dacey calls for a bold rethinking of the nature of conscience and its role in public life. Inspired by an earlier tradition that he traces to Spinoza and John Stuart Mill, Dacey defends a renewed secularism based in the objective moral value of conscience.

Susan Jacoby, author of *The Age of American Unreason*, says this book "is sorely needed at a time when both the religious right and the religious left claim that there can be no public or private morality without religion. With wit and a philosopher's insight, Dacey explains exactly why secular morality, grounded in an ethical approach that relies on reason rather than supernatural faith, must be restored to the public square."

Publishers Weekly offered this advance praise: "In a dazzling display of erudition, this book presents a cogent argument for secular liberalism... Dacey's presentation is especially timely in view of the emphasis by some current presidential candidates on their religious identity... a thoughtful, well-reasoned argument for progressive secularism."



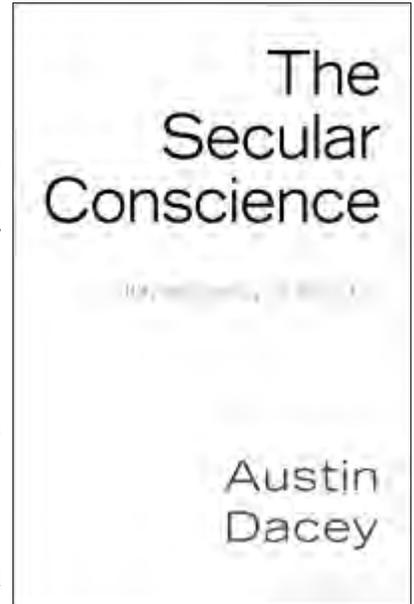
Austin Dacey

"Finally, a case for secularism that does not seek to rid the public square of religion, but which shows that it can be a place for all to exercise their deepest convictions civilly and on equal terms. Bravo!" says Mark Silk, Director of the

Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College.

"*The Secular Conscience* breaths new life into an old topic," says Princeton's Peter Singer, "Dacey's argument for allowing believers back into the "public square"---and then subjecting them to a forceful critique---is fresh and convincing..."

Best-selling author Sam Harris adds, "*The Secular Conscience* reveals how simplistic notions of privacy, tolerance, and freedom keep dangerous ideas sheltered from public debate. This is an extraordinarily useful and lucid book."



Please join Austin Dacey as he hits the road in support of *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life*. Join him in a town near you for compelling dialogue and the chance to have your book signed:

- Apr. 11 Bowling Green State University/Bowling Green, OH
- Apr. 12 Center for Inquiry NE Ohio, Brecksville Library/Cleveland, OH, 11 AM
- Apr. 25 Indiana University/Purdue University-Indianapolis/Indianapolis, IN
- Apr. 25 Center for Inquiry Indiana/Indianapolis, IN

.....  
• *Quote*

• One of the biggest changes in politics in my  
• lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal,  
• it has come in from the fringe, to sit in the seat of  
• power in the Oval Office and in Congress. For the  
• first time in our history, ideology and theology hold a  
• monopoly of power in Washington. Theology asserts  
• propositions that cannot be proven true: ideologues  
• hold stoutly to a world view despite being contra-  
• dicted by what is generally accepted as reality. When  
• ideology and theology couple, their offspring are not  
• always bad but they are always blind. And there is  
• the danger: voters and politicians alike, oblivious of  
• the facts.

• - Bill Moyers, December 2004

• *Unquote*  
• .....



## *God is Not Great: The Case Against Religion*

By Christopher Hitchens (Atlantic Books, 2007)

Review by Michael Skapinker

In two years' time we will celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. A year later we will mark 400 years since Galileo observed four moons orbiting Jupiter and concluded, as Copernicus did before him, that the earth was not the center of the universe.

These two events destroyed humanity's understanding of how we and our world came to be. It is extraordinary that literalist religion survived them - but it has. As Christopher Hitchens observes in *God Is Not Great*, people still attempt to subvert Darwin's findings with the notion of "intelligent design", while fundamentalist Islam threatens our lives.

Hitchens knows his scripture. He loves "the splendid liturgy of the King James Bible". He was married the first time by a Greek Orthodox priest and the second by a gay rabbi. But now all he wants from religion, he says, is that it leave him alone.

Except that he cannot leave religion alone. He loathes it. He notes in gory detail its practitioners' sins, from the sodomizing of boys to genital mutilation to complicity in mass murder. Religion, he says, poisons everything. This book is not only a polemic against literalism; it is an attack on any accommodation between religion and science, faith and progress.

He cites as evidence the story of God (or, as he prefers, god) instructing Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, only for an angel to stay his hand. Hitchens' fascination with this disturbing tale is not surprising. How could a loving deity order such a thing? Others see it differently. Many have argued that child sacrifice was common at the time and the story of Abraham and Isaac was an instruction to end it. Similarly, Hitchens describes the Old Testament's "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" injunction as "brutish and stupid". Many scholars regard it instead as a warning against excessive vengeance. Hitchens is either unaware of these views, which would be surprising given how much else he knows, or he prefers not to mention them

because they might demonstrate that religion can advance human progress too.

Some of the fights he picks make sparkling reading - his assault on "intelligent design" in particular. But the problem with Hitchens' thesis that religion poisons everything is how to explain those who use it to do good. How does Hitchens account for Martin Luther King? Here's how: King was not really a Christian. Really? Well, at no point did King suggest that those who reviled him would be punished in this world or the next. "In no real as opposed to nominal sense, then, was he a Christian." Let's leave aside the possibility that King's lack of interest in revenge came from the Gospels; instead, let's use the tools of a thinker Hitchens himself commends: Karl Popper.

Popper said that for any theory to be scientific, it had to be falsifiable. Is "religion poisons everything" falsifiable? Potentially - all we have to find is something that religion did not poison, and see how the theory stands up. Martin Luther King didn't poison everything. Ah, says Hitchens, he wasn't religious. Any student of Popper recognises this dodge: it is an ad hoc hypothesis, designed to explain away uncomfortable facts that refute the theory. (I notice that Hitchens doesn't try the King trick on Desmond Tutu. But then Tutu is still alive and we can imagine his response to any suggestion that he is not a real Christian.)

What of godless people who do evil? Unlike some, Hitchens does not claim that Nazism was Christian, but he devotes pages to the churches' complicity with the Nazis and how few clerics stood up to them. All true, but the Nazis remain responsible for their crimes whoever collaborated with them, and their godless atrocities far exceeded anything the godly have done.

As for Stalin, Hitchens writes, look at "the permanent search for heretics and schismatics; the mummification of dead leaders as icons and relics". Remind you of anything? Hitchens says that Stalin understood his people's religious superstitions and mimicked them. So King wasn't really religious and Stalin was. If that sort of intellectual and moral shabbiness is to your taste, this book should be too.

Michael Skapinker is editor of the *FT's* Weekend edition.

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April Potluck:  
Tuesday April 8, 2008 6:30 PM



March Meeting  
Tuesday, March 25, 2008 7:00 PM  
At the Vernon Manor



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](mailto:figinfo@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at [gofigger.org](http://gofigger.org) or [freeinquirygroup.org](http://freeinquirygroup.org).