

FIG LEAVES

Volume 17 Issue 5

May 2008

May FIG Meeting:

Wednesday, May 28, 7:00 PM
at the Vernon Manor
Note Date Change

The Creation Museum - Bad Bible and Bad Science

by Rabbi Robert Barr

For the May meeting, FIG invites Rabbi Robert Barr to discuss the Answers in Genesis Creation Museum. Last year on Memorial Day, FIG sponsored the Rally for Reason Speak-Out to organize community and Freethought leaders against the troubling claims made by the museum. Now, one year later, Rabbi Barr will share his thoughts and provide an update on the museum. Earlier this year, Rabbi Barr visited the museum with a liberal minister and a reporter from German Public Radio. Rabbi Barr's presentation will share his thoughts from his tour and provide FIG members a brief overview of the museum with photographs. Then he will discuss the issues the Creation

Museum raises and present challenges to their claims.

Robert B. Barr is the founding Rabbi of Congregation Beth Adam. Internationally known for its original liturgy, which celebrates Judaism from a humanistic perspective, the congregation was established in 1980. Raised in Greater Detroit, Barr attended Oakland University (in Rochester, MI) where he received his BA in Philosophy and Psychology. He came to Cincinnati following a year living in Israel. Rabbi Barr was ordained and received his MAHL from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Currently, he is serving as the President of the Greater Cincinnati Board of Rabbis.

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Barr also lectures regularly on business ethics and speaks frequently on liberal religious thought. His writings have appeared in books, journals and on websites. Rabbi Barr records a weekly audio blog that can be heard at <www.bethadam.org> or iTunes.

June Meeting:

Sunday, June 29, 2008, 2:00 pm:

The June program will be on Sunday, June 29 at 2:00 pm and the speaker will be Katie Hladky. Katie is a PhD candidate in Comparative Religion at Florida State

University. She will speak on her research on televangelism and prosperity theology, including the "Grassley 6". The "Grassley 6" are six preachers that have been called to testify in front of Congress by Senator Chuck Grassley on the legitimacy of their use of donations. Katie also serves as a Board member for Camp Quest.

Events (note date/time changes)

May Meeting

Wednesday, May 28, 2008, 7:00 PM
 at the Vernon Manor
 400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH

June Potluck

Sunday, June 15, 2008; 2:00 PM

June Meeting

Sunday, June 29, 2008, 2:00 PM
 at the Vernon Manor
 400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



April Meeting

The Myth of Nazareth

by René Salm

Frank Zindler, editor American Atheist Press



Frank started his talk by recalling he had spoken to a FIG Meeting before, but he could not recall the exact occasion. He expressed delight at being back and being able to share his enthusiasm about this book, which is perhaps the biggest thing he has been involved in. One could argue that this is the most important freethought book ever. According to Frank it is the only book that has succeeded in proving a universal negative. It is the only book that has been able to demolish a popular god. The reason, he showed us is that René Salm has been exhaustive.

If someone says that there is a unicorn in your upstairs closet, it's very easy to test that. You just go up and look. But, if someone insists there is a unicorn somewhere in the universe, you can check many places but not the whole universe. Hence people talk about "god" just in a general sense. You can't really prove or disprove him by location. If Christians claim that a particular person, Jesus of Nazareth, is god; then because this person is associated with a physical place, you have a way to examine his reality.

Frank explained about René himself. He's quite an amazing fellow. He is a polymath. Originally he was a German and music major in college. He is an accomplished pianist, a composer of piano and chamber music. He spent about twenty years researching the origins of Buddhism and its ties to Gnosticism and that is how he got into the subject of Christianity. In the process of this research he pursued some questions that interested Frank for a lecture he gave in 1993, "Where Jesus Never Walked." This deals with the geography of the New Testament. In limiting himself to Nazareth René could be more exhaustive than Frank.

Whoever heard of Jesus of Nazareth? The authors of the Gospel of Matthew do mention Jesus in relation to a place called either Nazareth or Nazara. It is interesting that they can't seem to get their spelling straight. Usually when you see something like that in an ancient text you have to suspect that there has been conflation of several different traditions leaving more than one author's hand in the work. It also tells us there are several languages involved leading to the differences in spelling. The Gospel of Luke does not have Nazaret but it has Nazareth. In ancient Greek, the final th (*theta*) is a separate letter, not t (*tau*). The Gospel of John has Nazareth, the Book of Acts has Nazareth and the Gospel of Mark in only one place (1:9) has Nazaret. There are numerous other mentions in the English Bible, but these are all mistranslations of a Greek word which should be translated as Nazarene. The one reference in Mark is considered a later interpolation.

Here is the astounding fact. Nazareth is not known anywhere else in the New Testament, nor is it known in the entire Hebrew Bible. Nazareth is unknown in the Babylonian Talmud in which 63 towns in Galilee are mentioned, but Nazareth is not one of them. Who else never heard of Nazareth? All of the ancient geographers →



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

figinfo@fuse.net;

or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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before the beginning of the fourth century. Josephus, the Jewish historian, is the source of almost all we know of first century Palestine. He mentions 45 cities and towns in Galilee. As a general in the Jewish War he fortified the city of Sepphoris, which is a little over four miles from present day Nazareth. Certainly, if there was anyone who could have been expected to mention Nazareth, it would have been Josephus.

Next, we come to the witness of Origen, one of the church fathers who lived from c.185-c.254. His name is interesting because it means produced by Hor, the Egyptian god Horus. So he came from Alexandria in Egypt. He lived in Caesarea as an adult as a bishop. He was only about thirty miles from Nazareth. He never visited Nazareth. Here is a quote from him: "We have visited the places to learn by inquiry of the footsteps of Jesus and of his disciples;" yet nowhere does he mention visiting Nazareth.

About a hundred years later a church historian named Eusebius lived at Caesarea. He wrote a book of place names called *Onomasticon*. He has this quotation: "Nazareth of which Christ is called a Nazarene; and we, who are now called Christians formerly Nazarenes even until today, it is in Galilee opposite Megiddo about 15 milestones away to the East near to Mt. Tabor." Frank pointed out these place names on a map and demonstrated the difficulty of finding the Nazareth based upon this quotation. He concluded that Eusebius was passing on things he had heard from others. Frank also quoted a passage from the original King James version in which a precipice is mentioned as being atop the hill at Nazareth as well as a synagogue. There is no precipice, either atop or on the side of the hill nor is there a synagogue there. The Nazareth hill has never had buildings on top before modern times, not even in the Middle Ages. In Nazareth are some buildings from the Middle Roman Period several centuries later, but none from the first century BCE or the first century CE.

What else is not found at Nazareth archeology? No pottery that can be dated to the turn of the era, no oil lamps. The lack of oil lamps is significant, for it was the only illumination for the dark of night, so they were ubiquitous. Not a single coin has been found from the site of present day Nazareth that dates to the first century BCE or CE. At archeological sites in the Near East we usually find many coins. At nearby Megiddo literally

thousands of coins from the period have been found.

Frank used an aerial photograph of present day Nazareth to point out several landmarks. There is a conical shaped tower of the Church of the Annunciation connected to a monastery of the Franciscans and a church of St. Joseph built over Joseph's legendary workshop. All of these buildings are owned by the Franciscan Order and are in the Roman Catholic quarter of Nazareth. The Greek Orthodox Church also has a section which duplicates many of the features of the Roman Catholic Quarter. Frank pointed out the location of Sepphoris the ancient Roman capital of Galilee. He commented that this town should have been a major center of Jesus' activity. It is not mentioned in the New Testament. Much of the NT geography is mythical. But a lot of the geography that is real doesn't appear in the Gospels. At Nazareth exist some tombs dating from the Iron and Bronze ages, as well as some later tombs from the Roman era of the destruction of the Temple (70 CE). Jewish Law prohibits habitation within 150-250 feet from a grave or a tomb. When the Franciscans first started their investigations they were naive and described the tombs. As they gained understanding they stopped mentioning any burials. Nazareth actually may have been a necropolis not a town.

As mentioned Salm was exhaustive in his research. He has demonstrated there are no buildings from the turn of the era at Nazareth, no tombs from that time, no coins, no pottery, no lamps, or any signs of habitation from the Hellenistic age. Since there never was a Nazareth at the time, there never was a Jesus of Nazareth.

- Reported by George Maurer ☚

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 **Talking With Jesus**

When I am troubled, I find comfort sitting
in my back yard with a Scotch and a quiet
conversation with Jesus.

Yesterday I said, "Jesus, why do I work so hard?"
Came the reply, "Men find many ways to demonstrate
the love they have for their family. You work hard to cre-
ate a peaceful place for friends and family to gather."
I had yet one more burning question: "Jesus, what is
the meaning of life?"
He replied, "The answer is in your heart, my friend."
"And, while I would love to continue our little chat,
Señor, I really ought to finish mowing your lawn!"

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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:

6-8 May: *An Atheist Navy Vet,*
with Keith Taylor

13-15 May: *The Naturalism of Ron Giere,*
with Ron Geire

20-22 May: *The Naturalism of Charlene H. Siegfried,*
with C. H. Siegfried

27-29 May: *The Challenge of Naturalism,*
with Randall Dipert

Hear! Hear! *Answers in Atheism* at

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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.

The Answers in Atheism crew

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. We'll repeat this list in the next FIG Leaves as a reminder. The soldiers have requested:

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

Any magazines or books (atheist or humanist

In Memory

L. Charles Hughes

Our friend and member L. Charles Hughes suffered a broken hip in February followed by various complications. He died on 13 March at his home in Brookville, Indiana; he was 83 years old. Charles was a veteran of World War II and the U.S. Navy having served in the South Pacific. He delighted in recounting his narrow escape from death by leaving a hot poker game. Charles was a retired Mechanical Engineer, a graduate of the Carnegie Institute of Technology. He was an avid sailor and a member of the U.S. Power Squadron. Charles is survived by his wife Marian, and by two sons, and grandchildren.

I shall miss Charlie. We wrote each other quite frequently on the e-mail exchanging jokes, and stories. Charles was fond of drawing my attention to extreme, outrageous stories, and enjoyed a good discussion. He was certainly a unique individual and was truly a good man.

- Wolf Roder



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/>

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

Thank you,
John Welte



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



Association for Rational Thought.

May 10 @ 10:00 AM
Molly Malone's Restaurant,
6111 Montgomery Road,
Pleasant Ridge, 45213.

A New Look at the Lamarckian Evolution through Epigenetics

Epigenetics refers to stable and heritable (or potentially heritable) changes in gene expression that do not involve a change in DNA sequence. Evidence is mounting to show that it is involved in the development of many human diseases. However, it is still controversial if it plays a role in evolution. Jean Baptiste de Lamarck (1809) suggested that new species could arise through changes in the relationship between the organism and its environment to produce new traits that become inherited in successive generations. This theory was widely discredited during the post-Darwin period. Today, with a new understanding of epigenetics, Dr. Ho will re-visit the scientific evidence for and against the Lamarck's theory of "acquired characters."

Presenter Dr. Shuk-mei Ho, Chair and Professor, Department of Environmental Health, University of Cincinnati School of Medicine.

Is there a Food Panic?

Not enough food or too many mouths? President Bush has asked Congress for an additional \$770M in emergency food assistance for poor countries. The only complaint from Congress was that it won't be available until the new fiscal year in October. But these countries are poor because they are overpopulated, undereducated, and women have no control over reproduction. Food won't solve the problem unless it's linked to women's rights including easy access to the pill and education in its use.



- *What's New* by Robert Park, 2 May 2008

The Climate is warming, except right now it's cooling.

There is a lot happening on this complicated planet besides greenhouse warming, so it's not too surprising that things added up to give us a little cooling. And give the warming deniers a rare - and temporary - victory. As we understand it, vacillating ocean floes spell a cooling trend up until about 2015, and then we can get back to warming. Oh sure, say the warming deniers.

- *What's New* by Robert Park, 2 May 2008

I turned to speak to God
About the world's despair;
But to make bad matters worse,
Found God wasn't there.
Robert Frost (1874-1963)

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.

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





What is Catholic health care?

An article by Barbara Coombs Lee, President of Compassion & Choices, a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding and protecting the rights of the terminally ill. (February 2008)

Compassion & Choices promotes freedom of conscience in health care, and right now the Catholic takeover of hospitals in Denver and Santa Fe brings this value front and center. Most people don't know that Catholic clinics, hospitals, doctors and insurance plans deliver health care in strict accordance with Catholic doctrine, as laid out in a document called "Ethical and Religious Directives (ERDs) for Catholic Health Care Services."

My impression is Catholic health care managers would just as soon the public didn't read these rules, but the cat is out of the bag:

- Read all the ERDs on the site of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops <http://www.usccb.org/bishops/directives.shtml>
- Read "Pope Benedict XVI Calls on Doctors to Resist Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide" <http://www.lifenews.com/bio2345.html>
- Read "Denver Archbishop Decries 'Coercion' of Catholic Hospitals in Merger Dispute" <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=11888>

The Directives are harsh and uncompromising in their enforcement of Catholic doctrine, particularly at life's beginning and life's end. No sterilization is allowed, even in the setting of a Caesarean section, though delay means assuming the risk of a second anesthesia and surgery at a non-Catholic hospital. No "abortion" allowed, ever, even in an emergency, as when ectopic pregnancy threatens a woman's life.

Catholic hospitals will pass out advance directives, but they won't follow them unless they conform to "Catholic moral teaching." (ERD#59) In a classic catch-22, a patient may direct removal of the ventilator, dialysis or feeding tube that keeps him alive, but not if he intends to die as a result. (ERD #60) If a patient wants the ventilator removed with the intention that his death be peaceful, he is to receive loving care and spiritual

support, but no respect for his wish. (ERD #60)

Perhaps most alarmingly, the ERDs instruct that patients remain conscious despite unbearable pain, breathlessness or other suffering, in order to "prepare for death." If suffering cannot be relieved they "should be helped to appreciate the Christian understanding of redemptive suffering." (ERD #61) Patients may be delivered into unconsciousness only with "compelling reason."

Whether a patient believes in the redemptive value of suffering is beside the point. The point is Catholic providers deliver theology-driven health care to Catholics and non-Catholics alike and replace patient choice with a bishop's discretionary interpretation of terms like "burden," "benefit," "intention" and "compelling."

Patients who land in a Catholic hospital may unknowingly submit to dogmatic rules way out of line with their own dearly held values, beliefs and religious faith. At the very least, people deserve fair warning before they do so. Health care providers of every faith enjoy a public trust, not an entitlement to entrap unsuspecting patients into their private beliefs.

On 9 April 2008 the *Cincinnati Enquirer* commented on the situation in the tri-state:

Officials at this region's nine Catholic hospitals last week said they will continue to honor end-of-life directives until they are told otherwise. They don't expect most directives to be affected at all. The Catholic Hospital Association, made up of 565 U.S. hospitals, praised the pope for reaffirming the "inviolable dignity of human persons" no matter their condition and cautiously agreed that his "guidance" requires further "dialogue."

The law on advance directives varies from state to state. University of Dayton law professor Vernellia Randall says under Ohio law, doctors and hospitals are duty-bound to tell you at admission if they can't comply with some wish

in a living will. A separate statute also says they may not try to keep a patient from being transferred. "They not only can't interfere, but they should do what they can to facilitate the transfer," she said. She also warned, "There is no legal right to health care." A patient's advance wishes could be moot in an area where there is only one hospital and it doesn't share the patient's belief system.





"I don't know how, but acupuncture works."

You will not be surprised to learn that we got a lot of disagreement about the item on acupuncture last week. As one reader pointed out, "millions of people have been treated with acupuncture and say it works; scientists

should be trying to find out how it works rather than ridiculing it." Look at it this way, an even larger number of people around the world say astrology works. If you think they're right you're beyond help. What we need to understand is why people think acupuncture works. If you ask an acupuncturist how it works, the answer is "qi." What's qi? Briefly, dissection was forbidden in ancient China, as it was in the West before about 1500 AD. Beheadings, on the other hand, were common. The carotid artery and jugular veins sticking out of the severed neck looked like empty tubes, and were assumed to be passageways to let air flow through the body. Blood was thought to fill the body cavity. As recently as the late Ming dynasty (1368 B 1644) the arteries were thought to carry air. Qi is the word for air.

Why is quackery big and happening now?

It's not just acupuncture. In the waning days of his administration Bill Clinton created a 20-member White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine, perhaps as a gift to Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), a true believer who had been a loyal supporter. The commission members advocated homeopathy, acupuncture, touch therapy, magnets, reflexology, crystals, chelation, craniosacral manipulation, echinacea, aromatherapy, yohimbe bark and more. Incredibly James Gordon, who had been a follower of the notorious Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, was chosen to head the commission. A Georgetown professor, Gordon predicted the Gordon Report would replace the 1910 Flexner report that established medicine as a scientific enterprise. It could happen. With the candidates talking up some form of National Health Coverage, the push is on for CAM therapies to maneuver to be included. How better to look scientific than to be on a university campus.

- *What's New* by Robert Park, 11 April 2008

Snakes.

If you think Christians who "take up serpents" (Mark 16; 18) are a little crazy, try the village of Choto Pashla about eighty miles northwest of Kolkata (Calcutta). Here the Hindu villagers began worshiping the snakes hundreds of years ago as the representatives of a goddess and believe that their farms have consequently prospered ever since.

"Women offer milk to the reptiles at midday when the priest worships the goddess of snakes, Manasa, in the temple," said Samir Chatterjee, the local school headmaster. When a snake dies, the villagers place it in an earthen jar and then immerse it in the sacred Ganges River. Still, apart from feeding them and performing their last rites, the villagers do try to keep the snakes at arm's length, or more. "Our customs forbid us from touching the snakes," said 25-year-old Dipu Majhi who was bitten by a snake nearly five years ago while fishing in a pond.

Nearly a dozen villagers die of snake-bite every year, locals say, with the village still relying on traditional treatments. I was asked to bathe in the pond beside the temple of the goddess of snakes and then a pinch of mud from the temple compound was rubbed on the injury," said Majhi, a fish and vegetable seller. "My hand swelled but healed after a week."

The village of Choto Pashla in West Bengal state has one snake for every two residents, mainly the poisonous monocled cobra, a black reptile with a yellow ring around its neck that can grow to seven feet in length. Such snakes are found everywhere -- in rice fields, ditches, muddy ponds and even sometimes sunning themselves by houses -- and no one appears to fear them.

Ghost Science: how widespread is the practice?

Vioxx was a top selling painkiller until Merck took it off the market in 2004 after evidence linked it to heart attacks. Merck reached a \$4.85 billion settlement of thousands of Vioxx lawsuits, but, according to a story by Stephanie Saul in Wednesday's New York Times, documents released in those cases reveal a practice of promoting Vioxx by recruiting doctors to sign drug studies actually ghost written by Merck.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 18 April 2008





There will be no science debate, instead candidates will debate Jesus:

It seemed to be going well for efforts to arrange a debate on science issues. The National Academies, the Council for Competitiveness and the AAAS had agreed to serve as official cosponsors; the plan was endorsed by all major research universities and scientific societies. However, in a world faced with the threat of global warming, dwindling fossil fuel, continuous warfare, disease and starvation on the rise in Africa, spiraling food prices world wide, the candidates must focus on "solutions." They have therefore chosen to attend "The Compassion Forum" instead, a "wide ranging and probing discussion of policies related to moral issues." It will be held at Messiah College somewhere in central Pennsylvania. Founded by the Brethren in Christ Church in 1909; Messiah's motto is "Christ Preeminent." It has not been decided whether the candidates will remain on their knees during the debate.

- *What's New* by Robert Park, 11 April 2008

Science Debate 2008:

Some days get really long. The "Compassion Forum" on Sunday night at Messiah College was not exactly the debate scientists had hoped for. It wasn't a debate at all; Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were interviewed separately. Jon Meacham of *Newsweek* asked Senator Clinton straight out, "do you personally believe life begins at conception?" "I believe the potential for life begins at conception," she began. Would she now try to explain to this Christian-conservative audience why a single cell is not just a very small person? Not a chance; she wandered off into a discussion of her Methodist roots. It would be up to Senator Obama. Campbell Brown of CNN, Meacham's co-host, asked Obama what he would say to one of his daughters if she asked him if God really created the universe in six days. Glory! It was the opening scientists pray for, a chance for an audacious young man to tell the story of creation to the entire nation. "No dear, the story of the beginning of the universe is far grander than that. It is 14 billion years old and still changing. Science has learned much, but there is far more still to be learned . . ." Of course he did not say that. He said, "Six days in the bible may not be 24-hour days." Sigh! They debated again on Wednesday - nothing to report.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 18 April 2008

Italy: Padre Pio's little secret

On occasion of his 40th death anniversary, the body of Padre Pio - meantime Saint Pio of Pietrelcina - is on display in a glass coffin at his friary at San Giovanni Rotondo, in Puglia, southern Italy. 700,000 pilgrims have registered in advance to take a look at the saint who bore what he claimed to be Jesus' bleeding wounds. They may be disappointed, as there is no trace of those famous stigmata at his hands and feet now, though his skin is still intact.

Padre Pio had a little secret. He would use carbolic acid to create those holy wounds himself. He was "an ignorant and self-mutilating psychopath who exploited people's credulity", said the founder of Rome's Catholic University Hospital. Historian Sergio Suzette found Padre Pio out last year. His research was based on a document found in the Vatican's archive. It was the testimony of a pharmacist from San Giovanni Rotondo, from whom the padre had ordered acid. He had disclosed to her that it was to sterilize needles and pledged her to secrecy. During the beatification process, the document was examined - but dismissed. Apparently the Vatican was in no mood to have a great miracle spoiled. Moreover, in his younger years, the late Pope John Paul II had himself been one of the pilgrims who came all the way to Puglia to get Padre Pio's blessings.

International Rationalist Bulletin #174

The magic of a US visa.

Lord Balaji - also known as Venkateswara - was merely a locally popular Hindu god in Hyderabad, India, until a few years ago, when a priest noticed that many of his worshipers were complaining that valuable U.S. professional "H-1B" visas were harder to get. Almost overnight the Lord Balaji was transformed from a purveyor of general prosperity to the "visa god," specializing in the lucky H-1B visas. The limited number of these visas are distributed partly by lot. The temple now draws some hundred thousand visitors a week. Claimed one, "I've never heard of anyone who's gone to the temple whose visa application was rejected." Even though the typical advice from the local priest is simply: to walk around the temple "eleven times."





*Snake Oil Science:
The Truth About Complementary
& Alternative Medicine*
by R. Barker Bausell
(New York: Oxford University Press, 200&)
reviewed by Harriet Hall, M.D.

I could condense this review into three words: “read this book!”

The term “complementary and alternative medicine” (CAM) is relatively new, but the treatments it encompasses are not. Before we had science, all we had to rely on was testimonials and beliefs. And even today, for most people who believe CAM works, belief is enough. But at some level, the public has now recognized that science matters and people are looking for evidence to support those beliefs. Advocates claim that recent research validates CAM therapies. Does it really? Does the evidence show that any CAM therapy actually works better than placebos? R. Barker Bausell asks that question, does a compellingly thorough investigation, and comes up with a resounding “NO” for an answer.

Bausell is the ideal person to ask such a question. He is a research methodologist: he designs and analyzes research studies for a living. Not only that: he was intimately involved with acupuncture research for the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM). So when he talks about what can go wrong in research and why much of the research on CAM is suspect, he is well worth listening to.

He describes his acupuncture research in great detail. It involved patients with pain from dental surgery. Before designing the experiments, he searched the literature and found an article that reviewed 16 previous trials of acupuncture for dental pain and concluded that it was probably effective. But on the Jadad scale, a simple 5-point measure of quality, none of those 16 studies scored higher than 3 (which is considered barely adequate) and 5 of them incredibly scored zero. Bausell’s group set out to resolve the question with research of much higher quality. For instance, a low dropout rate is one measure of quality; they only had 3 subjects drop out

during the course of the study, and those 3 were people the researchers sent home because of a snow storm!

They compared “true” acupuncture to the most credible “sham” acupuncture they could devise. There was no difference in outcome: both were equally effective in relieving pain. When they looked more closely at their data, they found some surprises. The placebo control was not perfect, and some subjects had been able to guess which group they were in. Knowing you really got acupuncture should have increased the placebo response, and knowing you didn’t should have decreased it. Yet even so, there was no difference between the groups. So the results were even more negative than they appeared. Even more fascinating, patients who *thought* they got real acupuncture reported much more pain relief than those who *thought* they got the sham, regardless of which they actually got!

Bausell points out that penicillin cures pneumonia even if you’re in a coma, but alternative medicine only seems to work when you are awake. You have to know (or think) you’re being treated. And penicillin works by well-understood scientific principles, while much of alternative medicine is based on “entire physiologic systems or physical forces that the average high school science teacher already knew didn’t exist.” If any alternative treatment clearly worked as well as penicillin, prior plausibility wouldn’t matter: science would adopt it and worry about *how* it worked later. Under the circumstances, prior plausibility is an important consideration.

He tells his mother-in-law’s story. She had knee pain from osteoarthritis with fluctuating symptoms. Every time the pain increased, she would try something new she had read about in *Prevention* magazine and every time it would seem to work as the pain naturally decreased again. And eventually it would seem to stop working as the pain naturally increased again. She would phone every couple of months to tell him about the wonderful new treatment she had discovered. She was not ignorant or stupid, but she underestimated the power of the placebo and didn’t realize how the natural fluctuations of her pain led her to false conclusions.

She had fallen for the most common human error: the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. The fact that pain relief follows treatment doesn’t necessarily mean that the





treatment caused the pain relief. This is only one of the many impediments to correct thinking that plague our fallible human brains. Bausell describes some of those other impediments. He shows how patients, doctors, and researchers are all equally likely to fool themselves, and why the most rigorous science is needed to keep us from reaching false conclusions.

Bausell's thorough discussion of the placebo phenomenon is illuminating and invaluable. He covers the history of research on placebos and tells some fascinating anecdotes. He argues that placebo response is not just imagination. It is a learned phenomenon, a conditioned response. You respond to a placebo pill because you have previous experience of being helped by pills. Morphine injections in dogs cause a side effect of salivation: after a while, you can inject water and they will respond with salivation. Physiologic effects from placebo are always smaller than with the real thing, but apparently they do occur. The evidence for *objective* physiologic effects may not be entirely convincing, but it is certain that pain and other *subjective* symptoms respond to placebos. And there is even research suggesting a mechanism: the release of endogenous opioids, pain-relieving chemicals produced by our own brains. If you counteract those chemicals with a narcotic antagonist like Narcan, you can block the placebo response.

He shows that the act of taking a pill may really relieve pain, but that the contents of the pill may be irrelevant. Research shows a hierarchy of placebo response: injections work better than capsules and capsules work better than tablets. The color and size of the pill and the frequency of dosing all make a difference. And intriguingly, patients who have responded to a placebo have distortions of memory: they remember the pain relief as greater than it actually was!

Bausell points out that,

Just because someone with a PhD or an MD performs a clinical trial doesn't mean that the trial possesses any credibility whatsoever. In fact, the vast majority of these efforts are worse than worthless because they produce misleading results.

The book includes valuable lessons on how to tell credible research from the other kind. Even the most experienced researchers will find food for thought here,

and for the layman it will be a revelation.

Research is full of pitfalls. Negative studies tend not to get published (the file drawer effect). Research done by believers and pharmaceutical companies tends to be more positive than research done by others. Studies from non-English speaking countries are notoriously unreliable for various reasons. 98% of the acupuncture studies from Asia are positive, compared to 30% from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The researcher may delegate the actual research to others, who may make undetected mistakes or deliberately skew results to please their boss. Double blind studies may not be truly blind: subjects may have been able to guess which group they were in. Subjects who are not responding may drop out. People who believe in homeopathy are more likely to volunteer for homeopathy studies. Researchers may put a positive spin on their findings or reach conclusions that are not justified by the data. Even if the research is impeccable, we arbitrarily use $p < .05$ as the measure of statistical significance, and this means there is a 5% probability that the results will appear falsely positive just by chance.

There are more pitfalls, and Bausell covers them all. When you come right down to it, no experiment is beyond criticism, and most published research is wrong. So how can we decide which studies are credible? We now have published guidelines such as the 22 item Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) checklist to assess the quality of randomized controlled trials, but Bausell offers some simpler criteria that can rule out the worst offenders:

- Subjects are randomly assigned to a CAM therapy or a credible placebo
- At least 50 subjects per group
- Less than 25% dropout rate
- Publication in a high-quality, prestigious, peer-reviewed journal

Using this simple 4-item checklist, he reviewed all the CAM studies published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* and *The Journal of the American Medical Association* from 2000-2007. 14 met the criteria, and all were negative. When he expanded his search to include the *Annals of Internal Medicine* and *Archives of Internal Medicine*, he ended up with 22 studies, only one of which





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was positive (exactly what you would expect from the 5% rule if none of them worked).

Since different studies have conflicting results, we now use meta-analyses or systematic reviews to try to reach a reliable conclusion. In fact, we even have systematic reviews of systematic reviews! After explaining why systematic reviews are subject to several pitfalls of their own, Bausell goes on to examine the high-quality systematic reviews from the Cochrane collection. Cochrane's independent reviewers take the quality of studies into account and try to evaluate *all* the published evidence without bias. Of 98 CAM reviews in the Cochrane database, 21 were positive. When he subtracted those that lacked confirmation by studies in English-speaking countries, those with suspect controls, and those that were subsequently trumped by more definitive high-quality studies, the percentage of positive studies dropped to that familiar 5%.

A highly touted non-Cochrane review of homeopathy concluded that the clinical effects of homeopathy were not just due to placebo. But strangely they also concluded that there was insufficient evidence to show that any single homeopathic treatment was clearly effective in any one clinical condition. A re-analysis of the studies they had reviewed showed that when only the highest quality studies were considered, the alleged positive effect for homeopathy disappeared.

What all this amounts to is that advocates can point to plenty of "snake oil" science that apparently supports various CAM treatments; but when examined critically, the entire body of evidence is compatible with the hypothesis that no CAM method works any better than placebo. True believers will never give up their favorite treatment because of negative evidence; they will always want to try one more study in the hope that it will vindicate their belief. They see science as a method they can take advantage of to convince others that their treatment works. They don't see it as a method of finding out *whether* their treatment works. Bausell says: "CAM therapists simply do not value (and most, in my experience, do not understand) the scientific process."

He doesn't aim to dissuade anyone from using CAM. He just doesn't want anyone to choose it for the wrong reasons, to be fooled into thinking there is credible evidence where there isn't. He emphasizes that CAM nourishes hope, and its placebos work, if only for

symptoms that would eventually resolve on their own anyway. The comfort CAM brings can be valuable, as long as it is not used in place of effective treatments for serious conditions; and most of the time it isn't, despite the occasional horror story of a patient who refuses effective cancer treatment and dies using a useless remedy. He even has some advice on how to choose a placebo therapy that works for you. He encourages you to *believe* because otherwise it won't work.

Bausell writes in an entertaining, accessible style: the book reads almost like a detective story. It should appeal equally to the general reader and to the scientist. The book isn't perfect, but its minor flaws don't detract from its message. It is destined to be a classic on the order of Robert Park's *Voodoo Science* and Michael Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things*. If you want to understand how medical research works, if you want to know what can lead patients and scientists to false conclusions, if you have ever used complementary or alternative medicine or have wondered why others do, if you value evidence over belief, if you care about the truth, read this book.

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Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.
Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,
And lay them prone upon the earth and cease
To ponder on themselves, the while they stare
At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere
In shape of shifting lineage; let geese
Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release
From dusty bondage into luminous air.

O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,
When first the shaft into his vision shone
Of light anatomized! Euclid alone
Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they
Who, though once only and then but far away,
Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)



June Potluck:
Sunday June 15, 2008 2:00 PM



May Meeting
Wednesday, May 28, 2008 7:00 PM
At the Vernon Manor



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

FIG

Our Purpose

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

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



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

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

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

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail figinfo@gofigger.org, or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.