

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 16 Issue 8

August 2007

## August Picnic!

Joins us for a Swim Party Picnic!

Sunday, August 26 at 2 PM

Join Chef Edwin, steady at the helm,  
'Midst his helpers, he will overwhelm  
Us with burgers, corn or hotdogs,  
(please don't reverse the dogs!)

Please do bring a dish to share,  
And your swim suit, if you dare.  
If your suit you dare to bring,  
Remember your towel or whistles will sing.

All our families and our friends,  
Will all be there as our joy transcends  
Food and talk. So join us for great fun,  
Sitting in their backyard, shade or sun!



**September FIG Meeting** will be on Tuesday September 25 at 7 PM at the Vernor Manor. More information on the speaker and topic will be in the September issue

A good, believing, Christian mother took her daughter to the doctor and asked him to examine her for she had a terribly swollen abdomen. It took the doctor only a few seconds to determine: "Your daughter is pregnant." The mother turned red with fury and argued with the doctor that her daughter was a good girl who would never compromise her reputation by having sex with a boy. The doctor went to the window and silently searched the sky from horizon to horizon. The mother became angry and screamed, "Quit looking out the window! Why aren't you paying attention to me?" "Yes, of course, Ma'am, I am paying attention. It is only, the last time this is said to have happened, a bright star appeared in the East, and three wise men came from far away. I was hoping that they would show up again."



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### Events

*August Swim/Potluck*  
August 26 at 2 PM  
at the home of

### September Potluck

*Alert! - Date change!*  
**Wednesday**, September 19, 2007,  
6:30 PM at the home of

### September Meeting

Tuesday, September 25, 2007,  
7:00 PM at the Vernor Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



## July Meeting...

The Evolutionary Theory of Sexual Selection  
Speaker: Denice Robertson, PhD

The speaker started with a review and outline of the evolutionary process and its variables.

Natural Selection depends on the fact that individuals differ from each other, in other words (1) all species are variable, individuals differ, and some (not all) of these variations can be inherited. (2) Among all plants and animals more offspring are born than survive and reproduce, (3) survival and reproduction differ among individuals, some will have a long life and many offspring, others will die before they reach reproductive age, and (4) change in population of species is mediated by these differences. Thus differential reproduction may gradually change aspects of the population, which is the essence of evolution.



One aspect of most species of animals is sexual dimorphism, the fact that males and females differ from each other. Among mammals the male is usually larger, but nature is extremely complex and many sexual dimorphisms exist. The speaker gave a number of examples, including slides. Among some species of angler fishes males are tiny, attach themselves to the female, and actually become part of her circulation. Her body will provide nutrition for the male, who supplies the sperm.

Among long tailed widow birds only males have extremely long tails. The females are brownish-grey, able to hide in the grass from predators, while the male stands out. Why does a feature like this long, cumbersome tail last over evolutionary time? The tail is highly visible, it invites predators, it requires extra nutritional energy. Why do only males show this feature? It must be advantageous in some way for either survival (not) or reproduction. As in so many aspects of nature, sex is the answer. Apparently female widow birds select partners for reproduction from among males who display the most magnificent tail - hence tail feathers persist despite their attraction to predators. In some way the tail must signal something positive to the choosy female, health, strength, or the capacity for survival.

Sexual selection is driven by the fact that the reproductive process in most animals is asymmetric. For females the production of eggs or the gestation of offspring is expensive in time and energy. Females are limited as to the number of eggs or offspring they can produce over a lifetime. In consequence a mother has a much larger investment in her offspring than the father. Males in contrast have relatively little investment in their offspring. For males reproductive success in many species is limited only by the number of females they can mate with.

Sexual selection and success for males is besting other males in competition for access to females. For females reproductive success is affected but not determined by choice of male or males to impregnate her, so it is good for the female to be choosy. The speaker then went on to discuss some of the research procedures. Essentially, it involves keeping track of and counting the offspring of various males in a popula- ➔



**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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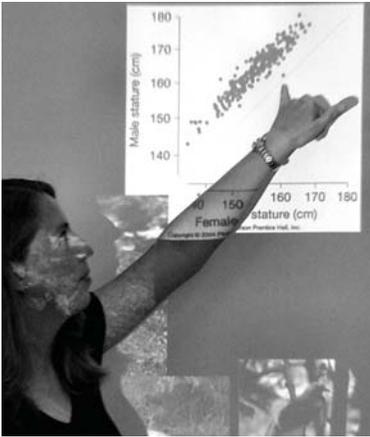
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# FIG LEAVES



tion, if necessary by DNA testing. Interestingly, in many species the eggs or cubs of a specific mother have a variety of fathers, and yet most of the offspring in a population were fathered by a small number of very successful males.

Males compete by various means, each spe-

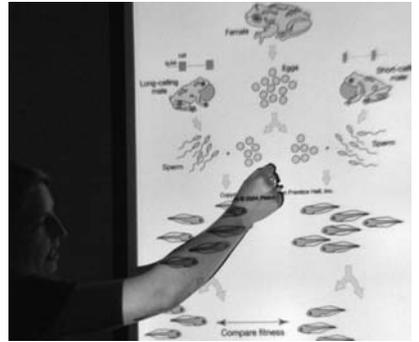
cific to the species. Direct competition, i.e. by combat is not unusual. The stronger male, who takes over a female or harem of females may kill existing offspring, to bring the female into estrus more quickly. The male may guard the female, or even aid in feeding the cub or chick. This is more common among birds and some primates. Competition may be limited to the sperm, i.e. the female collects sperm from several males by mating with each in succession. The male may offer a resource, i.e. food to attract the female. Among some spiders, the food offered may be the male himself after copulation. Among some species, e.g. iguanas, the males establish territories. The females may choose the male, may enter several territories and copulate with more than one male. The size of ejaculate, or scraping out the sperm of an earlier male are means by which males compete.

Female choice may be driven by various aspects of the species. The speaker mentioned tail length in widow birds; also the nest built - a resource - among bower birds. For some species of tree frog the length of the song appears to indicate better genes and attract the female, other parts of song may be clue to the females. Some females have the ability to abort a pregnancy, if a new male comes in who would kill the cub of another father when born. There is no sense expending energy on a pregnancy which will not result in a successful offspring. A successful offspring



is one which lives and reproduces in turn.

At the very end the speaker remarked briefly on selection among plants in sexually reproducing species. This is a topic little understood and requiring yet much research. Like females among animals attracting males, the male plant is dependent on attracting a large number of pollinators for reproductive success. Females have many reasons to be choosy in picking the fathers for their offspring. We learned about the very many and varied ways of sexual selection among species, and the ways in which these promote the evolution of life on planet earth. - reported by Wolf Roder



## SCIENCE BOOK CLUB: 2007 Schedule

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 because of holidays or other conflicts as noted below:

**Aug. 19 (3rd Sunday)** - *Into the cool: energy flow, thermodynamics, and life* by Eric D. Schneider

**Sept. 23** - *The big splat, or, How our moon came to be* by Dana Mackenzie

**Oct. 28** - *Facts and mysteries in elementary particle physics* by Martinus J.G. Veltman

**Nov. 18 (3rd Sunday)** - *What we believe but cannot prove : today's leading thinkers on science in the age of certainty* edited by John Brockman

**Dec. 16 (3rd Sunday)** - *The Republican war on science* by Chis Mooney



### Quote

The most beautiful sentence in the French language:  
The sentence, in pensée no. 206, describes Pascal's reaction to viewing the night sky:

*Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie.*

- Roger G. Newton, From Clockwork to Crapshoot:

A History of Physics (2007) p. 191

Unquote



## **Hello again fellow atheists!**

*Onion Breath* is shipping! This children's book is unique in two ways: it takes back the word "atheist" and it's a quirky, slightly macabre, modern fairy tale. Production took a little longer than we expected, but it was worth the wait.

The colors are intense, and Steph's illustrations are bright and fun. We've changed the look of the website ([www.onionbreath.net](http://www.onionbreath.net)) a bit, to reflect the slightly offbeat, macabre humor of the story. Some of the atheists who got our first press release questioned us on the realism of the story, and some religious folks had questions about the atheism. So we put up a page ([www.onionbreath.net/FAQ.html](http://www.onionbreath.net/FAQ.html)) that addresses these questions and explains a little about our approach to storytelling.

*Onion Breath* can be ordered online at [www.onionbreath.net/BUY.html](http://www.onionbreath.net/BUY.html), but if you know any local bookstores that might be interested, please drop us their names. Places you actually like to visit. We're trying to work with smaller, independent booksellers. The big bookstores won't be able to stock it, because their distributors can't supply it to them. This is an entirely grassroots deal, and any success *Onion Breath* achieves will come directly from the global (check our hit-map! [www.onionbreath.net/wordpress](http://www.onionbreath.net/wordpress) ) atheist community and folks who just really like the book!

We'll be announcing a library promotion of some type, as soon as we have a couple of minutes to nail down the details. Will send you info on that soon. Thanks again for your interest! Feel free to contact us anytime.

--Dan & Steph; [dan@onionbreath.net](mailto:dan@onionbreath.net)

**The Senate's Prayers.** Hindu priest Rajan Zed, the first Hindu asked to lead a Senate prayer, was just getting started yesterday when protestors from a fundamentalist Christian anti-abortion group began shouting "this is an abomination" from the Senate visitor's gallery. Abomination? The prayer was as inconsequential as any other opening prayer. But why, in light of the First Amendment, is any prayer offered? Maybe the Senate should consider Transcendental Meditation instead.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 13 July 2007

## **George II looking for answers in all the wrong places.**

A front-page story by Peter Brown in the Washington Post on Monday says the meetings are never listed on the president's public schedule, and remain unknown to many on his staff, but Bush is summoning "leading authors, historians, philosophers and theologians to the White House." He is searching for answers to the collapse of his presidency but scientists were not consulted. Perhaps it was an oversight by the writer, but it may explain the number of terminally stupid Bush programs that could have been averted by checking with freshman science students. They could have told him: 1) Not even Dick Cheney can break The First Law of Thermodynamics - hydrogen is not an energy source and for that matter neither is corn ethanol. 2) Ballistic missiles are easier to make than they are to stop. 3) Because the sexual urge, even of presidents, is shaped by evolution to insure procreation - girls under 18 need access to Plan B. 4) Embryonic stem cells are not one-celled people - the "soul" is an ancient superstition with no legal standing.

**Why not ask infertile patients themselves?** A survey of patients at major infertility centers, reported in today's *Science*, did just that. In contrast to the prevailing view, they found that only 22 percent would even consider donating excess frozen embryos to other couples. Most patient couples prefer that their excess embryos be used for research, and if not needed for that, simply destroyed.

-- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 6 July 2007

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**Maharishi Central University opens 1 September 2007.**

Maharishi Central University, constructed at the center of America in Kansas, promises Total Knowledge to every student for only \$45,000 per year, which includes lessons in Yogic Flying. At \$9 million each, MCU wants branches in all 50 states. Just inform MCU how many you want to finance. John Hagelin, described as the pinnacle of physicists in the world, has been named Founding President of Maharishi University. He finally got to be a president.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 13 July 2007  
Editor's Comment: the geometric center of the US used to be in Kansas, but when we made Alaska a State it moved across the border into Canada! The population center is located in Missouri.



## Attach on Taslima N33asreen

*Rationalist International* expresses shock and deep concern about the attack on Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen today (August 9) by the radical political outfit **Majlis Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen** (MIM) at the Hyderabad Press Club. She was releasing the Telegu translation of her book *Shodd*. Taslima Nasreen is an Honorary Associate of *Rationalist International*.



MIM activists, led by three state Legislative Council members (MLAs), raised slogans against Taslima and flung chairs at her and others attending the function. However, no injuries have been reported so far. MIM leader Akhtar Khan, an MLA, said: "She is enemy of Islam, she is a black spot on Muslims.. We cannot bear anyone talking against Islam. She has written books against Islam. We will not tolerate her in Hyderabad."

Taslima was rescued by the police and journalists present at the press club and was escorted to the airport. Three radicals have been detained by the police for questioning. Taslima is living in exile for the last twelve years after death threats forced her to flee Bangladesh. She is an outspoken champion of equal rights for women and a fearless fighter against religion. Taslima has faced numerous death threats from Islamic radicals. Recently, in March 2007, an Indian Muslim group offered a bounty of 500,000 rupees for her beheading.

- *Rationalist International* (9 August 2007)

## Damned either way.

Mircea Pavel, 40, is serving twenty years in prison in Romania for murder. But that didn't keep him from filing suit in a Timisoara court accusing "the defendant God, who lives in the heavens and is represented in Romania by the Orthodox Church," of "fraud, betrayal of trust, corruption and influence peddling." Pavel claims that: "At my christening, I made a deal with the defendant aimed at freeing me from evil. But the latter has not respected that agreement until now, although he received from me various assets and numerous prayers." But the court threw out the suit, noting that "God is not subject to law and does not have an address." About as close to saying doesn't exist as a court can.

(Agence France Press)

Quote  
If atheism is a religion, then "not collecting stamps" is a hobby.  
Unquote

## Anyway you can get them to take it

Polio has been eliminated from most developed countries but still paralyzes children in India, Nigeria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hindu priests in Bihar, an impoverished state in India, are blessing children with polio vaccine drops instead of holy water to help eradicate polio. Eleven cases of polio were reported in early 2007 in Bihar. More than 600 cases were reported across India last year.

Health officials trained hundreds of priests to give polio drops to immunize children across the state. The officials approached various Muslim organizations too for removing the religious stigma in a section of the minority on polio drops who considered such drops could affect the fertility of their children.

A senior official argued that the government thought of involving temple priests and Muslim clerics because people trust and listen to them. The move was aimed at eradicating polio by 2007 after the efforts by celebrities like Jackie Shroff, Shekhar Suman, Farooque Shaikh and the local media seemed to be insufficient in controlling the increasing number of polio cases in Bihar.

(*India Tribune*, 20 April 2007)

## Tune in to Freethought Radio via Podcast Archives!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's weekly radio broadcast, *Freethought Radio*, airs locally in Madison, Wisconsin, streams live nationally, and is podcast and archived at: <<http://ffrf.org/radio>>.

To listen online live, tune in Saturdays from 11 am CST at: <<http://themic921.com/main.html>>.

The show, hosted by Foundation co-presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, features a variety of guests as well as music. Periodic segments include Dan's "Pagan Pulpit," "Freethinkers Almanac" and news commentary, including "Theocracy Alert."

### Recent shows in the archive include:

- August 4: Special Guest: August Brunzman, director of the Secular Student Alliance
- July 28: Special Guest: Emily Lyons, survivor of religious antiabortion terrorism
- July 21: Brian Flemming, director of the film *The God Who Wasn't There*
- July 14: Interview with Hope Knutsson, president of the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association
- July 7: Special Guest: Darrell Lambert, expelled atheist Eagle Scout



## School ‘rejects boy named Hell’

An Australian Catholic school is at the centre of an unholy row over claims it refused entry to a five-year-old boy with the surname Hell.

Alex Hell said St. Peter the Apostle School, Melbourne, had welcomed his son Max when enrolled under his mother’s maiden name, Wembridge. But they balked when the family had a change of heart over the surname. School officials now say Max has a place, but Mr. Hell claims they changed their minds because of media attention. He said he would not now be taking up the school’s offer.

Our heritage: Mr. Hell said he initially decided to enroll Max at the school under his wife’s maiden name, to avoid the ridicule he himself had suffered as a school-boy. The decision won the support of the school’s head teacher and parish priest, he said. But at the last minute, he and his wife decided against the name change.

Mr. Hell claimed the priest refused to accept his son as Hell, and was told by the school’s head he had “made a rod for your son’s back.” “It’s Hell. That’s our name, it’s our heritage,” Mr. Hell told *The Age* newspaper. “It’s who he is, and if he wants to change his name at 18 then that’s up to him.”

Mr. Hell has been quoted as saying the name is Australian, and means “bright”.

Stephen Elder, director of Catholic education in Victoria state, said the decision to change the name to Wembridge had been the parents’ idea to “assist the child in the transition of schools.” “After discussions between the parish priest and principal, St. Peter the Apostle School has made an offer of enrolment to the student,” he said in a statement. “The school is working with the family in the best interests of the child.”

Story from BBC news: 9 July 2007

## Richard Dawkins Replies to David Sloan Wilson

(FigLeaves June, p. 8)

In his *Skeptic* article entitled “Why Richard Dawkins is Wrong about Religion” (initially published online in *eSkeptic*, 4 July 2007), David Sloan Wilson writes:

When Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* was published I naturally assumed that he was basing his critique of religion on the scientific study

of religion from an evolutionary perspective. I regret to report otherwise.

Why would Wilson ‘naturally assume’ any such thing? Reasonable, perhaps, to assume that I would pay some attention to the evolution of religion, but why *base a critique* on an evolutionary perspective, any more than on Assyrian woodwind instruments or the burrowing behavior of aardvarks? *The God Delusion* does, as it happens, have a chapter on the evolutionary origins of religion. But to say that this chapter is peripheral to my main critique would be an understatement. When I was asked to prepare an abridgment for the British audio recording, I had to decide which bits of the book were essential, and which bits could, however regretfully, be left out. My first cut, and the only chapter I deleted completely, was the chapter on evolutionary origins. Sad as I was to lose it (I was consoled by the fact that we also recorded an unabridged version for the American market) it seemed to me the least essential chapter to the central theme of the book.

The central theme of the book is the question of whether God exists. I agree that it is also interesting to ask whether religion has some kind of Darwinian survival value. But whatever the answer to that might turn out to be, it will make no difference to the central question of whether God exists. Religious belief might have a positive survival value and God might or might not exist. Religious belief might have a negative survival value and God might or might not exist. Moreover, other important aspects of my critique, dealt with in other chapters of *The God Delusion*, are also unaffected by religion’s possible evolutionary advantages.

As for group selection (either as normally understood or in the idiosyncratic sense of Wilson’s private re-definition, about which he has been obsessing for thirty years), *The God Delusion* devotes a sympathetic page and half to the possibility that something like it might apply to the special case of religion. But a page and a half was all I could spare because I had more interesting matters to talk about, for example the “moth in the candle flame” theory of the origins of religion. I referred my readers to Wilson for a fuller treatment of what he calls group selection, and moved on. I thought it a generous gesture at the time, and I see no reason now to regret my choice to write my own book rather than his.





## Elder Statesman Responds to "The New Atheism"

Council for Secular Humanism founder and chairman Paul Kurtz has responded to the recent cultural phenomenon known as "The New Atheism" with a position booklet titled

### *What Is Secular Humanism?*

"The New Atheism" is a term created by a handful of pundits and journalists to describe the recent flood of highly popular best-selling books by the likes of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens, and Stenger - a veritable law firm of men putting belief in God on trial. The booklet was published for the Center for Inquiry by its sister organization, Prometheus Books.

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**Atlas of Creation: good production values, bad science.** Weighing in at twelve pounds, 800 glossy pages, this lavishly illustrated book by Turkish Islamic creationist collective Harun Yahya has been showing up in mailboxes of American scientists. My copy must have been lost in the mail. No matter it's now apparently available free on line. Where does the money come from?

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 20 July 2007

### Quote

How about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes?

*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.*

And so on.

Not exactly planks in a Republican platform. Not exactly George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, or Donald Rumsfeld stuff.

For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere.

"Blessed are the merciful" in a courtroom?

"Blessed are the peacemakers" in the Pentagon?

Give me a break!

- Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man without a Country* (2005) p. 97-98

### Unquote

## Hymn of Praise to the Intelligent Designer

by Phillip Appleman

(from: Reports of the NCSE, Sept-Oct 2007, p. 39)

O Clever Designer, I want you to know  
I believe in you - but as a favor,  
Explain to me, please, all these mysteries  
So that my faith doesn't flicker or waver.

Your intelligent windpipe will keep me alive,  
And, I'm grateful - but, hey, were you joking  
When you hooked that thing up to my swallowing tube  
So I'm always in danger of choking?

O Intelligent One, whose great wisdom designed  
All these intricate knee joints and hips,  
This journey through life would have been very nice  
If they'd lasted the whole bloomin' trip!

O Brainy Designer, I'm glad that your cunning  
Urethra affords me relief.  
But why did you wrap a big prostate around it  
To give me such misery and grief?

I'm Ok with my abdomen - belly and guts,  
And most everything you put in it -  
But why did you stick an appendix in there  
That could rupture and kill me this minute?

Now don't get me wrong, you're a brilliant Designer.  
But somehow, just every so often,  
I fear that your nifty Intelligence will  
Design me right into a coffin!

Some will recall that on 8 July 1947 witnesses claimed that an unidentified object with five aliens aboard crashed on a sheep and cattle ranch outside Roswell, New Mexico. This well-known incident has long since been covered up by the Federal Government. However, it is less well known that in the month of March 1948, exactly nine months after the historic day, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, Condoleezza Rice, and Dan Quayle were born. Consider what happens when aliens breed with sheep. This piece of knowledge may explain a lot of things.

- Lynn Chadderon in *Freethought Perspective* vol. 5, no. 1 (July 2007) p. 19



## The Camel is Heading for your Tent

by Gil Gaudia (FIG Member, author of the atheist novel *Outside, Looking In*)

The curious thing about the old Arabic tale of the kind and considerate camel owner, is that we never seem to get it. The compassionate owner, who permitted his camel to warm his nose under his tent, was victim of his own tolerance, which eventually cost him his abode. "Oh, it's so cold and it's only my nose, and it won't be any problem to you," the camel said on the first try. But then it was more and more of the beast's body until there was no room for the owner, when the half-ton, six-foot-tall, ruminant, "ship-of-the-desert" had finally managed to squeeze him out of the tiny dwelling. For those who may be unfamiliar with this charming tale of dromedary *chutzpa*, its message is the equivalent of "getting your foot in the door," or "give 'em an inch, and they'll take a mile," also known as "down the slippery slope."

So now we have to confront another camel; and it's all about the "elective study of the Bible in high schools." "Oh, it's so important to know about the Bible in Western society, and most of our kids are ignorant about so much of it, and it will enhance their understanding of all of literature, and make them better-informed voters," says this camel, which masquerades as the Bible Literacy Project (BPL). In my opinion, this is nothing but another Christian ploy to get the camel's scriptural nose under the tent.

The BLP ([www.bibleliteracy.org](http://www.bibleliteracy.org)) is a study that was funded by the John Templeton Foundation, a Christian-oriented organization that attempts to appear ideologically neutral, but is behind many efforts to "Christianize" American politics and education, indeed the country. This "patriotic" and "education-minded" study group enlisted the Gallup Organization, Inc. to survey about a thousand high school students to determine how much they knew of the Bible, and then having created their own problem (Surprise--the students didn't know very much) they set about solving it by declaring that all of education and America will inevitably suffer from this biblical illiteracy and therefore it is imperative to teach them about the Bible.

In their report called the "Bible Literacy Report" they state, "Our primary goal . . . was to establish whether the 'best' English teachers . . . think that their students need to know about the Bible in order to master the literature they are already being taught." With all due respect to English teachers, I wonder why science, math, history, anthropology and geology teachers weren't asked the same question with regard to their subject areas? Is it reasonable to assume that English teachers are representative of all teachers?

Upon reading<sup>(\*)</sup> the Report, it is difficult not to find it to be one-sided; based on egocentric assumptions of the importance of Christianity; statistically indefensible, and logically unsound. Even more questionable is the textbook it has developed and recommends in

order to rescue America from biblical illiteracy entitled, *The Bible and Its Influence*. This is a book that would be suitable for a Sunday school class where the goal was to present Christianity in the most favorable possible light, not as a seriously taught and examined subject. A casual examination of some relevant topics, such as *The Ten Commandments*, and *The Virgin Birth*, make it clear that the text glosses over any possible questions about the many critical issues surrounding these subjects, and treats them as accepted truths.

Among other things, the BLP argues that much of the meaning of other literary works is being lost because of biblical illiteracy; that there are many references to the Bible in other great literature, e.g., Shakespeare. Teaching about the Bible will make these references clear and thus increase students' general knowledge of literature. Well, there's plenty to understand in Shakespeare that doesn't require ever having heard of the Bible. If it is true (as some Christian scholar is alleged to have maintained) there are "1,300 biblical allusions in Shakespeare," it is probable that there are at least 1,300,000 allusions to other ideas, concepts and historical events. The story of Romeo and Juliet is just as meaningful and tragic whether or not one knows that when Romeo spends 40 pieces of gold to buy the poison, that Judas sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Would we say that a student couldn't appreciate the dilemma of Oedipus unless he had previously taken a course in Greek literature? Would success in a science class be contingent upon a previous understanding of a "flat earth" view? This is nonsense.

Nobody "gets" everything that could be "gotten" out of any substantial piece of literature, and the argument, as commonsensical as it seems until one seriously examines it, is nothing more than a Christian camel's attempt to get warm. If the BLP were to become successful, the religious right will then be able to say "Well we're a Christian nation, founded by Christians, whose money says, "In God We Trust," with

a Pledge of Allegiance that proclaims we are "under God," . . . and we teach the Bible in our public schools."

Here's the irony of the BLP movement and their logic in a nutshell. They have started from the dubious assumption that a sample of forty-one English teachers know the best solution to the major educational problems in America. These teachers have allegedly said that the study of English literature is suffering from the lack of biblical literacy. But the BLP does not stop there. They continue by emphasizing its significance for "understanding American and Western history, culture, religion, arts and letters, language and public rhetoric." (p.27) Not to be forgotten are, "academic success, . . . understanding of their own culture, and just to be well-grounded citizens of the United States; to know where the institutions and ideas come from." (p.5) In one giant leap of hyperbole, the BLP asks, "Is it possible to help reduce economic disparity through Bible literacy?" (p.27)

Since so many pandering, pious, politicians are revealing and depending upon their holy image, in order to get elected these days, another major implication is that if we want to understand the political issues and elect better congressmen and presidents, we have to know more about the disingenuous topic the politicians have decided will earn them votes. In my opinion, the BLP is less concerned about Shakespeare than it is about who runs the country, and it is very unlikely that poetry has preempted politics. They say their study has revealed that students don't know a whole lot about literature and (presto!) the solution to the problem is to introduce the Bible into the public schools of America.

In any case, the BLP is coming to your town, to your school board and to your students. Their noses are cold and they are very eager to share your tent. It would be a good idea to be ready for them.

(\*) <http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Secure/Documents/BibleLiteracyReport2005.pdf>





## Bad Apples and Bad Barrels: Lessons in Evil from Stanford to Abu Ghraib

By Michael Shermer

The photographs of prisoner abuse from Abu Ghraib shocked most Americans. But social psychologist Philip Zimbardo had seen it all 30 years before in the basement of the psychology building at Stanford University, where he randomly assigned college students to be “guards” or “prisoners” in a mock prison environment. The experiment was to last two weeks but was terminated after just six days, when these intelligent and moral young men were transformed into cruel and sadistic guards or emotionally shattered prisoners.

As he watched the parade of politicians proclaim that Abu Ghraib was the result of a few bad apples, Zimbardo penned a response he calls the *Lucifer Effect* (also the title of his new book from Random House), namely, the transformation of character that leads ordinarily good people to do extraordinarily evil things. “Social psychologists like myself have been trying to correct the belief that evil is located only in the disposition of the individual and that the problem is in the few bad apples,” he says. But, I rejoin, there are bad apples, no? Yes, of course, Zimbardo concedes, but most of the evil in the world is not committed by them: “Before we blame individuals, the charitable thing to do is to first find out what situations they were in that might have provoked this evil behavior. Why not assume that these are good apples in a bad barrel, rather than bad apples in a good barrel?”

How can we tell the difference? Compare behavior before, during and after the evil event in question. “When I launched my experiment at Stanford, we knew these students were good apples because we gave them a battery of tests and every one of them checked out normal,” Zimbardo explains. “So, on day one they were all good apples. Yet within days the guards were transformed into sadistic thugs and the prisoners were emotionally broken.” Likewise at Abu Ghraib. Zimbardo notes that before going to Iraq, Staff Sergeant Ivan “Chip” Frederick the military police officer in charge of the night shift on Tiers 1A and 1B, the most abusive cell blocks at Abu Ghraib “was an all-American patriot, a regular churchgoing kind of guy who raises the American flag in front of his home, gets goose bumps and tears up when

he listens to our national anthem, believes in American values of democracy and freedom, and joined the army to defend those values.”

Before Abu Ghraib, Frederick was a model soldier, earning numerous awards for merit and bravery. After the story broke and Frederick was charged in the abuses, Zimbardo arranged for a military clinical psychologist to conduct a full psychological assessment of Frederick, which revealed him to be average in intelligence, average in personality, with “no sadistic or pathological tendencies.” To Zimbardo, this result “strongly suggests that the ‘bad apple’ dispositional attribution of blame made against him by military and administration apologists has no basis in fact.” Even after he was shipped off to Fort Leavenworth to serve his eight-year sentence, Frederick wrote Zimbardo: “I am proud to say that I served most of my adult life for my country. I was very prepared to die for my country, my family and friends. I wanted to be the one to make a difference.”

Two conclusions come to mind. First, it is the exceedingly patriotic model soldier ‘not a rebellious dissenter’ who is most likely to obey authorities who encourage such evil acts and to get caught up in believing that the ends justify the means. Second, in *The Science of Good and Evil* (Owl Books, 2004), I argued for a dual dispositional theory of morality ‘by disposition we have the capacity for good and evil, with the behavioral expression of them dependent on the situation and whether we choose to act. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who knew a few things about the capacity for evil inside all of our hearts of darkness, explained it trenchantly in *The Gulag Archipelago*: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

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### The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Tuesday, 21 August at 8:00PM

**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)





*American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*  
by Chris Hedges  
(New York: Free Press, 2006)

Let me be clear that Chris Hedges has no beef with Christian believers, or even the fundamentalist faithful. His argument is strictly with that subset of Christians who want to impose, by hook or by crook, by stealth or force, their interpretation of the Bible on all of us Americans. And after that presumably on the rest of the world. Chris Hedges sees a sub-group of religious fundamentalists who wish to impose an authoritarian regime on America. In this regime abortion will be illegal and punished, gay people will be persecuted, creationist religion will be taught in the public schools, and science in general will take a back seat to Christian doctrine. These Christians according to Hedges wish to install a true fascist culture on America.

The author points out that the Bible is profoundly ambiguous about the nature of god. Liberal churches can cherry-pick the scriptures to describe a god who is always loving and compassionate. But that same god can be ruthless, terrifying and violent. He can murder all the first born in Egypt, call his enemies a “brood of vipers,” or cast virtually the whole of mankind “into the lake of fire.” Christians who hate and expect conflict have no difficulty finding support for war, strife, use of force, and other forms of murder in “the good book.” The Book of Revelation is particularly violent, and fundamentalists tend to find inspiration in this source.

To have faith means that we do not, - and can not, - know. Those who claim to know exactly what god instructs us to do, and are willing to impose that on all of us, are themselves playing god. That means taking away freedom of choice to force us into following their dictates. Chris Hedges spells out to whom he refers, (p. 9)

... the Pat Robertsons, the Jerry Falwells and the James Dobsons, clutching the cross and the Bible, offer, like Mephistopheles, to lead us back to a

mythical paradise and an impossible, unachievable happiness and security, at once seductive and empowering. They ask us to hand over moral choice and responsibility to them. They will tell us they know what is right and wrong in the eyes of God. They tell us how to act, how to live, and in this process they elevate themselves above us. They remove the anxiety of moral choice, the fundamental anxiety of human existence. This is part of their attraction.

Hedges discusses the individual fascist leaders in some detail. He looks at the violence promoted in the twelve volume *Left Behind* novels of Tim LaHaye based on the Book of Revelation. This connects to the Christian love of war and violence, the cult of guns, and the willingness to murder. Hedges describes in some detail how the organization of D. James Kennedy, the Coral Ridge Church,-- uses stealth advertising methods to recruit individuals as “soldiers in the army of Jesus Christ.”(p. 51) The same church uses fear to keep its followers in line, and the domination of men over women to promote an authoritarian male god. “Submission to church authority . . . is a potent form of emasculation. It entails surrendering of conscience and personal control and deadens emotions and feelings.” (p. 80). The various leaders, Benny Hinn, Pat Robertson, and others behave like little Hitlers and rule their fiefdoms as despotic potentates. They amass personal fortunes, travel in private jets and limousines, surrounded by body guards. No questioning is allowed, followers surrender their personal and political will. This leadership cult mirrors on a smaller scale the fascist America they wish to create.

Debate with the radical Christian Right seems useless. They do not want dialogue and rational thought or discussion is wasted. They are not appeased that others too, pray, or teach Sunday School, or do good works like Jimmy Carter, or follow moral imperatives. The radical believers hate the enlightened world and liberal religion supported by the Constitution. “They have one goal-its destruction.” (p. 202)

When fascism comes to America, it will be a cross rolled into the flag. Quite frankly, I think this book is a little over the top, I can not see any chance that we Americans will give in to the fascists.

--Wolf Roder



September Pollock:  
**WEDNESDAY**  
 September 19, 2007  
 6:30 PM



August No Meeting  
 Join us for a PICNIC!  
 Sunday, August 26, 2007 2 PM



**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).