

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 17 Issue 8

August 2008

## August Picnic!

Sunday August 24, 2008  
2:00 PM

*Joins us for a  
Picnic Potluck Pool Party*

Join Chef Edwin steady at the helm,  
'Midst his helpers, he will overwhelm  
Us with hotdogs, burgers or corn,  
From his famous grill will be born.

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

All our families and our friends,  
Will all be there as joy transcends  
Food and talk. Join us for great fun,  
In their backyard, amidst shade or sun!



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### September Potluck/Picnic

Tuesday Sept 9, 2008  
at 6:30 PM.

Your host will be Wolf Roder  
& Donna Loughry. We will be at a  
Winton Woods picnic Shelter. The  
plan is to choose one of the first

come, first serve picnic shelters on  
Valley View Drive in this order:  
Hawk Knoll, Kingfisher Shelter,  
Maple Knoll or Oak Hill.

Plates, plastic ware, cups,  
some softdrinks and ice will be  
provided.

### Events (note date/time changes)

#### August Potluck

At the Home of the Kagins  
Sunday, August 24 2 PM.

#### August Meeting

There will be no meeting -  
See you at the Picnic!

#### September Potluck

Tuesday Sept 9, 2008  
6:30 PM  
Winton Woods Park

#### September Meeting

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



## July Meeting

### *Surviving America's Depression Epidemic: How To Find Morale, Energy, And Community In A World Gone Crazy*

by Bruce E. Levine, PhD, clinical psychologist  
(Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007)



Bruce E. Levine

Dr. Levine started by saying he would like to make some sense of the enormous increase in cases of depression in the United States. Then he would explain what he thinks is actually the cause of depression. This is very different from what we hear in drug promotions on television. What he cares about most is what we can do about depression. At issue is what we can do ourselves as individuals -- we can help each other. Also germane are the errors of mental health professionals: psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers. He expressed his belief that his profession, mental health, has failed; but so has society as a whole.

First, the epidemic: In 1998, the then President of the American Psychological Association,

Dr. Martin Seligman, an important name in Mental Health, addressed the National Press Club. He reported some depressing news. For one thing, several epidemiological studies show the rate of depression has increased tenfold in the last five decades. Since then several more epidemiological studies have indicated the trend is continuing. Moreover the average onset of illness has gone in one generation from around 30 years to somewhere between 14 and 15 years of age. A little while later the World Health Organization found depression is wide spread; it is very prevalent in rich consumer societies, places like the US.

What is the cause of depression. After Prozac hit the market at the end of 1987; and later when drug commercials were allowed on television (1997) the general public and even doctors were flooded with the idea that depression is caused by low levels of neurotransmitters especially serotonin. To maintain the level of serotonin, depression is treated with the so-called SSRI drugs. And, these drugs became blockbusters in sales earning millions. The question became, if the depression rates are going through the roof, and depression is caused by low levels of serotonin, what's sucking the serotonin out of people? Yet, there are no studies on this and here is why. In the mid-1990's, the scientific community found no association between serotonin or other neurotransmitters and depression. We are not even talking about cause, only about association. By 1998 the American Medical Association's Official Guide to Depression (on p. 64), states there is no correlation between serotonin and levels of depression --high levels, low levels, any levels, there is no relationship. But people have heard so much the opposite that few have accepted this.



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

fignote @ 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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# FIG LEAVES



Much has been written about just how good the antidepressants were. Everyone knew somebody who said, "my paxil or zoloft saved my life." But that's not real science, it's anecdotal. By 2002 a lot of contrary evidence was appearing. *Newsweek* ran a major story "The Emperor's New Drugs" by a researcher from the University of Connecticut. He used the Freedom of Information Act



to get a look at never published studies by the Federal Food and Drug Administration. He discovered the majority of the studies of antidepressants showed that they failed to outperform the placebo.

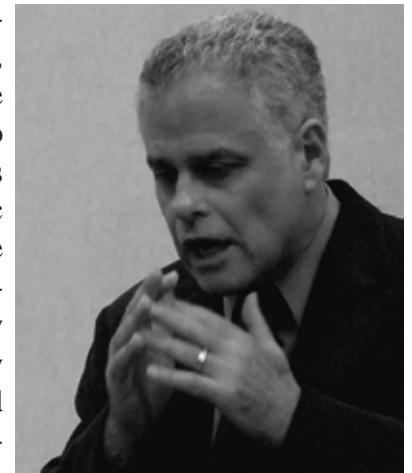
So experts rejected the theory that serotonin deficiency causes depression. Multiple studies had failed to confirm this precept. But still most people hadn't heard the news, and the advertising continued. Last year finally, *The New York Times* published an article called, "Men In Depression." They interviewed the Director of the National Institute of Mental Health, a man named Thomas Insel, and you can't get any more psychiatric establishment than that, and they asked him about neurotransmitters. And he insisted: "Oh no, we know now that depression is not caused by the underproduction of anything." In fact the psychiatric establishment has moved on to other things having to do with excessive cortisone, neurological damage and a whole new slew of drugs but that is another topic.

One of the reasons Doc Levine wrote this book is to say we've got a window here before the next set of drugs appears to actually think about this depression thing --another model or theory about what depression might be. What do we really know that is associated with depression. A lot is just straight common sense. First, how is depression associated with loneliness, with lack of social support, lack of friends? A real scientist asks the question, "Did loneliness lead to depression; or is it when people get depressed, they lose all their friends?" In depression there is a lot of interaction and vicious cycles happen. Never-the-less, relationships are a huge part of depression; think of a bad marriage.

We do have one major study where researchers asked unhappily married, depressed women -- not a difficult population to find -- "What do you think is the cause of your depression?" The majority of them agreed: "My unhappy marriage."

Another area that we know is associated with depression, at least in the United States, is poverty. If you are living in a society where everyone around you is equally poor it's bearable. But to live in the United States on public assistance, triples the rate of depression. Similarly to be unemployed doubles the rate of depression. Mental health professionals have known for years, that trauma --especially childhood trauma is highly associated with depression. Studies of child abuse and neglect show depression as an adult 12 times as likely. Any major loss, physical incapacitation such as stroke or major economic upheaval such as bankruptcy increases your likelihood of becoming depressed. The obvious question is "What is the common thread?"

Doc Levine sees the common thread is overwhelming pain. When people are overwhelmed by pain, they move into a strategy to shut down that pain. Some of us, we move into alcohol, substance abuse, watch TV all day, smoke pot excessively, eat too much, gamble -- there is a wide variety -- but Doc Levine points out, he never met a human being without a tendency to do something if they become overwhelmed by pain. The classic cycles of depression are a



shut down of energy levels, shut down of the ability to experience any pleasure, shut down the sex drive, shut down cognitive functions --memory goes, concentration goes -- sometimes appetite quits, and along with that come symptoms of self-loathing, people feel guilty and sometimes they even develop suicidal thoughts.

Because we live in an industrial society with very little social support, depression can become lethal in the United States. What happens to many people as they move toward depression, they start to get terrified. When you're terrified in our society and you stay depressed,



you're going to lose your job. You may not have the energy to go out and find another one. It's everybody's nightmare to end up homeless, on the street, become institutionalized. So there is this enormous fear. Some may



find fear a great motivator to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Psychologically that is not what happens usually. That terror makes people feel they have to shut down. One of the reasons Levine wrote the book is to help people extricate themselves from this vicious cycle.

The doctor then touched on something that was radical about a decade ago, but now is becoming politically correct. It's the medicalizing of normal reactions. We used to have shy kids, now we have *social anxiety disorder*; we used to have rebellious teenagers, now we have *oppositional defiance disorder*; and we used to have people going through normal grief, but now its diagnosed as depression. People visit the doctor and are told: you've got depression and moreover you'll have it for a long time like diabetes or some other long term illness. Here are some pills and you have to be on this medication for life. That really jacks up the statistics for depression. It's time to encourage all our friends and colleagues to stop this disease mongering.

Disease mongering is a big part of the problem. But Doc Levine emphasized we need to look at what is going on in our society as well. The quality of life for many is declining. With increasing levels of despair, we experience decreasing resiliency. Some issues we can quantify; others not. People have fewer friends and they spend less time with the friends they do have. The *Sociological Review* published a paper recently which measured how many persons have a close confidant. Twenty years ago only ten percent felt they had no confidant; today it's about 45 percent.

The ever present consumer culture we live in is another issue. The really shrewd psychologists work in advertising and marketing, manipulating us to part with our hard earned money. These "experts" know if they can get a person to feel bad about their condition, they will go out and buy anything -- not just psychiatric

drugs, but cars, and a whole slew of things they don't need because they hope the feeling of depression will go away. It's not just a few people; it's our whole culture. A second thing; advertising jacks up our expectation levels. The economy intends to get people to want more and more so they will buy more. But the more people buy merely to feel good, the greater will be the dissatisfaction. A study of Mexican immigrants found that in 13 years their rate of depressive episodes tripled. They got more stuff, refrigerators and other goods but rates of depression, substance abuse, types of emotional difficulties increased. One reason probably was lack of social support; but it could also be attributed to the jacked up levels of expectations.



For thousands of years philosophers have considered self-absorbed persons depressed. Our culture encourages self-absorption. Psychologists might consider the thought. Dr. Levine explained the types of therapy which can be successful. They are based on finding community and energy and morale with friends and generally not with drugs.

- Reported by George Maurer ☚

### The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Monday, July 21 at 7:00PM - 10:00 PM

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

#### Meetup Description

Bistro - back room

There is no formal agenda, and the seating is flexible, so you're free to roam around and participate in different conversations. (Or just sit back and soak it all in.) New people join every month, and we all wear nametags, so you don't need to worry about trying to remember everyone. Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays. Check the "Message Board" section at the left for current hot topics.

Restaurant direct line phone number:  
(513) 396-8970



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:

**12-14 Aug:** *The Happiness Myth, Part 1*,  
with Jennifer Michael Hecht

**19-21 Aug:** *The Happiness Myth, Part 2*,  
with Jennifer Michael Hecht

**26-28 Aug:** *Israel: Should the Nonreligious Care?*  
with Stuart Fischman

**In September the annual schedule changes: we don't know if the day and time will change.**

These programs will be next:

**2-4 Sept:** *Quantum Mechanics and Free Will*,  
Part 1, with Barry Loewer

**9-11 Sept:** *Quantum Mechanics and Free Will*,  
Part 2, with Barry Loewer

**16-18 Sept:** *Quantum Mechanics and Free Will*,  
Part 3, with Barry Loewer

## Hear! Hear! Answers in Atheism at

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

**JOIN US!** - We are live on the internet Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 8 pm EST. Our shows are also available as archived audio files, so you can listen later at any time

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

The Answers in Atheism crew

## The Ascent of Man

by - Erich Kästner (1899-1974), trans. Dieter P. Lotze

Once they lived high up in the trees,  
mean faced, all covered with hair.

Then they were lured from the jungle with ease,  
and the world was blacktopped for fellows like these,  
and thirty-floor buildings rose up in the air.

There they now dwelt in the temperate zone,  
in heated apartments, escaped from the fleas.  
There they now sit by their telephone,  
and yet they're still using the very same tone  
as they did when they lived in the trees.

Voices and pictures can reach them from far;  
to distant planets their signals keep rushing.  
They brush their teeth: quite health conscious they are.  
Earth is a thoroughly civilized star  
where plenty of water is flushing.

Through tubes their pneumatic messages race.  
And creature comforts they amply provide.  
Microbes they've learned to breed and chase.  
Their flying contraptions soar up into space  
and after two weeks come home from their ride.

There is no waste: what they digest,  
is changed into cotton and starches.  
They split the atom. They cure incest,  
and conclude from a careful stylistic test  
that Caesar had fallen arches.

Thus with their language and power of mind  
they fashioned the progress of this human race.  
But take a close look and study their kind,  
forget all the trappings, and this you will find:  
the same old monkeys still stare in your face.

**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.

**Aug 17** Bob Strefithau: *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





## Ohio Atheist Coming Out Party A Success!

On Saturday, August 2, 2008, the first Ohio Atheist Coming Out Party was held at Everal Barn in Westerville, Ohio, just north of Columbus. An estimated one hundred fifty plus turned out for the event. This party was the brainchild of Ashley Paramore of the Secular Student Alliance at Ohio State. Sponsored by American Atheists, this net-



Ashley Paramore

working opportunity drew non-believers from a wide area of the Midwest. Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Kentucky were represented. It was a potluck style lunch with much good food. Leftovers were immediately taken to be donated to a homeless shelter.

The after lunch speakers were Frank Zindler, acting president of American Atheists, Hemant Mehta, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Secular Student Alliance, and Edwin Kagin, National Legal Director of American Atheists and FIG member.

Mr. Zindler discussed the importance of events such as this that bring atheism into the public eye. He impressed upon everyone that discrimination against atheists is deemed acceptable by most Americans and even encouraged in some cases. He also stressed that American Atheists will continue to be a strong voice for atheists despite the recent changes in leadership.

Mr. Mehta spoke of things we can learn from how Christian organizations are run. He suggested that we could improve in the areas of communication, charity work, and social gatherings. Atheists should also be able to laugh at themselves and not take themselves so seriously, he said. To illustrate, he repeated several atheist jokes that were submitted by readers of his website.

Mr. Kagin also told some jokes and treated us to a couple of his new poems. He updated the group on legal proceedings concerning atheist rights that are now taking place across the country. Most of these problems concern

our public schools and the separation of state and church. He spoke of the importance of youth membership and participation in atheist activism.

All of the speakers stressed that we must come out and let people know that atheists can be just as caring, patriotic, charitable, and reasonable as anyone. This is especially important in this election year.

The de-baptism ceremony took place with Zindler and Kagin officiating. Affirmations of "I do!" were repeated by the audience after Mr. Zindler asked, "Do you agree that the magical potency of today's ceremony is exactly equal to the magical efficacy of ceremonial baptism with dihydrogen oxide, and do you agree that the power of all magical ceremonies is nonexistent?" The celebrants were then ceremoniously dried by the Hair Dryer of Truth and Reason wielded by Mr. Kagin, who muttered some pseudo Latin phrases. Next they received a personalized Certificate of De-Baptism signed by Zindler and Kagin. After eating the unholy Triskit with peanut butter and honey, and washing it down with a small cup of root beer, the participants were freed from any previous religious commitment and guilt. Cries of "I'm free!" and "I can see!" were heard echoing through the hall accompanied by the sound of hysterical laughter.

Outside, there were four protestors at the entrance to the driveway. They carried signs proclaiming "God Loves You!" and "You Matter To God." They were respectful, non-aggressive, and non-disruptive. Several people went out to talk with them, invite them in, and took them bottled water and hot dogs.



Special thanks and congratulations go out to Ashley Paramore for conceiving, promoting, and carrying out this successful event. She has plans to do this again next year. It should be bigger and better than this inaugural event. The theme of the event carried the day - "It is OK to be an atheist."

By the way, look for your own "It is OK to be an atheist." t-shirt, coming soon to <AmericanAtheists.com>. Mention that you are a FIG member to receive a discount on any order you place with American Atheists.

-- by John Welte ☹  
www.gofigger.org



## Atheists bond during ‘de-baptism’ Nonbelievers say they need to show their numbers

By Sarah Pulliam, *The Columbus Dispatch*,  
(3 August 2008) <spulliam@dispatch.com>



Neal C. Lauron (Dispatch)  
Allison Page, 9, goes under  
the ceremonial hair dryer  
watched by her mother,  
Amy Page. Performing  
the ritual is Edward Kagin,  
national legal director for  
American Atheists.

Belief in God symbolically evaporated when more than a hundred atheists were “de-baptized” with a blow dryer yesterday. Organizers of the event in Westerville, described as a “coming out party” for atheists, agnostics and humanists, served root beer and crackers with peanut butter and honey to top off the late afternoon ceremony. “Do you agree that the magical potency of today’s ceremony

is exactly equal to the magical efficacy of ceremonial baptism with dihydrogen oxide, and do you agree that the power of all magical ceremonies is nonexistent?” Frank Zindler, president of American Atheists, said to launch the de-baptism. After a resounding “amen” from the audience, the first person in line yelled, “Dry me brother! I’m free!” The crowd laughed as each person squeezed his or her eyes shut and walked underneath the blow dryer. “It sounds perhaps frivolous, but it’s a very serious thing,” Zindler said before the ceremony. “The event is more of an invitation to a revolution more than a party in a sense. Until we come out of the closet and let people know our numbers, politicians think they can ignore us.”

Gillian Peiffer, 25, became more vocal about being an atheist after she said she was fired in the fall from a Columbus truck dealership because of her atheism. “It’s the last form of discrimination that’s still acceptable,” Peiffer said. “This is showing those who aren’t religious that there are (other) social groups. I’m not going to pretend I’m religious so I can be part of a group,” she said before giving water bottles to four protesters.

The protesters, from Worthington Christian Church, stood outside with signs that read “God loves you” and “You matter to God.” “They’re making a decision that there’s life without God, and we’re concerned about it,” protester Matt Lieser said.

Don Sutterfield, 28, said he was studying to become

an apologist for Christianity before he decided that Christianity wasn’t rational. Although he doesn’t hide his beliefs, he usually avoids the term *atheist* when he meets people. “It invites people to have overly simple stereotypes,” he said. “They believe we’re moral relativists who don’t believe in truth.”

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life’s most recent survey found that 1.6 percent of Americans describe themselves as atheist, 2.4 percent call themselves agnostic and 12 percent said they are “nothing in particular.”

“The de-baptism doesn’t have any magical or supernatural aspect,” event organizer Ashley Paramore said. “It’s just symbolic and a way to out themselves.” ☘

An interesting letter. This appeared in the *Berkshire Eagle* shortly after Independence Day:

### Religion mars Pittsfield parade

Since when did the Fourth of July parade become so infused with religion? I was astonished and dismayed at the sea of red shirts for Berkshire Revival Fire – with “Jesus is Lord” on the back. Not only did the red-shirted people march in mass, but they were carrying banners for Legacy Bank, Country Curtains and other local businesses. The first prize float for St. Agnes was lovely, but displayed a large gold cross and there were young people on the float singing, “My God is an Awesome God.”

As the sea of red was marching past, there was a young father with his small son and daughter in front of me. The father and son were both wearing yarmulkes, and I wondered how they saw this parade. There was an older couple with their grandchild; the woman was wearing a beautiful sari, and I wondered what they thought.

I thought the Fourth of July was a holiday where we celebrated the birth of the nation and where we proudly raised the American flag to honor those who have fought to preserve the freedom our forefathers risked their lives to claim in 1776. I believe in the right for all to practice their religion, whatever it is, but I also believe in the separation of church and state, and this parade on Friday clearly crossed that line.

– Carole Ireland



## The Pope vs. the Pill: *Humanae Vitae* after forty years.

Last Friday, July 25, 1968, marked the 40th anniversary of the encyclical of Pope Paul VI banning artificial birth control. Ironically, 1968 was also the year Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*, and *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962) was still fresh in the public mind. *Humanae Vitae* was almost totally ignored by Catholics in Europe where the birth rate now hovers at 2.1, just right to maintain a stable population. An op-ed in the July 27 Washington Post by a correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, describes the births that didn't happen because of the pill as "rivaling the impact of the Black Death." But never mind what the women want, the overwhelming support for *Humanae Vitae* among the celibate men who are the bishops of the church is seen as justification, as though irrelevance is a virtue.

## ... now, the President vs. the Pill: Defining "Abortion."

Among the parting gifts to the American people from George W. Bush is a regulation now under review that would deny federal funds to any health-care facility that does not allow employees to refuse to provide care that violates their personal convictions. The regulation would classify the most widely used methods of contraception as "abortion." Because abortion is legal, the regulation would not outlaw contraceptives, but it would add a significant obstacle to the easy access to methods of birth control that are used by 12 million women a year.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 1 August 2008

## Doctor Larry King clears up Cell Phones and Cancer:

It began 15 years ago on *Larry King Live*; a guest, David Raynard, whose wife died of brain cancer, claimed: "she held it against her head and talked on it all the time." What more do you need? This week Dr. King was back, talking about the warning issued by Dr. Herberman, director of the University of Pittsburg Cancer Center. He based it on one fewer cases than David Raynard had to go on. Ronald Herberman, Director of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, advising faculty and staff to limit cell phone use because there is no proof that it's not a cancer risk. Why did Ron Herberman, a law abiding immunologist and administrator, who probably hasn't had a parking ticket in 20 years, decide to flout the law of conservation of energy, the most fundamental law of

physics?

All cancer agents act by disrupting chemical bonds. Einstein won the 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics for showing that cell phones can't cause cancer. The threshold energy of the photoelectric effect, for which Einstein won the prize, lies at the extreme blue end of the visible spectrum in the near ultraviolet. The same near-ultraviolet rays can also cause skin cancer. Red light is too weak to cause cancer. Cell-phone radiation is 10,000 times weaker.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 1 August 2008

## The Hydrogen Hoax:

In his 2003 State-of-the-Union Address, President Bush promised to free us from dependence on oil from the Middle-East and clean up our environment by using hydrogen as a fuel. Oceans of hydrogen are available. Presidents are not required to be familiar with the first law of thermodynamics, but the willingness of industry to play along is frightening. Within months, GM had a hydrogen car driving around Capitol Hill, and Shell had added a hydrogen pump at a nearby station. This week Honda announced the Clarity, a highly-subsidized hydrogen fuel-cell car and said Jamie Lee Curtis is buying one. She lives near one of the four hydrogen stations in California. Today a *NY Times* editorial was mildly skeptical. You can make cars that run on hydrogen, although they have big problems, but it won't fix the energy problem or clean up the environment.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 20 June 2008

## Science in Muslim Countries.

I recommend to everyone the important and courageous guest editorial in today's edition of *Science*. The author, Ismail Serageldin, is director of the Library of Alexandria in Alexandria, Egypt. The Muslim world was the cradle of rationality and tolerance when medieval Europe was mired in the dark ages. Today the Muslim world is "driven by self-appointed guardians of religious correctness," Serageldin writes. "They increasingly force dissenting voices into silence and conformity with what they consider to be acceptable behavior." He calls on the scientific and academic communities in Muslim countries to challenge accepted views. And he points out that a similar battle rages in the U.S. over evolution, and I would add, over contraception, and stem cell research.

- *What's New* by Robert Park, 8 August 2008





## Mismarriage of Convenience: Religious Ideology or Realpolitik?

By Trita Parsi *Foreign Policy* (June 2008)

Iran and Israel are stuck in a dysfunctional relationship that neither party can escape on its own. Here's how to break up their fight. More smoke than fire? Iran's anti-Israeli ideology is real, but not insurmountable.

Last week, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)—the powerful pro-Israel lobbying group—held its annual policy conference in Washington, and it went as you might expect. Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain roused the faithful with a call to tighten the noose on Iran and mocked those who favor a more diplomatic approach. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained that negotiating with Iranian leaders would be pointless “while they continue to inch closer to a nuclear weapon under the cover of talk.” Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called for “all possible means” to be used to stop Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. A few days later, Israel's Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz warned that an attack on Iran is “unavoidable” as long as Tehran “continues with its program for developing nuclear weapons.”

As if to underscore these arguments, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad obligingly played the role of villain, predicting ominously from Tehran that Israel will “soon disappear off the geographical scene.” Against this backdrop, it's safe to say that few at AIPAC were convinced by newly minted Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama's call for direct U.S. talks with Iran (though the Illinois senator did win many new friends at the conference this year). In fact, AIPAC and Israeli leaders fear that any bargain between Washington and Tehran would come at their expense and have heightened their rhetoric accordingly.

It doesn't have to be this way. Although Iran and Israel will not be signing any mutual defense pacts anytime soon, the two countries aren't destined to be implacable foes. If anything, Israel could be a prime beneficiary of a rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

It might sound inconceivable that Iran, whose leaders since 1979 have used the most venomous rhetoric against the “little Satan,” would ever moderate its stance toward Israel. Yet a careful review of the past three decades shows that Iran's hostile rhetoric is more a product of opportunism than fanaticism. Iran and Israel have even

been willing to work together quietly at times, despite their conflicting ideologies.

The reason is simple: When forced to choose, Tehran invariably chooses its geostrategic interests over its ideological impulses. In no other area is the decisiveness of the strategic dimension of Iran's foreign policy clearer than when it comes to Israel. When these two pillars of Iranian foreign policy have clashed, as they did in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's geostrategic concerns have consistently prevailed. Tehran quietly sought Israel's aid, and the Jewish state made many efforts to place Iran and the United States back on speaking terms. Faced with an invading Iraqi army and finding its U.S.-built weaponry starved of spare parts by a U.S. embargo, Tehran was in desperate need of help from Israel. Israel, in turn, was more than eager to avoid an Iraqi victory and to restore the traditional Israeli-Iranian clandestine security cooperation established under the shah, the mullahs' fierce anti-Israeli rhetoric notwithstanding.

Iran never discarded its Islamic and anti-Israeli ideology, but for years it did refrain from translating that ideology into operational policy. It has been only for the past 15 years, for example, that Iran has come to play such a spoiler role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Why now? Today, the ideological and strategic currents of Iran's foreign policy are aligned, and the results are visible in every corner of the region: a surging Hezbollah in Lebanon, a more deeply entrenched Hamas in the Palestinian territories, a radicalizing Shiite population in Iraq.

Quelling these potential threats requires understanding why Iran behaves the way it does. On a strategic level, Iran opposes Israel because it perceives the Jewish state as seeking its exclusion from regional affairs. Iran thinks Israel is working assiduously to counter its interests, whether in Washington or Ashgabat. Israel is seen as a major obstacle in initiating a U.S.-Iran dialogue and has played a critical role in putting Iran's nuclear program atop the international agenda. Even Ahmadinejad's highly ideological broadsides against Israel have come to have a strategic purpose. Playing the anti-Israeli card helps Iran overcome the Persian-Arab and Shiite-Sunni divide, Tehran reasons. Harsh rhetoric against Israel goes down well with the Arab street, increasing tensions between Arab governments and their publics, which in turn prevents the Arabs from signing up with Tel Aviv against Tehran.





The key to eliminating the danger Iran could pose to Israel lies in arranging these two forces of Iranian foreign policy—strategic interest and ideology—to counter each other once again. Threats of war and sanctions cannot achieve this end, however. Only through a larger accommodation—Iranian political rehabilitation in the region in return for an end to destructive Iranian behavior—will Iran let go of its open hostility toward the Jewish state. Brought in from the cold, Tehran’s cost-benefit analysis would change dramatically. The Islamic Republic would be careful not to undermine its own geopolitical status with ideology-driven anti-Israeli and anti-American behavior.

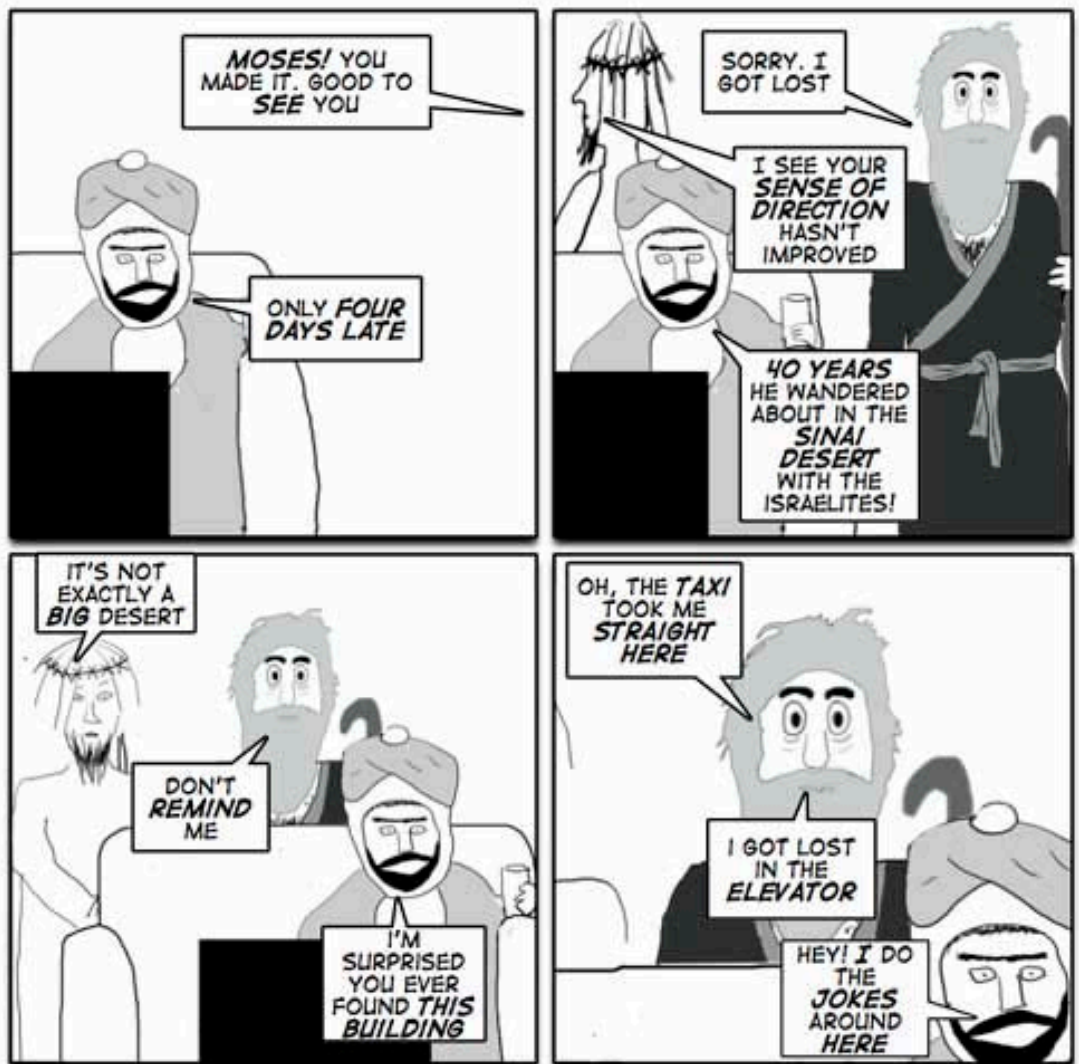
This is not a new formula, nor is it untested. China refuses to discard its communist pretense, but global integration has made it loath to put communist economic principles into practice due to the devastating impact it would have on its economic interests.

But why would Iran seek serious negotiations now, opponents of diplomacy might ask, when it appears to be having its way in the Middle East? Because the Iranians are eager to consolidate their gains through talks with the next U.S. administration and win American recognition for their role in the region. Those who would reject dialogue cannot have it both ways. They can’t argue that Washington shouldn’t negotiate because it lacks leverage (which isn’t true—for one, only the United States can lift its sanctions and support Iran’s inclusion in a new regional security architecture) and simultaneously claim that Tehran prefers the status quo and

isn’t interested in talks precisely because Iran *does* have leverage.

In reality, the United States need not pressure Iran to come to the negotiation table; it need only demonstrate that it is serious about reaching a strategic understanding. What will induce Tehran to play ball is not a threat, but the promise of achieving a legitimate regional role without surrendering its pride. For Israel, that could be a good thing. A tamed Iran—integrated into the region’s political and economic structures and the forces of globalization—is much less dangerous than an angry and isolated Iran that defends its interests by fanning the flames of anti-Israeli extremism in the region. That’s a concept supporters of Israel and AIPAC should find useful.

Trita Parsi is author of *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran and the U.S.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). ☞





## *With Speed and Violence: Why Scientists Fear Tipping Points in Climate Change*

by Fred Pearce  
(Boston: Beacon Press, 2007)

The Danish scientist Bjørn Lomborg has written a book on global warming called *Cool It*. He warns against spending millions to little effect attempting to mitigate CO<sub>2</sub>. He propounds the need for thinking about the benefits of a warmer world, and planning priorities carefully, rather than running off half cocked wasting food crops on bio-fuels or trying for a hydrogen energy economy. He has been attacked of course. Lomborg is an economist and statistician, who examines the most probable or average future cases.

Our current author is a journalist who takes the most extreme scenario, the worst possible outcome of global warming. He admits: "Some of this has the feel of science fiction." (p. xxv) So it is important to regard Pearce's narratives as "possibles," not the future, not reality, not even probable - and more specifically not all his horrors and monsters can happen simultaneously.

So Pearce takes us to the extremes of "what if" climate change. Boundless melting in the Arctic; Greenland slumping into the ocean; Tuvalu Island or the Maldives drowning. India's brown haze turning the monsoon off. Additional carbon dioxide is being released by clearing the Amazon rainforest; by thawing permafrost, or from *clathrates*. He divides his book into 37 chapters, and each brings new possibilities of doom.

Because Pearce is talking about science at the research frontier, his words are necessarily guarded and hedged about with maybe's. Certain high temperatures "may not be the most likely, but they cannot be discounted." (p. 106) On the release of methane ". . . the argument has yet to be resolved." (p. 96) or ". . . such concerns are exaggerated." (p. 97). One scientist's speculation on the role of clouds "is not proof, but it is worrying." (p. 109). And, not least, "The world of proxy data trends is a statistical minefield." (p. 206) Nevertheless I do think Pearce accurately reports the thinking of the many scientists he interviewed and whose papers he read. I

also think he has sorted the conflicts or disagreements between individual thinkers carefully and reports them clearly.

Pearce has much to say about rates of change, on processes, about warming and cooling, but nowhere does he provide a graph, image, or illustration. It is startling to read a book about climate change without a single graph, map, or picture. He has a chapter specifically on "the Hockey Stick" graph (ch. 33), but nowhere does he show the graph itself or the corrections which have been proposed. Pearce takes us to many places on Earth: Svalbard Island, Quelccaya Glacier, Pine Island Bay in the Antarctic, the Barents Sea, but nowhere provides a map or sketch showing where these places might be. On the other hand he avoids the metric system of the scientists and sticks to the traditional. Conversion from one to the other gives us spurious precision; estimate for instance what 10.8 sq. ft. amounts to.

The book is a careful report on what might happen to the climate over an uncertain span of time. At the end Pearce comments: "I have been struck by how little we know about the way Earth's climate and its attendant systems, feedbacks, and oscillations function." He goes on to speculate, "there are more inevitable surprises' out there: outcomes that nobody has yet thought of, let alone tested." He further admits "This story contains some heroic guesses, some brilliant intuition, and no doubt, occasionally some dreadful howlers: because that is where the science currently lies." (p. 229).

This is a good book, but I would not recommend reading it to the tyro. You need to arm yourself with a good atlas, know the measuring systems, and be familiar with some of the widely used graphs, e.g. the Keeling Curve, the Hockey Stick, the progression of the ice age climates. A book to be taken with a good pinch of salt. But, it is worth looking at what may happen; and that is an Earth which is unlivable for man or beast, or for a great deal fewer than seven billion humans.

- Wolf Roder ☚

### Quote

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Unquote



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# 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).