

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 20 Issue 8

August 2011

## August Potluck:

**Saturday, August 13, 4:00 pm** at Bryan Seller's home in his back yard.

A Potluck Meal and Discussion for All.

Politics and Religion are allowed.

Brian's home is located at 8895 Wuest Road, Cincinnati, OH 45251

Drive North on Colerain past Reagan Cross County Highway, go to the third light, then turn left onto Poole Road. The third street on left (after Cheviot and Woodthrus) is Wuest (no light) - Brian is on right side a few houses down the street. His house has lots of pine trees in front.

## August Canoe/Kayak Trip: Sunday, August 28, 1:00 pm

**Canoeing and Kayaking on a River of Hellfire (Whitewater).** Meet at the Green Acres Canoeing Rental (10465 Suspension Bridge Road in Harrison, 45030), followed by **FIG Dinner - 4:00 pm at El Mariachi's** in Harrison, OH (10513 Harrison Ave, Harrison, OH 45030)

Join us on **Sunday, August 28** for the first ever FIG Canoe/Kayaking trip at 1:00 pm. We will be doing a canoe/kayak trip down the Whitewater River. Check out Green Acres website for directions: [www.greenacrescanoe.com](http://www.greenacrescanoe.com) Thanks to Randy Gudvangen and Brett Siereveld for their help in coordinating our trip.

If Canoeing or Kayaking isn't your thing, feel free to join us at El Mariachi's at 4:00 pm for drinks and dinner and to hear the stories of any FIG members who were baptized, capsized.

If you would like to join us for either Canoeing or Dinner, please contact Shawn Jeffers at [figcincinnati@gmail.com](mailto:figcincinnati@gmail.com) or 513-404-8191.

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## Events

### August Picnic Potluck

Sat. Aug. 13, at 4:00 PM

At the home of Bryan Sellers  
8895 West Rd, Cincinnati, OH 45251.

### August Canoe Trip

Sun. Aug. 28 - Canoe & Kayak  
Trip on the White Water River.

Fig Dinner afterwards at  
El Mariachi's 10513 Harrison Ave.  
Harrison, OH 45030

→ **Save This Date** ←

**October 15-16, 2011**

## FIG 20th Anniversary Celebration

On October 15-16, 2011, FIG will celebrate 20 years with two days of national and local speakers. The event will be held at the Doubletree Hotel at the Cincinnati Airport. Tentative speakers include Tom Flynn and Tim Madigan - the first two speakers to speak at FIG in 1991, Dave Silverman, President of American Atheists, Greta Christina, Atheist blogger, JT Eberhart, organizer of Skepticon, Jamila Bay, journalist, Dr. Darrell Ray, author of the God Virus and PZ Myers. Founders of FIG - Joe Levee, Edwin Kagin and George Maurer are also expected to be in attendance.

To help us pull off this 20th birthday party for FIG, Joe Levee has issued a \$2500 challenge grant, so between now and October donations for the 20th Anniversary Event will be doubled by Joe Levee. Donations can be made by mailing to our PO Box - FIG 20th, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253 or online at Paypal. The PayPal link is on our website - [www.gofigger.org](http://www.gofigger.org) and on our facebook page - [www.facebook.com/gofigger](http://www.facebook.com/gofigger).

**Save this Date -**

**October 15-16, 2011**

**FIG 20th Anniversary  
Celebration**



## July Meeting

### Matthew Chapman on *The Ledge*

The July meeting of the Free Inquiry Group featured a showing of the new film *The Ledge*. We had a great turn out for this recently released movie featuring an atheist as the main character. Since there were no bookings to show this movie at theaters in Cincinnati, FIG took the initiative and brought the movie to Cincinnati for a showing. This article will discuss the movie briefly but go into more detail about the events that led up to making the movie. Matthew Chapman, who gave a sneak preview of the film to the audience there, discussed these in a talk at the 2011 American Atheists Convention.

Matthew Chapman is the writer and director of *The Ledge*. He is also a great great grandson of Charles Darwin. He was in the United States to research a book when he was asked to cover the Fitzmiller trial in Dover, PA for Harper's magazine. He witnessed the abuse and ridicule suffered by the parents who were suing to keep the Dover school district from teaching intelligent design alongside evolution. This got him thinking more and more about atheism. During the 2008 presidential debates that year he noticed how many faith issues were discussed while critical scientific issues such as global warming and stem cell research were mostly ignored. He then started an organization called Science Debates 2008, which tried to get the candidates to engage in a debate on science issues. Despite the fact that many famous scientists, including Nobel Prize winners, encouraged this debate, and a venue was reserved for the debate, and TV coverage was arranged through PBS's *Nova Now*, the candidates decided to forego this event and have a faith and values debate instead. Despite being extremely discouraged and almost going bankrupt because of this, Chapman is attempting to get a science debate arranged for the next presidential election.

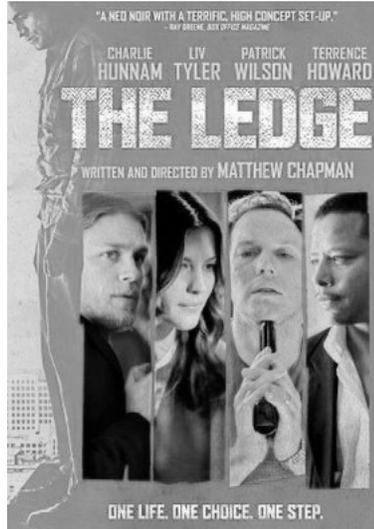
The more he thought about atheism and the negative perceptions of atheists held by most people, the more he wanted to express his own attitudes and interpretations of it. He wanted to show through film that atheists are not the dry, angry, intellectuals that most perceive them to be. His goal was to provide an intimate portrait of an atheist using drama, suspense and emotion.



Liv Tyler, Charlie Hunnam

Using his own outlook and memories of events that happened to him personally as a guide, he wrote a script that had an emotional effect on him, as he hoped it would on his audience. Ultimately, Chapman is striving to use emotion, especially the heart-breaking variety, to gain empathy for atheists and change people's prejudices.

He thought the movie would never ⇨



**FIG Leaves** - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to figmessage at gofigger dot org; 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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have a chance to be made because of the prejudice against atheism in Hollywood. The movie capital of the world is not as secular as you would think. He had his great experience as a screenwriter on his side. However, the plot itself made the selling of the film to a major movie company unlikely. Finally, he decided to go independent. He found a producer, Mark Damon, who was also an atheist and they began to search for a cast. They had to get big enough stars to be able to sell the movie to investors who would provide the funds to get it made. It took a very long time to get through all of the difficulties of making the film and getting it to be accepted by the Sundance Film Festival.



After the festival showing, Chapman defended his views about the dangers of religious fundamentalism in a heated discussion at the theater. At the height of this verbal battle a woman at the back of the theater stood, tears streaming down her face, and announced that as an evangelical Christian, she was sorry for everything that her religion had done to cause Chapman pain. This is one of his goals, to get an empathetic discussion going. Another goal is to be successful enough that others will attempt to cash in on these themes, make more entertainment along these lines and spread ideas that will counter the false characterizations that plague atheists. This goal was previously accomplished by such films as *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* and *Brokeback Mountain*, for African-Americans and gays respectively.

The movie itself features great acting and a great script. It pits an atheist and an evangelical Christian against each other. The atheist main character, played by Charlie Hunnam, is a likable person with whom the audience develops empathy. He is not perfect though, since he has an affair with a married woman. Liv Tyler plays the part of the frumpy, repressed housewife in a convincing way. Some women have complained that her character is portrayed as too weak and submissive. This characterization was necessary to the development of the plot since part of her appeal to the atheist was that he wanted to help liberate her. The intention here was not to characterize all women this way, just this particular woman. Patrick Wilson plays her husband. He is

powerful and intimidating as the unhinged evangelical Christian. Terrence Howard plays the part of the police officer. Some reviewers have claimed that the subplot concerning his family life is a distraction and unneeded. Maybe these reviewers were not atheists, since the ending of the movie concerns the resolution of his family problem and is essential to illustrate the positive effect that the atheist had on this man's life. Each character in the film exhibited good and bad qualities. In other words, they seemed human and real.

This movie is promoting thoughtful discussion about the perception of atheism in this country. In the words of Dinah, one of our members, "What a great film! Really enjoyed this movie. The words coming out of the born again Christian's mouth are spot on - exactly what I heard when I was a church goer. How refreshing to have the atheist viewpoint shown with dignity."

For more info about the movie, including where it is playing in theaters, cast and crew, and how to get it on itunes, go to <http://ledgemovie.com/>

The Ledge on facebook - <http://www.facebook.com/#!/theledgemovie> ☘



The biology professor at a posh girl's school calls on Miss Smith to name the organ in the human body which, under the appropriate conditions, expands to six times its normal size? And to define the conditions.



"Sir," the student gasps, "I don't think that is a proper question to ask me. I assure you my parents will hear of this." With that she sits down red faced.

Unperturbed the teacher asks Miss Jones the same question. With complete composure she replies, "Why, of course, it is the pupil of the eye, which expands sixfold in dim light."

"Correct," says the teacher. Now, Miss Smith, I have three things to say to you: one, you have not studied your lesson. Two, you have a dirty mind. And three, you will someday be faced with a dreadful disappointment."





THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



## Cincy Science Cafe

Dr. Gene Kritsky on

-- **Insects: Darwin's Secret Weapon**

Wednesday, August 10, 2011

6:00 PM

Dave and Buster's

11775 Commons Drive

Springdale, OH 45246

### Quote

#### The Uses of God

**She** "Then there are other times when I'm positive that God is involved with our petty lives. So many important things happen serendipitously that I just can't chalk them all up to coincidence."

**He** "I suppose if you're an atheist, that's exactly what you do . . . chalk it up to coincidence."

**She** "I'd rather believe in divine intervention. It's much more romantic and much more poetic."

**He** "That's because you have romance and poetry in your soul. Me? I believe in God but for an entirely different reason. I need God. Who else is there to curse when things go wrong?"

- Faye Kellerman, *The Burnt House* (Wm. Morrow, 2007) p.216

### Unquote

## Science Book Club

All the meetings are held at the downtown Cincinnati Library in Meeting Room 3A at 2:30 on the third Sunday of each month with the following exceptions:

June 26 on the 4th Sunday  
in Room 3A.

### Schedule for 2011:

**August 21-** *The Dominant Animal: Human Evolution & The Environment* by Paul R. Ehrlich  
2008, 420pp

**September 18 -** *Sacred Geometry* by Stephen Skinner, 2006, 160pp

**October 16 -** *What Have You Changed Your Mind About? Today's Leading Minds Rethink Everything* by John Brockman, ed, 2009, 387pp

**November 20 -** *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker, Pulitzer Prize, 1973, 314pp

**December 18 -** *The Dependent Gene: Fallacy of Nature vs. Nurture*, David S. Moore, 2002



The Center for Inquiry Institute and CFI—Amherst are proud to host a two-day conference.

## Daniel Dennett and the Scientific Study of Religion

A Celebration of the Fifth Anniversary of *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*

December 2-3, 2011

Center for Inquiry—Transnational

1310 Sweet Home Road

Amherst, NY

~••~

Daniel Dennett's 2006 book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* is a bold vision of religion as an entirely natural phenomenon, amenable to study by the various social, behavioral, and cognitive sciences. The theme of this conference is the further pursuit of the scientific study of religion along the major lines

elaborated by Dennett, together with pioneering research that is presently advancing this important interdisciplinary effort.

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Conference program is scheduled for:

Friday, December 2: 7pm-10pm

Saturday, December 3: 9am-9pm

Registration is \$79 for the public, \$59 for Friends of the Center, and \$29 for students (valid student ID required).

For more information about the CFI Institute, please visit our web site. Specific questions? Email a CFI Institute representative or call us at (716) 636-4869 ext. 408.

CFI—Transnational is located directly across from the University at Buffalo's North Campus.

Free parking is available at the Center.



## Real Choices at Life's End

A year ago, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops quietly issued a healthcare directive that could dramatically impact the thirty percent of American families, Catholic or not, who reside in or receive healthcare from Catholic institutions.

A set of rules called Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services governs all institutions having a Catholic charter: hospitals, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, etc. Those rules lay out how your health services must conform to Catholic doctrine, as promulgated by the Holy See and enforced by its Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the Holy Office of the Inquisition.)

The latest change to Directive #58 states that individuals who need a feeding tube to stay alive trigger an obligation to have one surgically implanted and kept indefinitely. This includes everyone in a permanent coma from stroke or trauma, in a persistent vegetative state, or with advanced dementia - thus unable to eat. The directive applies regardless of the patients' religious faith, their stated wishes, written advance directives, or the instructions of their families. The rule does not, as stated, apply to patients who are actively dying. (Those are not the usual recipients of feeding tubes anyway.) Rest assured, it applies in all situations where we most cherish our own authority to make healthcare decisions.

The bishops have put Catholic health centers in a real bind. After Pope Benedict XVI articulated this rule during the Terri Schiavo uproar in Florida, hospital spokespeople balanced a rationale allowing them to honor a person's stated wishes in these matters. Now the bishops have pointedly dismissed the "untenable positions of some Catholic ethicists" and made Benedict's rule strict, official, and binding. The Directive's former "presumption" for feeding tubes is now an "obligation." Local Catholic authorities may no longer allow hospital administrators or doctors who wish to honor patients' advance directives and the decisions of grieving families to do so. We may see enormous variation in Catholic institutions across the nation, depending on where a local bishop falls on the conservative- to- liberal continuum.

The bishops of the Catholic Conference consider this edict a small price to pay to maintain "the distinctive

## FIG Accepting Credit Card/PayPal Donations

FIG now can accept donations online through PayPal - pay with your credit card or PayPal account. All donations will support the FIG 20th Anniversary Conference in October and are currently being doubled due to a challenge grant provided by Joe Levee. PayPal donation information will be available soon on [www.gofigger.org](http://www.gofigger.org) soon. You can also donate online by using this web address - <http://tinyurl.com/3dtvpp4> or also find the information on our Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/gofigger](http://www.facebook.com/gofigger).

Catholic identity of the Church's healthcare ministry." Integral to that ministry is the application of the Church's "moral teaching" to all patients.

The sanctimonious audacity of these bishops takes my breath away.

Barbara Coombs Lee,  
President of Compassion & Choices  
*Common Sense Magazine*  
in *Final Exit Network Newsletter*  
vol 9, no 1, Winter 2011, p.9

## Benefits of Education

"He said black people don't belong in Bayview," reported Lt. Stu Miller of the Kootenai County (Idaho) Sheriff's Department. Daren Christopher Abbey, 28, who has neo-Nazi tattoos and told police he is an "independent skinhead," was allegedly harassing another customer at a bar. But Marlon L. Baker, 46, who is black, wasn't taking the bait. To avoid a fight, Baker walked out, but Abbey followed him, threatening to stab him and using racial slurs, witnesses say. After "quite some distance," Miller said, Baker turned around when Abbey got close and punched him one time, in the face. When deputies arrived, Abbey was still unconscious. He was treated for broken bones in his face, and then jailed for malicious harassment, the state's equivalent of a hate crime law. The back of Baker's shirt read, "Spokane Boxing Club Champion," Miller noted. "If he had been able to read, maybe he wouldn't have done that." (RC/Spokane *Spokesman-Review*)



## Contradiction Corner

By Dennis Davis



In this essay I will continue the theme I started last month discussing Biblical contradictions in doctrine that have led to schisms within Christianity. Such contradictions have been as simple as the split between those who emphasize a spirit of charity:

Galatians 6:2 “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.”

While right-wing leaning churches prefer to emphasize self-reliance:

Galatians 6:5 “For every man shall bear his own burden.”

Yes, these apparently contradictory sentences are only a couple verses apart in the same chapter. When read in context they are not actually contradictions, but they are used for contradictory positions showing that the Bible is a book of multiple-choice where any belief or desire can be justified.

One of the earliest schisms in Christianity was over most basic doctrines of the religion, namely the divinity of Jesus himself. Few today would think to question the idea that Jesus claimed to be divine because they are fed a steady diet of biblical verses that appear to make this beyond doubt such as John 10:30 where Jesus is quoted as saying he and his father are one. However, several groups such as the first century Ebionites believed he was the Messiah but not divine. We can appreciate this view in a few scriptures such as Mark 10:18 which says, “And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God.” Obviously, if Jesus said this, he did not view himself as god.

The greatest schism within Christianity was the one led by Martin Luther against the Catholic Church in the Sixteenth Century. For Luther, the essence of the separation was the doctrine of faith versus works. Verses such as Romans 2:13 (“For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified”) would lead one to believe that God is concerned with obedience to a set of rules. But Luther’s pet scripture Romans 1:17 “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith.” The break caused by this contradiction of doctrine led to the Reformation as the church split into

Protestant and Catholic parts. This division has caused an unmeasured amount of bloodshed, suffering, and war; possibly more than any other cause in history.

Another split from the larger body of Christianity concerns a doctrine found in a verse from Ephesians 1:4 which says “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world.” This would imply that the people who would be saved were predestined to be so for all eternity without their having a choice in the matter. The most famous proponent of this predestination version of Christianity was John Calvin and the churches he founded.

Other scriptures have a decidedly un-Calvinistic point of view indicating that we do have a choice in the matter, for example Matthew 7:8 “For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” From this and similar scriptures comes the popular modern theological idea of Free Will. Once again, the Bible can be used to justify either position equally with no way to decide the validity of one position over the other.

In my past discussions with Christians the topic of biblical contradictions always seems to come up. They usually end up saying that the examples I give them are insignificant legalistic arguments. As these last two articles have shown, some biblical contradictions are so important Christians have been willing to separate, quarrel and even go to war with one another. While we may disagree with the conclusion these Christians have come to, no one would call the contradictions that created these rifts insignificant. ¶

### Quote

There is now enough evidence for most scientists to conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that God does not exist. At least that is the conclusion reached by the elite of our scientific community through their studies of astronomy, physics, mathematics and other related disciplines. These conclusions are not new, of course, but they have received wider publicity since the appearance of Edward Wilson and James Watson, one a Nobel laureate, on the Charlie Rose show, December 13, 2005– a program that has been rebroadcast at least once. Their point is this: if you understand the workings of the universe, explanations involving a supreme being are not required.

– Henry F. Tonn, *American Atheist* (April 2008) p. 12

Unquote



## For God's Sake - Stop Talking

by: Cliff Schecter, *Truthout*, 15 July 2011

Cliff Schecter is the president of Libertas, LLC, a progressive public relations firm, the author of the 2008 book *The Real McCain* and a regular contributor to *The Huffington Post*. Follow Cliff Schecter On Twitter: @Cliffschecter

The US takes pride in its separation of church and state, but the current political scene is “strangely” religious. Lately, there would seem to be a whole lot more people who have a direct channel to the Big Guy Upstairs than one could have humanly thought possible.

It is oft said that “God works in mysterious ways.” But when Michele Bachmann hears voices telling her to run for president, am I the only who thinks the most likely explanation is a batch of bad clams or one too many nights role playing “The Book of Eli” with her equally demented husband Marcus? Perhaps, these are the very same voices that have shared with her the important role “founding father John Quincy Adams” played in ending slavery as he battled the oncoming scourge of puberty? I don’t know, just a stab in the dark.

Regardless, whether it is gay marriage or spotting the Virgin Mary in your gordita, our re-embrace of culture by theology in the United States (not unlike much of the rest of the world) has led supposedly “serious people” to say things that not so long ago would have landed them a starring role in “Girl, Interrupted.”

In our current age, in fact, possessing a direct cerebral channel to Deus (or at least claiming you do) would seem to be a requirement for receiving an invitation to a GOP presidential debate. Additionally, it equally pervades the rest of right-wing political culture in the US, as twisted scripture both provides ready justification for those who hate everything about this country post-1930, and renders more difficult the job of the media to effectively criticize any crackpot theory - lest they lose their “objectivity” for a moment and offend some True Believers.

For example, in light of the recent law passed by the New York State Legislature providing full marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples, dingy-old-Hammerhead-Bat Pat Robertson offered his expert testimony that “there’s never been a civilization ever in history that has embraced homosexuality and turned away from traditional fidelity, traditional marriage, traditional child-rearing, and has survived.” He went on to compare the United States to Sodom and pleasantly predicted we’d suffer the same fate - complete annihilation. In other words, in case you’re keeping score, Jesus is apparently cool with Rev. Robertson having befriended the

al-Qaeda-harboring, genocidal thug Charles Taylor, in order to fatten his wallet from a steady diet of Liberian blood diamonds. When it comes to loving couples of the same sex tying the knot, however, not so much. Thankfully, for the rest of us, Robertson’s many past predictions of our collective demise were so inane they might as well have been announced on an aircraft carrier with a “Mission Accomplished” banner in the background.

So, to pick up the slack, Missouri GOP Congressman and apparent Mary-Shelley-creation Todd Akin also jumped into the God interpretation game last week - likely as a strategy to forward his US Senate campaign. Akin, in an obvious moment of clarity, puked out that “at the heart of liberalism really is a hatred for God.” Because, as we all know, nothing is closer to the teachings of the Bible than Akin’s record of lying about his address for voting purposes and cutting taxes for eight-figure earning CEOs, while gutting health care for impoverished children.

Sadly, however, our God Culture isn’t limited to just the political game, but also allows some of those clever cats, professional athletes, to get in on the action. I must admit to finding it rather amusing - as in completely ridiculous - whenever an overpaid ballplayer hits a three-point shot or bashes a fastball over the center field wall, only to respond by pointing up to the Heavens as if it were Divinely ordained. Because we all know any Higher Power has nothing better to do - like ending conflict in the Sudan or curing cancer - than taking in some sport and using his/her powers to ensure Arsenal wins the FA Cup. I mean, somewhere Jacob is trying to best that bloodsucker Edward and win the affections of Bella, and God is going to worry about the Stanley Cup? How arrogant.

It is this hubris that must explain why one of the heroes of the 2007 Super-Bowl-winning New York Giants, David Tyree, thought it his place to tell us what his God would think of gay marriage in New York - much like Brother Robertson. As you can imagine, according to Tyree, it just up and freaked God out. I guess he missed the part where he’s the guy we trust to catch the ball on the field, not make public policy, according to his translation of the will of his Deity, off of it.

For, in the end, it doesn’t matter if you’re a Believer or not. Most of us to the north of birdbrain can agree that no matter what Bachmann, Akin, Robertson or Tyree have to say on the matter, it is in fact societies ruled by faux pious numbskulls that, to quote the elegant and articulate Robertson, have “never, ever survived.” Perhaps, he and his Republican buddies can ponder the words of the founder of their party, Abraham Lincoln, who once counseled that it is “better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak out and remove all doubt.”



## Militant Atheism, Militant Christianity

by Herb Silverman, *Washington Post*, 3 August 2011  
Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston.

In South Carolina, where I live, the Confederate flag is prominently displayed on the grounds of the state Capitol. Many of us want it moved to a museum that contains artifacts of the Civil War (also referred to here as “The War of Northern Aggression”). That’s why I’m somewhat conflicted about whether the cross-shaped steel beam found in the rubble of 9/11 should be placed in a museum that memorializes the event.

The courts might have to decide whether this cross would be in a museum simply to commemorate a historical event or as a sectarian religious artifact inviting worship.

Government displays of sectarian symbols can give the false impression that our government is allowed to favor one religion (usually Christianity) over another or religion in general over non-religion. The 9/11 cross has been displayed outside a nearby Catholic church for the past five years, certainly a non-controversial place for religious symbols. Nobody questions Ten Commandments plaques in churches or private homes, but they don’t belong on courthouses or other public buildings.

I didn’t like the argument by American Atheists that the cross should be taken down because it gave some of its members “dyspepsia, symptoms of depression, headaches, anxiety, and mental pain and anguish from the knowledge that they are made to feel officially excluded from the ranks of citizens who were directly injured by the 9/11 attack.” I can’t help but think that American Atheists, a serious organization, was just having a little fun. Nevertheless, that’s the kind of remark the media likes to focus on.

Atheists are often falsely accused of being “militant” for speaking out against religion or making fun of antiquated religious beliefs. Here’s what I view as militant: death threats and threat of violence posted against atheists after the Communications Director for American Atheists appeared on Fox News. Here’s a sampling:

“I say kill them all and let them see for themselves that there is God.”

“Shot them. Shoot to kill.”

“They’re atheists so it won’t matter if you kill them.”

“Nail them to the cross then display it.”

On a personal note, I also had a cross incident. The College of Charleston, where I was teaching, purchased a building from a church that had a cross on top. I sent an email to Alex Sanders, president of the College, requesting that he remove

the “plus sign” from what had become a public building. Sanders did, but with his usual sense of humor about most things, described our exchange in a local newspaper. He wrote, “I will just assign the building to Herb Silverman as his office. With the cross at the top and Herb Silverman at the bottom, that would be an equalizing force. I told him that if he kept quiet about the cross, no one would be nailed to it.”

Neither of us had been offended by Sanders’ public humor. However, there was much community outrage about my referring to the cross as a “plus sign.” Indignant writers fumed about how I offended Christians. Nobody took offense to Sanders’ allusion that I might get nailed to the cross for my behavior.

What do atheists want? We want the same rights and privileges as everyone else in our secular country. ☞



## Neither Catholic Nor Sharia Law

by Herb Silverman, *Washington Post*, 29 June 2011  
Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston.

Thank you, Bishop DiMarzio, for inadvertently reminding the apathetic public why separating religion from government is so critically important. In trying to become more politically relevant, I hope the latest pronouncement of the Catholic Church will make that church even less relevant. As far as I can tell, the Catholic Church is on the wrong side of all issues pertaining to sex.

Let’s see if I have this right. The Church wants heterosexual couples to remain celibate until marriage and then to have as many children as nature (excuse me, “God”) provides, whether they want or can afford them. The exception is for priests and nuns who must remain celibate their entire lives because .... (Fill in the blank, since the reasons have changed over centuries.) It’s bad for straight couples to cohabit, but good if they commit to a monogamous marriage; it’s bad for gay couples to cohabit, and even worse if they commit to a monogamous marriage. Don’t anyone even think of the sin of masturbation, which is safe sex for pleasure only. And I won’t get into why the church concluded that the sexual permissiveness of the 1960s led to pedophilia by church officials.

I want to keep my country secular and certainly wouldn’t want to live under any form of religious law. Surprisingly, some irrational Christians fear that unless we have actual laws opposing Sharia law we will be forced to live under it. This is far less likely than that we will be forced to live under some form of Christian law.

Recently, Republican candidates for president were ➡



asked about Sharia law. Here are some of their answers, where I take the liberty to substitute “Christian” for “Sharia.”

Herman Cain: There is this creeping attempt to gradually ease [Christian] law into our government. It does not belong in our government.”

Newt Gingrich: “We should have a federal law that says [Christian] law cannot be recognized by any court in the United States.”

Sarah Palin: “[Christian] law, if that were allowed to govern in our country, it will be the downfall of America.”

Tim Pawlenty: “The United States should be governed by the U.S. Constitution, not religious laws.”

Rick Santorum: “[Christian] law is incompatible with American jurisprudence and our Constitution.”

As long as we keep high the wall of separation between religion and government, neither Catholic bishops nor any other religious leaders will have a right to dictate public policy for those outside their faith tradition.



## Imagine Atheist Politicians

by Herb Silverman, Washington Post, 20 July 2011

Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston.

*Atheist actor and writer Ricky Gervais is working on a new show, Afterlife, which features “an atheist who dies and goes to heaven.” If Gervais hopes to bring cultural acceptance of non-belief to mainstream America, he faces an uphill battle. Polls show that many Americans distrust atheists and nearly half say they would not vote for one. Should it matter whether or not a politician believes in God? As mainstream acceptance of other minority groups grows, will atheists still lag behind?*

As an atheist, I just about always vote for political candidates who say they believe in God. Not because I’m impressed by their professed God beliefs, but because I have no other choice—unless I cast a write-in vote. Of course, in reality atheist politicians have received hundreds of thousands of votes, though their constituents likely didn’t know they were voting for closet atheists. Currently, Rep. Pete Stark (D-Cal) is the only uncloseted atheist in Congress, but I’m hoping we will see many more such courageous and honest politicians in the years to come.

I generally vote for candidates whose views on important issues seem closest to mine. These candidates give sound, evidence-based reasons for their positions, without a need to invoke a deity. I am aware that these candidates belong to a religious denomination, because they view such membership as a requirement for public office. However, I draw the line

at voting for a politician who claims a god told him or her to run for office or what position to take on an issue. I just won’t vote for someone who seems loony to me.

I wish everyone would judge candidates on their political positions, and not on their professed religious beliefs. But that might be a dream of mine more difficult to achieve than the dreams of Martin Luther King. Those who won’t under any circumstance vote for an “immoral” atheist, or whatever pejorative adjective precedes the A-word, are letting their blind faith and stereotyping get in the way of common sense.

America is the most religious Western democracy in the world, with the overwhelming majority believing in a personal God. By contrast, only 24 percent in Denmark and 16 percent in Sweden are believers. Americans pride themselves on our high quality of life. However, taking into account measures of income, health, freedom, unemployment, climate, political stability, life-satisfaction, and gender equality, countries like Denmark and Sweden (but not America) rank in the top 10. Moral imperatives of most religions include caring for the sick, elderly, poor and infirm; practicing mercy, charity and goodwill toward others; fostering generosity, honesty and communal concern. Statistics show that these are best put into practice in the most nonreligious nations in the world today.

Religious countries (and Bible Belt states) also have much higher rates of violent crime and teen pregnancy than more secular countries. I wonder what would happen if we elected more secular politicians.

I look forward to seeing Ricky Gervais’ new show, *Afterlife*, which features an atheist. I hope it will call attention to a much-underrated movie directed by and starring Ricky Gervais in 2010. *The Invention of Lying* is about a culture in which nobody can lie. There is not even a word for “lie” or for “truth.” Then one person develops the ability to lie. With the best of intentions, our liar-hero, Mark, tries to comfort his dying mother by telling her that she will be going to a wonderful afterlife. Naturally, she and others believe him. Soon everyone is begging for information about this afterlife. He then tells the world there is a Man in the Sky who is responsible for everything, and they will be happy up there with him after death. When asked if the Man in the Sky is also responsible for cancer, Mark has to grapple with theodicy, the question no monotheistic religion has been able to answer: Why is there evil in a world created by an all-powerful and benevolent god? The movie’s theme was that Man in the Sky religion is possible only in a world where it’s possible to lie.

To add to John Lennon’s “Imagine no religion,” imagine a world where politicians don’t lie. More realistically, I’d just as soon imagine an American electorate that doesn’t much care about the private religious views of elected officials, and politicians don’t make them part of their public campaigns.





## *Strange New Worlds : The Search For Alien Planets And Life Beyond Our Solar System*

by Ray Jayawardhana

(Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 2011)

Review by Justin Trottier

To invoke a quote often attributed to the astronomer Arthur Stanley Eddington, “Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine.” Many areas of scientific exploration have led to surprising discoveries never envisioned, and the hunt for new exoplanets—worlds beyond our solar system—is a splendid example.

In *Strange New Worlds*, the University of Toronto astronomer Ray Jayawardhana offers a glimpse into the real and often messy way science is done, along with the exhilarating surprises thrown at pioneering scientists. No one thought the first exoplanet would be discovered around the unlikely location of a pulsar, or that gas giants would be found so far from where they are in our own solar system. Some exoplanets are so close to their parent star that they orbit in a matter of days, whereas one exoplanet that is eight Jupiters in mass, was found more than 10 times the distance of Neptune to our sun.

Jayawardhana’s own studies of infant planetary systems offers one clear surprise. Early solar systems are far more complicated, chaotic and dangerous than we thought. This discovery may have tremendous impact on our understanding of our own birthing process. Consider for example the finding that gas giant planets often migrate. Now researchers think our solar system’s own so-called “late heavy bombardment” period that occurred 600 million years after initial planetary formation, as evidenced by lunar craters, may be explained by the migration of our own planets.

While cosmology explores the earliest moments of the cosmos and abiogenesis seeks to understand the origin of life, Jayawardhana and his planet hunters are filling in a crucial middle of the story origin account. It is a narrative description of how those materials generated by the universe can find an appropriate environment—a home—where life may emerge. It is also a story of challenge that shows how lucky we are on our own planet. We see how easily worlds can be destroyed, with migrating giants and interacting young stars ejecting Earth-size objects into the void of space, or sending them spiraling into the star. It’s also a tale of triumph. Accumulated data are starting to show how common solar systems

and even smaller worlds tend to be in our galaxy.

An award-winning science writer whose popular articles have been published in publications such as *Scientific American* and *The Economist*, Jayawardhana artfully blends interviews and profiles of leading researchers within his scientific narrative. Both aspects are fascinating and full of adventurous twists and turns.

If planetary systems are increasingly seen as chaotic and dangerous, such qualities might describe the enterprise of planet hunting itself. Chaotic because the nature of making observations at the limit of our equipment’s detection ability, or in which assumptions about planetary or stellar science are required, mean that there were a lot of early false starts, with lots of initial planetary candidates shown eventually not to exist.

Planet hunting was a pioneering field but also a dangerous game for those with uncertain career futures. In its early days in the 1980s there was great skepticism about whether the project was even a part of astronomy. Jayawardhana tells the story of Gordon Walker, now retired from the University of British Columbia, who watched as a senior astronomer left during a lecture he was giving on the topic. Walker’s postdoc teammate, Bruce Campbell, was compelled to leave the field for something more reliable, becoming a tax consultant. Even in the early 1990s, research groups were routinely turned down for funds, with granting agencies seeing little chance of detection improvement.

Yet, here we can see how quickly progress can be achieved in a scientific

discipline. With seven planets discovered in the turning point year of 1996, everything changed. Within a mere decade planet hunters Michael Mayor and Geoff Marcy shared a major triumph, winning the prestigious million dollar Shaw Prize for astronomy in 2005, a sure sign that the field had come of age.

As Jayawardhana describes the scientific figures involved, such as Marcy and others, we see portraits of characters who are each unique and colorful, not unlike the worlds they’ve discovered. Some were portrayed with an arrogance, such as the very early character Thomas Jefferson Jackson See, who brazenly declared back in 1899 that he had found conclusive proof of a third body orbiting the binary star system 70 Ophiuchi. When a paper showed that such a system would be unstable, See rebuked the journal, which went so far as to ban him from future publication. See suffered a breakdown three years later.

The failure to relent by many researchers is nicely contrasted with the humility of Andrew Lyne, who almost achieved credit for discovering the first exoplanet in 1992. Less than a week before his scheduled talk at the American Astronomical Society, and with *Nature* already declaring the significance of the discovery, Lyne found an error in his data that made the planet disappear. While Jayawardhana’s depiction of this episode can show how desires might affect data analysis, this was a proud moment for science. Lyne immediately reported his error in front of a huge audience and was honored for his forthrightness.





In *Strange New Worlds* we come to understand that these exoplanets also demonstrate the difficulty of doing science in areas such as planet hunting that are at the limit of our equipment's ability to discern signal from noise, and especially where human desires to see things can affect our observations. This may be exacerbated by the emotional side of searching for worlds in the hope of eventually finding other habitable homes, not unlike the well known drama of Percival Lowell and his false readings of long straight lines on Mars as evidence of artificially constructed canals and thus Martian civilization.

But considering these equipment limits, Jayawardhana shows us that it really is remarkable what we can learn about far off worlds. We can determine not just their mass, volume, and density, but sometimes we can glean details of their atmospheric constituents, with a tantalizing possibility for seeing biosignatures. We are now at the stage of detecting planets merely a few Earth masses, so-called super-Earths. As we zero in on Earth-type planets in Earth-type orbits around sun-like stars, we are led to the tantalizing hunt for Extraterrestrial Intelligence.

Unfortunately, Jayawardhana's book is rather short, and we're left wishing he had commented further on the second element of its subtitle, namely the search for life. Although planet hunting is only now reaching the point of giving us information directly relevant to this area of exploration, he might have shared his own speculations on how far next generation planet exploration missions could go in providing signs of life data, or on how such missions might actually integrate elements of SETI.

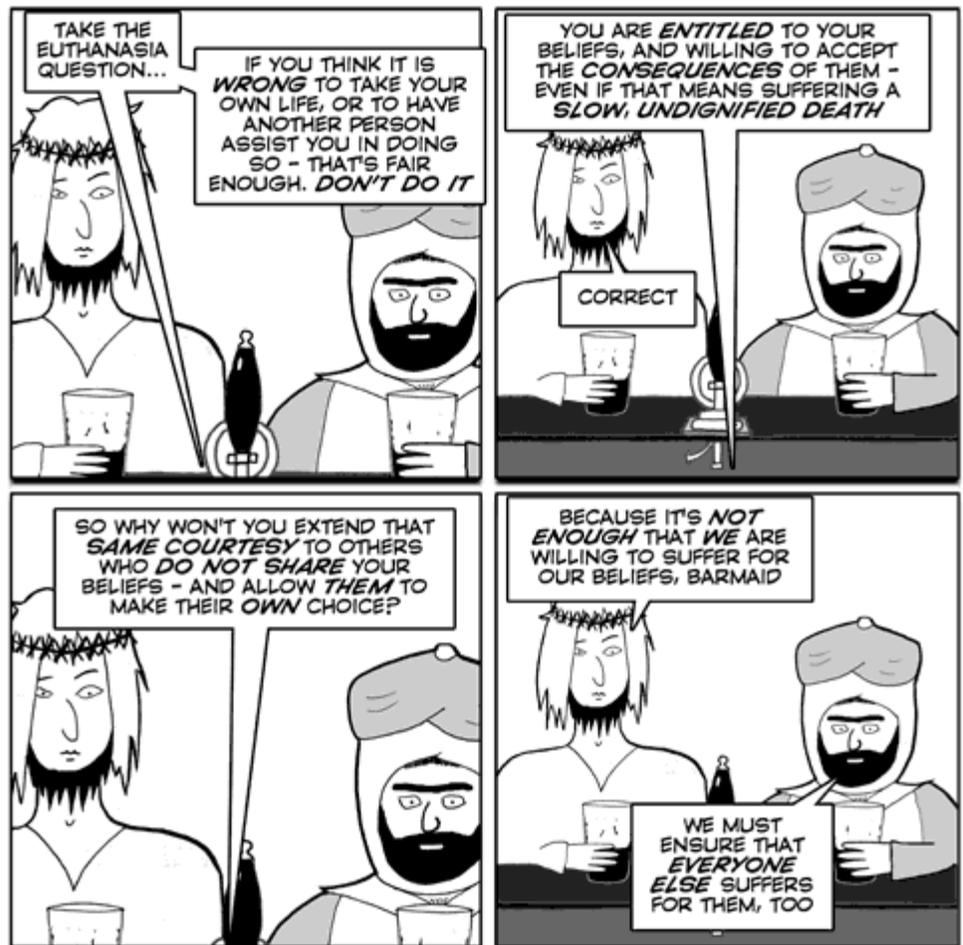
We're left eager for such comments after being shown actual pictures of other worlds. The first images of exoplanets not only serve as a symbolic vindication of the search, they have the immediate emotional appeal of seeing an object that's really there. Jayawardhana's closing chapters leave the reader understanding that we're only getting started and certainly just entering the most exciting part of planet hunting.

Just this February, the Kepler team

announced 1,235 planetary candidates. They require confirmation, which could take up to three years, but such data, accumulated over a mere five months, could triple the number of planets already discovered. Within this batch, 68 are Earth-like in size and 54 are within their star's habitable zone. The estimate is that six percent of stars contain Earth-size planets. This not only gives us a general understanding that there's a lot of real estate out there, but actually provides increasingly accurate quantities for two factors in the famous Drake equation for estimating the number of signaling ETs in the galaxy, namely  $f_p$  (the fraction of stars that have planets) and  $n_e$  (the average number of planets that can potentially support life per star with planets).

Jayawardhana's book offers a great and cohesive synopsis of how far the field has come and leaves the reader excited about the prospect of following along as

future discoveries are made. One need not be a passive observer either. Amateur astronomers such as Jennie McCormick from New Zealand are playing a role helping to confirm exoplanets discovered by gravitational lensing. The search for exoplanets has concreteness and an emotional appeal that other astronomical fields such as cosmology or the study of galaxies or black holes may lack, and even laypeople can join in through internet-based computing projects similar to [seti@home](http://seti@home). One of these, [www.zooniverse.org](http://www.zooniverse.org), has users identify transiting planets from real Kepler mission data. The idea that any member of our species with internet access could assist in the discovery of a new planet, eventually perhaps one that is habitable, is sure to keep the search for exoplanets popular and bring increased attention to the role of science in exploring the big questions of our place in the cosmos. ☘



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**FIG Potluck**  
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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 - [figmessage at gofigger dot org](mailto:figmessage@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at [gofigger.org](http://gofigger.org) or [freeinquirygroup.org](http://freeinquirygroup.org).