

FIG LEAVES

Volume 16 Issue 12

December 2007

January FIG Meeting: *Tuesday January 22, 2008 7 PM at the Vernon Manor*

The Lion's Way

Speaker: Peter Lloyd

Our fellow Fig member has written a new book he will tell us about.

The Roman Empire has not fallen. It thrives, having conquered the world under an enlightened political policy called *Empathia*, inspired by an all-but-forgotten Jesus. Never crucified, Jesus was kidnapped at the peak of his popularity by the emperor Tiberius, who used his revolutionary and empathetic ideas to rehabilitate the Roman Empire. Our story begins some 700 years later. Without a Church or Dark Ages to impede its progress, the Roman Republic has conquered space and achieved scientific success far beyond what we enjoy today. However, most of the Jesus-inspired *Empathia* has been corrupted or forgotten.

When we meet our protagonist Juventus Trajan Carnifex (Juve), he leads an underground insurgency bent on reforming the same corrupt Roman Republic that employs him as a highly trained member of its elite, law enforcement organization, the Indomitable Lions. At the same time, Barth, Rome's preeminent scientist, currently researching time travel, has uncovered historical evidence of Jesus, recognizing him as the source of *Empathia*.

As Juve plans the assassination of a leader of the Republic, he unwittingly falls in love with the leader's daughter, Maria. After an aborted assassination attempt and the death of his beloved Maria, Juve teams up with Barth to travel into the past and retrieve Jesus from obscurity. Their hope is to create a new and better future. In the process, Juve is transformed from a rebel, eager to use force to achieve his ends, into a man willing to follow his principles to the point of self-sacrifice.

Inside

Page

Let "FUN"draising Begin	2
In the News	3
Media Events/Programs	5
Science Book Club.....	5
Lloyd Evans reports a debate	6
Soldier Who Sued Army Facing Threats.....	7
Why are we Muslims so Self- destructive by Yasmin Alibhai Brown.....	8
Poem-The Respectable Burgher by Thomas Hardy.....	9
<i>Religious Literacy</i> by Stephen Prothero Book Review	10
<i>Lion's Way</i> by Marco Marsan and Peter Lloyd Book Review	11

Events

December Meeting

Tuesday, December 11, 2007, 7:00 PM
at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH

January Potluck

Tuesday, January 8, 2008; 6:30 PM
Panera Bread Company 405 E. Kemper Rd -
Across from Tri-County Shopping Center
We will be in the Community Room.
Plan on arriving early (6:15 PM) to place your
order, as they can be very busy.

See you there!

SNOW/ICE - CANCELS!

January Meeting

Tuesday, January 22, 2008, 7:00 PM at
the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



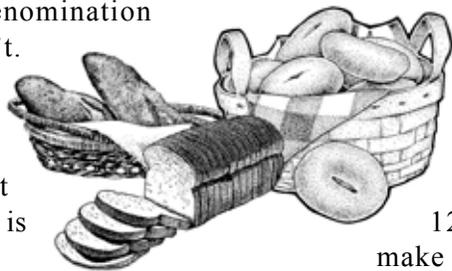


Let the FUN draising begin----selling Panera food coupons:

by Fran Welte

FIG needs Funds for many reasons, yet currently our income is primarily dependent upon membership fees. While one of our goals is to increase membership, it may not be prudent for us to rely on membership dues alone. One good reason is that more money would certainly help us launch bigger membership campaigns. More money would also help us to put even more fun activities on the schedule, which will support increased membership. There are also many serious issues where our voices need to be heard. We need money for megaphones; and the list goes on: software, postage, rental expenses for meeting rooms, stipends (extremely small ones) for our guest speakers, and so on.

So what are we going to do? Speaking for myself, I plan to become Fran the Fund Raiser. I am asking for your support. Now, it was suggested that I ask you to bring shoeboxes full of money (any denomination would do), but I won't. Instead, I am asking that you participate in our Panera bread sale. All of the information that you need to get started is included in this article.



It will be a good value for all concerned. Those who buy the pre-purchased product coupons do so at a 25-33% discount. No additional purchase is required for customers to receive their products. There are bagel coupon strips or combo coupon strips available. As an example, a customer buying a \$12 bagel coupon strip will be able to redeem 3 coupons at a time for 3 bagels per coupon. That's 9 Panera bagels for \$6, a nice deal. The combo coupon strips (also \$12) feature a variety of products: a sourdough baguette, a mini Asiago Cheese baguette, any variety of Focaccia round, 3 bagels, 2 cookies, and a brownie slice of any variety. The value for FIG will be a 40% profit. However, Panera requires a minimum order of 25 coupon strips.

Consequently, your commitment is required for the fund raising effort to be a success. As a small incentive, once we have reached 25 orders as a group, the highest individual seller will receive their choice of one of the two coupon strips. If, as a group, we do only the minimum, FIG will receive \$125. If we give it a little effort, we could

really boost the budget.

It is a great time of year to be selling these, as they will make terrific little gifts for the Winter Solstice or any of the many other winter holiday celebrations. Please contact me as soon as possible to have coupons back to you and your customers by 12/22/07. Remember to make all checks out to "Free Inquiry Group" or you may collect cash and give the customer a receipt. I realize this does not leave a lot of time for selling but I hope you will give it your best effort.

Please will you commit to sell or buy just 1 coupon strip? Will you consider selling as many as you can? Thank you. Here is the important information you will need to get started. To create your own sales sheet you will need to include YOUR NAME, MAILING ADDRESS, PHONE NUMBER and/or EMAIL. For each customer's order write down their name, address (please include zip code) and phone number. Indicate the number of bagel coupon strips and/or the number of combo coupon strips and total the order (\$12 per coupon strip).

Your coordinator is Fran Welte. For orders or questions, please contact her by email, <welte@fuse.net> with "FIG funds" in the subject line.

Coupons expire 6 months from the date that FIG purchases them. They will probably be purchased on 12/12/07.

Customers may redeem 3 coupons per visit.



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

figinfo@fuse.net;

or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 19034, Cincinnati, OH 45219. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

All material printed in FIG Leaves may be reproduced in similar publications of non-profit groups which grant FIG Leaves reciprocal reprinting rights as long as proper credit is clearly attributed to FIG Leaves and the authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the editor or the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., its board, or officers.

FIG Board of Directors:

President: John Welte
Vice President: Donna Loughry
Secretary: George Maurer,
Treasurer: Bryan Sellers,
Program Chair: Shawn Jeffers,
Members: Michele Grinoch,
Helen Kagin,
Margaret O'Kain,
Philip Ferguson,
Joe Levee,
Jessica Linburg
FIG Leaves Editor: Wolf Roder.



Memberships run from:

1 January to 31 December.
One year: \$25
Family: \$35
Subscription: \$10

If you join during the year, you receive a \$2 discount for each month that has passed.

We request contributions above membership dues. Contributions are tax deductible.



The War between Science and Religion: time for a little talk.

The New York Times on Saturday published an op-ed by Paul Davies that addresses the question: "Is embracing the laws of nature so different from religious belief?" Davies concludes that, "until science comes up with a testable theory of the laws of the universe its claim to be free of faith is manifestly bogus." Davies has confused two meanings of the word "faith." *The Oxford Concise English Dictionary* on my desk gives the two distinct meanings for faith as: "1) complete trust or confidence, and 2) strong belief in a religion based on spiritual conviction rather than proof." A scientist's "faith" is built on experimental proof. The two meanings of the word "faith," therefore, are not only different, they are exact opposites.

Davies, who won the 1995 Templeton Prize is not the only physicist to make that mistake. "Many people don't realize that science basically involves faith" Charles Townes said in his 2005 Templeton statement. On laser physics I would happily defer to Townes, but this is a matter of the English language. Here we defer to the dictionaries. The judges who awarded Townes the 2005 Templeton Prize cited a single line from his famous 1966 article *The Convergence of Science and Religion*: "Understanding the order in the Universe and understanding the purpose of the universe are not identical, but they are also not very far apart." They are a universe apart. Steven Weinberg, another great Nobel-laureate physicist, wrote "The more the universe seem comprehensible, the more it seems pointless." Nevertheless, by our count Townes is the sixth physicist to win the Templeton, which in dollars is larger than the Nobel Prize. In any case, the "purpose" of the universe is not on the science agenda. Suicide bombers no doubt believe they are part of some divine "purpose."

What connects scientists of faith? I count 8 physicists among the 34 recipients of the Templeton Prize, and a couple more had degrees in physics. It was initially the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, and the first winner in 1973 was Mother Teresa. Winners have included Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. Billy Graham got it in 1982, Charles Colson of Watergate fame in 1993 and Paul Davies in 1995.

But in 1999 Ian Barbour, a student of Fermi, was the recipient. A professor of physics and theology at Carleton College, Barbour was credited with initiating a "dialog between science and religion." Templeton admired Barbour, and coveted his dialog. The scientific revolution, after all, led to the fantastic growth in the world economy that made him a billionaire. Templeton believes God has chosen him to show the world that, as he put it, theology and science

are two windows on the same landscape. So he changed the name to the Templeton Prize for Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities. It is the largest prize for intellectual accomplishment in existence, chosen to be bigger than the Nobel. Since that time, six of the last eight winners of the Templeton Prize have been physicists. They all relied on the anthropic principle in their Templeton Prize statements.

Some think the Anthropic Principle proves there is a god. It argues that the universe has been "fine-tuned" to make life possible. In the so-called strong form: "The fundamental parameters of the universe are such as to permit the creation of observers within it." I believe an equivalent wording would be: "If things were different, things would not be the way things are."

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 30 November 2007

To Fig Members:

The Golden Compass, a new blockbuster Humanist movie, will hit theaters December 7, but not without its share of controversy. Be on the alert for local protests from critics who are unfairly portraying the film as a "stealth campaign" by its "deceitful" producers and author Philip Pullman to "promote atheism and denigrate Christianity." And be ready to launch counter protests if you are so moved. Pullman counters that his story from which the film is adapted champions values such as kindness, love, courage, courtesy, intellectual curiosity and opposition to tyranny. And he trusts his readers to see this in all the books in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

(We can see the interview on: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ErikinSF>.)

Unfortunately, Pullman's critics don't have the same faith in people to make their own decisions. The Catholic League launched a campaign against the film leading up to its premiere, complete with an "educational booklet" entitled, *The Golden Compass: Agenda Unmasked*, described as "all the ammo [Christians] need to convince friends and family members that there is nothing innocent about Pullman's agenda."

(Read how the Catholic League is marketing the booklet:

<<http://catholicleague.org/catalyst.php?year=2007&month=October&read=2322>> &month=October&read=2322.)

While critics acknowledge that the book's themes critical of religion are being toned down in the film, they accuse Pullman of encouraging parents to buy their children the trilogy of books which they call "overt in its hatred of Christianity". For Pullman, however, they are a positive Humanist response to the C.S. Lewis *Chronicles of Narnia*. But for the Catholic League and other opponents of the film, being critical of religion or being atheist is analogous to being immoral. We know that just isn't true. It's important to be on the lookout for



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



Media Events/Programs

The Humanist Perspective

Show times on Time-Warner Cable:

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

Channel 24: Friday 11:30 pm

Programs

11-13 Dec: 240 Rock for Relief, with Sarah Jordan, David Koepsell

18-20 Dec: 242 Media Mythmaker #2, with Benjamin Radford

25-27 Dec: 249 What the Scriptures really say, with R. Joseph Hoffmann

1-3 Jan '08: 254 Blasphemy in the West, with David Nash

8-10 Jan: 257 The Clash over Cartoons, with Tom Flynn

THE FOCUS

Published by the Center For Atheism (CFA)
centerforatheism.org

Editor: Kenneth Bronstein

The Focus provides links to articles collected from major newspapers and magazines, and is emailed weekly.

This Week in Atheism is a cable show that discusses the articles featured, every Wednesday at 6:30 PM (EST), Manhattan Cable station 57. Live streaming is available at: - <http://www.mnn.org>

Comments, suggestions and subscription: focus@centerforatheism.org (<mailto:focus@centerforatheism.org>).

International Humanist and Ethical Union

The IHEU is the world umbrella organisation for humanist, ethical culture, rationalist, secularist and freethought groups. Based in London, it is an international NGO with Special Consultative Status with the UN (New York, Geneva, Vienna), General Consultative Status at UNICEF (New York) and the Council of Europe (Strasbourg), and it maintains operational relations with UNESCO (Paris).

Its mission is to build and represent the global Humanist movement, to defend human rights and to promote humanist values world-wide. IHEU sponsors and runs the triennial Humanist World Congress. The 17th World Humanist Congress will take place on 6-8 June 2009 in Washington DC. You can find out more about IHEU at their website: www.ih.eu.org

The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

When: Tuesday, 18 December at 8:00PM

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

To see who's coming and to see more event details: http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve

Hear, hear: *Answers in Atheism* at

www.answersinatheism.net

Doesn't it just Figger? (pun intended). Some of your fellows have been up to something good and useful. Frank Bicknell, Helen Kagin, Edwin Kagin, John and Fran Welte have been hard at work on an internet radio show start up, called *Answers in Atheism*. With six shows broadcast, we are starting to think we are achieving something! Although we have no budget, we are determined to succeed in making an impression! Please volunteer to assist us, contact John or Fran (production or operations), Frank (engineering) or Edwin and Helen (hosts and famous atheists). Of course, financial assistance is also welcome, as we are in desperate need of higher bandwidth and various technical materials. We are live on the internet Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 8 pm EST. Our shows are also available as archived audio files, so you can listen later at any time of your choice.

Please tune in at www.answersinatheism.net.

The Answers in Atheism crew

SCIENCE BOOK CLUB: 2007 Schedule

Science book club as in past years plans on meeting at the Cincinnati Downtown Library on the 4th Sunday of each month at 2:30pm in Room 3A, except on the 3rd Sunday because of holidays or other conflicts as noted below:

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





Lloyd Evans reports on a debate

Articles and Content Copyright 82007 by The Spectator (1828) Ltd.
All Rights Reserved

The great thing about the Intelligence2 debates is their vitality, pace and compression. The motion 'We should not be reluctant to assert the superiority of Western values' was proposed by the author Ibn Warraq. He contrasted the West's openness and flexibility with the ossified 'closed book' culture of Islam. 'Easterners flock to collect their degrees from Oxbridge, Harvard and the Sorbonne,' he said. Traffic in the other direction is minimal. Rejecting the 'mind-numbing certainties' of Islam in favour of the 'liberating doubt' of Bertrand Russell, he asked us if Islam would tolerate an equivalent of the movie *The Life of Brian*.

Opposing the motion, Charles Glass, a distinguished American war correspondent, made an urbane, ironic speech in which he pretended to side with his opponents. 'Aren't we jolly lucky to be Western and to be superior to those not fortunate enough to share our values?' He reminded us that the explorer Magellan, on arriving in Madras, ordered the extermination of all the city's Jews and Muslims. Glass linked this to later atrocities committed by Europeans and Americans. 'A culture that created two world wars should be wary of assuming its superiority.' He invoked Vietnam and Iraq and, of course, Abu Ghraib.

Times columnist David Aaronovitch lighted on Iran and painted a vivid and appalling picture of its misogynistic legal system. Teenage girls are often subjected to stoning for 'crimes against chastity', i.e. being alone with a boy. A young woman recently imprisoned on such charges was raped by her jailer. Both were convicted of adultery. The man, 52, was flogged. The girl, 16, was hanged. These details subtly refined the terms of the debate. It was now a dispute between Islam and Judaeo-Christianity. But no one minded. The room was eager to slug it out on just that territory.

The French academic Tariq Ramadan gave a spirited rebuttal of Aaronovitch. Ramadan has a Jose Mourinho-like knack for coining memorable phrases. 'Implicit in your talk is that Islam is the problem,' he said. And he accused Aaronovitch of generalising. 'From one story we make a civilisation? Unfair! Unjust! Dangerous!' He surprised us with a list of Islamic mediaeval thinkers who had espoused the cause of free debate. We struggled to recognise their names. And that was the point. Western history is too blinkered and exclusive to admit the tradition of liberal Islam. He told us that our so-called 'superiority' is inspired by a fear of losing our special identity. 'We select the past to build a new "we,"' he thundered. And we - the we he meant - shuddered as we digested this slogan. Instead of 'superior', we felt suddenly biased, parochial and ill-informed.

Then up stood Douglas Murray, director of the Centre for Social Cohesion. The youngest of the speakers, Murray was easily the most adept and relaxed. Glancing only occasionally at his notes, he gave a searching, witty and brilliantly informal speech in which he dissected his opponents' arguments. Unpicking the motion and its troublesome word 'assert', he defused its imperialist flavour. 'Our superiority need not be asserted violently.' He reiterated a point made by David Aaronovitch about the crisis of Abu Ghraib. Ultimately the discovery that America had committed torture reaffirmed liberal values. 'Lynndie England was found guilty,' Murray said, 'in the West. By the West. For the West.'

Closing for the opposition, the travel writer William Dalrymple raked up the ashes of the West's guilty past. He gave a list of races annihilated by colonial adventurers - Tasmanians, Incas, Caribs, Apaches - and suggested that 'the tradition of colonial genocide paved the way for the Holocaust'. In a rowdy conclusion he urged the audience to stand up against 'the neocons and the neo-lefties'. Noisy approval greeted him.

Chairman Edward Lucas, inviting questions from the floor, conducted the ensuing discussion with icy wit and with a note of asperity that bordered, very pleasingly, on impatience. Brevity was encouraged. Wind baggery punctured. The best of the exchanges was Murray's answer to Dalrymple's second attempt to blame cultural divisions on our colonial past. 'This is masochism,' said Murray, 'and it's being offered to you by a sadist.' Huge laughter. The votes were counted and the motion was carried by 465 to 264. The winning majority howled with pleasure when Ibn Warraq summed up the debate: "I don't want to live in a society where I get stoned for committing adultery. I want to live in a society where I get stoned. And then commit adultery."

Before: For the motion 313; Against the motion 221; Don't Know 207

After: For the motion 465; Against the motion 264; Don't Know 18

Santa's Reindeer

According to the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, both male and female reindeer grow antlers in the summer each year. Males drop their antlers at the beginning of winter, while females keep theirs until spring. Therefore, according to everything we've seen, every one of those reindeer on Santa's team is a female.

This prompted my wife to observe, "You should have known this, because they were able to find their way." Typical, the woman not only gets the last word, but she's also right!



Soldier Who Sued Army Facing Threats

By Jason Leopold, *Truthout*, 21 September 2007

An Army specialist stationed in Iraq said he has been repeatedly threatened by other US soldiers after word spread that he sued the secretary of defense and an Army major this week for allegedly retaliating against the soldier when he convened a meeting of atheists, according to the founder of a military watchdog organization that filed the lawsuit on behalf of the soldier and has been in close contact with him since then.

Jeremy Hall, 22, who is based out of Fort Riley, Kansas, is deployed in Iraq. The email said a fellow soldier has threatened to “beat his ass,” called him an “atheist ass pirate” and “a faggot” and enlisted a “lynch mob” of other soldiers to intimidate Hall because of the allegations Hall made against the military in a lawsuit Weinstein’s foundation and Hall filed Monday in US District Court in Kansas City.

Weinstein said he has been in contact with supporters of his foundation who have reported the posting of messages on military and civilian-based blogs, such as *military.com*, apparently threatening Hall with “fragging,” a term used by the military in which an unpopular soldier could be killed by intentional friendly fire during combat. “Mikey, I hope I am not a victim of a hate crime while I sleep tonight,” Hall wrote in an email to Weinstein Thursday evening. “I do not want to die for my country this way. [The soldier] is threatening to beat my ass and all sorts of things. I may be harmed or worse. I am afraid for my safety. I can’t sleep, man.... I just lay in my bunk for two hours and I couldn’t sleep.”

Messages left for several Pentagon spokespeople Thursday evening - on cell phones and at the Defense Department - were not returned. Weinstein said late Thursday evening that he has not yet been able to verify the authenticity of the blog postings threatening Hall with “fragging.” But Weinstein said he takes the threat of violence against Hall seriously and has already reached out to senior officials in the Pentagon as well as senior Army operations officials to ensure Hall’s safety. Weinstein is a former White House attorney under Ronald Reagan, was general counsel to H. Ross Perot, and was formerly an Air Force judge advocate general (JAG).

Weinstein said he demanded “that the Secretaries of Defense and the US Army take absolute immediate action to do two things: provide for the comprehensive personal safety of our co-plaintiff Army Specialist Jeremy Hall, and immediately investigate all US Army personnel who may have violated the Uniform Code of Military Justice by threatening the personal safety and indeed the life of Specialist Hall. If one hair on Hall’s head is touched there will be hell to pay.”

Hall’s lawsuit alleges that his First Amendment rights were violated beginning last Thanksgiving when, because

of his atheist beliefs, he declined to participate in a Christian prayer ceremony commemorating the holiday. “Immediately after plaintiff made it known he would decline to join hands and pray, he was confronted, in the presence of other military personnel, by the senior ranking ... staff sergeant, who asked plaintiff why he did not want to pray, whereupon plaintiff explained because he is an atheist,” says the lawsuit, a copy of which was provided to *Truthout*. “The staff sergeant asked plaintiff what an atheist is and plaintiff responded it meant that he (plaintiff) did not believe in God. This response caused the staff sergeant to tell plaintiff that he would have to sit elsewhere for the Thanksgiving dinner. Nonetheless, plaintiff sat at the table in silence and finished his meal.”

Moreover, the complaint alleges that on August 7, when Hall received permission by an Army chaplain to organize a meeting of other soldiers who shared his atheist beliefs, his supervisor, Army Major Paul Welborne, broke up the gathering and threatened to retaliate against the soldier by charging him with violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The complaint also alleges that Welborne vowed to block Hall’s reenlistment in the Army if the atheist group continued to meet - a violation of Hall’s First Amendment rights under the Constitution. Welborne is named as a defendant in the lawsuit. “During the course of the meeting, defendant Welborne confronted the attendees, disrupted the meeting and interfered with plaintiff Hall’s and the other attendees’ rights to discuss topics of their interests,” the lawsuit alleges. The complaint charges that Hall, who is based at Fort Riley, Kansas, has been forced to “submit to a religious test as a qualification to his post as a soldier in the United States Army,” a violation of Article VI, Clause 3 of the Constitution.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation said Defense Secretary Robert Gates is named as a defendant in the lawsuit because he has allowed the military to engage in “a pattern and practice of constitutionally impermissible promotions of religious beliefs within the Department of Defense and the United States military.” The lawsuit seeks an injunction against Welborne from further engaging in behavior “that has the effect of establishing compulsory religious practices” and asks that Gates prevent Welborne from interfering with Hall’s free speech rights. “This landmark federal litigation is just the first of a galaxy of new lawsuits that will be expeditiously filed against the Pentagon in a concentrated effort to preserve the precious religious liberties guaranteed by our beautiful United States Constitution,” Weinstein said Monday. “Today, we are boldly stabbing back against an unconstitutional heart of darkness, a contagion of fundamentalist religious supremacy and triumphalism noxiously dominating the command and control of the technologically most lethal organization ever created by humankind: our honorable and noble United States armed forces.”





Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: Why are we Muslims so self-destructive?

The Independent, (24 September 2007)



Today, dissenting Muslims have to wear virtual body armour in case someone decides to take offence. I fast for some days every week of this month of Ramadan. At an *ifthar* (breaking of fast) gathering last week, Rahim, a handsome young Muslim doctor and I chatted about this and that, and the end of our world: “Do you think refined and educated Muslims will survive this century? Or will we become extinct? I feel I don’t know who I am any more. My parents, too, say the same. Barbaric Muslims are stronger than us, more stupid and ignorant, but stronger, you know.”

You hear these outpourings of grief and hopelessness a lot these days. Ignorance is not bliss, it is oblivion, wrote the American novelist Philip Wylie. Ill-educated, volatile, easily led, despised by millions, Muslims the world over are falling into that void, into oblivion. Some are and will be annihilated by external foes and enemies within, including the demon cheerleaders inside the heads of suicide bombers, but many more will be consumed by their own terror of the modern world.

Look today at India and Pakistan, neighbours, twin nations with identical histories and values. While the former is poised to challenge the economic and cultural power of the West, the latter is imploding and joins the ever-growing club of failed Muslim states. India has shameful problems B extreme poverty, corruption, greed, the caste system, Islamophobia and misogynist cultural practices B but, unlike Pakistan, it also has a free press and democracy, and its population understands the importance of education and enlightenment.

Come to our isles and the same stark contrast emerges. British Asians of Indian background (including Muslims from India) are top of the league tables in schools, universities, business and the professions. They are mentally agile, inquisitive, and encouraged to strive by their families. With some individual exceptions, British Muslims of Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds languish at the bottom of all indicator tables. It is heartbreaking.

Some of this failure to catch up is to do with

discrimination, no doubt about that. Some, though, is the result of self-limitation. In the past decade, there has been a sharp increase in British Muslims entering higher and further education, but even this good news has a depressing undertow. In nearly all universities in this country, including the elite establishments, there are cells of well organised Muslim obscurantists who entice or bully fellow Muslim scholars seeking to liberate their minds.

They write to me, bright and ambitious students who feel spied on, coerced, hounded and tormented because they do not wear a *hijab*, or are seen meeting diverse mates in the student union bars, or choose “*haram*” subjects such as creative writing, art, drama or even European languages. One young Muslim woman at the London School of Economics actually had a novel snatched from her hand, and says she was then held and harangued by her *hijabi* assailant who left a bruise on her arm. I pity both. What makes a university undergraduate this appallingly afraid of fiction? Who got into her head to distort it so?

It wasn’t always thus. The fanatics who want to take us into their version of the holy past don’t know and don’t care about inconvenient truths. Allah commands us to seek knowledge and intellectual engagement. The best of past Muslim civilisations nurtured enquiry, debate, love, desire, words, music, dance, art, philosophy, science and beauty. The effusive Michael Wood’s BBC program on the Mughal Emperor Akbar last week was a wonderful reminder of that enlightened period of our history,

Today, creative, imaginative, dissenting and innovative Muslims have to wear virtual body armor, hunker down, just in case someone decides to get offended (and someone always does), inciting an uproar on the web, on the media, on the streets bringing out the mobs in Pakistan, Egypt, Syria, South Africa, Somalia and on and on. Inevitably some die for a cause they never really understood and the restless army of discontents shuffles off until the next noisy and bloody march.

I know of talented painters and poets in Pakistan who have just given up or fled. Arab artists, activists and thinkers unafraid of the truth are in actual prisons or enclosed behind limitations built by their fearful societies. Explosive episodes are always gathering round the corner. We witnessed the organised outrage over the Channel 4 programs exposing some of the vile imams



still controlling some mosques. The film of the Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, about a young boy in Afghanistan, is causing much anger. One of the pivotal scenes involves a homosexual rape of a Shia boy. They won't have that, it is a slur, an insult. Muslims don't do such things. The same protests met Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*, in which a young Bangladeshi wife in Tower Hamlets has an affair. Muslims don't do such things etc, etc. Of course there is no rape and adultery in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, those are bad "western" behaviours. The controversy will be reheated when the film of *Brick Lane* is released in a few weeks.

Now I didn't rate the book much; the film, which I have been sent pre-release, actually moved me more. The more voluble East End Bangladeshis are not bothered about considered judgements of literary or critical merit. They will cry foul because the story taints their honour and culture, it reflects back to them what they would rather not see.

When cultures get this coarse, they can only give rise to the worst, most unaccountable and violent leaders. This is what we see all through the Muslim world. In good societies, people build up sense and sensibilities, acquire communication skills, learn intelligent engagement with written and spoken words and with diverse views, open their minds to new ideas and images. And the formally uneducated are as capable of this expansiveness as those with degrees.

The poorest Londoners loved Dickens, and he changed the way they imagined their lives; peasants were drawn to Gandhi because he helped them break out of mental bondage. These men brought political and personal awakening to the rough and wretched, and enabled them to understand subtleties and nuances and what it is to be human. Britain and India have strong democracies because their populations have been acculturated and sensitised over centuries. In Muslim states and communities, you find the people fast becoming deculturalised and desensitised; shutting down and withdrawing into paranoia.

I write this not to encourage Islamophobes, but because I care. Ramadan is a time for sober reflection. It should bring peace, but doesn't. Many of us tremble with trepidation at the bleak future ahead. The savages are taking over and, as Rahim says, they are stronger and will drag all the faithful down into the pits of hell. ☘

The Respectable Burgher On *The Higher Criticism*

by Thomas Hardy

Since Reverend Doctors now declare
That clerks and people must prepare
To doubt if Adam ever were;
To hold the flood a local scare;
To argue, though with stolid stare,
That everything had happened ere,
The prophets to its happening sware;
That David was no giant-slayer,
Nor one to call a God-obeyer
In certain details we would spare,
But rather was a debonair
Shrewd bandit, skilled as banjo-player:
That Solomon sang the fleshly Fair,
And gave the Church no thought whate'er,
That Esther with her royal wear,
And Mordecai, the son of Jair,
And Joshua's triumphs, Job's despair,
And Balaam's ass's bitter blare;
Nebuchadnezzar's furnace-flare,
And Daniel and the den affair,
And other stories rich and rare,
Were writ to make old doctrine wear
Something of a romantic air:
That the Nain widow's only heir,
And Lazarus with cadaverous glare
(As done in oils by Piombo's care)
Did not return from Sheol's lair:
That Jael set a findish snare,
That Pontius Pilate acted square,
That never a sword cut Malchus' ear;
And (but for shame I must forbear)
That — — did not reappear!...
— Since thus they hint, nor turn a hair,
All churchgoing will I forswear,
And sit on Sundays in my chair,
And read that moderate man Voltaire.



Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know - and Doesn't
By Stephen Prothero
(HarperCollins, 2007)

As you can tell from the title, Prothero contends that Americans lack religious knowledge. What's not so apparent is that Prothero considers this ignorance a very serious problem. However, he provides no evidence that the problem is as serious as he contends.

There are four main parts to the book:

- 1 The Problem
- 2 The Past
- 3 The Proposal
- 4 Dictionary of Religious Literacy

In "The Problem" section, Prothero makes his case that Americans are abysmally ignorant of religion, even though we're among the most religious people on earth. He doesn't just consider us ignorant of "foreign" religions but also of Christianity and Judaism. He provides a wealth of evidence to support his argument and it's impossible to dispute this point.

Prothero devotes the second half of "The Problem" section to proving that religion still matters today. He says religion matters because so many people are religious and their actions are guided (to one degree or another) by their religious beliefs. There are many issues in the public domain which are indisputably influenced by religious beliefs so this is another point that cannot really be argued – religion does matter.

I learned the most from the "The Past" section of the book. Before reading this section, I had no idea how pervasive religion was in daily life, politics, government and education at our nation's founding. In Prothero's view, this state of affairs was "Eden".

Of course, after Eden came "The Fall". This is Prothero's characterization of how religion was gradually reduced in the public schools. Of interest to me is the observation that this reduction resulted from disagreements among the believers who could not agree on what

should be taught and the religious sects who felt they were getting the short end of the stick. As a consequence, they instigated the removal of religious references and influenced the transformation from teaching religion into teaching morality.

Which brings us to Prothero's "Proposal" on how to improve religious literacy (pg 136): Americans deserve to be equipped to make sense of these situations, and one simple way to equip them is to see to it that every public school student takes, in addition to a Bible course, at least one course on the world's religions.

Prothero offers many justifications for his proposal. Here are a couple of them: Page 132: As a result an entire generation of Americans is growing up ignorant of the most influential book in world history unable to understand biblical allusions in fictional works by Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Toni Morrison, not to mention the 1,300 biblical allusions in Shakespeare...

Page 146: In today's world it is irresponsible to use the word educated to describe high school or college graduates who are ignorant of the ancient stories that continue to motivate the beliefs and behaviors of the overwhelming majority of the world's population. In a world as robustly religious as ours it is foolish to imagine that such graduates are equipped to participate fully in the politics of the nation or the affairs of the world.

This is where Prothero and I part company. I don't agree with his assertion (and that's all it is – there is no evidence to support it) that being religiously illiterate makes one unready for college or citizenship; uneducated; ill equipped to participate fully in the politics of the nation or the affairs of the world. In my struggles to understand Shakespeare, his biblical allusions are the *least* of my problems!

Here's an example to support my contention that the lack of religious literacy is not a significant factor in world affairs. The recent demonstrations against the dictatorship in Myanmar were led by Buddhist monks. I don't think my not knowing anything about Buddhism's 4 Noble Truths detracted from my ability to understand their role. It was enough for me to see them at the head of the demonstrations and to know that the monks are highly respected by the Myanmar citizens. Had these demonstrations been led by lawyers (as were similar recent demonstrations in Pakistan), I would not have been hindered by the fact that I'm at least as ignorant about law as I am about Buddhism.



Another oft cited example is the current administration's lack of knowledge of the differences between Sunni and Shiites. I don't see how knowing that Shiites differ from Sunni because of a disagreement over how to select the prophet Muhammad's successors helps understand the conflict between these 2 groups in Iraq. The important thing to know about Sunni and Shiites in Iraq is that:

- 1 Saddam's regime horribly mistreated the Shiites
- 2 At least in part because of this mistreatment, the Shiites and Sunni are willing to kill one another.

The important issue (are the factions willing to kill one another?) has nothing to do with religious literacy. I would argue that before we get involved in the affairs of another nation, we should understand all the core beliefs of that nation.

In conclusion, I found this book to be worth reading. Even though it doesn't provide in depth coverage of the seven religions Prothero considers the most important, I think the thumbnail definitions in the dictionary section make it worth owning as a reference book. And the section on the role religion played during America's early years was informative. I don't object to teaching about religion in public schools. I just don't see that it is as critical as Prothero contends. In fact, I would argue that a lack of knowledge of basic literacy (reading, writing and arithmetic) is a far more serious problem and should be addressed first.

- Preston Black ☚

At Church

The minister was completing a temperance sermon. With great emphasis he said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river."

With even greater emphasis he said, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river."

And then finally, shaking his fist in the air, he said, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." Sermon complete, he sat down.

The choir master stood very cautiously and announced with a smile, nearly laughing, "For our closing hymn, let us sing #365: *Shall We Gather at the River*."



Lion's Way: what if Rome had never fallen?

by Marco Marsan and Peter Lloyd

(Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group, 2008)

Lion's Way is a very interesting book. A strong main character, Juve, draws the reader into and through the shifts of time and the development of the plot. The action never stops as the narrative telescopes through an alternate Rome and a lost-in-time Jerusalem. Woven into the text are commentaries on capitalism, the nature of governance and religion. An agile reader will find much that is thought provoking in this extraordinary novel.

In summary, the hero, a Roman orphan trained in the "Lion's Way" to be an excellent "Indomitable Lion" (secret policeman), finds killing for the government unfulfilling. He organizes a splendid and amusing counter organization called Forza Facia, which loosely translates to "force to make things happen." This lighthearted group had serious intent, but is in the process of transforming. It started as a group effort to shame the elite, steal from the rich to give to the poor, and tattoo the naughty, but now is planning to murder a very evil man. The Forza is inspired by a fallen-out-of-favor government program called "Empathia." This alternate Rome has conquered the entire world using the strength of empathy. Restraint and understanding served to do effectively and cheaply what brute force did at great cost to all.

In the time this novel takes place, Empathia has become a faint memory and Roman power has returned to its more common course of selective brutality. Juve and his cohorts are the political assassins and as such know enough to be disenchanted with the system. They know the Roman Siberia, they know about the missing and the dead.

Through a series of events, Juve meets and loses his love and their child, and meets the agent of time travel - a great scholar. After his loss, Juve is driven to take part in the time travel adventure to search for the secret source of the ideas in Empathia, Jeshua. In the process, he finds himself alone in ancient Israel. Aided by a language device he begins his travel through the countryside.

He finds the Essenes, who tend him while he's sick, to be odd but kindly. He travels with one to Jerusalem. When he encounters Jesuha, Juve begins to change. The authors treat Jesuha with great sensitivity and insight. He is human, funny and surrounded by a motley crew. Juve becomes entangled in Jesuha's crucifixion.

The novel will be a surprise and delight to many readers. The ending is thought provoking. This work is well worth reading.

- Nancy Blignaut



January Potluck:
Tuesday Jan. 08, 2008 6:30 PM



January Meeting
Tuesday, Jan. 22, 2008 7:00 PM



FIG Leaves
P.O. Box 19034
Cincinnati, OH 45219

FIG

Our Purpose

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

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



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

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

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

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