

FIG LEAVES

Volume 19 Issue 12

December 2010

December FIG Meeting: Sunday, Dec. 19 at 3:00 pm

We shall tour the exhibit at the Cincinnati Museum Center

America I Am: The African American Imprint

Cost: Cost is \$5 for FIG Members, \$11 for Non-Fig Members (\$11 is the standard group rate)

Parking: It is \$6 to park at the Cincinnati Museum Center, so feel free to carpool with others. Another opportunity is to park for free on Hopkins St, which is immediately south of the Museum Center and walk through the parking lot.

RSVP: If you are interested in joining us, please contact Shawn Jeffers at 513-404-8191 or at smj145@gmail.com for tickets. We will need at least 15 people attending to receive the group rate.

About the Exhibit

America I AM provides an opportunity for people from all walks of life to explore this uniquely American story. With the nation's first African American president, **America I AM** endeavors to bring together Americans of all backgrounds to achieve a greater understanding of their shared culture and history.

Scholar W.E.B. Du Bois once wrote, "Would America have been America without her Negro people?" To examine the answer to that question, **America I Am: The African American Imprint** is mounted as the broadest museum exhibition of its kind. An assembly of poignant artifacts representing nearly 500 years of American history, the exhibition will convey and celebrate the undeniable imprint African Americans have had on the country and the world.

This National exhibit is touring American cities and will be in Cincinnati until January 2, 2011. More details on the exhibit can be found at www.americaiam.org.

Solstice Supper

After visiting the Exhibit, we will have a Solstice Supper at Frisch's in Queensgate/West End, which is just down the street from the Museum Center. If you can't make the exhibit, but want to join us for dinner, plan on being at the restaurant at 5:15. The restaurant is the Frisch's at 1001 Gest Street, Cincinnati, OH 45203.

January Meeting: January 25, 2011 at 7pm; Hannaford Suites

The Role of the African American Church Dr. Tonya Matthews; Vice President, Cincinnati Museum Center. For our January meeting, Dr. Tonya Matthews will be joining us to explore the role of the church in the African American community. Many free thinkers wonder how African Americans can be Christians when the Bible supports slavery, so expect a dynamic presentation and conversation as we explore this concept. Dr. Matthews was also involved in the **America I AM** exhibit at the Museum Center that we will be touring in December, so we will have an opportunity to ask any questions you have about the exhibit.

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Events

Note Location/Date/Time Changes!

December Meeting

Sunday, Dec. 19, 2010, 3:00 PM
Cincinnati Museum Center

FIG Community Dinner:

None for January

January Meeting

Tuesday, January 25, 2011, 7:00 PM
Hannaford Suites Hotel

FIG Community Dinner:

None for February



You Know It's a Myth!

Statistics show that nearly 50 million Americans are atheists. Some use terms like freethinker, agnostic or humanist to describe or modify their position, but atheism (the absence of a belief in a deity) is broad, and encompasses all those terms. If you don't have an active belief in a god, you're an atheist. It's a very good thing!

Millions of atheists are closeted, choosing to go along to get along, and feigning religion to their friends, family and coworkers. American Atheists understands the pressure to fit in, but we maintain that for people to love you, they must know the real you. We also assure you that, like every other person in this country, you know *far* more atheists than you think.

What You Do Know.

Chances are, if you're reading this, you don't believe in the fable of Adam and Eve and the talking snake. You probably think it's a story, created out of ignorance, to explain the origin of life. You probably don't believe that Adam literally ate a fruit, resulting in God expelling him and Eve out of the idyllic Garden of Eden.

In other words, you know that's a myth.

Right so far? So if Adam and Eve and the Talking Snake are myths, then Original Sin is also a myth, right? Well, think about it...

- Jesus' major purpose was to save mankind from Original Sin.
- Original Sin makes believers unworthy of salvation, but you get it anyway, so you should be grateful for being saved (from that which does not exist).
- Without Original Sin, the marketing that all people are sinners and therefore need to accept Jesus falls moot.

All we are asking is that you take what you know into serious consideration; even if it means taking a hard look at all you've been taught for your whole life. No Adam and Eve means no need for a savior. It also means that the Bible cannot be trusted as a source of unambiguous truth. It is unreliable, because it begins with a myth, and builds on that basis. No Fall of Man means no need for atonement and no need for a redeemer. You know it.

But Can You Really Know? Of Course You Can.

Theists love to validate their myths by trapping atheists into a philosophical discussion of knowledge and certainty. According to some theists, we can only be "pretty confident" of everything since we don't know everything. I guess they can only be equally sure that their gods exist.

In the movie *The Matrix*, we learn that life is an illusion, pumped onto our brains by aliens in a spaceship via a wire stuck in our heads. Good movie, but can you prove it false, with hundred percent certainty? Even if the writers came to your living room and told you they made it up, they could be mere illusions placed in your head for some unknown reason by the same unknown aliens.

So, is *The Matrix* fiction? How about Santa Claus? Zeus? Perhaps the mouse in your hand is an all-powerful ruler of the universe cleverly disguised as a mouse. How absurd does something have to be before we can comfortably call something fiction?

In the end, humans have to accept reality as, well, reality. There are unknown possibilities, and then there is fiction. Atheists know fiction when we see it -- all gods were invented by humans, and none is more valid than any other. You know it, just as well as you know anything at all.



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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Memberships run from:

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

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.





Christianity Stole Christmas.

Christians don't own this holiday, and never did. Christianity is neither the first, nor the fifth, nor the tenth mythology to adopt the Winter Solstice as their major day. Mythra, Bel, Krishna, Horus, and even the Mayan Qetzalcoatl were all born on the Winter Solstice. Jesus, if you believe the Bible, was actually born in the spring, but early Christians changed it to mesh with other myths.

Indeed, few of the trappings of Christmas are Christian. Most predate Christianity. Yuletide, and Yule logs come from the Pagan holiday of Yule (the pagans also took the Solstice for their own). Santa Claus is Nordic, Germanic, or Celtic, depending on whom you ask, and there were no tinsel-covered evergreens in Bethlehem – that's Pagan too. Christians don't deserve a monopoly on holiday cheer. We all own a piece of the Solstice (whatever you call it).

Happy Holidays!

For years, we have been accused of fighting a "war on Christmas" and making people say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" without even considering the truth of the issue. Yet, there have been no lawsuits or threats of lawsuits to change what people say. People can say whatever they want, but private corporations like Macy's and Target know that there are many holidays being celebrated, including the solstice, Chanukah, and Muharram; and that inclusiveness is better than divisiveness. They therefore ask their employees to use the broader, more inclusive greeting. It makes them more money, so they acknowledge everyone, and we think that's a pretty good idea.

A Federal Religious Holiday?

"But nobody is forcing Christmas on you!" We hear that all the time, too, when we mention the repugnance of Christmas being a federal holiday. Christmas is the only religious holiday that shuts down the government and yes, that in and of itself, forces all citizens to celebrate this religious holiday. Other religious holidays don't affect the whole country in this way, but Christmas is enforced by government rule. We cannot use the bank, we cannot get mail, we cannot conduct business of any kind. We are forced to observe other people's religious holiday, and that's wrong.

By the way, this is also the reason that Christmas is so commercialized. If you force all people to observe it, they will naturally observe the aspects with which they can most readily identify -- the commercialism. This is why Christmas is more

about gifts than it is about Jesus, much to the dismay of those very people who demand everyone take it seriously.

In Conclusion.

It's not a war on Christmas, rather it's a war on intolerance and ignorance. It's a war on false gods, false prophets, and false promises. It's a war on unearned rights, unwarranted exclusivity, and unrighteous divisiveness. It's a good and just war, fought without violence, against a behemoth known as organized religion. We are outnumbered and out funded. Our only weapons are the truth and the means to spread it. Hence the billboard, the web site, the magazine, the TV show, and the convention.

It's working. We're growing. Atheism is the fastest growing segment of the population in respect to religious belief (or the lack of it) in the country, and the future looks bright. *American Atheists* has been protecting the separation of church and state since 1963, and we will continue the fight until we achieve true equality in the laws, as well as the hearts and minds of America's citizens. Atheism can never go away, because it's the unassailable, provable, logical truth.

But then again, you knew that too. Happy Holidays and pass the eggnogg.

Featured literature:

Pagan Origins of the Christ Myth - A compact but informative booklet by John G Jackson.

Christianity Before Christ - A complete look at how Christianity was borrowed from other gods, also by Jackson.

A Christmas Sermon by Robert Green Ingersol - The Great Agnostic's newspaper article and the controversy it raised.

The Battle for Christmas - Stephen Nissenbaum rediscovers Christmas's carnival origins and shows how it was transformed, during the nineteenth century, into a festival of domesticity and consumerism.

The UFO of Bethlehem - Bible scholar Frank Zindler critically examines the Star of Bethlehem legend

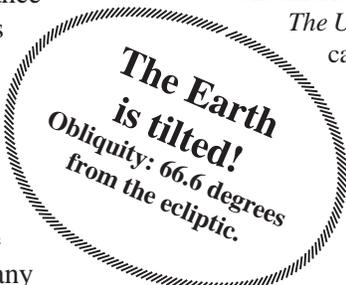
Articles on-line

Nativity - The origins of the Birth of Jesus - by Frank R. Zindler

No Virginia, There is no Santa Claus - by Edwin Kagin

What I want for Christmas - By Robert G. Ingersol

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THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



Announcing a New Meetup For The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup Group!

What: Cincy Science Café - Astronomy Science vs. Pseudoscience

When: Thursday, 9 December 2010 at 6:00 pm

Where: Slatt's Pub; 4858 Cooper Road
Blue Ash, OH 45242, Phone:513-791-2223;
[http://slattspub.com/Cincy Science Café](http://slattspub.com/Cincy%20Science%20Café)

The "Cincy Science Café" will be meeting Thursday, December 9th at Slatt's Pub in Blue Ash. The featured speaker will be Dean Regas, Outreach Astronomer of the Cincinnati Observatory. The program will begin at 7pm. Guests are welcome to arrive early at 6pm for dinner.

Dean Regas, December "Cincy Science Café's" presenter, will talk about science and pseudoscience in astronomy. Regas will discuss the science behind popular myths, from the 2012 apocalypse, Astrology, The Star of Bethlehem, Mars Hoax, Did we land on the Moon, 2012 etc).

Science Cafés are free monthly events that bring together the general public and working scientists in an informal setting. Cincinnati is home to many working scientists who are performing breakthrough studies in our own backyard, but these scientists rarely have a chance to speak about their amazing research to members of the community. Everyone is invited to attend, enjoy a dinner of fish and chips, drink a frosty lager, and learn about the wonders of scientific progress. How cool is that?

The "Cincy Science Café" will always encourage our speakers to allow plenty of time for questions and answers. The organizers want these events to be a conversation, and not a lecture. Everyone is encouraged to let their curiosity get the best of them and ask as many questions as they wish.

"Cincy Science Café" is a member of the NOVA ScienceNOW network and is partnering with University of Cincinnati's Sigma Xi fraternity, the Free Inquiry Group, and the Association of Rational Thought.

More information here:http://www.sciencecafes.org/event_pages/Cincy.html.

Science Book Club 2010 schedule - all meetings on 3rd Sunday of each month at 2:30 in room 3A of downtown Main Public Library unless otherwise noted.

Dec 19 - *Physics for Future Presidents: The Science behind the Headlines;* Richard A. Muller

Preliminary Schedule for 2011:

January - Kirk - *Rhythms of the Brain* by Gyorgy Buzsaki, 2006, 464pp

February - Peter - two of his articles
"Is It Inevitable That Evolution Self Destruct?" 4,400 words

"To Achieve Sustainability" 9,000 words, for both of which he will send out copies by email

March - Randy - *The Rational Optimist: How prosperity evolves* by Matt Ridley, 2010, 438pp

April - Rick Davis - *You Are Not a Gadget* by Jaron Lanier, 2010, 209pp

May - Carolyn - *On The Take : How America's Complicity With Big Business Can Endanger Your Health* by Jerome Kassirer, 2005, 251 pp

June 5 or 26 - Eric Otto - *Wrong: Why Experts Keep Failing Us - and How to Know When Not to Trust Them* by David Freedman, 2010, 295pp

June 5 or 26 - Bryan - *A Life Decoded: My Genome, My Life* by J. Craig Venter, 2007, 390pp

July - Bob Streifthau - *13 Things That Don't Make Sense* by Michael Brooks, 2008, 240pp

August - open

Sept or Oct - Frank - *Sacred Geometry* by Stephen Skinner, 2006, 160pp

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

Oct or Nov - Richard Bozian - *The Dependent Gene: Fallacy of Nature vs. Nurture* by David S. Moore, 2002, 312pp,

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

December - open

no date - Bernie - *The Dominant Animal: Human Evolution & The Environment* by Paul R. Ehrlich 2008, 420pp





Faith: Life in a Multicultural Democracy.

I have a number of devoutly religious physics colleagues who are able to partition their life: scientist on one side, devout believer on the other. I can only admire the ease with which they move from one side of the partition to the other. With climate change as the greatest threat we face, we may only hope that Rep. John Shimkus (R-Ill.), a member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce since 1997, has such a partition and equal alacrity in making the transition. He submitted a letter to his colleagues earlier this week asking for their blessing in his campaign to assume the gavel of Energy when Republicans take control of the chamber. Shimkus rejects the possibility of man-made climate disaster. "The Earth will end only when God declares it's time to be over. Man will not destroy this Earth. This Earth will not be destroyed by a Flood," Shimkus then quoted God's promise to Noah after the flood. "never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done." Genesis 8:21-22. "I do believe that God's word is infallible," Shimkus said, "unchanging, perfect."

 - *What's New* by Robert Park, 26 November 2010

Money Changers In The Temple.

Arizona minister Roy Spencer "Bud" Miller registered the Internet domain www.bible.com in 1996 for \$50, and shortly after turned down a \$100,000 offer for it. Instead, he formed Bible.com Inc., issuing stock and claiming "it is the goal of the board of directors of Bible.com to become very, very profitable." Enter James Solakian, who ended up with 28 percent of the company's equity in settlement of a \$400,000 debt. That upset the company, since the board is apparently all ordained ministers, so it allegedly stopped development of the site until "resolving" Solakian's involvement. Because of that, Solakian says, the site isn't bringing in the profit promised by the corporation, and he has sued the board for damaging his investment. (Reuters)



Turkey Gumbo

from Andrea Twiss-Brooks, adapted from *The Little Gumbo Book*
 When not in the kitchen, Andrea Twiss-Brooks is the co-director and general science and history of science bibliographer at the John Crerar Science Library.

Ingredients

- 1 leftover roasted turkey carcass, picked clean
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup flour
- 2-3 yellow onions, peeled and chopped fine
- 2-4 stalks of celery, including any leaves, diced small
- 2 green bell peppers, seeded and diced small
- 2-3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1-2 pounds andouille sausage or smoked sausage, sliced in 1/8-inch rounds
- Worcestershire sauce to taste
- 2 cups leftover turkey meat, diced
- Cajun seasoning to taste (salt and cayenne pepper to taste can be substituted)
- 3-5 stalks of fresh thyme
- 2 large whole bay leaves
- Tabasco sauce to taste
- Gumbo filé (ground sassafras leaves)
- About 1/2 cup cooked white rice per serving

Directions

Put the carcass in a large stock pot. Cover with water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer at least an hour or until the whole thing falls apart. Strain stock, cool, and refrigerate. Remove congealed fat and discard.

In a large stock pot, heat vegetable oil over medium flame. Add flour and cook, stirring, until the roux is about the color of a milk chocolate bar. Do not let the mixture burn, and be very careful stirring—hot roux sticks to the skin and burns! This process takes 15-20 minutes, so be patient; it's worth it.

When the roux is the right color, add the chopped onion, celery, and bell pepper (known throughout South Louisiana as the "holy trinity"). Cook until the vegetables are soft. Add garlic and cook until softened but not browned. Add the sausage and cook a few minutes more. Finally, add the cooked turkey, the reserved stock (and extra water if needed), Worcestershire sauce, Cajun seasoning, thyme, bay leaves, and Tabasco to taste. After the mixture has come to a boil, reduce heat and simmer 30 minutes. Fish out the thyme stems (most of the leaves should have fallen off).

Serve gumbo in soup bowls over a scoop of white rice and sprinkle with filé. Feeds a big crowd for one meal or my family for several. Did I mention that gumbo freezes well? Just leave out the rice.



Atheist Sign Poem

While driving down the highways, how many have I seen
 Of Christian signs and banners--some pretty, some obscene.
 And everywhere are fancy signs to make a Christian out of me
 Like "Jesus--the Reason for the Season," or some such fantasy.
 Mangers, Wise Men, Shepherds, a star above a feeding stall
 Surround me like a blanket leaving hardly room to breathe at all.
 Religious scenes on public lands outside of city halls,
 Baby Jesus in the classrooms, Bibles passed out in the malls,
 Choke reason from the victims of this vast wide sticky net
 Of pious talk upon our doors, our roads, and the Internet.
 But let some atheists post one sign saying reason should prevail
 Over the myth of Christmas, and you will hear the Fundies' wail
 That atheists are not respectful, that they should die, leave, or go to jail.
 And thus we learn the lesson, from what we see with solemn awe,
 That they think Christians are the only ones protected under law.



– Copyright © Edwin Kagin; November 30, 2010



Quote

**On design: He thought of every thing:
 Charles Darwin to American botanist Asa Gray,
 1861**

Your question what would convince me of Design is a poser. If I saw an angel come down to teach us good, & I was convinced, from others seeing him, that I was not mad, I shd. believe in design. — If I could be convinced thoroughly that life & mind was in an unknown way a function of other imponderable forces, I shd. be convinced. — If man was made of brass or iron & no way connected with any other organism which had ever lived, I shd perhaps be convinced. But this is childish writing. —

I have lately been corresponding with Lyell, who, I think, adopts your idea of the stream of variation having been led or designed. I have asked him (& he says he will hereafter reflect & answer me) whether he believes that the shape of my nose was designed. If he does, I have nothing more to say.

Unquote



Thoughts about Christmas

(with thanks to Jon Winokur and the *Funny Times*)

I am sorry to have to introduce the subject of Christmas. It is an indecent subject, a cruel, gluttonous subject; a drunken, disorderly subject; a wasteful, disastrous subject; a wicked, cadging, lying, filthy, blasphemous and demoralizing subject. Christmas is forced on a reluctant and disgusted nation by the shopkeepers and the press; on its own merits it would wither and shrivel in the fiery breath of universal hatred; and anyone who looked back to it would be turned into a pillar of greasy sausages.

– George Bernard Shaw

Christmas is the only religious holiday that's also a federal holiday. That way, Christians can go to their services, and everyone else can sit at home and reflect on the true meaning of the separation of church and state.

– Samantha Bee

Once again, we come to the holiday season, a deeply religious time that each of us observes, in his own way, by going to the mall of his choice.

– Dave Barry



The Unbearable Grayness of Morality

by Nick Lee

An overriding concern of non-believers as well as moderate Christians and adherents of most other faiths, is the maintenance of the separation of Church and State. The challenge is to strike a balance between civil concerns and personal beliefs. This is a concept that has only existed since the Enlightenment, but it has become the world-wide norm, except for pockets of fundamentalist Christians and Muslims. While Free-thinkers tend to interpret this concept to mean total separation, shielding us from religious interference, there is a another, more nuanced side to the issue.

We are accustomed to defending our secular lives against the imposition of religious views, but there is also a case to be made from the opposite prospective. The recent dust-up involving the State of Texas and the Fundamentalist LDS Church illustrates the dilemma of the interface between religious practices and the concerns of society as a whole. What justification does a Society have to interfere in the free exercise of religious beliefs? Are there some fundamental laws that we should insist all citizens abide by, regardless of their personal beliefs? Or is it just a matter of *our* cultural norms versus *their* cultural norms? There are sometimes conflicts between the definition of human rights versus the interpretation of religious law. Here are some troubling examples that have no easy answers:

Polygamy – Do we have the right to tell three or more consenting adults that they cannot form a more perfect union? What is the harm to society in this practice (setting aside the issue of under-age or forced marriages)?

Education - Does the general Society have the right to tell parents how their children should be educated and what they should be taught? Is there a compelling reason for establishing standards of education that all children must achieve, even if it conflicts with religious views?

Drug Use – On what basis can Society tell a religious group that they may not use hallucinogenic drugs in the course of their worship? What is it we are trying to control, and is it worth the cost of their religious freedom?

Child Care – Does Society have the right to impose standards of child care on people of faith, even when

contrary to that faith? Who gets to decide on what is proper upbringing? Should that include requiring medical treatment in lieu of prayer?

Child or Spouse Abuse – What is Society's compelling interest in controlling behaviors that are contrary to societal norms? In the case of Gender inequality, when is it a violation of human rights, and when is it adherence to religious law? In the case of child discipline, at what point does parental control become physical abuse, requiring Society to step in to protect the children? Many religious practices of genital mutilation (male or female) are deeply-held tenets of their faith. What would be a justification for interference from civil Society?

You and I can form our own opinion regarding each of these issues, and we will probably agree, based on what feels right to us. The question is, can we impose our opinions on others, in the name of the "greater good"? Are there universal standards of behavior that should be enforced? Are there absolutely unambiguous rules for social living that must be imposed on all members of society? The answer is, society's interest in morality and social behavior must be balanced against an individual's right to live his life to the fullest. There's a lot of gray area there!

From *FACT* newsletter of
Freethinkers Association of Central Texas for December 2010



Quote

... literary academe represents a protected preserve where ideas that have been hunted to the brink of extinction in other academic fields (just to name a few, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, classical Marxism, blank slate models of human nature) can survive a while longer, shielded from the spears of skeptical hunters. It is the quintessential modern *Thinkery* because it is a zone where the dangers of confirmation bias are hardly recognized, where political preferences often determine fact claims, where dissenters (like the liberal Crews) can be tarred as closet Republicans, and where the dogmas of gurus are paid proper obeisance.

- Jonathan Gottschall in a review of *Follies of the Wise*
by Fredrick Crews

Unquote



Exceptional Arrogance

by Herb Silverman, 29 November 2010

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

Washington Post political reporter Karen Tumulty wrote Monday about the growing use of the idea of “American exceptionalism” by political conservatives as a “battle cry from a new front in the ongoing culture wars.” Sarah Palin and many other prominent conservatives assert that “God has granted America a special role in human history.” It is this belief about America’s destiny that they say is “under attack” by liberals who downplay America’s distinctiveness.

Are these leaders saying that America has a special relationship with God? How do you interpret this?

I agree with Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich (in a rather roundabout way) that America was formed as an exceptional nation because of a special relationship with God. The framers of our U.S. Constitution wanted no part of the religious intolerance and bloodshed they saw in Europe and wisely established the first government in history to separate church and state. They understood the devastating nature of holy wars and founded a secular nation whose authority rests with “We the People” (the first three words of the U.S. Constitution) and not “Thou the Deity.” Our exceptional founders guaranteed religious liberty by not giving preference to one religion over another or religion over non-religion. There is no mention of a deity in the U. S. Constitution, so the special relationship America has with God is God’s complete absence in our founding document.

America may not as exceptional as France, Australia, Switzerland, Germany, and New Zealand, which a recent study found to be higher on a quality of life index.

It is the height of exceptional arrogance to believe that other countries should be more like us and that we have nothing to learn from them, especially when they are more successful in dealing with essentials such as health care, education, and the environment. For what it’s worth, countries rated higher in quality of life also have fewer believers in any gods.

Still, I do believe America is exceptional in some important ways, just as I believe my wife is exceptional. But I don’t spend much time bragging about my wife to

my neighbors, nor is my relationship with her diminished if I hear them discuss relationships with their exceptional spouses.

“Exceptional” does not mean “perfect,” which is why I appreciate those American citizens who help make our flawed but good country even better. On the other hand, many of our politicians are exceptionally proud of their purposeful scientific ignorance on climate change, evolution, and whatever else conflicts with their holy books or displeases their constituencies. Bragging about America, and about how much God blesses this country, is a whole lot less impressive than working together to improve American life for everyone. After all, by their deeds ye shall know them.



.....

Quote

Susan Stern (ed.) *Speaking Out: Jewish Voices*
 From *United Germany* (Berlin: edition 1995) p.
 237

How then, after the Shoah, after having experienced the real possibility of complete extinction, can there still be a Jewish identity without an awareness of this sense of threat? The Nazis were not an instrument of God (as some in the ultra-orthodox camp would maintain) sent to test or punish the Jews (for assimilating or otherwise); and by the same token, the survivors were not saved as a result of some divine plan.

The survivors and their descendants basically know very well that their survival, the fact that they continue to live, is just as meaningless as the death of their family members. And it is not easy to take refuge from this knowledge or live with this meaninglessness. Regardless of whether we banish the question behind the walls of a museum or try to banish it from our minds with a trick called “positive Jewish identity.”

Unquote.

.....





Contradiction Corner

by Dennis Davis

Once again we find ourselves in the holiday season so I will take this opportunity to examine some biblical contradictions related to the Christmas story. Contrary to popular belief, the greatest numbers of biblical contradictions are not in the Old Testament but in the new, and the greatest proportion of these New Testament errors are in the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Mark and John both start off with Jesus' baptism and skip the nativity, so here we will only consider the books of Matthew and Luke in this article. Both give detailed genealogies in an attempt to prove that Jesus was a descendant of King David as prophesied by the prophet Micah, which is also why they went through wild gyrations to have him born in Bethlehem. Curiously, the genealogies are very different and both trace Jesus' ancestry through Joseph; but remember, Jesus was supposedly born of a virgin (not a descendent of Joseph or his ancestors) so both genealogical exercises are pointless. Since ancient Jews did not trace the genealogies of women we are not told about Mary's ancestry and have no evidence that Jesus was a descendant of David at all.

In Luke chapter 2 we are told that Joseph and Mary have to go Bethlehem because of a Roman tax decree issued while Cyrenius was governor of Syria. Cyrenius is the Aramaic pronunciation of the Latin name Quirinius and Roman records tell us that he became governor of Syria in the year 6 AD. (Robin Lane Fox, *The Unauthorized Version*, 1991; pp31) In Matthew we are told that King Herod slaughtered all the infants in Bethlehem in a vain attempt at killing Jesus. Roman records indicate that Herod died in 4 BC, a full ten years before Quirinius became governor. (Bart Ehrman, *Jesus Interrupted*, 2009, pp32) This is why scholars date Jesus' birth as a range from 4 BC to 6 AD, the gospels are so contradictory that they cannot be more precise.

Whoever wrote the book of Luke did not understand anything about the Roman system of taxation. Roman emperors did not tax conquered provinces directly. Instead they installed subservient rulers and made them responsible for levying and collecting the taxes then passing them on to Rome as tribute. So Luke's statement here that the tax was ordered by Augustus Caesar



was blatantly false. Furthermore, taxes then were just like they are in our time, concerned with how much you owe; they were in no way concerned where the payer's ancestors came from.

There is yet another contradiction in the nativity story. Luke 2:8-15 tells us the shepherds find Jesus in a livestock feeding trough or manger in a stable. In contrast, Matthew 2:11 tells us instead about the three wise men "and when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshiped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh." Notice they found him in a house, not a stable.

Once Jesus is born in Bethlehem, where did the new family go? Matthew 2:12-15 says that Joseph is warned in a dream that Herod would slaughter the small children in Bethlehem so he and the family immediately fled to Egypt and stayed there until after Herod was dead. Yet Luke tells us, they stayed in Bethlehem until Jesus was weaned according to the law of Moses (33 days, see Leviticus 12) when they took him to Jerusalem to have him circumcised and afterwards returned to Nazareth.

The two nativity stories don't even agree as to how Jesus was named, Matthew 1:25 says he was named by Joseph while Luke 2:21 says the name was given to Mary by an angel.

As you can see, if Christians would read their Bible critically, they would quickly realize the American Atheist campaign is right, the Christmas story is only a myth. ☞

.....

• His teacher was horrified to hear •
 • Little Johnny swearing in school. •
 • "I never want to hear you using lan- •
 • guage like that again. Where on earth did •
 • you pick up such foul-mouthed talk?" •
 • "From my Dad," said Johnny. •
 • "Well, he should be ashamed of himself," said the •
 • teacher. "And it's no reason for you to talk like that. •
 • Anyway, you don't even know what it means." •
 • "I do," said Johnny. "It means the car won't •
 • start." •
 • •
 • •
 • •
 • •
 • •



Owed to Christmas

Copyright © 2009 by Tim Kelly from
The Dark & the Light:
Poems from Both Hands

The halls are decked
With ambivalent cheer
As they all are
This time every year

The stockings are hung
The trees have been trimmed
The lists have been made
From want never dimmed

The gifts are all wrapped
And topped with a bow
Disguising the loss
Of my hard-earned dough

The holiday lights
They help ease the chill
They shorten the night
But jack up the bill

The carolers sing
They give it their best
They wail at our doors
Disturbing our rest

Your family they come
And stay overnight
They drink all my booze
That doesn't seem right

The Salvation Army
I know they mean well
They give food to the hungry
But I hate those d*** bells

The Christmas Eve mass
The sermon was swell
It removed all my doubts
That I'm going to Hell

Oh the Yuletide cheer
It spreads o'er the land
Like a full-blown virus
It's all I can stand

These holidays come
So big and so bright
But next year I'll fight it
With all of my might

Next year I will run
Next year I will hide
I'll go to the moon
If I can just catch a ride

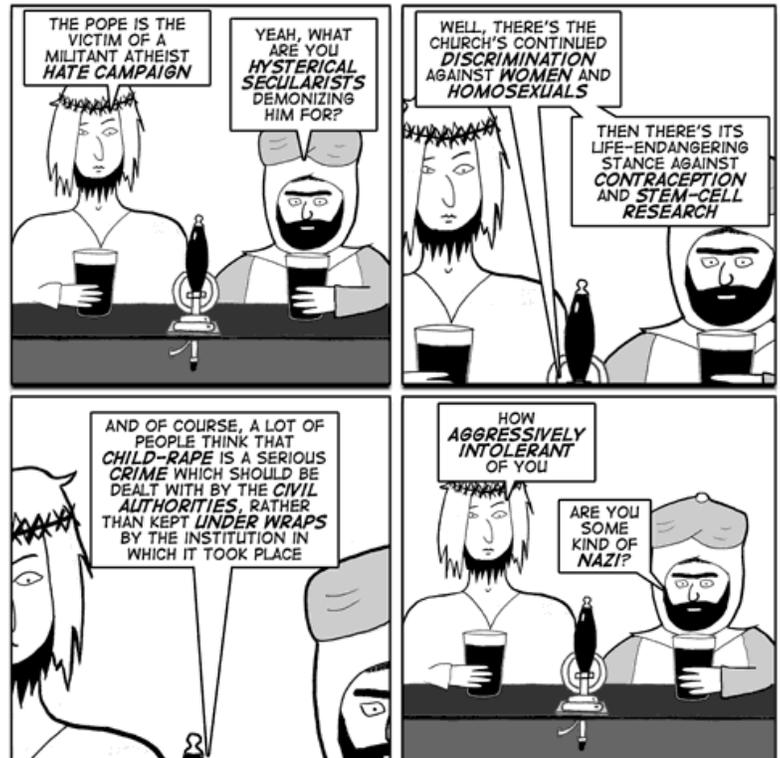
But knowing my luck
As soon as I land
I will be greeted
By a Santa-Land band

So I guess I will stay
And keep trying to find
Some holiday cheer
Without losing my mind.



Signs You've Grown Up

1. Your houseplants are alive, and you can't smoke any of them.
2. Having sex in a twin bed is out of the question.
3. 6 a.m. is when you get up, NOT when you go to bed.
4. You hear your favorite song in an elevator.
5. You keep more food than beer in the fridge.
6. You don't know what time Taco Bell closes anymore.
7. Dinner and a movie is the whole date instead of the beginning of one.
8. Older relatives feel comfortable telling sex jokes around you.
9. If you're a woman, you go to the drug store for ibuprofen and antacid, not condoms and pregnancy tests.
10. You read this entire list looking desperately for one sign that doesn't apply to you and can't find one to save your sorry old butt.



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Complexity Redux

Complexity: A Guided Tour

by Melanie Mitchell

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

a book review by James N. Gardner

The best popular science books are those that give the reader the sense of looking over the shoulder of a leading researcher doing cutting-edge work at the frontier of scientific inquiry. Walter Isaacson's recent biography of Einstein belongs in this category. So too does Melanie Mitchell's comprehensive new book chronicling the latest advances in the sciences of complexity.

Mitchell, a professor of computer science at Portland State University and an External Professor at the famous Santa Fe Institute that specializes in the study of complexity, is one of the world's leading experts in the field of genetic algorithm research. This is a special kind of computer science that has the audacious goal of coaxing software to evolve on its own through a process of natural selection that resembles Darwinian evolution.

Research into genetic algorithms is representative of the broad portfolio of disciplines comprising the sciences of complexity because it relies on a fusion of seemingly disparate scientific fields -computer science and evolutionary biology -to produce a hybrid possessing (in complexity lingo) emergent properties. For instance, evolutionary computation can yield solutions to seemingly intractable engineering challenges that no human designer could have imagined.

The pervasiveness, power and sheer intricacy of evolutionary forces is a unifying theme of Mitchell's book and of the scientific breakthroughs she describes. Some of her best discussion focuses on the seething debate, largely shrouded from the eyes of lay persons, regarding the deficiencies of the so-called Modern Synthesis, which united Darwin's theory of natural selection with Gregor Mendel's path-breaking work in genetics.

Current research, made possible by new DNA sequencing technologies, is revealing that some of the fundamental tenets of the Modern Synthesis may be wrong or least seriously incomplete. For instance, the

synthesis asserts that natural selection is the major mechanism of evolutionary change and adaptation; that evolution is an inherently gradual process reliant exclusively on small random variations in individuals; and that the origin of new species can be satisfactorily explained by the microscopic process of gene variation and natural selection.

As Mitchell demonstrates lucidly, these conclusions are being seriously undermined by researchers who are starting to view the phenomenon of evolution through the prism of the sciences of complexity. Here are just a few of the startling insights that have emerged:

Genes are not static but jump around on their chromosomes and between chromosomes. As Mitchell puts it, "The result can be a much higher rate of mutation than comes from errors in DNA replication."

The complexity of living systems is largely due to networks of genes rather than the sum of the independent effects of individual genes. This explains how human beings and mustard plants can have roughly the same number of genes (about 25,000) but exhibit vastly different levels of biological complexity.

The new field of Evo-Devo (short for evolutionary developmental biology) is providing insights into how evolution can sometimes move at warp speed (for instance, during the Cambrian Explosion half a billion years ago when multicellular animals emerged in a geological blink of an eye). The apparent mechanism is not mutation of ordinary genes but rather mutation of "master genes" that regulate the formation and morphology of many of an animal's body parts.

The late physicist Heinz Pagels once wrote that he was "convinced that the nations and people who master the new sciences of complexity will become the economic, cultural, and political superpowers of the next century." When you read *Complexity: A Guided Tour*, you will get a good sense of why Pagels reached that conclusion.

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January Meeting
Monday, Jan. 25, 2010, 7:00 PM



December Meeting
Sunday, Dec. 17, 2010, 3:00 PM



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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 or freeinquirygroup.org.