

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 17 Issue 2

February 2008

## February FIG Meeting:

**Bodies: the Exhibition and Film:  
*The Human Body at the Omnimax***

**Sunday February 24, 2008 2:30 PM**

**at Union Terminal  
or, meet at 2 pm at Vernon Manor to  
carpool to Union Terminal.**

From 2:30 - 4:00 PM, we will tour *Bodies: The Exhibition*. At 4:00pm, we will view the film, *The Human Body* at the Omnimax. The group adult rate is \$22.50 per person for both *Bodies: The Exhibit* and the Omnimax film. This program is open to all members of the family. Children 3 - 12 are \$13.50 a person. **The first 20 people that register will receive \$5 off their ticket, so it would only be \$17.50 for adults and \$8.50 for those under 12.** At 5pm, we will return to Vernon Manor and all FIG members are invited to stay for post-visit discussion and dinner at Vernon Manor's Forum Grill. **RSVP:** If you are interested in attending and receiving the group rate, you must either call Shawn Jeffers at 513.404.8191 or e-mail at <smj145@gmail.com> by Thursday, February 21. After February 21, members can join us but they will have to buy their own ticket at \$26.50 a person.

**In honor of Darwin Day**, FIG will explore the evolution of the human body by attending *Bodies: The Exhibition* and the Omnimax Film, *The Human Body* at the Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal. Charles Darwin was born 199 years ago in 1809 and freethought groups around the world observe Darwin Day to commemorate his contributions to science and freethinking individuals.

**Bodies:** The Exhibition is a one-of-a-kind opportunity to come face-to-face with full human bodies and partial body specimens in a way never seen before. It's the ultimate anatomy lesson, featuring real human bodies. These meticulously dissected bodies are preserved through an innovative process and respectfully presented, giving visitors the opportunity to view the beauty and complexity of their own organs and systems. "For centuries, the medical community has learned about the inner workings of anatomy through the study of real human bodies, and now it is possible for the public to gain an intimate knowledge as well," said Dr. Roy Glover, professor emeritus of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the University of Michigan and chief medical director for *Bodies*. "The exhibition will change the way people see themselves. It will enlighten, empower, fascinate, and inspire."

In addition to providing an up-close look inside our skeletal, muscular, respiratory and circulatory systems, visitors will walk away with a better understanding of what makes us tick and the importance of healthy lifestyles and taking care of the only body you'll ever have. The basic premise of the exhibition is simple: If people better understand their bodies, they'll better understand how to care for them. And in a society filled with an overweight, overmedicated, and sleep-starved majority, it seems the best medicine could be a healthy dose of body education.

Perhaps the most sobering part of *Bodies* is what it shows us about disease. Various body parts (displayed inside the body and separately in display cases) show the ravages of certain disease, a healthy liver resting beside another diseased by excessive alcohol consumption, and the consequences of other poor lifestyle choices, the blackened, shrunken lungs of a smoker near pale healthy lungs.

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## Events

### February Meeting

*Sunday, February 24 2008, 2:30 PM* at  
Union Terminal for the *Bodies*  
Exhibit & Film. Optional Dinner  
afterwards at the Vernon Grill

### March Potluck

*Tuesday, March 12, 2008; 6:30 PM*

### March Meeting

*Tuesday, March 26, 2008, 7:00 PM* at the  
Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



## January Meeting

### The Lion's Way: a novel

Peter Lloyd, past-president of Fig, co-author with Marco Marsan,

Peter started by explaining what he would be talking about, how two people collaborated on producing the book but before that he wanted to talk about the book as a bridge between Christians and atheists. By way of analogy he referred to the current Sunday *New York Times Magazine* article by Sarah Corbett on female circumcision; he ended by quoting the article at length:



Marco Marsan & Peter Lloyd

Western awareness of female genital cutting has grown--anthropologists, policy makers and health officials have warned against blindly judging those who practice it, saying that progress is best made by working with local leaders, and opinion makers, to gradually shift the public discussion of female circumcision from what it is believed to bestow upon the girl...these mothers believe that they are doing something good for their children. For our culture that is not easily understandable. To judge them harshly is to isolate them, they cannot be changed that way.

He said that he agreed with that quote because he saw no future in forcing people to stop any kind of abuse, physical or verbal, by trying to impose our beliefs and reasoning. And we are having such experience with our book. We are getting some requests from atheists and Christians to come and talk about *The Lion's Way*. It is an opportunity to build a bridge. The book describes an alternate past which has never had the influence of Christ or experienced the Dark Ages with its decline of science.

Atheists recognize no divinity in Yeshua (Jesus), he is a good guy, and no he does not sin. But he's not the main character. He's not divine, he doesn't perform any miracles; he is a secular Jesus. A secular Jesus is someone atheists can begin to talk about. Well, that's what the novel has. The authors did not set out to write with him in mind, but Marco and Peter affirmed the concept. Marco originally had a Robin Hood story he had worked on and there is a Robin Hood like character in the story. This person was going to go back in time and try to save Jesus. This Yeshua is not divine, no miracles, and no Bible stories as source. The characters are the authors' own. There may be a Bible story to touch on once in a while, but he's not going to be called Jesus, and you'll know who he is, but the authors go their own way with him.

Peter then referred to the Statement of Purpose on the back of all our FigLeaves newsletters. He is one of the FIG founders and helped write them. He could see a correlation between our Statement of Purpose and the structure and content of the book. He took us through the four purposes to show how to build bridges between Christians and atheists. Starting with what we believe in and he described how the book unfolds.

Our first statement of purpose is "To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life." *The Lion's Way* has ➔



**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.

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a secular Jesus, his ideas are liberal, socialist, anti-establishment. There are a lot of Christians who believe that Jesus was a revolutionary, a Che Guevara of his times. So our hero is a kind of Christ figure. There are all kinds of



Christ figures in literature, so our hero, Juve, is pretty much a regular person; he has a sex life (it's not graphic,) it's just to show that he is not averse to it. His disciples were and are morons.

As a bridge the book describes a Christ who says everything he actually said according to the Gospels and in later other writings. Yet he can do that without being divine. A very open-minded Catholic who read the book thought it was the best portrayal of Jesus that she had ever read. Peter said he felt very comfortable about it if somebody who is a Christian can say that.

Our statement of purpose number 2 is: "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." That would be publication. Publishing today is a strange world. No publisher says "Here's the money, go write the book." It's more like "How much money do you contribute, how long are you going to work, and how many places are you going to show up. How many books do you want to buy and how many books are you going to give away?" And also it doesn't end with the book, it also goes into advertising and blogging. We have <thelionsway.com> as a blog so we're able to discuss the issues that are in the book.

To Christians, Jesus represents more than a sacrificial lamb, in their view he is the key to salvation and eternal life. We unbelievers question this. If you had the opportunity would you save Jesus from the horrible death of crucifixion? Does a person have to believe that Christ is god in order to be Christian? Is there value to the example of a secular Jesus as a non-violent crusader? These are the kinds of questions being asked.

Purpose No. 3 "To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human

condition." Our secular alternative is something called "empathia". In the story Yeshua has been kidnaped by the Roman Emperor, Tiberias, who is using his ideas to create an enlightened government based on empathia.

In *The Lion's Way* Juve, our hero, is given the opportunity to risk his life to change the world for the better. Peter said: "I don't know if that makes him Christ-like, but I wonder what's the difference." For Christians and non-Christians alike Jesus represents an example of self sacrifice to achieve a moral objective. The monks who destroyed themselves to protest the Viet Nam war did the same thing. How are they similar to Jesus?

Purpose No. 4: "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." When you recreate a phantasy government you can make it look like any government you want. In *The Lion's Way* a corrupt government learned to chip away at empathia to maintain and increase their power.

Peter eventually addressed the question of how did two authors collaborate to bring this story to publication? Marco believes so much in this story that he is the driving force behind it, he put all sorts of resources behind it and asked Peter to actually write it. So the words are largely Peter's. Marco had the connections and resources to get it published. Some will assert working with another writer is something that rarely or never succeeds. Peter once turned down an offer to write somebody else's book. It seemed to him then, if you can't get something down on paper you really don't have an idea. He was disabused of this when Marco and Peter wrote a non-fiction book together. The structure of creativity is the way it is, it's nature, it's not something that you can make up. "We comfortably agreed upon the story, and we agreed that the story was worth writing. Basically you get comfortable with all you are going to do. We started outlining it. Marco is passionate, full of ideas, brilliant, but he can't pick it up and write it. He does write; but it looks illiterate at times, until you analyze and then it's 'oh, I see what you're saying.'" Marco gave Peter the bones of themes and collaboration became a writer's dream. Peter concluded, he feels that they're each comfortable saying: "Here is this book that I wrote."

– Reported by George Maurer





## THINGS TO DO....

## THINGS TO SEE...



### Media Events/Programs

#### The Humanist Perspective

Show times on Time-Warner Cable:

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

Channel 24: Friday 11:30 pm

#### Programs

12-14 Feb: 250 Prospects for Secularizing Islam, with Ibn Warraq

19-21 Feb: 251 Humanism in Africa, with Norm Allen

26-28 Feb: 265 The Naturalism of Akeel Bilgrami, with Akeel Bilgrami and Lauren Becker

4-6 March: 266 Radical Naturalism, with Tom Clark and David Koepsell

### Free Film Series Sponsored by

The Society for Evolution Education

View the PBS video series, *Evolution!*

Realize the extraordinary impact the evolutionary process has had on our understanding of the world around us.

*Please note, this did not come in time for the last issue of FIG Leaves for the Feb 2 & Feb 9 dates...Editor*

~~Feb. 2 Darwin's Dangerous Idea~~

~~Feb. 9 Great Transformations~~

Feb. 16 *Extinction!* - Explores why 99.9 percent of all species that have ever lived on Earth are now extinct and then confronts a frightening notion: Are humans causing the next mass extinction-the sixth in the history of life on Earth?

Feb. 23 *The Evolutionary Arms Race* - Explores our own spiraling arms race with microorganisms-a real threat to our existence-and traces the alarming spread of resistance among pathogens that cause disease. See survival of the fittest in action.

Time: 7 to 9 PM, Saturdays

Place: Sunrock Farm

103 Gibson Lane

Wilder, KY 41076

Call: (859) 781-5502

- The film series is free.
- Donations and membership fees accepted.
- Refreshments available for sale.

### Charles & Ralph Dury Science Lecture Series

#### Presented by the Friends of Cincinnati Museum Center

The Charles & Ralph Dury Lecture Series promotes an understanding and appreciation of the natural world. Science topics include anthropology, archaeology, environmental science, geology, paleontology and zoology. Lecturers are local and nationally known authorities. All lectures begin at 7:30 p.m. and are free and open to the public.

Thursday, February 28, 2008 - Dr. Geoff Hill

*Ivorybill Hunters: The Search for Proof in a Flooded Wilderness*

Thursday, March 6, 2008 - Devere Burt

*The Museum of Natural History & Science and John James Audubon's Role in its Development*



### Hear, hear: *Answers in Atheism* at

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

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

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

The Answers in Atheism crew

### The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Tuesday, 19 February at 7:00PM

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

To see who's coming and to see more event details: [http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1\\_ve](http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve)



# FIG LEAVES



## O.F.A.

**Operation Foxhole Atheists** needs our help. Created by Blair Scott of the North Alabama Freethought Association (NAFA), OFA sends packages to troops in Afghanistan and Iraq who have identified themselves as atheists or humanists. You may not agree with the war but the soldiers aren't responsible for starting it and they need our support. I'm asking you all to bring some of these goods to our March meeting and I will see that they get to OFA and from there to the troops. We'll repeat this list in the next FIG Leaves as a reminder. The soldiers have requested:

- |                                   |                |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| Beef Jerky                        | Poptarts       |
| Granola Bars                      | Breakfast Bars |
| Pringles                          | Cookies        |
| Cheetos                           | DVD's          |
| Canned soup with poptop lids      |                |
| Crystal Light on-the-go drink mix |                |
| Powdered Gatorade drink mix       |                |
| Travel pillows (U-shaped)         |                |

Any magazines or books (atheist or humanist materials can be sent but some of the soldiers choose to remain unknown as such in their companies)

Any kind of snack food or reading material would be appreciated.

If you would prefer, their website takes PayPal donations. <http://thenafa.org/ofa/>

Let's rally behind our fellows in uniform and show them some support!

Thank you, John Welte

### God's E-mail



God looked down at the earth and wanted to know what kind of behavior was going on. He decided to send an angel to Earth to check on mankind. When the angel returned, he reported to God, "Yes, it is really bad on Earth; 95 percent are misbehaving and only 5 percent are good."

God was not pleased, so he decided to E-mail the 5 percent that were good, because he wanted to encourage them. Give them a little reward and help them continue doing good.

Do you know what that E-mail said?

No?

Neither do I; I didn't get one either ...

**SCIENCE BOOK CLUB 2008 Schedule** - all meetings will be held on the 3rd Sunday of each month at the downtown Cincinnati Public Library in Room 3A at 2:30 PM.

- Feb 17** Frank Huss: *Varieties of Scientific Experience* by Carl Sagan
- Mar 16** Rick Davis: *The Female Brain* by Louann Brizendine
- Apr 20** Eric Otto: *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race* by Edwin Black
- May 18** Bert Bruce: *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* by Oliver W. Sacks
- June 15** Jerry Wiles: *In the Beginning* by Isaac Asimov.
- July 20** Bryan Sellers: *Under a Green Sky: Global Warming, the Mass Extinctions of the Past, and What They Can Tell Us About Our Future* by Peter Ward
- Aug 17** Bob Streifthau: *World Without Us* by Alan Weisman
- Sept 21** Bob Riehemann: *Doubt and Certainty* by Tony Rothman and George Sudarshan
- Oct. 19** Pauline Smolin: *In Search of Memory: the Emergence of a New Science of the Mind* by Eric Kandel
- Nov 16** Gary Weiss: *What we believe but cannot prove: today's leading thinkers on science in the age of certainty* ed. by John Brockman
- Dec 21** Randy Weaver: *Into the cool energy flow, thermodynamics, and life* by Eric D. Schneider
- Jan 18, 2009** - Dr. Richard Bozian: *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* by Antonio Damasio





## Evolution Book Sees No Science-Religion Gap

By Cornelia Dean,  
*New York Times*, 4 January 2008

In 1984 and again in 1999, the National Academy of Sciences, the nation's most eminent scientific organization, produced books on the evidence supporting the theory of evolution and arguing against the introduction of creationism or other religious alternatives in public school science classes.

On Thursday, it produced a third. But this volume is unusual, people who worked on it say, because it is intended specifically for the lay public and because it devotes much of its space to explaining the differences between science and religion, and asserting that acceptance of evolution does not require abandoning belief in God.

"We wanted to produce a report that would be valuable and accessible to school board members and teachers and clergy," said Barbara A. Schaal, a vice president of the academy, an evolutionary biologist at Washington University and a member of the panel that produced the book. The panel, convened by the academy and the Institute of Medicine, its medical arm, was headed by Francisco Ayala, a biologist at the University of California, Irvine, and a former Dominican priest.

The 70-page book, *Science, Evolution and Creationism*, says, among other things, that "attempts to pit science and religion against each other create controversy where none needs to exist." And it offers statements from several eminent biologists and members of the clergy to support the view.

In the book, which will be available on the Web site of the National Academies ([www.nas.edu](http://www.nas.edu)), the panel reports that evidence for the theory of evolution is overwhelming and growing. It cites findings from DNA research, fossil discoveries and the observations scientists have made about emerging diseases, like SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome. The book also denounces the arguments for a form of creationism called intelligent design, calling them devoid of evidence, "disproven" or "simply false."

## Christianizing US History

by Chris Hedges

Here is an event I have no intention of honoring: American Religious History Week. OK, it's not official yet. But it is spelled out as Resolution 888 in the bowels of a House committee, sponsored by Republican Congressman Randy Forbes and backed by thirty-one other Representatives. This is an insidious attempt by the radical Christian right to rewrite American history, to turn the founding fathers from deists into Christian fundamentalists, to proclaim us officially to be a Christian nation. If you want to know why Mike Huckabee is dangerous, why his brand of right-wing Christian populism is so frightening, you should read this resolution.

Sent to me by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, the resolution has passages like this: "Whereas political scientists have documented that the most frequently-cited source in the political period known as The Founding Era was the Bible" and "Whereas the United States Supreme Court has declared throughout the course of our Nation's history that the United States is 'a Christian country', 'a Christian nation', 'a Christian people', 'a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being' and that 'we cannot read into the Bill of Rights a philosophy of hostility to religion....'"

*The House resolution can be found at:*

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=hr110-888>

Thanks to Michele Grinoch for bringing this to the editors attention

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## Science on the International Space Station:

A lot of paperwork is involved. Expectations for the \$100 billion ISS were high in 1998 when in-orbit assembly began, but recent collaborations put it in perspective. An Aeronautics professor at the University of Tokyo and the Japan Origami Airplane Association expect astronaut Koichi Wakata to launch a heat-resistant paper plane back to Earth from the ISS later this year. It's expected to survive reentry. Another Japanese astronaut is training with the world-champion boomerang thrower to find out on the ISS if a paper boomerang can circle in zero gravity. It can't.

- *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 25 January 2008



## **A science laboratory is launched, really.**

The rickety shuttle Atlantis finally took off yesterday after two months of delays, carrying the European science laboratory "Columbus" to the International Space Station. It was supposed to be launched in 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of the discovery of the New World, but clocks

slow down on the ISS, and the Columbia shuttle disaster set it back even further. Press reports described the equipment on Columbus, but I found no mention of the experiments if any. It's a fine laboratory, lacking only a purpose.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 8 February 2008

## **People are again turning to ethanol, and not only to fuel cars.**

Ethanol use has always increased in stressful times. Two reports in today's *Science* find that ethanol contributes more to global warming than conventional fossil fuels if the full emissions cost of production and forest clearing is taken into account. The reports are certain to exacerbate the controversy over government efforts to boost biofuel production as an alternative to gasoline. The resulting stress may result in increased use of ethanol for more traditional purposes.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 8 February 2008

## **The New Right-to-Life Strategy:**

Forget *Roe v. Wade*; according to *U.S. News*, an initiative expected to be on the 2008 ballot in Colorado would amend the state constitution to declare a fertilized egg to be a person. This one-celled person would then be granted a soul by heaven and citizenship by the state. Would the sensuous twisting together of chromosome strands to form a zygote mark the legal date of birth? And what of the 500,000 or so frozen embryos stored in fertility clinics? Do they age in the frozen state?

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 11 January 2008

## **The Pope cancels visit as scientists protest.**

Benedict XVI had been invited to lecture at Rome's most prestigious university to mark the start of the academic year. Sixty-seven professors protested, led by particle physicist Marcello Cini. In a 1990 visit to La Sapienza, the Pope, then Cardinal Ratzinger, supported the trial of Galileo by quoting oddball science philosopher Paul Feyerabend: "The trial against Galileo was reasonable and just." Using a quote to make his point is a standard ploy of the Pope to preserve deniability. "The pontiff didn't say it," the Vatican will explain, "he was quoting someone else." The protest led Prime Minister Romano Prodi, to pontificate, "No voice should be

stifled in our country." He's right, and that includes the voices of protestors. Yesterday Prodi lost a vote of confidence in the Senate and must resign. In any case, the Italian Government denied any role in pressuring the Vatican to cancel the talk, as Benedict XVI implied.

*What's New*, Robert L. Park, 25 January 2008

In September, *What's New* wrote about production of a documentary *Expelled: No intelligence allowed*, featuring creepy narrator Ben Stein. It's the story of poor Guillermo Gonzalez, denied tenure at Iowa State University just because he learned nothing in college. Gonzales coauthored *Privileged Planet*, a screwy take on the screwy anthropic principle: "If things were different, things wouldn't be the way things are." He got \$58,000 from the Templeton Foundation for this kind of deep thinking.

- *What's New* by Robert Park, 18 January 2008

## **Creation Museum: "you shouldn't have to lie!"**

Critics say the museum is just drawing people who are already sold on creationism and the ministry's literal interpretation of the Bible.

"The people who believe are going there to have their beliefs reinforced," said Edwin Kagin. The evidence is overwhelming from all areas of science that the Earth is billions of years old and dinosaurs disappeared 65 million years before humans appeared," said Kagin, national legal director for the American Atheists, who lives in Union and has visited the museum three times. "It's an extremely well-done display, there's no doubt about that. However, because something is well-done does not make it true.

"They are doing remarkably well, which is a testament to the ignorance of the American public," said Kagin.

Lawrence Krauss, another critic, said the museum benefitted from the free publicity around the world when it opened last summer. Krauss, professor of physics and astronomy and director of the Center for Education and Research in Cosmology and Astrophysics at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve University, said he thinks once Answers in Genesis' core believers have toured the museum, attendance could drop. "My hope is that this is a little flash in the pan," he said. "And then the rest of the country will ignore it as it's supposed to be ignored."

Krauss, who has toured the museum, doesn't think that it will change anyone's mind. "It's really meant to validate the beliefs of those people," he said, "and make them feel comfortable in the lie that somehow science supports this."

Krauss said the museum may confuse people, especially children who are too young to have learned science. He said anything that prevents people from learning about science is dangerous because the world will need science to solve problems including global warming, energy needs and even national security.

"It's full of lies, the world isn't 6,000 years old whether you want it to be or not," he said. "And you shouldn't have to lie about the world to believe in God."

- *Cincinnati Enquirer*, (25 November 2007) pp. A1, A10



## BACK IN THEIR BURKAS AGAIN

(May be sung to the tune of "Back in the Saddle Again")

They're back in their burkas again  
Women obeying their men  
No other man should ever see  
Her eyebrow or her knee  
They're back in their burkas again

Women are wrapped up by men  
Protecting their bodies from sin  
Women must comply  
And not tempt some lustful eye  
So they're back in their burkas again

The wrap must be shared with a friend  
With sister and cousin and kin  
It costs far too much  
With accessories and such  
But they're back in their burkas again

A woman can't leave her pen  
While the burka is still out on lend  
So in her house she's trapped  
'Till in that horror she is wrapped  
'Till she's back in her burka again

The burka's a smothering affair  
No garment can even compare  
It gets so hot in there  
She can barely breathe the air  
They're back in their burkas again

*Covered head and eyes and nose  
Down their thighs right to their toes  
They're back in their burkas again*

*But sometimes under there  
They wear sexy underwear  
They're back in their burkas again*

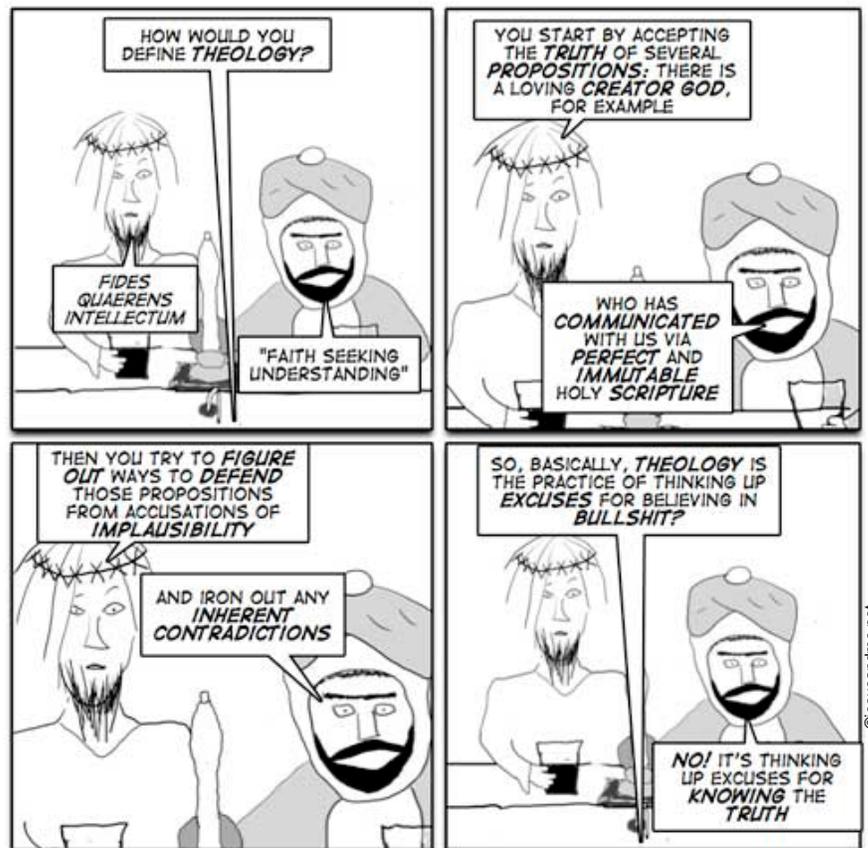
Everybody will finally win  
When women aren't wrapped end to end  
Law is a disgrace

When it hides a pretty face  
And puts women in burkas again

Freedom can only begin  
When women can show off some skin  
That law will have to go  
When all women just say "No"  
"We'll not wear those burkas again"

And on some happy day  
They will put those laws away  
And never wear burkas again  
And on that glorious day  
They will throw those rags away  
And never wear burkas again

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## The New Atheism

Editors comment: **Here is a paper for discussion: are we really like that?**

“There are two kinds of atheists—ordinary atheists who don’t believe in God and passionate atheists who consider God to be their personal enemy.”

Freeman Dyson

“New atheism” was the surprise political hit of 2007. God-bashing books by Hitchens, Dawkins and other thinkers who come out in a rash when they hear the word “religion” flew out of the bookshops. Philip Pullman’s anti-divine *Golden Compass* hit the big screen. Everywhere, God was exposed as a fraud and God followers were given an intellectual lashing.

I am as atheistic as it gets. But I will not be signing up to this shrill hectoring of the religious. The new atheists have given atheism a bad name. History’s greatest atheists, or the “old atheists” as we are now forced to call them, were humanistic and progressive, critical of religion because it expressed man’s sense of higher moral purpose in a deeply flawed fashion. The new atheists are screechy and intolerant; they see religion merely as an expression of mass ignorance and delusion. Their aim seems to be, not only to bring God crashing back down to earth, but also to downgrade mankind itself.

There’s something bitterly ironic in the fact that the new atheists pose as the successors to Darwin. Darwin himself had little interest in baiting the devout. In the early 1880s, he was asked by the radical atheist Edward Aveling to endorse a new book on evolutionary theory. Darwin, caring little for Aveling’s “anti-religious militancy”, refused. He wrote to Aveling: “It appears to me ... that direct arguments against Christianity and theism produce hardly any effect on the public; and freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men’s minds which follows from the advance of science. It has, therefore, been always my object to avoid writing on religion ... “

Marx, too, believed that direct assaults on religion were pointless. He argued in *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* that religion existed as spiritual compensation for social alienation, and believed that once the true nature of religion as a comfort blanket in an alienated society had been revealed, it would become clear that religion is merely a secondary phenomenon dependent for its existence on socioeconomic circumstances. Radical critics should focus their intellectual ire on the degraded society that sustains

religion rather than on attacking religion itself: “The criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.”

Old atheists sought to “illuminate men’s minds”, through advancing science or deepening our understanding of capitalist society. New atheists take exactly the opposite approach. They expend all of their energy on attacking the institution of religion and its ridiculous adherents.

Consider their bizarre and fevered obsession with religious symbols, such as crucifixes worn around the neck, or statements of religious belief by public figures like Tony Blair or George Bush: their distaste for anything that looks or sounds vaguely religious exposes the shallow anti-intellectualism of their new atheism. Their opposition to religion is not driven by a profound or radical vision, as was Darwin’s and Marx’s, but rather by a dinner-party disdain and moral revulsion for the stupidity of the religious. Where old atheism was driven by a passionate belief in progress, new atheism springs from today’s crisis of secularism. It is because new atheists have lost their own belief in progress and Enlightenment that they turn harshly against those who still cling to visions of a better society or “kingdom”.

The inhumanity of the new atheism is best illustrated by its move from the world of social critique into the realm of sociobiology. Some new atheists believe humans must be genetically predisposed to believing in a higher being. Marx and others saw religion as the product of socioeconomic circumstances, and thus believed that religion would wither away as humanity proceeded along the path of progress. New atheists see religious belief as a kind of animalistic instinct, driven by DNA.

Where Marx viewed people’s turn towards religion as an understandable response to the harsh reality of alienation in capitalist society, new atheists see it as the product of mankind’s twisted genetic makeup.

So what is their solution? Mass genetic therapy? Compulsory injections of the correct DNA - you know, the kind possessed by intelligent and well-bred people who can see through religious delusion? The new atheists’ abandonment of a social outlook leads them to adopt some very grim, anti-human views.

The key difference between the old and new atheism is in their views of mankind. For atheists like Marx religion expressed, in a backward and limited form, human aspirations to greatness: “Man ... looked for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven and found nothing there but the reflection of himself.” He continued: “The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being ... “ Today, Hitchens says of religion’s destructive impact: “What else was to be expected of something that was produced by the close cousins of chimpanzees?” For Marx, religion had to be abolished because it made man despicable; for new atheists religion exists precisely because man is despicable, little more than a monkey.

New atheists will continue to ridicule the religious in 2008. But there is more humanity in the “superhuman” delusions of the devout - in their yearning for a sense of purpose and greatness - than there is in the monkeyman realism of the hectoring atheists.

Brendan O’Neill, 30 December 2007  
[http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/brendan\\_oneill/2007/12/the\\_new\\_atheism.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/brendan_oneill/2007/12/the_new_atheism.html)



## Politics of Religion: Mitt Romney, Mormon

Hendrick Hertzberg in the *New Yorker*, 7 January 2008

In Mitt Romney’s case, it’s the religion itself that may have a glass jaw. When Mitt’s father, George Romney, a liberal Republican governor of Michigan, ran for President, in 1968, his Mormonism was just another biographical detail. That was before the Party’s firm embrace of “faith” as a mandatory political talking point. It’s no longer clear that the dogmas of whatever sect a candidate happens to be affiliated with can be dismissed as irrelevant to the policies he or she might pursue in office.

And the dogmas of Mitt Romney’s sect are breathtaking. They include these: that in 1827 a young man named Joseph Smith dug up a set of golden plates covered with indecipherable writing; that, with the help of a pair of magic spectacles, he “translated” the plates from an otherwise unknown language (Reformed Egyptian) into an Olde English that reads like an unfunny parody of the King James Bible; that the Garden of Eden is in Missouri; that American Indians descend from Hebrew immigrants; that Jesus reappeared in pre-Columbian America and converted so many people that the result was a series of archeologically un-confirmable wars in which millions died; that while polygamy had divine approval for most of the nineteenth century, God changed his mind in 1890, just in time for Utah to be allowed into the Union; and that God waited until 1978 to reveal that it was O.K. for blacks to be fully paid-up members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

One might ask, “What of it?” Plenty of religions have curious doctrines. (Several, for example, hold that on Sundays millions of people drink blood and eat flesh.) The Framers knew this was dangerous territory, which was one reason they tried to rule it out of political bounds. And Romney himself warned, in a speech, titled “Faith in America,” that he delivered on December 6th, “There are some who would have a Presidential candidate describe and explain his church’s distinctive doctrines. To do so would enable the very religious test the founders prohibited.”

The weasel word here is “distinctive.” Romney had no problem describing his church’s not-so-distinctive doctrines. “There is one fundamental question,” he continued, as if he were speaking on tax cuts, “about

which I often am asked. What do I believe about Jesus Christ? I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Saviour of mankind.” (But please don’t ask about Jesus’ post-Resurrection travel schedule.) The candidate went on to patronize rival religions, administering quick head pats to Catholicism (“I love the profound ceremony of the Catholic Mass”), evangelicalism (for the “approachability” of its version of God), Pentecostalism (“tenderness of spirit”), Lutheranism (“confident independence”), Judaism (“ancient traditions”), and Islam (“frequent prayer”—a bit feeble, that).

Missing from this litany, of course, was something to the effect of “I appreciate the deep commitment to reason of the agnostics and atheists.” Indeed, the only “religion” that Romney had anything rude to say about was “the religion of secularism.” He pointed scornfully at the “empty” cathedrals of Europe as evidence of “societies just too busy or too ‘enlightened’ to venture inside and kneel in prayer,” adding a little later that “any person who has knelt in prayer to the Almighty” has “a friend and ally in me.” Take that, NATO. On your knees.

Secularism is not a religion. And it is not true that “freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom,” as Romney maintained. What freedom, including religious freedom, requires is, precisely, secularism—which is to say, state neutrality in matters of religion. (Nor does religion require freedom, as the European past and the Middle Eastern present demonstrate; religions, plural, do, however.) “Americans do not respect believers of convenience,” Romney thundered in his “faith” speech. “Americans tire of those who would jettison their beliefs, even to gain the world.” These were strange observations, coming as they did from a man whose campaign has consisted largely of jettisoning the beliefs he found convenient as a Massachusetts politician but finds highly inconvenient now that he stands to gain the Republican nomination for President. But then those were merely political beliefs . ☘

.....  
• *Quote*  
• . . . television has created a nation of people many of whom,  
• consciously or not, now think of themselves as audiences and  
• think of politics and education— and even, yes, religion— as forms  
• of entertainment. Accordingly, many legalistic ministers have  
• designed their worship services— whether at small fundamental-  
• ist chapels, at large megachurches, or on televangelist programs—  
• to make them more like TV talk or variety shows.  
•  
• - Bruce Bawer, *Stealing Jesus* (1997) p. 298  
• *Unquote*  
• .....



## *Infidel*

by Ayaan Hirsi Ali  
(New York: Free Press, 2007)

*Infidel* is the autobiographical story of the growing up of a good, dutiful, Muslim daughter until she runs away from home and becomes an atheist. She also grows up into a very bright, beautiful woman. We learn a great deal about what it is like to grow up a Somali female, a refugee, and how to adjust to life in Europe. We learn relatively little about the nature of Islam.

Ayaan Hirsi Magan is a Somali of the Darod clan. She was born into an upper class family, her father is an educated man, a graduate of an American university. The family home is in Bari, but she was born and spent her first years in Mogadishu, the capital. Because the father becomes an opponent of the dictator Siad Barré, she becomes a refugee when still a child. By the time she is a teenager, she has lived in four countries and learned five languages. Most of this time she grows up in a Somali refugee community in Kenya, where her schooling is in English and the everyday language Swahili.

Her parents are modern people, much too enlightened to have their daughters undergo female circumcision. But when father is away, as he is much of her life, grandmother insists. The author's description of this operation is nothing short of gruesome. It is considered a rite of purification. It is not in the Koran, and not all Islamic people practice female circumcision. Some non-Islamic people practice it.

Ayaan describes herself throughout her growing up as a dutiful daughter, who most of the time in most circumstances tries to do what is expected of her by her mother and other relatives. She also describes herself as trying to be a good Muslim in word and deed and prayer. She goes through a time of being super-pious, wearing at all times the most conservative, cover up clothing. In her later teens she becomes more relaxed, and the demands of the faith sit more easily on her.

Her big break comes when her father decides to marry her to a good man, whom she has never met, and in fact even her father hardly knows. That he lives in Canada is

a plus for a refugee. The father flatly does not hear her objections. She is sent on her way to Canada, and on a change stop in Germany simply walks out of her life.

She easily obtains refugee status in the Netherlands, and goes to work on learning the language and getting an education. The family eventually give up trying to bring her back on the straight and narrow as they understand it; and the husband allows her a divorce.

For unbelievers a most interesting part of her story are the pages in which she argues herself out of religion. Many of us have gone through that struggle. At one time, after the 9/11 attacks she writes (p. 272):

I found myself thinking that the Quran is not a holy document. It is a historical record, written by humans. It is one version of events, as perceived by the men who wrote it 150 years after the Prophet Muhammad died. And it is a very tribal and Arab version of events. It spreads a culture that is brutal, bigoted, fixated on controlling women, and harsh in war.

Eventually, she leaves god behind, realizes she no longer believes, and has become an atheist. And there she feels mostly relief (p. 281):

There was no pain, but a real clarity. The long process of seeing the flaws in my belief structure and carefully tiptoeing around the frayed edges as parts of it were torn out, piece by piece – that was all over. The angels, watching from my shoulders; the mental tension about having sex without marriage, and drinking alcohol, and not observing any religious obligations – they were gone. The ever-present prospect of hellfire lifted, and my horizon seemed broader. God, Satan, angels: these were all figments of human imagination. From now on I could step firmly on the ground that was under my feet and navigate based on my own reason and self-respect. My moral compass was within myself, not on the pages of a sacred book.

She is no longer god's slave, who must submit at all times without a personal will. No more good behavior merely because you fear hell. Now she will rely on her own personal and rational ethic. – Wolf Roder





March Potluck:  
Tuesday Mar 11, 2008 6:30 PM



February Meeting  
Sunday, Feb. 24, 2008 2:30 PM  
at Union Terminal



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

# FIG

## Our Purpose

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

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



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

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

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

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail [figinfo@gofigger.org](mailto:figinfo@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at [gofigger.org](http://gofigger.org) or [freeinquirygroup.org](http://freeinquirygroup.org).