

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 19 Issue 2

February 2010

## February FIG Meeting:

**Note Location/Date/  
Time Changes!**

*Sunday 28 February 2010 at 1-3 PM*

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

### Without Sanctuary:

### Lynching Photography in America.

**Location: National Underground Railroad Freedom Center**

For the February meeting, FIG members will have the opportunity to take a FREE tour of the *Without Sanctuary Exhibit* at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. The exhibit is a collection of photographs and postcards of lynchings and historical accounts to help bring the exhibit into context. In the late 1800's and early 1900's almost 4000 documented lynchings occurred in this country with African-Americans being the victims in the vast majority.

Photographs taken at some of these horrible incidents were turned into mass-produced post cards that were distributed in the mail and shared among friends. The exhibit is based on the 2000 book by James Allen, who went around the country collecting examples of these postcards.

The exhibit does share the information in graphic detail, but the larger social message is an important reminder. Unfortunately this was an acceptable practice in this country, despite the massive amount of pain and turmoil it brought to its victims. As freethinkers, it is important be aware of this history and be vigilant in our efforts to not allow history to repeat itself. At the conclusion of the tour, we also have a room reserved for us, so we are able to share reactions and discuss modern day implications of this history.

**Tour Details:** FIG members should gather at 1:00PM in the lobby of the Freedom Center (50 E. Freedom Way, 45202). Main entrance is at the doors facing towards the Ohio River/Roebling Suspension Bridge. A Pay Parking lot is available underneath the building which you enter through Pete Rose Way (the street is next to the Bengals stadium and then weaves back underneath to the Freedom Center) or since it is Sunday, meters are free if you want to park 1 or 2 blocks away and walk.

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## Events

### February Meeting

1:00-3:00 PM, Sun.y Feb. 28, 2010  
National Underground Railroad-  
Freedom Center

### A New Event!

### FIG Community Dinner

*Join the FIG Gang for Dinner!*  
Tuesday, March 9, 2010, 6:30 PM  
Bronte Bistro, 2692 Madison Rd.  
Cincinnati, OH 45208  
**RSVP by 3/1** to Donna Loughry  
961-7331 or dloughry@fuse.net.  
We need tell the Bistro how many  
will be coming for better service.

### March Meeting

Speaker & Location - TBD

## Haiti Relief

Thank you to all who donated to the Haiti Relief Fund at the last meeting! We raised \$100.00 and sent it to Humanist Charities at the American Humanist Association, with whom FIG is affiliated. The money is being used to supply the earthquake victims with medicine, food, water and tools. To see what the Humanist Charities are doing in Haiti and to donate to their efforts go to: <http://www.humanistcharities.org/>



## January Meeting

### What's New in the Right to Die Movement

Through selling medical instrumentation to cardiac units and intensive care units in hospitals, Judith Snyderman was exposed to people who were so ill that they had no hope of recovery, no quality of life, and no say in what their treatment was to be. Many wished to die. This prompted her to join the Hemlock Society, the only right to die group at the time.



Judith Snyderman

Derek Humphry wrote *Jean's Way* in 1978 and founded the Hemlock Society in 1980. He is now an advisory board member of the Final Exit Network, which was named after his book, *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*. His experiences with his dying wife, Jean, motivated him to lessen the suffering of the terminally ill. There are 46 right to die organizations in 27 countries in The World Federation of Right to Die Societies. There are three organizations in the US, including Death With Dignity and Compassion and Choices, both mainly political organizations. These groups were instrumental in passing Right to Die laws in Washington State, Montana, and Oregon. The smallest is Final Exit, whose goal is to support individuals who wish to hasten their death.

Ms. Snyderman brought the audience up to date on the history of these groups, what they are doing now, and the laws they have helped to pass. The laws differ from state to state and include many restrictions and guidelines a person must follow if they wish to end their life. There are laws being considered in several states that give persons a right to take their life. She also spoke briefly about the laws in other countries pertaining to this issue.

Hospice is a great help to the terminally ill but can only help if a patient has less than six months to live. There are several diseases, including cancer, MS, Alzheimer's, and Muscular Dystrophy, and conditions involving stroke and neurological problems, which make people so miserable and lessen their quality of life so much that they choose to end it. These are the people that the Final Exit Network works with and supports.

Final Exit Network's guiding principle:

We believe that mentally competent adults have a basic human right to end their lives when they suffer from a fatal or irreversible illness or intractable pain when their quality of life is personally unacceptable and the future holds only hopelessness and misery. Such a right shall be an individual choice, including the timing and companion, free of any restrictions by the law, clergy, medical profession, even friends and relatives, no matter how well-intentioned. We do not encourage anyone to end their life, do not provide the means to do so, and do not actively assist in a person's death. We do however support them when medical circumstances warrant their decision.

The mission of Final Exit Network is to offer the service to qualifying people who want to hasten their death, raise awareness for all Americans for what they



**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:

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consider a basic human right, and foster research to find peaceful and reliable ways to self-deliver. They want to promote the use of advance directives, such as living wills and durable powers of attorney for healthcare, and vigorously defend their principles in courts of law when necessary.

A person requesting the services of Final Exit must qualify by answering 22 questions about their illness and prognosis and personal and family questions. Then they are assigned a counselor and must write a letter explaining why they want to end their life and send it along with a physician's record as proof of their condition. This information is given to the medical director who determines whether to accept a patient into the program or not. If unsure, he consults two others on the medical advisory board. If accepted they will be instructed by an exit guide who tells them what to do and how to do it. The guide may be present but will not assist in the procedure if the person has no family for support. The patient must acquire the necessary equipment and be able to use it themselves. Final Exit provides no physical assistance. The patient is asked many times during the process if they want to go through with it.

Who objects? The far right, some Catholics, and some religious organizations oppose this idea. Most polls show that 60 to 70 percent of those polled favor some sort of physician-assisted suicide. However, due to the influence that can be bought by the well-funded religious/political far right, only three states and five countries allow assisted suicide. These restrictive attitudes ignore the suffering of individuals by denying what is a fundamental human right: to die with dignity and to retain control of that event. The religious have stigmatized suicide as a sinful act, claiming that only god should decide when a person is to die.

There are four cases currently pending against the Final Exit Network. Judy discussed the two most prominent. In Arizona, four people were arrested including two exit guides that were present at the woman's death, the case coordinator, and the medical director, Dr. Larry Egbert. One of the exit guides, an elderly woman, has pled guilty in return for a guarantee of no jail time. The others are pleading not guilty. The charge is manslaughter, which carries a maximum twenty-year prison sentence.

There is a case pending in Georgia. An elderly man,

who was severely deformed and miserable from cancer of the face, used the services of Final Exit and ended his life. An ex-wife reported finding the literature from Final Exit in his personal belongings and called the police. An special agent of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) called Final Exit and claimed he was suffering from pancreatic cancer and wanted to end his life. Ms. Snyderman did the phone interview. She passed on his paperwork and he was approved using a fraudulent physician's document, which stated that he indeed had pancreatic cancer. Two exit guides arrived at his home expecting to be there as he ended his life, but were arrested by GBI officers. Four people were arrested, the two exit guides, the case coordinator, and the medical director again. The charges were assisting a suicide, removing evidence and racketeering. The racketeering charge enabled the GBI to freeze the bank accounts of Final Exit and was an excuse to make raids all over the country, including Ms. Snyderman's home. They are also harassing the members of Final Exit. They ransacked Ms. Snyderman's home and her computer, discs, and files were confiscated, all because she helped in filling out a questionnaire. So far they have not been able to get the ACLU involved. They have changed some of their policies as a result of this legal action and are not going to be present at the exits of persons in Arizona and Georgia.

What can you do? Support the right to die organizations that Judy mentioned. Obtain a copy of Final Exit, the book, from [www.finalexit.org/ergo-store/](http://www.finalexit.org/ergo-store/). ERGO is the Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization. This is Derek Humphry's web site and the only place you can get a copy of the book that contains the addendum regarding the preferred method of using helium as a safe and peaceful way to end your life. Fill out a durable power of attorney to make your wishes known and talk to your family and loved ones about what you want in the event you are stricken and unable to communicate your wishes. Ms. Snyderman ended her excellent presentation by wishing everyone a good life and a good death.

For more info go to: [www.finalexit.org](http://www.finalexit.org), [www.compassionandchoices.org](http://www.compassionandchoices.org), [www.deathwithdignity.org](http://www.deathwithdignity.org) or [www.worldrtd.net/](http://www.worldrtd.net/) (World Federation of Right to Die Societies).

– reported by John Welte



## From Faitheist to Fundagnostical

by Michael Shermer, (1 December 2009)

Last week, while I was giving thanks for an abundance of family, friends, and food, a brouhaha was brewing over an invited opinion editorial I wrote for CNN celebrating the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (on Tuesday, 24 November).

The title, "Religion, Evolution can Live Side by Side," was written by the CNN editors, but it does capture the thrust of the piece which I concluded by noting that if you are a believer in an eternal god, what difference does six zeros make on when the creation happened - 10,000 or 10,000,000,000 years ago - or by what method of creation was used: spoken word or big bang?

Well, this set off a mild firestorm among some observers of the science-and-religion debate, most prominently the estimable Jerry Coyne, the author of one of the best book ever written on the subject, *Why Evolution is True*, in his website of the same title called me an "accommodationist" and even a "faitheist" (faith atheist).

I responded to Jerry on my **True/Slant** blog, and had a good horselaugh (which according to Martin Gardner trumps 10,000 syllogisms) at the comment by Lewis Grossberger (who also blogs at True/Slant): "As far as I'm concerned, there's only one thing worse than a faitheist - and that's a fundagnostical. I hope you're not one of those." Continuing in the neologistic theme, "Furcas" says that my writing is "faitheistic accommodationism in its purest and most disgusting form."

Another good horselaugh was provided by a physicist at his own blog: "Michael Freakin' Shermer's heart is not pure enough for Jerry Coyne. If Jerry Falwell's circle of orthodoxy was, say, one meter in radius, then His Worshipfulness The Right Reverend Jerry Coyne's circle of orthodoxy has a radius of, roughly, a Planck Length."

This comment well captured my position and needs no further comment:

What Shermer is trying to make peace with are sensible moderate theists, not fundamentalists. It is the people in the middle, not those on the fringes, who will, ultimately, determine the virulence of religion and irreligion. Shermer is trying to reduce religion's virulence, not embracing fundamentalist ownership of the Bible, and it's ridiculous interpretations of it. Shermer is right to reclaim the Bible as part of the Western cultural patrimony, and not leave it to fundamentalists to tell us what it means, and the implications to be drawn from it.

How one responds to theists all depends on the context and goals of the response. I think we nonbelievers have fallen into black-and-white thinking on the question of "what is the 'right way' to respond?" The answer is that *there is more than one way*. There are multiple ways, all of which work, depending on the context. Sometimes a head-on, take-no-prisoners, full-frontal assault à la Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, or Jerry Coyne is the way to go. Sometimes a more conciliatory approach à la Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, or your humble servant is best. It all depends on the context and what you are trying to accomplish.

By the way, agreeing with my alleged critics for a moment, I do not actually think that Dawkins and Hitchens are rude or disrespectful. If you read their works or listen to them in public lectures and debates, they are forceful, clear, and unwavering, but they are not disrespectful. Watch, for example, the recent body slam Hitchens and Stephen Fry gave the Catholic Church for its stance on women's rights, birth control, and third-world poverty. It was focused and direct, but not disrespectful.

It is my goal, and the goal of the Skeptics Society, to educate as many people as possible about the power and wonders of science and to employ science to solve social, political, economic, medical and environmental problems. As such, we need as many people as we can get on board with a common goal, whatever it may be (starvation in Africa, disease in India, poverty in South America, global warming everywhere - pick your battle). My concern is that if we insist that people of faith renounce every last ounce of their beliefs before they are allowed to join the common fight against these scourges of humanity, we have just alienated the vast majority of the world's population from our project.

Sometimes religion is the problem - and when it is let's not hesitate to call it out. I did so myself on the day before Thanksgiving on Hugh Hewitt's radio show in a debate with Dinesh D'Souza when Hewitt insisted that we thank God for our abundance and that believing in God leads to a prosperous nation like America. I pointed out - without accommodationism, faitheism, or fundagnosticalism - that 99 percent of everyone in Peru is Christian and yet they are dirt poor. Why? Because of warring political factions, governmental corruption, lack of education, resource depletion, currency debasement, inflation, and especially the lack of property rights and the rule of law.

So let's not accommodate or pander in those areas where religion is clearly a problem or unmistakably mistaken. But not all (or even very many) social problems are caused by religion, so let's pick our battles carefully and choose our strategies wisely.





THINGS TO DO...

THINGS TO SEE...



## Hear! Hear! *Answers in Atheism* at

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

**JOIN US!** - We are live on the internet Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 8 pm EST. Our shows are also available as archived audio files, so you can listen later at any time. Please tune in at [www.answersinatheism.net](http://www.answersinatheism.net).

The Answers in Atheism crew

## 2010 Partial SCIENCE BOOK CLUB Schedule

- All meetings will be held on the 3rd Sunday every month at 2:30 pm at the downtown Cincinnati Public Library in Room 3A.

We have not yet established a final schedule beyond February 2010.

**Feb. 21, 2010** - *In Search of Memory: Emergence of a New Science of Mind* by Eric R. Kandel



## Interview On Our Website:

[www.freeinquirygroup.org](http://www.freeinquirygroup.org)

An interview by Michael Shermer of Georgia Purdom, PhD; Research Scientist at Answers in Genesis Creationist Museum in Petersburg, KY. Michael Shermer has a long background in fundamentalist religion, he is the publisher of *The Skeptic* magazine and founder of the Sceptic Society, he holds a doctorate in psychology. His website is [www.sceptic.com](http://www.sceptic.com).

Georgia Purdom has earned a doctorate in molecular genetics from The Ohio State University. She has taught at Nazarene College for six years, and now is a full time researcher at AiG. Their website is [www.answersingenesis.org](http://www.answersingenesis.org). Dr Purdom comments about her studies: ". . . Darwinism, evolution, it never entered the picture. It wasn't even a major part of the class I took . . ."

The interview ranges over several topics, from evolution to Jesus Christ. It provides considerable insight into the thinking of a highly trained creation scientist. Because it is about seven pages long, it is too large for *FigLeaves*. It will be found in the news section of our website, [www.freeinquirygroup.org](http://www.freeinquirygroup.org) as a pdf.

## Cincinnati Atheist Group

Monthly Meetup Announcement

**Monday, February 15, 2010, at 6:30 pm**

at: Joseph-Beth Booksellers, 2692 Madison Road in the Rookwood Pavillion, Cincinnati, OH 45208 (513) 396-8960

### Meetup Description

6:30 - 9:00 \* Please note time \* The bookstore is now closing at 9 PM, so we've shifted the meeting a bit.

Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists and Freethinkers meet here. Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics.

This is a purely social gathering. No agenda, no speaker, no rules of order. If you'd prefer a bit more structure, please check the calendar for lectures, FIG meetings, and other events.

To find us: Go in the front doors of the bookstore and turn left. Enter the Bistro and walk straight back as far as you can go. We're all freethinkers, so we'll look just like you.

The Bistro has a full menu, including vegetarian options. If you like, enjoy dinner, dessert, tea, or a brewski. Restaurant direct line: 513.396.8970 The Bookstore / Bistro is not associated with this meetup group, and will not be able to answer questions. Please use our Message Board to connect with fellow group members. **[info@meetup.com](mailto:info@meetup.com)**.

## FIG Adds High School Affiliate

Ellen Duffer and Nick Reynolds contacted FIG recently to request that their future group at Mason High School be permitted to affiliate with the Free Inquiry Group. We agreed and they have since started their group under the name, Mason High School Free Inquiry Group, or MHS FIG. They held their first meeting recently. We are proud to have them emulate our group and have offered to work with them in the future. Be sure to check next month's issue of *FigLeaves*. Ellen and Nick are writing an article for it explaining the process they had to go through to start a high school group, their reasons for starting a group, and their goals. It should be interesting.

Good luck to Ellen and Nick! May your group prosper!



## Lie Detection In Popular Culture.

A prospective adoptive-couple have been named as “persons of interest” in the disappearance of an eight-month old baby in Arizona (Gabriel). The couple appeared on television early this week demanding a polygraph test to “determine absolutely whether we are telling the truth.” The next day the polygraph examiners announced the result: “inconclusive.” The public perception is that the polygraph is a scientific device that distinctively signals a lie. This is abetted by the media which rarely mentions the strong scientific objections to the polygraph. Devices claimed to be lie detectors are even used in television game shows (Fox of course). In fact, the polygraph looks for spikes in blood pressure, heart rate, respiration and perspiration. In other words, you can’t tell a lie from the sex act.

### So how many spies has the polygraph exposed?

According to a CBS News account of the suicide bombing at a CIA base in Afghanistan, “The double agent was brought onto the base without first being given a polygraph test, one of the basic tools in establishing a spy’s trustworthiness.” Really? Aldrich Ames, the master Soviet spy who was a high-ranking CIA analyst, routinely passed polygraph exams, even as he passed information to the Soviets. Nor did the polygraph expose Larry Wu-Tai Chin a Chinese language translator working for the CIA who sold information to China, or Robert Hanssen of the FBI. In fact, not a single spy has been caught by a polygraph screening exam. In 2003 the National Academy of Science issued a report, *The Polygraph and Lie Detection*, that found the majority of polygraph research to be unreliable, unscientific and biased. The high rate of false positives was considered unacceptable. I have argued, however, that the small number of true positives is the real problem. I propose replacing the polygraph with a coin toss. That would identify 50 percent of the double agents compared to zero with the polygraph. The unfortunate increase in false positives constitutes collateral damage, which is inevitable in war.

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 - *What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 15 January 2010

## Spirit: The Great Adventure On Mars Is Not Yet Over.

The very name given the Mars rover implies vigor and energy. But telerobots, like those who build them, suffer decline with age. Sent to Mars in 2004 on a two-month assignment; in rover-years Spirit is now 210 years old. Its been limping most of that time, The wheels don’t work like they used to either, but Spirit is now hopelessly stuck in a sand trap. NASA has abandoned hope of getting it out, and now plans to use Spirit as a stationary observatory. It’s like

watching out the window of a nursing home. **What is farting on Mars?** As this week’s *Nature* points out, the mantra for the rovers was to find the water; that would lead them to life. Unfortunately, water has been hard to find. Methane of course is not an unambiguous indicator of life. It can be produced geologically. In any case, methane found in the atmosphere gives no indication of where it came from.

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 - *What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 29 January 2010

## The President Raises Serious Concerns About Alternate Energy.

In his State of the Union address the president called for increased generation of nuclear power and offshore drilling for oil and gas. Who could argue? On Wednesday, however, the president sought to increase production of corn-based ethanol and spur development of technologies to capture carbon dioxide from burning coal. Researchers have reportedly engineered a bacterium that can convert biomass directly into diesel fuel, but it would be a serious mistake to become dependent on food crops as fuel without firm plans to reduce fertility rates throughout the world. It seems impossible to find a single politician willing to utter the word “population” in public. All the evidence from the depletion of ocean fisheries to global warming and the Pacific garbage patch, are clear warnings that the population of Earth already exceeds that which can be sustained without further degradation of our beautiful home.

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 - *What’s New* Robert L. Park, 5 February 2010

## Lunacy And Our Dreams End When Reality Shakes Us Awake.

Anyone who still dreamed of a Moon base for human expeditions to Mars and beyond had a rude awakening this week by President Obama’s FY2011 budget request to Congress. This is an asking budget; its significance for space lies in what it did not ask for, namely a human mission back to the Moon. Incredibly, Apollo 11 made the first moon landing with vacuum tube electronics. Astronauts are now equally old-fashioned. Congress will hotly debate these matters in the coming months, but there won’t be an appropriation bill before October. International obligations make it difficult to withdraw from the ISS but that may well be the last human outpost in space, at least for a very long time. The asking budget calls for increasing NASA science by 11 percent. NASA will be free to do science, which it does very well.

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 - *What’s New* Robert L. Park, 5 February 2010





## The Underlying Tragedy

by David Brooks

*New York Times* 15 January 2010

On Oct. 17, 1989, a major earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 struck the Bay Area in Northern California. Sixty-three people were killed. This week, a major earthquake, also measuring a magnitude of 7.0, struck near Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The Red Cross estimates that between 45,000 and 50,000 people have died.

This is not a natural disaster story. This is a poverty story. It's a story about poorly constructed buildings, bad infrastructure and terrible public services. On Thursday, President Obama told the people of Haiti "You will not be forsaken; you will not be forgotten." If he is going to remain faithful to that vow then he is going to have to use this tragedy as an occasion to rethink our approach to global poverty. He's going to have to acknowledge a few difficult truths.

The first of those truths is that we don't know how to use aid to reduce poverty. Over the past few decades, the world has spent trillions of dollars to generate growth in the developing world. The countries that have not received much aid, like China, have seen tremendous growth and tremendous poverty reductions. The countries that have received aid, like Haiti, have not.

In the recent anthology "What Works in Development?," a group of economists try to sort out what we've learned. The picture is grim. There are no policy levers that consistently correlate to increased growth. There is nearly zero correlation between how a developing economy does one decade and how it does the next. There is no consistently proven way to reduce corruption. Even improving governing institutions doesn't seem to produce the expected results.

The chastened tone of these essays is captured by the economist Abhijit Banerjee: "It is not clear to us that the best way to get growth is to do growth policy of any form. Perhaps making growth happen is ultimately beyond our control."

The second hard truth is that micro-aid is vital but insufficient. Given the failures of macrodevelopment, aid organizations often focus on microprojects. More than 10,000 organizations perform missions of this sort in Haiti. By some estimates, Haiti has more nongovernmental organizations per capita than any other place on earth. They are doing the Lord's work, especially these days, but even a blizzard of these efforts does not seem to add up to comprehensive change.

Third, it is time to put the thorny issue of culture at the center of efforts to tackle global poverty. Why is Haiti so poor? Well, it has a history of oppression, slavery and colonialism. But so does Barbados, and Barbados is doing pretty well. Haiti has endured ruthless dictators, corruption and foreign

invasions. But so has the Dominican Republic, and the D.R. is in much better shape. Haiti and the Dominican Republic share the same island and the same basic environment, yet the border between the two societies offers one of the starkest contrasts on earth C with trees and progress on one side, and deforestation and poverty and early death on the other.

As Lawrence E. Harrison explained in his book "The Central Liberal Truth," Haiti, like most of the world's poorest nations, suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences. There is the influence of the voodoo religion, which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile. There are high levels of social mistrust. Responsibility is often not internalized. Child-rearing practices often involve neglect in the early years and harsh retribution when kids hit 9 or 10.

We're all supposed to politely respect each other's cultures. But some cultures are more progress-resistant than others, and a horrible tragedy was just exacerbated by one of them.

Fourth, it's time to promote locally led paternalism. In this country, we first tried to tackle poverty by throwing money at it, just as we did abroad. Then we tried microcommunity efforts, just as we did abroad. But the programs that really work involve intrusive paternalism.

These programs, like the Harlem Children's Zone and the No Excuses schools, are led by people who figure they don't understand all the factors that have contributed to poverty, but they don't care. They are going to replace parts of the local culture with a highly demanding, highly intensive culture of achievement - involving everything from new child-rearing practices to stricter schools to better job performance.

It's time to take that approach abroad, too. It's time to find self-confident local leaders who will create No Excuses countercultures in places like Haiti, surrounding people - maybe just in a neighborhood or a school - with middle-class assumptions, an achievement ethos and tough, measurable demands.

The late political scientist Samuel P. Huntington used to acknowledge that cultural change is hard, but cultures do change after major traumas. This earthquake is certainly a trauma. The only question is whether the outside world continues with the same old, same old. ☘

## An open letter to David Brooks on Haiti

by: Tom F. Driver and Carl Lindskoog,  
*truthout* 19 January 2010

Dear Mr. Brooks,

In your January 15, 2010, opinion piece in *The New York Times*, "The Underlying Tragedy," you present what you seem to believe is a bold assessment of the situation in Haiti and what





you certainly know is a provocative recommendation for Haiti's future. You also offer some advice to President Obama. In order to successfully keep his promise to the people of Haiti that they "will not be forsaken" nor "forgotten" the president, you say, has to "acknowledge a few difficult truths." What follows, however, is so shockingly ignorant of Haitian history and culture and so saturated with the language and ideology of cultural imperialism that no valuable "truths" remain. Please allow us, therefore, to present you with some more accurate truths.

First, Haiti is not a clear-cut case of the failure of international aid to achieve poverty reduction. For almost its entire existence, Haiti has been shouldered with a load of immense international debt. The Haitian people had the audacity to break their chains and declare independence in 1804, but were later forced by France to repurchase their freedom for 150 million francs, a burden that the country has had to carry throughout the 20th century.

What's more, the "aid" Haiti has received from its powerful neighbor to the North has never been the sort that would help the country reduce poverty or achieve meaningful development. In the early 20th century, the principal aid Haiti received from the United States came in the form of a brutal military occupation that lasted from 1915 to 1934. After "Papa Doc" Duvalier ascended to power, "aid" meant assistance to a ruthless (but conveniently anti-communist) dictator. The US gave Duvalier \$40.4 million in his first four years in power, briefly suspended military and economic assistance to the dictator in 1963, but resumed shortly thereafter, restoring full military and economic aid to Duvalier by 1969. In the early 1970s and 1980s, when "Baby Doc" Duvalier was at the helm, the "aid" the United States and other international agencies contributed failed to reduce poverty, but did enrich foreign investors in the newly constructed assembly industry. Economic policies that the US forced upon Haiti decimated its agriculture for the benefit of American farming while driving Haiti's peasants into Port-au-Prince and other cities where they found few jobs and scarce housing. Four years after Baby Doc's departure, the Haitian people decided to help themselves by democratically electing a new leader, but the United States aided Jean-Bertrand Aristide's domestic opponents in the coup of 1991 and did so again in 2004. It is no wonder then that such aid from the United States has failed to lift Haiti out of poverty.

Equally unconvincing is your argument about "progress-resistant cultural influences," which brings us to important truth number two: Haitian culture is not "progress-resistant" as anyone familiar with the examples you yourself provide can attest to. If Vodou or "the voodoo religion" as you put it, "spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile," how do the majority of Haitians manage to survive on scant resources and less than two dollars a day? How do so many Haitians manage to travel abroad, find and maintain difficult jobs and send money

back home if not through careful planning and a fierce defense of precious life? How do the nationwide customers of Fonkoze, the Haitian banking operation that teaches literacy and business practices to curbside marketers to whom it makes small loans, achieve such strong records of loan repayment? In fact, it might be Haitian culture itself (and even Vodou) which allows Haitians to persist. After all, the Vodou spirit Ogou (St. Jacques) is honored as a clever planner and master of skills. So was the champion of Haiti's war of independence, Gen. Toussaint L'Ouverture, a onetime slave who entered history as a military and diplomatic genius.

The third important truth we have to offer (and we hope President Obama is listening as well) is the opposite of your call for "intrusive paternalism" as the solution to Haiti's woes: Haiti does not need nor does it want the paternalism of the United States. Haiti is literally dying of cultural imperialism.

Whenever America's leaders and pundits speak of subordinate peoples, the ideology of imperialism shines through. As it does in your words, Mr. Brooks, so it has done for far too many earlier Americans. President William McKinley, for example, facing the difficult question of how he was to govern the newly-conquered Filipinos worried that:

left to themselves they are unfit for self-government- and they would soon have anarchy and misrule ... [So] there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them.

Closer to home, those who worried about an earlier form of "progress-resistant cultural influences" decided it was better to remove the children of Native-American families than to let them absorb the backwardness of their pagan and uncivilized parents and community. A common refrain by these "reformers" was, "kill the Indian, save the man." And now, Mr. Brooks, you propose to save the Haitians from themselves by replacing Haitian cultural values and institutions with "middle-class assumptions, an achievement ethos and tough, measurable demands." Imperialism, whether economic or military, is the primary reason for the conditions that so worsened the impact of the earthquake on January 12. Haitians need less imperialism, not more.

During the Vietnam War, an American officer famously stated that "it became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it." Today, Haiti is virtually destroyed. The earthquake having done the hard part, Mr. Brooks, you think "intrusive paternalism" will save it. Lacking a foundational understanding of Haitian history and culture, and bearing the familiar colors of American imperialism, you and your ilk will do vastly more harm than good





## What's God Got To Do With It?

By Herb Silverman, 25 December 2009

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

**Q:** *What was the most important religion story of 2009?*

The important story for me was the omni-absence of a personal God in so many stories about religion. God may not exactly be dead, but perhaps he, she, or it should be denied health insurance because of a strongly suspected pre-existing condition of nonexistence.

The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, released in March of 2009, showed that "Nones," those who don't belong to any particular religious group, is the fastest growing religious category in America. They are the only group to have grown in every state of the Union. Some are atheists, some are agnostics, some are spiritual, some believe in Karma or crystals, and some believe in a deity or deities. Most have simply rejected the religion in which they were raised. Generally, though, they are more accepting of those with different beliefs.

Atheist and agnostic "Nones," emboldened by the release of the ARIS survey that showed unexpected growth of the non-religious, have become more vocal. And along with opportunities to increase the visibility of, and respect for, the viewpoints of secular Americans, there come the inevitable strategic and philosophical divisions. Here is my gross oversimplification of the two basic camps.

Group A: Atheists who don't suffer fools gladly. They point out that religious belief should be treated as any other kind of belief, open to criticism, and that unquestioned faith is a vice with inherent dangers, not a virtue to be respected.

Group B: Atheists who prefer identifying as humanists, who would rather look for ways to make this world a better place than talk about gods in which they don't believe. They try to find common bonds between theists and nontheists, and seek issues on which to cooperate. Their focus is on being good without God.

Group A's take pride in being intellectually honest, while Group B's take pride in helping a movement grow. Quite a few, myself included, have a foot or toe in both groups.

Many people distrust atheists because atheists don't worry about rewards or punishments in an afterlife. The message that needs to get out is how many non-atheists live like atheists, for all practical purposes, without belief in a judging god involved in the workings of the world. This would include all deists, almost all Unitarians, and most liberal religionists of all stripes. I even think many politicians, not just the one acknowledged atheist, Rep. Pete Stark (D-Cal), would be willing to make known publicly that their actions and policies have nothing to

do with belief in an afterlife. I expect this category of "functional atheists," those who believe that their actions in this life have nothing to do with how or whether they are treated in an afterlife, is larger than just about any religious denomination.

This brings me back to non-God religion stories, which I'll illustrate with two of this year's movies. The first is the blockbuster, *Avatar*. Russ Douhat, in the *New York Times*, wrote about its pantheism, a faith that equates God with Nature, where trees have "spiritual energy" and a network of energy is the sum total of every living thing. Douhat claims that Hollywood regularly returns to such themes because most people can't accept the literal-mindedness of monotheistic religions. It's a movie for my Group B people, since the good guys on this alien planet are spiritual progressives who prefer to be engaged in cooperating and making love, not war.

For Group A people, a more interesting and less viewed movie is *The Invention of Lying*. It's about a culture even more alien, one in which nobody can lie. There is not even a word for "lie" or for "truth." You can guess what this does to politics, advertising, and dating. Then one person develops the ability to lie. In a world where every word is assumed to be the absolute truth, a liar can become a king or a god. With the best of intentions, our liar-hero (Mark) tries to comfort his dying mother by telling her that she will be going to a wonderful afterlife. Of course she and others believe him. Soon everyone in the world is begging for information about this afterlife. Every word Mark makes up is taken as, well, gospel. In the biggest lie of all, he tells the world there is a Man in the Sky who is responsible for everything, and they will be happy up there with him after death. When asked if the Man in the Sky is also responsible for cancer, Mark quickly has to grapple with theodicy, the question no monotheistic religion has been able to answer: Why is there evil in a world created by an all-powerful and benevolent god? Incidentally, I think the 10 rules for the world that Mark writes on Pizza Hut boxes compare favorably to the 10 Commandments.

This movie helped me to imagine a world without lies. The movie's theme was that Man in the Sky religion is possible only in a world where it's possible to lie. (This reminds me that if there were an international anthem for atheists, it would be John Lennon's "Imagine"--no religion).

Atheists sometimes compare belief in the biblical God to belief in Santa Claus. One difference is that Santa is omniscient only in December and omnipotent only on Christmas Eve. In "Do as I say, not as I do" fashion, many parents this month explained to their children why lying is bad, and that "Santa will know if you've been bad or good." Whatever parents teach their children about God or Santa, I hope it will include a message to be good for goodness' sake, a message to live by in all seasons. ☘



## Natural, Not Supernatural, Disasters

by Herb Silverman, 19 January 2010, Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

*Q: Many have criticized Pat Robertson's suggestion that the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti was the work of the devil or a form of divine punishment. But if one believes God is good and intervenes in the world, why does God allow innocents to suffer? What is the best scriptural text or explanation of that problem you've ever read?*

I'm not particularly concerned about flat earthers and Holocaust deniers in this country, because they have no influence. I can't even name one, and that's a good thing. Unfortunately, the same can't be said about Pat Robertson, a household name to Americans. Even worse, he is influential and respected by millions. According to the book of Robertson, the reason for every disaster is sin, and the solution usually involves sending him money.

While Haitians may not blame past sins for the earthquake, many have a worldview similar to Robertson's. Numerous Haitians gave thanks to God for keeping them alive. They, like Robertson, believed that what happened was the will of God.

Here's an alternative view. The "fault" lies under the Atlantic Ocean, not in the sins of

Haitians. The earth's tectonic plates are neither good nor evil. The more we learn about their shifting, the better we will be able to predict future earthquakes.

And for those who still believe in the supernatural at the exclusion of scientific discovery, I'll confidently predict when you will again see God's wrath: July 11, 2010, the next total solar eclipse. And my home state of South Carolina will see such wrath on August 21, 2017. Fortunately, most people no longer think of an eclipse as a warning from God. Science works whether you believe in it or not.

If an all-powerful god either caused the earthquake in Haiti or stood passively by as thousands perished, he would be a god more worthy of blame than praise. Some days the best thing you can say about God is that he doesn't exist.

Natural disasters like the one in Haiti require action by humans, regardless of their theological views. Human lives can be saved by other humans, and the sooner they act the better. Many of us who want to contribute, but are not sure how, should do a little homework and contribute to organizations they trust. I'll not be contributing to Pat Robertson's "700 Club," which is soliciting for prayers and donations. I will contribute through the Richard Dawkins *Foundation for Reason and Science*, which has joined forces with 13 other freethought groups to collect donations for two fine non-religious relief organizations. Contributions will go, depending on one's stipulation, to either Doctors Without Borders or the International Red Cross.

To quote Robert Ingersoll, "Hands that help are better far than lips that pray." ☚

## Creationism And Stork Theory: Yale's Response To Ray Comfort

by *Stork Storkman (Michael Wright)*, Yale University

On a brisk November morning, my shower was interrupted by a screaming Yale student. "Gather the flock! The Creationists are here!" The unexpected news spun my head like a navy commander at Pearl Harbor. I sprung out of the shower. "Damn it all," I said, fumbling with my towel, "they weren't supposed to hit till tomorrow!" Brow furrowed with intense concentration, I sent out a rallying cry to the Yale Students for Stork Acknowledgement. Our time had come.

Some months earlier, Ray Comfort—a near-prophetic Creationist minister and YouTube semi-star-hatched an ingenious plot to bring the nation's brightest students into the Creationist fold. He would publish a 150th anniversary copy of *On the Origin of Species*, the evolutionist bible. This special edition would feature an introduction from Mr. Comfort himself, revealing the obvious flaws in evolutionary theory and Darwin's link to the Nazis. He would raise piles of money to print thousands of books, and give them away at America's top universities. Brilliant!

When Yale's chapter of the Secular Student Alliance got wind of Mr. Comfort's devious plan, we were paralyzed with fear. The minister's masterfully articulated criticism of evolutionary theory was sure to be so conclusive that students exposed to it would fall to their knees in a deluge of collective repentance. Our only hope was to distract the students with another equally compelling scientific theory: **Stork Theory**.

Stork Theory is a little-known but well-documented scientific tradition that evidences the truth of human conception and infant delivery. Noting the complete lack of evidence for vaginal birth and the large size of human infants com-

pared to the female "birth canal", Stork Theory presents a more accurate and common sense explanation, positing that babies are delivered by a fleet of well-trained storks based in Tampa Bay, FL.

That night we began preparations to distribute stork materials to counter Mr. Comfort's mass book giveaway. We ordered "Students for Stork Acknowledgment" shirts, channeled the comprehensive Stork Theory treatise from heaven for printing, and gathered support from students on campus. In all our calculations, however, we overlooked a critical characteristic of our Creationist adversary.

Deceit! Ray Comfort, in his wily way, told his ministries to distribute the books a day early. When my shower was interrupted with word that the Creationists had struck early, I should not have been surprised: what does the religious establishment do best if not deceive?

All was not lost. The SSA-Students for Stork Acknowledgment, mind you-responded to my call with the swiftness and grace of a flock of storks. Within minutes each Creationist was flanked by two of our own, one distributing straightforward information showing students

that their copy of Darwin's *Origin* was prefaced with Creationist silliness, and the other madly professing Stork Theory.

The typical passer-by's experience went something like this:

**Creationist:** Would you like a copy of *Origin of Species*? **Student:** Sure. **SSA Member:** Hey, here's a bookmark to separate the secret Creationist intro from the actual book. **Student:** Wow, really? Those guys are Creationists? Haha, that's golden! **Stork Fanatic:** HEED THE TRUTH! BABIES COME FROM THE STORK!

We hope to have sent Ray Comfort's ministries a clear message: promote ludicrous pseudoscience at an institution of higher learning, and you'll be laughed off campus.

May the stork be with you!

- Stork Storkman  
Stork Storkman (*Michael Wright*) is a junior Cognitive Science major at Yale College and president of the University's Secular Student Alliance chapter. ☚



*Good Book: The Bizarre, Hilarious, Disturbing, Marvelous, And Inspiring Things I Learned When I Read Every Single Word Of The Bible*  
by David Plotz  
(New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009)

David Plotz is a writer and editor at *Slate* who one day decided to read the Bible cover to cover and word for word. Although he went through Hebrew school as a youngster and was *bar mitzvah*; this time he read the Hebrew Scriptures,-- what Christians call the Old Testament,-- in English translation. He recounts to us what it says in the Good Book, and provides his comments on the action. He leaves out, or skips over, the long boring parts, the begats, and the uninformative repetitions, e.g. the books of *Chronicles*.

Most important, Plotz' review gives us a coherent narrative of the story in the Bible. It is in fact a history of the Jewish people from the Beginning until the return from Babylonian exile. There are thrilling historical dramas, the escape from Egypt, followed by the migration and the quarrels in the desert. The giving of god's commandments – and there are not merely ten, but hundreds. The promised land is not free but must be conquered. There are stirring battles, which modern Israeli commanders profess to study and follow in present warfare. Joshua is ordered to read the book of the law. God tells him: "You shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it." Thus begins, comments Plotz, thousands of years of scholarship, *midrash* and *pilpul*.

The book is full of myth and miracle, and the god is truly as mean, jealous, violent, and punishing as he has been described by unbelievers. The god of the Bible is quick to kill. If necessary or he feels like it he smites thousands; but he is also quick to forgive and return to his people. The question is why do the Jews constantly and repeatedly go whoring after other gods, Baal, Astartoth, or the golden cow? Were they really unfaithful or stupid or absent minded? Perhaps, as there is no god, and he thus can not do what his priests promise, that is do justice to his people against others and protect them

against the fates. Perhaps it was the absence of god that encouraged the Jews to look elsewhere.

It is essentially a book about the deeds of men. Few women are mentioned by name in the Bible, and most are prostitutes or otherwise sexually misbehaving. Women are essentially banished from the public arena so as to control their virtue so that men are assured of paternity of their children. In this the Bible is similar to many other primitive cultures and myths.

In contrast Plotz points to the Book of Ruth. It shows Biblical law in action at its best, it follows good people, the details of family life like a Jane Austen novel. There is no smiting, no prophecies, no punishment, no kings, and no god interferes. "Just the story of one family and its two good women."(p. 268)

But Plotz is also appalled by events in the Book of Ezra. Returnees from Babylon have married Canaanite women, which god in the person of the prophet Ezra regards as the abomination of contaminating the "holy seed" of the Jews. The people are made to realize they have wronged god and must correct their sin. They agree to banish all their foreign wives with their children and send them into the wilderness. Plotz comments it is not exactly a family friendly religion. "This is yet another reminder of the Bible's radical morality. God does not put families first. He will let them be destroyed to preserve the faith."(p. 291)

Plotz says nothing about belief or truth in the Bible. At the beginning he makes it clear he has been a secular Jew all his life, and at the end he reaffirms that nothing in the Bible has convinced him of the existence of god. In fact he could not believe in a god so unmerciful, unjust, unforgiving, and indeed unloving. What he does get out of his study is a greater sense of belonging to the Jewish community, to a historical continuity. This Bible is the source of the Shema, the story of the "lion's den," of the original Ahab, who gave his name to the one in *Moby Dick*, and the source of blessing in the name of Ephraim and Manasseh. The source of Jewish tradition and holidays, of actions and activities.

The book is a useful guide through the history and thought in the Hebrew Scriptures. ☚

– Wolf Roder





March FIG Community Dinner  
 March 9, 2010 6:30 PM  
 Bronte Bistro (RSVP Needed by 3/1)



February Meeting  
 Sunday, February 28 at 1:00-3:00 PM  
 National Underground Freedom Center



**FIG Leaves**  
 P.O. Box 53174  
 Cincinnati, OH 45253

# FIG

## Our Purpose

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

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



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

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

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

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