

FIG LEAVES

Volume 22 Issue 2

February 2013

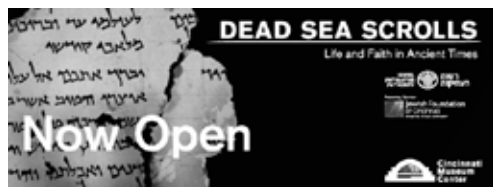
February 2013 Meeting: Sunday Feb. 24, 1:00 PM, Frisch's & Museum Center

The February FIG meeting will be brunch at Frisch's followed by a visit to the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit at the Cincinnati Museum Center on Sunday, Feb. 24th. Join us! Please **RSVP (preferred) by Wednesday Feb. 20th** to Shawn at figcincinnati@gmail.com or 513-404-8191.

Dead Sea Scrolls Exhibit

In 1947, a shepherd stumbled upon a hidden cave along the shore of the Dead Sea. Concealed inside were ancient scrolls that had not been seen for 2,000 years. After extensive excavation, a total of 972 remarkably preserved scrolls were found, including the earliest Biblical texts ever discovered.

Now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, they have been called the most significant archaeological find of the last century. You can witness these ancient handwritten texts of the words that shaped the future of the Western world at the new blockbuster exhibition, Dead Sea Scrolls: Life and Faith in Ancient Times.



Dead Sea Scrolls: Life and Faith in Ancient Times features the most comprehensive collection of ancient artifacts from Israel ever organized, including one of the largest collections of the priceless 2,000-year-old Dead Sea Scrolls. The exhibition was created by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) from the collections of the Israel National Treasures and produced by Discovery Times Square and The Franklin Institute.

Considered among the world's greatest archaeological discoveries, the Scrolls contain the oldest known copies of the Hebrew Bible. Of the more than 500 objects from the Biblical to Byzantine Period in Israel, many objects are from recent archaeological excavations in Jerusalem and have never been publicly exhibited. Objects include remains of religious articles, weapons of war, stone carvings, textiles and beautiful mosaics along with everyday household items such as jewelry and ceramics.

The Website: <http://www.cincymuseum.org/deadseascrolls>

Our February 24th Schedule:

11:15 AM Meet for brunch at Frisch's, 1001 Gest St., Cincinnati 45203 (very close to the museum)

12:30 PM Leave for Museum Center, car pool or walk.

12:45 PM Congregate at Museum Center.

1:00 PM Begin exhibit tour.

Our ticket prices, which include the audio tour:

FIG Member \$15

Nonmember \$21

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Events

February 2013 Meeting

Sunday, Feb. 24th at 1:00 pm
Cincinnati Museum Center
RSVP Requested.

March 2013 Meeting

TBD
Hannaford Suites Hotel
5900 East Galbraith Rd.
Cincinnati, OH

Please Let Us Have Your E-mail Address!

Whenever we send out an E-mail, several rejections are returned. To confirm your E-mail and Snail-mail address if it has changed, please send an E-mail to Brian Sellers at bsellers@fuse.net.



January Meeting

Satirical Broad Strokes Get At Something Important.

By Greg (on Amazon)

A review of: *Salvation Boulevard* (DVD)

Watching *Salvation Boulevard*, I realized that satire was never going to be the funniest form of comedy. Ever since Swift penned *A Modest Proposal*, whatever laughs there are in these dark artistic works have been nervous and mixed with horror and revulsion.

So it is with *Salvation Boulevard*, not the darkest comedy I've ever seen, but plenty dark, disturbing, and sometimes violent. But in the service of deflating piety, hypocrisy, and egomania, the atmosphere feels entirely appropriate.

The movie starts with a debate between Pastor Dan Day (Pierce Brosnan) and atheist Peter Blaylock (Ed Harris). Having watched similar debates between various clerics and religious apologists and the likes of Richard Dawkins and the late, great Christopher Hitchens, the script and direction gets the tone mostly right and mines the hubris and false confidence (of both parties) for laughs. The scene also serves to introduce us to most of the key characters, including Carl Vanderveer (Greg Kinnear), a former Deadhead who has had a radical conversion to an evangelical form of Christianity and married a seemingly holy woman, who has a saner-than-she-should be teen daughter.

Not nearly as broad as "Saved!" a satire in a similar vein "Boulevard" deals with Pastor Dan accidentally shooting atheist Blaylock (which rather than killing him, puts him in a coma) and trying to pin the shooting on Carl. Because all of this happens within the opening minutes of the movie, no spoiler alert was called for, but from that point on the surprises begin to stack up and to say more would be to rob the reader of those moments of shock and humor. Suffice to say that contemporary Christianity as practiced by celebrity megachurch leadership and attendees comes in for some well deserved parody.



To any person of faith tempted to cry foul and offer "Boulevard" as just one more example of Christianity coming under unfair fire in America, I would say that not a week goes by that a new Christian movie doesn't show up in Red Box rental kiosks or the local megaplexes, so your privilege is still intact; and if you don't like being made fun of, start acting to drive the clowns and con artists from your midst. Is making fun of Christian hypocrisy like shooting fish in a barrel? Hell yes, and it's because sincere, honest people of faith don't do all they can to shut up people like Jack Van Impe, the idiots on Trinity Broadcasting, and the various charlatans and faith healers who ply their craft over the airwaves and in opulent cathedrals. If you were to criticize these sickening, slick shysters as thoroughly as they deserve, there might be less ammunition left for those of us who don't share your faith.

As it stands, there is a need for movies like *Salvation Boulevard* to remind us votaries and infidels alike that the human condition is more complex and absurd than any single worldview can accommodate, and among the worst ideas for addressing that condition is religion.



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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Contradiction Corner

By Dennis Davis



Last month I began looking beyond specific contradictions and errors to discuss the rationalism of the larger biblical message as put forward by the Christian majority. In my previous installment I discussed the fall of man from a sinless state into depravity. Today I will move on to the doctrine of sacrifice and redemption as a solution to this sinfulness.

While the Christian will read Jesus' sacrifice into the Adam and Eve myth, it is nothing more than wishful thinking. In actuality the Genesis story gives no indication that the fall of humanity is anything but permanent. In the five "Books of Moses" specific rules are laid out for sacrifices but there is no indication of these being anything other than a temporary substitution for sin. Animal sacrifices were to be offered annually during specific rituals spelled out in painful detail. Essentially the Old Testament god provided a list of laws and real-world penalties for their violation with no mention of a reward or punishment after death. The law and the prophets promise prosperity or devastation in this life based on obedience to the law, sort of an Iron Age version of New-Age Karma. This is a system of unyielding justice where the perpetrator of a crime pays the penalty, either through punishment or offering a required sacrifice. The saying "an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" comes from Exodus 21:24 and is repeated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

In the New Testament several new ideas are introduced that never existed in the Old Testament, most notable among them being the idea of an afterlife; specifically, that people dying in a state of sinfulness are eternally punished while followers of Jesus inherit eternal bliss. We are told that Jesus' followers are able to obtain this reward because he sacrificed himself for their sins. More peculiarly, the only way the Christian can claim this payment for sin is through believing in Jesus not by actions or deeds (John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life").

Several logical problems in this new plan become immediately obvious. The first problem I see is that we are told no matter how great or small our sins may be the only fitting punishment is eternal damnation. If Jesus could pay for the evil committed by billions of people in a

couple of days then you and I should only burn in hell for a few minutes at most. By no definition is justice served by issuing the same punishment for every crime, yet we are told that this is the best plan that the most intelligent being conceivable could come up with. Personally, I cannot think of any crime that would merit eternal torture, the most heinous crimes imaginable wouldn't deserve more than a few years torment.

For the sake of argument, let us imagine that I did owe a debt that could only be paid by eternal punishment. The gospels tell us that this debt was paid by Jesus being dead for little more than a day-and-a-half; not only that, but this payment was sufficient payment for all of humanity! Even if we assume that Jesus spent that time in hell, how could all the sins of all time be wiped out by Jesus having a bad weekend? Especially if afterward he came back to life, went to heaven and gets to rule the entire universe forever after. At least the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were really dead; they didn't spring back to life a couple days later invalidating the deal.

Then there is the bigger moral problem of substitution for sin. How can it be fair to punish an innocent victim for the sins of another no matter how willing the victim? We develop a sense of fair play as a child that tells us that only the guilty should be punished, yet the New Testament says the opposite. The biblical plan of salvation is like a parent grounding their 10 year old son for their 16 year old daughter stealing the family car because he asked to be punished. This doctrine alone invalidates any claim that the Christian god is fair or just.

We have another problem regarding the requiring belief for forgiveness of sins. In essence this teaching invalidates all morality substituting gullibility as the only rewarded virtue. According to this doctrine, the worst evil monster in the history of the world could ask Jesus for forgiveness believing and waltz into paradise. But according to the same doctrine Mahatma Gandhi will burn for eternity if he didn't have the same deathbed conversion. Why would you live a life of self-denial carefully obeying biblical law when a simple "Jesus forgive me" in faith can wipe the books clean. This invalidates the point of living a moral life and is the opposite of the message that Christians want to project.

Next month I will continue this discussion by examining the doctrines of heaven and hell. See you then... ❧





THINGS TO DO...

THINGS TO SEE...



Upcoming Meetups

Wednesday, February 6, 2013; 6 pm

Tri-State Freethinkers: Guest Speaker
David Silverman, of American Atheists
Radisson Hotel Cincinnati Riverfront,
668 West Fifth Street
Covington, KY 41011

First Thursday @ Pomodori's Pizzeria

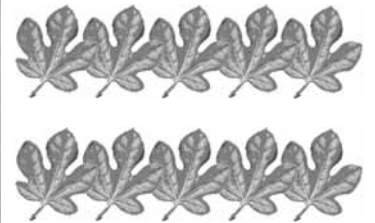
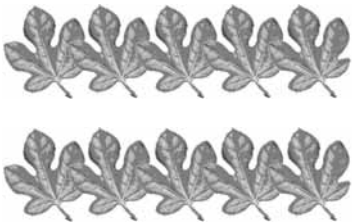
Thursday, February 7, 2013; 7:00 PM
121 W Mcmillan St.
Cincinnati, OH 45219

Monday, February 18, 2013 6:30 PM

Monday Meetup @ Rio Grande Mexican Restaurant

Sunday, February 24, 2013 11:15 AM

FIG to visit Dead Sea Scroll Exhibit
We meet at Frisch's Big Boy Restaurant 1001
Gest St. (lunch, park, walk to Museum) meet
at Museum at 12:45, tour at 1:00 pm. RSVP
requested.



Science Book Club 2013 Schedule

All meetings on 3rd Sunday of the month except in June on the 2nd Sunday. All meetings at the Cincinnati and Hamilton County downtown Public Library in room 3A except in February in the Huennefeld Tower Room and in March and May in room 3B.

February 17 (Huennefeld Tower Room) *The mind's eye* - Oliver Sacks, 2010

March 17 (room 3b) *The Swerve : How the World Became Modern* - Stephen Greenblatt, 2011.

April 21 *The Universal Sense : How Hearing Shapes the Mind* - Seth S. Horowitz, 2012.

May 19 (room 3B) *Personality Types: a Systems Science Explanation* - Walter Lowen, 2007

June 9 *Why Does the World Exist? An existential Detective Story* - Jim Holt

July 21 *The Signal and the Noise : Why Most Predictions Fail but Some Don't* - Nate Silver, 2012.

August 18 *The Earth in Turmoil: Earthquakes, Volcanoes, and their impact on HumanKind* - Kerry Sieh, Simon LeVay, 1998

September 15 *End this Depression Now!* - Paul Krugman, 2012

October 20 *Incognito: the Secret Lives of the Brain* - David Eagleman, 2011

November 17 *The Republican Brain : the Science of Why They Deny Science and Reality* - Chris Mooney, 2012

December 15 *Time Reborn: From the Crisis in Physics to the Future of the Universe* - Lee Smolin, 2013





None' Leaders To Chart Path For More Political, Cultural Power For Religiously Unaffiliated

By Dan Merica, CNN, 25 January 2013

Washington (CNN) - The religiously unaffiliated - the "nones" - have noticed their ranks are growing. And at a meeting Saturday, a group of leaders will look to turn those swelling numbers into workable political and cultural power.

It's one of the top priorities of the eighth annual Heads Meeting, which will be held in Atlanta. Some of the nation's most influential leaders, representing various organizations, will convene to chart a path forward and discuss the most important issues facing "nones" today.

"It is not enough that we are growing in numbers," said Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association. "We have got to find a way to bring those numbers to bear in an organized fashion so that people will take us seriously."

A number of studies have found that religious "nones" - people who either don't believe in God or do not affiliate with a religion - are increasing rapidly in the United States. A 2012 Pew study, for example, found this faction to be the fastest growing "religious" group in America and determined that one in five Americans now identify with no religion.

These numbers have emboldened atheists, humanists, agnostics and other secular Americans, many of whom have long expressed a desire for more political power.

In particular, they point to the fact that they are widely underrepresented in the halls of the highest U.S. legislative body. Though 20% of the population classifies themselves as "none," according to Pew, only one member of Congress, Democratic Rep. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, identifies as such.

Speckhardt said it'll take presenting "viewpoints in an organized way" to see change.

Dale McGowan, executive director of Foundation Beyond Belief and one of the Atlanta meeting's hosts, said building awareness through community engagement will be a key topic of discussion.

"Part of it is trying to consolidate that cultural presence," McGowan said. "That has something to do with politics, but it is also more generally cultural."

Much as churches and synagogues foster and nurture communities, McGowan said he thinks atheists can do the same to gain clout and broader acceptance.

But the meeting is more than just a forum for "none" leaders to outline their plans going forward. It is also a way for these leaders to meet face to face and discuss differences that they may have with one another.

According to McGowan, finding ways to work together was the original goal when the meeting was first held in 2005.

For years, McGowan said, "These groups operated separately from each other and sometimes at odds with each other. There was a realization that we should meet once a year and come together on the goals that we have in common."

Other leaders echoed this viewpoint.

"One of the biggest benefits of these meetings is that it is human interaction," Speckhardt said. "You get people face to face, and you dispel these negative ideas. You realize that we are all endeavoring toward very similar goals and that we can cooperate to make them happen."

But while the leaders stress the need for cohesion, they also have long highlighted, even celebrated, diversity of opinion in their movement. This diversity has, at times, caused friction.

For example, the Christmas season revealed a growing rift among American atheists. Some activists want to seize the holidays to build bridges with faith groups, while other active unbelievers increasingly see Christmas as central to confronting religion.

"We certainly do disagree," said David Silverman, president of American Atheists. "But we are on the same side. What we have to do is sit down at the table and say, 'You are going to do your thing, and I am going to do my thing.'"

McGowan called cohesiveness "really the central challenge" for people who thrive on independence. "This is a group of people accustomed to taking a critical approach to things, and that means not just letting differences slide and saying, 'Hey, these differences matter.'"

Other attendees in Atlanta will include Ron Lindsay, president of the Center for Inquiry, and Margaret Downey, founder and president of the Freethought Society, according to Silverman.





Nonbelievers On The Rise In Congress

By Charles Mahtesian, Politico, 06 January 06

The number of members of Congress who don't identify with any particular religion is on the rise, according to an analysis by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

In the 96th Congress (1979-80), not a single member of the House or Senate said they didn't belong to any particular faith, didn't know or refused to disclose their religion. But in the new 113th Congress, 10 members fall under that category.

That's twice as many as in the 111th Congress (2009-10). Pew notes there's still a great disparity between the percentage of U.S. adults and the percentage of members of Congress who don't identify with any particular religion. From Pew's fascinating report on the religious composition of the 113th Congress:

About one in five U.S. adults describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" a group sometimes collectively called the "nones." But only one member of the new Congress, Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.), is religiously unaffiliated, according to information gathered by CQ Roll Call. Sinema is the first member of Congress to publicly describe her religion as "none," though 10 other members of the 113th Congress (about 2%) do not specify a religious affiliation, up from six members (about 1%) of the previous Congress. This is about the same as the percentage of U.S. adults in Pew Research Center surveys who say that they don't know, or refuse to specify, their faith (about 2%).

The numbers here caught my eye, not because of the disparity between nonbelievers in the general population and in Congress, but because I was surprised so many members actually admitted to it.

Religious affiliation has always been a sensitive issue for members of Congress who belong to religious minorities, but it's especially true for those who don't identify with any religion at all. The issue is fraught with political peril because of the prominent role of faith in American public life.

As recently as 2007, former California Democratic Rep. Pete Stark caused a stir when he referred to himself as "a



Unitarian who does not believe in a supreme being," a statement that led atheist groups to claim he was the first member of Congress to say publicly that he did not believe in God.

During my time as editor of the Almanac of American Politics, I discovered the sensitivity of the issue firsthand the thorniest, and testiest, conversations with members or their staffs usually involved attempts to identify their faith as part of their biographical data.

In any case, the Pew numbers seem to be a sign that the taboo about religious identification is being broken and members of Congress are increasingly comfortable admitting they don't adhere to any particular faith.

A Kind Of Murder:

Ariel Ben Sherman called himself the "spiritual father" of Jessica Crank, 15, and advised her and her mother not to seek hospital care for the girl's rare form of cancer they should rely on faith and prayer for a cure. The girl died. Sherman and the mother, Jacqueline Crank, were charged with felony child neglect, and found guilty in Loudon County, Ky., of misdemeanor neglect. Sherman was fighting even that conviction, but his attorney has moved for his appeal to be dismissed because he has died of cancer, in a hospital where he had gone for treatment, at 78. "It's sad and ironic," said Loudon County Deputy District Attorney General Frank Harvey. "He lived by a different standard." (*Knoxville NewsSentinel*)

First Graders With Guns?

We all know the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun, is a first grader with a gun. Lawmakers in the Missouri state Senate are considering legislation that will require all first graders in that state to take a gun safety training course. Funding for the course would be provided by a grant from the NRA - which is more eager to get new, young customers hooked on buying guns, instead of actually preventing gun violence and accidents.



So kids will be forced to learn how to safely use guns in First Grade - yet Missouri doesn't require any sexual education classes at any age. And considering that Missouri's young people have some of the highest STD rates in the nation - maybe lawmakers should focus on teaching kids about their body - rather than turning them into gun toting vigilantes with Batman lunch boxes.



Truthout, 31 January 2013

community throughout the year.

Inquiry: Enlightening minds of all ages and inspiring the innate human desire to learn and explore, with educational programs, world renowned publications, paranormal investigations, and even a summer camp for the young and inquisitive.

In addition, this report also updates the reader on what's been going on at CFI as an organization, including changes in staff and leadership, highlights of our presence in the media, CFI's work as a multimedia platform unto itself, as well as a listing of our major donors.

The 2012 Annual Report can be downloaded here in PDF format. Take a look back at all we achieved together in 2012, and get ready for an even more amazing 2013.

* * *

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) is a nonprofit educational, advocacy, and research organization headquartered in Amherst, New York, with executive offices in Washington, D.C. It is also home to both the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanism. The mission of CFI is to foster a secular society based on science, reason, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values. CFI's web address is www.centerforinquiry.net.

The CFI Annual Report 2012 (17 pages PDF)
<http://www.centerforinquiry.net/uploads/attachments/CFIAnnualReport2012.pdf>



What We Achieved Together in 2012: CFI Releases its First Annual Report

2012 was a momentous year for the Center for Inquiry and its affiliates. Just as national and world events confronted the secular and skeptic movements with new and unprecedented challenges and opportunities, CFI was at the center of it all, with ambitious new projects, unforgettable events, and powerful campaigns.

To encapsulate and reflect upon the year gone by, and to look with fresh eyes at 2013, the Center for Inquiry presents its Annual Report for 2012. This is the first time CFI has produced such a report, and given all that has happened and all that we have planned, 2012 proved to be a year that demanded this kind of documentation.

We tell the story of 2012 from the perspective of the three main pillars of CFI's work:

Advocacy: Working for science and secular values in public policy in areas such equal treatment for the nonreligious, church-state separation, and science-based health policy. Internationally, bringing our expertise and activism to work on behalf of the freedom of expression and combatting the persecution of nonbelievers.

Community: Building networks at the local, state, national, and international levels, as well as on college and high school campuses, providing support and camaraderie to those who seek meaningful interaction with their fellow human beings outside of religion. National conferences and dynamic local events fueled debate and discussion among a growing and dynamic freethought

The Higgs Boson Was The Top Story In 2012.

As it does each year, the journal Science picked ten breakthroughs to mark the advance of science in 2012. In the 21 Dec. 2012 issue, Editor-in-Chief Bruce Alberts reported that the Higgs boson had been chosen as the "Top Science Breakthrough in 2012." There is no immediate application for the Higgs particle in sight, but it represents a huge advance in our understanding of why the universe came out the way it did. Science seeks to trace the chain of cause and effect relationships back to a presumed first cause. The Higgs boson is causally linked to the formation of the material universe. The discovery was made with CERN's Large Hadron Collider at an operating budget of about \$1 billion per year and the efforts of thousands of scientists. By comparison the war in Afghanistan has so far cost the US \$1.2 trillion and 2000 lives with no tangible benefits.

- What's New by Robert L. Park, 16 January 2013





The Supreme Court Would Rather Not Talk About Stem Cells.

Last week the court refused to keep the government out of embryonic stem cell research, which is thought by many to be the most promising approach to the treatment of numerous human diseases.

About 20 years ago, however, anti-abortionists pushed a bill through Congress banning the use of federal funds for research on human embryos. They believed the Holy Ghost bestows a soul on the zygote at the moment of conception, making the zygote a person (see *What's New*, 8 Nov 98). The Obama administration long ago rejected this preposterous superstition, but it was kept alive by an appeal to the Supreme Court. Rejection of the appeal assures continued funding, but the delay, contrived on superstitious grounds, may have cost many lives.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 16 January 2013

Don't Replace Religion; End It

Opinion by Penn Jillette, *New York Times*, 22 January 2013

Religion cannot and should not be replaced by atheism. Religion needs to go away and not be replaced by anything. Atheism is not a religion. It's the absence of religion, and that's a wonderful thing.

Religion is not morality. Theists ask me, "If there's no god, what would stop me from raping and killing everyone I want to." My answer is always: "I, myself, have raped and killed everyone I want to ... and the number for both is zero." Behaving morally because of a hope of reward or a fear of punishment is not morality. Morality is not bribery or threats. Religion is bribery and threats. Humans have morality. We don't need religion.

Religion is faith. Faith is belief without evidence. Belief without evidence cannot be shared. Faith is a feeling. Love is also a feeling, but love makes no universal claims. Love is pure. The lover reports on his or her feelings and needs nothing more. Faith claims knowledge of a world we share but without evidence we can share. Feeling love is beautiful. Feeling the earth is 6,000 years old is stupid.

Religion is often just tribalism: pride in a group one was born into, a group that is often believed to have "God" on its side. We don't need to replace tribalism with anything other than love for all humanity. Let's do that, okay?

Religion also includes fellowship, joy, compassion, service and great music, and those can be replaced by ... fellowship, joy, compassion, service and great music.

Atheism is the absence of religion. We don't really need atheism. We just need to get rid of religion. ☚



Dog, n. A kind of additional or subsidiary Deity designed to catch the overflow and surplus of the world's worship. This Devine Being in some of his smaller and silkier incarnations, takes, in the affection of Woman, the place to which there is no human male aspirant. The Dog is a survival—and anachronism. He toils not, neither does he spin, yet Solomon in all his glory never lay upon a door-mat all day long, sun-soaked and fly-fed and fat, while his master worked for the means wherewith to purchase the idle wag of the Solomonic Tail, seasoned with a look of tolerant recognition.



The Devils Dictionary, Ambrose Bierce, 1911



Quote
* The midget fortune-teller who escaped from prison was a small medium at large.
* The soldier who survived mustard gas and pepper spray is now a seasoned veteran. *Unquote*



King David and King Solomon
King David and King Solomon
Led merry, merry lives,
With many, many lady friends
And many, many wives;
But when old age crept over them,
With many, many qualms,
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs,
And King David wrote the Psalms.
James B. Naylor



A United States For Nonbelievers?

By Herb Silverman, *The Washington Post*, 23 January 2013

At Monday's moving inauguration ceremony, President Barack Obama repeated the constitutionally prescribed oath to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

Like most but not all presidents before him, he also placed his hand on a Bible and recited the words "So help me God," which is not constitutionally required. This atheist was, of course, disappointed but not surprised at the addition.

To understand how many atheists feel about this, consider substituting "Zeus" or "Shiva" or "Allah" for "God." Like the other approximately twenty million non-religious Americans, I wish President Obama had taken his oath on the Constitution under which our nation is governed, rather than on a divisive sectarian book under which we are not governed, thanks be to Thor.

Inauguration festivities often send symbolic messages to the country, and I give two cheers to President Obama because he talked about treating people equally regardless of race, creed, gender, national origin, or sexual orientation. I liked his message, but not the justification for it which was God. What would we think if our president had said "Freedom is a gift from Odin" or we must preserve our planet because it is "commanded by Gaia, the goddess of the Earth?"

And despite the relative inclusiveness of this inaugural, Obama took a step back from his first inaugural address, during which he gave a token nod to atheists: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and nonbelievers." At Monday's inaugural, atheists and their millions of nonreligious friends were as invisible as deities.

During the many debates I've participated in about whether the United States is a Christian nation, I always referred to the authority of our godless Constitution, which makes no mention of God or Jesus. My opponents usually countered with the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, as did President Obama on Monday, stating that all men are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." However, the Declaration of Independence does not govern us. It was a call for rebellion against the British Crown. By emphasizing our unalienable rights, the founders distinguished us from

an empire that asserted the divine right of kings.

President Obama paid tribute to Abraham Lincoln during his inaugural festivities, taking the oath with his hand on Lincoln's Bible. A chorus sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" a Christian hymn that exults in "the coming of the Lord" and "the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword." Lincoln turned this song into an antislavery message. I wish President Obama had included one of my favorite Lincoln quotes: "When I do good, I feel good; when I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion."

Although President Obama tried to deliver a bipartisan message for Democrats and Republicans, I wish he had also included a bi-theological message for theists and nontheists. We who live responsible, lawful and creative lives without supernatural beliefs are the fastest growing segment of our country. We voted overwhelmingly for Obama. And as with African Americans, women, and gays, whose rights we have long supported, atheists will continue to insist on inclusion.

An invocation or closing comments by a humanist or atheist could have sent the country and the world a message that nontheist citizens are also valued. We do not ask for special treatment. Instead, we look for opportunities where religious and secular people in our community can gather for common purpose in a country with a constitution whose first three words are "We the people," not "Thou the deity." Unfortunately, President Obama's second inauguration ceremony was a missed opportunity for us.

Herb Silverman is founder and President Emeritus of the Secular Coalition for America and author of *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt*.





The Last Myth: what the revival of Apocalyptic Thinking tells us about America
by Matthew Barrett Gross and Mel Giles
(Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012)

The Devil's Finest Trick, The Human Mind's Worst a book review by Frank Miele

La plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu'il n'existe pas. - Charles Pierre Baudelaire, *Le Joueur Généreux*. [The Generous Gambler] (1869).
Translation: "The finest trick of the devil is to persuade you that he does not exist."

Charles Baudelaire was a major innovator in French literature (among those he influenced, fellow poets Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, composer Claude Debussy) and the higher artistic regard given the works of Edgar Allan Poe in his country than in Poe's may in large part be due to Baudelaire's translations. (As may also be true for those of K. D. Balmont and V. Y. Bryusov in Tsarist Russia). A contemporary, colloquial translation of his above *bòn mót* was used most memorably in the cult classic neo-noir film, *The Usual Suspects*.

Baudelaire and Keyser Söze (ranked #48 on the American Film Industries list of all time movie villains) notwithstanding, the devil's greatest trick may be to convince us that he does exist. Because if he does, he certainly can't be us or what we believe in. Therefore he must be some other person, group, nation, or belief. And since it's the devil we're after, no ways or means can be spared in routing him out and keeping him caged until the apocalyptic "final showdown" when Ultimate Good gives Ultimate Evil its final Smack Down.

The point to be made is that without some form of existential (d)evil, existential fear of an apocalypse is at a minimum diminished and at maximum rendered meaningless. But if accepted, apocalypticism can be downright dangerous. And that's the take home lesson and significant contribution of *The Last Myth*. Authors

Gross and Giles entertainingly and informatively, if at times breezily, explain why what they term "apocalyptic thinking," which they define as "a pattern of thought that assumes that end of our way of life (if not physically the end of the world itself) is imminent" (pp. 11-12) has undermined "our ability to gauge the magnitude of the global challenges rushing towards us" (p. 28). In supporting their thesis, they document that "apocalypticism" is neither "built into the human brain," nor has it been present always and everywhere, and that even where well rooted (notably the United States from the outset) it has waxed and waned depending on other factors.

In making their case, the authors compare and contrast the optimistic decade of the 1990s, kicked off and epitomized by Francis Fukuyama's 1989 article, "The End of History," which argued that with the fall of Soviet communism all political questions had been solved and so liberal democracy would reign peacefully throughout the world, with what they term, "The Apocalyptic Decade" which exploded from lower Manhattan to worldwide cable TV news on September 11, 2001 and, in the minds of many, will end in a worldwide catastrophe at the end of the Mayan long cycle on December 21, 2012 or thereabouts. (They review the evidence, also covered in *Skeptic Magazine* 15.2, that this is a misinterpretation of the Mayan "long cycle"; my own favorite hypothesis is that Meso-Americans simply ran out of stone.)

Among the most interesting items covered in *The Last Myth* is Todd Strandberg's Rapture Index. An Air Force retiree and born-again Christian, Strandberg developed the Index in the 1980s, not to specify when the Rapture is coming, since "no man knows the day or the hour" (Matthew 24:36) and an endless string of pseudo-exegetes have turned out to be super stupid trying, but what is the trajectory of events portending the Tribulation ("the tumultuous days prophesied in the Bible that would precede the return of Christ"). Is it accelerating, decelerating, or remaining the same?

And what really are the signs of the end times? Among those considered for the Rapture Index are such obvious markers straight out of the Book of Revelation: False Christs, the Occult, Satanism, Apostasy, False Prophets, Gog (read Russia), Persia (read Iran), the Kings of the East, the Mark of the Beast, Beast Government, and, of course, The Antichrist, as well as Anti-Semitism and Israel (though these had somewhat



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different valence and interpretation among Bible Belters not that long ago); but also some more often associated with the *Wall Street Journal* such as Unemployment, Inflation, Interest Rates, and Oil Price; or the Weather Channel such as: Volcanoes, Earthquakes, “Wild Weather,” Famine, Drought, Climate, and Floods.

Giles and Gross note that Strandberg became frustrated because the various apocalyptic timekeepers gave “wild and wildly varying interpretations -- to the daily news” and couldn’t even agree whether “earthquakes were increasing or decreasing in frequency.” They note his consternation upon realizing that, “If people can’t even count something as simple as tectonic movements of the earth, what yardstick would they possibly use to measure something like apostasy?” (pp. 29, 217, n. 14).

For all its virtues, the authors of *The Last Myth* fall victim to the very sort of thinking they warn against, perhaps understandably so given that, like all authors, they want to sell their book. They too easily divide time periods (decades, even centuries), authors, and world-views into neat, little pigeonholes of Apocalypticism versus Pragmatism. In discussing Francis Fukuyama and his landmark article, “The End of History” they write, “it’s important to remember the earnestness of the delusion that we had escaped history—a delusion that spread from Washington to the NASDAQ to the Top 40 charts—for it represents the starting point in our bipolar shift in consciousness toward apocalyptic despair. Our exuberant optimism would soon boomerang back at us. From the highest hopes come the deepest disappointments” (p.23). Then they go on that, “Indeed, Y2K established the tone for the decade to follow” (p. 28).

No. Widespread apocalypticism did not undermine the greater society’s ability to gauge the magnitude of that “oncoming challenge.” It’s true that media evangelists did churn out booklets with titles like Y2K = 666? (note the escape hatch question mark) which implied that a worldwide crash of communications and computer systems could be the start of the end, and they made real money selling them to their believers. But at the same time real businesses, from Fortune 500 corporations down, with real interests made the necessary changes to software and documentation that prevented even the slightest glitch; and many of us in IT made real money implementing them.

Further, in the interests of being evenhanded, Gross

and Gilles stretch their hands a bit too far. They criticize not only the Doomsday Sayers of the Religious Right, but also Nobel Laureate and former Vice President Al Gore and Jared Diamond for their works on climate change and ecology. Nor is sufficient attention given to the demographics of Apocalypticism. What are the age, race, religious, educational, sexual, political, and marital characteristics of those who believe versus those that do not.

With those reservations, however, *The Last Myth* is still worth reading, especially for those wanting to begin taking a skeptical look at a subject that fully deserves one. ☘



Some Punny Puns

* The fattest knight at King Arthur's round table was Sir Cumference. He acquired his size from too much pi.



* I thought I saw an eye doctor on an Alaskan island, but it turned out to be an optical Aleutian .

* A rubber band pistol was confiscated from algebra class, because it was a weapon of math disruption.

* No matter how much you push the envelope, it'll still be stationery.

* A grenade thrown into a kitchen in France would result in Linoleum Blownapart.

* Two silk worms had a race. They ended up in a tie.

* A hole has been found in the nudist camp wall. The police are looking into it.

* Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.

* Atheism is a non-prophet organization.

* Two hats were hanging on a hat rack in the hallway. One hat said to the other: “You stay here; I'll go on a head.”



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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.

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