

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 15 Issue 1

January 2006

## January FIG Meeting: Tuesday, 24 January

### The issue and article about NOMA

Speaker: Professor Wolf Roder

In the March 1997 issue of the magazine *Natural History* the well-known Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould published an essay on "Nonoverlapping Magisteria." In it Gould asserted that science and religion are valid, but separate ways of knowing which do not overlap or contradict each other. Under the abbreviation NOMA this essay has been and continues to be widely discussed.

Roder will explain just what Gould asserted in the article, and what NOMA means. He will explain further why Gould is wrong, and incidentally describe why religion is not believable. At least why he, Roder, doesn't believe it. He even has doubt that the religious people believe it. Then he will explain why or in what way Gould is right, even though he, Gould, specifically wrote that, that is not why he wrote the article.

Wolf Roder is Professor Emeritus of Geography at the University of Cincinnati.

### February FIG Meeting

Tuesday, 28 February 2006

Professor Gene Kritsky will speak on: **A Darwinian Menagerie.**

This will be an illustrated examination of the animals that inspired and helped explain Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection.

Gene Kritsky, PhD, is Editor of the *American Entomologist* and Professor of Biology at the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati.

### For Good Food and Great Talk - Host a Potluck!

This is an opportunity to open your cherished home for up to 20 people on the second Tuesday (or so) of the month from about 6:30 to about 9 PM. Your guests will provide the food, if you provide plates (paper is ok), silverware (plastic is okay) and drinks with cups (& ice). The first Tuesday we have open is for February, with more potlucks available for 2006.

If you would like to host a potluck and have additional questions or would like to volunteer, please contact Donna Loughry to discuss dates and place. **Enjoy Great Talk & Food - Host a Potluck!**

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## Events

(Watch the dates!)

### January Potluck

Tuesday 10 January 2006  
6:30 PM at the home of

### January Meeting

Tuesday, 24 January 2006  
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio

### February Potluck

*No Potluck for February. Spend time with your sweetheart.*

### February Meeting

Tuesday, February 2006  
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio





## December Meeting...



### Some Recent Speculations on the Nature and Function of Religion

Bill Jensen, Oesper Professor of the History of Chemistry at UC

Bill approached the speculations he discusses through the work of three different thinkers: David Stove, an Australian philosopher, most noted for his criticisms of the ways in which much twentieth century philosophy has been subverted to the task of undermining science and reason. The second is Steward Guthrie, a Professor of Anthropology at Fordham University, whose views on religion are taken from his 1993 volume, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. The third speculator is Paul Thagard, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Waterloo in Canada. His observations on religion are taken from his 2000 volume, *Coherence in Thought and Action*.

As for Stove, he was an acknowledged atheist and materialist. He gives his personal opinions or observations on the nature of religion, rather than attempting a formal theory based on empirical evidence. These opinions appear in an article entitled "Idealism: A Victorian Horror Story, Part I" which, in turn, is printed in a collection of essays entitled *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies* (1991). He answers the question, "What is the origin of religion?" as follows:

Hegel held that animals have no religion, but against that, Darwin (and others before him) said that, to a dog his master is a god. If this is true, it is to the credit of canine intelligence, since the evidence for this theism is obvious and overwhelming. But where is the evidence for our belief that we are somebody's cattle? What is there that could even have rationally suggested this belief to our minds... what on earth, or in the sky, or in the sea, could have given the cleverest species of animals on earth reason to believe that it wasn't the cleverest? That it ranks only third, or tenth (or whatever subordinate degree your religion assigns us to) in the order of intelligent beings? I have never met with a satisfactory answer to this question, or even with a promising answer.

Stove does not attempt to disguise his own opinions on this matter.

Religious beliefs are discreditable, and about equally discreditable to our heads and to our hearts: the beliefs are irrational, and the emotion from which they spring is bad

What is original here are not the arguments from irrationalism—any book on atheism by a philosopher (e.g. George Smith) will spell out in great detail the rational reasons why religion is defective – but it is the argument from emotion, which is novel. The emotion he refers to is spelled out in the following paragraph:

The irrationality of the beliefs consists in their being groundless, and inconsistent with other beliefs, which we know to be true. The bad emotion behind religion is, nearly enough, that "restless appetite for applause" which, as Hume said, Christianity ascribes to the deity: although it ought really be ascribed only to ourselves.



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

figleaves@fuse.net;

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

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# FIG LEAVES



In other words, religion is emotionally based on a deep-seated tendency for humans to be “attention junkies:”

... our care absorbing system is underfed absolutely, always and extremely. It is simply impossible for us ever to have enough interest taken in us...If you lie face-up in the open air on a clear night, you are suddenly reminded that, in a line drawn from your face outwards, there is nothing, however near or far, which takes or even could take the smallest interest in you. The reminder is extremely disagreeable while it lasts, and it is therefore fortunate that any optical barrier- clouds, a roof, or even closing your eyes –is sufficient to interrupt it.

Not only does the physical environment fail to satisfy our need for attention; the same is largely true of our human environment:

And even the best of human environments is far more like the void of space than we can bring ourselves to realize. How many people are there to feel, or could feel any interest in you? A few kindred, a few friends; perhaps if you are a writer, a few readers. How many non-people? Well you may have a dog or two. That is as far as it goes at the very best. How little way it goes at the worst, and how common the worst is: these are among the many things which are not to be told to those, such as the young, who are fortunate enough not to know them. This is the emotional source of religious belief.

There is fundamentally no difference between the lonely child with its imaginary playmate and the lonely adult with his guardian angel or his friend in Jesus -- or, for that matter between either of these and the young girl who wants to be the perpetual center of attention by becoming a cheerleader, fashion model, movie actress or recording star.

With all this, Stove is careful to note that neither human behavior nor religion is always driven by a desire for positive and loving attention:

Of course the gods are not just projections of our wishes; otherwise they would all be conceived in the image of ideal parents, which is notoriously not the case. Religious beliefs are, quite naturally, subject to some broad empirical constraints, including ones supplied by hostile and dangerous elements of our environment. Besides, what humans want from superintelligent agents is not

necessarily love, or protection, or sustenance, it is necessarily attention. Even hostile attention is better than no attention at all. It is a version of the vulgarism, “There is no such thing as bad publicity.”

One of the perpetual criticisms of humanism offered by religious conservatives is that it deals in the unspeakable conceit that humans are the most intelligent life form known. But does this not pale before the conceit of the religious that a superintelligent, all powerful, infinite being has nothing better to do than with its time than to be enthralled by



our petty concerns and needs? To believe this is to act, as Stove claims, on a fundamentally bad or at least not very admirable, emotional impulse.

Bill then turned his attention to Steward Guthrie’s thesis that religion is rooted in the human tendency to anthropomorphize. Guthrie is a Professor of Anthropology at Fordham University. His views on religion are taken from his

1993 volume, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*.

Guthrie’s major thesis is that religion is heavily and unavoidably rooted in the human tendency to anthropomorphize, i.e., in the tendency to attribute human physical features, emotions, and motivations to non-human objects, whether living (e.g. other animals) or nonliving. Unlike previous writers (Hume, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, etc.) who have linked anthropomorphism with religion, and who speculate that this tendency is based on the desire for familiarity

or comfort, Guthrie argues that anthropomorphism has a biological basis which has been programmed into us by evolution and is rooted in our survival tactics as social animals:

Anthropomorphism may best be explained as the result of an attempt to see not what we want to see or what is easy to see, but what is important to see, i.e. what may affect us for better or worse.





In other words, other humans are simultaneously our most important allies in the struggle for existence and our most dangerous enemies. It is in our best interests for survival to have evolved a highly developed ability to detect both their presence and to infer their moods. In support of this, Guthrie cites psychological studies of both children and adults:

Developmental psychologists show that children and even infants interpret phenomena as humanlike, as caused by humans or both. In sum, the research shows that a generalized anthropomorphism is spontaneous in children and persists in adults.

Guthrie is, of course, not the first to develop an anthropomorphic theory of religion. Perhaps his most famous predecessor is the German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, who essentially argued that God is created in the image of man – in short, that God or the Gods are a reification of a given society’s psychological and ethical values.

All of these previous writers have argued that this anthropomorphism was driven by a psychological desire for familiarity or comfort. Guthrie argues that it goes deeper than this – that in fact we have no real choice in this matter. We are biologically programmed to think in this manner and any other alternative is essentially impractical.

Just as scientists and philosophers have fought a continuous battle to eradicate anthropomorphism from science and philosophy, so modern theologians have attempted to do the same with religion, arguing that attributing human behavior and motives to God debases religion. The net result of this, however is to make God into an unintelligible, unsympathetic abstraction, and generally – despite official doctrine to the contrary – most members of a given religion indulge in a highly anthropomorphized version

of God as a father figure, or else substitute in his place lesser supernatural personages, more easily envisioned in human form, such as the Virgin Mary, assorted saints, or guardian angels.



Bill next considered Paul Thagard’s observations on religion taken from the volume, *Coherence in Thought and Action* (2000). He is interested in cognitive science, that is, in questions of how we construct mental concepts and act on them – an area of philosophy that heavily overlaps with psychology.

In particular, Thagard is interested in the role of coherence in concept formation and action. In other words, are the underlying assumptions of a given concept or view mutually compatible? Are its deductions and explanations logically related to its initial assumptions? Are they consistent with the facts of the external world or the behavior, which they seek to explain, etc., etc.

For most ideas or concepts, the number of interrelationships between assumptions, deductions, explanations, external facts and observed behaviors which must be simultaneously optimized in order to evaluate the overall coherence can be quite large. Thus if assumptions 1 and 2 are initially coherent, but it is later found that a deduction from assumption 2 is inconsistent with assumption 1, how does this affect the initial coherence between the two assumptions?

Thagard is interested in being able to reduce this complexity to a quantitative Index that will give us an overall rating of the total coherence of an idea, concept or world view. In order to achieve this, he has developed a series of computational algorithms, which allow a computer to evaluate the relative coherence of a concept if given a list of its initial assumptions or hypotheses, its deductive explanations, and the relevant external evidence for each.

Most relevant to our interests, however, is its application to three competing metaphysical world views, which Thagard calls:

**Materialism:** single causality based on the assumption that all phenomena, including mental or psychic, are reducible to the interactions of matter and energy.

**Dualism:** two kinds of causality – material and spiritual. In other words, mind or soul is separate from body, is not⇒





constrained by the same physical laws, and may survive the death of the body.

**Theism:** all causality is ultimately due to God, who can subvert normal physical causality if he so chooses (miracles).

Though dualism need not necessarily imply theism and vice versa, Thagard recognizes that these two views are generally linked together, at least in Western religions:

Dualism and theism are usually discussed in isolation from each other. But both psychologically and logically they go together. I have not conducted a survey, but I suspect that virtually all theists are dualists and almost all dualists are theists, whereas materialists are typically atheists.

After first listing the respective assumptions or hypotheses of each view, their deductive explanations, and the relevant external evidence for each, he submits them to his coherence algorithms with the result that materialism displays a positive coherence rating, whereas both dualism and theism display negative ratings.

-- Submitted by George Maurer  
⌘



## Bush kills deep space climate observatory in political retaliation

Triana was never able to overcome its roots. NASA has quietly terminated what may have been its most important science mission. Critics of programs to limit emissions argue that climate change is caused by solar variation, not by atmospheric changes.

There is one unambiguous way to tell: locate an observatory at L-1, the neutral-gravity point between Earth and Sun. It would have a continuous view of the sunlit face of Earth in one direction, and the Sun in the other, thus constantly monitoring Earth's albedo.

Al Gore initiated the observatory project in 1998 to inspire school children with a continuous view of climate unfolding on our fragile planet. It was even given a poetic name, Triana, the sailor on the Santa Maria who was first to sight the New World. But Triana's importance to climate research, perhaps Earth's biggest challenge, was not recognized until later. With urging from the National Academy, it was finished in 2001 and given a new name. It was still waiting to be launched when Columbia crashed. By

then we had a new President and a new *vision*. It was put on hold. The official reason for killing it is *competing priorities*.

The priority is to replace Gore's vision of the world with the Bush vision of sending people back to the moon. We should all weep.

– *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 6 January 2006

## Which god caused Ariel Sharon's strokes?

Television evangelist Pat Robertson had previously called for hurricanes to be unleashed on sinful Florida, and told residents of Dover, after they voted out the school board, not to bother turning to God if disaster strikes, because "you just ejected him from your city."

Yesterday, Robertson suggested to his audience that Ariel Sharon's stroke was divine punishment for "dividing God's Land." Meanwhile, Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had already declared that the holocaust never happened and Israel should be wiped off the map, told a group of Muslim clerics that he hopes Sharon perishes.

– *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 6 January 2006

## Papillomavirus vaccine intercepted by the grinch.

*What's New's* item on the new vaccine drew a lot of mail from readers who found it hard to believe that there is opposition to its use. After all, human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted viral infection in the U.S., and the cause of almost all cervical cancers. At least half of U.S. adults have been infected, though not all with the deadliest strains. It's even more serious in developing countries where screening is not available.

Nevertheless, *New Scientist* magazine quotes Bridget Maher of the Family Research Council, a leading Christian lobby group: "Giving the HPV vaccine to young women could be potentially harmful because they may see it as a licence to engage in premarital sex." While hailing the vaccine as a great medical advance, the Family Research Council is concerned that widespread inoculation would infringe on parental consent or perhaps it would infringe on divine retribution.

– *What's New*, Robert L. Park, 6 January 2006

The **Cincinnati Atheists Meetup** Group has an event in two weeks.

Tuesday, January 17 at 8:00PM

Joseph-Beth Booksellers 2692 Madison Rd.

In the Rookwood Pavillion

Cincinnati OH 45207

513-396-8966



## Creationists Lawsuit on University of California

As a lawsuit against the University of California system wends its way through the legal system -- with a hearing on a motion to dismiss the complaint to be heard in federal court in Los Angeles on December 12, 2005 -- the media are taking notice of it again. The suit charges the University of California system with violating the constitutional rights of applicants from Christian schools whose high school course work is deemed inadequate preparation for college. Creationism is involved, since the plaintiffs cite the university's policy of rejecting high school biology courses that use textbooks published by Bob Jones University Press and A Beka Books as "inconsistent with the viewpoints and knowledge generally accepted in the scientific community" in their complaint. One of the lawyers representing the plaintiffs is Wendell Bird, a former staff attorney for the Institute for Creation Research. "The case is being closely tracked by free speech advocates, public educators and Christian leaders who are concerned about the impact the case could have on state school admissions policies and the ability of some Christian schools to teach their core beliefs," wrote Matt Krasnowski in the San Diego Union-Tribune (November 23, 2005). Krasnowski interviewed a variety of experts for his story, including lawyers on both sides of the case, Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center (who speculated that the plaintiffs might have a valid case), Barmak Nassirian of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (who is worried about a subsequent wave of similar cases), and NCSE's Glenn Branch (who was quoted as saying, "I don't think the UC is insisting that

incoming students accept evolution ... They want them to have a good understanding of it.")

In his syndicated column for the Sacramento Bee (November 23, 2005), Peter Schrag reviewed the recent controversies in Dover, Pennsylvania, and Kansas before reminding his readers that "California isn't immune" and describing the lawsuit in detail. (He notes that the preparers of one of the books at issue, Bob Jones University's Biology for Christian Schools, write in the introduction that they "have tried consistently to put the Word of God first and science second.") "Still UC is taking the suit seriously, concerned that it might compromise its right to set its admission standards," Schrag concludes. "More important, according to UC spokesperson Ravi Poorsina, is the worry that the suit will create an impression that the university doesn't welcome students from Christian schools, something that she says simply isn't true. It could also bring another *fatwa* from Pat Robertson."

For NCSE's previous coverage of the case, visit:

[http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2005/CA/393\\_university\\_of\\_california\\_syste\\_9\\_8\\_2005.asp](http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2005/CA/393_university_of_california_syste_9_8_2005.asp)

[http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2005/CA/279\\_creationist\\_lawsuit\\_against\\_uc\\_10\\_7\\_2005.asp](http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2005/CA/279_creationist_lawsuit_against_uc_10_7_2005.asp)

For the story in the San Diego Union-Tribune, visit:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/state/20051123-1631-cnsuc-lawsuit.html>

For Peter Schrag's column in the Sacramento Bee, visit:

<http://www.sacbee.com/content/opinion/story/13895998p-14734821c.html>

### The Evolutionary War

President Bush recently suggested that public schools should teach Intelligent Design alongside the theory of evolution because, after all, evolution is, quote, "just a theory." Then the president renewed his vow to drive the terrorists straight over the edge of the earth.

I'm sorry, folks, but it may very well be that life is just a series of random events and that there is no master plan. But enough about Iraq, let me instead restate my thesis. There aren't necessary two sides to every issue. If there were, the Republicans would have an opposition party. And an opposition party would point out that even though there is a debate in schools and government about this, there is no

debate among scientists.

Evolution is supported by the entire scientific community; Intelligent Design is supported by guys in line to see *The Dukes of Hazard*. No! Stupidity isn't a form of knowing things . . . "Babies come from storks" is not a competing school of thought in medical training. We shouldn't teach both and if Thomas Jefferson knew we were blurring the line this much between church and state, he would turn over in his slave.

Now as for me, I believe in Evolution and in Intelligent Design. I think God designed us in his image, but I also think God is monkey.

– ascribed to Bill Maher





## CAMP QUEST - A camp experience for young humanists and freethinkers.

Camp Quest, the secular summer camp, is now accepting registrations from prospective campers for its summer 2006 session. Camp Quest is the first residential summer camp in the history of the United States for the children of Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, and Freethinkers.

Camp Quest 2006 will be held at our wonderful location obtained in 2002-YMCA Camp Campbell Gard, outside Cincinnati. The dates are **July 15<sup>th</sup> - July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006**.

The fee for this year's camp is \$550 for one camper and \$500 for each additional sibling from the same family unit. Fees must be paid in full by June 15, 2006.

Register with payment before January 31 and you will be eligible for a \$50 reduction off of the regular fees. Ages for campers are 8 to 17.



Apply early to reserve your spot for a camp experience that combines reason, science, and critical inquiry with such traditional camp activities as swimming, high ropes, crafts, nature study, and camp food. We expect the bunks to fill up early. When full, we are full. The two invisible unicorns are still there-with a prize, as yet unclaimed, of a godless \$100 bill for any camper who can prove they aren't there.

For additional information and registration forms, visit [www.camp-quest.org](http://www.camp-quest.org) or contact [registrar@camp-quest.org](mailto:registrar@camp-quest.org)

Shawn Jeffers; Education Coordinator  
Photographs courtesy of Edwin Kagin.



## Science Book Club - Schedule for 2006

Science book club as in past years plans on meeting at the Cincinnati Downtown Library on the 4th Sunday of each month at 2:30pm in Room 3A, except on the 3rd Sunday where conflicts with holidays occur as noted below and in May in Room 3B because of a room schedule conflict.

**Jan 22** - *The Wisdom Paradox: The New Science of Wisdom and How the Mind Can Grow Stronger as We Grow Older*: Elkhonon Goldberg

**Feb 26** - *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain*: Antonio Damasio

**Mar 26** - *Global Survival: The Challenge and its Implications for Thinking and Acting* ed. by Ervin Laszlo & Peter Seidel

**Apr.23** - a discussion on "Problem Solving (approaches and techniques)" from short articles

**May 21** (third Sunday in Room 3B) - *Fly: The Unsung Hero of Twentieth Century Science*: Martin Brookes

**June 25** - *Silent Sky: the incredible extinction of the passenger pigeon*: Allan Eckert

**July 23** - *Ohio Archaeology an illustrated chronicle of Ohio's ancient American Indian cultures*: Bradley T. Lepper

**Aug 27** - *On Intelligence* Jeff Hawkins

**Sept 24** - *Economics in Perspective, A Critical History*: John Kenneth Galbraith

**Oct 22** - *The "God" Part of the Brain*: Matthew Alper

**Nov 19** (third Sunday)- *Black Holes and Time Warps: Einstein's outrageous legacy*: Kip Thorne

**Dec 17** (third Sunday) - *Science of Aliens*: Clifford Pickover – Bryan Sellers



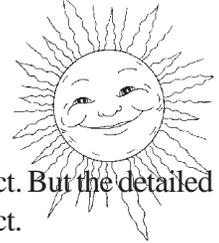


## From Dover, PA...

### Judge finds: Intelligent design is re-labeled creationism

*New Scientist* .com news service, 21 December 2005

by Kurt Kleiner



A Pennsylvania judge's ruling against intelligent design legally applies only to a single school district. But the detailed critique of the arguments in favor of intelligent design could have a far-reaching legal and political impact.

Judge John Jones of the US District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania ruled on Tuesday that requiring intelligent design in public school science lessons amounts to promotion of religion, and is therefore unconstitutional. In doing so, he sided with mainstream science organizations and rebutted almost every argument made in favor of intelligent design, calling it the "progeny of creationism".

"Intelligent design is about religion, and this ruling makes it very clear," said Tammy Kitzmiller, one of the eleven parents who filed the suit against the Dover District School Board in December 2004.

But the Discovery Institute, a Seattle think tank which promotes the idea of intelligent design, dismissed Jones as an "activist judge" trying to censor legitimate scientific debate.

"The empirical evidence for design, the facts of biology and nature, can't be changed by legal decree," said John West, associate director of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, in a written statement.

#### Voted off

The decision is only legally binding within the Pennsylvania Middle District. But Richard Katskee, a lawyer who helped bring the suit, says other judges are likely to be influenced by the decision if they face similar cases. And Witold Walczak, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, said the decision might convince other school boards to avoid requiring intelligent design in the first place.

An appeal seems unlikely, since the board members who advocated the policy were voted off in November, in favor of candidates who opposed teaching intelligent design as science.

The Dover lawsuit was the first to challenge the constitutionality of teaching intelligent design. But in November, the Kansas Board of Education changed science standards to incorporate elements of intelligent design. And in August President George W Bush said he

thought that intelligent design should be taught along with evolution in schools.

#### Pandas and people

Intelligent design says that some features of the universe and living things can not be accounted for by natural causes, but instead show signs of being designed by an intelligent agent.

The suit was filed after the Dover school board told teachers to read a statement to high school biology students that said, among other things, that the evolution was a theory, not a fact, and that intelligent design was a competing explanation.

The statement encouraged students to keep "an open mind" and referred them an intelligent design book called *Of Pandas and People*. After science teachers refused to read the statement, administrators read it to students instead.

#### "Breathtaking inanity"

Judge Jones found that the school board had acted from religious motives, and castigated them for the "breathtaking inanity" of their decision. And he concluded that intelligent design is not science, but merely creation science in disguise. The US Supreme Court ruled in 1987 that creation science was a religious concept, not a scientific idea, and could not be mandated in public schools.

In reaching the decision, Judge Jones relied heavily on the history of the writing of *Of Pandas and People*. The book was first published in 1989, just two years after the Supreme Court ruled against creation science. He found that early drafts of the book referred heavily to creationism and creation science. But sometime after the

1987 decision, references to creation and creationism were replaced throughout the book by references to intelligent design – about 150 times in all. "The overwhelming evidence at trial established that intelligent design is a religious view, a mere re-labeling of creationism, and not a scientific theory," he wrote.

#### Supernatural force

Judge Jones found that intelligent design fails to qualify as science for a number of reasons. For one thing, it violates a fundamental rule that science seeks explanations in the natural world, with no need to invoke a supernatural force. Since intelligent design requires a designer working outside of natural processes, it is by definition not science.

He was also critical of the intelligent design argument of "irreducible complexity" – the idea that some features of living things could not have arisen from simpler constituents, but must have been created whole.

He says that the examples offered by intelligent designers, such as the immune system and the blood clotting process, do in fact have natural explanations. But even if they did not, that would merely be an argument against evolution, not necessarily for intelligent design.

He also dismissed the idea that science classes should teach the controversy over intelligent design as a way to promote critical thought. "The goal of the intelligent design movement is not to encourage critical thought, but to foment a revolution which would supplant evolutionary theory with intelligent design," he wrote.





## The Religious Right's Phony War On Christmas: Myth making in action

(An Americans United Report)

Religious Right leaders and their allies in the right-wing news media claim there is a “war on Christmas.” To prove their charge, they have rolled out a series of allegations involving bias against Christmas by government officials and public schools. Researchers at Americans United for Separation of Church and State looked into the most common examples of supposed hostility toward Christmas and found them largely baseless.

**Religious Right claim:** The Saginaw, Mich., Township schools oppose red and green clothes and prohibit singing Christmas songs.

**Response:** Superintendent Jerry Seese says no such policies exist and pointed out that the school’s color is green.

**Religious Right claim:** Watchung, N.J. they have begun referring to their Christmas tree as a “Mitten Tree” and have replaced ALL references to Christmas with “Holiday.”

**Response:** Mayor Albert Ellis said the “Tree of Lights” (not a mitten tree) is sponsored by the local rescue squad as a fundraiser. The tree is placed in the town green and people can buy a light in honor of or in memory of someone. The town has been doing it for 15 years and no one has ever raised an issue. The town also negotiated a holiday display policy with the two local churches and developed a policy so private citizens can erect holiday displays. There is no conflict in the community over this.

**Religious Right claim:** A Plano, Texas, school told the students they could not wear red and green because they were Christmas colors.

**Response:** A spokeswoman for the district said this is not true and never has been true. She expressed frustration that this story continues to circulate and said she does not know its origin. The school debunks the claim on its website and instructed its attorney to write to Bill O’Reilly, requesting a correction.

**Religious Right claim:** Ridgeway, Wisc., elementary school’s “winter program” has changed the name of “Silent

Night” to “Cold in the Night.” Sung to the tune of “Silent Night,” the lyrics now read: “Cold in the night, no one in sight, winter winds whirl and bite, how I wish I were happy and warm, safe with my family out of the storm.”

**Response:** The school is not located in “Ridgeway” Wisconsin but is named Ridgeway Elementary School in the town of Dodgeville, Wisc. This school has several times over the past 18 years presented a play titled “The Little Tree’s Christmas Gift.” The play, copyrighted in 1988, is about a scraggly Christmas tree that worries it will not find a home for Christmas; it uses several Christmas carols with different lyrics to make it easier for children to learn the words. “Silent Night” was not rewritten by the school because of its religious content. Diane Messer, administrator of the Dodgeville School District, said, “Somebody totally misunderstood and had the belief that one of our teachers took it upon herself to rewrite the words to ‘Silent Night.’ This program is well within our district’s policy which allows us the use of both religious and secular content in our curriculum and in our productions and performances.” The school has posted an item on its Web site calling the entire story “a fraud.” (See [www.dsd.k12.wi.us](http://www.dsd.k12.wi.us) and click on “News & Information.”)

**Religious Right claim:** The Glendale-River Hills School District in Wisconsin has expressly prohibited any song close to the Christmas holiday from having any religious “motive or theme.” While banning Christian Christmas songs, the district permits secular holiday songs as well as songs celebrating Hanukkah

**Response:** The district says this is not true. It has posted a notice on its website reading, “Recently, there have been a number of reports in the media that the upcoming Holiday Program at the Parkway School doesn’t include songs or music recognizing the Christian religious tradition. This is simply not the case.” The school also posted the holiday program on its site. Songs being sung include “Angels We Have Heard on High” and “I Saw Three Ships.”

**Religious Right claim:** The Raleigh, N.C., town council has recently voted to erect a Christmas display on public property (which includes a Nativity scene, snowmen, reindeer and a menorah). Apparently the ACLU has



contacted the city attorney to let him know they'd fight it.

**Response:** *This display was erected by a private religious group, not the city. North Carolina ACLU Executive Director Jennifer Rudinger says her group never threatened to sue and does not oppose this type of balanced display.*

**Religious Right claim:** A kindergarten room-mother in Niskayuna, N.Y., was informed that the Christmas party was changed to a "Holiday" party and that no one was to send in any treats that had any religious connotation attached. No Christmas-shaped cookies, no angels. She was directed to "think snowman."

**Response:** *Superintendent Kevin Baughman says this is not true. He said the district is diverse and that it recognizes several holidays.*

**Religious Right claim:** Christmas concert has songs in which the words are changed to avoid referring to Christmas and even replaces the word Christmas with "xmas" in Mine Hill, N.J.

**Response:** *The school's spokeswoman says this is not true.*

**Religious Right claim:** The Jackson County, Ga., school district has prohibited teachers from wearing "any pins, angels, crosses, clothing" that contain any religious connotation or affiliation, referring to any party as a "Christmas" party, or displaying a Bible in their rooms.

**Response:** *The district has no such policy. The superintendent sent a message to principals reminding them not to include religious material in class unless it was tied to a lesson plan. One principal misunderstood and told teachers to stop wearing religious jewelry. The district quickly clarified the policy.* ☘

## Quote

The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.

– Thomas Jefferson to John Adams (11 April 1823)

## Unquote

### A No Brainer

In religion, there is no place at all  
For any common sense, as I recall.  
You're told god watches over all your life,  
No matter all the misery and strife.

See, god will compensate all that one day.  
Of course, you must die first, but anyway,  
He'll send you up to heaven on a cloud,  
Where you'll be happy in spite of the crowd.

Now please, what idiot will believe all that?  
Who'd even want such crappy habitat?  
According to the Bible, heaven's dull.  
It's white, no food or trees, what's more it's full.

The Bible says it's such a little place.  
God didn't plan ahead.. What a disgrace.  
You must have faith, and leave your brain behind,  
You have to worship god, but not be kind.

God owns all things, but yet he needs your dough,  
Give up the ten percent he says you owe.  
Religion does demand a lot of fear,  
And blind obedience god does hold dear.

The whole of the god myth is quite obtuse,  
And, forcing it on kids is child abuse.

– Dorothy B. Thompson (March 1999)



An English bishop happened to drop in on one of his vicars at the start of a confirmation class and accepted his invitation to stay and listen to the candidates that were soon to be presented to him. The vicar asked one of the girls to define the state of matrimony. "It's a state of terrible torment which those who enter are compelled to undergo for a time to prepare them for a better world," she replied nervously.

"No, no, my dear," said the vicar. "That's not matrimony. That's the definition of purgatory."

"Never mind," commented the bishop, "perhaps the child has been shown the light."



BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas
by Elaine Pagels
(New York: Random House, 2003)

Elaine Pagels is one of the foremost scholars of the scriptures of early Christianity. She is particularly well known for her interpretation of the gnostic writings discovered in Egypt in 1945. She has published a book on The Gnostic Gospels and on The Origin of Satan who barely appears in the Old Testament. She has further authored a gnostic interpretation of Paul's letters, and a volume on God, the Mother, in early Christianity. In the present volume she examines the Gospel of Thomas by considering it in opposition to the Gospel of John, and explains why John was chosen for the New Testament, while Thomas was destroyed.

The church father Irenaeus (140-202 AD) fought the gnostics and explained the orthodox Jesus. Matthew shows Jesus as a god appointed king, who can trace his family to David; Luke emphasizes his role as a priest, and Mark depicts him as god's prophet. All these are human roles in which Jesus is merely given special divine powers. John oversteps anything human found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Only the Gospel of John identifies Jesus as god himself. "Irenaeus declares that 'the Lord God' who created humankind in Paradise was 'our Lord Jesus Christ,' who 'was made flesh' and was hung upon the cross." (P. 152) This became the orthodox view, and it remains the orthodox view of Catholics and Protestants to this day.

What John teaches, that you must believe Jesus is god incarnate, is exactly what Thomas opposes. In fact, the two gospels may have been written about the same time, and were directed against each other. Thomas encourages everyone to seek and know god through his own personal divinely given abilities. Since all persons are created in the image of god, his light shines not only in Jesus, but in all of us. To strive to know god through our own spirit, soul, and experience was the creed of the people called gnostics - a creed which led of course to a proliferation of views and beliefs in Jesus and in god.

The Gospel of John, together with the synoptic gospels promoted the creation of a unified hierarchical Church for

later generations. Thus it became part of the orthodox creed. The Gospel of Thomas with its emphasis on each individual's search for god, led to a dispersion of creeds. Thomas does not even require revelation, a history of Jesus' miracles, or an interpretation of the crucifixion. There is no need for a divine being, who has come to earth temporarily and at a precise time in history to take on human form. All of us have the divine spark to know god and to follow his wishes and instructions.

Irenaeus wrote five volumes, Against the Heresies, because he regarded the gnostics as such. He declared himself shocked and distressed by gnostics liberal reading of the received writings. Why could people not stick to a straight forward, simple, literal reading of the texts? How could ordinary members of the congregation think they shared the insights of Jesus? What errors and ill thoughts would the gnostics pull out of their mortal minds? "To what distance above God do you lift up your imagination, you rash and inflated people?" he insists (p. 167).

Given this view of infighting in early Christianity, the construction of the New Testament from second century polemics, the suppression of disagreement by force, I wonder how anyone can continue to believe in either the New Testament or in the Jesus story. Elaine Pagels explains why she remains a believer. She clearly has much sympathy for Thomas, and for the idea of each individual's search for spiritual meaning. She speaks of the intense impact of soaring music and about compelling celebrations in her life and of consolation in loss and grief. The stories of the miraculous child born in Bethlehem - which she and most scholars regard as legend and myth - those stories can be embraced with joy and solemnity in the community of the festival.

Attending to the sounds and the silence, the candlelight and darkness, I felt the celebration take us in and break over us like the sea. When it receded, it left me no longer clinging to particular moments in the past but borne upon waves of love and gratitude that move me toward Sarah [her daughter], toward the whole community gathered there, at home, or everywhere, the dead and the living. (P. 144)

For Elaine Pagels as for Thomas, there resides spiritual meaning in the stories and myths of the scriptures.

- Wolf Roder

Quote .....
If electricity comes from electrons, does morality come
from morons? ..... Unquote.



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

# FIG

## Our Purpose

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

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



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

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

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

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail [figinfo@gofigger.org](mailto:figinfo@gofigger.org), or leave a message at (513) 557-3836. Visit our web site at [gofigger.org](http://gofigger.org).