

FIG LEAVES

Volume 14 Issue 7

July 2005

July FIG Meeting: Sunday, 24 July 7:00 PM (note Date)

What the Koran Really Says

Over the last ten years Ibn Warraq has researched the origins and nature of Islam. Raised as a Muslim, he has personal experience with Islam as well as a thorough knowledge of Islamic scholarship. He has written *Why I Am Not a Muslim* and edited four books, including *Origins of the Koran* and *What the Koran Really Says*. Ibn will summarize for us what he has learned about Islam in preparing to publish these books. He will describe the current state of research on Islam.

In the course of his remarks, Ibn will explain the conflicts between the Sunni and Shia factions. He will elucidate the term "Muslim fundamentalist" and comment on why some act in such extreme ways as suicide bombings.

Ibn Warraq is a Research Fellow at the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York. Paul Kurtz calls him one of the leading Islamic scholars in the country.

-- Joe Levee

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Nominations & Elections to the FIG Board of Directors



At our July program we will convene a brief business meeting to elect the number of FIG members required to fill the expiring terms and other vacancies. At this meeting The Board will present a slate of candidates and accept nominations from the FIG membership.

FIG Board, proposed slate:

These completed their term:

Margaret O'Kain
Nurit Bowman
Wolf Roder
Shawn Jeffers
Kathy Lyons
Helen Kagin
Arnold Wilson

These are continuing on the board:

Bill O'Kain
Joe Levee
George Maurer
Bryan Sellers
Phil Ferguson
Donna Loughry

Events (NOTE CHANGE OF DAY)

July Potluck

Sunday 17 June 2:00 PM
At the home of

July Meeting

Sunday 24 July 7:00 PM
at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio

August Picnic

Sunday 28 August 2:00 PM
At the home of



May Meeting

Mapping Our Tears: a tour of Mayerson Hall museum of Hebrew Union College. Guide and Speaker: Shawn Jeffers, Education Coordinator, Center for Holocaust and Humanity Education.

In a departure from our usual format and meeting place, Fig members assembled at the Mayerson Building on the campus of Hebrew Union College at 2:00 PM on a Sunday afternoon in May. We were greeted in the lobby by Shawn Jeffers. He explained that the purpose of the exhibits was for teacher training and preservation of the history of survivors of the Holocaust and their connection to Cincinnati. The Exhibit opened in 2000.

The lobby displays had a direct Cincinnati connection. Until the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 1938 many Jews hoped that the Nazis were a temporary aberration and stayed on in Germany. After flight became general, any place of refuge had to serve. Some fled east as far as Asia. The eastward diaspora went to three major cities; one group settled in what is now Bangladesh, another in Shanghai and a third in Manila.

The Philippines at that time were American territory and strict immigration rules applied. A Cincinnati family, the Frieders owned a cigar factory in Manila. For refugees to be admitted they had to have the promise of a job and living quarters for one year. The four Frieder brothers provided many of these guarantees and became leaders of the growing Jewish community in Manila. Eventually some 1200 people were admitted to the Philippines. In February 2005 there was a reunion of the people saved and the members of the Frieder family. Display items were contributed at that time. In 2003 Frank Ephraim described the history of this refuge in *Escape to Manila* (University of Illinois Press).



We then proceeded to the third floor to a glass case containing a *Torah*. Copying a *Torah* takes about a year as each letter is written by hand. If a mistake is made the entire section of the manuscript is discarded and must be started anew. The *sofer* who transcribes *Torah* uses a feather quill. There are several tools, which go with the *Torah*. It is never touched because the oil and acid on the human fingers would damage the writing so a *Torah*



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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pointer is used. The pointer helps the reader keep track of where he is since there are no vowels used in Hebrew writing and no punctuation.. Other tools are the *finials*, which fit at the top of the rolled up scroll and aid in its unrolling.

Jeff mentioned how Christian Churches have message boards to give the topic of the sermon and the hymns. Jewish houses of worship need no such announcement board because in every synagogue or temple the reading from the *Torah* is the same throughout the year whether the synagogue is

Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or Humanistic. The Rabbi's interpretations will differ though.

The particular *Torah* on display had belonged to the Weinberg family, a family of rabbis who made the investment in this *Torah* in 1845. It is rare for a family to own a *Torah*, but the small Jewish community in their town on the German-Dutch border encouraged the family to retain possession. In the 1930's it came into the possession of Werner Weinberg who was not a rabbi but a cantor. This *Torah* survived the war and the Nazi persecutions through a series of near miracles. In October 1938 it was removed from the synagogue for repairs by the *sopher*. During the war the *Torah* scrolls fell into the hands of the occupying Germans army. Uncharacteristically the Nazis did not desecrate and destroy it, but stored it in a warehouse to keep for a future museum display of Jewery. It was returned to the Weinbergs, who survived the war in hiding and concentration camps. The Weinberg family donated the scriptures to the College on it's hundredth anniversary.

Shawn explained the exhibits of the Jewish life cycle. Cases were arranged in half circles to illustrate

the elements from birth through *bar and bat mitzvahs* to weddings. Another half circle contains the tools and implements of the holiday and ritual cycle. He explained the meaning of the *bar and bat mitzvah*. Each child at about age 13 prepares for entry into the adult community. This requires a great deal of learning and includes a public reading of a portion of the *Torah* in the synagogue. With this ceremony each child is treated as an adult and is considered responsible for their own actions.

Displayed from the ceiling was a *huppah* or wedding canopy. There was also a copy of a wedding contract with its elaborate decorations. In contrast a divorce document is very simple without the decoration of the marriage document. A final document displayed is the memorial on the anniversary of a person's death.

The Jewish tradition expects a major responsibility in caring for the sick and dying, and obligates remembrance on the anniversary of somebody's death. In the Holocaust so many died without remembrance or ceremony or even a specific date. After Israel became a state the religion added a specific remembrance holiday called *Yom Ha Shoah*. On this day Jews are encouraged to remember their family members who were killed in the Holocaust. The holiday year starts with *Rosh Ha Shanah* or the Jewish New Year followed nine days later by *Yom Kippur*, the most solemn time during the year.



In the Spring comes Passover. It is a memory when the Jewish people were freed from slavery in Egypt. *Shibboloh* fifty days later celebrates when Moses received the first ten commandments on Mount Sinai. It is said that Passover celebrates freedom and *Shibboloh* your responsibilities.





We finally proceeded to the fourth floor, "The Attic" which was designed with things typically kept in such a place. It also contained display cases and a video theater. One case contained three uniforms typical for a prisoner of a concentration camp. It had blue stripes on a white background, it also had a number stenciled that matched the number on the hat and the number tattooed on the wrist of the victim; an American soldier's uniform was second, representing the Liberators, and the third was a guard's black uniform.

Shawn then showed us a series of videos. The first one was of two teenagers on a class assignment to try to find out what they could about the Holocaust. They discussed what they had learned from relatives and neighbors some of whom had survived the Holocaust. The video mentioned there were two countries in Europe that had saved their Jewish populations, Denmark and Bulgaria. In Denmark, the king told the Nazi occupiers that if one segment of his people had to be identified by a yellow star, they would all wear one. The Nazis then backed off briefly. Of the 7000 Jews living in Denmark 6500 were able to escape to Sweden across the narrow Sound. The Bulgarian government simply told the Germans to get lost.

Another item Shawn explained was the German passport. He showed the passport from 1933 that contained the German eagle. One year later the size of the eagle was reduced and a swastika was added. In 1936 a red "J" was added together with a new middle name, Israel for males and Sarah for females. The red J was added at the request of neutral Switzerland to identify Jews so they could know which entry to refuse. These are poignant reminders of what the Holocaust was about and the sharp lessons are worth a trip to Mayerson Hall.

—reported by George Maurer



Letters To The Editor



Dear Editor,

Your subscriber and my fellow printer Ron Roy Diesselin has kindly sent me a copy of the June 2005 number of FigLeaves. Fine material, especially the Ingersoll lead.

In my capacity as her researcher, I once proved to the satisfaction of the late Madalyn O'Hair that Ingersoll regarded himself as an atheist by producing RGI's letter of November 11, 1887 to Henry M. Field, DD, in which Harry writes, "I am exceedingly gratified that you and I have demonstrated that it is possible for a Presbyterian and an Atheist to discuss theological questions without exhibiting a theological temper."

David L. Kent, co-founder,
Atheist Community of Austin, TX

Fourth of July, 2004: A CALL TO PATRIOTISM

by Edwin Kagin at Lake Hypatia, Alabama

On this Independence Day
Hard won rights are being lost
How can we let them slip away
Are they worth less than what they cost
Shall pious lies and greed replace
Freedoms traitors now disgrace

While we pause and hesitate
While we with whining anguish cry
The wall that holds back Church from State
Crumbles as our freedoms die
Shall we stand frozen in our tears
With no resistance but our fears

Again inspire our nation's rage
Again hold back a barbarous age
Become those patriots we prize
To wake our nation from its daze
And freedom's promise realize
Expel those criminal fools and knaves
Who dare defile our martyrs' graves

© 2004 by Edwin Kagin



A Humanist Advice Column.

The long time humanist writer and editor, Molleen Matsumura, has started an advice column on the *Humanist Network News* a weekly publication of the Institute for Humanist Studies. She comments: “. . . humanism relies on reason and compassion. Reason guides our attempts to understand

the world about us. Both reason and compassion guide our efforts to apply that knowledge ethically, to understand other people, and to have ethical relationships . . .” You can find her column at <<http://humaniststudies.org/sweetreason.html>>. Clearly she is endeavoring to apply sweet reason to the problems of daily life.

Summer Conference of the *Secular Student Alliance*. Columbus, Ohio 11 - 14 August 2005 on the main Campus of The Ohio State University

Students and non-students are invited to have a wonderful and informative time at the SSA’s fifth annual conference. A purpose of the SSA conferences is to connect student and non-student populations with the Freethought movement. Details of the organization and the conference may be found on the <www.secularstudents.org> website.

The conference will unite scholars and leaders from numerous disciplines and organizations in order to foster dialog about how the growing nonreligious communities can connect with and relate to other communities. The following speakers have agreed to be at the conference:

- Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists
- Tim Gordimer, a director of the Institute for Humanist Studies
- Mynga Futrell, co-founder of the Brights network
- Mel Lipman, president A.H.A.
- Roy Speckhardt, deputy director A.H.A.
- Herb Silverman, Sec. Coalition for Am.
- Joel Pelletier, artist

Headscarves, Prayer and Religion at Work

As more and more offices begin each day with a prayer session, the Workplace Religious Freedom Act of 2005 is working its way through the Senate. Supporters argue that religious observances are primary rights of religious liberty, supercedent to other concerns in all but the most extreme

situations. Current law requires employers to make religious accommodations when the expense and inconvenience is small –reshuffling schedules to observe religious holidays, for example. The WRFA would require employers to accommodate religious beliefs, practices, and behaviors unless doing so would cause the employer undue hardship. But how far does that go? Could physicians and pharmacists deny patients certain treatments or medications? Could men refuse to work alongside menstruating women? And what constitutes uncompromisable religious belief? In a *Slate* article <<http://www.slate.com/id/2120789/fr/nl>>, R.T. Ford says that “judges trying to separate the spiritual wheat from the ideological chaff would be forced to interpret religious doctrine, an imprudent and probably unconstitutional entanglement of church and state.”

Center for Inquiry - *On Campus* Regional Conference in Pittsburgh. Details TBA.

This fall, Center for Inquiry - *On Campus* will be holding a regional campus conference in Pittsburgh. This event is free of charge and it will be a great way for students, faculty, staff and others interested in the campus movement to share their experiences and gain new skills of campus organizing. To participate in this event, please contact Sarah Jordan at <sjordan@centerforinquiry.net>

Voodoo Medicine.

Tai Sophia and Penn Med form a partnership. Tai who? What’s going on with the great Ivy League med schools? A study at Columbia claimed to show that the prayers of complete strangers halfway around the world increased pregnancy rates of fertility patients, who were not even aware of being prayed for. The study was revealed to be fraudulent. Somebody had to tell them this?

Harvard too has been embarrassed by ties to the wacky world of alternative medicine. Now, the oldest medical school in the nation, the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, is pandering to the public’s obsession with mystical healing. Medical and nursing students at Penn will be able to earn a master’s degree in Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) from Tai Sophia Institute. Tai Sophia began teaching acupuncture 30 years ago, but has since expanded into other “medical arts” that don’t work. Two weeks ago, Tai Sophia sponsored a Deepak Chopra conference Wayne Jonas, author of *Healing with*



In the News (cont.)

Homeopathy, is on the Board of Trustees.

Acupuncture, or maybe, you could just eat a jalapeño pepper. *JAMA*, May 4, reports a randomized, controlled trial comparing the effectiveness of acupuncture with sham acupuncture in treating migraine. There were 302 patients in the study. Acupuncture is widely touted for treating migraine, but in 12 sessions over 8 weeks, sham acupuncture, in which the needles are inserted in the “wrong” points, was just as effective as inserting them in the “correct” points. This should greatly simplify the training of acupuncture specialists. Just stick the damn needles anywhere.— *What’s New*, Robert L. Park (13 May 2005)

“We shall do our best to advance his failure”

Sanal Edamaruku in an interview with Radio BBC about the new Pope (21 April 2005)

We don’t expect any change. The Pope has been the doctrinal adviser and enforcer of his predecessor for 23 out of 26 years. He will continue to scourge humanity with inhumane concepts of sexuality, birth control, abortion and euthanasia. He will continue to try and cripple the critical faculties of generation after generation and to bludgeon down their self-respect and free will. He will fight for submission and irrationalism against the spreading triumph of rationalism. That is his mission. He is the Pope. We shall do our best to advance his failure.

-- Rationalist International Bulletin # 143 (9 May 2005)

Spain: The true Pope died before his “devilish” competitor in Rome.

Pope Gregorio XVII, who was personally coronated by God after the death of Pope Paul VI in 1978, is dead. The pontiff, who headed the Church of El Palma de Troya in southern Spain, which has allegedly more than seventy bishops and followers in Europe, USA and Nigeria, passed away silently in late March within the vast walled complex of the church of El Palma de Troya. Church officials declined to reveal details of his death or comment on the question of his succession.

Pope Gregorio XVII, 58, born as Clemente Dominguez Gomez, was an uncompromising defender of traditional doctrine. He staunchly refused to accept reforms introduced in the Catholic Church during the sixties, such as saying the mass in local languages instead of the traditional Latin or indulging in theological dialogue with other branches of Christianity. He considered his competitor in Rome a representative of the Devil.

There have been many “antipopes” throughout the history of the Catholic Church, some of them strong contenders for the Vatican office after controversial elections, some leaders of small Catholic break-away groups. Besides Gregorio XVII, the 20th and 21st century knows at least seven other antipopes in Canada, USA and Italy.

— Rationalist International Bulletin # 143 (9 May 2005)

The Science Book Club schedule for 2005

We will continue to meet in room 3A at the Cincinnati downtown library at 2:30 on the 4th Sunday of each month except where noted.

Sunday July 24 - *The Ancestor’s Tale: a Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* by Richard Dawkins, 2004 (**Note change of Title**)

Sunday Aug 21 - *Godel, Escher, and Bach* by Douglas Hofstadter, 1979 (**Note change of Date**)

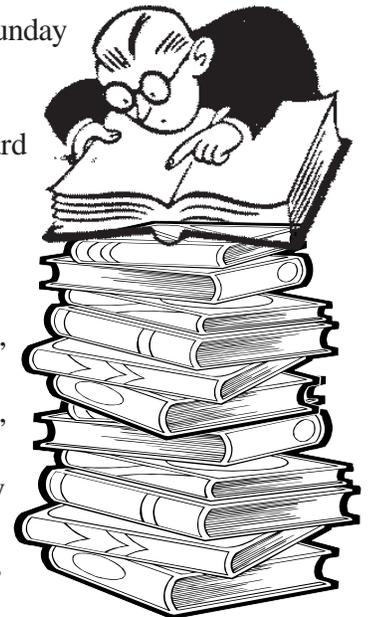
The Main Library is closing on Sundays. Watch here for new venue information.

Sunday Sept 25 - *The Electric Meme : a New Theory of How We Think* by Robert Aunger, 2002

Sunday Oct 23 - *Where Mathematics Comes From* by George Lakoff and Rafael Nunez, 2000

Sunday Nov 20 (3rd Sunday) - *Eyes on the Universe : a History of the Telescope* by Isaac Asimov, 1975

Sunday Dec 18 (3rd Sunday) - *The Science of Good and Evil : Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* by Michael Shermer, 2004





Summer Camp That's a Piece of Heaven for the Children, but Please, No Worshiping

By Susan Hansen, *New York Times*, 29 June 2005

Hamilton, Ohio: Fresh from a week at Camp Quest in southern Ohio, Alex Houseman can boast that his badminton game is a little better, his archery skills are a little sharper and he can now crank out tie-dye T-shirts on demand. All that, and 12-year-old Alex got a rare chance to be around other children just like him - children whose parents do not go to church or any other place of worship, and who do not necessarily believe in God. At the public school he attends in Boone County, Ky., he said, he has learned to keep quiet about the fact that his family left the fundamentalist Christian church it used to belong to, that his father now considers himself an atheist, and that his mother, if she believes in God at all, does not do so in a conventional way. At Camp Quest, on the other hand, he was not worried that his fellow campers would judge him. "It's good to know there are other people out there who don't believe in God," he said.

Providing a haven for the children of nonbelievers is what Camp Quest is all about. As the camp's official T-shirt announces, it's a place that's "beyond belief." More precisely, it claims to be the first summer sleep-away camp in the country for atheist, agnostic and secular humanist children. Nearly two million American adults openly identify themselves as atheist or agnostic, according to a 2001 survey by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. As a group, they face more than their share of bigotry, said Edwin F. Kagin, Camp Quest's longtime director, and their children are often made to feel like outcasts.

Many of the two dozen campers who attended this year's session last week recounted experiences of being called names and otherwise harassed. For instance, Travis Leepers, 17, from Louisiana, reported that just about everyone he knows has expressed concern to him about his soul and has tried to convert him. Sophia Riehemann, 14, from Bellevue, Ky., recalled how one of her schoolmates called her a devil-worshiper. "People get really confused sometimes," Sophia said. "They think that if we don't believe in God we believe in the devil."

At Camp Quest, children age 8 to 17 take part in all the usual summer camp activities. But in addition to horseback riding, organized water balloon fights and outdoor survival lessons, the camp's volunteer staff aims to promote a healthy respect for science and rational inquiry, while assuring campers that there is nothing wrong with not believing in the Bible and not putting stock in a supreme creator.

"We're serving as a night light in a dark and scary room," said Mr. Kagin, who started the nonprofit camp in 1996, along with other members of the Free Inquiry Group in the Cincinnati and northern Kentucky area, a secular humanist organization. The cost for the week long session is \$650. With his booming voice and his penchant for khaki-colored canvas hats and garb, Mr. Kagin, 64, looks like a summer camp director. Besides being director of the Kentucky chapter of American Atheists, he is also a certified Eagle Scout. And in other ways - the unappetizing food, for example, or the 7:30 a.m. bullhorn calls badgering campers to wake up - Quest is much like any other summer camp. (It rents the cabins and other facilities from a Y.M.C.A.-owned camp.)

There are also obvious differences. At the wooden barn that served as the main mess hall, the camp's program director, Fred Edwards, set up posters of famous atheists and free thinkers in world history like Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein and Margaret Sanger, and after meals he presented talks on the contributions they had made.

At the opening campfire ceremony, Mr. Kagin issued a set of challenges for campers to respond to in skits on the final night of camp. One such challenge: Help residents of the faraway planet Questerion understand how life on earth came into being. Another challenge: Prove that the two invisible unicorns in residence do not exist.

As in years past, camp leaders also worked on presentations in science and other natural (as opposed to supernatural)

phenomena. This year's subjects were raptors and meteorology, including a demonstration of a portable weather station. Also, Gene Kritsky, a biology professor at the nearby College of Mount St. Joseph, talked to campers about creationism, arguing that the theories used to try to disprove evolution fail to hold up.

Not all the programming is a hit. "Some of the presentations are really boring," said Caitlin Fox, 13, from Mansfield, N.J., who thought the session on swords and other medieval weaponry dragged on too long. For his part, Tomás Aguilar, 16, a Chicago native, thought the presentations on famous free thinkers like Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, could have used more balance. "Fred paints them in only a positive light," he said of the program director. Tomás said he liked the way Mr. Kagin and other camp leaders tried to inspire critical thinking. But for him, the best thing about Camp Quest was seeing friends from previous years and getting to go swimming every day and run around. "I'm here just to have fun," he said.

Staff members conceded that sometimes the programming had been too didactic. In recent years, they said, they have adjusted the balance to include more activities that are purely fun. Also, as a new generation of camp leaders has taken over, different sorts of lectures have been added, including talks this year and last on various religions, to broaden campers' perspectives and keep the programming fresh.

With Mr. Kagin and his wife, Helen, retiring this year as the camp's leaders, other changes may also be in store. Still, the camp's new director, August Brunsman, 28,





promised that the primary mission - giving the children of nonbelievers a sense of community - would remain the same. Parents like Lev Pinsky, a computer programmer from Brooklyn, are not looking for any major overhaul. In fact, Mr. Pinsky, a Russian immigrant, values the camp so much that he let his son, Eugene, 11, skip the last week of school to attend this year's session. "There's no other place like it in the United States, for sure," said Mr. Pinsky, adding that he had searched the American Camp Association catalog in vain to find a nonreligious summer program that still offered all the activities of a traditional summer camp. "This is a complete experience," added Mr. Pinsky, who finally found Camp Quest by doing a Google search.

Sarah Silverman, 17, from Camp Hill, Pa., agreed. She liked Camp Quest so much that she has attended for three summers and is planning to return next year as a volunteer counselor. Sarah has also been doing her part to recruit new campers. "I tell my Christian friends they'd love it here," she said. ☘

Quote

• Religion is fundamentally opposed
 • to everything I hold in veneration--
 • courage, clear thinking, honesty,
 • fairness, and, above all, love of the
 • truth.
 • --Henry Louis Mencken (1880-1956)
 •

Unquote

Honors for Doctor Henry Morgentaler

The University of Western Ontario (UWO) has awarded an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree to Dr. Henry Morgentaler - physician, Holocaust survivor and relentless fighter for women's rights to self determination and reproductive freedom. Dr. Morgentaler is an Honorary Associate of Rationalist International and a member of the Humanist Association of Canada.

The degree was awarded in the UWO's convocation on June 16, 2005 amidst standing ovations and great applause. Dr. Morgentaler was honored for "his determination, courage and effectiveness in promoting human rights and especially the right of women to make their own decisions regarding reproduction," said the University's Vice-President in the citation.

The University's decision, to honor Dr. Morgentaler, had been vigorously opposed by the Catholic Church. The "Catholics for Life" launched an online petition to force the UWO to go back from their plan. The ceremony was protected by police, as several hundred demonstrators against abortion gathered outside the University.

"I wish to congratulate the University, and its President, Dr. Paul Davenport, for standing by its decision in spite of protests by people opposed to what I represent and stand for," said Morgentaler in his address. "Over the last 37 years I have dedicated myself to the struggle to achieve rights to reproductive freedom and to provide facilities where women could obtain safe abortions in an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion," he said. "I am proud to have been given the opportunity to make an important contribution to a safer, kinder society where women are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve."

On 28 January 1988, Dr. Morgentaler

won the landmark Supreme Court of Canada decision that gave pregnant Canadian women the right to have an abortion. This was the greatest day of his life, he says. "It was a vindication of everything I believed in. For the first time, it gave women the status of full human beings able to make decisions about their own lives."

Before that decision came down, he had to fight a 20-year battle with the national government, the judicial system, the police force, religions of every brand, snipers, and a deeply patriarchal social system. For openly performing thousands of abortions - one in front of cameras for CTV -, he had to endure several trials, numerous arrests, eight raids on his clinics, a fire-bombing and 10 months in jail. But nothing could deter him. "I believe what I do is important," he once said. "We have a safer, better society as a result. I felt it was my duty. And I've never regretted it."

– *Rationalist International Bulletin*, # 144 (22 June 2005)

"Still cranky after all these years"

By now, most Americans know what Andy Rooney thinks about nearly everything. Or do we? Is there anything he hasn't revealed about himself? He pauses. "I do hide my atheism," he says slowly.

It's a belief Rooney has held for more than six decades, sealed perhaps by the random violence of war. But being an atheist hasn't kept him from pondering life's mysteries. He's awed by the intricacy of the cosmos and has questions about the origin of the universe. But as a good newsman, he won't inject his personal feelings and wants to pin down the source of the story. "I can't imagine how all this happened, but I'm not about to invent a reason for it. Besides, if God created all this, then who created God?"

Why not come out of the cosmic closet and talk more openly about his atheism?

"I think it would damage what I do, and fewer people would hear what I have to say about other things," he says quickly. For a moment, the late afternoon light seems to soften his features as he settles back in his chair. "Every writer dreams of having some good effect on the world, and I don't want to destroy that ability by announcing things that don't matter."

– Jean Noel-Bassior, *AARP The Magazine* (May-June 2005) p. 22





subject to debate by Katha Pollitt from *The Nation*

Brooklyn Prof in Godless Shocker

[from the June 27, 2005 issue]

So it's 2005 and this is the academic question that has driven the *Daily News* and the right-wing *New York Sun* into apoplectic fits, and caused heartburn all over CUNY: Should Tim Shortell, an atheist, be allowed to assume the chair of the sociology department of Brooklyn College? You know, an atheist--someone who doesn't believe in God. An anticleric. A disrespector of religion. A mocker of Christianity. Someone like, oh, Diderot ("Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest"). Or Voltaire ("The truths of religion are never so well understood as by those who have lost the power of reasoning"). Or Bertrand Russell ("The Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world"). Actually, Russell is a particularly relevant example here. The appointment of one of the twentieth century's greatest logicians to a professorship at City College in 1940 set off a hysterical campaign against the "Godless advocate of free love" on the part of the Episcopal and Catholic churches, the Hearst papers and Tammany Hall. A flagrantly trumped-up lawsuit was fast-tracked through the system, Russell was denounced in the state legislature and the job offer was withdrawn.

Unfortunately, Shortell is no Bertrand Russell, whose *Why I Am Not a Christian* did so much to enliven my teenage years. For one thing, Russell was an energetic antireligious propagandist, while Shortell's low opinion of God and his fans is confined to a brief essay, "Religion and Morality: A Contradiction Explained," posted at <www.anti-naturals.org> an obscure website with a vaguely Situationist flavor. For another, Russell was a terrific writer, while Shortell's essay is self-satisfied adolescent twaddle. Believers are "moral retards," "an ugly, violent lot": "In the heart of every Christian is a tiny voice preaching self-righteousness, paranoia and hatred. Christians claim that theirs is a faith based on love, but they'll just as soon kill you." Moral *retards*? Well, at least he can't be accused of linguistic PC.

Shortell's fighting words may have been intended, as he told me, as a "manifesto" aimed at a few avant-garde artists, but they gave the right plenty to work with in attacking his election to the chair. After reports of his election appeared in the *Sun* and *Daily News*, Brooklyn College president Christoph Kimmich wrote a letter to the *News* saying he found the essay "offensive" and had "convened a committee of three high-ranking Brooklyn College officials and asked them to investigate the situation." The handwriting must have been on the wall, because even as I was writing this column, Shortell withdrew his name from consideration. Whatever one thinks of the sentiments or the prose style of his essay, this is not a happy turn of events. A college president should champion academic freedom and professional standards, not side with those who assault them on the basis of someone's

nonprofessional writing. Academic procedures exist for a reason. Do we really want the tabs micromanaging departmental decisions?

Besides, so what if Shortell's essay is offensive? Brooklyn College is a public, secular institution, not a Bible college. The *Sun* claimed Shortell's disdain for religion would cloud his judgment of job candidates, but there was never any evidence that this would be the case. No student ever complained about his teaching; his colleagues trusted him enough to elect him to the post; the student work posted on his website is apolitical and bland. Predictions of bias, absent any evidence, are just a backhanded way of attacking his beliefs. You might as well say no Southern Baptist should be chair, since someone who believes that women should be subject to their husbands, homosexuality is evil and Jews are doomed to hell won't be fair to female, gay or Jewish job candidates. Or no Orthodox Jew or Muslim should be chair because religious restrictions on contact with the opposite sex would privilege some job candidates over others.

But nobody ever does say that. As long as a believer ascribes his views to his faith, he can say anything he wants and if you don't like it, you're the bigot. Simplistic as Shortell's essay is, it does raise a useful point: Faith and morality are not only not the same, as Americans like to think, they express contradictory impulses. I believe Kierkegaard said something along these lines in *Fear and Trembling* in his discussion of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Or as the physicist Steven Weinberg put it more recently: "With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things, and evil people

doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion." Would Weinberg be too "offensive" for CUNY?

The Tim Shortell case is not a blip, even at CUNY. Around the same time it went after Shortell, the *Sun* ran a front-page story accusing Priya Parmar, a young untenured professor in Brooklyn College's School of Education, of attacking standard English as "the language of oppressors," based on a reading assignment and complaints from two students accused of plagiarism. Under the guise of depoliticizing academia, David Horowitz is pushing the "Academic Bill of Rights," which would empower state legislatures to mandate "balance" in the classroom. His website invites students to report their teachers for such sins as "introduced controversial material," "mocked political/religious figures" and the ever-popular "biased grading." (What was the point of complaining, one student wrote sadly: "He has ten-year.")

People who believe in academic freedom have got to take these incidents seriously and get active before it's too late. "The perfect case is never going to come along," my old friend the historian Joshua Freeman told me. "Nobody is going to fire their Nobel laureate." Actually, City College almost did that: Ten years after losing his CCNY post, Bertrand Russell won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He certainly had the last laugh, but others weren't so lucky. The campaign against Russell blossomed into the Rapp-Coudert hearings, a general witch hunt for leftists in New York City's public schools and colleges. Some 800 educators were denounced; more than fifty lost their jobs, and a climate of fear was created that lasted for a long, long time.

— suggested by Wesley Allinsmith



Creationism in the Netherlands.

The religious flood of Intelligent Design propaganda that tries in the USA to ban the Theory of Evolution from school curricula, is slopping to the Netherlands. One of its “pioneers” is Dutch education minister Maria Van der Hoeven from the ruling Christian Democratic Appeal party (CDA), who introduces the ideas of the American creationists in her weblog. Now the minister plans to initiate a public debate on Evolution versus Creation between scientists and religious believers in order to “make connections” between the two. It’s “too bad”, she feels, that scientists want to keep science and religion separated.

“You have to admit that the Theory of Evolution is incomplete. New discoveries are still being made”, said Van der Hoeven in an interview with the daily *de Volkskrant*. “In the history of science there have often been moments that we thought that we knew pretty much all there was to know. Now we realize that we don’t know everything yet, by far not”. Follows a popular preacher’s argument: “Now that scientific investigations expand the boundaries of our knowledge again and again, one should have an open ear and eye for different points of view” - for supernatural ones, that is.

The education minister is “convinced that we are on earth with a mission from God” - and she is not shy to make her government office the forum of her missionary ambitions. She does not share concerns that this may violate the separation of government and religion.

But so far, the traditionally progressive Netherlands seem to be no fertile ground for creationism. Though Prime Minister Balkenende (CDA) initially stated he found Van der Hoeven’s plan “ok”, when discussed in the Second Chamber of Parliament (House of Representatives), it was rejected by all parties, even by the CDA. “The political parties aren’t interested in a minister that sets us back to the 50’s”, said categorically an MP from the Liberal Party VVD, the coalition partner of the CDA, summing up a stormy debate.

Things did not end there. The education minister’s escapade sensitized the public to the danger of creationism creeping into Biology curricula. In fact, Dutch curricula make it compulsory for pre-university high schools and senior general secondary schools to discuss God’s creation of the universe as an alternative opinion to the Theory of Evolution. Though religious belief in creation is not presented as valid challenge to science here, bible stories are out of place in Biology classes and can only be discussed in Comparative Religion classes, argue education specialists with all political parties - except the CDA, which wants to keep the curricula as they presently are. Dutch MPs, moving to scrap the divine act of creation from the Biology curricula, are backed by the Dutch Institute for Biology, which counts most of the Biology teachers among its members.

Meantime Von der Hoeven’s party colleague Peter Boon, vice-chairman of the provincial board of the CDA in the northern city of Groningen and headmaster of the Protestant Augustinus College, added a harder note to the public debate about Creationism. Boon plunged the Augustinus College into a crisis, when he furiously insisted that there was no Theory of Evolution to be taught in his school. Several teachers felt offended. Boon got so enraged that he had to take some days leave to cool down and to allow the atmosphere at the school to normalize. In an interview with the

newspaper *Dagblad van het Noorden*, he explained that he could not tolerate one of his teachers telling his class, he was a supporter of the Theory of Evolution. “A teacher cannot simply state to his or her class that man descended from an ape, Boon said. “People have to explain how evolution theory relates to Christian belief!” Asked for their opinion, most teachers of the Augustinus College were “careful” enough to feel that the Theory of Evolution can well go hand-in-hand with the biblical account of Creation.

- *Rationalist International Bulletin*, #144 (22 June 2005)





BOOK REVIEW

The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason

by Sam Harris

(New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2004)

On the second page of text, the author asks us to guess the religion of a suicide bomber; and he makes it easy from the circumstances of the narrative. Since he describes a Middle Eastern bus scene, the answer must be that Islam is meant. That many suicide explosions have been perpetrated by the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka the author mentions only in a footnote, and the Kamikaze of World War II are not mentioned at all.

On the next page the author claims that intolerance is intrinsic to every creed: “respect for other faiths, or for the views of unbelievers, is not an attitude that God endorses” (p. 13). He omits thereby the broad tolerance of the many pagan gods of antiquity. He also overlooks African and Japanese ancestor faiths. When I venerate my ancestors, and you venerate yours, there is no sense fighting over religion or converting anyone. If the author is right that religions lead to strife and war, this must be predominantly the result of the exclusive claims of monotheistic faiths.

Further down the same page the author informs us that “technology has a way of creating moral imperatives.” And, that these have made our “religious differences ... antithetical to our survival.” Yet, bombs and airplanes used as missiles are not exactly part of the latest technology.

Questions like these on the first pages, makes me approach the author’s thesis with some doubt. His thesis is not that faith is ending, but that religious faith must end to give way to a rational and scientific understanding of the world and human actions. “Faith-based religion must suffer the same slide into obsolescence,” as alchemy (p. 14).

Secular Humanists will have no difficulty following the author as he shows that religion and its scriptures are irrational, incoherent, endorse war and violence, and are just plain *not true*. Nor will we be inclined to quarrel when the author presents an entire chapter to show Islamic texts are more violent than those of other religions. I have difficulty going along with the author, when he tries to convince me that all or at least most wars are at bottom wars of religious ideas.

No doubt, the issues about which we fight wars are deeply believed by soldiers and people. “We must defend the fatherland!” or “. . . those bastards are attacking us,” are deeply held beliefs on both sides of conflicts, but are they at bottom “religious” beliefs, and are all causes of wars religious?

The issues are complicated by the fact that we often don’t really know or remember the causes of war, and that these causes may be different on opposing sides. Was the American Civil War fought to free the slaves? Or, was it a war for independence on one side, and to keep the Union together on the other? Or, was it a war to decide whether the United States would remain an agricultural country or become an industrial society with high tariffs to protect manufacturers from European competition? Whatever the reasons for this war, religion does not seem to have been among the top causes.

The American Indian wars, the war against Mexico in 1848, do not seem to have been driven by religion. Rather, these and many other nineteenth century wars appear to have been plain and simple over real estate and who was to occupy it. The ideologies which drove the European wars of the twentieth century seem to have been misplaced scientific ideas of social Darwinism in the case of Germans, and historical and economic arguments of Marx in the case of the Russians. Why the Americans entered these wars I don’t know.

Sam Harris describes the major monotheistic religions as so many species of socially sanctioned lunacy. Persons who believed these claims as lone individuals would be locked up as mad. Only because these irrational convictions are socially sanctioned, do we accept them as religions. Harris insists the same factual evidences must be demanded for religious assertions, which we expect for other claims. If a thing can’t be shown true by reasonable evidence, it should remain in the private domain, and must not influence public actions. Harris has a lot of good rational arguments to marshal against religion, but to blame it for the whole of wars does not convince.

— Wolf Roder

Quote.....
• **Iraq**
• The United States fought a needless war against a
• phantom menace.
• — Charles V. Peña, at Cato Institute
.....
Unquote!



August Picnic: Sunday, 28 2:00 PM

July Meeting: Sunday, 24th 7:00 PM



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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, or leave a message at (513) 557-3836. Visit our web site at gofigger.org.