

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 17 Issue 6

June 2008

**June FIG Meeting:** Sunday June 29, 2:00 PM  
at the Vernon Manor

## Televangelism & Prosperity Theology

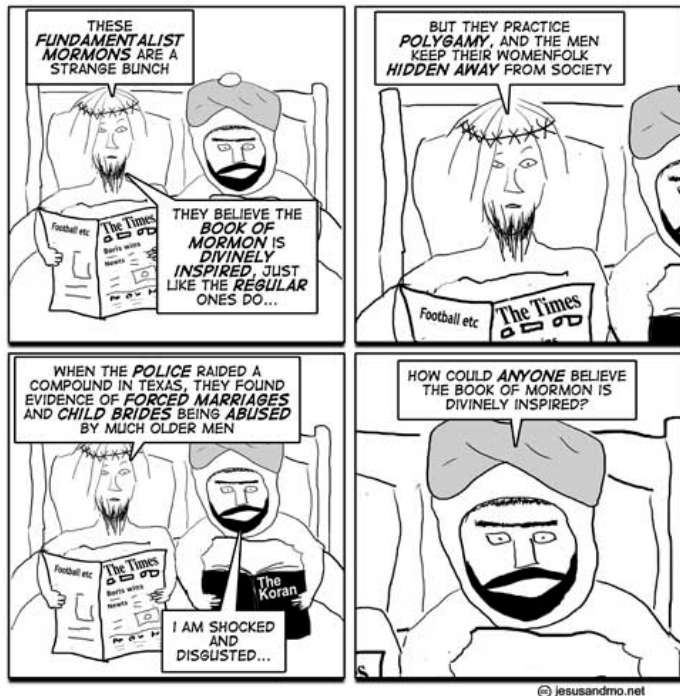
Speaker: Katie Hladky

The June program will be on Sunday, June 29 at 2:00 pm and the speaker will be Katie Hladky. Katie is a PhD candidate in Comparative Religion at Florida State University. She will speak on her research on televangelism and prosperity theology, including the "Grassley 6". The "Grassley 6" are six preachers that have been called to testify in front of Congress by Senator Chuck Grassley on the legitimacy of their use of donations. Katie also serves as a Board member for Camp Quest.

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### July Meeting -

Tuesday, July 22, 7:00 pm at Vernon Manor:

### Surviving America's Depression

### Epidemic: How to Find Morale, Energy, and Community in a World Gone Crazy

By Bruce Levine

Bruce Levine will discuss his most recent book: *Surviving America's Depression Epidemic: How to Find Morale, Energy, and Community in a World Gone Crazy* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007). Dr. Levine is a clinical psychologist and a regular contributor to *AlterNet*, *Z Magazine*, *The Huffington Post* and has also written for *Adbusters*, *The Ecologist* and numerous other publications. More information on Bruce's writing can be found at <http://www.brucelevine.net/>.

## Events (note date/time changes)

### June Potluck

Sunday, June 15, 2008, 2:00 PM

### June Meeting

Sunday, June 29, 2008, 2:00 PM  
at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati,  
OH

### July Potluck

No Potluck

### July Meeting

Tuesday, July 22, 2008, 7:00 PM  
at the Vernon Manor  
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati,  
OH



## May Meeting

### The Creation Museum, Reflections on the First Anniversary

by Rabbi Robert Barr, Congregation Beth-Adam,  
President of The Greater Cincinnati Board of Rabbis

Rabbi Barr began by telling us how he happened to visit the creationist museum. This after he had declared publicly and on his website he would never go because he did not intend to give them any money for admission. However, about nine months ago he received a call from German Public Radio. He was slightly skeptical at first but he answered the call. The person identified himself as American, and when Rabbi Barr asked where he was calling from, he replied he was calling from Berlin. He went on to explain that he had lived in the States as a teenager so his English was colloquial. He produced a Sunday show from Berlin talking about American Culture.



Rabbi Robert Barr

The broadcaster was coming to the United States to visit the Creation Museum. The debate between evolution and creation is an American phenomenon he explained. He was planning a program on the Creation Museum on its first anniversary. He had been given the name of Rabbi Barr as a knowledgeable contact person, and would the Rabbi accompany him on this excursion.

The German broadcaster, the Rabbi, and another friend, a Presbyterian minister visited the museum on 9 November. Rabbi Barr Told us: "We arrived about a quarter to ten. Other than I thought it was silly, offensive and bad science, and bad Bible, I had no pre-conceived notions about what it was going to be." After the laughter abated, he continued, "These were not really pre-conceived notions, they are facts. I had my camera along because I travel a lot and I take a lot of pictures in the process. I didn't know whether it was going to be a problem but I started taking pictures." He then took us on a "virtual tour" of the Creation Museum.

We showed up and we were early and the parking lot was full. Before we go any further I want to read you something: "Officials at the Museum said that



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

fignote @ fuse.net;

or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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Frank Zindler



My sincere apologies to Frank Zindler and Herb Zigler for using the wrong photograph in the last issue of the FIG Leaves for Frank Zindler. We hope it did not cause any problems.



Herb Zigler



#### Memberships run from:

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they had passed their one year attendance goal in only seven months, drawing \$297,000 dollars at the end of 2007, and gotten 400,000 visitors in the first year." When the Museum opened on Memorial Day with protesters outside, the Creation Museum said that their twelve month goal was 250,000 visitors. They passed the 300,000 mark in January of this year. When I read about this in *The Enquirer*- not that I'm a skeptic - but I thought that maybe *The Enquirer* was being more generous than was warranted. When we showed up I began to see the number of people who were there. I talked to a number of friends of mine who went on a Saturday, it was so busy, they stood in line for an hour to get tickets, and it was so crowded they walked out, but they were told: "we'll give you your money back, we know it's crowded on the weekends, come back during the week." When I had read about the fact that there were not enough parking spaces, I thought that was also part of the press, but when you drive around the neighborhood, in some of the subdivisions, there are signs that say, "Please don't park here." The neighbors are bothered by it. They need more parking. It was depressing. Almost a half a million people have gone there already.

At the same time, an unaffiliated Institute for Creation Research in Texas seeks approval for a Master's Program in Science Education. So there is not only this museum but there are people who are trying to award master's degrees in creationism biology and geology and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board may well give its final approval. Teachers thus qualified would find employment in religious schools, but might well apply



to teach in public schools too.

The first thing, outside the building is a dinosaur. The kids love dinosaurs. The museum goal is to get families, homeschoolers, and churches to come

visit and dinosaurs are hip, cool and fun. What would you see at the Natural History Museum? The bones of dinosaurs. So here too, dinosaurs. But their notions of when dinosaurs lived and our notions of dinosaurs are extremely different.

They believe in the creation in six literal days. Their Bible is bad. It isn't just that their science is bad, their Bible is worse. A lot of folks who are against the museum just object to their science. I



rail against the fact that they reject astronomy, physics, geology, archeology, and linguistics along with other fields. But their Bible study I find repulsive.

Fundamentalists do a lot of work to show the "day" as used in one of the stories in Genesis is a 24-hour day. Every major religion has rejected the notion that the days of creation are 24-hour days. The Catholic Church has said that a biblical day can be different than a modern day, the Lutherans, the Methodists, Conservative and Reform Judaism, most religious people are no longer trying to shoe horn creation into six days. They view these stories as metaphors.

If you read the bible closely there are two creation stories side by side, Genesis I and Genesis II. In the one man and woman are created simultaneously and equally; in the other man is created first and woman subservient four days later. Fundamentalists don't deal with that.

The first thing you see in the museum is a scene with a waterfall and people and dinosaurs living together. Then you see Adam and Eve and a lamb and a penguin all very co-existent because everything was created in six days. This scene is before the fall of humankind. Animals didn't function like animals today. Before the fall none of the animals in the Garden of Eden were meat eaters. So all the animals that we know co-exist. Dinosaurs lived at the same time as human beings. According to their interpretation of the Bible everything was perfect. And perfect meant there was no death. So animals would not kill each other and that means even the dinosaurs were plant eaters. They merely had those big teeth to crack coconuts!





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That is not what the bible was meant to say. The Rabbi does not think they are reading Genesis right. But for somebody who wants to believe, for somebody who is bringing their children here, they provide an explanation.

There is a dinosaur with a sign saying, *Thou shalt not touch*. The Rabbi thought this was cute. He insisted the museum and its production is incredible, it is absolutely fantastically well done. He was depressed. It wasn't junky, it wasn't cheesy, they put 35 million bucks into it and you can see the money. There is another display of Adam and Eve. This is another display of the Garden of Eden. If you look at them, they are not what you would expect Adam and Eve to look like, you wouldn't expect European looking folks in the Garden of Eden.

This building is called a Creation Museum, but it's not a museum; it's a church that has a series of sermons. Their use of the word *museum* I think is disingenuous. It is not even a Biblical museum - "I've been to Biblical museums" - this is a sermon. There is a quote posted: "For this cause a man shall leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife and they shall be together as one flesh, therefore what god has joined together, let no man separate." Jesus Christ said that! This is really interesting because this is in the Garden of Eden. They are already quoting from Jesus Christ. If you know the Bible, he wasn't part of Genesis. They quoted this because they wanted a foundation for marriage as one man, one woman. All of this display is about supporting certain ideas. And this brings up a bizarre aspect: it doesn't matter when something happened as long as it can be ascribed to the Bible. The point is they don't care if they quote out of sequence; they want to make their point. In this museum people are taking pictures. Some people who come to this museum imagine this is what the Garden of Eden looked like.

The reason the museum is located here is that two-thirds of Americans are living within a one day drive. That is why they came to Northern Kentucky. They weren't looking for some cheap land, they are strategically located to bring field trips from churches and the home schooled. These people come to see the Garden of Eden. The serpent is here and it looks benign. Why is the serpent benign looking? They haven't eaten the apple yet, so nothing is quite bad. So what happens next: Eve eats the fruit of the tree and gives it to the man who also eats it and their eyes are opened. God comes

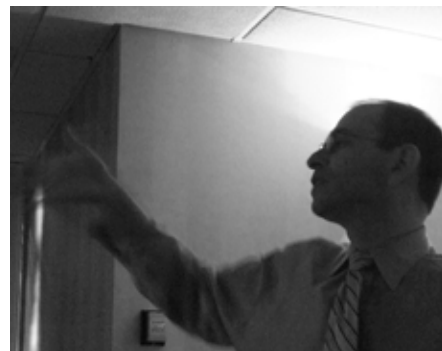
down and they hide from him. The world changes and death comes into the world.

Now what happens in the museum, things go dark. Their clothes are made of animal skins. The next scene is Noah's Ark. This is incredibly important for fundamentalists for the flood explains much that exists on earth. All the fossil records we know, the stratigraphy we've studied, the reasons that fossils are on mountain tops, all that is explained by the flood. The museum has an amazing diorama with marvelous animatronics.

Then they have a whole section about passing down traditions. You have to prove that tradition came down accurately. That is a really important point. How do you prove that their God was an epiphany at Sinai? Because 600,000 people witnessed it. They use numbers and then they say it all came down accurately. It is emphasized the King James version of the Bible is the authorized translation. What believers want is to authorize it. The passing of the tradition becomes incredibly important. If there is a break in the transmission, then one could argue that the stories we have are incorrect. They need to do that.

Rabbi Barr concluded: "I really went in thinking I was going to a Creation Museum. Assuming that it was going to focus on the state of creation and the period that ends at the Tower of Babel. But this is not a Creation Museum. Creation is only a small segment. The whole point to show creation is true is to justify Jesus." This appears in a quote from the Museum brochure: "Our hope is that the museum will challenge non-Christians to receive Jesus Christ as savior and Lord and to equip Christians to better evangelize the lost of Jesus Christ as Creator and Redeemer."

So that's what the museum is. When the Regional Board of Tourism promotes them, they're promoting a church. What we should be saying to every public official: "we don't want dime one to go there because it's a church." They can be tax exempt, but let's start calling it what it is. Call it a Creation Church. They shouldn't get the benefit of being called a museum.



– Reported by  
George Maurer   
www.gofigger.org



**THINGS TO DO....**

**THINGS TO SEE...**



## Media Events/Programs

### The Humanist Perspective

Show times on Time-Warner Cable:

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

Channel 24: Friday 11:30 pm

### Programs:

**3-5 June:** *America needs a new Enlightenment*, with Paul Kurtz

**10-12 June:** *Does Religion make people behave better?* with Christopher Hitchens

**17-19 June:** *God: the failed hypothesis, Part 1*, with Victor Stenger

**24-26 June:** *God: the failed hypothesis, Part 2*, with Victor Stenger

## O.F.A.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you, John Welte

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

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

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

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

The Answers in Atheism crew

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

**June 15** Jerry Wiles: *In the Beginning* by Isaac Asimov.

**July 20** Bryan Sellers: *Under a Green Sky: Global Warming, the Mass Extinctions of the Past, and What They Can Tell Us About Our Future* by Peter Ward

**Aug 17** Bob Streifthau: *World Without Us* by Alan Weisman

**Sept 21** Bob Riehemann: *Doubt and Certainty* by Tony Rothman and George Sudarshan

**Oct. 19** Pauline Smolin: *In Search of Memory: the Emergence of a New Science of the Mind* by Eric Kandel

**Nov 16** Gary Weiss: *What we believe but cannot prove: today's leading thinkers on science in the age of certainty* ed. by John Brockman

**Dec 21** Randy Weaver: *Into the cool energy flow, thermodynamics, and life* by Eric D. Schneider

**Jan 18, 2009** - Dr. Richard Bozian: *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* by Antonio Damasio





THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



## All-Ohio Atheists Coming Out Party

*please mark you calendars*

**Saturday, August 2nd; 12pm-5pm**

**Women's Field House at Ohio State**

**Free Parking** in the South Lincoln Tower Lot (a marked map will be provided to show where that is in PDF format soon)

**Potluck Style** (Columbus provides beverages and main course, Cincinnati & Cleveland provide side dishes & desserts)

**\$5 Entry, \$3 for Students w/ID** – Money collected will reimburse the Columbus groups. Any extra will be held to finance this event again next year. There will be literature distribution and display tables from the attending groups.

**Speakers** - Edwin Kagin and Hemant Metha

**Sponsors** - Students for Freethought at Ohio State

This is being planned as a social and networking event for all free thought groups in Ohio. It is the brainchild of Ashley Paramore, Secular Student Alliance Board Member. More information will be forthcoming and be available at the following website:

<http://groups.google.com/group/omnipresentatheists>

E-mail is - [omnipresentatheists@googlegroups.com](mailto:omnipresentatheists@googlegroups.com)

From Ashley at the above website, "This will primarily be a social event, but I'm very excited about it. It'll be a great opportunity for freethinkers to be able to network with each other, and just have a good time! Please give me some responses with your thoughts."

Organizations involved so far: Students for Freethought at Ohio State, Omnipresent Atheists, Secular Student Alliance, Atheist Meetup Groups from Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland, the Free Inquiry Group of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, and the Center For Inquiry group of Cleveland.

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### The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

**When:** Monday, 16 March at 7:00PM

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

For more event details: [http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1\\_ve](http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve)

## Letters To The Editor



### To censor a science exhibit over a hunch that the bodies were obtained illegally?

There have been complaints to the Museum Center regarding the *Bodies* exhibit. The controversy has raised demands in the US House to ban all *Bodies* exhibits by law. I don't have details; the Museum Center did not reply to my inquiry. But a TV announcement did say to "write congress." So, here goes my gut-reaction. There is no evidence that these bodies were obtained illegally. People only assume that since the Chinese venerate their ancestors, they would never give up their own or their relative's to science, for exhibit, for medical schools or even for donating organs. There is no call for a law to censor any and all exhibits using dead bodies. Basically I have a gut feeling this is about the Christian anti-science movement.

Who are these people that are basically anti-science? It's not enough that the Church wants to omit Darwin from public schools.... the Church now wants to outlaw physiology taught in museums.

Is this mostly about the worship of dead bodies.

The Chinese people say "we do not donate our bodies... not for science...not for organ donations to the dying people to save their life".

This is a wide-spread ancient custom practiced by many American churches.

It's as if the dead are more sacred than the living who need a transplant.

How else will doctors learn to be surgeons if they cannot use dead bodies?

When people can see how humans are made it can encourage many to respect their cells and learn all about physiology.

Instead of outlawing a science exhibit wouldn't it be better if the pro-life people would campaign to encourage organ donating?

Many thousands of Americans die every year waiting for a transplant. Mean while, families of the deceased prefer to bury whole bodies six-feet under which will only feed the worms!

How barbaric is this?

My best friend died of diabetes at age 35 after waiting on the organ list for two years, as he suffered on dialysis. Imagine how many of these patients have to read that the right-to-life people are against stem cell research to one day prevent these deaths....and they are against donating an organ to prevent these deaths right now everyday!

What's wrong with these ultra-selfish, heartless people?

- Si Lenzbegone

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## Academic Freedom is the new strategy for Intelligent Design.

Even before Darwinian evolution defeated intelligent design in *Kitzmiller v. Dover School Board*, it has been apparent that this would not be the end of it. Who thought it would? The creationists began casting about for a new strategy. An article in today's *Science* suggests they think they've found it: academic freedom. I mean they've got Ben Stein, who in the movie *Expelled* seems to think Guillermo Gonzalez should be allowed to teach whatever astronomy agrees with his religion. That's going to be a hard sell. Suppose, for example, I teach my students that pi equals three. It makes a lot of sense. Who ever thought up irrational numbers in the first place? We've got plenty of numbers without them. What's more, it's a matter of religious conviction. I Kings 7:23-26 describes a round cauldron in the Temple of Solomon that's ten cubits in diameter and 30 cubits in circumference. If it's good enough for Solomon it's good enough for me. My guess, however, is that it's going to get a few challenges. You can believe anything you want, but you don't get to pick the facts. So what are these guys up to? They must know that. Maybe Ben Stein just likes being in the movies.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 9 May 2008

## Does science make belief in god obsolete?

Yesterday at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, William Phillips, 1997 Nobel Prize for Physics, answered "Absolutely not!," while Michael Shermer, well known skeptic and author, said "It depends." Their stimulating debate was co-sponsored by the Templeton Foundation, created in 1987 to act as a "catalyst" for scientific studies into the "Big Questions." Shermer noted that "belief in God," cannot be obsolete since most people, including many scientists, are believers. Science, by contrast, begins with causality; supernatural causes don't count. To Phillips, however, that simply means that belief in God is not a scientific belief. Like most religious scientists, Phillips keeps science and religion separate. The God/Creator doesn't do much these days. He must be emeritus. Or perhaps quantum-indeterminacy exists to allow God to do stuff without being detected. You may recall that Templeton once went directly to the American Association for the

www.freeinquirygroup.org

Advancement of Science with a million dollars to create the AAAS Dialogue between Science and Religion. What Templeton bought was elaborate sound effects supporting his conviction that science and religion will find common ground. Many scientists found this relationship inappropriate and it was ended. For the American Enterprise Institute it seems perfect.

- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 16 May 2008

## After acupuncture the next big thing will be astrology.

Last month, after learning that the University of Maryland Health Center offers acupuncture, I wrote to object to this promotion of superstitious medicine by a research University. The university administration responded that this "immensely popular" service has been offered for eleven years. Where have I been? Health centers offer acupuncture at many top universities, including UC Berkeley and Harvard. So what does acupuncture treat? Acupuncture it seems can handle anything. After all, the "meridians" run the full length of the body. What! They didn't teach you about meridians in Physiology 101? Meridians connect the acupuncture points - the places they stick the needles to get the chi flowing. You didn't learn about chi either? It's like vital-life stuff, but nobody's ever seen it. Are there other ancient beliefs that universities should make available to our students? How about astrology? It's even older than acupuncture, and like acupuncture it only works for true believers. Also, like acupuncture, astrology has no rational explanation. Moreover, few students can construct their horoscope without expert assistance. I recommended that Maryland create a Horoscope Center staffed by licensed astrologers.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 23 May 2008

## Professor Francis Collins leaves Genome Institute:

He served the nation well leading the National Human Genome Research Institute after James Watson stepped down. His idea of relaxation is to roar about the countryside on a Harley. He also plays the guitar, eloquently defends Darwinian evolution, and yet became a devout Christian at age 29. He cited two factors for his conversion: the anthropic principle and the moral law. Almost all religious scientists cite the anthropic principle; the moral law is the principle that humans instinctively know right from wrong.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 30 May 2008



## Once again: Einstein's god:

Like many scientists of his era, Einstein often used God as a metaphor for forces of nature that are not yet understood. As a result, he is often incorrectly cited as a physicist who believed in God. It happened again in yesterday's American Enterprise Institute debate. Ironically, at that very moment a January 3, 1954 letter from Einstein to philosopher Eric Gutkind went on sale in a London auction house. The letter, handwritten in German one year before his death, described belief in God as "childish superstition," and ridiculed the belief that Jews are "the chosen people." The letter sold to someone with "a passion for theoretical physics," for \$404,000, 25 times the pre-sale estimate

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- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 16 May 2008



## ... and in Texas, creationism's strengths and weaknesses.

Texas is a huge textbook market with a major influence on content. Republican Governor Rick Perry, and Don McLeroy, a dentist who chairs the State Board of Education, are both creationists. So are 7 of the 15 board members. And this summer the board will determine the curriculum for the next decade. Curriculum standards call for teaching the "strengths and weaknesses" of evolution. The "weaknesses" seen by the creationists are religious objections. *The New York Times* quotes McLeroy as saying, "that little baby born in the manger was the god that created the universe." ☞

- *What's New* by Robert Park, 6 June 2008

## The first casualty of war is common sense:

Defense Secretary Robert Gates said yesterday that medical care of the wounded needs major changes before he leaves office. Why not start with the Fort Bliss Restoration and Resilience Center? Last Friday the American Forces Press Service reported on the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the new Center. The cutting edge treatments at the facility include Reiki, acupuncture and Qi Gong - three so-called "energy" therapies that have in common that they are many hundreds of years old and have no conceivable mechanism of benefit other than the placebo effect. Our soldiers deserve better

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- *What's New* Robert L. Park, 16 May 2008

## Preachers' pulpits pronouncements plague primaries.

Barrack Obama's problems with the incendiary Rev. Jeremiah Wright were cancelled out this week when megachurch pastor John Hagee, whose support McCain had earlier welcomed, declared that God allowed the rise of Hitler because in the end it returned Israel to the Jewish people. To McCain's credit he recognized at once that Hagee is rowing with one oar and renounced his endorsement. Back in February Hagee implied that Hurricane Katrina was divine retribution for a planned Gay Pride parade in New Orleans. At that time McCain repudiated Hagee's remarks but held on to the endorsement.

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- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 23 May 2008

389 'Tis true, my friend, (and far be flattery hence)  
 399 This good had full as bad a consequence:  
 400 The Book thus put in every vulgar hand,  
 401 Which each presum'd he best could understand,  
 402 The common rule was made the common prey;  
 403 And at the mercy of the rabble lay.  
 404 The tender page with horny fists was gall'd;  
 405 And he was gifted most that loudest bawl'd:  
 406 The spirit gave the doctoral degree:  
 407 And every member of a company  
 408 Was of his trade, and of the Bible free.  
 409 Plain truths enough for needful use they found;  
 410 But men would still be itching to expound:  
 411 Each was ambitious of th'obscurest place,  
 412 No measure ta'en from knowledge, all from *grace*.  
 413 Study and pains were now no more their care:  
 414 Texts were explain'd by fasting, and by prayer:  
 415 This was the fruit the private spirit brought;  
 416 Occasion'd by great zeal, and little thought.  
 417 While crowds unlearn'd, with rude devotion warm,  
 418 About the sacred viands buzz and swarm,  
 419 The fly-blown text creates a crawling brood;  
 420 And turns to maggots what was meant for food.  
 421 A thousand daily sects rise up, and die;  
 422 A thousand more the perish'd race supply:  
 423 So all we make of Heaven's discover'd Will  
 424 Is, not to have it, or to use it ill.  
 425 The danger's much the same; on several shelves  
 426 If others wreck us, or we wreck ourselves.

From John Dryden (1631-1700)  
*religio laici* (a layman's faith)







*Before the Dawn: recovering the lost history of our ancestors*

by Nicholas Wade  
(New York: Penguin Press, 2006)  
reviewed by Kenneth W. Krause

In *Before the Dawn*, Nicholas Wade, science writer for the *New York Times*, traces our ancestral population's unlikely prehistoric passage out of Africa through the Gate of Grief, eastward into Sunda and Sahul for some, northward into modern day Turkey and Iran for others. Mastery of language, pair mating, and a swiftly swelling intellect were among the crucial innovations that allowed humans to embark on this epic voyage, to overcome their aggressive hunter-gatherer past, and embrace a settled, cooperative, and civilized future.

Wade relies on a recent "cascade of DNA data" that has enabled scientists to reconstruct an especially critical leg of the modern human journey. During the last 50,000 years, Wade explains, an anatomically consistent population has fashioned and been fashioned by an entirely new social structure based on trust instead of tyranny, reciprocity rather than retribution. A fully articulate language probably co-evolved with some form of religion approximately 50,000 years ago, the former facilitating, among other things, deception and economic interaction, the latter providing a means, albeit imperfect, by which to deter dishonesty and freeloading.

And it was language as well that supplied the ancestral population with the organizational and executive talents required to traverse the African border and compete against the Neanderthals, evidence of which vanished from the archeological record about 30,000 years ago.

Wade suggests that, in many important ways, the ancestral population might have resembled the modern !Kung San, many of whom lived as hunter-gatherers in Africa well into the 1970s. He deduces this hypothesis from the San population's unique Y chromosomes and mitochondrial DNA, each of which can be distinguished as descending from the oldest branches of the human genetic trees, plus the fact that, although populations generally continue to adapt to their surroundings, hunter-

gatherers tend toward genetic consistency consequent to their presumably static environment. The author infers as well that, like the !Kung San, the ancestral people might have developed a click language (the "!" in !Kung represents a specific click sound), since such languages are often lost but seldom invented. Similarly, our ancestors likely thrived in small, egalitarian societies of no more than 150 persons or so that constantly battled one another. Undoubtedly, religion served to unite them in war when mere kinship could not.

But the rate of human evolution probably accelerated following the ancestral population's exodus from eastern Africa, given the extraordinary environmental changes they must have experienced throughout their migrations. According to Wade, "specific evidence has now emerged suggesting that the human brain has continued to evolve over the last 50,000 years." Indeed, two genes determining brain capacity were recently discovered by the University of Chicago geneticist Bruce Lahn. Lahn found that an alternative version of the microcephalin gene appeared some 37,000 years ago and is currently carried by approximately 70 percent of Europeans and East Asians, but only 0 to 25 percent of sub-Saharan Africans. Similarly, the ASPM allele surfaced in the Middle East or in Europe some 6,000 years ago and is now carried by 50 percent of those populations, being far less common in both East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Although it "seems likely that each new allele conferred some cognitive advantage," Wade concludes, "there is at present no evidence that the microcephalin or ASPM genes do anything other than determine brain size." At this time, perhaps the most one can infer from Lahn's findings is that human evolution continues and that it takes divergent forms and proceeds at different paces among dissimilarly situated populations. No matter how it is interpreted, this data apparently offers a more complex, if not a completely alternative, theory of civilization's genesis than the geographically based model proposed by Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs & Steel*. For Diamond, geography was the key to agriculture, and agriculture was the key to civilization. For Wade, an initial round of genetic revisions resulted in sedentism, which triggered more genetic changes that led to agriculture, trade, and finally complex societies.

Before a hunting and gathering species can settle





# FIG LEAVES



into large communities, its members must first learn to cooperate with strangers. Both freedom and egalitarianism must be sacrificed to social order and hierarchy. Such was the ancestral people's revolutionary onus during the Upper Paleolithic age, from about 45,000 to 15,000 years ago. As the Last Glacial Maximum receded, approximately 15,000 years ago, humans began settling in the Near East. "Almost all subsequent human history and development," Wade surmises, "seems in one sense a consequence of the pivotal transition from a foraging lifestyle to a settled, structured society." This profound transition marked the beginning of the Neolithic Age.

So, if "behaviorally modern" humans evolved at least 50,000 years ago, why did they not become sedentary and develop agriculture much sooner than they did? The answer is implied in the author's conclusion that human evolution is both stepwise and continuing. In other words, "behaviorally modern" is a relative expression. While some have theorized that agriculture resulted from population pressures or from momentous climate changes, Wade points out that human populations burgeoned only after the advent of agriculture and that temperatures improved in several regions while agriculture emerged in few. Instead, he professes, both sedentism and agriculture resulted from "a suite of genetic changes" that rendered the ancestral population less aggressive and more amenable to abstract thought and economic interaction.

Thus, hunters and warriors ceded their reproductive advantage to farmers, administrators, and clerics. Although he admits that scientists have yet to identify the genes responsible for specific human behaviors, Wade emphasizes "the ease with which the human genome responds to cultural changes in society," citing lactose tolerance as an especially prominent and relatable example. In humans, lactase, the enzyme that digests milk lactose, is usually switched on before birth and off after weaning. In a pre-agricultural world, human adult bodies would no longer produce lactase for lack of

advantage. But in contemporary populations descended from northern Europeans and certain milk-drinking African and Bedouin tribes, the lactase gene remains turned on into adulthood or even throughout life. Lactose tolerant Europeans have inherited a very large block of DNA including the lactase gene, and large blocks of DNA shared by many people tend to indicate recent selection. Most importantly, however, lactose tolerance demonstrates quite clearly that human physiology adapts to cultural changes that affect the environment. Thus, in theory, humans are to some extent capable of directing their own evolutionary destinies.

One must not, of course, confuse evolution generally with the romantic concept of progress. Even so, a person might be excused for reflecting upon humanity's recent development with nominal pride. And perhaps Wade is correct to point out that human evolution specifically might one day prove to be different. Humans, after all, make choices, both personal and collective. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin himself observed that man's advancement, though in no way due to his own exertions, might still give him "hope for a still higher destiny" in the future.

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## BOOK REVIEW II

*Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*  
 by Michel Onfray;  
 translated from the French by Jeremy Leggatt  
 (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007)

Dawkins' *The God Delusion* has been strongly criticized for never engaging the evidence for and against god. He blithely accepts this has been proven many times, and god is highly unlikely in any case, and goes on to discuss the damage religion does. Dawkins is a biologist—Michel Onfray is a philosopher. He details the evidence against god. In fact, Onfray sets himself three objectives, to deconstruct the three major monotheisms, to refute Christianity in particular, and to show the damage done by theocracy in the past and the present.

Onfray proves himself an uncompromising atheist. Nothing supernatural finds his acceptance. Nor is he willing to simply follow the ethics or world views of believers. In this he is a student of Nietzsche rather than Kant. He has been a student of many religions and is familiar with their scriptures and dogmas, but none can accept naked reality, pass philosophy, or satisfy the enlightenment. "Human credulity is beyond imagining. Man's refusal to see the obvious, his longing for a better deal even if it is based on pure fiction, his determination to remain blind have no limits." (p. 2) Religions are mere fables, fictions, myths and fairy tales. Religions above all are feeble attempts to obscure the reality that we each have to die.

Onfray takes us through a brief history of atheism. He identifies the first true atheist in the history of ideas as Jean Meslier, who published *Clear and Evident Demonstrations of the Vanity and Falsity of All the Religions of the World* in 1729. He was the first to deny all divinity. Paul d'Holbach dismantled Christianity; Ludwig Feuerbach showed god untenable; and Friedrich Nietzsche asked after god, then what. What would a post-Christian morality look like?

. . . a morality in which the body is not a punishment; the earth ceases to be a vale of tears;

this life is not longer a tragedy; pleasure stops being a sin; women, a curse; intelligence a sign of arrogance; physical pleasure, a passport to hell. (p. 62)

Historically most other unbelievers have not really opposed religious thinking. Kant particularly justified Christian ethics, and Marx accepted religious values.

A major part of this book is devoted to examining Christianity. Onfray clearly questions the existence of Jesus. No historical document has established his life at a precise time or in an identifiable place. He may be a combination of various stories about the life of a sage; and this life story resembles the lives of many similar heroes of the time. Thus, he is most likely a myth, a fable, or at best a legend of an otherwise forgotten miracle worker.

How could this fable evolve into a major world religion? Onfray ascribes the myth mostly to Paul of Tarsus. Paul admittedly never met Jesus, did not agree or get along with the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, and wrote his letters at least twenty years after Pilate had ended his rule in Judea. Onfray sees Paul as a hysteric, a weakling, who preached a hatred of the body, of women, and of life. Jesus did not preach celibacy, chastity, abstinence, to subdue the body. It is Paul who is full of self-hatred, which he turns against the world and its concerns. He inveighs against life, love, desire, pleasure, sensations, body, flesh joy, freedom, independence, and autonomy. (p. 135) He also exhibits a book burning contempt for learning and any kind of independent thought.

Onfray clearly dislikes Paul of Tarsus, and, by extension, all his successors who preach blind obedience and inveigh against the joys and pleasures of this world. There exists no single source for the god idea, all the world's holy scriptures contradict each other. Even more, the scriptures, the Bible, the Koran, on careful reading contradict themselves, saying one thing in one place and the opposite a few sentences later. The only reasoned conclusion remains: God is a delusion. What then is the world without god, and what should it be? ☘

– Wolf Roder





June Potluck:  
 Sunday June 15, 2008 2:00 PM  
 July Potluck  
 (no potluck)



June Meeting  
 Sun. June 29, 2008 2:00 PM  
 July Meeting  
 Tues. July 22, 2008 7:00 PM



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

# FIG

## Our Purpose

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

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



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

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

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

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