

FIG LEAVES

Volume 14 Issue 6

June 2005

June FIG Meeting: Tuesday, 28 June 7:00 PM

Telling the Truth.

Arnold Wilson has retired after thirty years of teaching Philosophy, mostly courses in logic, ethics, and philosophy of science. His attraction to Philosophy began in earnest when he was 15. He remembers telling a high school teacher how insignificant humanity seemed on this tiny planet lost in an infinite universe, and asked her what life was all about anyway. She said he shouldn't worry about such things. He said that he really wanted to know, and that if he ever found out he wouldn't keep it a secret but would tell everyone the truth.

In this talk Arnold recounts over 30 years' experience in trying to "tell the truth" to young people about the kinds of questions and issues that philosophers think important. He'll want to hear of your own experience in hearing and of strategies for "telling the truth."

Arnold Wilson is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Cincinnati. He is founding and executive editor of the journal *Teaching Philosophy* (1975-), and editor of the book *Demonstrating Philosophy* (1989).

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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.

If you want to be part of the Board of Directors, contact our president, Margaret O'Kain via e-mail at figinfo@gofigger.org

Events (NOTE CHANGE OF DAY)

June Potluck

Tuesday 14 June 6:30 PM
At the home of

June Meeting

Tuesday 28 June 7:00 PM
at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio

July Potluck

Sunday 17 June 2:00 PM
At the home of

July Meeting

Tuesday 28 June 7:00 PM
at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio

The Report for the May Meeting will appear in the next Issue. Watch for it!

Shawn Jeffers, our Guide for Mapping Our Tears





Robert Green Ingersoll

Robert Green Ingersoll

compiled by Wolf Roder

We've all heard of Ingersoll, but just who was he, what did he do and say? Can anyone still read him today? He was known as "the great agnostic," but also as that damn "atheist," as the "American infidel" and the "pagan politician." Robert Green Ingersoll was born on 11 August 1833 in Dresden, New York. His home there is today a museum maintained by secular humanists. Ingersoll did not stay in Dresden long, but grew up largely in Illinois. Although his father was an enthusiastic Congregationalist preacher, Bob early developed a dislike for religion. As a young man he read law and settled in Peoria in 1858 to practice. He served in the Civil War and later was appointed attorney general of Illinois from 1867 to 1869. His

efforts to enter elective politics came to naught, probably because of his anti-religious views. He gained a measure of renown as a spokesman for presidential candidates James G. Blaine and Rutherford B. Hayes.

He became famous as an anti-Christian lecturer. His presentations scandalized many among the clergy, and an extensive literature to refute his assertions arose. His own complete works cover twelve volumes, published in 1902, and reprinted in 1929 and 1990. They include, *Why I am an agnostic* (1896) and some twenty anti-religion lectures. His ethical creed was the belief that human happiness is the greatest good, and the way to be happy is to make others so. Ingersoll died in Dobbs Ferry, New York on 21 July 1899.

To give some feeling for the man's reasoning and a taste of his words, I shall quote from Ingersoll's *Some Mistakes of Moses* which he published in 1879. Some of his comments would fit right into the struggle to keep "creationism" out of the public schools today.

Our country will never be filled with great institutions of learning until there is an absolute divorce between Church and School. As long as the mutilated records of a barbarous people are placed by priest and professor above the reason of mankind, we shall reap but little benefit from church or school. (Chapter II)

His comments on the division of church and state, and on the hypocrisy of politicians are as applicable today as when he wrote them about a century and a quarter ago. We have not changed one whit since, and politicians try to mix religion into politics then as now.

Our Government has nothing to do with religion. It is neither Christian nor pagan; it is secular. But as long as the people persist in voting for or against men on account of their religious views, just so long will hypocrisy hold place and power. Just so long will the candidates crawl in the dust—hide their opinions, flatter those with whom they differ, pretend to agree with those whom they despise; and just so long will honest men be trampled under foot. (Chapter III)

Ingersoll points out we know little about god and religion. The one source book is unreliable and contradictory, so that our religions are speculation. Despite this we have tendency to fight over the meaning of words and interpretations of events and ceremonies. We enjoy killing each other over what is at base mere ignorance.

It is amazing to me that a difference of opinion upon subjects that we know nothing with certainty about, should make us hate, persecute, and despise each other. Why a ➔



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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difference of opinion upon predestination, or the Trinity, should make people imprison and burn each other seems beyond the comprehension of man; and yet in all countries where Christians have existed, they have destroyed each other to the exact extent of their power. (Chapter I)

His attitude to the Bible is to examine it in the same way we might consider the truth and reality of any other book which claims to provide great insights into human life and history.

After all, the real question is not whether the Bible is inspired, but whether it is true. If it is true, it does not need to be inspired. If it is true, it makes no difference whether it was written by a man or a god. The multiplication table is just as useful, just as true as though God had arranged the figures himself. If the Bible is really true, the claim of inspiration need not be urged; and if it is not true, its inspiration can hardly be established. As a matter of fact, the truth does not need to be inspired. (Chapter V)

Ingersoll's "mistakes of Moses" is an assessment of the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures which Christians call the *Old Testament*. He looks at these writings as a modern, nineteenth century thinker, not a traditional theologian. As a lawyer he examines the infamous ten commandments and the claims that they represent the foundation of the legal system of our own day.

It has been contended for many years that the Ten Commandments are the foundation of all ideas of justice and of law. Eminent jurists have bowed to popular prejudice, and deformed their works by statements to the effect that the Mosaic laws are the fountains from which sprang all ideas of right and wrong. Nothing can be more stupidly false than such assertions. Thousands of years before Moses was born, the Egyptians had a code of laws. They had laws against blasphemy, murder, adultery, larceny, perjury, laws for the collection of debts, the enforcement of contracts, the ascertainment of damages, the redemption of property pawned, and upon nearly every subject of human interest. The Egyptian code was far better than the Mosaic. (Chapter XXIII)

Ingersoll has much to say about the history reported in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible ascribed to have been written by Moses himself. Much in this history is contradictory, including the description of Moses own death. Ingersoll is interested in applying a scholarly common sense to the ideas he finds in the Bible. To him it is a fact that our American civilization is plainly not inspired by the Bible, and he asks what would be the consequences if we followed the Bible?

If the Pentateuch is inspired, the civilization of our day is a mistake and crime. There should be no political liberty. Heresy should be trodden out beneath the bigot's brutal feet. Husbands should divorce their wives at will, and make the mothers of their children houseless and weeping wanderers. Polygamy ought to be practiced; women should become slaves; we should buy the sons and daughters of the heathen and make them bondmen and bondwomen forever. We should sell our own flesh and blood, and have the right to kill our slaves. Men and women should be stoned to death for laboring on the seventh day. "Mediums," such as have familiar spirits, should be burned with fire. Every vestige of mental liberty should be destroyed, and reason's holy torch extinguished in the martyr's blood. (Chapter XXIX)

But Ingersoll's bottom line is not simply that the Bible is mistaken, but a rational examination of the deeds and acts of the god of the Pentateuch shows this god to be downright evil.

It is impossible to conceive of a more thoroughly despicable, hateful, and arrogant being, than the Jewish god. He is without a redeeming feature. In the mythology of the world he has no parallel. He, only, is never touched by agony and tears. He delights only in blood and pain. Human affections are naught to him. He cares neither for love nor music, beauty nor joy. A false friend, an unjust judge, a braggart, hypocrite, and tyrant, sincere in hatred, jealous, vain, and revengeful, false in promise, honest in curse, suspicious, ignorant, and changeable, infamous and hideous – such is the god of the Pentateuch. (Chapter XXIII)

Robert Green Ingersoll writes a very readable prose. Many of his ideas are as active and vital for this country today as they were a hundred and twentyfive years ago.

Biographies

- Herman Eugene Kittredge, *Ingersoll: a biographical appreciation* (New York: Dresden Publishing Co. 1911)
- Isaac Newton Baker, *An Intimate View of Robert Green Ingersoll* (New York: C. P. Farrell, 1920)
- Charles T. Gorham, *Robert G. Ingersoll* (London: Watts & Co. 1921)
- Clarence H. Cramer, *Royal Bob: the life of Robert Green Ingersoll* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952)
- Orvin Prentiss Larson, *American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll, a biography* (New York: Citadel Press 1962, reprinted 1993)
- David D. Anderson, *Robert Ingersoll* (New York: Twayne Pub. 1972)
- Roger E. Greeley, *Ingersoll: immortal infidel* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1977)
- Mark A Plummer, *Robert G Ingersoll: Peoria's pagan politician* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University, 1984)
- Frank Smith, *Robert Ingersoll: a life* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990)





Jesus, Is This News?

By Susan J. Douglas

www.inthesetimes.com; May 31, 2005

No matter how much columnists and media critics bemoan the sorry state of American journalism, no matter how low the press sinks in the estimation of the American people, the news media, particularly on television, remains defiantly abysmal. Now, on top of the usual toxic doses of runaway brides, irrelevant celebrity trials and President Bush holding hands with Crown Prince Abdullah, we have the rise of Jesus News.

Blinded by their own erroneous news frame that the last election was all about “moral values,” and pressured to give religion more coverage by an evangelical right running on methamphetamines, the news media are devoting more airtime to everything Jesus.

The ghoulish death watch of Pope Paul John II (“Is he dead yet?” “No, Bob, not dead yet, back to you.”) hogged nearly an hour of total news time on the three networks from March 28-April 1, and his death and funeral preparations garnered 129 minutes of network news attention the following week, making it the year’s third biggest story so far. By contrast, that same week, Tom Delay’s ethics problems received four minutes of coverage on ABC and CBS combined, and none on NBC. By the week of April 18-22, when the networks devoted 37 minutes to the Conclave of Cardinals (“Is the smoke white or black, Bob?”) and another 32 minutes to the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as the new pope, one might have thought Catholicism had become our state religion.

The week of May 2, ABC news inaugurated a series called “Under God,” about how conservative Christians are “searching for new ways to make their mark on popular culture.” First up was a story about Christian cheerleading camps, and the next day a story about how Christians like to spank their kids. By the time Thursday’s episode, “Faith and Fashion Under God” aired, one sensed that some at ABC had been a bit hoodwinked. Here we learned that “a growing number of people, especially young people, are proudly wearing their beliefs.” Cut to a picture of the campy baseball cap that has a picture of Jesus on it and reads, “Jesus is my Homeboy.”

My daughter has that cap; so do quite a few of her friends. They have it because they find it hilarious and irreverent. It is the ironic juxtaposition of hip hop slang with

evangelism that they love; the last thing they are doing is “wearing their beliefs.”

And then there’s Fox News. It routinely traffics in interviews with folks like the Reverend Franklin Graham, whose newsworthy pronouncements include “Jesus ... came to this Earth to take sinners and save us from our sins ... [we need to] receive Christ by faith.” Fox is the platform from which James Dobson of Focus on the Family can accuse Democratic Senators of being, well, the infidel. Not be outdone, NBC’s “Dateline” with Stone Phillips had a story about an exorcism to rid a man of demons.

What are we to make of the rise of Jesus news? Yes, it is indeed important to know what the religious right is up to, especially as they seek to pack the courts with Jesus freaks, outlaw the teaching of evolution, reverse decades of environmental regulation because “the rapture” is just around the corner, and suppress free speech and academic freedom on college campuses by charging that evangelical students are “silenced” and “harassed” and thus should be able to sue.

But that’s not the detailed coverage we’re getting, at least not on TV. Instead, Jesus news embezzles time away from stories people really need to hear, like much more detailed coverage of the Bush/Republican energy bill, which got a total of six minutes of coverage from all three networks when it passed the house the week of April 18.

Not to mention local news. Here in Michigan, we are contemplating, and not without bitterness, the famous 1955 quotation from Charlie Wilson who said of his company “What’s good for General Motors is good for the rest of America.” In that year, GM sold over half of the cars purchased in the United States. Today, GM has been downgraded to junk bond status. The company’s arrogant, willful myopia, which has kept it producing gas-guzzling, poorly designed, undesirable cars, could very well lead to a major fiscal disaster in Michigan and elsewhere. But except for the business pages, (and the Detroit News and Free Press), this has not gotten near the attention that the religious invocations used at NASCAR rallies has.

The parade of evangelicals on TV exaggerates the numbers of these folks and makes them seem much more influential than they are--or certainly should be. Rather than clones of the Christian Broadcasting Network, we need solid, investigative work about the money, organizations and, indeed, the cynicism behind all of these crusading efforts to turn our country into a giant Bible camp.





FIG LEAVES



Our "FIG" Leaf...What is it really?

As most readers of FIG Leaves know, we use a series of fig leaves behind the title. For sometime now, the rumbling has been heard: "it's not really a fig leaf." "Okay, What is it?" The few responses received were inconclusive when checked out on the internet. After digging deeper on the internet, here is what was found.

The family to which the Fig belongs is called *moraceae*. The Mulberry tree also belongs to this family. The White Mulberry tree, locally found, has a leaf with five lobes but is much smaller than our fig leaf and has different fruit.



The fig is in the genus called *Ficus*. There are over 800 species of *Ficus* consisting of vines, spreading trees and shrubs all commonly known as "Fig Trees." The leaves of these species come in many shapes and sizes. The leaves of the Hairy Leaf

Fig, Red Leaf Fig, and the Glossy Leaf Fig have no lobes. The *Ficus auiculata* has three lobes. The *Ficus religiosa* has no lobes and is sacred to the Buddhist and Brahmin communities. *Ficus elastica* is known as the Indian Rubber plant. *Ficus benghalensis* is known as the Banyan Tree.



Our FIG Leaf is the *Ficus carica* commonly known as the "Edible Fig." It is the only one with 5 lobes on its leaf. It is cultivated commercially in the southern part of the United States. The *Ficus* plants are propagated by grafting, cutting or budding but not by their seeds. Their flowers are located inside the fruit technically known as a synconium. It is considered a deciduous broad-leafed tree and grows in full sun to about 10-30 feet depending on the climate. While the fruit is edible, the sap is a milky latex substance that is irritating to human skin.



The original Fig tree is believed to have originated in Asia and brought to the Mediterranean by humans. Then it was brought to Mexico and England during the 1500's. In about 1669 it was introduced to the eastern United

States and then to California in 1881. Successful cultivation is only in California and some of the Gulf States. Too much humidity causes the plants to rot and they cannot tolerate temperatures below 10 degrees Fahrenheit.

The fig leaf is mentioned in at least two places in the Bible. In Genesis 3:7 Adam and Eve sew together fig leaves to make themselves aprons to cover their nakedness. In Mark 11:13, Jesus curses the fig tree because it has leaves but not fruit.



If you are interested in seeing a local example of *Ficus carica*, there is one in the Tropical section of the Krohn Conservatory in Eden Park. As you go in to the Krohn Conservatory, turn right, move to the right around the circle, walk towards the end of the circle and look up. The Krohn Conservatory will call me the next time they prune the tree so I can have a few of the leaves. The rest will go to the ZOO as the elephants love them!

For more information you can check out these web sites: www.the-tree.org.uk or www.crfg.org, or enter *Ficus carica* in your favorite web search engine. Be forewarned, if you enter "Fig Leaf," you will be inundated with web sites you children should not see and are not on this topic!

Donna Loughry

The Devil Should Retire

By Dorothy B. Thompson

I think the devil should retire,
Close up shop, put out the fire!
It's clear he has more power than god,
Which seems to me precisely odd.
Since no one asked my opinion
I should not question god's dominion.
But, common sense is strong in thought.
So I can't bare the tommy rot!
Devil dogma is a winner.
Someone has to tempt each sinner.
People must be vile and base
So god can save them by his grace.
Believing that keeps folks in line,
The devil never will resign!





Miscegenation Law

Never let the Church and State
 Get close enough to meet and mate;
 For the safety of our nation
 Prohibit this miscegenation;
 Keep Church far from the bed of State;
 Separate their greed and hate;
 Abstinence is what they need
 Or the monsters they will breed
 Will mongrelize both law and creed.
 Never let Church marry State
 Do not even let them date.

Edwin Kagin

Quote

Scotland, my Scotland.

We tend to think of the Scots as all dour Presbyterians, that is members of the established Church of Scotland. According to the latest census the five million Scots divide as follows: (in percent)

- 42.4 Church of Scotland
- 15.9 Roman Catholic
- 6.8 other Christian denominations
- 1.4 Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu
- .5 other religions
- 27.6 no religion
- 5.5 did not answer the question

Unquote



2 Kings ii, 23-24. [Elisha] went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!" And he turned around, and looked at them, and he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and savaged forty-two of the boys.

Watson Heston, *Old Testament Stories Comically Illustrated: The Stories being Humorously Told and Hard Facts Given Concerning the Origin and Authenticity of the Old Testament.* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1892)



Calling All Pagans: It's time to fight back Nicholas von Hoffman, 12 May 2005

A piece of treacherous language has made its way into our public discourse. Where once words such as “religion,” “Christianity” and “Judaism” were heard, public figures now speak of “persons of faith” or “people of faith,” “the faith community” and “faith-based.” Moreover, anything “faith-based” is axiomatically good, and anyone who questions the presumption is axiomatically bad.

These expressions divide us into believers and nonbelievers, with the believers or persons of faith enjoying not only an alleged numerical majority but a moral superiority as well. It follows that anyone living outside the community of faith is a bottom-dwelling, life-hating, secular pederast destined for pain eternal.

The term “people of faith” has come to be used interchangeably with the word “American.” If there’s a politician left in the United States who doesn’t season his speech with tremulous references to the “peoples of faith,” I can’t recall his name. The expression “people of faith” conveys the idea of a holy (or not-so-holy) alliance of religions, united for good against the disorganized forces of anarchic relativists, secularists, and people of little or no faith. They have values -- a good thing. The rest of us (few in number though we may be) stand for what is destructive of hearth, community and country -- a bad thing.

The people of faith are sympathetic to the Republican Party and its objectives. Democrats, intimidated by the religiosity loose in the country, have come to accept the premise that the test of public policy is how a measure is greeted by the faith community. At the rate the faith juggernaut is moving to govern the nation, the once-red-hot liberal patootie, Hillary Rodham Clinton, now a wifely Mrs. Hillary Clinton, will soon be campaigning against *Roe v. Wade*. Judging by who Ms. Clinton was in the days of yore as against who Lady Clinton is nowadays, you would have to agree that faith can pass miracles.

Hillary is not alone. Can you think of a single person of stature in public life who dares to challenge the people of faith? Maybe a shock jock here or there has the onions to take on this coalition of the altogether too godly. Nobody else does.

The closest thing we have to organized opposition to the religious domination of public life is Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. Battling the appointment of faith-based judges and preventing public buildings from being

festooned with Bible quotations is well and good as far as it goes, but it isn’t far enough. Somebody or something has got to start battling religion itself. God is the enemy -- meaning the God locked up by organized religions and guarded by ministers, priests, rabbis, popes and mullahs.

This is not a struggle to be carried on in the law courts and the legislatures. Religionists are crawling in everywhere, swarming the schools, movies, medicine and research labs. Their intent is to install a faith commissar to oversee every major social institution.

We need people to stand up in public against the Christo-Islamic alliance’s assaults on relativism. It’s been more than a generation since anyone with access to a significant pulpit stood up for relativism. The clerics have made “relativism” into a dirty word instead of what it actually is: a term for the application of reason to public affairs.

Turn your back on relativism and you get absolutism. Show me a true believer and I’ll show you a bigot. Absolutism is at the heart of every religion -- our dogma or nothing. The absolutist foundations of every faith preclude compromise, adjustments, deal-making, pragmatism, the changing of opinion, the admission of new evidence -- all the tools necessary for running a complicated, polyglot, poly-religious, poly-ethnic, poly-cultural modern, science-based, technology-dependent society. The absolutism that underlies religious faith closes the door marked “Reason” and opens the door labeled “Holy War.”

There was a time when the evangelical Calvinist form of the Christian religion was so prevalent that it could run American

society with some success -- but that was 200 years ago. Even then, people of non-faith tried to beat off the religious prohibitionism that strove to close the country down on Sundays, to suppress music, dancing, baseball, Sabbath smooching and the joy of life and replace it with on-your-knees worship and clerical rule. The coming of large numbers of Roman Catholic immigrants touched off the public-school wars of the 19th century. Religious absolutism being what it is, the fight over whose dogma and morals were to be inculcated into the students had to be resolved by kicking all religion out of the schools. That never completely happened, but at least God was pushed into the corner with the elimination of school prayer and the exile of religious symbols and activities. Recently, though, God has been making a comeback -- and God help us all if He is successful.

A good guess would be that only a minority of the population is infected with virulent forms of faith. But it’s an organized minority, awash in money. We of little faith and less zeal are neither organized nor rich nor eaten up with a need to proselytize.

To stop them, we don’t have to pass laws. It’s not vital to get “under God” out of the Pledge of Allegiance. What is vital is that we, the faithless, raise a hullabaloo every time the people of faith play the family-values card, every time they claim that their faith puts them at the head of the line, every time they presume to decide what we should see, hear and do. What is vital is that we bray, honk, whinny, oink and screech at every public assertion that superstition trumps science, that they’ve got a god and that those of us without one are no damn good.



On Holy Books

Massimo Pigliucci (June 2005)

Newsweek made a mistake in reporting, based on an anonymous source, that US interrogators at the infamous base in Guantanamo Bay have desecrated the Koran, allegedly by flushing it down the toilet. Bad journalism, though no worse than what the American media have accustomed us to for the past several years. Even the use of anonymous sources is neither unusual nor necessarily a bad idea. Watergate might not have happened without the anonymous source famously referred to as “deep throat.” What is most interesting about the Newsweek debacle is the reaction of the US government, and the widespread outrage at what the American weekly has allegedly caused as a result of its mistake.

Take the reaction of US government officials. The attack on Newsweek was fierce, with allegations of damaging the American reputation with Muslims across the world. As if that needed any help since the Bush administration has gone to war on the basis of what turned out to be false information about alleged weapons of mass destruction. This information provided by anonymous sources, and which former Secretary of State Colin Powell shamelessly paraded as “fact” in front of the United Nations.

It is more than a little worrisome, that the Bush administration is so eager to attack the press and use it as a scapegoat for its own foolish foreign policies. It is downright scary when so many right-wing media pundits are ready to jump on Newsweek for being “unpatriotic.” It is funny, in a dark humor sense, when the magazine is labeled as part of the “liberal media conspiracy,” even though Newsweek has run plenty of stories that covered the war on Iraq and the actions of the US military favorably. It is dangerous when almost everybody, except an op-ed piece in the New York Times, ignored the statements of an American general to the effect that the riots that killed several people in Pakistan had nothing to do with the publication of the

incriminating article.

But let us consider the broader picture for a moment. Suppose for the sake of argument that the short, inaccurate article in Newsweek really had been the spark that led to murderous riots half a world away. In what reasonable sense are the author of the piece and editor of the magazine responsible for such a sad outcome? The reasoning behind the accusations raised against Newsweek is that we actually expect people to become violent because a book they care for has been flushed down the toilet. We may not, at least officially, condone such reaction, but we put the responsibility square on the shoulders of the journalists, rather than on the people who so easily resort to violence. Is it really understandable or acceptable when religious zealots riot or kill to defend their twisted understanding of their faith.

But wait! Isn't it precisely this sort of religious intolerance that brought about the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11? There may have been reasons why the terrorists did it, and these reasons surely had something to do with American foreign policy in the Middle East during the past several decades. But reasons are not the same as justifications. The terrorists who

attacked the twin towers in New York and the Pentagon were fully to blame for having decided that the way to resolve cultural and political conflicts is to kill innocent people. Similarly, the only culprits in the Pakistani riots are those religious bigots and overzealous security forces who went ahead and did the rioting and killing, regardless of what real or imaginary “offense” to their religion they may have used as an excuse for their senseless actions.

Here is another way to put the point. Imagine the headlines: “Creationists flush a copy of Darwin’s Origin of Species down the toilet. Dozens killed in the resulting riots on university campuses.” Of course, you will never see such a headline, except perhaps in *The Onion*. Not even the most ardent secular humanist actually regards Darwin’s writings as sacred. The whole ethics of science and humanism is about tolerance for other people’s views. To paraphrase Mel Brooks, a sense of humor is the humanist’s best defense against the universe. Unfortunately, the one thing religious zealots seem to sorely lack is precisely a sense of humor. Yet surely God, the most perfect of all beings, appreciates a laugh here and there, even at Her own expense. After all, didn’t she create the Platypus?





Creating a Modern World.

Once upon a time, many long years ago, before the white man came sailing down the Ohio, many wood buffalo lived in the forests north of the great river. This was a time when a squirrel could run and clamber through the tree tops from the eastern coast of the ocean all the way to the Father of Rivers without having to touch ground anywhere. The winters were colder then and the snow would linger on the land for days and weeks at a time. Late in Fall the buffalo would migrate along the broad valley of the Mill Creek and swim across the Ohio River to find lush grazing in the blue grass landscape south of the river.

The Shawnee and Miami Indians would follow along the trail the buffalo had trampled out. They would hunt the great animals in Kentucky for their meat, and they would build their tepees from his hides. The buffalo fur would be made into blankets, and clothes for men, and women, and children. And thus the buffalo trail along the Mill Creek became an Indian path.

In the middle of the eighteenth century white hunters, explorers, and assorted scalawags started drifting down the Ohio from Pennsylvania and points further east. Some settled on the Kentucky side and others sought out the wide terrace above the river near the mouth of the Mill Creek. And they followed the Indian trail along the Mill Creek into the interior to pursue trade, and hunting, and generally to take the Indian's land.

Towards the end of the century more permanent settlers with wives and children began to arrive at the mouth of the Mill Creek creating the settlement of Losantiville and the threat of Fort Washington. Settlements also sprang up in the interior along the Mill Creek and further north in the valley of the Miami River. John Cleves Symmes, a man with political clout, managed to persuade the Congress to let him have all the land between the Big and Little Miami Rivers. Influence then was as important as it is now. Symmes got rich selling his Miami purchase to later arrivals. By this time the Indian path no longer sufficed to carry wagon loads of goods into the interior. So the early settlers constructed a plank road where the buffalo had shown the way.

The economy of the region thrived. Thousands of swine grew fat on the acorn mast of the surrounding woods, and were slaughtered in the stockyards of Cincinnati. The city was known as *porkopolis* for a reason. It smelled that way too, but the scourge of air pollution was not to be invented for another hundred years. For a time Cincinnati became the

largest city west of the Appalachian Mountains. Hence, the Queen City of the West.

The most efficient transport for large loads was by water, but rivers don't run everywhere. So it was clear that artificial water ways would be needed, and Americans engaged in a boom of canal building. A canal to connect Lake Erie in the north with the Ohio river followed the old trace of the plank road along the Mill Creek. It met another canal from Indiana, to enter the City along Central Parkway to eventually divide the terrace into downtown and a region *over the Rhine*.

The famous English writer Charles Dickens once took a passenger boat from Cincinnati to Lake Erie and described the stink of mules, who pulled the boat, and the stagnant water that carried it. He also remarked on getting stuck, when upstream workers did not release timely and enough water to float the canal boat. It was possible to get stuck for days when grounded. Grand Lake St. Mary and Indian Lake south of Wapakoneta are remnant water supply reservoirs of the canal era. Cincinnati suburb Lockland is, you guessed it, where a series of locks allowed the canal to descend to the plain.

The canal era didn't last long. By the middle of the nineteenth century the railroads paralleled the canal in the Mill Creek valley. They were faster and more efficient, so the canals fell into disuse, and soon became derelict. In the early part of the twentieth century Cincinnati tried to build an underground railway on the old canal right of way, but the powers in charge ran out of money. The abandoned tunnel entrances can still be seen from the highway.

Some forty years ago as the passenger railways lay dying, the old canal right of way was filled and became the route for the most important north-south Interstate Highway. This road, I-75 runs from where the United States meets Canada between the Great Lakes to the southern most tip of Florida. And if you ask who laid the route right through the middle of the busiest part of Cincinnati, the answer is, why it was the wood buffalo some two hundred years ago. Nothing is so modern it isn't old. ❧



During the Spanish Civil War a protestant missionary tries to convert one of the Catalan loyalist anarchists. "Don't bother," he is told, "I don't believe in the only right and true religion, so how could I believe in yours."



Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life

by Alister McGrath

(Oxford: Blackwell, 2004)

from *Science*, vol 308, no. 5719, pp. 205–206, (8 April 2005)

a book review by Michael Shermer



In 1999, Frank J. Sulloway and I conducted a study on religious attitudes that included a question asking survey takers to explain in their own words why they believe in God. The most popular reason given was: “Good design, natural beauty, perfection, and complexity of the world or universe.”¹ As pattern-seeking primates, we have a natural tendency to look for and find design in nature. Before 1859 the default explanation for that design was a top-down designer, God. This was most forcefully argued by the 18th-century English theologian William Paley: If one stumbled upon a watch on a heath, one would not assume it had always been there, as one might with a stone.² A watch implies a watchmaker. Design implies a designer.

In 1859, Charles Darwin provided a scientific explanation of design from the bottom up: natural selection.³ Since then, arguably no one has done more to make the case for bottom-up design than the Oxford University evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in a series of books that includes the aptly titled *The Blind Watchmaker*⁴, a direct challenge to Paley. But if design comes naturally from the bottom up and not supernaturally from the top down, what does that imply about the existence of God? Although most scientists avoid the question altogether or take a conciliatory stance along the lines of Stephen Jay Gould’s non-overlapping magisteria (NOMA).⁵ Dawkins unequivocally concludes: “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.”⁴ Dawkins has generated controversy within the ranks of evolutionary theorists for his strict adherence to Darwinian natural selection (“random mutation plus non-random cumulative selection” in his succinct description) as the only mechanism of evolutionary change worth bothering about – Gould called him a “Darwinian fundamentalist”⁶ – but it is his statements about religion that have drawn attention to him from outside the scientific community. Now, in *Dawkins’ God*, we have a book-length analysis by Alister McGrath, professor of historical theology at Oxford. With professional training in the sciences as well as theology (he earned a doctorate in molecular biophysics), McGrath is well qualified to assess Dawkins’s literary corpus.

The book begins with an engaging first-person account of McGrath’s own

journey from atheist to theist, emphasizing the shortcomings of the former and the strengths of the latter.⁷ During his time as a graduate student at Oxford, McGrath began to explore the relation between science and religion, which led him to realize that Christianity was more sophisticated than his atheism allowed him to appreciate. “While I had been severely critical of Christianity as a young man, I had never extended that same critical evaluation to atheism.” When he did, he discovered “that the intellectual case for atheism was rather less substantial than I had supposed.” At the same time, he was reading Dawkins, whose conclusions were just the opposite; thus was born this book, decades in the making.

After a brief tour of the life and science of both Darwin and Dawkins, McGrath addresses Dawkins’s vision of evolutionary theory as a complete worldview. “I’m a Darwinist because I believe the only alternatives are Lamarckism or God,” Dawkins explains, “neither of which does the job as an explanatory principle.”⁸ Because science supports Darwinism, the implications are broad and deep. “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.”⁹ What place, then, for God? The remainder of *Dawkins’ God* consists primarily of a point-by-point critique of Dawkins’s writings on religion, which McGrath sees as too simplistic and full of easy-to-topple straw men. McGrath summarizes his position thusly: (i) “The scientific

method is incapable of adjudicating the God hypothesis, either positively or negatively.” (ii) “God need not be invoked as an explanatory agent within the evolutionary process” (to be subsequently dismissed). (iii) “The concept of God as ‘watchmaker,’ which Dawkins spends so much time demolishing, emerged as significant in the eighteenth century, and is not typical of the Christian tradition.” This is, in essence, Gould’s NOMA – science and religion serve different purposes using different methods, and attempts to bring them into harmony or conflict cannot be logically justified.

Then how do we know there is a God? Faith. According to Dawkins, faith “means blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.”¹⁰ This, says McGrath, “bears little relation to any religious (or any other) sense of the word.” In its stead McGrath presents the definition of faith by the Anglican theologian W. H. Griffith-Thomas: “It commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence; it continues in the confidence of the heart or emotions based on conviction, and it is crowned in the consent of the will, by means of which the conviction and confidence are expressed in conduct.” Such a definition – which McGrath describes as “typical of any Christian writer” – is an example of what Dawkins, in reference to French postmodernists, calls “continental obscurantism.” Most of it describes the psychology of belief. The only clause of relevance to a scientist is “adequate evidence,” which raises the follow-up



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question, "Is there?"

Obviously McGrath must think there is, but he never says. On this point I found the book frustrating. As McGrath's relentless deconstruction of Dawkins unfolds, he repeats, over and over, that religion offers a worldview every bit as sophisticated and worthy of respect as science. His defense of religious faith is a passionate and honorable one, and he demonstrates that some of Dawkins's characterizations of religion are indeed overly simplistic or selective, but he never delivers an answer to the God question. The closest thing to an argument for God's existence I could find in the book is this: "Why should God require an explanation at all? He might just be an 'ultimate,' ... one of those things we have to accept as given, and is thus amenable to description, rather than explanation." That may be, but like all other arguments made in favor of God's existence, this only works as a reason to believe *if you already believe*. If you do not already believe, science cannot help you.

I was eager to read *Dawkins' God* because of the gladiatorial weight of the contestants and what they represent. And although McGrath presents many side issues in a pleasantly readable fashion (e.g. Darwin's religiosity, the historiography of science and religion, and how and where religion embraces science), he dodges the biggest question of all, the question at the heart of Dawkins's writings: Is there a God? Whether Dawkins is simplistic or sarcastic or sardonic is a secondary issue. By elevating it to the primary focus of the book, McGrath missed an opportunity to make his case, *pace* Dawkins, and give us the very best arguments in his arsenal. With McGrath, I still do not know why he believes in God. With Dawkins, there is no doubt about where he stands.

References & Notes

- (1) The results are reported in M. Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (Freeman, New York, 2000).
- (2) W. Paley, *Natural Theology: Or, Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (London, 1802).
- (3) C. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (John Murray, London, 1859).
- (4) R. Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (Norton, New York, 1986).
- (5) S. J. Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and*

Religion in the Fullness of Life (Ballantine, New York, 1999).

- (6) S. J. Gould, *N. Y. Rev. Books* 44, 34 (12 June 1997).
- (7) See also: A. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (Rider, London, 2004).
- (8) R. Dawkins, in *The Third Culture*, J. Brockman, Ed. (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1995), pp. 75-95.
- (9) R. Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1995).
- (10) R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 1976).

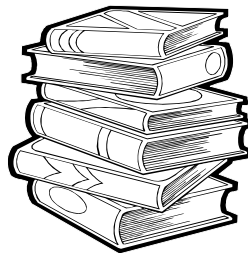
Quote

Homeland Defense Act?

... the fetters imposed on liberty at home have ever been forged out of the weapons provided for defence against real, pretended, or imaginary dangers from abroad.

— James Madison

Unquote



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 June 26 - Prime Obsession : Bernhard Riemann and the Greatest Unsolved Problem in Mathematics by John Derbyshire, 2003

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

Quote

Whereas Americans used to count on their soldiers to defend the homeland, we have now assigned that task to an entirely new cabinet agency, freeing the armed services to focus on their actual post-Cold War mission, which is to coerce, pacify and influence others, everywhere from Kirkuk to Kabul and beyond.

— Andrew J. Bacevich, *Washington Post Weekly*, (15-21 March 2004) p. 32

Unquote



July Potluck: Sunday, 17 2:00 PM

June Meeting: Tuesday, 28nd 7:00 PM



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