

FIG LEAVES

Volume 16 Issue 3

March 2007

March FIG Meeting:

NOTE DATE AND TIME!!!

Sunday, 25 March 2:00 PM At the Vernon Manor

World Transhumanist Association

by Willow Brugh

The **World Transhumanist Association** is an international nonprofit membership organization which advocates the ethical use of technology to expand human capacities. We support the development of and access to new technologies that enable everyone to enjoy **better minds, better bodies** and **better lives**. In other words, we want people to be **better than well**.

Transhumanism is the evolution of humans through use of technology. We are going beyond what is considered the norm - we are transcending beyond what has been considered what humans are able to accomplish as well as the life span allowed to us. The use of technology for such extreme ends brings up many issues. Many tools which have been put into use have drastically altered the way in which we live. Fire, the wheel, language, and writing are all examples of things which have all caused paradigm shifts. In the past these shifts have been spread out over vast amounts of time, but they have been coming faster and faster as time progresses.

Technology has been a tool in the past, but now it threatens to become a crutch, something we depend upon. As a student of sociology I am most concerned with the impacts of using technology for advancement upon the populace in general. While we have used knowledge to double and even triple our lifespan, new expectations accompany the current rate of advancement. Business moves at an ever-increasing rate. E-mail is asynchronous, prompting the expectation of instant response. We no longer have time to dwell upon the possibilities before us but must decide and act upon a plan immediately. I feel that the abilities offered to individuals through such advancements must be tempered with appreciation and joy for the world around them. We must know who we are before we can become who we will be. Understanding our connection to the world and those around us will allow us to progress in a nurturing route instead of the destructive route we are currently on.

You can read more about the general Transhumanist perspective at the WTA website (<http://www.transhumanism.org>), but my talk will mainly be about the affected aspects of society. There will be an overview of what it is to be a Transhumanist as well as some of the current political hurdles early in the speech. I enjoy discourse so please come with questions. I may not know the answers, but I always enjoy the discussion.

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Events

Note: Change of Date and Time

March Meeting

Sunday, March 25, 2007

2:00 PM at the Vernon Manor

400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH

April Potluck

Tuesday, April, 2007; 6:30 PM

April Meeting

Tuesday, April 24, 2007

7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor

400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, OH



February Meeting...

Videoclips: the translations of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) Presented by Shawn Jeffers



Shawn started by explaining what the Middle East Research Institute does, tracking what is going on in the Middle East on Arab and Muslim television channels, translating programs and making them available to journalists and academics. Shawn explained that he wanted to share this material with FIG because so much is going on in the Middle East. It is a way to give background and helpful perspectives to FIG members so they can speak logically in discussions about the war in Iraq, and possibly soon to be war in Iran? Shawn just returned from Israel, where he was for most of January attending a seminar at Yad Vashem, the National Holocaust Museum of Israel.

Shawn gave us a brief background on Islam. The religion was founded in the seventh century and is the second largest religion in the world. The three holiest places are Mecca, Medina, and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Shawn visited the Dome of the Rock and the guide explained, Muhammad had visited the Dome of the Rock. He rode in one night from Mecca to Jerusalem, and there had a vision of an angel taking him to heaven. Rationalists think he must have dreamed this.

Because of the war in Iraq, we hear a lot about the difference between Sunni and Shia. The largest group are Sunni, who dominate almost every Muslim country with the exception of Iraq and Iran. The split between them dates all the way back to 661, and a disagreement over the legitimate successor to the Prophet.

It has been said that the Middle Ages were the best time for relations between Jews and Muslim. In that period Jews were treated equally - equally as bad as the Christians. Islam had definite rules about treatment - no Christian, Jew or pagan was allowed to be higher than a Muslim. Thus they were not allowed to ride on a horse as that would give them stature above a Muslim. Mosques had to be built higher than any church, synagogue or temple. In essence these rules made them second class citizens, but they were not persecuted such as one might find today. Islam never went through a Reformation or Enlightenment period, which makes the position of liberals precarious even today.

Shawn then proceeded to show some videos. The translations from Arabic and Farsi were done by MEMRI. We might easily get the impression these speakers are nuts, or else making biased political statements. Shawn explained the source of these videos was <MEMRITV.org> It is possible to download the MEMRI files from the Internet. MEMRI is based in Israel and Washington. Some of the broadcasts and other media they collect are selective or biased. Yet most tapings come from national news programs of countries throughout the Middle East. ➔



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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The videos provide a lot of double talk, that is lies. For instance, one anti-Semitic aspect is Holocaust den-



ial. A speaker may claim the holocaust never happened, and yet may, in the same breath suggest that “we” want to finish the job Hitler started! If the orator does not believe in the Holocaust, he may say that Hitler didn’t kill any Jews,

it was really a typhus epidemic. On the other hand if a speaker accepts that Hitler did kill six million Jews, he may add that Hitler didn’t go far enough. Such claim would not be widely acceptable so speakers may simply insist the Holocaust wasn’t as bad as it is portrayed.

In one video a Professor repeated the ancient lie that Jews killed Christian children before Passover because they needed blood to make Passover matzos. If anyone has ever been to a Seder and has eaten Passover matzo; he must wonder how can one make something so flavorless out of Christian blood?

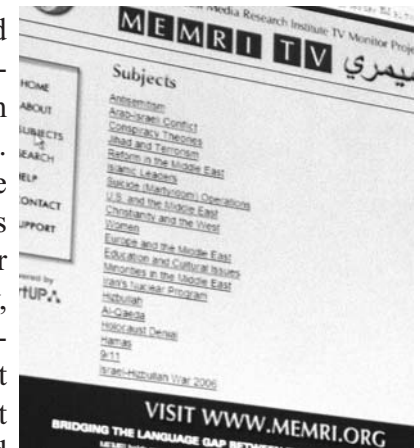
In the next clip that Shawn showed the speaker commented on the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. The gist of the commentary was that Muslim don’t believe that the Jesus was god, but that a crime was committed and the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion. Here is one interpretation. The High Priest ruled the Temple and the Temple was the main ground for Judaism. Jesus was a rabbi who took to preaching on the road, and he was attracting a lot of the common people who were not identified with the Temple. The Roman authority and the High Priest felt threatened by the large crowds following this Prophet. They, together, took the official decision to crucify Jesus. The followers of Jesus converted to Christianity, and the only Jews left were the High Priest’s people. Although all the Jews weren’t the killers they had a hand in it. The speaker in this clip did mention a couple of positives; the Vatican II Council which exonerated Jews.

Another video clip came from Saudi Arabia and it was on “man on the street” interviews: would they shake hands with a Jew? The general conclusion seemed to be

“No, they wouldn’t.”

Then there was the “Pepsi” clip. This is an acronym standing for: Pay every penny to support Israel. The group responsible claims that for every dollar the Pepsi Company earns, 33 cents go to Israel. Shawn commented that he never saw Pepsi when he was there. There was a reference on this video to the story (*hadith*) that a Jew had tried to kill Muhammad. A Jewish woman cooked a lamb for the Prophet and his companions. She put poison in the back right leg because she knew it was Muhammad’s favorite part. However, when the Prophet reached for that portion, the lamb came alive and said: “Muhammad, don’t eat me! I’ve been poisoned.” Then Muhammad said to the woman: “Why would you do this to me?” The women replied, “I was testing you to see if you were truly the prophet as you claim, if you ate the poison and died then you would not be protected by god, and you would be a fraud. You have now been shown to have amazing power.”

A last clip showed the president of Malaysia speaking to an international audience. He said the Jews have invented human rights and democracy, not for the benefit of humanity, but for their self-serving needs to protect themselves, so they get included in society and



they become parasites. This falsehood comes from an infamous book: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is a late 19th century forgery by the then Russian secret police. It describes a world Jewish meeting where Jewish leaders come together and formulate their plan to take over the world. The *Protocols* have been widely and repeatedly reprinted to smear the Jews. Henry Ford printed them in the US, they were popular in Hitler’s Germany, today the book is nowhere more widely printed than in the Middle East. This book has been widely and repeatedly exposed as a fake, and the details have been published and explained many times. But the lies go on and on.

- Reported by George Maurer





Creationism Not in Kansas anymore.

© Copyright 2007 *Houston Chronicle*, 15 February 2007



Just when Kansas returns science to the classroom, Rep. Chisum tries to goad Texas toward the Dark Ages. It started off as a such a good week — both for science and for the American students who must understand it to compete with their peers abroad. The Kansas Board of Education finally joined most of the United States in accepting the teaching of evolution in public schools.

Then Texas' own state Rep. Warren Chisum, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, had to mail colleagues a freakish memo denouncing evolution as a religious plot disseminated by one "Pharisee Religion." The mix of nonsense, free-floating anti-Semitism, misuse of power and seeming obliviousness to all of the above were like a dip into the Dark Ages.

Evolutionary science, Chisum's memorandum told lawmakers, was the creation of "Rabbinic writings" in the "mystic holy book Kabbala." As such, the memo went on in a medley of type fonts, underlined sentences and misplaced capitals, teaching evolution in public school violates the Constitution. The document linked to Web sites including "fixedearth.com," which asserts that Earth is the center of the universe. Chillingly, the links also offer overtly anti-Semitic rants, contending that evolutionary science supports a "centuries-old" Jewish conspiracy against Christian teachings.

Circulated under Chisum's letterhead as Appropriations Committee chairman, the memo actually was penned by Rep. Ben Bridges of the Georgia Legislature. "I ... greatly appreciate his information on this important topic," Chisum assured his Texas colleagues. Chisum has offered — wanly — to apologize about the Jewish references. Unsavory as they were, though, the memo's incoherent ravings about rabbis and Kabbala may not be its most dangerous offense. Most literate people know the Hebrew Bible and rabbinical writers as the sources for Judeo-Christian accounts of Creation. Chisum's far-fetched theology doesn't quite track.

But recent events in Kansas do show how religious agendas can distort education and economic decisions. Until this week, Kansas was known internationally for

high school science class guidelines that challenged evolutionary science. Voters resolutely routed the guilty Education Board in the last election. The new members have restored Kansas' science class guidelines to the scientific mainstream.

In Kansas, as elsewhere, battles over evolution have been fought by advocates of "intelligent design," who urged that science teachers introduce theological assumptions as if they were hypotheses based on empirical observation. The campaign took what might be a mortal wound last year in Dover, Pa., when a federal district judge ruled teaching creationism in science classes was unconstitutional. Kansas seemed the last redoubt of this campaign — until Rep. Chisum revived it.

According to the Dallas Morning News, Chisum said he's "willing to apologize" about his references to Jews. He said he didn't know about the ranting on the memo's recommended Web sites. But presumably he knew, and liked, the preposterous contents of his memo itself. It's hard to know what's worse: Chisum's careless spreading of words he condemns — or his unremorseful promotion of ideas that would fling Texas' students and economy years behind their competitors. ☘

Creationism in the land where humans evolved

Deep in the dusty, unlit corridors of Kenya's national museum, locked away in a plain-looking cabinet, is one of mankind's oldest relics: *Turkana Boy*, as he is known, the most complete skeleton of a prehistoric human ever found.

Christians are up in arms!

But his first public display later this year is at the heart of a growing storm — one pitting scientists against Kenya's powerful and popular evangelical Christian movement. The debate over evolution vs. creationism — once largely confined to the United States — has arrived in a country known as the cradle of mankind. "I did not evolve from Turkana Boy or anything like it," says Bishop Boniface Adoyo, head of Kenya's 35 evangelical denominations, which he claims have ten million followers. "These sorts of silly views are killing our faith." He's calling on his flock to boycott the exhibition and has demanded the museum relegate the fossil collection to a back room — along with some kind of notice saying evolution is not a fact but merely one of a number of theories.

The fossil hunter fights back.

Against him is one of the planet's best-known scien-

www.gofigger.org



tists, Richard Leakey, whose team unearthed the bones at Nariokotome in West Turkana, in the desolate, far northern reaches of Kenya in 1984. "Whether the bishop likes it or not, Turkana Boy is a distant relation of his," Leakey, who founded the museum's prehistory department, told the Associated Press. "The bishop is descended from the apes and these fossils tell how he evolved."

Many fossils on display.

Among the 160,000 fossils due to go on display is an imprint of a lizard left in sedimentary rock, dating back 200 million years, at a time when the Earth's continents were only beginning to separate. Dinosaur fossils and a bone from an early human ancestor, dating back seven million years, will also be on show along with the bones of short-necked giraffes and elephants whose tusks protrude from their lower jaws. They provide the clearest and unrivaled record yet of evolution and the origins of man, say scientists. But the highlight will be the 5'3" Turkana Boy, who died at age twelve and whose skeleton had been preserved in marshland before its discovery.

- Associated Press, 7 February 2007

... and in Russia, St. Petersburg Court rejects suit over Darwinism

Novosti 21 February 2007

A St. Petersburg court Wednesday rejected a lawsuit against Russia's education authorities over the compulsory teaching of evolution. Maria Shraiber, a high school girl from Russia's second city, and her father, Kirill Shraiber have said their suit does not seek to abolish the teaching of Darwinism in schools, which was official dogma in Soviet times, but to give schoolchildren the right to study other theories regarding the origins of life. According to the schoolgirl's father, Shraiber had left school and the country, citing pressure from teachers and anonymous threats ever since the suit was filed in July last year.

The Shraiber family said they hoped the litigation would alter the curriculum and result in new textbooks that did not offer only one explanation for the origins of life. "Darwin only presented a hypothesis that has not been proved by him or anyone else," Shraiber said. "Therefore, we think that when schools impose this theory on children as the only scientific option, they violate the human right of free choice."



Creationism



Yelena Mamedova, deputy headmaster at the school, earlier said that Maria did not know biology well enough, even though she was a good student. "Her grades were never very good in biology. I don't think she knows Darwin's theory very well," Mamedova said, adding that teachers had never discussed Maria's lawsuit.

The Russian lawsuit echoes a string of similar disputes in the United States over the teaching of Creationism alongside Darwinism in the school curriculum.

How do you get the mosasaur on board Noah's Ark?

"Scientist of faith" is an oxymoron. The University of Rhode Island recently accepted the dissertation of a doctoral candidate in paleontology, Marcus Ross, who just happens to also be a young-Earth creationist. His thesis is on mosasaurs that lived 65 million years before Ross believes Earth was created. How does Ross deal with this? He says he uses different paradigms. Most scientists who regard themselves as religious, and there are many, interpret the scriptures metaphorically. Even so, they often partition their lives, treating faith as a virtue on one side of the partition, and a scientific sin on the other. Dr. Ross, meanwhile, now teaches earth science at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. He can't do much harm there. Wonder what paradigm he uses? As the song goes, "Brother can you paradigm?"

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 16 February 2007

The Cincinnati Atheists Meetup

When: Tuesday, 20 March at 8:00PM

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

To see who's coming and to see more event details:
http://atheists.meetup.com/90/calendar/5140742/t/cv1_ve

After the Vatican II conference and its many documents one Cardinal comments to another.
"Now I think, we have the proof that God really wrote the ten commandments."
"How proof?" asks the other.
"Can you imagine ten simple, rational sentences, no ifs, buts, or clauses?"



Climate



Christian Right's Focus on Sex rather than Global Climate

By Laurie Goodstein, *The New York Times*, Saturday 03 March 2007

Leaders of several conservative Christian groups have sent a letter urging the National Association of Evangelicals to force its policy director in Washington to stop speaking out on global warming.

The conservative leaders say they are not convinced that global warming is human-induced or that human intervention can prevent it. And they accuse the director, the Rev. Richard Cizik, the association's vice president for government affairs, of diverting the evangelical movement from what they deem more important issues, like abortion and homosexuality.

The letter underlines a struggle between established conservative Christian leaders, whose priority has long been sexual morality, and challengers who are pushing to expand the evangelical movement's agenda to include issues like climate change and human rights. "We have observed," the letter says, "that Cizik and others are using the global warming controversy to shift the emphasis away from the great moral issues of our time." Those issues, the signers say, are a need to campaign against abortion and same-sex marriage and to promote "the teaching of sexual abstinence and morality to our children."

The letter, dated Thursday, is signed by leaders like James C. Dobson, chairman of Focus on the Family; Gary L. Bauer, once a Republican presidential candidate and now president of Coalitions for America; Tony Perkins, president of the

Family Research Council; and Paul Weyrich, a longtime political strategist who is chairman of American Values.

Are those white ursine carnivores endangered by global climate?

The Alaskan division of the Fish and Wildlife Service circulated a memo instructing biologists not discuss global warming or polar bears unless they have been designated to do so. A year ago NASA's top climate scientist, physicist James Hansen, was being pressured by a White House appointee to cool it on global warming. NASA chief Michael Griffin put a stop to that, issuing a policy that allows scientists to speak their minds if they give their boss notice. Science owes its success to a culture of openness in which Nature is *The Decider*. Anything else is just religion.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 9 March 2007

An evangelical, Christian climate.

"Conservative Christian" sounds like an oxymoron to me, but there is a split between the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) which has expanded its agenda to include climate change and human rights, and really conservative groups. These would include James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Gary Bauer's Coalition for America and Tony Perkins' Family Research Council. Note: Real conservatives aren't interested in conservation. The Christian right wants to get back to fighting the real enemy sex. Sex and drugs were the downfall of Ted Haggard, who was the President of the NAE.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 9 March 2007

SCIENCE BOOK CLUB: 2007 Schedule

Science book club as in past years plans on meeting at the Cincinnati Downtown Library on the 4th Sunday of each month at 2:30pm in Room 3A, except on the 3rd Sunday because of holidays or other conflicts as noted below:

Mar .25 - *The revenge of Gaia : Earth's Climate in Crisis and the Fate of Humanity* by James E. Lovelock

Apr. 22 - *Eyes on the universe: a history of the telescope* by Isaac Asimov

May 20 (3rd Sunday)- *The Difference Engine : Charles Babbage and the quest to build the first computer* by Doron Swade

June 24 - *Natural Justice* by Ken G. Binmore

July 22 - *The Mountain People and The Forest People*, both books by Colin Turnbull

Aug. 19 (3rd Sunday) - *Into the cool : energy flow, thermodynamics, and life* by Eric D Schneider

Sept. 23 - *The big splat, or, How our moon came to be* by Dana Mackenzie

Oct. 28 - *Facts and mysteries in elementary particle physics* by Martinus J.G. Veltman

Nov. 18 (3rd Sunday) - *What we believe but cannot prove : today's leading thinkers on science in the age of certainty* edited by John Brockman

Dec. 16 (3rd Sunday) - *The Republican war on science* by Chis Mooney





General



Of Pandering and People

Politicians working to capture the creationists. Even as these words are being turned into electrons, Senator John McCain is in Seattle delivering the keynote luncheon speech to the Discovery Institute. Eighteen months ago, just as the Dover School Board trial involving “intelligent design”

was about to start, McCain came out in favor of teaching “all points of view,” We have no idea what he is saying now, but it doesn’t really matter; McCain is a master of the art of changing positions between breakfast and lunch. Apparently, however, he has decided, for the moment, to challenge Sam Brownback for the support of the creationists.

The author of the Columbia “power of prayer” study commits plagiarism. More than five years ago *WN* called attention to a paper in the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* in which researchers at Columbia claimed prayers doubled the success of in-vitro fertilization. If total strangers on their knees halfway around the world could suspend the laws of nature, it would be the end of science. *WN* suggested we pray the study is wrong. Behold! Our prayers were answered: The lead author took his name off the paper and resigned as chair of gynecology; another author landed in prison on an unrelated fraud conviction. The editor of *JRM* still refused to retract the article. This week, the remaining author, a businessman who owns fertility clinics in Los Angeles and Seoul, was charged by the editor of *Fertility and Sterility* with plagiarizing the work of a student in Korea on a different paper. The avenging angel was Bruce Flamm, M.D., UC Irvine, who has hounded the authors, Columbia, and *JRM* relentlessly since the paper was published.

Ironically, even as the fraudulent prayer study was going on in the Columbia medical school, a professor of behavioral medicine at Columbia, Richard Sloan, wrote an important book condemning those who pander to a superstitious public by claiming to show that religion is good for your health *Blind Faith: the Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine*, (St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

- *What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 23 February 2007

The Supremes take on faith based initiatives.

Early in his presidency, George W. Bush issued an executive order creating a White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives that gives billions of dollars to religious groups of its choosing without oversight. No politician dares to challenge it, but a group of atheists who pay taxes sued in federal court, arguing that it violated the “establishment clause” of the 1st Amendment. An appeals court ruled that the case can go forward. However, the White House director short circuited the process by asking the Supreme Court, stacked with conservatives, to weigh in. The issue is whether taxpayers have standing under the establishment clause to challenge the way the executive branch uses money appropriated by Congress. The Court heard oral arguments this week and is expected to rule before adjourning for the summer.

- *What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 2 March 2007

The lost tomb of a guy named Jesus?

The documentary, “The Lost Tomb of Jesus,” aired on the Discovery Channel. It claims to have found a tomb in Jerusalem that held the remains of Jesus, his wife Mary Magdalene, their son Judah, his mother Mary, and assorted other family members. Coming just before Easter, it outraged the faithful who point out it couldn’t be the same guy, that one ascended bodily into heaven.

The War Between Religion and Science, ignited by the Intelligent Design movement, is heating up. According a front page story in today’s “Weekend Journal” section of the *Wall Street Journal*, it’s now generational. The story says that the new thing in adolescent rebellion is to be excessively devout, driving liberated parents nuts.

- *What’s New* by Robert L. Park, 2 March 2007

Numbers

A recent survey by the Barna Group explores the “god gap” between Republicans and Democrats. And, indeed they found 53 percent of Republicans claim to attend church, but only 41 percent of Democrats. Further, only about 7 percent of Republican voters are not aligned with a Christian faith, while 20 percent of Democrats are other than Christians, and two-thirds of these are atheists or agnostics.

- Source: <www.barna.org>





General



Humanist Jeered for Supporting Gay Rights at Nigerian Public Hearing

LONDON, February 19, 2007 – A Nigerian Humanist was repeatedly jeered in Abuja last week during his statement opposing the proposed new anti-gay legislation in Nigeria, the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association revealed last night. Leo Igwe, the Executive Secretary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement, made his statement at a public hearing to gather views from the public on the proposed *Act to Make Provisions for the Prohibition of Relationship Between Persons of the Same Sex, Celebration of Marriage by Them, and for Other Matters Connected Therewith* before a committee examines it and sends a final version to Parliament for voting.

Reacting to the outrageous statement made by an Islamic law professor who said that sometimes the minority should be destroyed in order to protect the majority, Mr Igwe said that that was exactly what the bill was meant to achieve and that it was unhealthy for the country and its democracy. Mr Igwe said that law should not be made to oppress people. It should be made to serve the interests of all the people, he said. "One of the hallmarks of a true democracy is not only upholding the will of the majority but recognizing and respecting the rights of minorities," he pointed out.

In response to the contention that same-sex marriage should be banned because it was alien to Nigeria, Mr Igwe replied by saying that Christianity and Islam, the Bible and Koran, were all alien to Nigeria and if they wanted to ban same-sex marriage they should also ban Christianity and Islam and their holy books.

When the religious groups also said that banning same sex marriage was to protect public interest, good and morality, he said: "The term 'public' was all inclusive and included gay and lesbian people and therefore their interest and good should not be excluded or undermined." However, the vast majority of those who spoke agreed with Jonathan Adamu of the Christian Lawyers Fellowship of Nigeria who said: "Western society is decaying. We cannot use Western society as a model for moral values. If we let a man go with a man or a woman go with a woman, the next thing will be a man with an animal."

The secretary of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, George Broadhead, said the "courageous intervention" of Mr Igwe was welcome. "It is hardly surprising that he was shouted down. Nigeria is split about evenly between Christians and Muslims and the one thing they can agree on is that gay relationships are abhorrent and gay rights have no place in human rights. "This being the case, it seems highly likely that this pernicious legislation will be enacted and there can be no doubt that it has been driven and fortified by religious hatred," Mr. Broadhead said. ☚

Intelligent Design?

Poorly designed with high
Maintenance costs, our bodies wear
Out fast. Is this fair?
We are born, suffer and die
After few laughs, many tears.
Is this "intelligent design"?
So many are born only to find
Themselves on battlefields of fears.
Poorly designed with cracking crust,
Our Earth crackles and splits;
Hurricanes roam and volcanoes spit.
Intelligently designed to end in dust?
We are under attack by religious twits.
Resist them? We certainly must.

Dan Nagle, <www.dnagle.info>

Quote

My parents and grandparents were humanists, what used to be called Free Thinkers. So as a humanist I am honoring my ancestors, which the Bible says is a good thing to do. We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. My brother and sister didn't think there was one, my parents or grandparents didn't think there was one. It was enough that they were alive. We humanists serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community.

– Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man without a Country* (2005) p. 79-80

Unquote:



Supreme Court Debates Bagels for Christian Prayer Breakfasts?

By Tony Mauro, *The Legal Times*, 28 February 2007

Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer looked skyward Wednesday as he tried to come up with a “more amazing” hypothetical during arguments in a key church-state case. With or without divine intervention, he found one: Could the federal government fund churches and ministers of a single religion nationwide “dedicated to the proposition that this particular sect is the true sect,” without fear of taxpayer lawsuits against it? “Horrible hypothetical,” growled Solicitor General Paul Clement, but he went on to say yes. “The bottom line is that there would not be taxpayer standing.” With a helpful suggestion from Chief Justice John Roberts Jr., Clement qualified his point by asserting that adherents of other religions could file suit against such a program on the basis that they were being discriminated against. But Clement held firm on the point that taxpayers, merely as taxpayers, could not challenge a network of government-funded churches.

That exchange may prove crucial in determining the outcome of the case before the Court, *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation*. The Wisconsin-based foundation filed a taxpayer lawsuit against the Bush administration’s funding of faith-based initiatives, claiming that conferences sponsored under the funding program favor religious groups. The government defended the program, claiming the plaintiffs did not have standing, but the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit said the foundation could continue with its suit.

The case is an important test not only for the faith-based initiative but also for a 39-year-old precedent that has treated First Amendment establishment-clause cases differently when it comes to standing. In other contexts, taxpayers can’t challenge government programs in court solely on the grounds that their tax dollars are being misused. To prevent trivial lawsuits, the high court has required plaintiffs to show a more direct injury or a bigger stake, such as a violation of rights or a denial of benefits. But in the 1968 case of *Flast v. Cohen*, the Court made an exception. It ruled that taxpayer status alone was enough to achieve standing when the claim is that a congressional expenditure violates the First Amendment’s bar against establishment of religion. In making the exception, the Flast Court hearkened back to the Framers’ reason for creating the Establishment Clause in the first place: to prevent government from taxing and spending to favor one religion over another, even if only “three pence” of the taxpayer’s money is used for that purpose, in the words of James Madison.

Madison’s formulation was invoked often on Wednesday - Justice David Souter

quaintly pronounced it “thrupence” - as the justices struggled to figure out how and whether to honor that Madisonian goal. Clement argued that the Flast exception allows taxpayer standing only to those challenging congressional spending that benefits an outside party or church - not in cases like the faith-based initiatives, in which the executive branch, acting on its own, has done something that the taxpayer dislikes. Broadening the exception to cover executive-branch activities, Clement said, would threaten the separation of powers and invite lawsuits every time a government official makes a religious reference.

Several justices seemed to think that was an artificial distinction and taxpayers might have standing whether a congressional or executive-branch activity is involved. Clement struggled to define the difference, and when Breyer pinned him down with his hypothetical, it appeared that Clement may have taken his point too far by suggesting that taxpayers could not challenge even such an overtly religious program. But both Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito Jr. threw Clement lifelines. At one point, as justices tried to follow Clement’s answers, Alito pointedly asked him, “Are you arguing that these lines that you are drawing make a lot of sense ... or are you just arguing that this is the best that can be done ... within the body of precedent that the Court has handed down in this area?” Clement replied, “The latter, Justice Alito. And I appreciate the question.”

Amid laughter, Scalia said, “I’ve been trying to make sense out of what you’re saying.” Clement shot back, “And I’ve been trying to make sense out of this Court’s precedents.” At which point Justice John

Paul Stevens chimed in, “Do we think we have a duty to follow precedents that don’t make any sense?” But as much as the justices seemed troubled with Clement’s position, they also seemed troubled about siding with the foundation.

D.C. lawyer Andrew Pincus, representing the foundation, said Clement had drawn “arbitrary lines” that did not conform to Court precedent or to the First Amendment’s history. Pincus is a partner at Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw. Roberts, nodding toward the Court’s marshal, Pamela Talkin, asked whether, under the foundation’s theory, a taxpayer could sue her for saying “God save this honorable Court” at the start of Court sessions.

Scalia offered another hypothetical, asking whether taxpayers could sue when Air Force One and Secret Service agents are used in the course of a presidential trip to a religious event. Pincus said taxpayer standing would not extend to religious activities that are “incidental” to government expenditures, and he served up his own hypothetical: government funds “paying for bagels at a prayer breakfast” would not, he suggested, trigger a valid lawsuit. Scalia later skewered that hypothetical, arguing that if the bagels went only to prayer breakfasts for evangelical groups, someone who is Jewish might feel that is not incidental or trivial at all: “You know, what could be worse than not buying bagels for a Jewish prayer breakfast?”

-- Tony Mauro can be contacted at <tmauro@alm.com>

Quote
“With soap, baptism is a good thing.”
Unquote:
Robert G. Ingersoll



General



The Recruit

by Sarah Posner, web exclusive 8 February 2007
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Ted Haggard's fall from grace proves to many conservative Christians that the homosexual agenda can ensnare even the most devout. A Focus on the Family executive, H. B. London, was one of the facilitators of Haggard's alleged conversion.

Last fall, while doing some reporting in northeastern Kentucky, I was talking to two local activists (registered Democrats, no less!) about why they were trying to shut down anti-bullying training at the public high school. Their gripe? By teaching that homosexuality is normal, and that students shouldn't harass their classmates because they're gay, the training sought to recruit students into being gay. "You know," said one of the activists, "homosexuality cannot be reproduced, because two homosexuals can't bear children. So they have to recruit people into their organizations."

There's still a slice of America, in the post-Ellen DeGeneres/*Will and Grace* era, that didn't laugh when prominent megachurch pastor Ted Haggard was declared "completely heterosexual" earlier this week by a panel of pastoral counselors charged with the task of turning him into the straightest man ever to hire a male prostitute. For them, the recruitment narrative is so powerful that Haggard's three-year dalliance with a man and his meth proves not that Haggard is gay, but that the "homosexual agenda" is so aggressive that it can recruit even the holiest among us. Far from encouraging them to denounce their vociferous anti-gay-marriage campaign as hypocritical and mean, it proves that the "homosexual agenda" is still very much worth fighting against. If you're not born gay, then what led Pastor Ted to give in to his "dark and repulsive" urges? As the Church Lady used to muse, "could it be . . . Satan?"

The recruitment canard explains a lot about why Haggard's fall from grace, although swift and thorough, did not irredeemably condemn either the man or the empire over which he presided, including the political movement to make gay marriage unconstitutional. Instead, Haggard reinforces the need to labor on. If Haggard could be recruited -- and, by the other side of the coin, converted -- then why concede the point that God could have made gay people in his image?

There's nothing this crowd loves more than a good

conversion story, despite abundant evidence that gay conversion programs are psychologically devastating; they have been denounced by the American Psychiatric Association. DeGeneres' ex, the actress Anne Heche, was "converted" back to heterosexuality, and now her mother is a missionary for the cause, touting conversion on Christian television. This week CNN's Anderson Cooper featured Melissa Fryrear, a Focus on the Family employee who claims to have been converted to heterosexuality after ten years as a lesbian. As if to reinforce the point that only gay people are obsessed with sex, Fryrear insisted that "when I lived homosexually, everything in my world resolved around being a lesbian. And you know, when we say 365, 24/7. So it was all of my thoughts, my behaviors, my attractions." And now?

Alan Sears, the former Reagan Administration Justice Department lawyer who now heads up the Focus on the Family-affiliated Alliance Defense Fund, says that "the homosexual agenda and religious freedom are on a collision course." In other words, as Sears lays out in detail in his book, *The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious Freedom Today*, gay rights are antithetical to the church. The homosexual agenda, Sears told an audience of hardcore activists last year, "probably includes the abolition of marriage, but also the silencing of speech [condemning] homosexual behavior." His book lays out a variety of ways that homosexuals "recruit" their next generation, including by exposing kids to SpongeBob SquarePants.

As retrograde and silly as it sounds, the recruitment narrative strikes a powerful chord with many fundamentalists, who grow up in authoritarian church environments where they're taught that the Bible is the unerring word of God, and as such, represents God's unerring condemnation of homosexuality. Haggard's transgressions may have disqualified him from church leadership, but he will continually be offered up as a poster child for conversion. Handed a clean bill of health but nonetheless banished from his megachurch to live out his days with his wife, Haggard sadly represents a high-profile instance of something too many gay Americans raised in fundamentalist environments still endure. What kind of agenda is that?

Sarah Posner is a freelance writer and contributor to *The Gafflyer* and AlterNet's *PEEK* blog. She is working on a book about televangelists in politics.





***Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right
Distorts the Faith and Threatens America.
An Evangelical's Lament***
by Randall H. Balmer
(New York: Basic Books, 2006)

The author is an evangelical Christian who wants to “reclaim the faith from the Religious Right.” (p. xii) He is also a professor of history at Columbia University. He attacks the religious fundamentalists very much for the same reasons unbelievers and other rational people do. He also insists the Religious Right has lost its way from the teachings of Jesus and the words of the Bible into a morass of narrowness, legalism, censoriousness, and misogyny. He wants to recall them to Jesus’ love of the poor, marginalized, and downtrodden and to the teachings and work of evangelicals of earlier centuries of American history.

The concept of “evangelical” believer differs. Balmer describes her or him as “someone who takes the Bible seriously” sometimes to the point of simple minded literalism, and “who believes in the transformative power of Jesus,” (p. xii). Because definitions and survey questions differ, estimates of evangelicals in the American population vary between nine and 36 percent depending of who designs the survey.

Balmer’s take on Religious Right issues are based on rational assessment and historical interpretation. They run parallel to the insights of other thinkers. That the modern Religious Right organized around the anti-abortion fight after the Supreme Court’s Roe-vs-Wade decision he calls a myth. In fact, in 1971 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution calling for legislation permitting abortion under conditions of rape, incest, or deformity of the fetus. The political awakening of the fundamentalists really dates to 1975. The occasion was the IRS attempt to revoke the tax exempt status of Bob Jones University for racist regulations. “The IRS attempt to deny tax-exempt status to segregated private schools, then, represented an assault on the evangelical subculture,” (p.14).

Most of all, Balmer explains, the Religious Right is contradicting both its historical past and the tradition of the Bible. He describes Roger Williams as both the first Baptist

and the founder of the principle of religious freedom. Williams invented and practiced the idea that religion could only be free by separating from entanglement with the state. It was Baptists who insisted on the first amendment and the Wall between Church and State. Contrary to their ideological forefathers, today’s Religious Right expects the state to enforce their contentions against abortion and gays. Yet, in the New Testament Jesus says nothing about these issues, but plenty against divorce, which the religious have quietly accepted, and don’t even inveigh against any longer. Most of all, Balmer laments that the Religious Right has made a devil’s bargain with guns, war, and capitalism; forgetting their historic care for the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed about whom Jesus had very much to say.

“Scientific” creationism and intelligent design are the fundamentalists quest for academic legitimacy. This merely shows that for fundamentalists “faith is not sufficient in itself.”(p. 134) Balmer is clearly a “two magisteria” believer; faith tells him that God somehow or in some way used evolution to create the world. This teaching belongs into the home and the church, not in the science classroom.

According to Balmer the search for scientific legitimacy, tax finance for religious schools, and political power has led the evangelicals astray and contrary to the best of their historic past. The church is best when separate from the state, promoting its moral vision, not attempting to enforce it on society.

But the leaders of the Religious Right prefer the exercise of political influence to impose their vision of moral order on the nation, a vision with only tangential connections to the scriptures they claim as their authority, an interpretation informed less by the good news of the gospel or the humility of true discipleship than by the ruse of selective literalism dictated by ideological passions. (P. 189)

Ultimately Balmer thinks the leadership of the evangelicals will come to their good senses and return to working for the betterment of all. As a hint in that direction, he sees some evangelicals taking a rational interest in environmental issues and global warming. The scriptures, after all, instruct us to be good stewards of God’s creation and of his creatures.

-- Wolf Roder



April Poluck:
 April 10, 2007 6:30 PM



March Meeting:
 Sunday, March 25, 2007
 2:00 PM



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

FIG

Our Purpose

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

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



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

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

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

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail figinfo@gofigger.org, or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.