



Willamette Freethinker



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Corvallis Secular Society (CSS) is a Humanist and Freethought society for all nontheists of good will.

CSS is affiliated with the American Humanist Association (AHA) and the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH).

From the Editor:

By the time you read this, it is highly likely that Bill Frist of the U.S. Senate will have engaged his “nuclear option” — a scheme concocted by the Republican leadership to eliminate the right to filibuster against Senate confirmation of judges.

This will be one of the most important Senate votes in our lifetimes. Eliminating the threat of filibusters over judicial nominations will allow this President to pack the federal courts with ultra-right-wing ideologues. Federal judgeships are lifetime positions — the damage done today will be felt for decades to come. And, through precedent, much longer.

Besides, if filibusters can be banned in one instance, they can be banned in other instances — and our last constitutional defense against the tyranny of the majority will be eliminated. The grossly unethical power grabs we’ve already seen will be nothing compared to what is to come.

A procedural rule change like this in the Senate is SUPPOSED to require 60 votes to enact — votes the Republicans don’t have. So they’ve found a different way. They plan to simply deny that the right to filibuster judicial nominations ever existed. (Never mind that Senators have filibustered such nominations, and bargained based on a THREAT to filibuster, several times in the past.)

A “rule interpretation”, as opposed to a “rule change”, requires only a bare majority to pass — and Vice President Cheney has already announced how he plans to break a tie vote in this case.

We need a minimum of six honest Republicans to vote against this “rule interpretation”, if the filibuster is to survive unscathed. In addition to the 44 Democrats plus Independent Jim Jeffords who will vote against the change, we already have three Republicans — John McCain, Lincoln Chafee and Olympia Snowe — who have indicated they will vote against it as well.

That means we need three more of the Republican “undecided seven” — Susan Collins of Maine, Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, John

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CSS Meetings and Events

Calendar:

Saturday, May 21st 2:00-4:00 CSS regular meeting
Saturday, Jun 18th 1:00-4:00 CSS potluck
Saturday, Jul 16th 2:15-4:15 CSS regular meeting

Regular meeting time:

Third Saturday of each month, from 2:00-4:00 pm.

Regular meeting location:

Corl House (3975 NW Witham Hill Dr, Corvallis).

Postcard to Iraq

Dearest Iraq:

Act like me.

After 100 years of Democracy,
let your slaves go.

After 150, let your women
vote.

At the start of Democracy,
ethnic cleansing is quite OK.

Love you madly!

-- Uncle Sam



Interim Government

Iraq

Middle East

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From the President:

A Humanist Looks at Pope Benedict XVI

The new pope, Benedict XVI, is a power to be reckoned with. As the religious leader of a sixth of the world's people, he has a razor-sharp intellect and an unstinting dedication to extreme religious and political conservatism. His power to do good is tremendous: so is his power to do harm. I fear we will see much more of the latter. He is a fanatic. Humane and rational people have much to fear from this man.

The former Cardinal Joseph (Josef) Ratzinger was born on April 16, 1927 in Marktl am Inn, Germany. He was a member of the Hitler Youth. This Nazi connection was largely dismissed by the press, if it was noted at all: "Everybody had to be enrolled in Hitler Youth at that time," according to the *Herald Tribune* (April 21, 2005). This is not true, according to Vicente Navarro ("Triumph of the Theo-Cons: Pope Benedict XVI, a Rightwing Politician," *Counterpunch*, May 2, 2005: <http://www.counterpunch.org/navarro05022005.html>):

"Many young Germans, including Catholics, not only refused to join the Hitler Youth but fought against Hitler in a courageous and principled way...In Munich, where Ratzinger later became archbishop, twenty Catholic students were executed in 1942 for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets at the university. They became known as the White Rose — die weisse Rose. There was an anti-war resistance in Germany, including a Catholic resistance, which Ratzinger never joined, supported, or recognized. Even later, when Germany regained democracy, Bishop Ratzinger of Munich never paid tribute to those who had been killed because of their commitment to liberty and freedom. Among them, incidentally, were many communists, whom Ratzinger had defined as 'scum.'"

Ratzinger is a man of immense, lifelong ambition, a characteristic of tyrants. According to Navarro, "There is no evidence that Ratzinger was a Nazi or a Nazi sympathizer. But there is plenty of evidence that he was an opportunist who went along pursuing his personal ambitions, regardless of what was happening around him. He indicated early in life that he wanted to become a cardinal. And recently — a mere two years ago — he confided to another person that he expected to become Pope. Spanish public television showed a postcard that Ratzinger sent two years ago to a person in Spain, which he signed 'Pope Benedict XVI,' the name he took when he indeed became Pope. This contradicts his recent statement that he did not want to become Pope. In fact, when he finally was chosen, reports indicate that he accepted quickly, firmly, and without any hesitation."

Navarro, Professor of Public Policy at Johns Hopkins University, and Pompeu Fabra University, Spain, writes: "During all his years in Germany, Ratzinger never in his writings publicly condemned the Holocaust...."

"Ratzinger's ultra-conservatism made him an attractive figure to the Vatican. He was made a cardinal shortly after being appointed bishop of Munich. He was strongly hostile to students protesting the Vietnam War in the 1960s, calling them 'ideological terrorists.' He was eventually appointed head of the Inquisition (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), soon overseeing a record number of condemnations by that tribunal. One of his priorities as head of the Inquisition was to ban and destroy the Christian liberation movement that had surged in Latin America in protest against the Catholic hierarchy's support of fascist and ultra-right dictatorships."

"Surrounded by what the Italian press has called the 'theo-cons,' Ratzinger has a political project aimed at strengthening conservative forces worldwide, but particularly in Europe, supposedly awash in moral decay. His intervention in political matters is very aggressive. In Spain, for example, the Vatican has given instructions to Catholic civil servants to sabotage enforcement of the civil union law that applies to homosexuals. The Vatican's hostility to the socialist government of Spain — which has eliminated Catholic teaching as a compulsory subject in public schools, while maintaining it as an elective; has made it easier to get a divorce; has legalized homosexuals' civil unions, including their right to adopt children; and is planning to expand the law on abortion, which until now has allowed abortion only on medical and social grounds — has reached extreme and overtly hostile levels. Seeing Spain as its territory, the Church cannot accept the secular and democratic processes that have been occurring in that country since the end of the Franco regime — one of Europe's cruelest fascist dictatorships (for every political assassination by Mussolini in Italy, Franco killed ten thousand), supported by the Catholic Church. Today, in Spain, the Church is one of the least trusted and least liked institutions, particularly among the young. Only 14% of young people are practicing Catholics. Actually, this lack of popularity of the Church is evident in all countries. In the Latin American countries, the largest granary of Catholics in the world, the number of Catholics has fallen by 25 million over the past ten years, as they have moved to Protestant churches. And the number of priests is declining most dramatically. Even in the new Pope's Germany, the most recent poll among university students shows that 83% thought the Church was either in crisis or dying. In this poll, more Germans opposed Ratzinger's becoming Pope than favored it."

Navarro adds: "Still, more than 1,200 million of the world's people are Catholic. And the Church, with 4,700 bishops and 400,000 priests, is a formidable organization that can do a lot of harm. The Vatican's prohibition of condom use, for example, has been a major factor in the

spread of AIDS in Africa. As Mithela Wrong of Nigeria has written (*New Statesman*, 11 April 05), 'The Vatican has done more to spread AIDs in Africa than all the prostitutes of that Continent combined.' And the Vatican's support for oligarchic regimes in Latin America (including Duvalier's in Haiti) has created enormous poverty. The Pope and many of the cardinals form an ultra-right leadership that has become a source of religious and political fundamentalism that threatens progress worldwide. While much has been written about the threat of Muslim fundamentalism, not much has been said about the threat posed by this Catholic fundamentalism. It is time that people recognized it. As Umberto Ecco recently wrote, 'It almost seems like we are going back to the middle Ages.'"

This Pope is not just the Pope from Europe, but the Pope for Europe. He will be the one who will make the most concerted attempt to re-Christianize Europe, to pull it away from secular humanism and back to its "Christian roots." In Ratzinger's view, there is no continent that is more urgently in need of saving from the war of secular humanism and relativism than Europe. He refers to "a dictatorship of relativism."

Roman Catholicism has grown significantly in the Third World, in contradistinction to Europe, which has become post-Christian. In spite of claiming to be "catholic" (universal), it shows more concern for Europe. It has never accepted the secularization of Europe; its attempt to put Christianity into the European constitution failed. It sees Europe as a Christian union, not a federation of secular states. (Hence its opposition to Turkey's membership in the European Union: Turkey is predominantly Muslim.)

As the former prefect of the congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly, the Office of Holy Inquisition), he moved against dissenting theologians, and has resisted discussion of women priests, mandatory celibacy, contraception, etc. In September, 2001, he issued a document (*Dominus Iesus*) stating that Protestant and Anglican churches are deficient: only the Roman Catholic Church is valid! (How, then, could the [Anglican] Archbishop of Canterbury describe Ratzinger as "a theologian of great stature who has written some profound reflections on the nature of God and the Church"?) Imagine what the pope thinks of other religions. Imagine what he thinks of nonreligious worldviews.

From The Democrat's Diary (<http://www.democratsdiary.co.uk/2005/04/blessed-are-poor-in-spirit.html>), comes this observation: "Ratzinger's rise to the Papacy is ominous indeed. But, when comparing him to his predecessor one should reflect that all of the abovementioned exploits occurred under the gaze of Pope John Paul II. When considering alternative paths the church might have taken one should reflect that, to a greater or lesser extent, religious dogma will always attempt to subordinate rationality. Those who believe that a reasoned enquiry into the workings of the world around us offers humanity's best hope of happiness and

fulfillment should reflect on Ratzinger's warped and scornful view of that secular humanism: 'Relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and "swept along by every wind of teaching," looks like the only attitude acceptable to today's standards. We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires'. We can be sure that Pope Benedict XVI will spend his reign working tirelessly to protect the poorest and most vulnerable from their own corrupting desires."

I agree with *American Atheists*, which has reported that the selection of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as the new pope (Benedict XVI) is "bad news" for civil liberties and the rights of women, gays, intellectuals and other secularists throughout the world. Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, noted that the new pontiff demonized atheism, individualism and other alleged ills during a papal conclave mass. She added that Ratzinger, former head of the papal office which ran the Inquisition and sniffs out dissent within church ranks, is the foremost advocate of "reconverting" Europe to Catholicism, and is a leading opponent of secularism. "Ratzinger is even more extreme than Pope John Paul II. He opposes many of the civil liberties that Americans take for granted including equal rights, dissent from religion, and even free speech. He clearly sees government as a servant and instrument of the church." Johnson added that the new pope will likely embrace policies which inflame the civilizational conflict between Islam and the west, and cited Ratzinger's opposition to allowing Turkey to join the European Union. "He's got the mentality of a Crusader, and his attitudes will provide new ammunition to Islamic extremists like Osama bin Laden."

Dave Silverman, Communications Director for American Atheists, said that expects that as a result of Ratzinger's rise to the papal throne, U.S. Bishops could become more aggressive in the political arena and intensify their efforts for government aid to religious schools, banning abortion and carrying out the Vatican's global agenda. "The American Religious Civil War has just gone nuclear," said Silverman.

It is necessary for Humanists and Freethinkers across the country and around the world to redouble their vigilance. All the principles of democracy, civil rights, peace, and secularism are now under attack by political demagogues on one side (think "Bush") and religious demagogues on the other (think Pope Benedict XVI).

John Dearing
President of CSS

"When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying the cross."

— Sinclair Lewis, "It Can't Happen Here", 1935

Vatican Condemns Spain Gay Bill

by Robert Piggott, *BBC News*, 4/22/2005

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/4473001.stm>

ROME: The Vatican, under the new leadership of Pope Benedict XVI, has condemned a Spanish government bill allowing marriage between homosexuals.

The bill, passed by parliament's Socialist-dominated lower house, also allows gay couples to adopt.

A senior Vatican official described the bill — which is likely to become law within a few months — as iniquitous.

He said Roman Catholic officials should be prepared to lose their jobs rather than co-operate with the law.

The bill would make Spain the first European country to allow homosexual people to marry and adopt children.

Belgium and the Netherlands only allow same-sex marriages. It is also a dramatic step in the rapid secularisation of what was once one of the most devoutly Roman Catholic countries in Europe.

The head of the Vatican's Pontifical Council on the Family, Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, denounced the legislation as profoundly iniquitous.

Secular state

Interviewed in the Italian newspaper, *Corriere de la Serra*, Cardinal Lopez Trujillo said the Church was making an urgent call for freedom of conscience for Roman Catholics and appealing to them to resist the law.

He said every profession linked with implementing homosexual marriages should oppose it, even if it meant losing their jobs.

The cardinal insisted that just because something was made law it did not make it right.

Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero took office a year ago making it clear he intended to remove what he called the church's undeniable advantages and make Spain a secular state.

There are likely to be further tensions with Pope Benedict XVI. Mr Zapatero has made it clear that he intends to streamline divorce law and even to relax the conditions placed on abortion.

Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero took office a year ago making it clear he intended to remove what he called the church's undeniable advantages and make Spain a secular state.

Letter to the Editor of Corvallis Gazette-Times

by CSS Members Barry & Evelyn Sherr, 4/27/2005

<http://gtconnect.com/articles/2005/04/27/news/opinion/2lets427.txt>

So, the anti-science folks are at it again (letters, April 18, John W. Pyles, "No basis exists for theory of evolution") with the same old tired and thoroughly refuted arguments and carefully selected quotes. Make no mistake, this is not just about evolution — it is against science in general, and in particular the scientific underpinnings of biology, geology, astronomy, and climate change.

The anti-science trend in this country is harming our status in the world as a leader in basic research and technological development. It is reducing the quality of our education, and it will hinder our economic progress. Most of the rest of the world's nations have no problem accepting evolution and other findings of science, and it is their young people, rigorously trained in modern science, who will develop new technologies, and their companies who will hold valuable patents to those technologies. If the United States doesn't get off the current anti-science kick soon, we Americans will indeed be left behind economically.

From the Editor...

(continued from page 1)

Warner of Virginia, Mike DeWine of Ohio, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and John Sununu of New Hampshire — to stop this latest Republican scheme to dominate the judiciary.

It seems like I've said this alot since Bush became President, but... if this one goes through, the damage may well be irreversible...

In personal news, Angela's feeling MUCH better these days, and the house is almost finished being repaired from the flood. But neither of us will be able to make it to this month's CSS meeting, because it is unfortunately the weekend of the the annual huge neighborhood garage sale, and we're hoping to make a dent in the massive amount of clutter that dominates our lives.

If you've got nothing better to do after the meeting, feel free to come on by and socialize and browse our accumulated treasures. There are some really nice items (some brand new), and all priced to move... :)

As with any good garage sale, it's less about getting rich, and more about finding good homes for stuff you just don't have room for...

Reed Byers

Editor, *Willamette Freethinker*

Letters to the Corvallis Gazette-Times

Atheists are ones most persecuted

According to James H. Coffin, (letters, April 29, "Atheists distort First Amendment"), atheists and agnostics have prohibited the free exercise of religion in this country. Yet the United States has vibrant religious freedom, demonstrated by our wide range of spiritual beliefs. If any group is guilty of trying to squelch that freedom, it is conservative evangelicals. They've had a lot of practice.

When the Puritans, precursors of today's religious right, burned to death 700 "non-praying" Pequot Indians, Rev. Cotton Mather rejoiced that "...all of them (were) brought down to Hell in one day."

Our history books are filled with stories of conservative evangelicals harassing and persecuting Quakers, Catholics, Mormons and many other religious groups that differed from their own narrow view of faith. But the most persecuted of all have been the very people Coffin claims to be stealing our religious freedom: Atheists and agnostics.

Article VI of the Constitution of the United States commands that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." Yet no atheist or agnostic can be elected in this country. Religious faith has always been the unconstitutional litmus test for public office.

Since atheists and agnostics have no political power and therefore could not possibly be depriving Mr. Coffin of his religious freedom I can only conclude that when he speaks of atheists and agnostics he is really referring to anyone outside his faith: Those condemned to join the poor Pequot Indians in the Hell created by religious fanaticism.

— Joe Fulton, 5/6/2005

Right wing is one often 'un-faith'ful

Any "war against people of faith" is being waged by the pseudo-Christians, not by some imaginary "secularists." Were there a shred of Christ left in this ugly perversion of Christianity, it would not justify wars and other forms of violence "against evil" or ignore economic injustice and enslavement while it focuses on personal sexual behavior.

This is what the Bible warns against. Religion is the big problem in the Bible, not "secularism." It is false gods and allegiances to authorities which are not able to back up their claims which gets in the way of faith.

Faith is intellectual and moral honesty, not some escape hatch from reality.

What we are seeing, as President Bush and Republicans such as Tom Delay pander to religious zealots, is more like that of Islamic zealots than either authentic Islam or Christianity.

If we are supposed to "know they are Christians by their love," we can also recognize that homophobia, moralism and religious nationalism have nothing to do with the real thing. These so-called conservatives are ignorant of Christian and American history and traditions.

— Don Caughey, 5/9/2005

Atheists not ones eroding boundary

In his April 29 letter, "Atheists distort first amendment," James H. Coffin blames the wrong culprits for the separation of church and state that he deplors. In particular, Mr. Coffin tells us that "Atheist and agnostic have purposely distorted the First Amendment to the Constitution" and that "The atheists and agnostic have certainly prohibited the free exercise of religion in this country!" A simple consideration shows that these accusations are misdirected.

The U.S. Constitution is a wonderfully brief document that depends for its interpretation and vigor on the laws, judicial decisions and commentaries written by its original authors and by subsequent generations of legislators and judges.

Without exception that I know of, atheists and agnostics do not now hold, nor have they ever held, any positions of consequence in our government, and so have not been in any position to write, amend, or interpret the Constitution or other laws. We must conclude that the wall of separation between church and state, first articulated by Thomas Jefferson, has been erected and buttressed by religious people, the vast majority of whom have been God-fearing Christians. We all, believers and non-believers alike, have benefited greatly from their wisdom and tolerance.

— William C. Wickes, 5/9/2005

State not harming any worship rights

James Coffin alleged, "The atheists and agnostic have certainly prohibited the free exercise of religion in this country" but he offered no proof of how they did this — except to further allege "Atheist and agnostic have purposely distorted the First Amendment to the Constitution and neglect to complete what it says regarding religion." There's no truth to any of these allegations.

Apparently this "distortion" concerns the principle of separation between church and state. This was mentioned in an 1802 letter by Thomas Jefferson — no raging atheist or agnostic — to the Danbury Connecticut Baptist Association. Long after Jefferson died, Supreme Court justices referred to his letter in judgements designed to keep the wall between church and state strengthened.

Lately a group of folks I call "The New Theocrats" have pledged to "restore the original intent of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and dispel the myth of the separation of church and state." I see no myth to the wisdom espoused by Jefferson, and the theocratic violence of the Middle East lately totally shreds such a notion. Thanks to this wise policy, Mr. Coffin may worship as he pleases — without state interference — and any claims of prohibition are based upon falsehoods.

— Robert G. Gourley, 5/9/2005

Morality is doing what is right no matter what you are told. Religion is doing what you are told no matter what is right.

— Jerry Sturdivant

Bush Elected Pope! Catholic Cardinals Stunned!

by Willie E. Davis

The almost 120 Cardinals from around the world that gathered to choose a successor in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel were stunned and expressed amazement.

Cardinal Mohoney the Vatican spokesperson had this to say, "We in the conclave are all shocked. We cast our vote's using these new electronic voting machines. The results overwhelmingly favored George W. Bush over all the Catholic candidates. The last Pope, John Paul, was a superb linguist, fluently speaking 11 languages, this one can't speak fluently in one language. We just don't know what to say."

George W. Bush had this to say moments ago as he spoke from the Rose Garden:

I am honored to be the spiritual lighthouse, and the first War Pope. I promise Evangelical Catholics and Prostates alike that I will be embodied in salvation and fair in the performance of my duties. I am a Unitifier, not a Divide-a-cater.

I am obliged to try to save as many lost souls as I can, at least the Devout Wealthy Elite Souls, as it is well known that Heaven is a very select place, indeed, it is more exclusive than even the best of country clubs.

It is a members only Heaven. I may have to put a fence around it.



Voice of an Angel

Everywhere you look nowadays, you are surrounded by lies and more lies. This is especially so with the news networks. The networks are like starving dogs ready to snap at anything that comes within reach. All that matters is the ratings. Just look at the recent stories on the "Wendy's Chili Finger", "Buried Treasure" and the "Run Away Bride". Every one of these stories, a hoax.

The real problem behind all this is clear — news reporters don't research any of the stories they present. They simply "report the news". They sit there reading off their monitors and don't even bother commenting — even on the most outrageous statements made in the stories. I was recently watching an interview where the guest was spouting ridiculous claims. When the interview was over, all the news lady had to say was "Now wasn't that interesting?". How about challenging these claims? How about making the obvious observation that this person was full of boloney?

Speaking of making up "facts", let's look at the newest craze: making Pope John Paul a saint. As you know, to be a saint you had to have produced a "miracle".

I was recently watching a BBC report (one of the rare places where reporters actually research their stories). They presented two possible "potential miracles" that are currently being considered.

The first one being the Pope's survival of his assassination attempt. I think they are reaching here — why not call all medical procedures "miracles"?! Why credit those lazy doctors who've only studied and practiced medicine for many years?!

The second possible miracle mentioned is the conversion of all the "atheistic communists" in Eastern Europe after the Wall came down. They are crediting the spread of Christianity there to Pope John Paul. They like to assume that everyone there were atheists and don't bring out the fact that many people practiced their religion in secret. Just because your government espouses a certain religious stance, doesn't mean you do. And why does the Pope get all the credit for this anyway?! And for that matter, even if it WERE true, how is being persuasive a "miracle"?

What ever happened to investigation? What ever happened to people giving a damn about their integrity? What ever happened to people having to back up their claims with credible evidence? Do these people not realize that by spreading a lie, they are just as responsible as the person telling it? But that would mean there was some sort of accountability in this society.

It seems that people can say just about anything they want and get away with it. What I am really asking is — what ever happened to the truth? As a Humanist I care about that sort of thing.

Angela Byers
CSS Treasurer & Webmaster

Home from Iraq; Journalist urges Americans to Search for Truth, Freedom

by Molly Bingham, *Louisville Courier-Journal*

This article is adapted from a speech given by photojournalist Molly Bingham at Western Kentucky University last month. Bingham, a Louisville native, was detained in 2003 by Iraqi security forces and held in Abu Ghraib prison from March 25 to April 2, 2003. Eighteen days after her release, she returned to Iraq to pursue stories for The New York Times, The Guardian of London and others. Taking a short break during the summer of 2003, Bingham had the idea of working on a story to explore who was involved in the nascent resistance that was becoming apparent throughout Iraq. She scanned the papers that summer, looking for an article that would show some journalist had reported the story, had gone deeper to find out the source of the new violence. No one had. So in August 2003, Bingham returned with British journalist Steve Connors and spent the next 10 months reporting the story of the Iraqi resistance. Her account was published in Vanity Fair magazine in July 2004; Connors shot a documentary film on the subject. This speech was a challenge to journalists, and Americans, to speak up and be sure their comments, questions and thoughts are heard, and that the First Amendment is celebrated in all its strengths. Bingham began her career as a photo intern for The Courier-Journal and Louisville Times.

We spent 10 months in Iraq, working on a story, understanding who the people are who are fighting, why they fight, what their fundamental beliefs are, when they started, what kinds of backgrounds they come from, what education, jobs they have. Were they former military, are they Iraqi or foreign? Are they part of al-Qaida? What we came up with is a story in itself, and one that Vanity Fair ran in July 2004 with my text and pictures. [My colleague Steve Connors] shot a documentary film that is still waiting to find a home. But the basic point for this discussion is that we both thought it was really journalistically important to understand who it was who was resisting the presence of the foreign troops. If you didn't understand that, how could you report what was clearly becoming an "ongoing conflict?" And if you were reading the news in America, or Europe, how could you understand the full context of what was unfolding if what motivates the "other side" of the conflict is not understood, or even discussed?

Lesson One: Many journalists in Iraq could not, or would not, check their nationality or their own perspective at the door.

Lesson Two: Our behavior as journalists has taught us very little.

Just the process of working on that story has revealed many things to me about my own country. I'd like to share some of them with you:

Lesson One: Many journalists in Iraq could not, or would not, check their nationality or their own perspective at the door.

One of the hardest things about working on this story for me personally, and as a journalist, was to set my "American self" and perspective aside. It was an ongoing challenge to listen open-mindedly to a group of people whose foundation of belief is significantly different from mine, and one I found I often strongly disagreed with.

But going in to report a story with a pile of prejudices is no way to do a story justice, or to do it fairly, and that constant necessity to bite my tongue, wipe the smirk off my face or continue to listen through a racial or religious diatribe that I found appalling was a skill I had to practice. We would never walk in to cover a union problem or political event without seeking to understand the perspective from both, or the many sides of the story that exist. Why should we as journalists do it in Iraq?

Lesson Two: Our behavior as journalists has taught us very little. Just as in the lead up to the war in Iraq, questioning our government's decisions and claims and what it seeks to achieve is criticized as unpatriotic.

Along these lines, the other thing I found difficult was the realization that, while I was out doing what I believe is solid journalism, there were many (journalists and normal folks alike) who would question my patriotism, or wonder how I could even think hearing and relating the perspective "from the other side" was important.

Certainly, over the last three years I've had to acquire the discipline of overriding my emotional attachment to my country, and remember my sense of human values that transcend frontiers and ethnicity. And with a sense of duty to history, I needed to just get on with reporting the story. My value of human life and rights don't fluctuate depending on which country I'm in. I don't see one individual as more deserving of fair treatment than another. . . .

Now, I realize I'm in Kentucky, a state with many military connections, and there are many of you here who may have served, or have family members who serve, and let me take this moment to say that I have the utmost respect and sympathy for the American soldiers overseas right now, particularly in Iraq. They have been sent on a most difficult mission, to quell a population that will not be quelled, in a land awash with weapons. The American military is being used to find a solution to what is essentially a political problem, an equation that rarely adds up well. As if that were not enough, our soldiers have been sent with insufficient resources to protect themselves. In my mind, that is all inexcusable.

Lesson Three: To seek to understand and represent to an American audience the reasons behind the Iraqi opposition is practically treasonous.

Every one of the people involved in the resistance that we spoke to held us individually responsible for their security. If something happened to them — never mind that they were legitimate targets for the U.S. military — they would blame us. And kill us. We soon learned that they had the U.S. bases so well watched that we had to abandon our idea of working on the U.S. side of the story — that is, discovering what the soldiers really thought about who might be attacking them. There were so many journalists working with the American soldiers that we believed that that story would be well told. More practically, if we were seen by the Iraqis going in and out of the American bases, we would be tagged immediately as spies, informants and most likely be killed.

As terrifying as that was to manage and work through, there was another fear that was just as bad. What if the American military or intelligence found out what we were working on? Would they tail us and round up the people we met? Would they kick down our door late one night, rifle through all our stuff and arrest us for “collaborating with the enemy?” Bear in mind that there are no real laws in Iraq. At the time that we were working, the American military was the law, and it seemed to me that they were pretty much making it up as they went along. I was pretty sure that if they wanted to “disappear” us, rough us up or even send us for an all expenses paid vacation in Guantánamo for suspected al-Qaida connections, they could do so with very little, or even no recourse on our part.

I could go into a long litany of the ways in which the American military has treated journalists in Iraq. Recent actions indicate that the U.S. military will detain and/or

kill any journalist who happens to be caught covering the Iraqi side of the militant resistance, and indeed a number of journalists have been killed by U.S. troops while working in Iraq. This behavior at the moment seems to be limited to journalists who also happen to be Arabs, or Arab-looking, but that is only a tangential story to what I'm telling you about here.

The intimidation to not work on this story was evident. Dexter Filkins, who writes for The New York Times, related a conversation he had in Iraq with an American military commander just before we left. Dexter and the commander had gotten quite friendly, meeting up

sporadically for a beer and a chat. Towards the end of one of their conversations, Dexter declined an invitation for the next day by explaining that he'd lined up a meeting with a “resistance guy.” The commander's face went stony cold and he said, “We have a

position on that.” For Dexter the message was clear. He cancelled the appointment. And, again, this is not meant as any criticism of the military; they have a war to win, and dominating the “message,” or the news is an integral part of that war. The military has a name for it, “information operations,” and the aim is to achieve information superiority in the same way they would seek to achieve air superiority. If you look closely, you will notice there is very little, maybe even no direct reporting on the resistance in Iraq. We do, however, as journalists report what the Americans say about the resistance. Is this really anything more than stenography?

And many American journalists often refer to those attacking Americans or Iraqi troops and policemen as “terrorists.” Some are indeed using terrorist tactics, but calling them “terrorists” simply shuts down any sense of need or interest to look beyond that word, to understand why indeed human beings might be willing to die in a violent struggle to achieve their goal. Pushing them off as simply

“insane, wild Arabs” or “extremist Muslims” does them no service, but even more, it does the U.S. no service. If we as Americans fail to understand who attacks us and why, we will simply continue on this same path, and continue watching from afar as a war we don't understand boils over.

Lesson Four: The gatekeepers — by which I mean the editors, publishers and business sides of the media — don't want their paper or their outlet to reveal that compelling narrative of why anyone would oppose the presence of American troops on their soil. Why would anyone refuse democracy? Why would anyone not want

Lesson Three: To seek to understand and represent to an American audience the reasons behind the Iraqi opposition is practically treasonous.

Lesson Four: The gatekeepers[...] don't want their paper or their outlet to reveal that compelling narrative of why anyone would oppose the presence of American troops on their soil.

the helping hand of America in overthrowing their terrible dictator? It's amazing to me how expeditiously we turn away from our own history. Think of our revolution. Think of our Founding Fathers. Think of what they stood for and hoped for. Think of how, over time, we have learned to improve on our own Constitution and governance. But think, mostly, about the words I just used: It was our decision and our determination that brought us where we are now.

Recall Patrick Henry's famous speech encouraging the Second Virginia Convention, gathered on March 20, 1775, to fight the British, "Give me liberty or give me death!" Why is it that we, as Americans, presume that any Iraqi would feel any differently? If the roles were reversed, do you think for a moment that our men wouldn't be stockpiling arms and attacking any foreign invader with the temerity to set foot on our soil, occupy our buildings of government and write us a new constitution?

Wouldn't we as women be joining with them in any way we could? Wouldn't the divisions between us — how we feel about President Bush, whether we're Republican or Democrat — be put aside as we resisted a common enemy?

Then why is it that this story of human effort for self-determination by violent means cannot be told in America? Are we so small, so confused by our own values that we cannot recognize when someone emulates our own struggle? Even if it is the U.S. that they are struggling against? I want to be careful to explain that I am not saying that the Iraqis fighting against us are necessarily fighting for democracy, but they are fighting for their right to decide for themselves what their nation looks like politically.

Lesson Five: What it's like to be afraid of your own country.

Once the story was finished and set to come out on the street, I was rushing back to the States — mostly because we could no longer work once the story was published — and I found I was scared returning to my own country. And that was an amazingly strange and awful feeling to have. Again, you could call me paranoid, but the questions about what might happen to me once in America — where at least I would have more rights — kept racing through my brain. I'm still here, so you could say that my frantic mental gymnastics about what could happen to me in my own country were paranoid anxieties.

But I would turn that question around:

How many other American journalists, perhaps not as secure in their position as I, have thought to do a story and decided that it's too close to the bone, too questioning of the American government or its actions? How many times was the risk that our own government might come in and rifle through our apartment, our homes or take us away for questioning in front of our children a factor in our

decision not to do a story? How many times did we as journalists decide not to do a story because we thought it might get us into trouble? Or, as likely, how often did the editor above us kill the story for the same reasons? Lots of column inches have been spent in the discussion of how our rights as Americans are being surreptitiously confiscated, but what about our complicity, as journalists, in that? It seems to me that the assault on free speech, while the fear and intimidation is in the air, comes as much from us — as individuals and networks of journalists who censor ourselves — as it does from any other source.

We need to wake up as individuals and as a community of journalists and start asking the hard and scary questions. Questions we may not really want to know the answers to about ourselves, about our government, about what is being done in our name, and hold the responsible individuals accountable through due process in our legal or electoral system.

We need to begin to be able to look again at our government, our leadership and ourselves critically. That is what the Fourth Estate is all about. That's what

American journalism can do at its zenith. I also happen to believe that, in fact, that is the highest form of patriotism — expecting our country to live up to the promises it makes and the values it purports to hold.

The role of the media in assisting the public to ensure those values are reflected in reality is undeniably failing today.

Go ahead, take a hard look in the mirror, ask the questions — if there is something in our nation that needs repair or change, that is how it will get done, by asking those questions, getting answers and reporting them.

We still have the freedom in this country as individuals and as journalists to defend the rights enshrined in the Constitution, to defend the values that we as individuals still hold dear — so why aren't we doing it? Are we scared? If we're scared, then who will be there to defend those rights and values when it is proposed that they be taken away?

I still believe in that country that I love so dearly, the place I think of when the words "freedom," "opportunity," "liberty," "justice" and "equality" are spoken on lips, but I want it to be a country I see, hear and feel every day, not one that lives in my imagination.

It's time we looked in the mirror and began to take responsibility for what our country looks like, what our country is and how it behaves, rather than acting like victims before we actually are.

Or do I need to start facing the reality that all I love and believe in is simply self-delusion?

Lesson Five: What it's like to be afraid of your own country.

The Evil of Evolution

I came across this graphic posted on one of the blogs I commonly read ("Sadly, No!", located at <http://www.sadlyno.com/>).

The poster ("Brad") made the following comments:

While reading Massimo Pigliucci's *Denying Evolution*, I came upon the following graphic, which is used by creationists to illustrate how teaching evolution leads to... well, everything they think is evil:

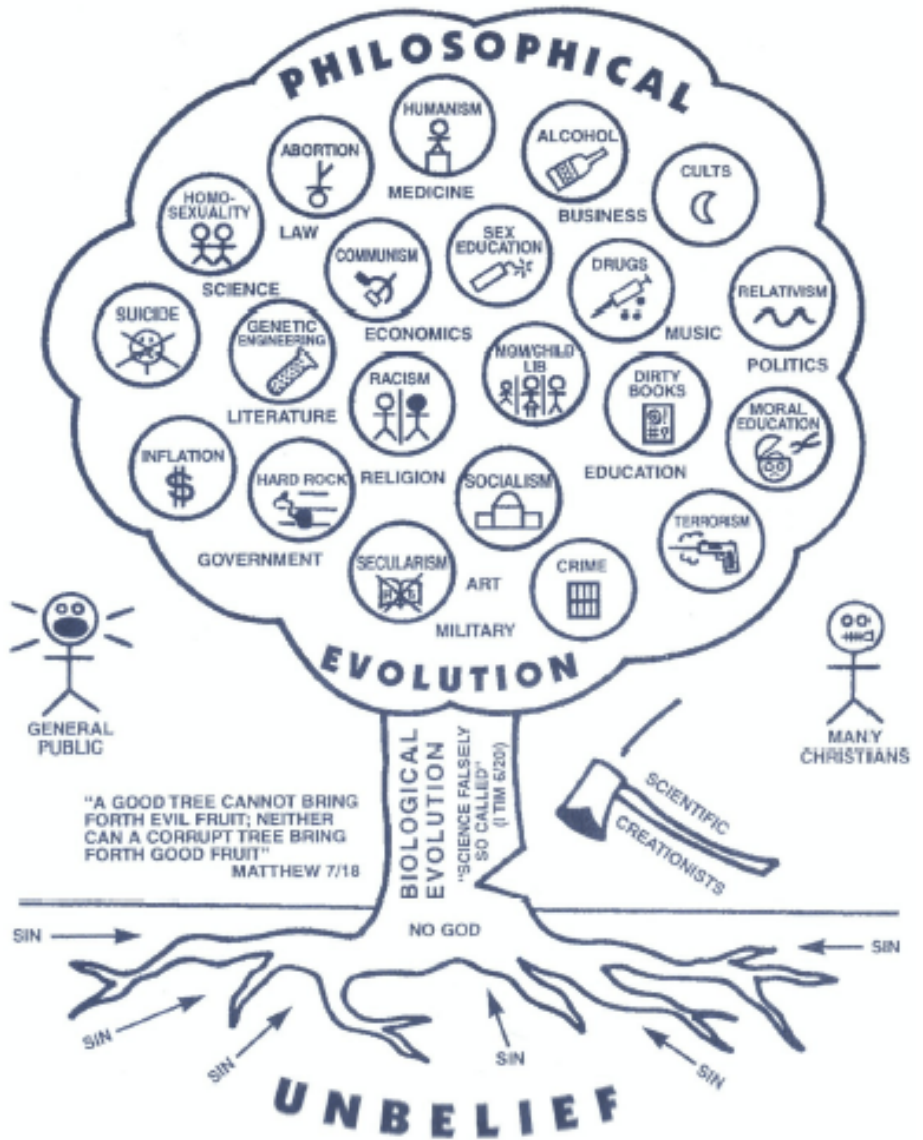
Your challenge, should you choose to accept it, is to figure out how sex education, dirty books, genetic engineering, hard rock, racism, terrorism, women's liberation, and inflation are all connected. Oh, AND you have to show how they're all caused by teaching evolution. Good luck.

So I thought I'd pass along the challenge. Just for fun, try to think like a Creationist for a moment, and try to explain how evolution (rooted in Unbelief and feeding on sin) leads to all of these "evils".

Be sure to have a giggle at the thought of the "General Public" screaming loudly, while "Many Christians" have their mouths zipped shut...

Reed Byers

Editor, *Willamette Freethinker*



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