

## VIDEO SHOWING OF "THE GOD WHO WASN'T THERE" AT APRIL 12 MEETING

*Bowling for Columbine* did it to the gun culture. *Super Size Me* did it to fast food. Now *The God Who Wasn't There* does it to religion. Holding modern Christianity up to a bright spotlight, this groundbreaking film demands answers to questions few dare to ask. Our guide through the world of Christendom is former fundamentalist Brian Fleming, who unflinchingly examines believers and their beliefs. The documentary delves into the issue of what it means that we have a culture somewhat dominated by a religion revering a man who may never have existed. Fleming, who attended two Christian schools as a child, describes himself as a "Christian atheist." By this he means that he was brought up in a Christian culture and that, albeit an unbeliever, he does not reject many of the moral beliefs informing that culture. Fleming has made several documentaries and plans to release another controversy-stirring film, *The Beast*, later this year.

Helping him in the film we are to see are such luminaries as Jesus Seminar fellow Robert M. Price (*Deconstructing Jesus*), historian Richard Carrier (*The Empty Tomb*) and PEN award-winning author Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*).

A thought provoking film that should rouse a lively discussion afterwards. Try to join us at our usual meeting place.

*The ultimate aim of government is not to rule or restrain by fear, not to exact obedience, but on the contrary, to free every man from fear, so that he is able to live in the greatest possible security; in other words, to strengthen his natural right to exist and go about his business without injury to himself or to others. The object of government is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or puppets, but to enable them to develop their minds and bodies in security, and to use their reason without restraint; without showing hatred, anger, or deceit nor watched with the eyes of jealousy and injustice. In effect, the true aim of government is liberty.*

--Baruch Spinoza, *On Government*

These sentiments concerning the proper role of government anticipated the *Age of the Enlightenment* by a hundred years and our own Declaration of Independence and Constitution by well over a century. Sadly, they often do not hold sway in the “land of liberty” even today.

Spinoza was much more than a political theorist. He was one of the greatest philosophers of his day and perhaps the one from the *Age of Reason* whose metaphysics resonates most trenchantly in the contemporary world. Our speaker, Ken Carlson, though not neglecting the multiple ways in which Spinoza speaks to us today, chose to concentrate in his March 8 presentation on the “green Spinoza.” *Deus sive Natura*. Harming nature, you harm God.

## HoFW NEWS AND VIEWS

**APRIL MEETING:** Before the video showing, we will discuss and vote on changes in the by-laws proposed by a committee appointed at the March meeting. Our thanks go to Dick Trice, Ray Weil and Jim Fogelman for their work on behalf of the association.

We will be meeting at our customary locale: Friends of the Fort Worth Public Library Book Store located in the Wedgmont Shopping Center a block from Granbury Road south from I-20.

**PRE-MEETING DINNER:** Our pre-meeting dinner will be held at Joe’s Italian Restaurant located across the parking lot from Friends of the Fort Worth Public Library Book Store.

**TREASURER’S REPORT:** The Association had income from donations of \$25 and expenditures of \$78.89 during the month preceding March 8. Our balance as of that date was \$746.13.

**REMINDERS:** Don’t forget the needy. It has been suggested that some members may wish to contribute cash in lieu of canned food to WestAid. Generally, aid organizations prefer money to goods since it facilitates the adjustment of resources to the needs of the recipients. Dolores will accept either and both.

**A WAY TO EXPRESS OUR APPRECIATION TO OUR HOST:** Friends of the Fort Worth Public Library Bookstore depends on book contributions from the public for their income. If you have books you don’t expect to read or consult again and they are still marketable, consider making a contribution to our host.

## YOUR OFFICERS AND HOW TO REACH THEM:

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### American Humanist Association Sponsors Summer Camp for the Non-religious

Camp Quest is the first residential summer camp in the United States for the children of atheists, freethinkers, humanists, "brights" and others holding a naturalistic world view. Camp Quest is run by Free Inquiry of Cincinnati and North Kentucky. An unpaid staff is composed of volunteers who get to the camp on their own and are provided with room and board while at camp.

Camp Quest is a not-for-profit educational organization created in 1996. It is dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry, critical and creative thinking, scientific method, self respect, ethics, democracy, free-speech and the separation of church and state. It features activities ranging from astronomy, creative writing and study of fossils—to name just a few—to sports both mental (chess) and physical (horseback riding, archery, etc.) For complete information go to [www.camp-quest.org](http://www.camp-quest.org) or write to Camp Quest, P.O. Box 8471, Cincinnati, OH 45208.

### Adoption Institute Supports Gay Parents

**"Laws and policies that preclude adoption by gay or lesbian parents disadvantage the tens of thousands of children mired in the foster care system who need permanent loving homes," the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institutes says in a March 24 report. It advises abandonment of a "don't ask, don't tell" approach which prompts some potential parents to be discreet about their sexual orientation. A recent Pew Research poll shows that public opposition to gay adoption has narrowed in recent years. Its 2006 poll found 48 percent of the public opposed and 46 percent in favor with a margin of error of three percent. Florida is the only state with an outright ban on gay adoption. (AP)**

## **MASSACHUSETTS COURT LIMITS SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

Massachusetts' highest court ruled March 30 that same-sex couples, who live in other states, cannot get married in Massachusetts unless gay marriage is legal in their home states. No other state currently allows gay marriage. Only one justice dissented, writing "the Commonwealth's resurrection of a moribund [1913] statute to deny nonresident same-sex couples access to marriage is not only troubling" but "also is fundamentally unfair." (NYT)

## **Jerry Falwell's University Bans Visit of Gay Rights' Advocates**

Soulforce Equality Riders, a gay campus organization touring religious and military schools, has been received cautiously but cordially at most stops so far. But it was refused admission at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, and 12 riders were arrested there when they ignored the order not to enter. Elsewhere, reception reflected a greater degree of tolerance. At Oklahoma Baptist University (Shawnee), where the administration allowed the riders access to the student center, students showed the group respect even as they disagreed about Scripture. "They're trying to talk about how being gay is justified in the Bible," said Lee Goggin, 23, a senior wearing a STRAIGHT PRIDE T shirt. "I think the majority of students here believe that's not how it is." (Newsweek)

## **FORD FACES RENEWED CONSERVATIVE BOYCOTT**

Ford Motor Company is facing a boycott from a coalition of 19 conservative groups that have challenged the automaker's decision to resume advertising in gay-themed publications after an earlier decision not to advertise. The boycott is being led by the American Family Association (AFA) of Tupelo, MS. The group claims Ford reneged on an earlier agreement to stop advertising in the publications and end all charitable giving to groups that support gay issues. "It's a culture war," said Randy Sharp of AFA. (WP)

## **MISSOURI LEGISLATURE MULLS CONTROVERSIAL 'CHRISTIAN NATION' RESOLUTION**

A resolution that attacks the U.S. Supreme Court for its church-state rulings and declares that the Founding Fathers "recognized a Christian God and used the principles afforded to us by Him as the founding principles of our nation" has sparked controversy in Missouri. Americans United noted that the resolution promotes inaccurate history. Far from establishing a "Christian nation," the founders wanted a republic that welcomed people of all faiths and deliberately wrote a secular constitution and a First Amendment that separates church and state. (C&S)

## CATHOLIC CHURCH GETS 783 NEW ABUSE CLAIMS

The nation's Roman Catholic leaders received 783 new claims of sex abuse by clergy in 2005, with most of the allegations involving cases that are decades old. The new claims bring the total number against the Catholic Church to more than 12,000 since 1950. Previously, the total cost to the Church had been put at more than \$1 billion, but the total for 2005 alone was \$467 million, including therapy for victims, support for offenders and attorneys' fees, among other things. (NYT)

## Should Polygamy Be Decriminalized?

"Polygamy rights is the next civil-right battle," says Mark Henkel, who as founder of the Christian evangelical polygamy organization TruthBearer.org, is at the forefront of the movement to legalize polygamy. His argument: if Heather can have two mommies, she should also be able to have two mommies and a daddy. Supporters point to Canada, where, in January, a report commissioned by the Justice Department recommended decriminalizing polygamy. A lawyer for a bigamist challenging Utah's anti-polygamy law before the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals plans to use the same argument made in the *Lawrence v. Texas* 2003 sodomy case in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that individuals have "the full right to engage in private conduct without government intervention." Experts estimate that there are between 30,000 and 50,000 polygamists in the United States associated with Mormonism. There's also a growing, perhaps even a greater number of evangelical Christian and Muslim polygamists. A May 2005 Gallup poll found that 92 percent of Americans oppose the practice, which is illegal in all 50 states. (Newsweek)

## NOTRE DAME'S PRESIDENT ALLOWS "MONOLOGUES AND GAY FILMS"

The University of Notre Dame will continue to allow a gay film festival and the play "Vagina Monologues" on campus, its president announced April 5. The decision was a sharp turnaround from a speech that the president, the Reverend John I. Jenkins, gave to faculty members and students in January questioning the appropriateness of such events on Roman Catholic campuses. His reversal drew strong criticism from conservative Catholic leaders. (NYT)

## Billy Graham Sees Times Getting Worse and Worse

"When Jesus died on the cross, he was not only dying for our sins but he was dying to destroy the power and the works of the Devil. We don't see that destruction yet. We are living in a period that Jesus predicted would be a very serious and difficult time, and as we approach the end of the age, it is going to get worse and worse. We see it on every hand today." [Well, he's 87 years old.] (Newsweek)

## Blame It on Voltaire: Muslims Ask French to Cancel 1741 Play

A municipal cultural center in Saint-Genis-Pouilly, a town near the Swiss border, recently organized a reading of a 265-year-old play by Voltaire, whose writings helped lay the foundations of modern Europe's commitment to secularism. The play, "Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet," uses the founder of Islam to lampoon all forms of religious frenzy and intolerance. The production quickly stirred up passions that echoed the cartoon uproar. "This play...constitutes an insult to the entire Muslim community," said a letter to the mayor of Saint-Genis-Pouilly, signed by Said Akhrouf, a French-born café owner of Moroccan descent and three other Islamic activists representing Muslim Associations. They demanded the performance be cancelled. The dispute rumbles on. A debate on Swiss television last month degenerated into a shouting match when the director of the performance accused a prominent Muslim of campaigning to censor Voltaire in the past. "Help us Voltaire. They've gone mad," read a headline last month in *France Soir*. "Fanaticism," the play that stirred the ruckus, portrays Muhammad as a ruthless tyrant bent on conquest. Its main theme is the use of religion to promote and mask political ambition. [It could be performed advantageously on this side of the Atlantic, don't you think?] (WSJ)

## "MISSING LINK" FOUND!

A team led by paleontologist Neil H. Shubin of the University of Chicago have uncovered several well-preserved skeletons of a fossil fish in sediments of former streambeds in the Canadian Arctic. The scientists found telling anatomical traits of a transitional creature, a fish that is still a fish but has changes that anticipate the emergence of land animals. Scientists said that in addition to confirming elements of a major transition in evolution, the fossils were a powerful rebuttal to religious creationists, who have long argued the absence of such transitional creatures as a serious weakness of Darwin's theory. (NYT)

## MEDICAL STUDY QUESTIONS THE POWER OF PRAYER

Prayers offered by strangers had no effect on the recovery of people who are undergoing heart surgery, a large and long-awaited study has found. And patients who know they were being prayed for had a higher rate of post-operative complications like heart rhythms, perhaps because of the expectations the prayers created, says a report scheduled to appear in the *American Heart Journal* this week. The results, the authors said, raise questions about how and whether patients should be told that prayers were being offered for them. The study cost \$2.4 million and most of the money came from the John Templeton Foundation, which supports research into spirituality. The government has spent more than \$2.3 million on prayer research since 2000. [It's your money!] (NYT)

## IRS UNFAIR ON VIOLATIONS OF TAX CODE

A group of religious leaders accused the Internal Revenue Service April 6 of playing politics by ignoring its complaints that two large churches in Ohio are engaging in political activities in violation of the Tax Code. The two churches cited are the Fairfield

Christian Church and the World Harvest Church of Columbus. The group notes that the agency is investigating All Saints Church, a large liberal Episcopal Church in Pasadena, CA, that staged a mock debate among Jesus, Bush and Kerry during the 2004 presidential campaign, and wonders why the Ohio churches are not being audited. (NYT)

It is often said that religion is special, because people's religious convictions are so central to their personalities that they should not be asked to tolerate ridicule of their beliefs, and because they might feel a religious duty to strike back at what they take to be sacrilege. Britain has apparently embraced that view because it retains the crime of blasphemy, though only for insults to Christianity. But we cannot make an exception for religious insult if we want to use law to protect the free exercise of religion in other ways. If we want to forbid the police from profiling people who look or dress like Muslims for special searches, for example, we cannot also forbid people from opposing that policy by claiming, in cartoons or otherwise, that Islam is committed to terrorism, however misguided we think that opinion is. Certainly we should criticize the judgment and taste of such people. But religion must observe the principles of democracy, not the other around. No religion can be permitted to legislate for everyone about what can or cannot be drawn any more than it can legislate about what may or may not be eaten. No one's religious convictions can be thought to trump the freedom that makes democracy possible.

--Ronald Dworkin, "The Right to Ridicule" (New York Review of Books)

#### **JUSTICE GINSBURG FAULTS GOP CRITICS FOR INCITING THE "FRINGE"**

Addressing an audience at the Constitutional Court of South Africa on March 7, Justice Ruth Ginsburg criticized various Republican proposed House and Senate measures that either decry or would bar the citation of foreign law in the Supreme Court's constitutional rulings. Especially targeted are rulings supporting abortion rights and gay rights. "It is disquieting that they have attracted sizable support. And one not-so-small concern—they fuel the irrational fringe." She cited a February 28 chat room posting that called on unnamed "commandoes" to ensure that she and Justice O'Connor "will not live another week."

Justice O'Connor used a speech in early March at Georgetown University Law Center to repeat her past warnings about the threat to judicial independence posed by Republican criticism of the court's rulings. She apparently was referring to comments by Tom Delay and John Cornyn. (WP)

#### ATHEIST TEACHER FIGHTS CATHOLIC PRIVILEGE IN SCOTLAND SCHOOL AND WINS

A teacher, who describes himself as an atheist, has won a religious discrimination suit in Scotland after a Catholic school denied him promotion. The local employment tribunal ruled that the Glasgow Catholic Church had discriminated against David McNab, a math teacher, on the grounds of his religious beliefs by preventing him from applying for a promotion to a post involving pastoral care. He was awarded 2000 pounds compensation. Under a 1991 agreement, non-Catholics are excluded from certain key posts such as head-teacher, assistant head, and teachers of religious education. However, the ruling stated that the 1980 Education (Scotland) Act "does not permit the Roman Catholic Church to reserve certain posts for teachers who are Roman Catholic." Catholic schools in Scotland are publicly financed. (IHS)

#### PASTORS' GET-OUT-THE-VOTE TRAINING COULD TEST TAX RULES

Weeks after the IRS announced a crackdown on political activities by churches and other tax-exempt organizations, a coalition of non-profit conservative groups is holding training sessions to enlist Pennsylvania pastors in turning out voters for the November elections. Archconservative Senator Rick Santorum is running well behind his Democratic challenger in opinion polls and the Republican candidate for governor, former pro-football star Lynn Swann, is in a tight race to oust the Democratic incumbent. (NYT)

#### JEB BUSH VOWS TO CONTINUE FIGHT FOR SCHOOL VOUCHERS

Rebuffed by the Florida Supreme Court, Governor Jeb Bush has vowed to use the rest of his term to reestablish the voucher system recently rejected as unconstitutional. The Florida constitution requires a uniform system of free education, a requirement a voucher system would violate. (C&S)

#### Proper Healthcare Levels at 55 Percent, New England Journal of Medicine Finds

Patients receive proper medical care from doctors and nurses only 55 percent of the time, regardless of their race, income, education or insurance status, according to a national study published March 16 in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. A well-functioning healthcare system should provide recommended levels of care 80-90 percent of the time, the study's authors said. The findings show that everyone is at roughly equal risk of inadequate care from the medical profession. But small differences did occur in the care given to male and female patients and to those from different racial and ethnic groups. "No matter what group we looked at, whether they were black, white, rich or poor, uninsured, insured, educated, uneducated, all of them were receiving mediocre

care,” commented one of the authors. He blamed the nation’s “fragmented and chaotic” healthcare system for making it difficult to deliver quality care. Greater use of computers could improve care by helping doctors track patients’ medical histories, he said. (Knight Ridder)

#### **The Health Care Crisis and How to Fix It.**

Authors Paul Krugman and Robin Wells argue that the U.S. health care system is both unfair to those most in need and inefficient in its delivery. Forty five million Americans are without health insurance and many of the insured have inadequate coverage. The U.S. spends a much larger portion of its Gross National Product on healthcare than any other developed country, yet lags in terms of longevity and in the fitness of its citizenry. Adherence to a market-based healthcare policies, the authors argue, has led to a patchwork system that cannot be made to function either efficiently or justly. A national insurance system that covers all is the only solution. A very perceptive essay that should be read by all who are interested in providing quality care to all Americans.

(New York Review of Books, March 23, 2006.)

#### **HIV DROPS IN WORST-INFESTED PARTS OF INDIA**

Until recently, experts predicated that India, where up to 5 million people are believed to be infected with the AIDS virus, was heading for a catastrophe to rival that of southern Africa. But a study published March 30 shows that new infections appear to have fallen sharply in the worst-hit parts of India, underscoring the effectiveness of condoms in stopping the spread of the disease and casting doubt on the dire warnings of an AIDS epidemic in the subcontinent. The medical journal Lancet said the trend shows that “prevention efforts can work to turn the tide against AIDS at last.” A September 2002 study had predicted 20 to 25 million AIDS cases in India by 2010. Presumably, this estimate will now be lowered. The Lancet article suggests that infections may be declining because of programs that promote awareness and condom use. (WP)

#### **SLAVERY: A GROWING EVIL IN MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD**

Estimates of the number of people forced to work for nothing and robbed both of their freedom and the fruits of their labor by violence or the threat of violence range from about 10 million to 30 million. Many feel the real figure is much closer to the latter number than the former. Despite the almost universal moral repugnance over slavery and the laws forbidding it, abolition has proven no easy task. In fact, the situation seems to be getting worse. While conventional wisdom reckons the problem of slavery a question of history, and while slavery is outlawed in virtually every place where law exists, as well as in international treaties, there are probably more slaves at work around the globe, and in more countries, than ever before. Indeed, the price of a slave is at an all-time low—approximately \$100, on average; in some places as low as \$10. (TLS)

## WHY ARE SOME ANIMALS SO SMART?

A recent study by anthropologist Carel van Schaik , puts the emphasis on social learning. A child learns primarily from the guidance of patient adults. Without strong social—that is, cultural inputs—even a potential wunderkind will end up a bungling bumpkin as an adult. [It's more than just genes determining intelligence.] The same seems to hold in the wild. By and large, the animals that are intelligent are the ones that are cultural: they learn from one another innovative solutions to ecological or social problems. Culture promotes intelligence. Van Schaik's conclusions are based on a study made in Borneo of orangutans. Worth a look. (Scientific America, April, 2006)

## APRIL/MAY ISSUE OF FREE INQUIRY RECOMMENDED

As always, Free Inquiry in its latest edition carries several articles that can be read profitably. Especially commended are four articles inspired by the Dover decision: Lawrence Kraus refutes the “fair-play” argument that would give Intelligent Design equal time in the classroom with Darwinian evolution. Intelligent Design, he argues, hasn't proven itself scientifically; in fact, proponents have eschewed submitting their arguments to scientific publications where they would have to undergo critical scrutiny by qualified scientists. Forgoing peer review, they wish to stake their claims with a public incapable of judging what has scientific merit and what doesn't.

Richard Dawkins asks “Who designed the designer?” Intelligent Design presumes a designer who is more complex than what is designed. “To the extent that they allow their unevolved supernatural designer to have sprung into existence *ab initio*, they should allow natural agents the same dubious privilege.”

Anthropology professor Stewart Elliott Guthrie claims that “belief in Intelligent Design results from certain features of human thought that are naturally selected and, in most ways, well adapted.” A teleological viewpoint held sway in the West from the time of Aristotle until Francis Bacon discredited it with most of the scientific community. The lay public has still to catch up.

Religion Professor R. Joseph Hoffmann thinks the cure for religious dogmatism is the study of religion(!). This may sound a bit paradoxical, but haven't we all met Bible thumpers who knew very little about the book they worship, and heard evangelical preachers swear by the inerrancy of the Good Book while ignoring its contradictions? And the Koran is yet to undergo the kind of critical scrutiny that Bible scholars have been engaged in since the time of Spinoza.

Also, don't pass up the opportunity to read about the Lubbock teenager who waged a campaign to have sex education taught in the Lubbock schools. She has become the focus of a documentary that has been shown at the High Falls Film Festival in Rochester, New York.