

## Next Meeting - March 8, 2006

The topic to be discussed at this gathering will be “Humanist Ethics for a Green World.”

Presented by our own Ken Carlson

Baruch Spinoza (b. 1632, d.1677) ranks with Rene Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz as one of the greatest metaphysicians of the 17th Century, the so-called Age of Reason. The sobriquet was not conferred for the reasonableness with which kings, religious authorities and their acolytes conducted the affairs of Europe during that century, but rather for the dominance of mathematics and mathematical thinking over the world of ideas. Galileo

heralded the new century with his theories of planetary orbits and Sir Isaac Newton was to succeed him in revolutionizing man's understanding of the physical world and his place in it.

The 17th century political and religious worlds featured more than their share of wars for political dominance and of sectarian violence. The first half of the century saw almost unrelenting warfare between the Protestant north and the Catholic south of Europe, the so-called Thirty Years War, in which a third of the German population was to die either from its direct or indirect consequences. England was to be engulfed in an off- and on war involving competing claims of the official church, the Catholic church and radical Protestant sects from 1640 to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that finally nailed down the dominance of a mildly protestant Church of England.

Spinoza lived his short span of years in the relative tranquility of the Dutch Republic, where devotion to commerce was as great as to the salvation of souls. Spinoza's ancestors, displaced persons from the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions, were welcomed for their potential for enhancing Dutch commercial interests in a wider world than Europe alone. They were not granted Dutch citizenship and their tenure in Holland was, if not explicitly, at least implicitly conditioned on “not rocking the boat” of a Calvinist-dominated society. Baruch Spinoza, however, was not to be placed in an intellectual straitjacket of anyone's devising. For his heterodoxy from the Jewish faith, he was to be anathematized at the age of 24 in the Amsterdam Jewish community and was to spend the last two decades of his life as a lens grinder working in various Dutch towns and settling finally for the last eight years of his life in The Hague.

In his spare time he composed philosophical treatises in a language, Latin, that he only learned when almost grown and conducted seminars with Christian friends. Though inelegantly expressed, his ideas were unsettling to the preachers and other religious zealots and his most important work *Ethics* was withheld from publication until after his death. While never lacking the scrutiny of subsequent generations of philosophers, Spinoza was really to come into his own in the last half century or so with the establishment of ever more secular societies, particularly in Europe, and the advancement of biological science to parity with physics. Spinoza's rejection of transcendentalism and his positing of an immanent God—one coextensive with nature—fits comfortably with Darwinian evolution.

**For those interested . . . We dine at Joe's Italian Restaurant across from our meeting place  
- Time 5:30**

**The management encourages us to BYOB, since the establishment does not possess a liquor license.**

Time to take a break from heavy philosophizing and indulge in a little tongue-in-cheek satire. Our former editor, Wallace Harrison, forwarded the following from the on-line publication "*The Onion*."

### **Evangelical Scientists Refute Gravity With New 'Intelligent Falling' Theory**

KANSAS CITY, KS □ As the debate over the teaching of evolution in public schools continues, a new controversy over the science curriculum arose Monday in this embattled Midwestern state. Scientists from the Evangelical Center For Faith-Based Reasoning are now asserting that the long-held "theory of gravity" is flawed, and they have responded to it with a new theory of Intelligent Falling.

"Things fall not because they are acted upon by some gravitational force, but because a higher intelligence, 'God' if you will, is pushing them down," said Gabriel Burdett, who holds degrees in education, applied Scripture, and physics from Oral Roberts University.

Burdett added: "Gravity □ which is taught to our children as a law □ is founded on great gaps in understanding. The laws predict the mutual force between all bodies of mass, but they cannot explain that force. Isaac Newton himself said, 'I suspect that my theories may all depend upon a force for which philosophers have searched all of nature in vain.' Of course, he is alluding to a higher power."

Founded in 1987, the ECFR is the world's leading institution of evangelical physics, a branch of physics based on literal interpretation of the Bible.

According to the ECFR paper published simultaneously this week in the International Journal Of Science and the adolescent magazine God's Word For Teens!, there are many phenomena that cannot be explained

by secular gravity alone, including such mysteries as how angels fly, how Jesus ascended into Heaven, and how Satan fell when cast out of Paradise.

The ECFR, in conjunction with the Christian Coalition and other Christian conservative action groups, is calling for public-school curriculums to give equal time to the Intelligent Falling theory. They insist they are not asking that the theory of gravity be banned from schools, but only that students be offered both sides of the issue "so they can make an informed decision."

"We just want the best possible education for Kansas' kids," Burdett said.

Proponents of Intelligent Falling assert that the different theories used by secular physicists to explain gravity are not internally consistent. Even critics of Intelligent Falling admit that Einstein's ideas about gravity are mathematically irreconcilable with quantum mechanics. This fact, Intelligent Falling proponents say, proves that gravity is a theory in crisis.

"Let's take a look at the evidence," said ECFR senior fellow Gregory Lunsden. "In Matthew 15:14, Jesus says, 'And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.' He says nothing about some gravity making them fall—just that they will fall. Then, in Job 5:7, we read, 'But mankind is born to trouble, as surely as sparks fly upwards.' If gravity is pulling everything down, why do the sparks fly upwards with great surety? This clearly indicates that a conscious intelligence governs all falling."

Critics of Intelligent Falling point out that gravity is a provable law based on empirical observations of natural phenomena. Evangelical physicists, however, insist that there is no conflict between Newton's mathematics and Holy Scripture.

"Closed-minded gravitists cannot find a way to make Einstein's general relativity match up with the subatomic quantum world," said Dr. Ellen Carson, a leading Intelligent Falling expert known for her work with the Kansan Youth Ministry. "They've been trying to do it for the better part of a century now, and despite all their empirical observation and carefully compiled data, they still don't know how."

"Traditional scientists admit that they cannot explain how gravitation is supposed to work," Carson said. "What the gravity-agenda scientists need to realize is that 'gravity waves' and 'gravitons' are just secular words for 'God can do whatever He wants.'"

Some evangelical physicists propose that Intelligent Falling provides an elegant solution to the central problem of modern physics.

"Anti-falling physicists have been theorizing for decades about the 'electromagnetic force,' the 'weak nuclear force,' the 'strong nuclear force,' and so-called 'force of gravity,'" Burdett said. "And they tilt their findings toward trying to unite them into one force. But readers of the Bible have already known for millennia what this one, unified force is: His name is Jesus."



***“To love justice, to long for the right; to love mercy, to pity the suffering, to assist the weak, to forget wrongs and remember benefits; to love the truth, to be sincere, to utter honest words; to love liberty, to wage relentless war against slavery in all its forms; to love wife, and child, and friend, to make a happy home; to love the beautiful in art, in nature, to cultivate the mind; to be familiar with the mighty thoughts that genius has expressed, the noble deeds of all the world; to cultivate courage and cheerfulness, to make others happy; to fill life with the splendour of generous acts, the warmth of loving words; to discard error, to destroy prejudice, to receive new truths with gladness; to cultivate hope, to see the calm beyond the storm, the dawn beyond the night; to do the best that can be done and then to be resigned: this is the religion of reason, the creed of science; this satisfies the brain and heart”.***

*There are more details and quotes in the section 'OUR BELIEFS'.*

[http://www.humanists.freemove.co.uk/welcome!/visitors0305.html-\(2\)/odyframe.htm](http://www.humanists.freemove.co.uk/welcome!/visitors0305.html-(2)/odyframe.htm)

## **From the Chair . . . .**

A special thanks to all who greeted Dolores and I after our short absence. We were certainly happy to see all of you again. The knee surgery went well and my beloved is feeling much the better for it. Dolores says thanks for the cards, the calls, and the caring. She's completed the in-home Physical Therapy visits, no longer uses the walker, and is now able to get around with a cane. And, of course, is out and about driving to her meetings and the stores. You just can't keep a good woman tied to the house for very long.

A note about the logos in the masthead: The one to the left is the "Happy Humanist" of the American Humanist Association (AHA ); to the right is the symbol of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH)

– Don

**Noticed something different about the format of this month's Newsletter? Rather more informal than usual? It has been a joint collaboration with Ray Weil. We would appreciate hearing your comments. An improvement? Or would our readers prefer the old ways? We can better serve you if we get feedback from time to time. So let us know how you feel.**

**OUR APRIL SPEAKER WILL BE WILLIAM PHERIGO OF THE WEST AID ALLIANCE.**

**DATE: APRIL 12**

**Owe dues? See Dolores Ruhs: Renewal comes up this month. They remain the same as in 2005: \$18 for individual members receiving the newsletter by e-mail; \$24 for individuals receiving the newsletter by regular**

**mail; \$30 for couples receiving the newsletter by e-mail; and \$36 for couples receiving the newsletter by regular mail.**

**Relieve the strain on your overloaded bookshelves! Time to consider a donation to our host. Friends of the Fort Worth Public Library will be delighted to receive donations of marketable books.**

Last month's meeting featured two distinguished gentlemen from Ft. Worth's Black community, State representative Marc Veasey from district 95 and Rev. Peter Johnson. Both men expressed the need for people of all races to embrace each other for our common benefit. Much of the leadership in the Afro-American community, particularly the religious, is quite conservative on many of the causes Humanists advocate. That does not mean that we should not collaborate on those issues where we agree.

Our attendance for the meeting: 29 members, 2 guests and, of course, the 2 speakers.

Again, you are reminded to bring canned food to the meeting for distribution to the needy by WestAid.

We have been informed that money is also needed, so that items not donated may be purchased and distributed to those in need.

Today's challenge - You are to spend eternity with one of these two groups. Which do you choose?

### **Group A**

Steve Allen, Woody Allen, Susan B. Anthony, Lance Armstrong , Isaac Asimov, Irving Berlin, Ray Bradbury, Marlon Brando, Warren Buffett, Richard Burton , George Carlin, Dick Cavett, Charlie Chaplin, Arthur C. Clarke,

Richard Dawkins, Phyllis Diller , Walt Disney, Dr. Dean Edell, Thomas Edison, Larry Ellison, Stephen Hawking,

Robert Heinlein , Ernest Hemingway, Katharine Hepburn , Bill Gates, Molly Ivins, Larry King Tom Leykis, Barry

Manilow, Henry Miller, Jack Nicholson, Florence Nightingale, George Orwell, Penn & Teller, Ayn Rand Ron Reagan Jr,

Christopher Reeve, Gene Roddenberry, Carl Sagan, Charles Schultz, Neil Simon, Linus Torvalds, Ted Turner , Mark Twain Steve Wozniak and Frank Lloyd Wright

## **Group B**

Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Benny Hinn, Oral Roberts, T D Jakes, Dave Feddes, Bishop Earl Paulik, Bob Larson,

Calvin Bremmer, Doyal Davidson, D James Kennedy, James Dobson, Gene Scott, Garner Ted Armstrong, Jack Van Impe,

James Robison, Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, John Ankerberg, John Hagee, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth Copeland,

Paul and Jan Crouch, Ron Phillips, Robert Tilton, A A Allen, Creflo Dollar, George W Bush, John Ashcroft, Rick Santorum, and Rick Perry

You chose Group A? What were you thinking? You didn't pick the God fearing members of group B who are

destined to spend eternity in heaven, romping with the angels, while you'll be in the company of those atheists forever and ever, and ever and ever.

**Your officers may be contacted as follows:**

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## **WHERE YOUR TAX DOLLARS ARE GOING**

Operation Blessing, the religious charity founded by the Rev. Pat Robertson, is now receiving \$14.4 million in annual government grants, up from \$108,000 two years ago. Despite Robertson's initial criticism of President Bush's "faith-based initiative" as a "Pandora's box," Operation Blessing has been cashing in on it. Robertson's agency was one of 21 recipients in the first round of grants from the Compassion Capital Fund in October 2002. Over the past three years Robertson's group has received \$1.5 million through that program.

Operation Blessing, with a paid staff of 40 at its Virginia Beach headquarters, does not hire non-Christians. "We're a Christian faith-based organization," Operation Blessing employee Deborah Bensen avers. "We hire people that are able to help support our mission. Operation Blessing has received smaller grants from the U.S. Agency for International Development. It is also part of a consortium of eight groups receiving a USAID grant for HIV/AIDS treatment, care and prevention in 14 countries.

Nearly a quarter of President Bush's \$15 billion foreign campaign to fight AIDS is going to religious groups as "church partners" who emphasize abstinence over condom use. Bush's three-year AIDS program is being dilute, according to secular critics, by grants to religious groups without AIDS experience.

The New Partners Initiative reserves \$200 million through the 2008 budget for community and church groups with little or no background in government grants. AP reports that Christian conservative allies of the president are pressuring him to give fewer grants to established groups which distribute condoms and work with prostitutes. (Freethought Today)

## **AND WHERE YOUR TAX DOLLARS ARE NOT GOING**

The President's \$2.7 trillion budget for fiscal year 200 cuts or reduces 141 federal programs, limits benefits for the poor and elderly, and trims spending at 11 federal agencies. Impacted are food programs for the needy, emergency response, and community development grants. The Budget Reconciliation Act just passed by Congress already cuts entitlements such as Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Bush's proposed cuts would trim \$65 billion from entitlement programs over the next five years, including \$36 billion from Medicare.

O yeah. Faith-based spending in the 2007 budget is to increase by 36 percent. While trimming elsewhere, the administration proposes to go spending for programs pushing religion, such as the marriage and fatherhood initiatives. Wade Horn, HHS Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, announced the budget proposes \$100 million for competitive state grants to promote "healthy marriages." This is in addition to the \$150 million approved by Congress in last year's budget. In his State of the Union Address, Bush promised his administration also will work "closely with African American churches and faith-based groups to deliver rapid HIV tests to millions." To date, 15 regulatory actions in eight federal agencies have been enacted to promote government funding of faith-based groups. White House "faith-czar" Jim Towey complained at the Feb. 6 briefing about a "stranglehold" on Health and Human service funds by existing Head Start programs, which he claimed are shutting out faith-based groups. (Freethought Today)



## **JUSTICE DEPT. BACKS CHURCH COLLEGE AID IN COLORADO**

In December., the U.S. Dept. of Justice filed a brief on behalf of Colorado Christian University in its lawsuit challenging the Colorado Commission on Higher Education's refusal to allow the private religious school to participate in state-funded student financial aid programs. The Commission argues that the state may not support "pervasively sectarian" schools. In its brief, the Justice Dept. maintained that the U.S. Supreme Court has approved indirect funding of religious institutions. Stay tuned. (C&S)

## **SOUTH DAKOTA CHALLENGING 'ROE'?**

The South Dakota legislature's move to ban all abortion does not pose an immediate threat to reproductive freedoms. Containing an exception to protect the life of the mother but none for cases of rape and incest, the bill is likely to serve, rather, only as a short-lived moral preening by the legislature. But if the bill proves legislatively inconsequential, it is still troubling that a state legislature would pass such a categorical ban—and the idea seems to be gaining steam elsewhere [most notably Mississippi]. ...Barring further changes in the [high] court's makeup, it is hard to see how this law could spell the end of abortion rights in South Dakota or elsewhere.

...It is a mark of how far the Republican Party has shifted on this subject that potential presidential candidates feel compelled to sympathize with such measures—or, at least, seem to. Senator George Allen's chief-of-staff says that the Virginia Republican supports the right of states to pass such laws, though he declines to address the specific merits of South Dakota's bill. A spokesman for Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney said that, were he South Dakota's governor, he would sign the bill but make sure it includes exceptions for cases of rape and incest—exceptions the bill pointedly does not include. The office of Sen. John McCain has made similar noises.

All of which makes even President Bush seem like a moderate by comparison, though assuredly he is not a moderate on abortion. His position, he has emphasized, "has always been three exceptions: rape, incest and the life of the mother." South Dakota's law will not change the legal landscape on abortion, but it illustrates the extremity of what some antiabortionist activists wish to do and power they wield over the Republican Party. (WP editorial)

## **EVANGELICALS WAKE UP TO GLOBAL WARMING**

Despite opposition from some of their colleagues, 86 evangelical leaders have decided to back a major initiative to fight global warming, saying "millions of people could die in this century because of climate change, most of them our poorest global neighbors." Among the signers are presidents of 39 evangelical colleges, leaders of aid groups and churches like the Salvation Army, and pastors of mega-churches. The statement calls for federal legislation that would require reductions in carbon dioxide emissions through "cost-effective, market-based mechanisms." The statement is only the first stage of an Evangelical Climate Initiative including television and radio spots in states with influential legislators, informational campaigns in churches and educational events at Christian colleges.

Some of the nation's most influential high-profile leaders, however, have tried to derail such action. Twenty-two of them signed a letter in January declaring, "Global warming is not a consensus issue." Among the signers were Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries, James A. Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and Richard Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. (NYT)

## **IS AMERICAN SOCIETY FATED TO BECOME MORE CONSERVATIVE?**

Increasingly, the older generation of Americans is being replaced by the children of couples who espouse family values, i.e., those who have more than the 2+ replacement number required for a stable population. Nearly a quarter of the children of baby boomers descend from a mere 11 percent of baby boomer women who had four or more children. “These circumstances are leading to the emergence of a new society whose men will disproportionately be descended from parents who rejected the social tendencies that once made childlessness and small families the norm. These values include adherence to traditional, patriarchic religion and a strong identification with one’s own folk or nation. This dynamic helps explain, for example, the gradual drift of American culture away from secular individualism and toward religious fundamentalism. Among states that voted for George W. Bush in 2004, fertility rates are 12 percent higher than in states that voted for Senator John Kerry.” [For more go to [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).]

## **KANSAS U. PROFESSOR OUSTED AFTER COMMENTS CRITICAL OF INTELLIGENT DESIGN**

A furor has erupted over a graduate-level course that was to be offered at the University of Kansas in the Spring 2006 and some comments that were made by its proposed instructor, Paul Mirecki, a professor in the Department of Religious Studies. Mirecki, in response to Kansas Board of Education’s decision to mandate the teaching of alternatives to evolution as an explanation for life on Earth and its diversity, proposed a course at K.U. that was to have been titled “Special Topics in Religion: Intelligent Design, Creationism, and Other Religious Mythologies,” although these last four words were later dropped at the advice of other professors. In a private e-mail to the K.U. society for Open-Minded Atheists and Agnostics, Mirecki wrote: “The fundies want it all taught in a science class, but this will be a nice slap in their big fat face by teaching it as a religious studies class under the category ‘mythology’...Doing my part to piss off the religious right, Evil Dr. P.” When the e-mail became known to the K.U. administration, Mirecki was relieved of his post as chairman of the department. Some members of the state legislature are now calling for hearings, presumably with a view to his possible expulsion from the university. (Skeptical Inquirer)

## **GOVERNORS ADVOCATE TEACHING ‘ID’ IN PUBLIC SCHOOL SCIENCE CLASSES**

The governors of Kentucky, Texas and Florida have recently advocated teaching “intelligent design” in public schools. In a letter to a constituent Texas Governor Rick Perry wrote that it would a “disservice to our children to teach them only one theory on the origin of our existence without recognizing other scientific theories worth consideration.” (C&S)

**Knowing that our readership must be hankering to learn more about Spinoza, I exercise an editor’s prerogative of imposing my reading tastes on my audience:**

*The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*, by Matthew Stewart. W.W. Norton & Co. (2006)

Gottfried Wilhelm, Freiherr von Leibniz, has been called the last universal genius. Leipzig born and son of a professor at the local university, Leibniz was to display remarkable intellectual talents at a tender age. After taking a doctorate in jurisprudence he obtained employment at the court of one of the most influential figures in the then Holy Roman Empire, the elector and archbishop of Mainz.

In the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the chief menace to the political status quo in Western Europe was a territorially greedy Louis XIV of France. Fearing for the integrity of his employer's and other German-speaking lands, Leibniz came up with a proposal to convince the Sun King that greater glory was to be gotten by sending French armies to Egypt rather than picking away at his eastern and northern borders yet again. The elector was impressed and dispatched him on a diplomatic mission to Paris. The plan got nowhere. In fact, Louis never deigned to see Leibniz and he was not about to be diverted into a *mission civilisatrice* in exotic Muslim lands. (Interestingly, Napoleon a century and a quarter later was to play the role Leibniz had envisaged for Louis. Whether he had heard about the Leibniz initiative or not, I don't know.) Leibniz tarried four years in Paris and would have spent the rest of his life there if he had been able to find other gainful employment. As the co-inventor of the calculus he had entrance to the French Academy of Science but as a foreigner he was unfavorably placed to be elected as a member.

Among his other pastimes in Paris was the invention of a mechanical calculator. His luck having failed in Paris, he traveled to London to see if he could manipulate his way into the Royal Society with a demonstration of his latest invention. Though impressed, his distinguished hosts told him to try again when he had a machine that really worked. In that endeavor Leibniz was never to succeed, possibly because the technology of the time was still too rudimentary.

At this juncture Leibniz was left with only one offer generous enough to accommodate his somewhat lavish style of living: a privy counselor post in Hannover, a provincial town of some political importance but lacking cultural and intellectual distinction. In 1676 Leibniz left London for Hannover, albeit not on a direct route. For some time he had had a sporadic correspondence with Spinoza and used the occasion of his new appointment to solicit an interview with him to discuss "certain philosophical points." For at least three days and possibly much longer Spinoza, the elder by 14 years, entertained Leibniz at his The Hague boarding house. Unfortunately, no record has come down to posterity of their discussions. Spinoza was to die four months later of lung disease and Leibniz was to ever minimize the importance of the encounter.

The author surmises, however, that it was to have a decisive impact on Leibniz' philosophy. Although the two had many things in common besides a mutual intellectual brilliance, temperament and values divided them. Spinoza was basically a secularist who saw in a strong state a protector of the individual, especially from the claims of would-be theocrats. He was not opposed to religion, indeed he thought that religion was essential for those who were too little interested in philosophy or who were incapable of a philosophically guided life. He thought that state religion was desirable to better control religious passions and the mischievous activities of the priests. Perhaps the Church of England in 19<sup>th</sup> century England was about what he had in mind. Other religions were tolerated but the resources and the power of government were behind the official church.

Leibniz, coming from a land recently wrecked by mostly foreign armies, was, by contrast, apprehensive of the secular power and would have preferred a unified church with a unified theology to keep a rein on popular passions. In fact, says the author, he would have opted, despite being born a Lutheran, a medieval papacy, something along the lines of Innocent III.

For the last 40 years of his life Leibniz was to pursue a philosophical vision in many respects directly at odds with Spinozism. Man would be capable of moral discipline only so long as he believed in the prospect of eternal life. Life after death, in turn, depended on the independence of body and mind. Explaining the dualism had been attempted by Descartes (some believe with tongue-in-cheek) but to no one's great satisfaction. Leibniz was to invent a very ingenious but too little persuasive explanation that has intrigued the world of philosophy off and on for the past three centuries but ignored by everyone else. How serious Leibniz was intellectually committed to his solution has forever remained in doubt. On his death bed his man servant asked him if he wanted to see a Lutheran minister. Leibniz called him a fool and sent him away. The author wonders whether Leibniz, always the diplomat, shortchanged Truth for the Good. Some would probably argue that Spinoza was guilty of the opposite error.

The author, after obtaining a Ph.D. in philosophy from Oxford, founded a management consulting firm in New York. Now retired, he writes on philosophy from his New York home. This is a great read for any layman with philosophical interests.

Explanations for many obscure points in the philosophical systems of both subjects are as clear and concise as can be expected.