

January meeting program

Why would anyone think Jesus never existed?

Isn't it perfectly reasonable to accept that he was a real first century figure? As it turns out, no. This month our own David Fitzgerald takes us on a guided tour through his highly-praised new book *Nailed: Ten Christian Myths That Show Jesus Never Existed At All*. Dave doesn't just defend the Christ Myth theory, he goes on the offence and discusses the ten biggest fatal flaws in the assumption that Jesus was a real historical figure, as well as how very different the historical record would be if there had been a real Jesus - even a merely mortal one!

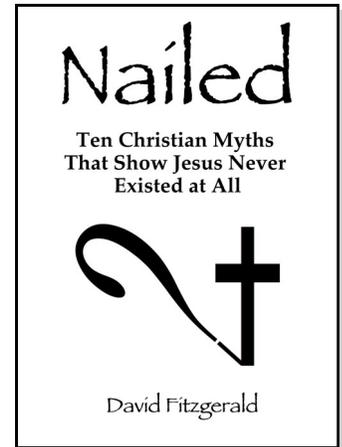
As members of San Francisco Atheists well know, Dave is not only a member of the SFA SC (and founder of Evolutionpalooza! and the Atheist Film Festival), but also a writer and historical researcher who has been actively investigating the Historical Jesus question for over ten years. He first approached the topic in his popular multimedia presentation *The Ten Thousand Christs and the Evaporating Jesus*. Come hear him discuss, with research gathered from historians all across the theological spectrum, how the traditional image of Jesus simply doesn't add up, and how the evidence points to a messiah transformed from a purely literary, theological construct into the familiar figure of Jesus – in short, a purely mythic Christ.

Copies of *Nailed* will be available for purchase and signing.

Saturday January 29 at 4:30pm

At Schroeder's Restaurant, rear dining room.

The restaurant is two blocks north of Market Street, between California and Sacramento Streets, 240 Front St San Francisco. Use California Street cable car, or BART/MUNI Embarcadero stop. Parking on street or at nearby Embarcadero garage.



Winter Solstice
Celebration



The Moral Landscape by Sam Harris

Review by Don Havis

Sam Harris has followed up his two blockbuster books, *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* with *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*.

I was pleased to see that, after a strong start at explaining to religionists that science might be the wiser path to appropriate behavior in general, he was now going to tackle the much more difficult path of taking them on in the field in which they claim “absolute authority” — that of sensible values, or “moral” behavior.

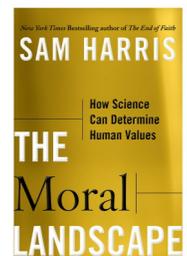
At first, Harris proposes the pretty much non-controversial notion—at least for us atheists—that moral judgments can clearly be made about some so-called “cultural” practices. The forcible vaginal mutilation of a young girl is pretty much an easy call for “wrong.” And, of course, science is the best tool to make such judgments in the light of how relevant facts “relate to the well-being of conscious creatures”—Harris’ stated evaluation yardstick.

Early in his book (page 28) Harris makes his claim clear: “I am arguing that science can, in principle, help us understand what we should do and should want—and, therefore, what other people should do and should want in order to live the best lives possible. My claim is that there are right and wrong answers to questions of physics, and such answers may one day fall within reach of the maturing sciences of mind.” This is certainly a statement that might be expected from one who holds a doctorate in neuroscience. But there is a caveat. Even earlier in the book, perhaps in keeping with the “in principle” part of the above quote, Harris says on page 7, “I’m not suggesting that we will necessarily discover one right answer to every moral question or a single best way for human

beings to live.... However, the existence of multiple peaks on the moral landscape does not make them any less real or worthy of discovery.” He admits here, I believe, the difficulty of making a “right” or “wrong” call on such cultural moral values as wearing a burqa in public... a veil? How thick a veil? How about male circumcision? Certainly, there are “preferable” and “less-preferable” answers to these kinds of questions, depending on circumstances, but my one criticism of the book is that Harris fails to make these kinds of distinctions clear.

The Moral Landscape has been criticized by other reviewers as nothing more than a restatement of the philosophy of Utilitarianism, and/or the philosophy espoused by Humanists or Unitarians. Indeed, Harris shares much in common with them. This does not, however, seem to be a valid criticism of Harris. I’m sure he realizes his affinity with such early pioneer efforts, and to simply state this would seem to be superfluous.

Harris states on the closing page of his book: “This book was written in the hope that as science develops, we will recognize its application to the most pressing questions of human existence.” I believe Mr. Harris has made a very valuable contribution to this effort, and I would recommend his contribution. I would add that I think it is high time that we atheists stop unjustly deprecating one of our own best minds for his valuable contribution to the better understanding of the complex field of science as it relates to morality.



Atheist News

Mountaineer in Trouble: No Prayers to God

Many are familiar with the story of Aron Ralston who had to amputate his own arm when trapped under a boulder and far from help. Less familiar is the story of Joe Simpson who, while climbing in the Peruvian Andes, severely broke his leg and ankle at 20,000 feet. Eventually he had to pull himself much of the way out - an excruciatingly painful experience. But did he ever pray to God for help or solace?

[Read more](#)

Hitchens—The Morals of an Atheist

If there is no God—no ground of being—if human beings represent nothing more than temporary swarms of atoms, then what sense does it make even to speak of “right” and “wrong”? Where does morality come from? Reflecting on what he calls “the appalling insinuation that I would not know right from wrong if I was not supernaturally guided,....” Christopher Hitchens takes on the likes of Jonathan Swift, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Darwin in making his case for atheism.

[See video](#)

Palestinian Blogger Angers West Bank Muslims

QALQILYA, West Bank — It is hard to imagine that a dingy Internet cafe buzzing with flies in this provincial Palestinian town could have spawned a blogger who has angered the Muslim cyberworld by promoting atheism, composing spoofs of Koranic verses, skewering the lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad and chatting online using the sarcastic Web name God Almighty.

[Read more](#)

Tony Blair debates Christopher Hitchens on religion

Former UK PM Tony Blair has defended the role of religion in global affairs, in a televised debate in Canada with atheist columnist Christopher Hitchens

Mr Blair, a Catholic convert, said faith was a force for good and it was futile to attempt to drive it out.

But Mr Hitchens, who is terminally ill with cancer, argued religion forced people into doing terrible things.

[See video](#)

A Monsignor Is Defrocked for Abusing a Student

A once-influential Roman Catholic monsignor who oversaw fund-raising for the Archdiocese of New York, running the annual Alfred E. Smith political dinner during the tenure of Cardinal John J. O’Connor, has been removed from the priesthood after an eight-year church review of sexual abuse accusations against him, the archdiocese announced on Friday.

[Read more](#)

Fort Worth bans religious, atheist bus ads

FORT WORTH, Texas, Dec. 16 (UPI) -- The Fort Worth Transportation Authority in Texas has decided to ban all religious ads on buses following an uproar over an atheist ad campaign.

[Read more](#)

Quote of the month

Thomas Jefferson, Life and Selected Writings

The legitimate powers of government extend to only such acts as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods, or no God.

Find out what is coming up

Click a graphic below to open that calendar

Please note: there will be no regular monthly meeting in February. Instead, we will hold our annual Evolutionpalooza! event on Sunday 2/27/2011 at the Main library.



Pro-Choice March & Day of Action for Reproductive Rights!
Saturday, January 22 at 11:00am
Location: Harry Bridges Plaza

Joke of the month



East Bay Atheists Meeting

This month we feature a talk by philosophy at California State publishes widely on Atheism, philosophy of religion, gives he writes a popular blog--

www.atheismblog.blogspot.com. He gives radio, print, and internet interviews. He wrote the entry on Atheism for the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/atheism/>), and two of his papers were anthologized in *The Impossibility of God* (Prometheus Press). His book *The Case Against Christ* is currently being reviewed for publication.

The talk is entitled *Are We Proving the Negative Yet?* Many of our agnostic friends look upon Atheism as philosophically unsophisticated. They charge that proving the negative is not possible. While we may be able to dismiss some arguments for God or rule out some descriptions of God, there always remains the vast unknown. God could be something we haven't conceived, we may just lack the imagination or the cognitive capacity to understand him, and the absence of evidence shouldn't be taken as evidence of absence.

Professor McCormick sees this view as being hopelessly confused. Countless negative claims have been proven to our satisfaction concerning other matters. Gefjun is the Norwegian goddess of agriculture. Reasonable people don't believe in her. Paluga is the almighty creator god of the North Andaman islanders. He's not real. Likewise with Manawyddan, Nemetona, Rudani, and thousands of others.

The agnostic critic of Atheism is committing what McCormick labels the sliding scale fallacy by ratcheting up the standard of proof for the Atheist while disregarding that standard in other matters. We can also understand the mistake this way: The critic rejects Atheism by invoking a standard of proof that none of the things we believe reasonably can satisfy. The result is a debilitating radical skepticism. In the Cold War, "winning" could only be achieved with Mutually Assured Destruction—if I can't conquer you, then at least I can guarantee that you won't win if I destroy everything. The critic of Atheism and even some advocates of faith are "going nuclear" with these ill-conceived objections.

Matt will diffuse the nuclear bomb, and will give an argument for the impossible: He will prove the negative.

Professor McCormick is a major voice in the Atheist movement, and is travelling from Sacramento for this talk. Please welcome him by attending. You will certainly learn something!

Join us after the meeting for dinner at the nearby King Dong Restaurant.

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a Matt McCormick, a professor of University, Sacramento. He teaches courses on Atheism and public lectures, does debates, and Atheism: Proving the Negative at



Sunday, January 16, 1:30 - 3:30 PM

Berkeley Main Library, 3rd Floor Meeting Room
2090 Kittredge St., One Block From Downtown Berkeley BART



[Check out our new reading list](#)

[Winter Solstice Celebration photos](#)

[See our new video: The Pope in perspective](#)