

February 25, 2009

Letters to the Editor
The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi

To the Editor:

I was shocked to read the article “Morality and Irrationality of an Evolutionary Worldview,” by Georgia Purdom and Jason Lisle, in the Spring 2009 issue of the *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*. I had always assumed that, as a scholarly society, Phi Kappa Phi’s primary periodical would limit itself to publishing articles written with at least a modicum of scholarly underpinnings. However, the Purdom and Lisle piece is not even a thinly disguised diatribe on atheism. Its primary thesis is that “only creationists have a rational, logical and consistent reason for morality,” and that “evolutionists have no rational reason” for adhering to a moral code.

To say that there are numerous problems with their thesis is grossly understating the case. First, the terms Purdom and Lisle employ to distinguish between religious believers and nonbelievers, namely “creationists” and “evolutionists,” implies that evolutionists do not believe in the Bible or subscribe to a religious faith. This assumption is patently false, as attested by Michael Zimmerman in his article which precedes Purdom and Lisle in the same issue of the *Forum*.

But more important is the remarkable leap of logic through which Purdom and Lisle implicitly assume that “evolutionists” can only develop a moral code as *individuals*, which allows them to set up an easy target to attack (e.g., the presumed moral codes of Adolph Hitler and Jeffrey Dahmer). However, “evolutionists” could argue that societies (not individuals) develop moral codes over time based on what these societies perceive to be the common good of the group as a whole. Thus, such moral codes do indeed have a “rational, logical and consistent” basis. Since their entire article is based on this fallacious dichotomy, one need go no further in establishing its irrelevancy to the evolution (or morality) debate.

However, let us also consider the other part of their argument, namely that “creationists” who base their morality on the Bible are uniquely entitled to assert the rationality of their moral code. Setting aside the fact that this argument excludes adherents of religions not based on “the Bible,” exactly what moral lessons can be learned from the Bible? Three points to consider:

1. Most Biblical scholars (that is, those who actually engage in scholarly study of the Bible) agree that the Bible was written by many individuals, and in the case of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) over a period of hundreds of years, as well.^{iiiiiv} Further, Biblical scholarship reveals that many different versions of the biblical texts were written and revised over time, to accommodate the religious and political goals of the authors. Hence, claiming that the Bible is the literal word of God is problematic.
2. Even if we allow that the Bible is the literal word of God, it is also true that there are many different interpretations of virtually everything the Bible contains. One consequence is that there exist many Christian –and also Jewish–sects or branches, each with its own set of interpretations and rituals. Typically, these differing interpretations are in direct conflict, that is, inconsistent with each other. And, unfortunately, all too often such differences have resulted in much discord, strife and tragedy (e.g., the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the conflicts in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, etc.).

3. What moral lessons does the Bible teach? The Biblical stories are rife with instances of polygamy, dishonesty, and even genocide, all presumably commanded by or done in the name of God. Religious authorities have spent considerable time and energy over the past 2000 years or so to devise explanations or interpretations of these events which presume to make them conform to their own group's sense of morality (as opposed to accepting them as written in the Bible).

In conclusion, I hope that future issues of the *Forum* will not publish religious dogma in the guise of serious scholarship.

David Steinberg
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ⁱAlthough there are many versions of “the Bible,” and many translations of the originals, I assume the authors are referring to a standard King James version.

ⁱⁱ Armstrong, Karen. 2007. *The Bible: A Biography*, Atlantic Monthly Press, New York.

ⁱⁱⁱ Friedman, Richard E. 1996. *Who Wrote the Bible?*, 2nd Ed., HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco.

^{iv} Kugel, James L. 2007. *How to Read the Bible*, Free Press, New York.