

# ENLIGHTENMENT

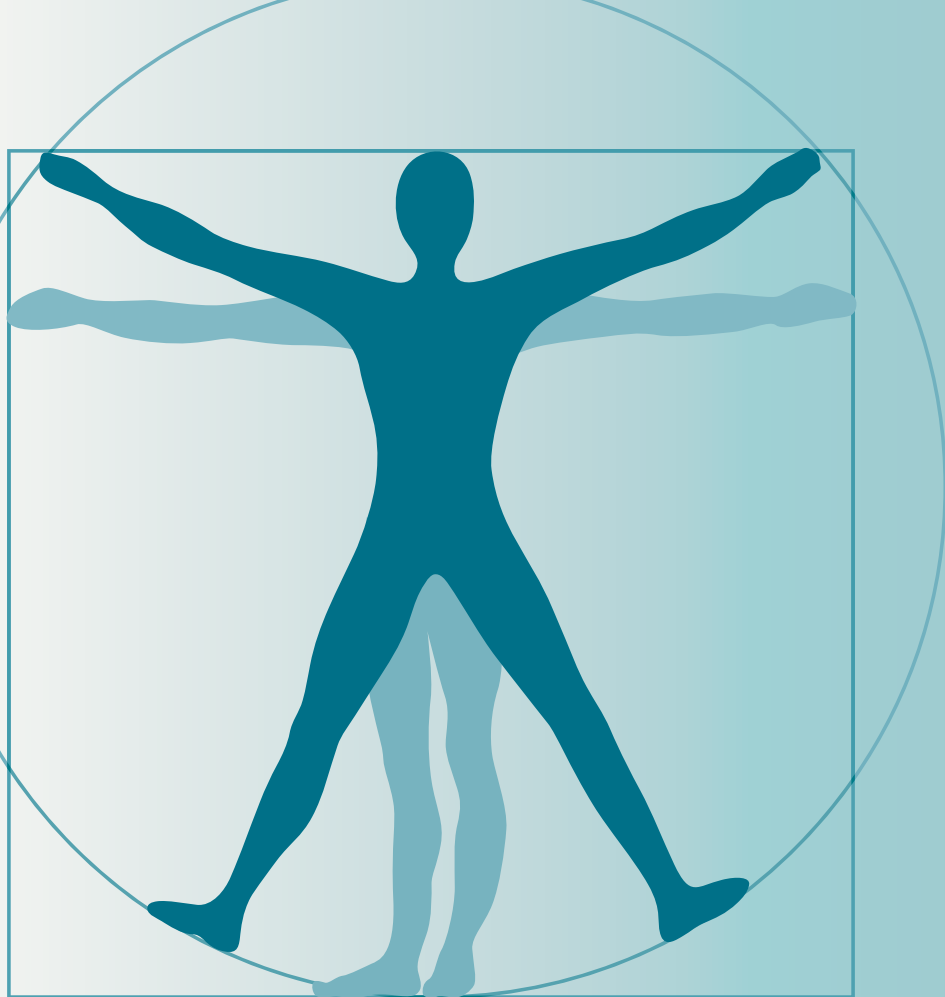
in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

» Anyone who is capable of  
splitting the atom and  
communicating via satellites, must possess  
intellectual and emotional maturity.

One of the ways this manifests itself is through the ability  
to let false ideas die, before people  
must die for false ideas. «

Manifesto of Evolutionary Humanism

# The Foundation



» We live in an age of *non-simultaneity*. Whilst *technologically* we are firmly seated in the 21st century, our *world views* are still shaped by legends of past millennia. This combination of advanced technical *know-how* and the most naïve child-like beliefs could, in the long run, have *fatal consequences*. We behave like five-year-olds, who have been given the *responsibility* for flying a *jumbo jet*. «

Manifesto of Evolutionary Humanism

## Think-tank for humanism and enlightenment

What do the philosopher of science Hans Albert, the cartoonist Ralf König, the primatologist Volker Sommer and the children's authors Janosch and Max Kruse have in common? What links the former leading SPD politician Ingrid Matthäus-Maier with the brain researcher Wolf Singer, the evolutionary biologists Ulrich Kutschera, Axel Meyer, Eckart Voland and Franz M. Wuketits with the author Esther Vilar, the philosophers Gerhard Vollmer, Norbert Hoerster and Bernulf Kanitscheider with the social scientist Gisela Notz? The answer is that all of them are members of the Giordano Bruno Stiftung.

The Giordano Bruno Stiftung is a think-tank for humanism and enlightenment, founded in 2004 by former entrepreneur Herbert Steffen, and now supported by numerous renowned scientists, philosophers and artists. The foundation's aim is to develop a viable secular alternative to existing religions and to help it become established in society.

This aim is based on the belief that we cannot deal with the complex challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century using the religious paradigms of the past. We need a modern view of the world, compatible with the results of scientific research (particularly those of evolutionary biology and brain research), and which ethically is clearly oriented towards the individual's right to self-determination (as expressed in the General Declaration of Human Rights).



The Giordano Bruno Stiftung advocates the position of Evolutionary Humanism, as formulated in the middle of the 20th century by Julian Huxley, the distinguished evolutionary biologist and first General Director of UNESCO. On behalf of the gbs, Huxley's ideas have been revisited and supplemented with insights from modern scientific research; in this form they are described, for example, in the "Manifesto of Evolutionary Humanism" ("Manifest des evolutionären Humanismus").

## Evolutionary humanism

Like other humanist philosophies, evolutionary humanism sees the improvement of human living conditions as both possible and necessary. Evolutionary humanists advocate values of enlightenment, critical rationality, self-determination, freedom and social justice. They do not view human beings as the "pinnacle of creation", but as the unintended product of natural evolution, different only by degree, not fundamentally, from the other life forms on this "speck of dust in space".

As children of evolution, we too are just "life that wants to live, in the midst of life that wants to live" (Albert Schweitzer), and this realization must lead to a more responsible way of treating non-human animals.

» *Evolutionary man can no longer take refuge from his loneliness by creeping for shelter into the arms of a **divinised father-figure** whom he himself has created, nor escape from the responsibility of making decisions by sheltering under the umbrella of divine authority, nor absolve himself from the hard task of meeting his **present problems** and planning his future by relying on the will of an omniscient but unfortunately inscrutable Providence.* «

In 1600 Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake by the “Holy Inquisition”, after seven years of bleak imprisonment. He had dared to challenge the Church’s view of the world and the special position of humanity and the earth, by proposing a theory of an infinite universe and multiple worlds. His ideas were even more far-reaching than those of Galileo Galilei, who was tried by the Inquisition not long after Bruno’s death (fortunately with a more lenient result).

Bruno’s methodology did not conform to that of modern science, and some of his mystical concepts are, in the light of modern discoveries, very hard to understand. Nonetheless, the validity of many of his theories is impressive, not only in the area of cosmology. His philosophy was far ahead of its time, and covered basic principles of a non-dualistic, naturalistic view of the world, as well as reflections on the idea of biological descent and on evolutionary-humanist ethics, including the rights of non-human organisms. Essential impetus for the development of modern criticism of religion can also be traced to Bruno.

## The foundation’s name

All of these reasons led to the decision to name the foundation after Giordano Bruno, one of the great tragic heroes in the history of science and emancipation. Critical research requires not only intelligent thought, but also the courage to stand up for the truth.

**Giordano Bruno memorial**  
By Alexander Polzin  
Potsdam Square | Berlin  
[www.bruno-denkmal.de](http://www.bruno-denkmal.de)

» *Those who want to judge properly must be able to let go of all the habits of belief they have accumulated since their childhood. The popular opinion is not always the one closest to the truth.* «

Giordano Bruno

### Spektrum der Wissenschaft

(the German edition of Scientific American) used our "Pop-Art Darwin" on the cover of their magazine.



»The time has passed when only rather straitlaced clubs of free thinkers got together after work to point out the mistakes of the Bible and the bishops. The gbs, founded in 2004 by the entrepreneur Herbert Steffen, is a “think-tank” of naturalism. Its advisory board is made up of academics who are among the best in their field in Germany; for this reason alone, it deserves greater recognition. The Giordano Bruno Stiftung can thus rightly claim to represent a significant intellectual current among German academics and beyond. After all, a third of all Germans now have no religious affiliation.«

*Süddeutsche Zeitung (Germany), November 2008*

## Press reaction to the foundation

»The Giordano Bruno Stiftung, from its headquarters in Mastershausen, is attempting to organize all those who do not believe in God and the Church. The foundation provides the arguments, and is the think-tank of German atheists. We could even say that the Giordano Bruno Stiftung is the spiritual leader of all those who don't trust spiritual leaders.«

*Der Spiegel (Germany), May 2007*

»...the Giordano Bruno Stiftung has become the leading source of ideas on humanism and enlightenment in the German-speaking world. The foundation is no ivory tower, but a think-tank that creates products and projects. As an antidote to Pope Benedict's 'World Youth Day', Schmidt-Salomon launched “Heathen fun rather than Hell's torture” (“Heidenspaß statt Höllenqual”), in a religion-free zone in Cologne. An even greater provocation is the Central Council of Ex-Muslims, of which Schmidt-Salomon is joint founder, and which Iranian media claim to be an agent of Mossad. The enlightenment movement of the Central Council has changed Islam-critical thinking, in Germany and elsewhere, by promoting a third way between multicultural-ideology and the vision of a Christian-dominated culture.«

*Tages-Anzeiger, (Switzerland), February 2009*

» Even laurel trees do not grow up to Heaven. «

Karlheinz Deschner

» *Nothing good*  
*will happen*  
*unless you*  
*make it happen!* «

Erich Kästner

The Activities



**fowid**  
 Forschungsgruppe  
 Weltanschauungen  
 in Deutschland

Research group: world views  
 in Germany



**hpd** humanistischer  
 pressedienst

Humanist news service

## Representing secular interests

There are now more people in Germany with no religious affiliation than there are Catholics or Protestants. However, they do not receive the recognition they deserve either in politics or in the media. The Giordano Bruno Stiftung is attempting to rectify this deficiency. It played a leading role in the foundation of the “Co-ordinating Council of Secular Organizations” (KORSO: Koordinierungsrat säkularer Organisationen), which will represent the many millions of people who do not belong to a religious denomination.

In order to find out what the non-religious think, and which views of the world and political philosophies they share or don't share, the gbs set up the “Research group: world views in Germany” (fowid: Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland), whose website can be found at [www.fowid.de](http://www.fowid.de) (in German). Here, numerous studies can be found relating to the social acceptance of religious and secular world views. This empirical knowledge is significant not only in the political sphere, where the population is assumed to have a much greater adherence to religion than is in fact the case, but also for the foundation, as it gives indications as to how best to pursue its work.

To give non-believers their own voice in the media, the gbs and the German Humanist Society (HVD: Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands) co-operated to set up the Humanist News Service (hpd: humanistischer pressedienst). This presents humanist and free-thinking viewpoints, in order to raise awareness of them in politics and the media. The website [www.hpd.de](http://www.hpd.de) (in German) went online in October 2006, and received over 5 million page hits in just its first two years.

» Whilst the two Christian churches are firmly established as a result of the “faltering separation” of State and Church, as well as the corresponding concordats or contracts between the two, and while the Muslims also seem set to receive State privileges in future, *politics* appears to have no concept to offer those without religious affiliation. This glaring breach of the constitutional imperative of a State that is neutral with respect to world views is something we will no longer accept! «

From the KORSO declaration of principles

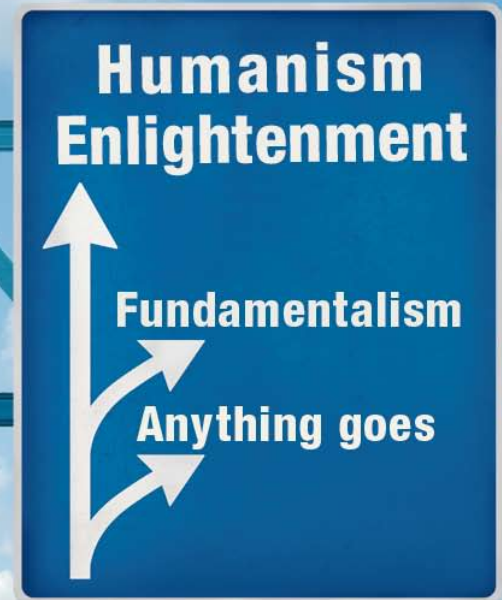


The Giordano Bruno Stiftung stands for the values of humanism and enlightenment, and protests whenever blatant infringements of these occur. During the controversy surrounding cartoons of Mohammed, the foundation started a widely noted campaign for the protection of free speech and artistic expression, something which must not be allowed to fall victim to religious fundamentalism. The gbs has also opposed various attempts at censorship by the state, as well as Ursula von der Leyen's "Alliance for Upbringing", which attempted to bring a stronger religious element into the raising and educating of children.

## Promotion of humanism and enlightenment as the mainstream culture

Representatives of the gbs have entered the debate on assisted suicide to promote the right to self-determination at the end of one's life, and have criticized the weakness of attempts to remove creationism from the school curriculum. The foundation has also opposed many cases of "cultural relativism", i.e. the assumption that people from different cultures do not necessarily benefit from the same constitutional protection of human rights. An example is the court case in Frankfurt in 2007, in which a German judge effectively approved a Muslim man's right to beat his wife "on cultural grounds".

According to the gbs, the violation of human rights should never be swept under the carpet with some kind of postmodern "anything goes" attitude. Humanist principles and fundamental modern values should be defended. The foundation has been active in campaigns such as that against the "culturally legitimized" practice of genital mutilation and has supported the International Committee against the Death Penalty in its attempts to save people sentenced to death under Sharia law. In the case of Nazanin Fatehi, a 17-year-old Iranian woman, this was successful.



» *Social coexistence can only work in a secular state. When rules of belief intrude into the laws of the land, this spells the end of civil liberty!* «

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spanish Prime Minister



» Whereas European Christianity went through the *hard school of the Enlightenment*, as a result of which it had to get used to more civil ways of interacting, Islam, despite admirable attempts in the 9th and 10th centuries, has mainly been spared such “*progressive harassment*”. We want to contribute to changing this in a lasting way. «

From the flyer “We have forsworn” of the Central Council of Ex-Muslims

Human rights must apply universally; they do not differ from one culture to the next. Unfortunately, Muslim abuses of human rights have long been subject to “false tolerance”. In order to avoid accusations of xenophobia, many progressive thinkers have shied away from criticizing religiously legitimized violence in the Muslim community.

## Enlighten rather than obscure!

The founding of the Central Council of Ex-Muslims and its “We have forsworn” campaign, both of which received substantial support from the gbs, have led to a change in the situation. The ex-Muslims, mostly refugees from Iran and Iraq, cannot be accused of xenophobia when they denounce honour killings, forced marriages, hostility to democracy and the religious indoctrination of children in the Islamic community. The political debate on integration, Islam and Islamism has thus taken on a new character, not only in Germany but far beyond its borders too. There are now ex-Muslim groups, based on the German model, in, among other countries, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

In partnership with the Central Council of Ex-Muslims and other organizations critical of Islam, the gbs initiated the first “Critical Islam Conference”. This showed that there is a sensible alternative to the extremes of xenophobia and reactionary defence of Islam. The international conference generated important signals and impetus for a worldwide, Islam-critical enlightenment movement.



## Promoting a scientific world view

Those who support humanism and enlightenment are concerned not only with values, but also with knowledge. Sadly, many people still see the world in a way which, in light of modern scientific advances, can only be compared with the ancient belief that the world was flat. The Giordano Bruno Stiftung has therefore made it one of its goals to promote the dissemination and acceptance of scientific knowledge.

The first major conference, organized in 2004 in co-operation with the International League of the Non-religious and Atheists, revolved around the questions of “Knowledge and Belief”. The theme has been revisited in subsequent years. The year 2009 represented a particular highlight because it was Darwin Year – his 200th birthday, and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his groundbreaking book “On the Origin of Species”.

The gbs made use of the double jubilee to draw attention, by various means, to the enormous impact that the theory of evolution has had on our view of the world. The foundation produced the website [www.darwin-jahr.de](http://www.darwin-jahr.de), the most comprehensive German-language Internet portal on the subject of evolution. The gbs also celebrated Germany’s biggest Darwin birthday party in the German National Library in Frankfurt. In a joint project with the “tower of senses” (“turmdersinne”), the foundation organized an academic symposium in Nuremberg, with many prominent participants, which looked into the subject of “the fruitfulness of evolution”.

Representatives of the Giordano Bruno Stiftung played a significant part in the public debate on Darwin and modern evolutionary theory, on television, radio, in the press and at international conferences. The “pop art” picture of Darwin, designed by the gbs, appeared on the cover of various academic magazines. Video clips produced especially for Darwin Year (“Children of Evolution” and “Susie Smartypants Explains Evolution”) enjoyed a positive reception worldwide.

» *Whether one wants to or not, one has to make a choice: either evolution or creation, enlightenment or obscurantism, scientific knowledge or religious belief. All attempts to combine the one with the other have failed. Which doesn't surprise me: after all, one cannot be a little bit pregnant!* «

From “Darwin's speech of thanks”, National Library, Frankfurt 2009

The enlightenment movement is rarely short of good arguments, but is in need of some good PR. Especially in the media-driven society we live in, it's not enough just to have good arguments; they have to be communicated effectively to people. Provocation is an essential part of promoting enlightenment; it comes from "pro-vocare", to call forth or challenge, and that is exactly what we wish to do. If we want to push society forward, we must not be afraid of being called "pushy".

## Campaigns that cause a stir

Many people have objected to gbs campaigns in the past, and that is certainly one of the reasons for their success. When the foundation set up a "religion-free zone" parallel to the Catholic World Youth Day, as a means of offering asylum to those fleeing the Catholic event, many Catholics were doubtless angered. However, this was the only way of effectively counteracting the otherwise uncritical reporting of the Pope in Germany. When the gbs started the "We have forsworn" campaign with the Central Council of Ex-Muslims, this enraged Islamic fundamentalists, who view renouncing Islam as a crime punishable by death. But the international headlines relating to the campaign gave critics of Islam (especially in the so-called Islamic countries) reason to hope that the regime of the Mullahs, Muftis and Imams can one day be brought down.

Naturally, some Christians were indignant about the gbs campaign "Evolution Day, not Ascension Day" to mark Darwin Year. Yet this "heretical initiative" made sure that the theory of evolution finally came to be discussed outside the ivory towers of academia. (It is worth remarking that in an online poll conducted by the German current affairs magazine "Der Spiegel", more than 69 per cent of the respondents were in favour of Ascension Day being renamed "Evolution Day".)



Asyl für alle Weltjugendtags-Flüchtlinge unter:  
**WWW.RELIGIONSFREIE-ZONE.DE**



**HEIDENSPASS  
STATT  
HÖLLENQUAL!**



» Enlightenment is a nuisance: when the world is illuminated, its filth becomes more visible. «

Karlheinz Deschner



## Support for pro-enlightenment literature

Today, the market for books is dominated more than ever by the economic interests of publishers and booksellers. Consequently, books are evaluated not by the quality of their content, but by the quantity of sales. The Giordano Bruno Stiftung contributes by supporting critical literature and other books reflecting the spirit of enlightenment, so that they are not buried in the avalanche of new publications. In its newsletter, the foundation draws attention to interesting new releases; it also works in cooperation with the German online store [www.denkladen.de](http://www.denkladen.de), which offers exclusively humanist/enlightenment books, videos, posters (and more).

Through the gbs network of experts, a number of interesting book projects have been initiated. The foundation also functions as the editor of the gbs book series, published by Alibri, and supports, amongst other things, the publication of the “Manifesto of Evolutionary Humanism” (“Manifest des evolutionären Humanismus”), the most successful humanist book of recent years, whose second edition is frequently reprinted.

The gbs does not confine its support to scientific and philosophical works. A very important, but sensitive area is that of children’s books. The foundation was instrumental in the publication of “Which way leads to God? asked the little piglet” (“Wo bitte geht’s zu Gott? fragte das kleine Ferkel”), which challenged the stronghold of religions in the nursery. This book caused a huge scandal, which very nearly led its being blacklisted. However, the “Little Piglet” was successfully rescued, and Michael Schmidt-Salomon and Helge Nyncke went on to publish two further books, “The Story of the Cheeky Dog” (“Die Geschichte vom frechen Hund”) and “Susie Smartypants Explains Evolution” (“Susi Neunmalklug erklärt die Evolution”) which look at subjects traditionally reserved for adults in a manner appropriate for children.

» To free someone from *ERROR* is to give and not to take away. «

Arthur Schopenhauer

# Festakt

zur Verleihung des

## DESCHNER- PREISES

der Giordano Bruno Stiftung an:

## RICHARD DAWKINS

FR 12. OKT. 07

AULA DER UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT\*

BEGINN: 19:00 EINLASS: 18:30

\* CAMPUS BOCKENHEIM, HAUPTGEBÄUDE,  
MERTONSTR. 17-21; 60325 FRANKFURT



» There is also *another prize*, called the *Templeton Prize*.  
The only specification of the quantity is that it has to be larger than  
the *Nobel-Prize* money. But I'm here to tell you today that *if I*  
*were given a choice* between the *Templeton Prize* and the  
*Deschner Prize*, I would go for the *Deschner Prize*. «

Richard Dawkins

From the very beginning, the foundation has been especially committed to the works of the author Karlheinz Deschner, who has been described as “the most significant critic of the church this century” (Wolfgang Stegmüller). Deschner is also recognized as one of the most eloquent of all German-language authors. At a celebration in Hassfurt in 2004, organized by the gbs to mark Deschner’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, the founder of the Giordano Bruno Stiftung, Herbert Steffen, announced the establishment of the Deschner Prize.

## The Deschner Prize

In October 2007 the Deschner Prize, worth €10,000, was awarded for the first time. The recipient was the renowned British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who received the prize at a festive event at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt.

In the citation, the foundation noted that Dawkins had performed outstanding services to the cause of secular, scientific and humanist thinking, through his work in evolutionary biology, and especially with his highly critical book “The God Delusion”. The speeches made at the prize-giving by Richard Dawkins, Karlheinz Deschner, Michael Schmidt-Salomon and Franz M. Wuketits, were published in 2008 with the title “On the virus of belief” (“Vom Virus des Glaubens”) as the second volume of the gbs book series.

» *Sapere aude!*  
*Have the courage,*  
*to reason*  
*for yourself* «

Immanuel Kant

The People



## 2500 YEARS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Epicurus, Hypatia, Al-Razi, Spinoza, La Mettrie, David Hume, Denis Diderot, Olympe de Gouges, Immanuel Kant, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, Sigmund Freud, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Julian Huxley, Erich Fromm, Karl Popper, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Richard Dawkins, Antonio Damasio, Helen Fisher, Susan Blackmore, Taslima Nasrin



» *One head does  
not think alone* «

Karlheinz Deschner

## Structure of the foundation

The Giordano Bruno Stiftung is composed, in accordance with the statutes, of three bodies: the board of directors, the board of trustees, and the advisory board. The board of directors is responsible for the actual work of the foundation, and is monitored by the board of trustees. The advisory board contributes important ideas and impetus to the work of the foundation.

Whilst the directors are in more or less daily contact with one another, the board of trustees and advisory board meet roughly twice a year. There is also an annual meeting of the foundation, when all three bodies meet at the foundation's headquarters in Mastershausen. At these meetings, the projects of the preceding year are evaluated, and the agenda for the coming year decided. There are also additional meetings to discuss particular projects. For example, the Darwin Year projects were organized six months in advance at a meeting of the directors with the foundation's evolutionary biologists.

The activities of the gbs are financed largely by donations from friends and benefactors of the foundation. No funding comes from the state, regional or local governments. As the foundation has far more ideas for projects than can be financed, donations are always most welcome. These are tax deductible.







» *Nothing is more powerful than an idea  
whose time has come.* «

French proverb

Since the beginning of 2005, anyone wishing to offer moral or financial support has been able to join the “Friends of the Giordano Bruno Stiftung”. Any person or organization that subscribes to the philosophy and goals of the foundation is welcome, without any financial obligation. There is no fixed monthly or annual subscription; members can decide for themselves how much they contribute.

## Friends and benefactors of the gbs

Members who would like to become more active in the work of the foundation, or to make contact with others, can register for the gbs web forum. This internal forum is the central discussion platform of the foundation. Members can communicate with each other in a private forum, discuss new projects, take part in the planning of the foundation’s activities, or arrange meetings.

There are now various regional groups within the “Friends of the gbs”, for example in Frankfurt, in the Cologne/Bonn/Düsseldorf area, in Berlin/Brandenburg, and in the Rhine-Neckar region, each organizing their own local events. There are also student representatives at 25 universities in Germany and Austria, and working groups for specific subjects. We are working to intensify the cooperation between the gbs directors and its supporters’ group, which at the end of 2009 comprised some 2000 members from 25 different countries.

# Members of the foundation

(Status: Summer 2009)

## DIRECTORS:

Herbert Steffen, Dr. Ernst Salcher, Dr. Michael Schmidt-Salomon

## TRUSTEES:

Dr. Carsten Frerk, Prof. Dr. Hermann Josef Schmidt, Shiro Sonoda, Jacques Tilly

## ADVISORY BOARD:

Prof. Hans Albert, philosopher of science; Prof. Christoph Antweiler, ethnologist; Dr. Pierre Basieux, mathematician, game theorist; Prof. Dieter Birnbacher, philosopher; Prof. Martin Brüne, neurologist, psychiatrist; Prof. Franz Buggle, developmental psychologist; Dr. Gerhard Czermak, lawyer, author; Helmut Debelius, oceanographer, underwater photographer, author; Dr. Carsten Frerk, political scientist; Dr. Mynga Futrell, publicist, co-director of the "Brights"; Dr. Colin Goldner, psychologist, author; Prof. Eric Hilgendorf, lawyer, philosopher of law; Ricarda Hinz, documentary film-maker, artist; Prof. Norbert Hoerster, social philosopher; Janosch, author and illustrator; Dr. Mathias Jung, psychotherapist, philosopher; Prof. Thomas Junker, biological historian, evolutionary biologist; Prof. Bernulf Kanitscheider, natural philosopher, physicist; Wolfram Kastner, artist; Prof. Günter Kehrer, religious sociologist; Ralf König, cartoonist, author; Max Kruse, novelist; Prof. Ulrich Kutschera, evolutionary biologist, physiologist; Dr. Fiona Lorenz, social scientist; Prof. Ludger Lütkehaus, literary scholar, philosopher; Dr. Martin Mahner, biologist, theoretical scientist; Ingrid Matthäus-Maier, politician, lawyer; Prof. Axel Meyer, evolutionary biologist, zoologist; Prof. Thomas Metzinger, philosopher of mind; Prof. Johannes Neumann, sociologist; Dr. Gisela Notz, social scientist; Prof. Heinz Oberhammer, nuclear- and astrophysicist; Prof. Rolf Oerter, developmental psychologist; Dr. Sabine Paul, molecular biologist; Udo Pollmer, food analyst, science journalist; Gerhard Rampp, ethics teacher, vice president of the DGHS (German Society for Dignity in Dying); Prof. Peter Riedesser, child/youth psychologist; Prof. Hermann Josef Schmidt, philosopher; Prof. Wolf Singer, brain researcher; Prof. Volker Sommer, anthropologist, primatologist; Prof. Beda M. Stadler, immunologist; Prof. Dr. Gerhard Streminger, philosopher; Jacques Tilly, sculptor, communications designer; Rüdiger Vaas, science journalist; Esther Vilar, novelist; Prof. Eckart Voland, sociobiologist, philosopher; Prof. Gerhard Vollmer, physicist, philosopher; Lilly Walden, actress; Prof. Isabell Welpé, economist; Prof. Franz Josef Wetz, philosopher; Prof. Gerhard Wimberger, composer, conductor; Prof. Franz Wuketits, evolutionary theorist

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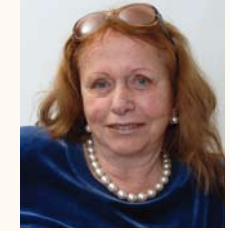
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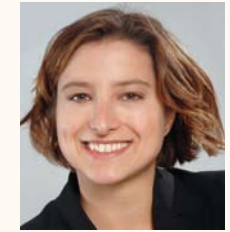
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F. J. WETZ



G. WIMBERGER



F. M. WUKETITS



H. OBERHAMMER



R. OERTER



S. PAUL



U. POLLMER

» *Those who know  
nothing  
must believe  
everything!* «

Science Busters

10 Questions



## Ten questions and answers

**The increased awareness of the Giordano Bruno Stiftung has led to numerous critical or even defamatory media reports. In most cases, the harsh criticism comes from the pens of theologians, even though this may not be obvious to the reader, viewer or listener; the prejudiced reviewers hide behind a mask of independent reporters. In this way, various misconceptions have crept in regarding the foundation, reflected in a number of enquiries to the management board. On the following pages, we are providing answers to the ten most commonly asked questions.**

### 1. *Is the Giordano Bruno Stiftung an atheist institution?*

The label “atheist” is very popular with journalists, for reasons of its “smell of sulphur”, i.e. strong emotive impact in religious debates, but it is hardly a suitable word to describe the foundation’s philosophy. The gbs represents a naturalistic rather than atheistic position. That is to say, we believe that the universe can be explained rationally, and that there are no gods, ghosts, goblins or demons interfering with the laws of nature.

This in turn means that a definition of “God” which does not interfere with laws of nature (this is incompatible with creationist belief or miracles) would not contradict naturalism, even though many supporters of naturalism are happy to do without the “inelegant god-hypothesis”. Incidentally, the idea that the Giordano Bruno Stiftung can be reduced to one-dimensional or even dogmatic atheism is disproved by the foundation’s name; it is known that Giordano Bruno was not an atheist, but rather a pantheist (i.e. believed that God and the Universe are one and the same).

### 2. *Is the gbs hostile to religion?*

The foundation is critical of religion, not hostile to it. We regard religions as the cultural treasure chamber of humanity, which, as well as outdated views of the world and morality, also contain meaningful aspects that should still be respected today. However, a critical, rational, secular approach to religion is required to separate the valuable elements from the archaic errors and the associated, often barbaric “moral values”. Religions are works of humanity, just like all the other products and institutions that our species has created in the course of its cultural evolution. Consequently, religious texts should be regarded in the same critical manner as works of ancient philosophers, especially as the latter were ethically and intellectually superior to the former in many areas.

The basic problem of religions is that they tend to regard imperfect human utterances as “holy” and thus “sacrosanct”, which in the course of human history has led to enormous suffering. Even today, the resulting inquisitorial logic, “You will believe in it, or we will make you believe in it”, represents a massive threat to the

peaceful coexistence of humans. As long as this danger still exists, criticism of religion will remain one of the most essential tasks of enlightenment.

### 3. *Isn't the gbs confusing religion with fundamentalism?*

We differentiate very clearly between fundamentalist and enlightened believers. In the same way that soft drinks are now available without sugar, thanks to enlightenment there is now Christianity without hell and the devil. Such a tamed “light version of belief” is certainly attractive; however it is logically inconsistent. (“Jesus’ sacrifice without hell and the devil is as meaningless as a football match with no opposing team!”) Without some effective metaphysical threat, religious belief loses its crucial point, with the result that liberal believers are in decline, whilst fundamentalist groups are growing at a similar rate to those who no longer consider themselves religious.

We may regret that “enlightened belief” is increasingly losing its role as arbitrator between thorough enlightenment and religious dogmatism, but we must not ignore this fact. The reason why enlightened belief is losing its significance is clear: never before has the gulf between scientific knowledge and religious belief been so obvious as it is today. For example, to accept the Christian or Muslim god as creator of the earth, one would have to ignore at least part of our modern knowledge of evolution. This undermines the basis for any enlightened-belief movement, the effectiveness of which should in any case not be overestimated. It is a time-limited cultural phenomenon, very largely confined to Western Europe, and in no way typical of what, worldwide, is or was understood by the term “religion”.

### 4. *Does the gbs promote “scientific fundamentalism”?*

The accusation of scientific fundamentalism, frequently raised by defenders of faith, is a contradiction in itself. Science, in contrast to religion, is by definition open to results. As a methodology of critical analysis, it neither bases itself on

“sacrosanct eternal truths” nor tries to find “unshakeable truth”. Anyone who were to believe dogmatically in specific results of scientific investigation would, in doing so, betray the basic principles of scientific thinking.

Apart from this, the gbs does not take the view that an alternative to religion can be founded on science alone. It is not without reason that one of the foundation’s central mottos is, “whoever possesses science, philosophy and art does not need religion”. It must be clear that many important questions of life cannot be answered by scientific methods. This does not mean, however, that religions are superior in these areas. Philosophical deliberation produces far more convincing results in e.g. ethical questions. And even where the cleverest arguments of philosophy fail, religion is not needed; this is the sovereign territory of art, which is able to capture the “poetic overhang of life” that no scientific or philosophical analysis can.

### 5. *Isn't the gbs basically just as missionary as the religions? Doesn't the book “Which way leads to God?” clearly show that the gbs wants to indoctrinate children too?*

The gbs naturally has the aim of reaching people. It wants to convince them that it makes sense to strengthen the values of humanism and enlightenment in society. However, unlike the Pope (for example), the foundation does not claim to be in possession of the “one and only divine truth”. Rather, it relies on the principle of critical examination, which demands that false convictions be given up, as soon as better arguments are available.

The children’s book “Which way leads to God?” asked the little piglet” was conceived as an antidote to the existing and very real religious indoctrination (for example in Catholic nursery schools) and is intended to bring some pluralism into the nursery. In numerous interviews, the authors made very clear that they would take the book off the market if the same were done with children’s bibles, in which horror stories such as the Great Flood are told with all their gruesome details. However, the religious fraction felt unable to agree to this step. Consequently, the little piglet is still on its travels, to free children light-heartedly from the fear of divine retribution.

## 6. *Shouldn't we respect the religious convictions of others?*

As humanists we naturally respect every human being as a human being. But some convictions and actions simply don't deserve to be respected. We must not overlook the fact that the religious convictions of many deeply religious people legitimize abuses of human rights (such as discrimination against women and homosexuals), and/or explain the world on the basis of nonsensical, totally outdated assumptions (such as the idea that humanity is the crowning glory of divine creation, which is diametrically opposed to the findings of evolutionary biology). To respect such inhuman or irrational beliefs would be a betrayal of the values of humanism and enlightenment.

## 7. *Surely religions are necessary for us to form moral values?*

It is a historically irrefutable fact that the fundamental rights we enjoy in modern democratic societies very largely did not come from religions; on the contrary, they had to be fought for in bitter emancipation struggles against the religions. Many values that we today take for granted, such as rationality, democracy or the right to self-determination, were developed as far back as the time of ancient Rome or Greece, but with the rise of Christianity disappeared for almost a millennium. It was not until the Renaissance, the time when the ancient scripts were re-discovered, that Europe finally began to develop ideas of individual liberty again.

In modern times too, it has largely been individuals with a critical attitude to religion who have promoted the development of values such as the equality of the sexes, ideas of social justice, freedom of speech and of the media and the right to sexual self-determination. For example, the subject of human rights was pushed forward by Thomas Paine, a critic of religion, whilst a whole string of Popes condemned it as "insufferable presumption". Not until 1961 was the Pope of the time, Johannes XXIII, able to bring himself to issue a convoluted recognition of human rights. The Vatican remains, however, the only state in Europe not to have ratified the European Human Rights Convention. This is one example of many which show that a closer inspection of "Christian values" reveals them to be much less than the name suggests.

## 8. *Wouldn't our social system collapse completely without the commitment of the churches?*

Most of the Church's social welfare facilities in Germany (such as hospitals, old people's homes, therapy centres) are financed completely by the state, the health insurance and direct payments from the beneficiaries. Only in a small segment (such as nursery schools and advice centres) do the churches have to pay a (minor) part of the costs themselves. This amount is compensated for many times over by the billions of Euros of subsidies that the churches receive every year from the state, i.e. taxpayer (over and above the special Church Tax levied in Germany).

Only very few German citizens realize that the salaries of many bishops, for example, are not covered by the Church Tax, but are paid for out of general taxes, including those of non-believers. If the unconstitutional privileges of the Churches were finally stopped, the state could save many billions of Euros each year, which could be used for social and educational projects.

## 9. *Didn't National Socialism and Stalinism do far more damage in the 20th century than all the theistic religions put together? And aren't the latter necessary to prevent a relapse into barbarianism?*

National Socialism and Stalinism were political religions, with all the characteristics of a belief system: they had "untouchable prophets", who claimed to have privileged access to the "absolute truth", "holy scriptures", which could never be questioned, hierarchical "priesthoods" that proclaimed the gospel, "heretics" who had the courage to question the dogma, and "Inquisitions" that persecuted the heretics without mercy.

Due to the many structural similarities between political and traditional "higher" religions, it is not surprising that established Christianity was not able to prevent the National Socialist dictatorship in Germany. In fact, apart from a few Christian resistance fighters, the Church was a central pillar of the Nazi system. Since some bishops and journalists have recently distinguished themselves by blaming

atheism for the atrocities of National Socialism, it needs to be pointed out that “belief in a god” was something of a state doctrine under Hitler. The majority of Nazis professed themselves to be Christians, and a minority described themselves as “believers” in the sense of Himmler’s esoteric cult. Atheists, on the other hand, were viewed as undesirable, both in the Nazi Party and in the SS, since being “godless” was deemed to be an expression of the “putrefying Jewish spirit”. This had far-reaching political consequences: associations of free-thinkers were outlawed immediately after the Nazis seized power (allowing the Protestant Church to use the former headquarters of the free-thinkers in Berlin to create a “centre for the fight against godlessness”). This was done with the full approval of the Nazis. Nazi Germany signed a fateful agreement with the Vatican, the “Reichskonkordat”, from which the Church still profits today! In the run-up to this agreement, it was the Catholic Centre Party no less that provided the necessary votes to carry the “Enabling Law”, thus making possible the tyranny of the Nazis.

### 10. *The gbs relies heavily on the theory of evolution. Doesn’t this amount to a legitimization of social Darwinism?*

Charles Darwin revolutionized our view of the world more almost than any other single person. It is only since Darwin’s time that we have begun to realize who we are and where we come from. Unfortunately, great ideas are subject to great abuse, and the theory of evolution is no exception. We all know the terrible consequences of social Darwinism, especially in the first half of the 20th century. This cannot be glossed over. However, it must be remembered that social Darwinism, which Darwin himself abhorred, represents a gross distortion of the circumstances in nature. The natural world does not by any means involve just the ruthless enforcement of selfish interests at the cost of others; altruism, solidarity and empathy can also be found here. Apart from this, social Darwinism is based on the so-called naturalistic fallacy, namely the ill-considered notion that the survival of the fittest in the wild (what *is*) is also “what *ought to be*”, i.e. supposedly implies a “right of the fittest”.

Anyone familiar with science will know that the theory of evolution is not in any way an attempt to say how the world ought to be, but rather an explanation of how the world is, and why it came to be that way. How we as a human society

should use the theory of evolution is not contained within that theory. This is not a question of empirical science, but of philosophical reflection, and this is precisely where evolutionary humanism comes in.

Evolutionary humanists interpret the knowledge of evolution in a humanistic way, and are totally opposed to all models of social Darwinism, which are an abuse of Darwin’s groundbreaking research, used in an attempt to legitimize inhuman actions. In agreement with the renowned evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould, evolutionary humanists firmly hold the rational conviction that *Homo sapiens* does indeed possess the potential to be a particularly gentle, clever and creative animal. So let us put everything into unlocking this positive potential! We do not know if we shall succeed in changing the course of humankind from a history filled with long episodes of inhumanity to one that in future develops in a more humane fashion. One thing we do know – from evolutionary theory in fact – is that the world is in a constant state of change. For humanists, who do not simply accept the suffering in the world, this can be seen as a genuine source of hope.



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1. Please complete, if possible, all sections of the application.

2. If you prefer automatic debiting, please sign the direct-debit mandate on the reverse side.  
(Only possible in Germany!)

3. Send your application in a window envelope to the address of the Friends of the gbs. That's it!

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May the foundation make your name and that of your company / organization known to other Friends of the gbs?

yes

no

Friends of the  
**Giordano Bruno Stiftung**  
Johann Steffen Strasse 1  
D-56869 Mastershausen

Application for membership

# Application for membership

Donation receipts will be issued by the Foundation only for annual donations of Euro 100 and above. For smaller donations the German tax office accepts a bank statement as proof. We request that all donations be transferred with the designated purpose "Förderkreis" to the account of the Giordano Bruno Stiftung (Account number 25 95 700 000) at the Commerzbank Frankfurt Hoechst (Bank sort code: 500 400 00), both for single donations and standing orders. For donations from outside Germany, please also specify the IBAN and BIC codes of the gbs account when you make a transfer (IBAN: DE 17 5004 0000 0259 5700 00; BIC: COBADEFFXXX).

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**AMOUNT OF DONATION**

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Lake-house in the grounds of the Giordano Bruno Stiftung

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# ENLIGHTENMENT

in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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# AUFKLÄRUNG

im 21. Jahrhundert

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