

FIG Leaves

Volume 11 Issue 4 April 2002

April Meeting

Intelligent Design: The Notorious "Wedge Strategy"

Wolf Roder will briefly review the concept of Intelligent Design, the who and what of the chief authors (Johnson, Dembski, Behe, Wells), and the Discovery Institute with its Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture. He will discuss the present struggle to insert ID into the revised Ohio Science Standards for schools. Roder will review the "Wedge Strategy" which is a blueprint and plan for changing American society and culture by a "return" to the Christian religion and God.

Wolf Roder is a Professor of Geography at the University of Cincinnati. He is a lifelong atheist. His research has been concerned with rural development and water resources. He is author of papers and books on African subjects, including "Magic, Medicine and Metaphysics in Nigeria" in The Skeptical Inquirer.

Wolf has long been one of FIG's favorite speakers and discussion leaders. We look forward to his leading a discussion of the troubling efforts here in Ohio to "balance" the teaching of evolution with intelligent design.

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Events

April Meeting
Tuesday April 23, at 7:00 P.M.
Vernon Manor Hotel

May Potluck
Tuesday, May 14 at 6:30 P.M.

Do we have your e-mail address?

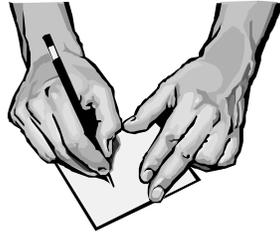
How can you tell whether we do, or not? If you did not receive an e-mail reminder of last month's meeting, we don't have it.

We are planning to send out such meeting reminders each month. It would also be helpful to be able to contact you by e-mail for action alerts on such issues as the proposed teaching of intelligent design in Ohio schools. Various other possible uses include notifying you that our speaker can't come for some reason.

If uncertain, please send your e-mail address to Joelevee@aol.com and he will check our records.

Letter from the Editor

Dear Fig Members:



This month I am pleased to print two interesting letters from two men unknown to one another, who each clearly articulates his secular world view. The first is from Larry Darby, reprinted from "The Times" of Birmingham, Ala. and is a response to a previous "Letter to the Editor" of that newspaper.

The second is from Bill Brinkmoeller, a local Cincinnati who has recently become aware of FIG through an article in "The Cincinnati Enquirer".

I found each writer to be articulate and especially appreciated the personal notes in the second. For the last few months we have been fortunate to be able to present some of the more personal ideas and feelings of some members, e.g. last month, Martha Ferguson and Tim Kelly. I value and enjoy hearing from others; it enriches and humanizes my own worldview. Please consider sending in your own stories or articles for future issues.

April
11, 2002

A recent writer [Dillon, April 3] asks, "Just what does the unbelieving atheist have to offer?"

Atheism is the natural or default human condition regarding religion; the word simply means "without theism." Atheism involves the mental attitude that unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a life-style and ethical outlook verifiable by experience and the scientific method, independent of all arbitrary assumptions of authority and creeds or supernatural agency. Where theists base their worldview on fear of eternal torment by a loving god, atheists live by the philosophy of materialism, which is predicated on ideas of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, Democritus.

Materialism declares that the cosmos is devoid of immanent conscious purpose; that it is governed by its own inherent, immutable, and impersonal laws; that there is no supernatural interference in human life; that humankind -- finding their resources within themselves -- can and must create their own destiny. Materialism restores dignity and intellectual

integrity to humanity. It teaches that we must prize our life on Earth and strive always to improve it. It holds that we are capable of creating a social system based on reason and justice.

Materialism's "faith" is in humankind and their ability to transform the world culture by their own efforts. This is a commitment that is in its very essence life-asserting.

Prior to Sept. 11, 2001, 29 million American citizens (14 percent) were identified as atheists. The number of citizens who wish to live the life of reason, and not a life of faith in unverifiable things or untenable concepts, is growing, too.

The faith-based terrorist attacks by theists on Sept. 11 caused many people to examine the validity of religion and cast out their superstitious beliefs.

Larry Darby
Alabama Director
American Atheists Inc. Montgomery

Idelle,

I received the March *FIG Leaves* a couple of days ago. Congratulations on a very fine issue. It's a big improvement over the last issue, from a purely technical point of view (i.e., font agreement, spelling, etc.), but I had a good time with the content as well. The "Rationally Speaking" column is a particularly good one.

One thing that struck me as I was reading the issue: In Wolf Roder's review of *Archaeology and the Bible*, he offers a quote wherein the book's

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FIG Leaves Volume 11, Issue 4, April 2002 - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in electronic format via Internet to figeditor@choice.net or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 8128, Cincinnati OH 45208. Contributions received before the first Tuesday of the month will be considered for publication that month. All material printed in FIG Leaves may be reproduced in similar publications of non-profit groups which grant FIG Leaves reciprocal reprinting rights as long as proper credit is clearly attributed to FIG Leaves and the author. Opinions expressed in FIG Leaves are those of their authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the editor or the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., its Board, or officers. © 2000 The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. FIG Board of Directors: President: Philip Ferguson, Vice President: Michele Grinoch, Secretary: George Maurer, Treasurer: Joe Levee Members: Frank Bicknell, Nurit Bowman, Martha Ferguson, Edwin Kagin, Helen Kagin, Tim Kelly, Boyd Riley and FIG Leaves Editor: Idelle Datlof.

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author refers to people such as us as "unbelievers." This is one of my primary beefs with most theists--the prevailing attitude among them seems to be that we believe in nothing. Of course, as you know, nothing could be further from the truth. I often tell people (usually Christians--they seem to be the ones who have the biggest problem with my beliefs) that I believe in just about everything they do, only I choose not to attach mysticism or superstition to the things I believe. One of the most common of the "playful ribbings" that I get from co-workers is that since I don't believe in a god, that I am a "devil worshipper." This is simply so absurd that I've never even bothered to point out the fallacy of the "thinking" that goes into that sort of behavior! I'm sure that you've had similar experiences.

A good encapsulization of one of the major tenets of my belief system is that theism is a tough thing for humanity to escape. In our deep past, we worshipped what we didn't understand: the sun, the moon, fire, rain, etc. As our understanding of the world and the

universe has grown, we've realized that we can't worship those things anymore. Their causes and purposes are known and understood. But the idea that something greater that we are controls our destiny is still firmly rooted in the human psyche, and as a result, the concept of "God" has become a murky, nebulous one. A great deal of mythology and blind faith has been constructed to support that idea, almost all of it preposterous in any sort of real-world context.

Another thing that I find amusing is that (as has been said in several letters to the editor in *The Enquirer* lately) theists (and once again Christians are leading the charge) seem to think that atheists have an attitude of superiority over them. All the while this is being said, the overwhelming subtext of their statements is that it is perfectly acceptable for theists to feel superior to atheists and humanists. This is the sort of hypocrisy that began my journey to humanism in the first place!

Bill Brinkmoeller



In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and how it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture

by Alister McGrath
(New York: Doubleday, 2001)

Many American Christians, especially fundamentalists, prefer to use the King James Bible, and some downright abhor any other version, or even refuse to accept another as authentic. I am forced to suspect some people must believe the King James is exact and Renaissance English the language in which the Bible was written. In fact of course, parts of the book were written in three languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Even the Latin Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church is a translation, not an original.

McGrath provides us with a competent history of this translation, why it was commissioned and how it was accomplished. A new translation of the Bible was authorized by King James I in 1604 to be made for use and reading aloud in the English Church. This was by no means the first English translation, nor the first widely available in the country. It was that James did not like the existing versions of the Bible, and instructed a very conservative committee to make the "right" kind of translation.

The first English translation was published by John Wycliffe about 1384, that is even before the Protestant Reformation. Wycliffe is considered a forerunner of Protestantism who saw no need for priestly mediation between man and god.

He also objected to serfdom and warfare. The Protestants were the radicals of their day, who among many other things objected to the divine right of Kings, but an idea on which James founded his sovereignty. He had even written some books which endeavored show the divine validation of his royal authority.

After several other translations the Puritans published the Geneva Bible which took its designation from the city where it was printed. This translation became exceedingly popular, not least for the republican and democratic marginal notes it bore. McGrath quotes at length some of the thorns in the King's side. It was mainly to get rid of the Geneva Bible that James authorized the new translation. He and his favorite bishop made sure that all the members of the translation committee were truly conservative royalists. It is also the reason there were to be no comments in the King's authorized Bible.

Being a thoroughly conservative undertaking, there is nothing very original about the King James Bible. In fact the first of the translation rules referred to an earlier Church of England version printed in

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1568 and based in turn on the 1539 Great Bible, which was a revision of Tyndale's 1525 translation:

The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishop's Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit. (p. 173)

Additional rules made it definite "that previous English translations were to be given full weight in the new work." (p.175) These rules made certain, that far from a new and modern work, the King James Bible used older forms of language which were already then becoming archaic. McGrath discusses the use of "thee" and "thou" to refer to god. Far from a title of respect, this familiar form of address was "if anything, derogatory, implying superiority on the part of the user over the one being thus addressed." (p. 268) God might use this form of talking to humans, but to return this hint of superiority might be considered inappropriate.

Given that the entire work was essentially a political royalist ploy, the appearance of the Bible made hardly a difference. The official church did have to use the King's version from the pulpit, but many of the ordinary people continued to prefer the Geneva Bible with its republican marginal notes. It took intensive pressure by Charles I to undercut the people's choice. In 1616 the printing of the Geneva Bible was interdicted in England, though imports continued. It was not until the restoration that the King's Bible began to win out in England.

In the North American colonies, of course, the King's word was law. Here the people had no choice in Bibles, so that the King James version prevailed almost from the beginning.

Wolf Roder

In view of this why does organized humanism seem to be failing? His answer is that humanist organizations see a limited horizon. He quoted Paul Kurtz, the head of the Council for Secular Humanism as seeing a potential humanist population of 15,000 in the United States. To counter that Larry cited recent studies that places the non-religious population at 40 million. If one granted that not all of these were non-believers, possibly 20 million might be. This would obviously be a far larger population for humanists to tap into.

In addition to the limited visionary scope that humanist organizations seem to have, he also cited the fact that the two largest humanist groups, CSH and the AHA did not cooperate with each other and were apt to compete with each other for membership and funds. As an example of this uncooperative attitude, he cited a disagreement around planning for a national meeting of the Coalition for the Community of Reason scheduled for 2004. CHS declined to participate because "they had philosophical differences" with some of the participating organizations and it was opposed to another organization handling its funds. Larry felt that the latter criticism was a "red herring" since no such proposal had been made.

This type of discordant attitude led Larry to recognize the need for a new organization that would promote humanism by funding those organizations devoted to those specific aims and were doing so with a degree of effectiveness.

Consequently in the fall of 1999, he established the Institute for Humanist Studies with headquarters in Albany, N.Y., as 501 (c)(3) with distinct aims:

- ?? Supporting the work of other organizations with financial assistance
- ?? Develop programs to meet unmet needs
- ?? Supporting diversity and cooperation.

The structure of humanist groups and indeed all advocacy groups is determined by the economics of information distribution. They all have to get the word out and given the cost of media promotion, unless the organization is the recipient of major funding most must rely on print media in the form of newsletters or publishing all of which come with a high price tag. To cover these costs they are forced into the status of a membership organization. If members fail to maintain their membership by the payment of dues, they are of necessity dropped and thereby cut off from the distribution of information.

These factors has led the Institute to avoid the

FIG March Meeting Review (3/26/02)

The speaker of the evening was the founder of the Institute for Humanist Studies, Larry Jones. Before getting to a description of the work of his institute, he addressed his perceptions of the state of humanism today. He began by saying that the United States was a good place to be a humanist because it is the front line of the battle between secularism and religion, science and revelation, and reason and dogma. The United States is the beachhead between these conflicting worldviews. It is a secular state and humanist values played a large part in its original development.

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membership route by formulating a new model utilizing the Internet:

The Internet revolution opens new options:

- ?? Unlimited access to information
- ?? Access is not limited by place or time
- ?? It allows for interpersonal communication in that anyone can communicate with groups with similar views.
- ?? Costs are greatly reduced in the dissemination of information and in administration.

HIS on the Internet is mostly confined to HIP (Humanist Internet Project). Presently,

The Institute hosts web sites for free supplying 50 groups domain names empowering these groups to take advantage of and utilize the new technology.

The advantage of the Internet is that it can reach many people, more than can be accommodated in face-to-face seminars such as CFI (Center for Inquiry). The idea behind COHE was to make humanist education available to the widest population. Looking toward the future, Larry plans to develop a "humanist think tank" and resources for disseminating humanist information to the media.

Questions from the audience followed:

One questioner wanted to know why there was a lack of cooperation between groups of humanists and freethinkers. One obvious answer was that since these were membership groups, there was competition for members and money to operate. Another suggestion was that there was a lust for power and the desire to be the spokesperson for the humanist movement. Other questions touched upon the reluctance of some humanists to identify themselves as such. There is a need "to come out of the closet." Also, humanist organizations need to learn to focus on their areas of agreement and less upon where they disagree. Another question was whether he had any sort of outreach directed toward the media for the purpose of building a working relationship with these reporters. The answer was affirmative, that press packages had been prepared with that end in view.

There seemed to be a great deal of interest in the work of the Institute by the members of the audience.

George Maurer

FIG VOICES IN THE NEWS:

Bob Streifthau quoted in Dayton Daily News

In a front page article on March 31, Easter Sunday, reporter James Cummings comments on a poll citing an increase to 14% among persons who said they had no religion. He also interviewed some people in Dayton, including FIG member Bob Streifthau, about their views on religion and church attendance.

Among other things, Cummings says this about Bob:

- ?? Streifthau studied zoology in college and has always considered himself a rational person. "The more you understand the scientific method, the more you realize there's no need for a God to explain things," he said.
- ?? Streifthau said co-workers and people he has known casually probably have never realized he's an atheist. He said the issue rarely came up.
- ?? The only time he generally discusses philosophy is when he attends monthly meetings of the Free Inquiry Group, an atheist organization based in Cincinnati.
- ?? "It sure is a lot more relaxing to be with people who won't feel badly toward you if you express yourself honestly," Streifthau said.

When asked whether he had been harassed because of his comments, Bob told us: "So far there have been no angry comments made to me about what I said. I did receive one anonymous card through the mail that advised me that I would not have a good afterlife unless I changed my beliefs and invited me to a church in Moraine. I believe the intent was kind."

The full article may be found at <http://www.activedayton.com/ddn/local/0331religion.html>

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terrorist acts on the one hand and fooling ourselves into thinking that such reaction will eradicate the problem. The war on terrorism will never be won, just like the equally misnamed and misconceived “war on drugs.” That’s because to solve these problems we first have to understand their roots. Until we acknowledge that human beings will always go after the easy pleasure of drugs and that people outside the US (especially in the Middle East) have a justifiable rancor against America, we will not make progress on either front. That this is the case should be obvious from the similarly endless conflict that has engulfed Palestinian and Israelis. Their differences are profound, cultural and historical, and cannot and will not be solved by blasting each other to pieces.

Where does said anti-US acrimony come from? If you don’t know, you haven’t paid attention. Even the European allies of the US have repeatedly taken action against what they see as the cultural and economic imperialism of Americans, and if you add the extreme poverty, ignorance, and religious fanaticism of many people in Middle Eastern countries, you have the perfect recipe for disaster. But it takes a much more serious commitment, and the art of making subtle distinctions, to address the problem seriously. It requires a radical revision of American foreign policy, and perhaps even a bit of a self-critical attitude toward the sacred cow of free-market capitalism. But of course it is far easier to keep bombing the “axis of evil” instead.

We are told by countless bumper stickers that unity is what makes us great and patriotism is proudly expressed with small flags on big SUVs. But what makes this country great is diversity and its respect. To be a real patriot means to support one’s government when it does the right thing, but be ready to march against it when it takes the wrong turn. I know there already is a list of “dissenting” and potentially subversive academics being kept since 9/11, and this article will surely get me added to it. I still hope that Americans have learned from their past mistakes and we are not about to spiral into a second McCarthy era, but that would again require cultivating the subtle art of making distinctions, realizing the difference between understanding and condoning. Are we up for the real challenge?

Further readings:

Islam: A Short History, by Karen Armstrong a manageable introduction to one of the most influential religions of the world, indispensable to put the 9/11 events in the proper context.

Web links:

<http://www.submission.org/jihad/>

Jihad and terrorism, an Islamic source commenting on terrorism, holy wars and other atrocities from the viewpoint of practicing Islam believers.

http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/dawkins_22_1.html

Design for a faith-based missile, by Richard Dawkins, a dark piece that includes no nonsense.

http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/kurtz_22_1.htm

Religious correctness and the Qur’an, by Paul Kurtz, a skeptic’s view of terrorism and Islam.

Next Month: The Meaning of Life

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