

FIG Leaves

Volume 12 Issue 4

April 2003

April Meeting

Tuesday, April 22, 7P.M. at the Vernon Manor Hotel.

The Christian Right in America

Kimberly Blaker will discuss the threatening aims and burgeoning programs of the Religious Right. She is the editor and a coauthor of *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America*. This book is a powerful expose of the effects of Christian fundamentalism on American politics and society, including children, women, African-Americans, and gays. After reading this book, Richard Dawkins wrote: "The fundamentalist Christian Right is America's Taliban. With the exception of the burqa . . . all the ingredients are there: slavish adherence to a misunderstood old text; hatred of women, modernity, rival religions, science and pleasure . . . and these people are on their way to taking over the Republican Party."

Edwin Kagin, author of a chapter in *The Fundamentals of Extremism*, will discuss some historical aspects of what he calls the coming American Religious Civil War. He says that the term "fundamentalist" as used in the book generally describes any Christian who believes in a literal interpretation of the Bible, acts politically to impose religion or Christian-based ideals on society, and holds there are absolute truths to all issues.

Kimberly Blaker, of Michigan, is a syndicated writer and columnist, social advocate, and staunch supporter of the separation of church and state.

Edwin Kagin, J.D., is an attorney and the son of a Presbyterian minister. The Kentucky State Director for American Atheists, he is an outspoken critic of violations of church and state.

A book signing by these coauthors will follow the presentation.

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Events

April Meeting

Kimberly Blaker
The Christian Right in
America

Tuesday, April 22nd
at 7:00 p.m.

At the Vernon Manor Hotel,
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

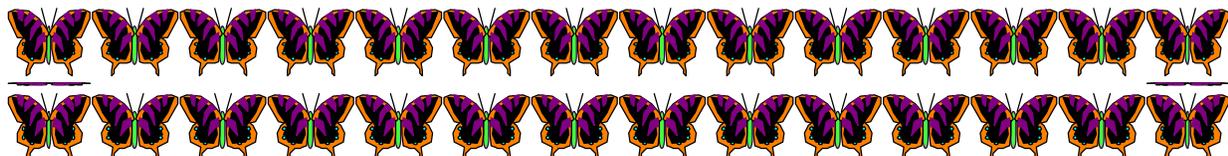
May Potluck

Tuesday, May 13th at 6:30

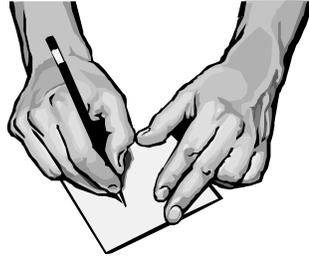
National Day of Reason

Thursday, May 1st, noon
Brown Bag Lunch

on Fountain Square
See Letter to the Editor



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



A consortium of leaders from within the community of reason recently endorsed the idea of a National Day of Reason. This observance will be held in parallel with the National Day of Prayer, on the first Thursday in May (1 May 2003). The goal of this effort is to celebrate reason - a concept all Americans can support - and to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into the private sphere of worship. (For more information go to www.nationaldayofreason.org)

The Cincinnati FIG Board of Directors discussed this event at our last meeting. We enthusiastically support a National Day of Reason and discussed what we might do locally to get the word out. We decided to place an ad in "CityBeat" the weekly newspaper and voted to allocate \$250 for this purpose. Since then, members have contributed another \$250. This will purchase an advertisement covering one-quarter of a page. We would like to publicize this event and give FIG some presence in the community with a bigger ad and are asking for contributions from members to help defray the costs. A half page ad costs \$869; please be one of fifteen people to send in \$25 or seven to send in \$50 or--- (you get the idea) and help us spread the word. Send contributions to: FIG, P.O. Box 8128, Cinti, OH 45208 by 4/22/03.

In addition, come join your fellow FIG members for a brown bag lunch on Fountain Square, on Thursday, May 1st at noon to celebrate this day; we'll be the ones deep in rational thought.

I.D.

FIG Leaves Annual Subscription: \$10

Annual Membership

Includes a year of FIG Leaves
Regular \$25 Family \$35
Patron \$50 Sustaining \$100

Donations are tax-deductible.

Please send all contributions to:
Free Inquiry Group, Inc.
P.O. Box 8128
Cincinnati, OH 45208

FIG proudly announces that it has become an affiliate of the American Humanist Association. Please see AmericanHumanist.org for more information about the organization.

FIG Leaves Volume 12, Issue 4, April 2003 - 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, Inez Klein, Bryan Sellers and FIG Leaves Editor: Idelle Datlof.

FIG Leaflets

By combining mysticism and useful beliefs in parables and symbolic forms, our ancestors' myths have conveyed the essence of the spiritual aspects of our cultures from generation to generation. Whether centered on trees, animals, or supernatural parents, they have given meaning to our lives and, to varying degrees, they have given us comforting, imagined control over the world in which we find ourselves. The Encyclopedia of Psychology describes the origins of magical thought as follows:

"Although modern society places great emphasis on the importance of rational thinking, research suggests that human beings today are as prone to magical thought as were their primitive ancestors. There seems to be a universal inclination to infer symbolic and meaningful relationships among objects and events, and an inability or a disinclination to properly evaluate the experiences upon which these inferences are based. While occultisms reflect an attempt, through magical thinking, to understand the workings of nature, they operate by and large outside conscious awareness, and often may serve the needs to increase personal power and to find solace in the face of existential anxiety. It is unlikely that human beings will ever be free of such needs or of the propensity for magical thought. Occultisms will in all likelihood always be with us in one guise or another, waxing when social organization is undergoing rapid change leading to widespread anxiety, and waning during periods of social stability."

Whether from dreams or otherwise, creating beliefs to satisfy our emotional needs is the fundamental source of friction between our intellect and our emotions. Understanding this biological reality is fundamental to understanding the biology of belief. It explains why faith systems are disturbed by the relentless pursuit of objective knowledge by science, and why so many scientists ignore religion. Moreover, it explains why faith systems have been both destructive and helpful. Peace of mind has its price. By denying reason and requiring faith as payment for peace of mind, subjective belief systems are free to indulge any prejudice, imagine any enemy, and demand any retribution from which no one is safe.

From a review by David Boccagna, Ph.D of "The Biology of Belief" by Joseph Giovannoli

Maybe the Climate Up North Isn't So Bad?

In a recent survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in Washington, only 30 percent of Canadians said religion was very important to them, compared with 59 percent of Americans. And 21 percent of Canadians said they attended religious services regularly in another survey taken in 2000 - about half the rate for Americans, although a bit higher than the rate for most of Western Europe.

The statistics would be far more skewed if it were not for the growing number of devout Muslim, Sikh and Hindu immigrants to Canada. In Martel's city of Montreal - crowned by a giant illuminated cross atop Mount Royal commemorating the piety of its founder, Paul de Chomedey de Maisonneuve - church attendance is plummeting so fast that at least 18 churches in the last three years have been boarded up and abandoned or converted into condominiums and, in one case, a pizza parlor. Meanwhile, rural churches are closing across the western prairies.

"This is a society where religion no longer wields cultural authority," wrote Marguerite Van Die, a theology professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

Politics And Religion

In stark contrast with American presidents, Canadian prime ministers rarely, if ever, speak in religious terms. They avoid being photographed attending church.

It would be almost unthinkable for a prime minister to say "God Bless Canada." It was not until after Pierre Trudeau died that Canadians learned that their former prime minister was a devout Catholic.

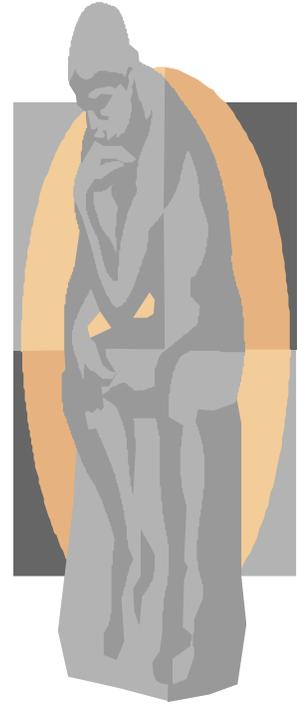
Trudeau was a champion of keeping government out of the bedroom, and most Canadian politicians have followed that example. The few Canadian politicians who have raised abortion as an issue have suffered at the polls for doing so, even in conservative provinces such as Alberta.

Although widening in recent years, Canadian scholars note, the divergence about religious content in Canadian and American societies goes back to different colonial pasts.

The Puritans who came to the New World in the 17th century as religious refugees never considered colonizing Canada's eastern coast, because it was French and Roman Catholic.

"Gulf Growing Between U.S., Canada About Religion"
Excerpted from The New York Times, April 6, 2003

National Day of Reason



Thursday May 1

A consortium of leaders from within the community of reason recently endorsed the idea of a National Day of Reason. This observance will be held in parallel with the National Day of Prayer, on the first Thursday in May (1 May 2003). The goal of this effort is to celebrate reason - a concept all Americans can support - and to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into our private lives.

Think it over!
To find out more about local groups that promote rational discussion of human issues and celebrate the moral basis of a secular society,

contact: The Free Inquiry Group at www.figeditor@choice.net or leave a message at (513) 557-3836.

FIG Meeting, March 25, 2003

Subject: Secular U

Humanism Defined – and Distinguished

Speaker: Tom Flynn, Editor of Free Inquiry magazine

Tom Flynn 's purpose in this address was "to define secular humanism in a way that makes clear the relationship to neighboring life stances such as atheism, agnosticism, and religious humanism – in the process shedding light on the Council for Secular Humanism and its unique mission."

Do the differences among these groups matter? Additionally, from a political perspective is this a compelling reason why more than a dozen national secular humanist, religious humanist, atheist, and freethought organizations all need to exist in the United States?

Does secular humanism merit an organization all its own? That is to ask whether secular humanism brings something to the marketplace of ideas that other life stances fail to provide?

At this point Tom introduced the concept of "unique selling proposition". Rosser Reeves, an advertising executive, coined this phrase. He meant a distinctive and meaningful characteristic that only one among a cluster of competitors exhibit. It's the thing that makes your message or product different from any other. Applying this concept to the situation the freethought movement faces, if secular humanism exhibits such a characteristic, then that would justify its existence as a separate life stance and demonstrate the need for a dedicated organization.

He went on to say that he felt that secular humanism's "unique selling proposition" lay in the balance it strikes between cognitive and emotional/affective commitments. Paul Kurtz captures this when he identifies knowledge (cognitive) and courage and caring (affective) as key secular humanist virtues...

Secular humanism derives its cognitive thrust from its naturalistic worldview, and its affective thrust from its positive ethical outlook. Each aspect is essential to secular humanism and effectively distinguishes it from religious humanism and simple atheism as well.

When atheists and agnostics adopt positive ethics they do so for reasons independent of their atheism or agnosticism. Neither atheism nor agnosticism inherently implies any particular ethical stance. By the same token, when religious

humanists defend naturalism they do so for reasons outside the boundaries of their religious humanism. Religious humanism is as silent regarding epistemological rigor as pure atheism or agnosticism is regarding ethical compassion. Only for secular humanists do both commitments – naturalism and ethical compassion – arise integrally from within the life stance.

That doesn't mean that secular humanists are not atheists. It's just that their atheism does not exhaust the meaning of their humanist commitment. In contrast to simple atheism, secular humanism affirms an ethical system that is:

- rooted in the world of experience;
- objective; and
- " equally accessible to every human who cares to inquire into value issues.

Some religionists accuse atheists of having no value systems. Tom said that most atheists he knows have strong value systems. But atheism is only a position on the existence of a god. In and of itself, it falls short of being a comprehensive life stance.

He went on to characterize agnostics as people who doubt a god's existence on epistemological grounds and freethinkers as people who engage in systematic, rational criticism of religious doctrine. But concluded that they were no more morally self-sufficient than pure atheism. Like pure atheism or pure agnosticism, pure freethought leads to no particular ethical position. Secular humanism is unique among all those life stances in that it contains within itself all the raw materials needed to construct value systems that are both realistic and humane.

Secular humanism asserts a rational ethics based on human experience. It is "consequentialist" meaning that ethical choices are judged by their results. Secular humanist ethics appeals to science, reason and experience to justify its ethical principles. Human happiness and social justice are the larger goals of secular humanist ethics.

Philosopher Owen Flanagan describes ethics as "systematic inquiry into the conditions that permit humans to flourish." These conditions include freedom from want and fear, freedom of conscience, freedom to inquire, freedom to self-govern, etc. Secular humanism seeks to emancipate individuals from the political control of repressive regimes, the ecclesiastical control of organized religion and even

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such social controls as family and cultural expectations, conventional morality, and the tyranny of the village. This does not mean that anything goes but rather that social and political limits on human freedom must be justified by the individual and social benefits they confer.

Tom maintains that his claim here is that secular humanism covers more of the waterfront than either pure atheism or religious humanism. Secular humanism is a hybrid life stance – a synthesis. It blends the influence of atheism and freethought from which secular humanism draws its cognitive component...and religious humanism from which it derives its emotional/affective component.

Turning to the historical antecedents of what we have today in secular humanism, it is hard to say precisely when the synthesis occurred. Atheism and freethought have existed in their modern forms since the early 19th century. Religious humanism emerged from Christian liberalism in mid-19th century. The movement now known as religious humanism proclaimed itself when 33 Unitarian ministers, philosopher Roy Wood Sellars, John Dewey and other signatories issued the Humanist Manifesto I in 1933, followed in 1941 by the founding of the American Humanist Association.

Although the term secular humanism appeared prior to 1961 no organization existed to advocate it until Paul Kurtz, Gordon Stein and others founded the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism in 1980. Including "democratic" in the name distinguished this organization from and showed opposition to totalitarian nontheism as in the communist world. The word was dropped from the name in 1996 when the fall of world communism made the distinction unnecessary.

Tom next addressed the question: "Is secular humanism a religion?" The obvious answer is "No," because it lacks essential characteristics of a religion. Every day usage assumes that religion has to do with a god or gods, life eternal and supernatural claims. He succinctly defined religion as "a life stance that includes at minimum a belief in the existence and fundamental importance of a realm transcending that of ordinary experience."

Some people claim to be religious humanists even though they have no right to call themselves that. Tom suggested that there were probably three principal processes that might make religious humanism a more popular option than it actually is.

The first process is improperly ascribing the

word religious to a secularized "spirituality" from which any hint of transcendence has been expelled. These people are not religious, at least in the rigorous pre-Deweyan sense of the word. If they want to speak with any degree of accuracy, then religious humanist misstates their position.

The second process is less edifying. Some find it a useful way to avoid having to admit their unbelief. If they don't believe in a god or eternal life, they are undoubtedly going to be unpopular, even reviled, in some quarters of American life. It is a best counterproductive to deny what they really are.

The third process that causes the prevalence of religious humanism to be exaggerated is the practice of humanists to retain certain forms that echo congregational life. They gather on Sunday mornings, observe rituals, focus their charitable activity within the community of belief, mark rites of passage, etc. But it is deceptive to take any of this as sufficient evidence that a person –or group – is religious.

The split between humanists who embrace humanist ceremonial and those who scorn it is not a split between secular and religious humanism; it belongs in some other spectrum. When we confuse genuine religiosity –transcendentalism – with mere taste for ceremonial, we misrepresent both and run the risk that secular humanists holding solidly naturalistic worldviews will mislocate themselves in the religious humanist camp solely because they savor ritual.

In conclusion he stated that because it lacks any reliance on (or acceptance of) the transcendent, secular humanism is not –and cannot be – a religion. By calling secular humanism a religion, the Christian Right activists hope to bar modern science, evolutionary theory, sex education, nonbiblical values, and pedagogical innovation from public schools.

When viewed from this perspective, there is no denying how important it is that secular humanists be unambiguously firm in upholding that their life stance is non-religious.

Tom concluded with a definition he wrote for Free Inquiry magazine:

"Secular humanism is a comprehensive non-religious life stance that incorporates a naturalistic philosophy, a cosmic outlook rooted in science, and a consequentialist ethical system."

George Maurer



BOOK REVIEW

Ancient Encounters: Kennewick Man and the First Americans

by James C. Chatters
(New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001)

On 27 July 1996 two teenage boys found a skull on the shore of the Columbia River in the town of Kennewick, Washington. The next day the author of this book, a forensic anthropologist, was invited to look at the skull. With his and others' searching over the next few days additional parts of a male skeleton were found at the same location. All these old bones had clearly weathered out of the riverbank. The remains looked more like a European skeleton and unlike any paleo-American native. But then, preliminary investigation showed it to be some 9300 years old. A Cascade Point confirmed dating, an ancient arrow point embedded in the man's thighbone. How could a modern European skeleton exist on the West Coast long before the present Indian tribes had entered the area?

Until recently Chatters was the only anthropologist who had a chance to examine the skeleton in some detail. These are his very preliminary findings and the story of the fight over the Kennewick bones. The fight developed almost immediately between the local Umatilla Indians, the Army Corps of Engineers that had jurisdiction over the find site, and the community of science of paleo-anthropologists. It is a riveting story.

At issue is NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, passed in 1990. This law permits Native Americans to claim any archaeological find which may belong to their ancestors. Generally, Indians who make use of this act will rebury the remains and prevent a scientific assessment. This is what the leaders of the Umatilla wanted to do. Contrary to their claim, the Kennewick skeleton is not likely to be an ancestor of the Umatilla, because the man died long before this Indian tribe moved into the U. S. Northwest. Or so the science evidence says.

The Umatilla religion, and that of most

American Indians, elaborates a Creation story in which Mother Earth brought forth the Tribe. Indian religion does not accept the scientific inference that ancestors of the Indians crossed the Bering Straight and migrated into North America -- they were created right here where they live now. So the Umatilla claim on Kennewick Man had a religious justification, and in turn was needed to confirm their religious tenets. Chatter's science in consequence met with considerable hostility from the Indian representatives. Creationism Indian style proved no more tolerant than Christian pseudo-science.

The immediate outcome was that the Corps of Engineers, which had jurisdiction, sided with the Indians. The book provides evidence the Officers in Charge had no use for science, anthropologists, or the separation of religion and state in this case. Most of all, the Corps had met with various cases of Indian resistance, and did not need any more grief. Compared to the trouble Indians could make, the local scientists had little power. The Corps promptly buried the riverbank site, to make sure no more bones could found, or any excavations proceed.

It took some time for the national community of physical anthropologists to rally to the side of Chatters. The Kennewick find is of major importance for understanding the earliest settlement and the settlers of North America. As such things go in this country, the whole mess landed in court, while the bones were sequestered from all parties. The book ends with the first court examinations of the issue.

The book is a good read on two scores; the first is the interaction of intolerant Native American religion with the needs of science. Of further interest is the narrative of the nature of this skeleton, and the preliminary findings and speculations about what it means for American pre-history and settlement.

Since the book was published, the case made its way slowly through the court system. In August 2002 a federal judge reviewed some 20,000 pages of documents and decided for the scientists. They are to receive time to study and measure the material, to try to recover DNA for tests, before the bones go to the Native Americans.

— Wolf Roder



Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
Massimo Pigliucci
Department of Botany,
University of Tennessee

N. 35, April 2003

Whence animal rights?

This column can be posted for free on any appropriate web site and reprinted in hard copy by permission. If you are interested in receiving the html code or the text, please send an email (skeptic@rationallyspeaking.org). Or, you can subscribe (free) to the Rationally Speaking announcements list.

Do animals have rights? Just posing the question is likely to draw reactions ranging from outright scorn for the idea to very passionate appeals in defense of non-human living species. It seems to me that this is a crucial question because of what it says about how we intend to treat the environment in which we live. Yet, it is a question that opens up endless avenues of discussion that may not necessarily lead one towards a simple answer.

To begin with, as I have argued in this column before, “rights” are not a feature of the natural world, but rather an entirely human construct. That, of course, doesn’t mean they are not interesting or important. Democracy is also a human construct, but its existence or lack thereof affects the lives of billions on the planet. The fact that rights are a human construct, however, means that we cannot appeal to the laws of nature to defend any particular viewpoint about them.

One could then construe the idea of animal rights as reflecting our acknowledgment that we live in a complex world that we share with other creatures, and that these other creatures should not be considered as pure means for our ends (in perfectly Kantian fashion, for the philosophically inclined). I am going to assume that all but the most callous individuals will

agree to this rather mild statement. But we are just beginning to unravel the complexity: what should the extent of these “rights” be, to what range of other species should we extend them, and using what criteria?

Clearly, here opinions soon diverge radically. Consider individuals who choose a vegetarian life style in order not to harm other living creatures. There are several styles of vegetarianism, from people who don’t want anything to do with any animal product whatsoever (including eggs, cheese, etc.), to people who are comfortable eating some animals, for example invertebrates (shrimp, clams), or even some vertebrates (fish). Furthermore, the motivations for being a vegetarian may also range enormously. Some feel this is a matter of not using other living creatures for our ends (however biologically justified this may appear to be), while others object to human practices of animal husbandry and are content when eating free-range or otherwise “humanely” raised animals, even chickens.

None of these positions is intrinsically irrational (though some may lead to a few internal contradictions when pushed to the limit), and there doesn’t seem to be a way to decide among them according to purely logical criteria. For example, one common thread emerging from the consideration of the range of vegetarianism is that people seem to apply a rough biological criterion to their choices: the spectrum from vegans to people that eat free-ranging chickens could be interpreted as a continuum along evolutionary time (species that diverged early on from us, like plants, are OK to eat, those more closely related to humans, like most vertebrates, are not allowed). Or it could represent an assessment based on the degree of complexity of each species’ nervous systems (most invertebrates, except squids and octopuses, are really dumb and it is difficult to think of them as having feelings, but dogs and even cats clearly seem to have them).

I am not saying that people consciously think in terms of evolution (heck, remember that about half of Americans don’t actually believe in it!) or neurobiology, but they seem to feel that those are reasonable criteria. The difference

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between different kinds of vegetarianism, and indeed even the one between vegetarians and meat-eaters (actually, omnivores, since nobody eats only meat) then becomes a question of where one chooses to draw the line in the sand of biological complexity. Few seem to want to draw the line at the boundary between the organic and inorganic worlds (i.e., refusing to eat even plants), but anything beyond that is rather arbitrary.

Arbitrary lines in the sand, of course, are not irrational to draw. We do it all the times in our lives, simply because the world is too complex to attempt to live without holding any belief or engaging in any behavior that is contradictory with others we also espouse. The real questions seem to be: first, what criteria should we agree upon to sensibly talk about animal (or human, or plant) rights? Second, and once we have answered the previous question, how do we negotiate as a society where that line in the sand is best drawn?

The problem that many people are likely to find with this approach is that it doesn't fit simplistic positions: vegetarians, for example, can't simply claim that eating animal flesh is immoral without being willing to do the additional work of answering the two questions posed above. They don't get to hold the high moral ground by default (I am aware, of course, that the question of animal rights is much broader than just vegetarians vs. meat-eaters, but this particular debate well illustrates the broader issues). Omnivores, on the other hand, can't just reject the other side's position as silly, or they will logically be faced with uncomfortable questions of their own (so, if it is OK to eat animals, what about your dog? Chimps?)

I don't pretend to have an answer, but I think it is important to pose the questions more broadly and invite a less emotional discussion to take place. For the record, I do eat meat, but I object to the treatment of animals by the large meat-producing companies that run most of the business in modern Western societies.

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Georgia House Votes to Change State Flag

Wednesday April 9, 2003 5:40 AM

ATLANTA (AP) - The Georgia House voted Tuesday to change the state flag and set up a possible referendum on the Confederate battle emblem.

If the Senate also approves the bill, Georgia would take down the current flag, which was changed in 2001 to shrink the rebel cross. The replacement flag would feature the state seal on a blue field in the top left corner, with three red-and-white stripes and the words "In God We Trust" to the right.

The new design is similar to the national flag of the Confederacy, rather than the more familiar battle flag.

From the AP

Join our fellow Humanists at the next meeting of the local Cincinnati chapter of The American Humanist Association:

Thursday, May 1 at 7P.M.

First Unitarian Church 536
Linton Street (corner of
Reading Road) Cincinnati,
OH

Call Joan Gilmore for info.