

FIG LEAVES

Volume 13 Issue 1

January 2004

January Meeting: Tuesday, 27 January,

Cooperation with The Interfaith Alliance

Speakers: Tommie Thompson and Dr. Richard Bozian

On January 27, at 7 PM at the Vernon Manor, Tommie Thompson and Dr. Richard Bozian will tell us about The Interfaith Alliance and why FIG should cooperate with it.

With over 150,000 members drawn from more than 70 faith traditions --and those with none at all-- the Interfaith Alliance has local groups in 38 states, including one here in Cincinnati. Their website contains the following excerpts:

We actively challenge those, such as the Religious Right, who foster intolerance and degrade the value of a multi-faith nation, instead protecting religious integrity in America by affirming the duty of people of faith and good will to promote the healing and positive role of religion in public life.

On Capitol Hill, through community and online activism, and by focusing media coverage, we work to safeguard religious liberty, ensure civil rights, restore good government, strengthen the public education system, eradicate poverty, and champion a safe and clean environment.

We work toward a religiously diverse and pluralistic society, wherein people of all faiths — and those who identify with no faith — are welcome, and no one faith receives preferential treatment. We reject the use of religion as a political weapon, and refute any claim that the only true national vision is that of a Christian America.

The Interfaith Alliance works to ensure that no American is discriminated against on the basis of religion, race, creed, ethnicity, color, gender, age, or sexual orientation. [www.interfaithalliance.org]

Tommie Thompson and Dick Bozian co-facilitate the local chapter of The Interfaith Alliance. Dick is also a member of FIG. He has spoken to us several times over the years, particularly on subjects connected with addiction.

Tuesday, 24 February, Gene Kritsky

The Life and Times of Charles Darwin

February 12 is the birthday of Charles Darwin. In remembrance of this event on February 24 Gene Kritsky, Ph.D, will speak to us on Darwin's life and times. This will include an illustrated commentary on the importance of the Galapagos research done by Darwin. Dr. Kritsky is a professor in the Department of Biology at the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati. Our thanks to Helen Kagin for inviting him to talk to us.

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January Potluck

Tuesday, 13, January
6:30 PM at the home of

January Meeting

Tuesday, 27 January
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

February Potluck

Tuesday, 10, February
6:30 PM at the home of

February Meeting

Tuesday, 24 February
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati



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DECEMBER MEETING:

The Term Bright: A Good or Bad Idea?

Speakers: Edwin Kagin and George Maurer

The original announcement in December's Fig Leaves gave the speakers as Edwin Kagin and Joe Levee. For the benefit of those persons who were unable to attend this meeting, it should be noted that Joe was prevented from delivering his side of the discussion by an eye problem that cropped up shortly before the meeting date. He asked George Maurer to stand in for him.

Edwin started by relating how the origin of the term bright as a descriptive term to identify persons who had a naturalistic worldview came about. He told how he had attended a meeting of the Council for the Community of Reason representing Camp Quest on March 1, 2003, during which Paul Geisert presented a power point display he and his wife, Mynga Futtrell had developed. According to Paul, the idea came to him at the Godless Americans March on Washington, which took place the previous November. He viewed the designation godless with distaste. So the idea came to him to shop around for another word. After a long talk, he finally introduced the word bright as the concept he had arrived at.

Edwin conceded that in the beginning he had thought, "What a dumb idea." He then segued into Richard Dawkins concept of meme. In his book, *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins postulated the concept of meme, which he defines as cultural concepts that are transmitted from generation to generation. An example of a well known meme might be "Americanism" We know what it is but we don't necessarily know where it came from or how we got it.

Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist at an English university. He has endorsed the concept of bright in an article in *The Guardian* (a well-regarded newspaper, formerly *The Manchester Guardian*). This was followed by an endorsement by Daniel C. Dennet, a professor of philosophy at Tufts University, in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* on July 2, 2003.

Edwin went on to explain that the word bright is used as a noun. An analogous word he likened it to is the use of the word, gay. When the homosexual community was looking for a less clinical word to define themselves they hit upon the word gay. (This analogy is not completely without fault but that is another discussion).

The idea was to find a word that did not produce a negative reaction from other groups and organizations. It is to be a generic term meant to include any one who shares a common characteristic, namely, a worldview that is free of supernatural or mystical elements. As such, the term represents a neologism.

He went on to illustrate how many names are used to identify various groups who are generally subsumed under the general term freethinker starting off with atheist. He mentioned in passing that he is the Kentucky State Director of American Atheists and he is comfortable using the term



FIG Leaves - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in Electronic format via the internet - figleaves@fuse.net; on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 19034, Cincinnati, OH 45219. Contributions received before the first Friday 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 authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the editor or the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., its board, or officers.

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atheist to describe himself but he confessed that at one time he felt uncomfortable doing so. While speaking to Herb Silverman's group in Charleston, S.C., he called himself an atheist and from that time on his discomfort disappeared.

Other terms people use to identify themselves are agnostic, non-theist, humanist, secular humanist, Buddhist, Unitarian, etc. To a greater or lesser degree all of these people do not subscribe to a supernatural worldview and it is the only thing that they have in common.

Brights does not now have the emotional overtones or the baggage that some of these other terms carry. Some of the most vocal opposition to the adoption of the term bright comes from atheists who view the use of the term as a cop-out. As an illustration of the emotional reaction of some people to these terms, he cited the experience of one of FIG's members, Inez Klein. She was shopping at a supermarket while wearing a Camp Quest T-shirt. Another shopper approached her and admired the color and the illustrations on the shirt. She went on to ask what the shirt stood for and was told by Inez that it advertised a camp for the children of Secular Humanists. The women went ballistic and put as much distance between herself and Inez as she could all the while crying out "Jesus is Lord!"

However, the use of bright can be useful in a political sense. A community of brights could be viewed by politicians as a voting bloc. Edwin concluded by saying that the term is there for use. He conceded that there may be other words that would be better but he doesn't know of any. And people are not forced to use it if they don't want to. But, we should be aware that it is an option and we can use it if and when we need to. He then turned the podium over to George.

George started by explaining why he was speaking instead of Joe Levee.

He made a point of crediting Joe with all the research, which as he said had a good feature and a bad feature. The good was that he didn't have to do the research but that bad feature was that as a result of not having done the research himself he didn't have the time to get into the argument as much as he would have liked.

Michael Shermer of the Skeptics Society has done some promotion of the use of the term bright as a substitute for the various terms used to describe our lack of belief in a supernatural deity (such terms as humanist, atheist, secular humanist, freethinker, agnostic, unbeliever, to name a few). He did not at the outset ask for feedback, but although he didn't ask for it, he got it. And most of it was negative. Among the most cogent was a letter from a scientist in Conway, Mass. I would like to read a portion of his e-mail because it touches on many of the things that I will be citing.

Letter:

I am a long time reader of Michael Shermer's material in and subscriber to The Skeptic nearly from its inception etc. (that is to say, I am a 55 year old scientist/humanist/atheist since my early twenties and I've thought about these things for many years) and I am pained to tell you that your choice of the term bright as the one to promote is a horrible one.

I agree entirely and enthusiastically with your enterprise and reasoning that goes into it, but I am dumbfounded that [it] will do nothing more than expose us to ridicule and engender hostility in those who do not agree with our worldview. . .

Never mind all that stuff about "bright" meaning "cheerful and lively". . . "the light of science and reason". . . "tolerance for all". . . and so forth. Consider two facts: (1) In the popular idiom "bright" as applied to people means, "smart." (2) Believers in God (and etc.) really resent us already because we have the gall to reject their most cherished beliefs and that people like them must be morons if they believe as they do.

I can't believe that you folks are this far out of touch. You are, despite your worthy intentions, doing all of us a great disservice and you can only wind up setting our cause back. Which we do not need.

I find the fact that a number of you have decided to label people like me "The Brights" to be embarrassing. I haven't thought of a better term to use but there have got to be many. Can't you . . . make an effort to get some kind of input from a large number of us? Get some larger sampling of opinion on this. It's too good an idea to screw up with that horrendous choice of a label.

Okay Bright Boys (ugh)
Sincerely and regretfully
Joseph Giandalone, Conway, MA

One of the common objections is that the term bright does not tell who we are. It is intended to describe someone who has a specific worldview, namely, naturalism, yet, it doesn't say that. It has to be explained. Humanist and Secular Humanist has some of the same problem, but atheist doesn't.

Another objection to the term is that whether it is intended or not, it implies that we are smarter than people who do not have the same viewpoint as we do. Here's another quote from one of Michael Shermer's readers:

In my opinion it (bright) is a bad choice of words and will cause the secular humanist movement more harm than good which can hardly be considered a bright thing to do. My choice of words is "rationalist." It conveys the purpose, method and goals of the movement without insulting anyone. (Person not identified).

It seems off-putting to introduce yourself as a bright, even before you tell them that it really means you are an atheist. We certainly have a problem picking a name: atheist, humanist, secular humanist, freethinker, nonbeliever, even eupraxopher. This may be best exemplified by the reactions of some to the suggestions that bright be

Put one and two together please!



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adopted to account for a multitude of nonbelievers with slightly different approaches to their unbelief. For example, Ben McIntyre confessed in The Times of London,

I shall not be coming out as a Bright just yet. For a start, the term secular humanist may be old-fashioned but it is still serviceable and mercifully doesn't sound like something dreamed up as an advertising gimmick. It has the added advantage that the Radical Right in America already loathes it, so it must be just fine. The term Bright seems too all-embracing for so many shades of doubt and uncertainty.

This sounds like grist for a stand-up comic at a humanist conference: Question: How many Brights does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Look it's not that I have anything against light bulbs in general, in fact I think they're a good idea- but changing it is going to be counterproductive, and simply implies to the public that we just can't handle the darkness.

And now for a few statistics:

Matt Cooper, Associate Director of the Skeptics Society (based upon his experience as a marketing consultant and political activist) pointed out that it is not the philosophy of the movement that is being debated, but the brand name. This is a branding issue not an ideological issue. And the scientific approach to branding is to conduct focus groups and marketing tests to see what works. Unfortunately this was never done for the bright brand, and as a consequence we are now embroiled in a bright brouhaha. As a start Matt and Michael Shermer analyzed all of the e-mails they had received in response to the second e-Skeptic which had solicited feedback and followed that up with a focus group study.

There were a total of 89 respondents (admittedly a small number for statistical significance). The results were as follows:

1. 3 had no position, just commented on the process 3%
2. 23 offered an alternative name (no comment on brights) 26%
3. 37 negative on brights, offered alternative name 42%
4. 18 were negative on brights, no alternative 20%
5. 8 were positive on brights 9%

There were 124 suggested alternatives to brights but the majority of these could hardly be considered an improvement.

The focus was assembled from 13 attendees at Skeptics Society Distinguished Science Lecture. These 13 were not told the nature of the focus group but were asked several questions. They were given a list of names culled from the e-mail respondents and asked to identify the names they liked the most. Among the results: 62% favored Freethinkers; 46% favored Inquirers; 31% favored Open Minders; 31% favored Skeptics; and 23% favored Seekers and Thinkers. They were also asked to identify their least favorite and 69% chose Brights; 54% chose Seculars; and Secular Humanists 69%.

In citing these statistics we need to bear in mind the sample was exceedingly small and as a result has no statistical significance but it does point up the need for getting feedback from any group's membership as to what kind of designation satisfies them. That idea was suggested as desirable to Mynga Futtrell and Paul Geisert before they launched their promotion of brights. However, they viewed it was an undesirable process. They claim social movements are best not driven by committee and executive discussions, after all freethinkers, humanists, and skeptics have been talking about the labeling problem for decades. Futtrell and Geisert wish to move forward with the goal of making it happen by momentum and force of personality.

Unfortunately, there is not enough space to include comments from the audience. It is worth saying that this was a session with the strongest audi-

Quote

I think if I ever hear the "God didn't make Adam and Steve" argument again I'll be sick. As a gay black man I stopped going to church because I always managed to go on that one day of the year when the preacher would give his annual you-all-are-going-to-hell-for-laying-down-with-another-man-sermon. I just couldn't take it anymore.

— E. Lynn Harris in Savoy (May 2003) p. 62

. Unquote

Quote

If you are looking for a deeper or hidden motive on my part, I'm afraid I can't be of much help. If anything, my attitudes are based on a rather lifelong antipathy to believing anything without evidence. As a kid I was more or less kicked out of Sunday school because of my argumentativeness and resistance to accepting things on faith. Scientific ways of thinking about things, however, have always appealed to me, and I feel no need to believe much of anything. Belief is really irrelevant to science. Its truth status doesn't consist of belief and doesn't depend on belief.

— Arthur R. Jensen in Frank Miele, Intelligence, Race, and Genetics (2002) p. 32

. Unquote



Is the United States really a "religious" country?

I heard something very irritating on the BBC World Service on the radio early this morning as I was bumbling around in waking-up mode. In beginning a feature on the religious avowals being made by all nine Democratic presidential candidates, the reporter said "The United States is a deeply devout country..." I gave a kind of mental yowl of disgust and rage. It is not! It does have a lot of religious believers in it, to be sure, but the figure is not hundred percent yet! And it is possible to ignore the stuff most of the time. Really it is. People who've never been here will hear that kind of thing and imagine that every other building is a church, priests and nuns lock up pregnant women and keep them imprisoned for years on end, contraceptives and divorce are unavailable, the streets are clogged with people crossing themselves or shoving Bibles in your face...It's not that bad yet! There is an enormous amount of religious nonsense flying around, especially in political rhetoric, but there are also huge swaths of the public realm that are entirely free of it. You can go to the supermarket and buy some pasta sauce and oranges without getting a sermon at the checkout counter. You can go to the post office and get stamps without being asked to pray with the clerk. There are no muezzins yelling into the air five times a day. Hey, supermarkets are even open on Sunday - in that way we're far more secular than the UK is.

The fact is, the degree of our "devoutness" gets badly exaggerated. I don't even know any devout people. Of course I only know about three people, so that doesn't prove much, but still - those three people don't know any devout people either, and none of their friends do, and, and . . .

No, but seriously. It is exaggerated. I don't know why - it's probably partly the usual maddening way that Democrats fall all over themselves to imitate Republicans. Bush II is a religious zealot and some people like and approve of that, so instead of offering us an actual alternative to that way of doing things, the Democrats do their level best to give us more of the same. Well, why bother having two parties then? Why not just drop the pretense and have one?

But why entities like the Beeb feel compelled to help them is beyond me.

"Deeply devout" indeed - two hurrah words when they could have been two neutral or even two boo words. "Devout" - that makes it sound so nice, doesn't it. Humble, loyal, grateful, all those good things. But there are other ways of looking at it, other adjectives that could have been used.

— off the Internet, by Souvlaki[?], 4 January 2004

Quote

• Oh, mercy. If it catches you in the
• wrong frame of mind, the King
• James Bible can make you want
• to drink poison in no uncertain
• terms.

— Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poison-wood Bible* (1998)

Unquote

Caught off the Internet.

Now that we have all celebrated Christmas and Channukah and Kwanzaa appropriately and with small fanfare, I would like to write in support of our Anticlaus. Anticlaus promotes the idea that we ought not to celebrate Christmas, because it is a religious holiday, and unbelievers really should not get involved in festivities which commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. All this despite the fact we know it is not his birthday, and in any case there is even doubt he ever existed at all, and if he did, he was a Jewish pharisee and sage, who had nothing to do with the founding of the Christian myth.

The interesting thing is that Anticlaus finds support among those who consider themselves truly believers, i.e. the fundamentalist evangelical types. Here is what the Life and Liberty Ministries of Petersburg in Virginia have to say: "Let us not set aside Yahweh's feasts in favor of pagan leftovers." He then goes on to quote Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (5:8)

Therefore let us not keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

I'm not sure what this has to do with it, but apparently the minister thinks Paul

is against Christmas too. I think the context indicates he is against sin, but who could think that of Paul. Columbia Christians for Life in South Carolina chime in on the same website:

I do not observe Christmas as I believe it is not a Christian holiday in its origins [he is right!] or in much of its worldly practice, though many Christians see it as a time to celebrate Jesus' birth. From what I understand, Jesus was most likely born around the time of the Feast of Tabernacles [Leviticus 23:34] which is celebrated according to the Jewish lunar, biblical calendar around our modern-day months of September and October.

That reference to Leviticus tells you when to celebrate the feast of booths, but nothing about the birth of any Jesus. He goes on to quote from that byword for sadness and lamentations, Jeremiah, specifically 10:2-5. Unlike on the website, I'm using the slightly better English of the Revised Standard Version:

Thus says the Lord: "Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are false. A tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. Men deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried for they cannot walk. Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good."

That first sentence sounds like telling us not to pay attention to any stars appearing in the East near or over some place called Bethlehem. But the rest of the story seems to have Christmas dead to rights, none of these "green trees" from the forest or any decking them with silver and gold. Fastening the tree so it cannot move, on the other hand, strikes me as a pretty good idea, for who wants his Christmas tree to fall down and start a fire? Actually, the whole verse has nothing to do with Christmas, but with worshiping idols carved of wood.

There you have it. All right thinkers are against feasting on Christmas. Now, pass the turkey.



BOOK REVIEW

The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror

by Bernard Lewis

(New York: The Modern Library, 2003)

On 23 February 1998 the Arabic language London newspaper Al-Quds al-'Arabi published a declaration of war. Over the signatures of Osama bin Laden and jihad leaders in Egypt, Pakistan, and Bangladesh it stated:

Since God laid down the Arabian peninsula, created its desert, and surrounded it with its seas, no calamity has ever befallen it like these Crusader hosts that have spread in it like locusts, crowding the soil, eating its fruits, and destroying its verdure, and this at a time when the nations contend against the Muslims like diners jostling around a bowl of food. (p. xxiv)

The declaration goes on to lay out the grievances under three headings. First, that the United States is occupying the lands of Islam. Second, the aggression launched from holy Arabia against Iraq [meaning the 1991 war], and Third, the religious and economic support for the petty state of the Jews and their occupation of Jerusalem. These crimes are a "clear declaration of war by the Americans against God, His Prophet, and the Muslims." (p. xxvi) Thus it is their general obligation:

to kill Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim who is able, in any country where this is possible, until the Aqsa mosque [in Jerusalem] and the Har m mosque [in Mecca] are freed from their grip, and until their armies, shattered and broken-winged, depart from all the lands of Islam, incapable of threatening any Muslim. (p. xxvii)

Bernard Lewis' book is an explanation how the Muslims, most of them not Arabs, arrived at the need for a holy war against the Crusaders and Jews, and the Christian West generally.

Throughout much of their history the Muslims could see themselves as the center of civilization. Until the First World War southwest Asia was part of an Islamic state. Even Egypt, though ruled by the British, remained nominally part of Ottoman Turkish domains. This last major Islamic power was defeated in 1918. Britain and France divided the Arab lands adding Syria and

Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Jordan to their existing colonies. The major resource of the region, the oil, was exploited by American and European companies. For 85 years or longer the Muslims have had to dance to the tune of the Crusaders.

For many Muslims the colonial period was an opportunity to acquire a Western education, to explore modern science and rationality, and in a few instances to become wealthy in trade and business. Many resented the yoke of colonial administration. Activists and leaders tended to seek allies among European nations against the ruling colonial powers. During the Second World War a few cooperated with Germany and Italy in the hope of an Axis victory. When that failed, others looked for an ally in the Soviet Union, which finally came to nothing as that nation disintegrated.

Throughout the colonial period the majority of Muslims looked to their religion for explanation and succor against colonial oppression. With all potential allies eliminated, a popular movement against the Crusaders was bound to arise. As the promise of secular European ideas failed to bring economic development, as newly independent states were ruled by corrupt dictators, a broad religious revival animated a majority. This revival rejected all that is Christian and modern, which was seen as most clearly represented by America, with all its perceived debauchery and degeneracy. "America had become the archenemy, the incarnation of evil, the diabolic opponent of all that is good, and specifically, for Muslims, of Islam." (p. 69)

The Islamic revival aims at restoring society to the greatness of the Islamic past. Islam does not call for a theocracy ruled by preachers. The Islamic vision expects a secular ruler who governs justly by the laws and traditions of the Koran. To that end he will be advised and willing to listen to the community of believers represented by the Ulema, those learned in the rights and wrongs of Islam.

— Wolf Roder

Quote •••••
• Since gods do not exist, just what is faith in god. •
• The use of ancient myths as a crutch to hobble into •
• the future. •
— Wolf •
••••• *Unquote*



January Meeting: Tuesday 27th 7 PM

January Potluck: Tuesday 13th 6:30 PM



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FIG

Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism and an affiliate of the American Humanist Association. We have applied to be also affiliated with the American Atheists. Our members are mostly secular humanists. However, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.

To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail figleaves@fuse.net, or leave a message at (513) 557-3836. Visit our web site at gofigger.org