

FIG LEAVES

Volume 19 Issue 3

March 2010

March FIG Meeting: Tues. 23 March 2010
at 7 PM

How to Talk about Humanism and Atheism

Presenters: Shawn Jeffers and John Welte

On February 26, the Secular Coalition of America, which includes leaders from national Atheist and Humanist groups, met with officials from the Obama Administration. Members of the religious right deemed that "hate groups" had been invited to the White House. Members from FIG and freethinking organizations hailed the significance of the coalition being invited to the White House. Two very different perspectives on the same event and while the religious right and FIG are unlikely to find much common ground, how are events such as these perceived by folks in the middle?

For our March meeting, we will explore how we can discuss issues relating to Humanism and Atheism to better promote our ideals. Through video clips and readings, we will explore how well know freethinkers such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Harvard's Humanist Chaplain Greg Epstein, Michael Shermer and others talk about their non-belief. These individuals run the gamut from outspoken criticism of religion to promoting a greater pluralism and provide an opportunity to analyze the positives and challenges presented by the various viewpoints. The presentation will conclude with an opportunity to explore what FIG stands for and how can we continue to change minds in the Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky area.

We Goofed!

We made a mistake in the February issue in our report on the talk by Judith Snyderman about the Right to Die Movement. There are not four legal cases pending against the Final Exit Network - there are two cases, but in each four members were arrested.

April Meeting

We will not have a Program Meeting in April, but invite FIG members to attend a Memorial Service for Helen Kagin, FIG Board Member and a Founder of Camp Quest. The Service has been scheduled for April 24 at Mt. Airy Forest and additional details will be available soon.

May Meeting, May 2nd

Save the Date of Sunday, May 2 for a presentation by Dr. Darrel Ray, author of *The God Virus: How Religion Infects Our Lives and Culture*. The provocative book explores the role of religion as it enters the lives of countless individuals, beginning in childhood and infecting their behavior, professions, sex lives, and virtually every aspect of living. Dr. Ray is also the founder of Recovering From Religion, an organization dedicated to helping people navigate the path out of religion. Location of meeting and Time To Be Announced.

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Events

March Meeting

Tuesday, March 23, 2010, 7 PM
Hannaford Suites Hotel

FIG Community Dinner

Join the FIG Gang for Dinner!
Tuesday, April 13, 2010, 6:30 PM
Bronte Bistro, 2692 Madison Rd.
Cincinnati, OH 45208
RSVP by 4/10 to Donna Loughry
961-7331 or dloughry@fuse.net.

April Memorial for Helen

April 24 at Mt. Airy Forest.
Additional details to be determined.

Directions to The Hannaford Suites Hotel,

- 5900 East Galbraith Rd.
- 1) Take Exit 12 onto Montgomery Rd.
 - 2) From the off Ramp at Exit 12:
From the North - Turn Left
From the South - Turn Right
 - 3) Continue on Montgomery Rd. to
East Galbraith Rd. Turn Left.
 - 4) After you go under I-71, turn right
into the driveway of the Hotel.



Helen Kagin Is Dead

Helen Kagin, my wife, and co-founder of Camp Quest, was pronounced dead at 6:55 pm. today, Wednesday, February 17, 2010, at Christ Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Helen underwent surgery for lung cancer on January 7, 2010 and never left the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). In conformity with her Living Will, and the opinions expressed to us by six physicians who strongly concurred, her daughter Caroline Good and I agreed that dialysis not be started when she went into renal failure. Helen had been on oxygen for some time, her lungs leaked air, she had developed fungal pneumonia, and systemic sepsis, her body had stopped making red blood cells, and she had suffered multiple systems failures that were incompatible with life. She had been unconscious for days. I know for a certainty that if she had decision making capacity, Helen would not have wanted to live on a ventilator and dialysis. Surrounded by family members, the ventilator was withdrawn and the life force that had been Helen departed within minutes. And she was dead.



Helen Kagin

Helen was born Helen McGregor Smith in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada on January 31, 1934. She attended Medical school at the University of Saskatchewan and came to Christ Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio as an Intern. She did her residence there, was employed as an anesthesiologist there, worked there until she retired, and she died there today. She was 76 years old. We celebrated her 76th Birthday in the ICU, but we do not know if she was aware of the signs, the cards, and the well wishers.

Helen was an accomplished athlete. She was a figure skater, an ice dancer, a hockey player, a softball player, a swimmer, a fencer, and a superb human being. She loved the Winter Olympics, and it is fitting indeed that she died during the Winter Olympics now being held in Canada.

Today is Ash Wednesday. Today is also the anniversary of the death of Freethought hero Giordano Bruno in 1600. Helen never did Ash Wednesday, and her death was far more gentle than that of Bruno.

Helen's body is now an empty shell, and it will be treated as such. The body will be picked up tomorrow by a funeral home and immediately cremated. The ashes will be given to her daughter Caroline, who has proved her very substantial character during these past few weeks. A celebration of Helen's remarkable life will be announced later.

And what a life it was! I am honored to have shared it with her for twenty-five years. She will be missed beyond my ability to say. She was the finest human being I have ever known.

If you would honor her accomplishments and memory, do not send flowers; do not send money to some charity.

Help send a kid to Camp Quest.

Edwin Kagin



FIG Leaves - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to figmessage at gofigger dot org; or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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Memberships run from:

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One year: \$25

Family: \$35

If you join during the year, you receive a \$2 discount for each month that has passed.

We request contributions above membership dues. Contributions are tax deductible.



In Memory Of Helen Kagin

A founder of fig and of Camp Quest, Helen Kagin participated in the establishment of FIG in 1991. She was on our first board of directors and continued as a board member up to her death on February 17, 2010. Helen made many valuable contributions to FIG over these 19 years. She was a wonderful, kind, caring person, and one of the most beloved members of FIG and of Camp Quest. This was illustrated by the call I recently received from my granddaughter, Mary Barczak. She was sobbing, having just heard that Helen had died. Mary had grown to love her over the many sessions of Camp Quest she had attended, beginning with the first one in 1996.

At a planning meeting in 1995, Helen and Edwin called for the founding of a secular summer camp. In the following year, Camp Quest was started as a project

of FIG at a facility located by Helen in Boone County, Kentucky. In 2002, FIG spun off Camp Quest to Camp Quest, Inc. The continuing efforts by Edwin and Helen enabled Camp Quest to grow to its present size and importance.

The last FIG meeting Helen attended was Tim Madigan's presentation in December 2009. Tim writes, "I am very glad that I did get the chance to see her one more time before her death, and especially in the setting of a FIG meeting where she was her usual gentle, funny and kind self."

We all know how much Edwin and Helen loved each other and how much he relied on her help and advice. We give him our condolences as he carries on alone the work they did so well together.

Joe Levee



For Helen

I am on the waiting list for death
 Behind so many friends who jumped the line.
 Now you, bad girl, have pushed ahead,
 Leaving your once happy flesh
 For something neither understood nor known,
 At least by me,
 Who will, in time, be where you are,
 If anywhere.
 Forgive me for any unkindness I have done
 As I forgive you
 For causing me to now so deeply grieve.

Edwin.

Edwin Kagin
 February 19, 2010



Helen McGregor (Smith) Kagin
 1934-2010



February Meeting

"We must remember evil, because if the world forgets, evil is reborn."

- W.E.B. Dubois

Ugly Truth

I usually think of truth as a basic, beautiful thing. After all, understanding reality is essential to our survival. So how can truth be ugly? For those FIG members that attended the meeting held at the Freedom Center, no explanation is needed. We saw the exhibit, *Without Sanctuary*.

For those readers who have yet to see the exhibit, it is indeed an ugly truth that must be witnessed. Most of our readers probably know what happened during the "lynching years" in America. Reading the personal stories, seeing the images, knowing that people sent postcards in order to brag about their participation produces a different level of knowing. On this level, the truth becomes ugly indeed.

So why do we do it? Why do we force ourselves to look, to read, to permit the feelings that threaten to overwhelm? Because it is truth. If we turn from it, we cannot learn from it. If we turn from it, we may forget it. If we turn from it, we may make the mistake of thinking that it is "only" history. As long as there are groups whose members are hated and abused, we have to face ugly truths.

It would be nice to think that this is what "they" did, in the past. It would be nice to believe that it is all over now. However, what is nice and what is true are different. We rarely hear the term, "lynching" used to describe recent crimes of this sort. The contemporary terminology is "hate crimes." Just twelve years ago, Matthew Shepherd was killed for being gay. Fifteen-year-old Lawrence King was killed a few years ago, for being gay. People all over the world are harmed for being what they are.

It is hard for me to imagine waking up to find myself a member of a hated group. But we must do so. Unless there is protection for all, there is safety for none. So let us give truth a makeover. Let us stand up. Let us speak out. Let us change things. Let us make the truth beautiful for everyone.

- comments by Fran Welte

Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America

Shocking, horrible, gruesome. These are a few of the words describing the exhibit, *Without Sanctuary*, that the Free Inquiry Group experienced on Sunday, February 28 at the Freedom Center. The title comes from a quote by Theophus Smith, Associate Professor of Religion at Atlanta's Emory College, who wrote in, *After Violence: Towards A Normative Practice of "Truth & Reconciliation."* "Let's work together to rescue ourselves and our children from the fate of becoming bystanders in a world without sanctuary." To ignore the history illustrated by these images of lynching in America is to give in to this fate of being bystanders to atrocities. It is essential that these atrocities and the subsequent braggadocio and casual attitude that accompanied them be remembered.

The term lynching refers to vigilante style justice that often included torture before the victim was put to death by hanging. The

victim was condemned without trial and often dragged from the jailhouse by violent mobs. Some were never arrested, but captured and killed on the spot. Many varieties of torture implements were employed in public where many persons did witness. Men, women and even children often attended these lynchings, as shown in some of the photographs. These photos were often sent to friends and relatives as post cards, which included messages that were cruel, condescending and callous towards the victims. Often the photos showed the burned remains of a victim with people posing next to them. One photo was accompanied by a note to the sender's mother. He seemed proud to reveal that he was the one to the right of the victim in the photo, and had placed a cross over his head in pencil to assure that his mother knew that it was him.

Though most of the victims were African Americans, many were persons who just did not fit in and were singled out because of their differences. These included Jews, Native Americans and others who were different from the general population of the area and therefore suspect.

After viewing the exhibit, the FIG group gathered in a conference room to discuss what we had just seen. The discussion began with a reading from an essay written by Mark Twain, who lived at the time when most of these events occurred. The essay is entitled *The United States of Lyncherdom*. It concerns the nature of humanity and why Twain thought most people attended lynchings. His thought was that no one except a couple of instigators actually wanted to witness such a gruesome event. People went because they were afraid of the backlash from their neighbors if they did not attend. "Why does a crowd...stand by, smitten and miserable, and by ostentatious outward signs pretend to enjoy a lynching? Why does it lift no hand or voice in protest? Only because it would be unpopular to do, I think; each man is afraid of his neighbor's disapproval - a thing which, to the general run of the race, is more dreaded than wounds and death." Being scorned or ostracized by their peers seemed to be, in Twain's view, more of a concern to them than the suffering of the victim. Few brave people stood up against a lynch mob. Twain did mention a few sheriffs who did, and the exhibit mentioned a fourteen-year-old daughter of a sheriff who faced down a lynch mob with a pistol.

The discussion quickly turned to events of the present and what can be done to combat racial and other injustice and discrimination today. The prevailing opinion of our group was that in order to prevent horrid events of this nature from happening, each person must voice their opinion in opposition when any type of injustice is discussed or proposed. We must not stand by and allow the construction of a prevailing opinion that ignores justice and humanity. To do so would be to invite these horrors back into our civilization. Rights come from wrongs. Humans see the wrongs being done to others, empathize with those victims and develop attitudes and laws to prevent future wrongs. This is accomplished without and often in spite of religion. However, to accomplish this we must be ever aware and vigilant of the prejudices that creep into our society, and voice our opposition when they start to appear. Humans tend to be imitators. We should strive to give people something noble and just to imitate. I hope that it will catch on!

- reported by John Welte ☘



FIG LEAVES



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



Hear! Hear! *Answers in Atheism* at

<www.answersinatheism.net>

JOIN US! - We are live on the internet Thursday evenings from 7 pm to 8 pm EST. Our shows are also available as archived audio files, so you can listen later at any time. Please tune in at www.answersinatheism.net.

The Answers in Atheism crew

FIG Is Now On Facebook!

If you have a Facebook account, become a Fan of FIG. To join you can type in this long weblink: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Cincinnati-OH/FIG-Free-Inquiry-Group-of-Cincinnati-and-Northern-Kentucky/306015475868> or it is much easier to search for "Free Inquiry Group" and find it the first option on the search page.

By being a Fan you can receive FIG updates and meeting notices and RSVP for events such as the monthly FIG Community Dinners.

The Cincinnati Atheists March Meetup

Monday, 22 March 2010, 6:30 pm
Dewey's Pizza, 1 Levee Way, Newport, KY 41071
(859) 431-9700

Meetup Description

6:30 - 9:00 * Please note time *

Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists and Freethinkers meet here. Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics.

This is a purely social gathering. No agenda, no speaker, no rules of order. If you'd prefer a bit more structure, please check the calendar for lectures, FIG meetings, and other events.

Also:

Wednesday, 17 March 2010, 7:00 pm
Miami University, Oxford, OH
New Business School Auditorium
for details: >www.meetup.com/cincinnatiatheists/calendar/12678266/<



Science Book Club 2010 schedule All meetings on 3rd Sunday of each month at 2:30 in room 3A of downtown Main Public Library unless otherwise noted.

Mar 21- *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*; Richard Wrangham

Apr 18 - *What's Next : Dispatches on the Future of Science : [original essays from a new generation of scientists]*; ed. Max Brockman

May 16 - *Power, Sex, Suicide: Mitochondria and the Meaning of Life*; Nick Lane

June 13 - (2nd Sunday) *How to Build a Dinosaur: extinction doesn't have to be forever* ; Jack R. Horner

July 18- *Logicomix: an Epic Search for Truth*; Apostolos K. Doxiadis, Christos Papadmitriou

Aug 15 - *Unscientific America* ; Chris Mooney

Sept 19 - *The Evolution of Consciousness: of Darwin, Freud, and cranial fire : the origins of the way we think*; Robert E. Ornstein

Oct 17 - *The Roving Mind*; Isaac Asimov

Nov 21- *The Little Green book of Awakening*; James George

Dec 19 - *Physics for Future Presidents: The Science behind the Headlines*; Richard A. Muller





Buckner, Provine Join Forces For Debate Summit 2010

American Atheists: <http://www.atheists.org>

The Debate Summit series exists as a forum designed to explain, test and defend various aspects of the Christian world view by interacting with qualified representatives of non-Christian worldviews in moderated public debates. The goal is to create and maintain an atmosphere of civility, mutual respect and the open exchange of ideas.

March 12-13, 2010 Washington Court House, Ohio

Dr. Ed Buckner, President of American Atheists will be a participant in the 2010 Debater Summit slated for March 12-13, 2010. He will be joining R. Will Provine, Professor of Biology at Cornell University and an outspoken Atheist in defending the naturalist world view in a debate with leading Christian apologists.

The venue is the Grace Community Church, 525 S. Glenn Avenue, Washington C.H., OH 43160

The schedule of events includes:

Debate #001

Friday, March 12, 7:00 pm

Dr. Ed Buckner vs. Jay Lucas

Topic: Moral Foundations: "Which makes more sense, Christianity or Atheism?"

Debate #002

Saturday, March 13, 3:00 pm

Dr. Will Provine vs. Dr. Andy McIntosh

Topic: "Flight in birds and bats: Is evolution or creation the best guide?"

Debate #003

Saturday, March 13, 7:00 pm

Dr. Dennis Sullivan vs. Dr. Will Provine

Topic: "Free Will: Does it exist? Does it matter?"

Washington Court House is easily accessible from the interstate and major metro areas. Lodging is available in town; and tickets for the debates (\$6 per session) can be purchased on line. For more information, visit <http://debatesummit2010.blogspot.com/>



The Boat Is Sinking Faster Than We Are Bailing!

A Special Section of *Science* magazine this week is devoted to the problem of feeding "an expected population of nine billion in 2050." Expected by whom? In the last forty years the population has doubled. If it doubles again in the next forty the population would be closer to 14 billion. In the entire issue of *Science* I did not

see a single mention of population control. In 1798, the Rev. Robert Thomas Malthus, British scholar and clergyman, observed that animals typically produce far more offspring than are required for replacement. This helps to ensure survival of the species, as Darwin noted fifty years later citing Malthus. To avoid excessive population, Malthus urged "restraint," but the reproductive instinct is far more powerful than Malthusian logic. I cannot do better than to once again quote Norman Borlaug's acceptance speech on the occasion of winning the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize for the Green Revolution. It bears repeating: "We are dealing with two opposing forces, the scientific power of food production and the biologic power of human reproduction. Man has made amazing progress recently in his potential mastery of these two contending powers...there can be no permanent progress in the battle against hunger until the agencies that fight for increased food production and those that fight for population control unite in a common effort." This, it is clear from the Special Section, has not yet happened.

-What's New Robert L. Park, 12 February 2010



California Supreme Court Rejects Prayer.

Bruce Flamm, obstetrician and skeptic, fought a millionaire fertility/prayer clinic operator through the California court system and won. The case involved the notorious "Columbia prayer study," in which it was claimed that prayer increased the success rate of fertility treatments. Flamm demanded the study be withdrawn. Qwang Cha, the millionaire clinic operator, lost at every level but kept appealing the judgment in the belief that Flamm must inevitably fold. Bruce Flamm doesn't fold. Last week the California Supreme Court refused to consider the Appeals Court decision against Cha.

- What's New Robert L. Park, 12 February 2010

Faith And Science:

This week saw the publication of Francis S. Collins' new book, *Belief: Readings on the Reasons for Faith*. Collins is free to hold any belief he likes, but he is now the director of the nation's largest science agency, having promised to set his personal quirks aside for the time involved. The argument is made that the book is work he did before he became director, but that's pretty thin cover. He could wait until he steps down. Modern science had its birth with the assertion of the Greek philosopher Thales in 585 B.C. that every observable effect has a physical cause. We should not regard any person as educated unless he understands those words, including the director of NIH.

- What's New Robert L. Park, 5 March 2010



ACLU Sues USAID: Are We Exporting US Taxpayer-Funded Religion?

by: Amie Newman | *RH Reality Check*; 19 February 2010

The ACLU has waited long enough.

On Thursday, February 18th, they filed a lawsuit against USAID for refusing to comply with their Freedom of Information Act requests from July and September 2009, for documents related to USAID-funded abstinence-only-until-marriage programs abroad. The ACLU has patiently awaited documents that may help shed light on an audit completed last year suggesting USAID is dispersing money, unconstitutionally, for religiously-based HIV prevention programs.

The report, filed by the Office of Inspector General, surveyed 9 out of the 10 faith-based organizations using USAID funds and stated clearly that USAID-awarded funds were being used for religious activities.

For example, USAID monies fund abstinence-only-until-marriage programs for African youth that include "Biblical stories and religious messages." What do these look like? One curriculum, used for HIV/AIDS prevention education, includes an optional psalm for self-reflection: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word." The take-away concept the curriculum sums up: "God has a plan for sex and this plan will help you and protect you from harm."

While it is important to recognize cultural mores when crafting curricula, these messages do more harm than good. Rates of HIV and AIDS throughout Africa vary greatly but sub-Saharan Africa is more heavily affected by AIDS than anywhere else in the world. Religious messages that reinforce harmful cultural and social constructs are far from useful - if God has a plan for sex, how does this help young people protect themselves against HIV and AIDS - especially young women who more often than not are not, in developing nations, the final arbiters when it comes to protecting themselves against HIV or pregnancy.

The ACLU, in its complaint, calls these USAID funded programs "an unconstitutional expenditure of federal tax dollars" through PEPFAR (the program President Bush created to fight the global HIV/AIDS pandemic - President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) and notes that, by definition, abstinence-only-until-marriage programs withhold life-saving information on contraception and condoms.

"In the face of a growing global HIV/AIDS crisis, USAID is not only violating basic constitutional principles by promoting government-funded religious activities, it is unconscionably putting young people's health and lives at risk," said Rose Saxe, staff attorney with the ACLU AIDS Project.

USAID regulations related to the disbursement of funds for faith-based organizations are clear:

Organizations that receive direct financial assistance from USAID under any USAID program may not engage in inherently religious activities, such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytization, as part of the programs or services directly funded with direct financial assistance from USAID. If an organization conducts such activities, the activities must be offered separately, in time or location, from the programs or services funded with direct financial assistance from USAID, and participation must be voluntary for beneficiaries of the programs or services funded with such assistance.

The ACLU also notes, in its complaint against USAID, that the Office of Inspector General's report found that the government agency "has a history of unconstitutionally funding religious abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in developing countries."

In African nations, in particular, using U.S. government funds to craft and disseminate HIV/AIDS prevention programs that include strong religious messages -- and let's be honest, we're talking about strong fundamentalist Christian messages which reinforce strict gender roles on women and do not acknowledge the range of gender and sexual identities -- seems particularly terrifying given the more recent reports of escalating violence and threats in the form of anti-gay bills, in Uganda, Rwanda and other African nations, that clearly arose from the intimate relationships between religious fundamentalists in the U.S. and these African nations.

HIV and AIDS prevention messages must impart life-saving information to young people. If the United States is, with one hand, attempting to address the continuing spread of HIV and AIDS in developing nations by providing government funds for prevention education and on the other hand disseminating powerful religious messages that only foster harmful gender and sexuality constructs that stand in the way of healthy behaviors and prevention, we're constantly taking one step forward and two steps back.

U.S. taxpayers need to know how our money is being spent. The ACLU is doing its part to push for transparency:

"The United States government cannot be in the business of exporting religiously infused abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that we know fail to give young people the information they need to stay healthy," said Brigitte Amiri, senior staff attorney with the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project. "It is essential that the government provide all of the information it has about these programs so that the public has a full accounting of how taxpayer dollars are being spent."

This article is republished from *RH Reality Check* [rhrealitycheck.org], a progressive online publication covering global reproductive and sexual health news and information.





The Bloom Box Energy Deflowered.

The Hubbert Oil Peak, the IPCC reports, and melting ice caps, do all these foretell a disaster? Maybe for polar bears, but for alternative energy pitchmen it's the mother lode. The free-energy scams such as Joe Newman's Energy Machine and Dennis Lee's Hummingbird motor will still find mom-and-pop investors hoping to stretch their meager retirements, but the big money awaits a more sophisticated pitch. Consider the Bloom Box. The pitchman, K.R. Sridhar, CEO of Bloom Energy in Sunnyvale, is not your typical scam artist, but an artfully understated business executive. He can go on 60 Minutes or Good Morning America and never make a slip. But there are warning signs. What is it he's selling? "It starts with beach sand" he says, opening a box of the stuff. It's like saying a diamond is a lump of carbon. Silicon dioxide is the most abundant mineral on Earth, and essential to modern electronics. With the help of animation, he explains that plates made of the stuff enable hydrocarbon gases to react with oxygen, producing an electric potential. It's a fuel cell. He never says so, maintaining the fiction that this is something really new. It's not. Fuel cells date back to 1838, but have found little application. The magic calls for painting the two sides of the plate with secret green and black ink respectively. Well there's a little more to it, but CEOs don't worry about details. Oh, and the Bloom Box is not cheap. However, Google, FedEx and Wel-Mart can afford to test the Bloom Box. Everybody loves the idea of distributed energy production, where we have our own power plant in the backyard. But a Bloom Box is not totally isolated; it needs to be tied to a gas pipeline. Is this the future? Probably not.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 26 February 2010

"Split Wood Not Atoms"

Split wood not atom was a popular bumper sticker in the period following the 3-Mile Island disaster in 1979. Usually described as "the worst civilian nuclear accident in US history," there were no human casualties. However, seven years later the Chernobyl disaster in the Soviet Union, now Ukraine, led to massive casualties from radiation exposure, reinforcing the nuclear fear factor. Not a single nuclear power plant has been commissioned in the US since. That's about to change. Industries are seeking approval of new modular designs that will bring the benefits of standardization to the nuclear power industry. The news comes just as President Barack Obama announced more than \$8 billion in loan guarantees to stimulate production of new nuclear power plants. If there is a problem, it most likely will come from a dysfunctional Congress.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 19 February 2010

Council For Secular Humanism Representatives Participate In Historic White House Briefing

Representatives from the Council for Secular Humanism have participated in a first-of-its-kind White House briefing for members of America's secular community. Officials of the Obama Administration met today with a delegation drawn from the nation's leading secular humanist, humanist, atheist, and freethought organizations to discuss policy in areas of concern to the nonreligious community. These issues included protecting children from religion-related neglect and abuse, ending proselytizing in the military, and fixing the faith-based initiative to conform with accepted secular principles. The briefing was coordinated by the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), a Washington, D.C.-based coalition of national organizations that lobbies on issues of secular concern. The Council for Secular Humanism is a member of SCA.

The Council's delegation included Tom Flynn (Buffalo, N.Y.), executive director of the Council and editor of its flagship magazine *Free Inquiry*, and three Washington-based activists: Toni van Pelt, executive director of the Center for Inquiry / Office of Public Policy; Melody Hensley, executive director of the Center for Inquiry/D.C., and Stuart Jordan, a retired NASA scientist and a science advisor for the Center for Inquiry/Office of Public Policy. The Center for Inquiry, a supporting organization of the Council for Secular Humanism, conducts lobbying and public education in the national capital area.

Speakers on behalf of SCA included:

SCA executive director **Sean Faircloth**, addressing the faith-based initiative and policy concerning religious child-care facilities;

Jason Torpy of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers and Kathleen Johnson, Military Director for American Atheists, addressing religious discrimination in the military; and

Liz Heywood, a survivor of a childhood bone disease left untreated by her Christian Science parents, was unable to attend due to weather-related travel difficulties. Her statement was read by Sasha Bartolf, Legislative Director for SCA.

This briefing represents the first time a U. S. administration has engaged in a formal exchange of views with representatives of America's fast-growing nonreligious community. President Obama was the first U.S. president to acknowledge nonbelievers in an inaugural address. In a press release issued prior to the briefing, the SCA described the briefing as "the latest indication that the secular movement is gaining significant momentum, and that secular Americans, numbering in the tens of millions, are a constituency that must be included."



A High School FIG.

Bright students at Mason High School learned about the existence of FIG by following up on the “Don’t believe in God” billboard campaign in November. Several decided to start a Free Inquiry Group in their High School. Here is what they write about this adventure:

We’d had to wait a week and a half to learn of the decision.

A month before the student activities director at our school had summoned us to the monthly administrative meeting, because she was “intrigued” by our proposed free thought club, to be called MHS-FIG. After we were told that our prospective group was going to be questioned, we were perplexed since other clubs had not gone through the same rigorous procedure. We arrived at the administrative meeting to a quiet room filled with unknown faces. We began our presentation by providing our goals and purposes: to foster a welcoming community for people of non-theistic views, to congregate and discuss their views and opinions, to provide tools and resources for people of non-theistic thinking in order to prevent mis-communication, and to provide our community with meaningful experiences and understanding of non-theistic and secular views.

What loomed ahead, however, was a potentially difficult interrogation session. We had confidence in our ability to stand firm in our beliefs and to explain them clearly. We also knew the room was filled with Christians who had previously accepted the addition of several prayer- and Bible-related clubs. Our club might be denied simply because the administrators could claim our club’s motives to be not thoroughly considered, our activities not meticulously planned, our focus a bit too controversial to publicize in the community, while really wanting to avoid establishing a place for non-theists (frequently labeled incorrectly) to congregate. Ironically, Christians often don’t like us or want to face our concerns and arguments.

As we concluded our brief presentation, relieved and anxious to exit the bland conference environment, the crowd of ten calm adults seemed to collectively exhale. The principal, seated to our right, adjusted in her seat and prefaced her first question with her understanding and confidence in our ability to maturely handle an array of situations that may be associated with our club. And then we were barraged with questions, though not always of the type we had anticipated. Some were technical questions, regarding specifics of meetings and needs. Others requested clarification of organizations we had mentioned, e.g. FIG, the Secular Student Alliance. The staff appeared to be just seeking a better understanding

of our plans. We realized the administrators would never deny a couple of students the right to create a safe forum for the exploration of ideas; they would never crush an opportunity to learn. As we walked out of the conference room and down the silent hall, shaking and parched, we knew MHS-FIG would be accepted.

Further steps to obtain confirmation were required formalities, and designed to ensure our seriousness. We typed a list of discussion protocols to maintain order in our group setting. A few days after this was submitted, the activities director e-mailed us the official proclamation of our status as a school-sanctioned club. MHS-FIG was in existence. We were thrilled to finally, after about a month and a half of nervous anticipation, be able to talk with those who understand our ideologies in a comfortable setting.

We chatted extensively with our adviser, a British teacher working at our school and decided to allow the first meeting to be a time for attendees to explain their specific personal views, in an effort to establish the basis for a comfortable atmosphere. A few days later, we began the meeting with outlines in hand.

We quickly strayed from our carefully considered plans and began talking to those few who were able to come to the meeting about a variety of topics relating to religion. We were all frustrated, but glad to have a place to vent and discuss and explain. Everyone got more casual, making jokes and exploding with random thoughts, as the meeting went on, eventually lasting a little over an hour, and we realized we would have plenty to talk about in the weeks to come.

– contributed by Ellen Duffer and Nick Reynolds

Manna: Wasn’t That A Gift From Heaven?

The town of Odessa, Missouri, population 4,818, located somewhere east of Kansas City, needs jobs. So when a company, Manna of Utah, said it wanted to build a plant there employing 3000 people, folks cheered. All the town had to do was provide \$90 million in revenue bonds and a site. The company even flew local officials to Florida for a demonstration of the “world-changing” technology that would be built there. It’s a home generator developed by Maglev Energy in Largo, Florida, which is leasing the technology to Manna of Utah. State Representative Mike McGhee (R-Odessa) said the product would be the “equivalent of the light bulb.” Steve Everly of the Kansas City Star thought it might be a good idea to check with scientists and engineers, including Bob Park. The mayor of Odessa, Tony Bamvakais, who went on the trip to Florida, says it’s not a perpetual motion machine, but it’s “so efficient that it keeps on producing power when it’s unhooked from an outside power source.”

– *What’s New* Robert L. Park, 5 March 2010



Our Secular Coalition Visit To The White House

by Herb Silverman, 28 February 2010

Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

Representatives from the Secular Coalition for America met with White House officials on February 26 to discuss issues of concern to secular Americans. We were grateful to have a place at the table, with a chance to hear from Obama administration representatives, and for them to hear from us about issues that affect all Americans. This historic meeting marked the first time in history that a presidential administration has met for a policy briefing with the American nontheist community.

The *Secular Coalition for America* includes 10 national nontheistic member organizations, and its mission has two goals: to increase the visibility of, and respect for, nontheistic viewpoints in the United States; and to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government as the best guarantee of freedom for all. Aside from the discussion of our issues with White House officials, the mere presence in that place for about 60 of our representatives from around the country marked a proud moment for all secular Americans.

Before giving particulars, I want to dispel some grossly unfair but predictable media comments that show why we are working so diligently to fulfill our mission. In response to the news that we would meet at the White House, the advocacy group called *In God We Trust* ripped the Obama administration “for meeting to plot political strategy with 60 atheist activists.” Its chairman, Bishop Council Nedd, said we represent “some of the most hate-filled, anti-religious groups in the nation.”

Then Sean Hannity claimed on Fox News that the Obama administration is giving special treatment to atheists, and that religious groups “have not received this treatment from the Obama White House.” I suppose in Hannity’s America a two-hour meeting with Secular Americans is “special treatment.” But a recent two-day meeting sponsored by the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, with more than 60 religious leaders gathered at the White House, was not special. Perhaps meetings between White House officials and religious leaders really are nothing special, since they occur on a regular basis. And President Obama has met with and paid deference to numerous religious leaders, including Pope Benedict, which brings me to another media alert about the Secular Coalition for America.

The headline in a press release from the *Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights* stated, “Obama Aides Host Catholic Bashers.” Catholic League president Bill Donohue referred to representatives of the Secular Coalition for America as “some of the biggest anti-religious zealots in the nation,” and that many

of us “would crush Christianity” if we could. (Interestingly, my dictionary defines “zealot” as a fanatical adherent to a cause, especially a religious one.) The Catholic League ended its diatribe with, “It is important that the public learn of the contents of this meeting. We will do what we can to find out what happened.” What on earth are they expecting--an atheist plot to take over the government?

Apparently, the Catholic League’s crack investigative team never thought to contact any of the Secular Coalition representatives at the meeting. So for the Catholic League and others who would rather opine than investigate, I’ll make it easy for you by telling what happened at the meeting.

Administration officials included Tina Tchen, Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement; Paul Monteiro, Associate Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs; Bryan Samuels, Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services; Mazen Basrawi, Counsel to the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights at the Department of Justice; and Bill Carr, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Personnel.

These are the topics we addressed:

Childhood medical neglect and abuse:

We seek to close legal loopholes for the religiously based medical neglect of children, because no child should ever have to suffer for lack of medical attention, regardless of a parent’s motivation. Liz Heywood, a survivor of a childhood bone disease left untreated by her Christian Science parents, was scheduled to speak, but unable to attend due to weather-related travel difficulties. Sasha Bartolf, Legislative Director of the Secular Coalition, read her moving statement.

Military proselytizing and coercion:

We seek to ensure that the men and women who risk their lives to protect American values, including freedom of conscience, are respected at all levels of the U.S. military. No service members should ever be coerced into religious participation, subjected to proselytizing, or discriminated against

because of their religious beliefs or lack thereof. Those who spoke included Kathleen Johnson, Vice President and Military Director for American Atheists, and past President of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers. She is a retired Army First Sergeant and a Department of the Army civilian. Jason Torpy also spoke. He is a former Army Captain, Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran and West Point graduate, who serves as president of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers. MAAF is a nontheist community with members in all branches around the world.

Fixing faith-based initiatives: We seek to make certain that religious organizations receiving federal funding for social welfare programs cannot discriminate in hiring on the basis of religion; that program beneficiaries are never subject to proselytizing; and that secular options are made equally available to those in need. Sean Faircloth, Executive Director of the Secular Coalition and former Majority Whip in the Maine legislature, spoke on unfulfilled promises by the Obama administration to fix abuses that unconstitutionally funnel money to religious institutions.

So there you have the Secular Coalition for America agenda presented to White House officials. We think these secular values are also American values. It’s not religion bashing or Christian bashing to mention that government neutrality toward religion is not the same as government hostility, that the government should not favor one religion over another or religion in general over non-religion, and that over 30 million Americans are good without God.

Those who continually accuse the Secular Coalition for America of hate-filled, religion bashing apparently haven’t even checked our website. You’ll see policy statements consistent with our positive mission. We may disagree with some religious activities and discriminatory remarks directed toward nontheists, but you will find no blanket condemnation of religion.

Of course, nothing will stop rants from those who would rather denigrate and stereotype than examine evidence. ☞



*This Land is Their Land:
Reports from a Divided Nation*
by Barbara Ehrenreich
(New York: Henry Holt & Co. 2008)

The division in Ehrenreich's *America* is not between Republicans and Democrats, believers and seculars, or men and women, but between the poor and the rich and super rich. The rich, the corporations, the profiteers are the bad guys, while we feel sorry for the poor and those trying to hold on to the middle class status.

There are 62 short chapters in this book, subdivided into sections on inequality, economic meanness, the middle class, work place, health industry, sex, and false gods. In other words quite a mixed bag, some good, some funny, some mistaken, and some missing the point all together. Is the rise in heating oil prices really due to the "gluttony" of the top oil companies? (p. 26) Or, are there impersonal economic forces, such as the increasing cost of drilling deeper and further off shore as global oil deposits dwindle.

Her comments on poverty continue much of the work she did for *Nicked and Dimed*. It is expensive to be poor. The poor pay more to cash a check or transact other financial business. Most of all the poor pay more interest to buy a car or a house, or for insurance. She quotes *Business Week* on "The Poverty Business," how to make Payday loans, rent-to-buy furniture, and exorbitant credit card interest. In fact, she describes profit from housing and car loans to the too poor to pay the interest. Of course, the book was written before the market collapsed.

Also reminiscent of *Nicked and Dimed* is Ehrenreich's description of the workplace dictatorship. Once the company doors close behind you, the worker has lost most of the democratic rights we tend to pride ourselves on. No free speech, only permitted rest breaks, and most of all no union activity. She gives a pretty clear description of how company security will stop union activity, and why the unions want to get rid of organizing elections which companies can so easily frustrate.

Unbelievers are probably most interested what Ehren-

reich has to say in the section on "False Gods." Several chapters deal with the self-help book industry, the sort of publication that claims you can get what you want if you just wish for it hard, and insistent enough. She comments on the *genre* of business success books "descended from Dale Carnegie's." work on how to succeed. (p. 208) Her chief comment is that these books are for those not able to reason. Other false gods she inveighs against are groupthink the insistence on "team players," who are never "out of step" and always "get with the program." (p. 213) Groupthink she comments is what got us into the middle eastern wars. Or as she comments in another context, sometimes "What you need is a narrow-eyed, deeply skeptical attitude." (p. 166)

Ehrenreich has ambiguous things to say about the church. On the one hand she considers it "loathsome" and "repulsive" to concede "moral values" to the Bush administration (p. 216). On the other, she has some good things to say about the welfare role played by many (not all) churches in helping the poor and out of work. Only in the very last chapter does she comment on some of her own attitude to belief. "God's latest felony," (p. 228) the South Asian tsunami has put the religious interpreters in a frenzy. Their only excuse is that god is a complete mystery, which of course does not stop them from knowing exactly what he thinks about abortion and gays. At the very end you realize she is an unbeliever herself.

This is an interesting book. The author has some good and some inadequate thoughts, it is a quick read, but it is not a must read. Most of what Ehrenreich has to say, I think we know, if we pay attention to the society we live in, and stay away from groupthink.

- Wolf Roder ☘



It's Still A Bad Economy

The recession, which has a specific definition, may be over, but the economy is still bad. How bad is it?

The economy is so bad that:

- I got a pre-declined credit card in the mail.
 - I ordered a burger at McDonald's and the kid behind the counter asked, "Can you afford fries with that?"
 - If the bank returns your check marked "Insufficient Funds," you call them and ask if they meant you or them.
 - McDonald's is selling the quarter ounce.
 - Parents in Beverly Hills fired their nannies and have had to learn their children's names.
 - A truckload of Americans was caught sneaking into Mexico.
- and...
- Exxon-Mobil was forced to lay off 25 Congressmen.



FIG Community Dinner
 April 13, 2010 6:30 PM
 Bronte Bistro (RSVP Needed by 4/10)



March Meeting
 Tuesday, March 23 at 7:00 PM
 Hannaford Suites Hotel
 5900 East Galbraith Rd.



FIG Leaves
 P.O. Box 53174
 Cincinnati, OH 45253

FIG

Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. (FIG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists.

Though most of our members are secular humanists, 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 - figmessage at gofigger dot org, or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.