

FIG Leaves

Volume 12 Issue 9

October 2003

October Meeting : on Tuesday 28 October

“Was Einstein a Humanist?”

William B. Jensen, Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) was more than a famous physicist. He was also a cultural icon, whose prestige and image is still invoked by mystics, liberal theologians, humanists, atheists, and cultural relativists in support of their particular causes. What exactly were Einstein's views on the nature of God and the role of man in the universe, and are his views consistent with the tenants of modern humanism? These and related questions will be explored, based primarily on a review of Max Jammer's 1999 book, *Einstein and Religion*

Tuesday, 11 November (note date!)

On Robert G. Ingersoll. Tom Flynn, editor Free Inquiry

The son of a preacher, Ingersoll (1833-1899) was inspired by Thomas Paine's struggle for political and religious freedom. He admired and followed Paine's major work, *Age of Reason* which laid out the basic thought for unbelief and doubting the Bible. Ingersoll became a lawyer and famous agnostic. Despite denying the tenets of Christianity he became a well known and admired lecturer and orator, who keynoted the 1876 Democratic convention. His birthplace in Dresden, New York, is a museum and memorial.

Tuesday, 16 December, Ed Kagin on “brights” with vigorous discussion
(Note: 3rd Tuesday)

Other News

Tim Kelly informs me that the Humanist Perspective program on access has been given new time slots. Look for it Fridays a 2 pm on channel 8, and Tuesdays at 7 am on channel 24.

Abolish Religion!

I prefer to talk directly and truthfully without hiding anything. ... I am not a diplomat or a politician, I just want to say whatever I believe in. That means abolishing religion. Because religion and freedom of expression, religion and human rights, religion and women's rights, religion and democracy, religion and freedom cannot coexist. That is impossible.

— interview with Taslima Nasrin, *Middle East Quarterly* (Sept. 2000)

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Events

October Meeting

Tuesday, 14 October
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

November Meeting

(Note change of date:)
Tuesday, 11 November
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

November Potluck

Tuesday, 18 November
6:30 PM at the home of

December Potluck

Tuesday, 9 December
6:30 PM at the home of

December Meeting

Tuesday, 16 December
7:00 PM at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati

Humanist Humor

Dear Intelligent Designer,

Creator God of Everything, I hope Thee wilt not decline
To answer me my questionings of Intelligent Design.

I know that every living thing came from Thy mighty mind
That Thou created perfectly every life form that we find.

Some pious people tell me they have, through Thee, resolved
That Eden spawned all living things and that life has not evolved.

That each kind of Thy created works Thou did to finest form refine,
And human perfection clearly shows the intelligence of Thy design.

Creator God, please do explain the truths of I.D. to me
And why some flaw-free eyes Thou made need glass to clearly see.

Tell me God of Everything, for I know Thou cannot lie,
Why every perfect thing Thou made must one day age and die.

And why are joints, and backs, and bones subject to ruin and pain?
Why must heads ache, and kidneys leak, and blood vessels burst from
strain?

Why do we jettison out our waste so near the port of birth?
Why should any of Thy organs quit? Were we designed just for Thy mirth?

Barely can we walk upright; most teeth will rot or fail.
And what does our appendix do? Did once we have a tail?

Why do some bodies attack themselves, when from disease we might be
free?

Tell me truly, God of Truth, were all our afflictions made by Thee?

Why does Intelligent Design make so many people fat?
Why have we not the grace or ease designed into the cat?

Quote

- Of course, it's possible that Bush is deeply religious, whatever that
- means. More likely, Bush is simply an empty vessel, a hollow shell, a
- person of weak character and limited experience who is therefore highly
- susceptible to the control of a small, determined group of ideological
- hard-liners bent on asserting U.S. power more forcefully in the world.

— Linda McQuaig, Toronto Star, (16 March 2003)

Unquote

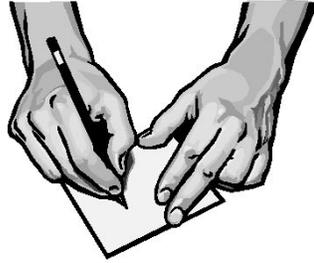


FIG Leaves - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in Electronic format via the internet - figleaves@fuse.net; on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 19034, Cincinnati, OH 45219. Contributions received before the first 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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Note on memberships: these run from 1 January to 31 December, If you join during the year, you can receive a #2 discount for each month missed, see the treasurer Margaret O'Kain.

Letters To The



Dear Editor:

Under the QUOTE section, page 6 in the September issue, you quoted a segment of a letter to the editor from Randy K. Bangert to the magazine Nature Conservation regarding Spirituality and Conservation.

I HIGHLY disagree with the statement that our environmental crisis is a DIRECT result of religious and spiritual thinking.

Our environmental crisis is, on the contrary, rather based upon the thinking that Humans, can improve upon and "conquer" nature via science and technological advances. Our "improvements" have for the most part been ego and economy driven. Furthermore, they have been poorly thought out, thus leaving us with massive amounts of pollution, and degradation of the environment that cannot easily be repaired.

I am a Pagan, and highly spiritual. Pagans have been some of the greatest leaders in the conservation movement. I do not despise science if it is conducted in a responsible manner. I also consider myself a Humanist. While I am spiritual, I am not without Reason.

To make a blanket statement that all spirituality and religion is the cause of environmental problems is irresponsible and rude. It only contributes to the problem of alienating those on a Spiritual path from those who choose a more atheistic path. Find the true enemy, those who would exploit this planet for greed and ego. Those are the real culprits.

We need to work together to heal the planet; both the spiritual and the scientifically minded. We both have something to offer this world!

Thank you
Caeli Good
Northside
542-1244

Editors of all stripes,

I was wondering if any editor types might want to put together a series on the various byproducts of your war on drugs.

Each story you run about a byproduct is always treated as "breaking news," and readers must dig deep into the article before you admit your drug war connection.

Here's an abbreviated list that should be plainly connected if journalists had ethics:

1. Intimidation of witnesses
2. Drug peddlers on street corners.

3. Drive-by shootings.
4. Drug prices made so artificially high, addicts must rob and steal to afford them.
5. A lucrative business that lures minorities and the poor into illegal activities and jail.
6. Products often adulterated, but leaving consumers with no legal recourse.
7. Jail over-crowding.
8. Minorities disproportionately represented in jail populations.

That ought to be enough to at least get you started. Your readers are waiting.

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Quote.....

• Childish Religion •

• I cannot think back to these ideas without con- •
 • necting them to other obsessions that preoccupied •
 • me at the same time. I had established a relationship •
 • with God that meant I had to think every evening •
 • about what he was going to eat, so the enumeration •
 • of the various dishes and glasses of water I offered him •
 • mentally — fussing over the size of the helpings, the •
 • rate at which they were served, etc. — alternated with •
 • the interrogations into the extent to which my future •
 • life would be filled with husbands and children. I was •
 • very religious, and it could well be that my confused •
 • perception of the identities of God and his son favored •
 • my inclination to counting. God was the thundering •
 • voice that brought men back into line without reveal- •
 • ing him to them. But I had been taught that he was •
 • simultaneously the naked pink baby made of plaster •
 • that I put into the Christmas manger every year, the •
 • suffering man nailed to the crucifix before which we •
 • prayed — even though both of these were actually his •
 • son — as well as a sort of ghost called the Holy Spirit. •
 • Of course, I know perfectly well that Joseph was Mary's •
 • husband, and that Jesus, even though he was both God •
 • and the son of God, called him "Father." The Virgin was •
 • in fact the mother of the Christ child, but there were •
 • times when she was referred to as his daughter. •

• — Catherine Millet, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* (2002)pp.2-3 •

•.....Unquote:

September Meeting

Dying With Dignity: A Humane Choice

Speaker: Dr. Faye Girsh, Senior Vice President, End-of-Life Choices, Inc. (formerly the Hemlock Society, USA)

Dr. Girsh began her talk by quoting Seneca, the Roman philosopher, who said that death was a punishment to some, to others a favor and to many a gift.

She invited members of the audience to ask questions at any time during the talk. One person then related an experience. Upon hearing about her upcoming talk, he had gone to the public library to find some literature about death and dying only to be told that type of literature was not available to the general public. Faye commented that she had never heard of a library not allowing distribution of literature dealing with death and dying in the United States but was aware of this type of censorship occurring in other countries, especially of Derek Humphry's book, *Final Exit*.

She commented on the recent name change of her organization from The Hemlock Society USA to End-of-Life Choices, Inc. There had long been discussion about changing the name. The founder, Derek Humphry, recalling the death of Socrates, who chose to drink the hemlock, rather than accept exile, had chosen the original name. Some members deemed it inappropriate for their organization to be named for a poison, and felt the new name better reflected what they were about. Thus the name change was made.

In 1997, the Constitutional Court of Colombia, the equivalent of our Supreme Court determined that it is not a crime to assist someone to die. They went on to say: "We have the right to speak and we have the right to remain silent; we have the right to practice our religion or we have the right to have no religion at all; we have the right to life and we have the right not to exercise that right and to die. And someone that chooses that right and asks someone for help; the person who provides that help should not be considered a criminal but that behavior should be considered the commendable thing to do." This decision was probably the most enlightened ever delivered on the subject anywhere in the world.

As an organization End-of-Life Choices has always had two goals. 1) To legalize physician aid in dying, at the moment for terminally ill, mentally competent adults, who request it, under careful safeguards. The Society as

spent over a million dollars in trying to get states to adopt empowering legislation either through the legislatures or by initiative. There has been success in only one, Oregon. Now the organization is working very hard to get legislation through the legislature in Vermont. A member has buttonholed legislators and has been successful in getting a number to sign on. Another state having considered legislation is Hawaii where it passed in the House but failed in the Senate by three votes. The legislation was spearheaded by the governor whose father suffered from Alzheimer's.

2) We think the decision to end one's life should be encompassed in the doctor/patient relationship and that people should not have to risk jeopardizing their loved ones or be forced to search for methods that will be difficult to use. We think it something that should be discussed openly and aboveboard with doctors, lawyers, and religious people. When it comes to the crossroads of dying and death, you should be able to discuss all of your options.

Faye then turned to a discussion of the Oregon legislation. The law was first passed by initiative in 1994 with 51 percent of the vote but was immediately challenged by the Right to Life forces and held up in the courts for three years. The Ninth Federal Circuit Court eventually threw out this suit. Thereupon, the Oregon Legislature put it on the ballot for rescission but the people voted to retain the law, in effect stating that they had not made a mistake the first time. The law is very restrictive. You must be a resident of Oregon, terminally ill with just six months to live as certified by two physicians, mentally competent, and an adult. But, if either doctor thinks you may be depressed, suffering from a mental illness or coerced, you must be subjected to a psychological exam. Further you must wait 15 days before proceeding. During that waiting period you must request termination twice orally and once in writing. Also during that time the doctor must explain what your other options are, such as hospice care. If at the end of 15 days, you still want to terminate your life you can get a doctor's prescription, if you can find one who is willing to provide it. Then you must find a pharmacist who is willing to fill it. Then it is up to the patient to self-administer the drug. The drugs frequently used are seconal or nembutal. A questioner asked how many people avail themselves of this opportunity. The answer was that less than 1/8th of one percent have availed themselves, going so far as to get the prescriptions but not all of them have died as a result. Some have died before they have used the drugs, others have decided not to. In the Netherlands where the practice has been used for 25 years, although



strictly speaking it was not legal, the legislature made it legal just last year. Their experience has been five percent have availed themselves of physician assisted suicide. The number probably will always be a small percentage of the population. Some other statistics from Oregon show that it is the number one state in the country for the use of hospice care and also number one in the use of morphine. Also it is the leading state in which a person is more likely to die at home than in a hospital or other institution providing care.

In 1991 about a month after 9/11 Attorney General John Ashcroft issued an edict threatening criminal penalties and loss of license to any doctor who prescribed for a patient under the Oregon Law or any other state law that might be passed in the future. The Attorney General of Oregon sued in Federal Court to prevent implementation. The trial court handed down a decision that Attorney General Ashcroft was out of bounds, that Congress had not empowered the Justice Department to decide what is legitimate medical practice. In the interim, Ashcroft has appealed the decision to the Ninth Federal Circuit Court, which has not yet handed down its ruling.

After the break, Faye briefly discussed the availability of legal end-of-life practices in other countries. In addition to the Netherlands, she noted that last year Belgium had passed legislation similar to that in the Netherlands allowing for doctor-assisted life termination. She also mentioned that Switzerland, in a revision of their penal code thirty years ago, had noted that although murder is illegal helping someone to die for unselfish reasons is not. Under that provision an organization called Exit Society has been helping people much like the Oregon practice. The doctor provides a prescription for barbiturates, which are secured from Germany. Then some members of the Society work with the patient to help him/her ingest the barbiturates. A few years ago a lawyer, Ludwig Minelli founded a group called Dignitas. This organization has received media attention in the US because they work with people from other countries while the Exit Society works only with Swiss citizens. It is Minelli's idea that people in need of this alternative should have a place to come to. Dignitas maintains apartments in Bern and Zurich where people can come to die. Some local citizens have become upset by the sight of coffins and have pressured parliament to pass legislation to end to the practice.

Faye then discussed the End-of Life Choices' Caring Friends program, which she started when she was president of the organization in 1997. Two adverse decisions, one from the US Supreme Court, the other from the Florida Supreme Court, which held assisted suicide was not a constitutional right were the impetus. About that time she received a check

for \$ 40,000 from a member. In an accompanying letter the donor explained that she had terminal lung cancer and "by the time you receive this, I will be dead." Faye used the money to start the Caring Friends Program. They trained 150 volunteers from all over the country to assist members who wanted to hasten their death. Members so desirous must submit an application and supply medical records, show that they have tried acceptable treatments available, and are mentally competent to make the decision to terminate their lives. About eighty percent of the members who apply are accepted. Members whose loved ones are opposed are not acceptable. Once accepted a volunteer will meet with the member and determine what their needs are. Sometimes the volunteer will connect the person to meals-on-wheels or possibly to hospice care. In an aside Faye noted that hospice care is the best place for people to die in comfort and in dignity. Some people do not want to try it; they just want to terminate their lives. However, the one does not preclude the other. There is a caveat. It is not a good idea to tell the care giver at the hospice of intentions to terminate because they will intervene. When the patient decides that the time is right, the volunteer will advise him of the method to use and be present at his final hour together with any family members.

Since its inception the program has worked with 180 patients who have terminated their lives, another hundred who have died without self termination and eighty to a hundred who are currently in the program. The method used is non-medical, thus requiring no prescription. The substance used is helium, which is easily obtained and is fast and effective.

Faye concluded by introducing the concept of terminal sedation and its companion principle double effect. In 1997, the US Supreme Court heard a case from Compassion in Dying in the course of the argument the issue of terminal sedation came up. To justify the argument the Catholic principle of double effect was introduced. This is the idea that if the intention of an action is benign, even though the result is evil, it is OK. This is the argument that Dr. Krevorkian used in his defense, that he didn't intend to kill but only to end the patient's pain and suffering. Under that principle a lot of doctors can aid a patient to end his life. Terminal sedation comes into play if the patient suffers from intractable pain and there is no other treatment recourse but to put the patient in psychological oblivion. Within a few days the patient will die from the increased dosage of the drug, from the underlying disease or from dehydration. The Supreme Court has held that this is acceptable because of the principle of double effect.

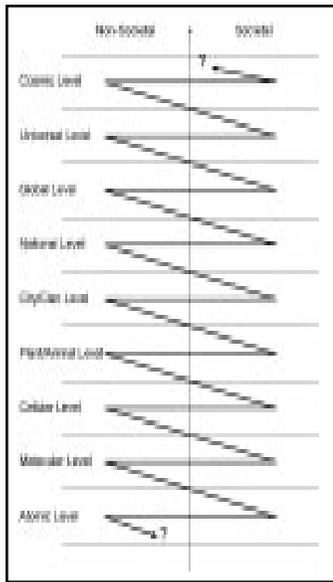


A New Model of the Universe and Human Destiny

Last Saturday evening, October 4, the members of the FIG Board and their significant others were invited to hear Anthony Marr explain his new theory of cosmology. We had only about 36 hours notice that he was available, so a larger group could not be accommodated. The following summary is based primarily on his comments that evening.

Anthony Marr has developed a new way of looking at the universe, that is, a new cosmology. He says that all groups throughout history have had a cosmology, most often based on religion. He wants his view to be based on the latest scientific findings. His concept is broader than most contemporary descriptions of cosmology because they are based primarily on physics, astronomy, and chemistry. He believes a cosmology is incomplete unless it includes the socio-biological sciences. That is why he calls his theory Omniscientific Cosmology, or Omni-Science.

He believes the cosmos cannot be properly understood without inclusion of humanity and the rest of the biosphere. Taking this all-inclusive approach “yields new insights for answering the ancient philosophical questions, such as the purpose of humanity, the meaning of life, the measure of morality . . .”



As far as I could tell, the main part of his theory concerns the future of human evolution. Based on analysis of the past stages of evolution, organisms evolved into ever more complex organisms. Man is the most complex biological organism, but Anthony’s theory looks beyond man, noting how man organized into societies, societies into cities, cities into nations, and nations into broader organizations such as the European Union. He sees the next step as planetary union, and way, way in the

future, an organization of the whole universe.

Anthony Marr does not seem to have advanced degrees in any of the sciences integral to his theory. However, he does have impressive comments from a number of scientists and philosophers. See his website at <http://www.omni-science.org>. (I was able to get confirmation of their plaudits from two humanists he mentions in an e-mail he sent me.)

His site also provides two summaries of his theory. I found the longer, seven-page summary easier to follow.

That website also provides information about his

book, *Omni-Science and the Human Destiny*. In spite of its title, this book is not devoted only to an exposition of his theory, but spends much time relating his travels to India as a wildlife preservationist seeking to save the tigers of India. Anthony is also very concerned about the broad environmental problems affecting the future of our Earth.

His book gives an account of how he learned his theory from the mysterious Raminothna, deep in Tigerland. In conversation, he points out that Raminothna is Anthony Marr spelled backward.

Anthony has written in his seven-page summary that at first contact, the “Omniscience Cosmology would strike many as so unfamiliar to be almost bizarre.” Among those of us who heard him explain his theories, there was general agreement that his ideas were indeed unique. A lively exchange of opinions ranged from partial acceptance to complete skepticism.

Joe Levee

Quote

• According to my Baptist Sunday-school teachers, a child is denied entrance to heaven merely for being born in the Congo rather than, say, north Georgia, where she could attend church regularly. This was the sticking point in my own little lame march to salvation: admission to heaven is gained by the luck of the draw. At age five I raised my good left hand in Sunday school and used a month’s ration of words to point out this problem to Miss Betty Nagy. Getting born within earshot of a preacher, I reasoned, is entirely up to chance. Would Our Lord be such a hit-or-miss kind of Savior as that? Would he really condemn some children to eternal suffering just for his accident of a heathen birth, and reward others for a privilege they did nothing to earn? I waited for Leah and the other pupils to seize on this very obvious point of argument and jump in with their overflowing brace of words. To my dismay, they did not.... Miss Betty sent me to the corner for the rest of the hour to pray for my own soul while kneeling on grains of uncooked rice. When I finally got up with sharp grains imbedded in my knees I found, to my surprise, that I no longer believed in God. The other children still did, apparently. As I limped back to my place, they turned their eyes away from my stippled sinner’s knees. How could they not even question their state of grace? I lacked their confidence, alas. I had spent more time than the average child pondering unfortunate accidents of birth.

— Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998)

••••• Unquote: •



BOOK REVIEW

Outside, Looking In
by Gil Gaudia
(Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2003)

This is an atheist novel, not merely a secular novel. Many novels, including whodunnits, science fiction and romance novel are secular, in that religion is not mentioned or does not play any role. But that merely means, the author does not bring up the topic of religion, as we mostly don't in everyday life. This book is about having no religion and god being an illogical construct. We can know this for one thing, because the back cover says so, and for another the literature that came with the book says the novel "raises compelling questions about religion that open-minded readers, no matter what their beliefs, will find stimulating," So how do you write a novel of unbelief, a subject that is essentially philosophical and cerebral, and not exactly the stuff of derring do and excitement?

Start with a Bildungsroman, a novel of growing up and coming of age of the main character. This in a world where ethnicity and religion are closely entwined, in other words New York City. Give the hero an Italian Catholic father married to a Russian Jewish mother, and conflict is built in. Being neither fish nor fowl, the protagonist grows up without adhering to either or any religion. Many individuals growing up in a secular family are able to carry their unbelief lightly and simply ignore the mumbo-jumbo of the believers. No so this character. In addition to two ethnic religions, the family is dysfunctional in many other ways, financial, emotional, educational and as parents. Add to this the hero's fiery antagonistic temper, and you are ready for some explosive events. The main character tends to lead with his chin when confronted with religion, and consequently often creates his own troubles. In fact, the most unbelievable aspect of the novel is how a character so brilliant, and he is, can be so stupid in some of his everyday choices.

Let me make it clear this is not some philosophical treatise on faith and religion. On the contrary, we follow the main character through a long and eventful life filled with many adventures, through love, marriage, and family. Only from time to time does he stub his toe on the god question in such a way he is made to feel an outsider. The novel may be regarded as a "seeker" novel, in that the protagonist spends much of his life searching for a niche in life where he fits, where he is happy, and where he can unfold his talents and live up to his potential.

His school years are marked by being the odd kid, the one without religion, the one that doesn't fit in. After high school he follows a number of low paying, dead end

jobs, and takes on a marriage long before he is mature enough or financially able. Only slowly, over the years does he find mentors who accept and believe in him. Gradually he wrestles himself into an education and an acceptable life. Constantly he explores additional interests or money making schemes, some of which get him into trouble. And, throughout his life, various members of his birth family pursue him for help, for succor, and to add yet another burden.

At this point you may think, OK a made up life about an unbeliever. Here is the kicker. The novel is largely autobiographical. How can I tell? It reads like an actual life, too many details, names, places, times which are characteristic of biography, but which novelists generally obscure. Enough so, that I asked the author, who confirmed: "Almost everything in the novel is autobiographical." and "Feel free to say that you have the author's word that it is mostly so." (By e-mail)

Many of us in the unbeliever fraternity would like to know how do we get that way, why did we lose that faith in the supernatural everybody else finds so easy to hold and keep. Here is the well written story of one unbeliever. Read it!



Fish, who have survived a near death experience remember seeing an old man with a long white beard and a visored cap saying: "Keep on trucking."

Quote

- Nineteenth Century Unbelief
- On the other hand, irreligion and outright skepticism, though never popular, were accorded far more respect than in contemporary, supposedly secularized, society. It's hard to conceive that in our day, a journalist could achieve even modest success by scoffing at religious credulity. Contrast the successful journalistic career of the openly infidel Ambrose Bierce a century ago. In nineteenth-century America, the echoes of the Enlightenment rationalism of the Founders yet lingered, and the bland, one-size-fits-all piety that suffuses our own public life had not yet developed.

-- Norman Levitt, Prometheus Bedeviled (1999) p. 36

Unquote



**November Potluck:
Tuesday 18th 6:30 PM**

**October Meeting:
Tuesday 28th 7 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