



COWTOWN HUMANIST

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Our meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month at the Friends of the Library Book Store located at 5332 Trail Lake Dr Ft Worth . . .Time 7:00 PM

For those interested, several of us dine at Valentina's Restaurant (formerly Joe's Italian Restaurant) prior to the gathering. (South side of parking lot across from our meeting place) - Time 5:30 – All are welcome to join us!

The October 11th meeting will feature Cora Mosely who has worked in the criminal justice field for 28 years as a probation officer in misdemeanor and felony court, parole officer, manager and commissioner, assistant warden, drug court manager, crime analyst, and college educator. She earned a bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of Texas at Arlington, and a Master's Degree in Criminal Justice Management from Sam Houston State University in Huntsville. She has been an instructor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Texas at Arlington for the last seven years. She is a member of the Association of Psychological Type, American Corrections Association, NAACP, and past chairperson of the Fort Worth Human Relations Commission.

Brights: Where Are They Now?

COLUMN By ELAINE FRIEDMAN HumanistNetworkNews.org Sept. 13, 2006

In summer 2003 the noun "Bright" burst into the lexicon after it appeared in a column by Richard Dawkins in the London Guardian and in a column by Daniel Dennett in the New York Times. The coiners of the term, Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert, defined a Bright as "a person whose worldview is naturalistic (free of supernatural and mystical elements)."

Despite the term's auspicious introduction by two world-renowned scientists, I'm still looked at quizzically by members of the general public when I use "bright" as a noun. Such confusion prompted me to research the current state of the "Brights Movement."

I must first state that I find the concept underlying the bright movement, well, brilliant. As stated in correspondence with Humanist Network News, Futrell and Geisert state that they wanted to define a category of people by what they are (free of supernatural beliefs) rather than by what they are not (non-believers or non-theists).

Indeed, the original motivation for developing the bright concept came from Futrell and Geisert's dismay at the use of the term "godless" in the "Godless American March on Washington" that occurred on Nov. 2, 2002. As stated on the Brights website, "Both terms (godless and nonbeliever) define people, trap them actually, into being defined by reference to religion and, for most practical purposes, just by one aspect in their broad-spectrum worldviews."

Futrell and Geisert quite correctly state that before the advent of the Brights Movement, many people did not have a term to define their beliefs, and thus had no way of identifying themselves and connecting with like-minded others. Believing themselves to be alone and having no way to reach out, they could not form a constituency to counteract the increasing intrusion of religious and supernatural ideas into our lives. As they stated in a recent article, "We intended that Brights would focus on their social and electoral circumstances, not their -- or others' -- beliefs."

Geisert and Futrell also assumed (probably correctly) that potential Brights were not "joiners" in the traditional sense and would be reluctant to become part of a group that required regular attendance to be effective. They were therefore careful to stress in our correspondence that "The Brights movement...is a constituency of individuals working toward a level civic/societal playing field for citizens of all worldviews."

Instead of meeting physically, Brights identify themselves and meet online by forming an "Internet Constituency of Brights." It is hoped that as more individuals discover they are Brights, identify themselves as such and sign onto the Internet constituency of Brights, they will form a critical mass of citizens who can influence social and public policy.

How is the Brights Movement progressing three years after its inception? Perhaps the best way to analyze its progress is in reference to the goals delineated on the Brights website.

- * 1. Grow the Brights numerically to increase general visibility and raise awareness (current priority)
- * 2. Call for and/or facilitate individual actions by Brights in specific situations (future)
- * 3. Arrange for actions by cadres of constituents in explicit circumstances (future)

Regarding (1), Futrell and Geisert state that "The constituency has increased in size, mostly in a consistent linear fashion. There was an initial burst of awareness due to mainstream media on the heels of Dawkins and Dennett placing their respective essays in the Guardian and the New York Times. After that gush of enrollments (and media) there has been a slow but steady linear rate of growth....Over 21,000 Brights have registered and the growth rate is running about 4,500 a year."

This consistent growth does not appear to have increased awareness among the general public. I understand that Futrell and Geisert are not interested in "converting" non-Brights into Brights but simply in allowing those who are already Brights to identify themselves. However, the concept of the Brights needs to become part of public awareness before they can hope to influence social and public policy.

Why doesn't the general public recognize Bright as a noun? I believe that there are two reasons for this lack of awareness. The first is the very term itself — "Bright" -- that was chosen to represent a category of people. The Brights website states "One long-term goal is to change the vocabulary of mainstream society such that bright is used in a new way, somewhat analogous to the use of the word gay."

Unfortunately, co-opting the word "bright" has different implications than co-opting the word "gay." The original meaning of "gay" is happy or joyous, so if you were not gay before about 1965, you were sad — not exactly an insult. If you were gay, it simply described your temporary emotional state and made no comment upon your value as a person. However, if you are not bright in the traditional sense of the word, then you are...dumb. Describing someone as bright makes a positive statement on his/her intellectual capacity; therefore most people will not call themselves bright for fear of appearing arrogant.

Despite Futrell and Geisert's insistence that the word as a noun has a different meaning than its use as an adjective, you cannot erase the public's lexical memory (the Scientologists have discovered this in their effort to use "clear" as a noun to describe themselves). Therefore, many who fit the definition of a Bright have been reluctant to identify themselves as such, and those who have are often viewed as arrogant and pretentious. Brights thus face the same problem as those who identify themselves as atheists or liberals — public opprobrium due to their use of a word that other segments of society have managed to turn into "dirty" words.

But it was this very problem — having to use words loaded with cultural baggage — that the term "Bright" was coined to escape! Will Brights be able to create a more positive view of the word so that others will proudly identify themselves as Brights to the public to create the awareness that is necessary to gain social and political influence?

The second problem with creating awareness of the Brights as a distinct category is the frequent lumping together of Brights and atheists. Much of the public that is aware of the term believe it to be a synonym for atheist. An article in Science and Theology News that stated "These anti-religious atheists, who want us to call them "brights...." required Futrell and Geisert to reply in the magazine that "There is a rather startling spectrum of people who are Brights...atheists, agnostics, ethical culturalists, humanists, secular humanists, freethinkers, rationalists, naturalists and skeptics. There are plenty of 'nones' — the individuals who, when confronted by a questionnaire that asks 'Religion?' will state 'None.'"

Will the Brights be able to clear up this misunderstanding?

The Brights Movement has had some success in facilitating the individual and occasional group actions that are their (future) goals. A Brights "constituent observer" attended the United Religions Initiative (URI) held in Brussels last fall (the URI invited a Brights "representative," but as the movement is not an organization but a constituency of autonomous individuals, an "observer" was sent instead). There are Brights local constituencies and Brights Meetups which are quite active in some areas (mostly major urban areas). The Brights e-zine, The Brights Bulletin, lists occasional "Brighten Ops" and "Special Initiative Groups" that call for groups to act on a specific issue. The Brights Movement Forums have many members from all over the world and are very active.

Will the Brights be able to influence social opinion and public policy in the future? I believe that they will only be able to exert influence when enough people feel comfortable loudly identifying themselves as Brights, but many are reluctant to appear arrogant by using the term. The Brights were formed as a new group to escape past cultural baggage, but made an unfortunate choice of terminology that saddled them with a term that makes them appear pretentious and condescending. Can they change this perception or will they have to start over again?

Elaine Friedman is the editor of Humanist Network News, the weekly e-zine of the Institute for Humanist Studies.

Don Ruhs found the following on www.Alnet.net.org – I thought you'd all enjoy it:

Sam Harris's book "The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason," which won the 2005 Pen Award for nonfiction, develops a smart, knowledgeable polemic about the growing dangers of all religious ideologies. Although I love Harris' rant, my personal obsession has long been with how weird monotheism is. Monotheism insists there is but one god, a man of course, alone in the universe for all eternity. Even as a child, I found this to be a crazy idea.

The Greeks and Romans, the Hindus, and the Egyptians all imagined many different gods who hang out together, the way people throughout the world do. These cultures envisioned social gods with busy existences who like pleasure, food, sex, art and other good things of life. As with people, the social ties among the gods loosely constrain their destructive impulses.

Mostly these gods are so involved with each other they only sometimes notice the lesser beings, just as people only sometimes notice their household animals. The multiple gods of great cultural systems, and the gods and spirits of many tribal cultures as well, are familiar, understandable. They project the human world into the sky, the same way science fiction does (except, of course, science fiction understands it is offering fiction).

But monotheism posits one omnipotent, lonely sucker all by himself -- "the sky god" as Gore Vidal once called him. The first five books of the Hebrews' Bible reveal, not surprisingly, that the sky god is often angry, jealous, vengeful, and even murderous -- regularly toying with, manipulating and punishing the puny beings he creates to worship and amuse him. Not surprisingly, he's a self-absorbed ascetic who invents for his "children" bizarre, impossible-to-comply-with rules governing a multitude of tiny details of daily life. Sometimes he goes berserk about minor infractions; frequently he ignores major violations of his own rules. He's the original bad father, threatening awful punishments, with no wife, lover, siblings, friends, co-workers, neighbors or relatives to reign him in.

Early Christians and then Muslims added to monotheism the great creative innovation of the promise of eternal life. A person gets to live forever if, and only if, that person closely follows the sky god's rules. This made monotheism much easier to sell, especially when coupled with the offer of extra credit toward salvation for converting others. It also made monotheism fantastically effective in motivating, inspiring, controlling and ruling people. Fueled by the monotheists' inexhaustible missionary zeal, in nearly 2,000 years this peculiar ideology has spread throughout much of the globe.

Here in the high-tech futuristic 21st century, the punitive, vengeful, sky god is as strong and legitimate as he's been in a long time. Modernity, it turns out, was no cure for monotheism. If anything, it increases extremism, especially -- but never only -- among the dispossessed. And now in the Middle East we have the volatile blend of pissed-off Jews, Muslims, and Christians, each convinced they possess an iron-clad mandate from their one and only angry god. Mixed in as well are many weapons, lots of oil, and the dangerous, born-again idiocy of George W. Bush and other prominent Republicans. All this is concentrated on the turf that monotheists everywhere see as their origin, their home, their "holy land."

Present-day America's most popular form of lunatic monotheism -- fundamentalist, evangelical Protestantism (and especially end-of-days Christianity with tens of millions of believers convinced that Jesus is returning soon) -- is deeply obsessed with the holy land. Crazy Christian fundamentalists love it when crazed Jewish warriors battle it out with crazed Islamic warriors. The Pat Robertsons regard the wars as win-win and ordinary believers see them as signs that the saved will soon be lifted to heaven. Unfortunately, these fundamentalist Christians now have enormous influence over the foreign policy of the most powerful nation in the world.

Most monotheists want governments to punish people who fail to obey some of the sky god's ascetic rules. Even moderate, middle-of-the-road monotheists -- like the Roman Catholic Church -- pressure governments to criminalize and punish homosexuality, drug use and abortion. The large and growing numbers of Christian, Muslim and Jewish fundamentalists have far grander ambitions.

Inevitably, some prominent believers turn out to have long been hypocrites, liars and secret sinners -- adulterers, gamblers, drug users, homosexuals. But hypocrisy poses no threat to the monotheists who say the hidden sins demonstrate the awful power of the evils they battle. The self-righteous condemn the sins, of course, but they actually approve of the lies, insisting that "hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue -- to the one heavenly lord.

Monotheists, especially in scary and desperate times like our own, easily hate other monotheisms and often loath variants of their own brand. And while they have often been happy to butcher polytheists by the wagonload, monotheists do not ordinarily hate polytheists (except when armed and dangerous). Traditionally, monotheists have regarded pagans as primitive or backward peoples who just don't know any better. But they, the other monotheists and the apostates, do know better, or should.

The historic battles within monotheism are legendary: Hebrews vs. Christians, Sunnis vs. Shiites, Catholics vs. Protestants, Lutherans vs. Calvinists, Church of England vs. dissenters, Puritans vs. Baptists, and so many others. Currently some Islamic extremists have a hard time deciding who they despise more: Is it the evil Christian and Jewish heretics, or is it the evil Muslims heretics? So much heresy, so little time.

For monotheism, it always comes down to heresy, to the rejection of orthodoxy. Starting perhaps with Zoroastrianism, each monotheism itself began as a heresy, instantly generating its own orthodoxy. Heresy -- free thought and choosing to reject the rules -- is the primal offense against the monotheists' conception, and love, of their solitary deity.

The chief authoritarian ideologies of the 20th century were secular and even anti-religious. They are not gone, but they are exhausted. Now, in our global warming, nuclear bomb-loaded world, especially in the United States and the Middle East, we face an older, far more popular and durable ideology: the angry god as mandate and role model.

Like Mark Twain, Bertrand Russell and others before him, Sam Harris insists that the basic premises and literal texts of monotheism are so authoritarian and repressive that people who believe them also easily and frequently support all sorts of other repressive causes. For evidence, see the last 2,000 years of history, or tomorrow's newspaper.

The following was forwarded by Cowtown Humanist member Marjorie Bixler:

In The God Delusion, the scientist Richard Dawkins sets out to attack God "in all his forms".

He argues that the rise of religious fundamentalism is dividing people around the world, while the dispute between "intelligent design" and Darwinism "is seriously undermining and restricting the teaching of science".

The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins is published by Bantam Press at £20.00.

THE GOD DELUSION

by Richard Dawkins

FROM CHAPTER 7: The "Good" Book and the changing moral Zeitgeist

There are two ways in which scripture might be a source of morals or rules for living. One is by direct instruction, for example through the Ten Commandments, which are the subject of such bitter contention in the culture wars of America's boondocks. The other is by example: God, or some other biblical character, might serve as - to use the contemporary jargon - a role model. Both scriptural routes, if followed through religiously (the adverb is used in its metaphoric sense but with an eye to its origin), encourage a system of morals which any civilized modern person, whether religious or not, would find - I can put it no more gently - obnoxious.

To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries. This may explain some of the sheer strangeness of the Bible. But unfortunately it is this same weird volume that religious zealots hold up to us as the inerrant source of our morals and rules for living. Those who wish to base their morality literally on the Bible have either not read it or not understood it, as Bishop John Shelby Spong, in *The Sins of Scripture*, rightly observed. Bishop Spong, by the way, is a nice example of a liberal bishop whose beliefs are so advanced as to be almost unrecognizable to the majority of those who call themselves Christians. A British counterpart is Richard Holloway, recently retired as Bishop of Edinburgh. Bishop Holloway even describes himself as a 'recovering Christian'. I had a public discussion with him in Edinburgh, which was one of the most stimulating and interesting encounters I have had.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Begin in Genesis with the well-loved story of Noah, derived from the Babylonian myth of Uta-Napisthim and known from the older mythologies of several cultures. The legend of the animals going into the ark two by two is charming, but the moral of the story of Noah is appalling. God took a dim view of humans, so he (with the exception of one family) drowned the lot of them including children and also, for good measure, the rest of the (presumably blameless) animals as well.

Of course, irritated theologians will protest that we don't take the book of Genesis literally any more. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision, just as much, or as little, as the atheist's decision to follow this moral precept or that was a personal decision, without an absolute foundation. If one of these is 'morality flying by the seat of its pants', so is the other. In any case, despite the good intentions of the sophisticated theologian, a frighteningly large number of people still do take their scriptures, including the story of Noah, literally. According to Gallup, they include approximately 50 per cent of the US electorate. Also, no doubt, many of those Asian holy men who blamed the 2004 tsunami not on a plate tectonic shift but on human sins, ranging from drinking and dancing in bars to breaking some footling sabbath rule. Steeped in the story of Noah, and ignorant of all except biblical learning, who can blame them? Their whole education has led them to view natural disasters as bound up with human affairs, paybacks for human misdemeanours rather than anything so impersonal as plate tectonics. By the way, what presumptuous egocentricity to believe that earth-shaking events, on the scale at which a god (or a tectonic plate) might operate, must always have a human connection. Why should a divine being, with creation and eternity

on his mind, care a fig for petty human malefactions? We humans give ourselves such airs, even aggrandizing our poky little 'sins' to the level of cosmic significance!

When I interviewed for television the Reverend Michael Bray, a prominent American anti-abortion activist, I asked him why evangelical Christians were so obsessed with private sexual inclinations such as homosexuality, which didn't interfere with anybody else's life. His reply invoked something like self-defense. Innocent citizens are at risk of becoming collateral damage when God chooses to strike a town with a natural disaster because it houses sinners. In 2005, the fine city of New Orleans was catastrophically flooded in the aftermath of a hurricane, Katrina. The Reverend Pat Robertson, one of America's best-known televangelists and a former presidential candidate, was reported as blaming the hurricane on a lesbian comedian who happened to live in New Orleans. You'd think an omnipotent God would adopt a slightly more targeted approach to zapping sinners: a judicious heart attack, perhaps, rather than the wholesale destruction of an entire city just because it happened to be the domicile of one lesbian comedian.

In November 2005, the citizens of Dover, Pennsylvania voted off their local school board the entire slate of fundamentalists who had brought the town notoriety, not to say ridicule, by attempting to enforce the teaching of 'intelligent design'. When Pat Robertson heard that the fundamentalists had been democratically defeated at the ballot, he offered a stern warning to Dover:

"I'd like to say to the good citizens of Dover, if there is a disaster in your area, don't turn to God. You just rejected him from your city, and don't wonder why he hasn't helped you when problems begin, if they begin, and I'm not saying they will. But if they do, just remember you just voted God out of your city. And if that's the case, then don't ask for his help, because he might not be there."

Pat Robertson would be harmless comedy were he less typical of those who today hold power and influence in the United States. In the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Noah equivalent, chosen to be spared with his family because he was uniquely righteous, was Abraham's nephew Lot. Two male angels were sent to Sodom to warn Lot to leave the city before the brimstone arrived. Lot hospitably welcomed the angels into his house, whereupon all the men of Sodom gathered around and demanded that Lot should hand the angels over so that they could (what else?) sodomize them: 'Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them' (Genesis 19: 5).

Yes, 'know' has the Authorized Version's usual euphemistic meaning, which is very funny in the context. Lot's gallantry in refusing the demand suggests that God might have been onto something when he singled him out as the only good man in Sodom. But Lot's halo is tarnished by the terms of his refusal: 'I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly. Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof' (Genesis 19: 7-8).

Whatever else this strange story might mean, it surely tells us something about the respect accorded to women in this intensely religious culture. As it happened, Lot's bargaining away of his daughters' virginity proved unnecessary, for the angels succeeded in repelling the marauders by miraculously striking them blind. They then warned Lot to decamp immediately with his family and his animals, because the city was about to be destroyed. The whole household escaped, with the exception of Lot's unfortunate wife, whom the Lord turned into a pillar of salt because she committed the offence - comparatively mild, one might have thought - of looking over her shoulder at the fireworks display.

Lot's two daughters make a brief reappearance in the story. After their mother was turned into a pillar of salt, they lived with their father in a cave up a mountain. Starved of male company, they decided to make their father drunk and copulate with him. Lot was beyond noticing when his elder daughter arrived in his bed or when she left, but he was not too drunk to impregnate her. The next night the two daughters agreed it was the younger one's turn. Again Lot was too drunk to notice, and he impregnated her too (Genesis 19: 31-6). If this dysfunctional family was the best Sodom had to offer by way of morals, some might begin to feel a certain sympathy with God and his judicial brimstone.

- It is unclear whether the story, which originated at <http://datelinehollywood.com/archives/2005/09/05/robertson-blames-hurricane-on-choice-of-ellen-deneres-to-host-emmys/> is true.
- Whether true or not, it is widely believed, no doubt because it is entirely typical of utterances by evangelical clergy, including Robertson, on disasters such as Katrina. See, for example, www.emediawire.com/releases/2005/9/emw281940.htm. The website that says the Katrina story is untrue (www.snopes.com/katrina/satire/robertson.asp) also quotes Robertson as saying, of an earlier Gay Pride march in Orlando, Florida, 'I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you.'

FROM CHAPTER EIGHT: What's wrong with religion? Why be so hostile?

In July 2005, London was the victim of a concerted suicide bomb attack: three bombs in the subway and one in a bus. Not as bad as the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, and certainly not as unexpected (indeed, London had been braced for just such an event ever since Blair volunteered us as unwilling side-kicks in Bush's invasion of Iraq), nevertheless the London explosions horrified Britain. The newspapers were filled with agonized appraisals of what drove four young men to blow

themselves up and take a lot of innocent people with them. The murderers were British citizens, cricket-loving, well-mannered, just the sort of young men whose company one might have enjoyed.

Why did these cricket-loving young men do it? Unlike their Palestinian counterparts, or their kamikaze counterparts in Japan, or their Tamil Tiger counterparts in Sri Lanka, these human bombs had no expectation that their bereaved families would be lionized, looked after or supported on martyrs' pensions. On the contrary, their relatives in some cases had to go into hiding. One of the men wantonly widowed his pregnant wife and orphaned his toddler. The action of these four young men has been nothing short of a disaster not just for themselves and their victims, but for their families and for the whole Muslim community in Britain, which now faces a backlash. Only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people. Once again, Sam Harris put the point with percipient bluntness, taking the example of the Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden (who had nothing to do with the London bombings, by the way). Why would anyone want to destroy the World Trade Center and everybody in it? To call bin Laden 'evil' is to evade our responsibility to give a proper answer to such an important question.

The answer to this question is obvious - if only because it has been patiently articulated ad nauseam by bin Laden himself. The answer is that men like bin Laden actually believe what they say they believe. They believe in the literal truth of the Koran. Why did nineteen well-educated middle-class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of our neighbors? Because they believed that they would go straight to paradise for doing so. It is rare to find the behavior of humans so fully and satisfactorily explained. Why have we been so reluctant to accept this explanation?"

The respected journalist Muriel Gray, writing in the (Glasgow) Herald on 24 July 2005, made a similar point, in this case with reference to the London bombings.

Everyone is being blamed, from the obvious villainous duo of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, to the inaction of Muslim 'communities'. But it has never been clearer that there is only one place to lay the blame and it has ever been thus. The cause of all this misery, mayhem, violence, terror and ignorance is of course religion itself, and if it seems ludicrous to have to state such an obvious reality, the fact is that the government and the media are doing a pretty good job of pretending that it isn't so.

Our Western politicians avoid mentioning the R word (religion), and instead characterize their battle as a war against 'terror', as though terror were a kind of spirit or force, with a will and a mind of its own. Or they characterize terrorists as motivated by pure 'evil'. But they are not motivated by evil. However misguided we may think them, they are motivated, like the Christian murderers of abortion doctors, by what they perceive to be righteousness, faithfully pursuing what their religion tells them. They are not psychotic; they are religious idealists who, by their own lights, are rational. They perceive their acts to be good, not because of some warped personal idiosyncrasy, and not because they have been possessed by Satan, but because they have been brought up, from the cradle, to have total and unquestioning faith.

The weather has finally become pleasant enough to pick up trash along “our” stretch of Granbury Rd. After polling members, it has been decided that Saturday, October 14th, beginning at 8 AM will be the date and time for our clean-up effort. After the completion of our task, breakfast will be on The Cowtown Humanists. It’s fun and worthwhile, so if you can join us – do so!

Don Ruhs will email each of you directions to the site.

Your officers may be contacted as follows:

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I'd like to solicit articles from members who may wish to contribute anything of interest to our membership.

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For newsletter comments, complaints and/or suggestions.

For more info about us and an archive of our past newsletters, go to: www.hofw.org

Our Members contributed \$19 to Westaid at our last meeting

Owe Dues? . . . See Dolores Ruhs