

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April, 2008

How do we love atheists? We count the ways. But we also consider our (you should excuse the expression) souls. What's more, we revisit (yet again) evolution (retired rocker perspective) and not-so "intelligent" design, capture nothing (albeit uncertainly), parody Rodgers and Hammerstein, and channel Mohammed via Aretha Franklin. We offer some Spring-season silliness on pages five and six, and sadly, say goodbye this month to one of the very best of our own.—JR

SORRY WE'RE LATE

To make the calendar useful even the first week of the month, we try to mail PIQUE early. But two-week travel by the entire staff made that impossible this issue. So, when you read pages 5 and 6, please pretend it's still April 1.

WHAT IS "SOUL"? WHAT IS "SELF"?

Daniel C. Dennett

(Excerpted from the Introduction to The Mind's I, Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul, edited by Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, which was the subject of a lively SHSNY Book Club discussion February 26, led by Book Club Editor Elaine Lynn.)

The idea that what you are is not simply a living body (or a living brain) but also a soul or spirit seems to many people to be unscientific, in spite of its ancient tradition. "Souls," they might want to say, "have no place in science and could never fit into the scientific world view. Science teaches us that there are no such things as souls. We don't believe in leprechauns and ghosts any more, thanks to science, and the suspect idea of a soul inhabiting a body—the 'ghost in the machine'—will itself soon give up the ghost." But not all versions of the idea that you are something distinct from your purely physical body are so vulnerable to ridicule and refutation. Some versions ... actually flourish in the garden of science.

Our world is filled with things that are neither mysterious and ghostly nor simply constructed out of the building blocks of physics. Do you believe in voices? How about haircuts? Are there such things? What are they? What, in the language of the physicist, is a hole – not an exotic black hole, but just a hole in a piece of cheese, for instance? Is it a physical thing? What is a symphony? Where in space and time does "The Star Spangled Banner" exist? Is it nothing but some ink trails on some paper in the Library of Congress? Destroy that paper and the anthem would still exist. Latin still exists, but is no longer a living language. The language of the cavepeople of France no longer exists at all. The game of bridge is less than a hundred years old. What sort of thing is it? It is not animal, vegetable, or mineral.

These things are not physical objects with mass, or a chemical composition, but they are not purely abstract objects either – objects like the number pi, which is immutable and cannot be located in space and time. These things have birthplaces and histories. They can change, and things can happen to them. They can move about – much the way a species, a disease, or an epidemic can. We must not suppose that science teaches us that every thing anyone would ever want to take seriously is identifiable as a collection of particles moving about in space and time.

Some people may think it is just common sense (or just good scientific thinking) to suppose you are nothing but a particular living, physical organism—a moving mound of atoms—but in fact this idea exhibits a lack of scientific imagination, not hard-headed

sophistication. One doesn't have to believe in ghosts to believe in selves that have an identity that transcends any particular living body.

SHSNY ELECTION – THIRD NOTICE

The triennial election for the Board of Directors of SHSNY is taking place this spring. Candidate statements and ballots will be mailed to all dues-paid members on or about April 15. *On the assumption that Family Memberships consist of at least two members, those memberships will receive two ballots.* All returned ballots will be due in the SHSNY P.O. box May 15. At a meeting of the current Board in late May, the ballots will be counted and the results tallied. The new 3-year Board term will begin June 1.

Who is eligible?

All dues-paid members are/were eligible for election, but nominations were due by April 1, as per notices in both February and March PIQUE, and by email.

Who is standing for election?

Only the nine current Board members are standing for election. Since our By-laws require a minimum of five directors, but mandate no maximum, the five Board members who receive the greatest number of votes will themselves vote (probably in 20 seconds by acclamation) to certify the election of the others. The new Board will then elect SHSNY's officers (President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary) for the new term.

Herewith, the statements of four of the current Board members seeking re-election.

Elaine Lynn

I have been a humanist for as long as I can remember and I'm eager to help, in whatever modest way I can, to make this a more enlightened society. I think people of all political and philosophical persuasions have a home among secular humanists. Though I am not eager to be unkind to anyone, we all need to face the fact that religion is an elaborately articulated form of superstition, and we can't afford to be in its thrall.

As to my background, I have a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Chicago, and have worked many years as a hotshot federal bureaucrat. (I can't resist pointing out that "bureaucracy," with its current negative connotations, is not peculiar to governments, but exists throughout the private sector as well.) I retired early to pursue my interests in the cognitive sciences and in international affairs.

Since I have joined SHSNY, I've found people I like and respect, whom I'm very happy to be with. I have tried to be helpful in stuffing envelopes, running our book club, recruiting new people to the Society and, did I mention stuffing envelopes? I think we can bring more even members in, and bring in more authors and otherwise well-known people, which we've gotten a start on in 2007-8. As new Secretary, I will produce minutes which may or may not resemble the actual meetings.

I would also like to find some way to contribute to library programs or other forms of support for science education. I've recently had two book reviews accepted by *Free Inquiry*, and I hope to do a lot more writing in the future. I also represent the Society on a local public access television channel where I am host of the "ABC," The Atheist Book Club.

Sam Milligan

I became a true non-believer on seeing Carl Sagan's "Cosmos" on public television in 1979. I am committed to secularism and resent the efforts of the religious to impose their cruel beliefs on others. I feel that this organization is a valuable tool for exposing that cruelty.

Irv Millman

We are living in a country that has become more and more religious, to a point that is threatening our democratic values. The political climate is intimidating even to our most respected politicians when “faith-based” issues come up.

SHSNY gives me an opportunity to interact and exchange ideas with like-minded people who promote the values I cherish. My hope is that our efforts will be effective in informing and reminding our countrymen of those ethical values we need to think about and employ from the secular humanist point of view. I welcome the chance to participate in that endeavor.

John Rafferty

I joined SHSNY in 1997 and the Board in 2002, became Editor of PIQUE and Secretary of SHSNY in 2004, and was elected President by the Board in 2007.

Three years ago I offered as goals for SHSNY:

1. To create and schedule more activities – and we now have our book club, brunches, movie nights, and roundtables (all new), and more lectures, dinners, and other social occasions;

2. To increase membership and subscriptions substantially – and we have, by more than 50 percent.

What next?

1. Doubling membership, with emphasis on youth.

2. Lectures and roundtables every month.

3. Closer working relationships with other free-thought groups.

4. A weekly SHSNY cable-TV show.

5. Non-partisan political action on humanist issues (e.g., the “miracle cross” at the WTC site).

I ask for your vote.

*Note: A new, non-incumbent has nominated himself for Board membership. We couldn't squeeze **Flash Light's** statement in here, so please go to page 10 to read it. (It's interesting.)*

ARTHUR C. CLARKE, 1917-2008, NOVELIST, FUTURIST AND SECULAR HUMANIST, HAS LEFT THE PLANET

(Excerpted from Humanist Network News, 3/19/08)

Arthur C. Clarke, who produced more than 100 books on space, science and the future, including *Childhood's End* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, died March 18 at age 90 at his home in Sri Lanka.

A man of uncanny vision, he accurately predicted within six months when the first manned moon landing would take place. Clarke was also credited with the concept of communications satellites in 1945, many years before they became an actuality. Geosynchronous orbits, which keep satellites in a fixed position relative to the ground, are called Clarke orbits.

Clarke called himself “an aggressive agnostic” and said that “religion is the most malevolent of all mind viruses. We should get rid of it as quickly as we can.”

Another of his quotes, that, “It may be that our role on this planet is not to worship God, but to create him,” adorns the cover of SHSNY's introductory brochure.

A member of the Secular Humanist Society of New York and a humanist laureate in the Council for Secular Humanism's International Academy of Humanism, Clarke was also a signer of the Humanist Manifesto 2000.

Among his legacies are *Clarke's Three Laws*, provocative observations on science, science fiction and society that were published in his Profiles of the Future:

“When a distinguished elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.”

“The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.”

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Sir Arthur left written instructions that his funeral have “absolutely no religious rites of any kind, relating to any religious faith.”

LET US BOW OUR HEADS IN THANKS FOR ATHEISTS

Linda Staten

(Excerpted from kansascity.com, 3/1/08)

The re-awakening of atheism in America is going to make for some very interesting times. Leaders of the Christian Right have spent years trying to cast themselves as the voiceless victims in a secular society, but the scapegoating is over. (Want to talk marginalized? How many atheists have there ever been in Congress or the White House?)

Nonbelievers know a lot about Christianity and Judaism, most having been raised in religious families. Believers, however, are somewhat less clued-in about atheists. Here are a few simple truths.

Atheists are well-behaved. Atheists seem to play well with others overall. They’re not in the news for getting caught doing things they tell others not to do. Most co-exist peacefully with believers. They pay taxes.

Atheists don’t start wars on behalf of atheism. They do join the military, however, and contrary to the cliché, they are found in foxholes. In fact, there is a lawsuit now against Defense Secretary Robert Gates and a major who harassed a group of “foxhole atheists” who simply wished to exercise their freedom of/from religion while serving their country in the Middle East.

Atheists have a thing for the American Constitution, particularly the First Amendment that separates church and state. They are secularists who support a government free from influence by any religion. They’re not anti-religious but nonreligious.

So when people like Mike Huckabee announce they want to “take this nation back for Christ” and make the Constitution fit the word of God, atheists worry, and feel everyone else would be wise to worry along with them.

Atheists don't take up much space. In fact, they only comprise 0.4 percent of the U.S. population, according to the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey. (Agnostics would add 0.5 percent, the nonreligious 14.1 percent more.)

A total of 900,000 people isn’t even enough to fill 10 football stadiums, but evangelical leaders insist the godless are behind the decline of a whole nation. Uh, okay.

Atheists make good neighbors. Chances are, if you lived next door to an atheist, you might never know it. Atheists aren’t known for going door-to-door or shore-to-shore to un-convert people. They will help you even though there’s no heavenly reward in it for them.

Atheists will not infringe upon your life uninvited. On the other hand, you have to wonder about the neighborliness of certain believers when you see, for example, the miracle of the multiplying churches and neighborhood-munching mega-churches.

Thanks to the Religious Land Use law, passed in 2000, it’s lots easier now for religious groups to build more tax-exempt houses of worship, often against the wishes of neighborhoods which they burden financially and environmentally.

Atheists are lousy fundraisers. If you really want to raise a ton of money, oh, say on a weekly basis, don’t ask an atheist. Go to the folks with the know-how.

Televangelists raise almost \$100 billion a year. In fact, they are so good at talking money out of people's bank accounts that six major Christian ministries are under investigation by the Senate Finance Committee.

These prosperity preachers tell their followers that God wants all of them to be well and be rich. (Serendipitously, God wants the preachers to have fancy cars, huge houses and the occasional Learjet.)

Atheists are the quiet type. Religionists have counted on atheists' need for self-protection, but things are changing. Witness the popularity of Christopher Hitchens' insightful book, *god is not Great*, the movie version of *The Golden Compass*, the mainstream media interest in the nonbelievers' demographic.

There's a new dialogue beginning between mainline believers and atheists, and among atheists themselves. While militant New Atheists fight to replace dogma with rational thinking, humanists encourage believers and nonbelievers to get the moral work of peace, social justice and saving the environment done together.

Right-wing Christianity shook the atheist community out of its complacency with its attempts to co-opt the country. A missing piece of the real picture of America is finally being restored. Amen to that.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE: AN OXYMORON?

Massimo Pigliucci

(Reprinted from rationallyspeaking.org, 3/4/08)

Is religious tolerance an oxymoron? To those of us outside of God's Fantasy World it would certainly seem that way, but philosopher Matthew Lopensti asks the question seriously, albeit within a pretty funny framework. Lopensti's essay, "The challenge of religious diversity in 'This Week in God'" is part of a recent collection of writings on the philosophy of Jon Stewart's "The Daily Show" [*on the Comedy Channel, weeknights at 11*]. The essay's title refers to one of the irregular segments of the show, which a-periodically asks what God (or, rather, his followers) has been up to of late.

Lopensti nicely summarizes the options available to religious people who wish to be tolerant of other religious traditions (tolerance toward atheism, of course, is a different matter...). First, one can decide not to be tolerant at all, and embrace exclusivism. This is the familiar position of many in the Middle East and in the American Bible Belt: there is only one God, and it's mine. If you don't believe in It, no matter how pious and well intentioned, you're going to Hell (or another horrible place of my choice). Clearly, there are few options to "accommodate" other traditions if one is an exclusivist: usually believers in other gods are (often forcibly) converted, or exterminated. Hence the religious wars in Europe for most of the Middle Ages up to the Enlightenment, and the chronic disaster that is Palestine.

The second alternative, according to Lopensti, is inclusivism. Here the idea is that "we all believe in the same God," sort of. This, as it should be immediately obvious, is plainly not true. Despite heroic fits of mental gymnastics by progressive religionists, there is just no sensible way in which the God of the Old Testament is the same thing as the Spaghetti Monster, or, for that matter, the same thing as the God of the New Testament. I'm reminded of a moment in Bertrand Russell's autobiography, which I read when I was a teenager and which obviously made a lasting impression on me. Russell was arrested by the British government for demonstrating against Britain's entrance in World War I. When he was brought to jail he was asked the customary questions by the local record keeper, including "What religion are you?" When Russell responded that he was agnostic, the guard pondered the answer for a bit, obviously confused, then shrugged, wrote something down and commented along the lines of "Oh, what the hell, we all believe in the same God." No, not really.

The final option presented by Lopresti is pluralism: the idea is that different religious traditions are in fact distinct (à la exclusivism, contra inclusivism), but they also have enough shared values and common objectives to foster reciprocal collaboration. Lopresti's example of shared goals isn't exactly flattering, though: "Jews, Christians, and Muslims of the holy city of Jerusalem banded together in a show of solidarity – not for peace, social justice, or some other wacky idea, but against a gay-pride parade." In other words, religious people can set aside their internal disputes when they rally behind the common banner of religious intolerance!

More seriously, pluralism faces a variety of obstacles, beginning with the obvious one: what are we to make of the suggestion that various religious traditions are different ways to get at the same truth, if one rejects the idea that there can be such a thing as a religious truth to begin with? Indeed, what would such "truth" look like, and how would we know it? It is useless to invoke religion as a guide to morality, first because one can obviously be moral without being religious, and second because religious "morality" has been responsible for countless atrocities throughout human history. It won't do either to go minimalist and claim that what all religions have in common is the "truth" of the existence of God, because the various notions of "god" proposed by different religions are often incompatible, and—more importantly—because god truly is just make-believe.

It's hard to be tolerant when one is religious.

THE TRUE MEANING OF EASTER

Last spring, the (presumably Christian) powers that be at the Somerfield chain of supermarkets in the U.K. decided to lecture shoppers about Easter.

"Brits are set to spend a massive 520 million pounds [US\$1.02 billion] on Easter eggs this year," said the press release, "but many young people don't even know what Easter's all about – the birth of Jesus."

[Begin April Fool Insert]

PEEK

Newsletter of the Sexual Humorist Society of New York

April 1, 2008

Once again on this date, in a time-honored, one-year-old tradition, we forebear frivolous issues like church-state separation, Christian Right lunacy, and global warming and warring. Instead, here's news you'll get nowhere else about Dumbth-Award winner Ann Coulter's crush on Al Sharpton, George Washington's view of George W., Jesus's take on Tim LaHaye, Rudy Giuliani's opinion of himself, and Pope Benedict's assessment of the Yankees' chances in the American League East. — *JR*

POPE, SHUT OUT OF YANKEE STADIUM, TO MEET SHSNY BOOK CLUB

A Vatican spokesman announced today that, because of the cancellation of his appearance at Yankee Stadium April 17, Pope Benedict XVI would instead address the Book Club of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, and will moderate the group's discussion that evening of atheist Daniel Dennett's book, *Freedom Evolves*.

"It was all we could arrange at the last minute," said Msgr. Guido Sarducci, referring to the scheduling mixup that embarrassed the Holy See last week. "Once Alitalia bumped

His Holiness from his flight to JFK because of overbooking, we missed the Yankee Stadium date.

[photo of “Msgr. Sarducci”]

“And by the way,” Msgr. Sarducci continued, “His Holiness completely understands Mr. Steinbrenner’s decision to play the Yankees’ scheduled games against Baltimore that weekend. ‘Hey,’ His Holiness said to me, ‘the Yankees are in a pennant race and the American League East is the toughest division in baseball.’

“So the cancellation meant we had to scramble to fill the hole in the schedule. But the Knights of Columbus were busy, a wedding was booked into St. Patrick’s, and nobody seems to answer the phones at Opus Dei.”

Appearing at the press gathering with Msgr. Sarducci, SHSNY Book Club Editor Elaine Lynn said, “We’re very glad that we’ve been able to reschedule our April meeting to accommodate His Holiness, and we look forward to an interesting evening with him.”

When asked if some Secular Humanists might not object to an evening with a religious leader who has strongly condemned secularism, humanism, and even rationalism, Ms. Lynn admitted that a few book club regulars had, indeed, demurred. “But then His Holiness promised to bring cannolis.”

ANN COULTER ANNOUNCES ENGAGEMENT TO AL SHARPTON. SHARPTON: "NEWS TO ME"

[Photo of Ann Coulter with Al Sharpton]

NEW YORK, April 1: “I’m on a high,” an ebullient Ann Coulter trilled at a hastily-called press conference at the Fox News midtown headquarters. “Ever since winning the 2007 Dumbth Award — thank you, thank you, thank you, Secular Humanist Society of New York, you godless scum are great! — I’ve been so happy I just love everybody and everything.

“In fact,” she continued, “I’m so happy I’m willing to allow Muslims to live, to let Jews be Jews if that’s what they mistakenly want, to legalize the Democrat party, and even to give liberals full U.S. citizenship rights, including the right to marry and breed. I’m even going to marry one, the sexiest liberal I’ve ever met, the Reverend Al Sharpton.”

When informed a few minutes later by a reporter—who text-messaged Reverend Sharpton during the press conference—that her “fiance’s” reaction to news of their engagement was, “Ann Coulter is crazy,” she shouted in reply, “*Yes, crazy in love!*”

MUSLIM SUICIDE HOT LINE OPENS

(From the Taliban News Service, Peshawar, Pakistan)

The Taliban Government-in-Hiding here announced today the inauguration of a 24-hour Muslim Suicide Hot Line phone service “to counsel and comfort devout Muslims confused or depressed by the continued existence on Earth of non-Muslims.”

PEEK’s Peshawar Bureau Chief tested the new service by dialing 1-800-NOISRAEL.

(Recorded voice)

“Muslim Suicide Hot Line. To proceed in Arabic, press 1.

“To proceed in English, press 2.

“To proceed in Hebrew, press 3. *(disconnect)*

“If you are Sunni, press 4.

“If you are Shii’a, press 5. *(disconnect)*

“If you are mildly depressed, press 6. *(disconnect)*

“If you are feeling suicidal, press 7.”

(Connect to human operator)

“Allahu akbar. Can you drive a truck?”

DIEBOLD ACCIDENTALLY LEAKS RESULTS OF 2008 ELECTION MONTHS EARLY

(Excerpted from Onion Network News, April 1)

A computer glitch at the Diebold Corporation’s headquarters has caused thousands of electronic voting machines across the country to accidentally release the results of the 2008 presidential election, more than seven months before Election Day.

In spite of the premature revelation of the winner, all the candidates have vowed to continue their campaigns. A spokesman for Hillary Clinton, speaking to supporters in Ohio, vowed, “Hillary Clinton isn’t about to give up just because she lost. She’ll give up when she’s supposed to, on Election Day. And she’ll act surprised.”

At Diebold headquarters, a public relations executive faced cameras this morning. “We at Diebold would like to formally apologize to all of our shadow puppet masters,” he said. “This will not happen again.” Fighting back tears, he added, “Please have mercy on us.”

RUDY GIULIANI MAKES VP BID

SUN CITY, FLORIDA, April 1: In a dramatic re-entry into the Republican nominating process, Rudy Giuliani today offered himself as a Vice Presidential candidate on the GOP ticket that will be headed by John McCain.

“The political reality of 2008 is that the Republican party needs to attract more women voters,” the former New York mayor told a crowd of seven retirees today. “We need someone on the ticket—and I think I’m that person—who can win those women over to the Republican side. After all, I often dress like a woman, and I’ve been married to three of them.”

When asked if he had met with Senator McCain about his offer, Mr. Giuliani said, “Not yet, but when I do, I’m not going empty handed. I’m ready to swing my delegate behind John McCain at the convention.”

RETIRED GEN. GEORGE WASHINGTON CRITICIZES BUSH’S HANDLING OF IRAQ WAR

(Excerpted from The Onion, 6/6/07)

WASHINGTON, DC, April 1: Breaking a 212-year media silence, retired Army General George Washington appeared on NBC’s “Meet the Press” Sunday to speak out against the way the Iraq war has been waged.

Washington, whose appearance marked the first time the military leader and statesman had spoken publicly since his 1796 farewell address in Philadelphia, is the latest in a string of retired generals stepping forward to criticize the Iraq war.

[Photo of Washington on “Meet the Press”]

The Virginia-born Revolutionary War veteran and national-capital namesake made the cable news rounds, telling Wolf Blitzer that the war was a “tragic mistake for our nation” and “badly handled and led.”

However, White House response to the former general’s criticism was swift and sharp. Spokesman Tony Fratto dismissed Washington as “a relic” who “made some embarrassing gaffes” during his own military career, such as the Continental Army’s near destruction in the Battle of Long Island in 1776.

Conservative pundits moved quickly to discredit the decorated general. On his radio program Monday, Sean Hannity said, “I don’t care who you are—or if you cannot tell a lie—it’s un-American to question the president in a time of war. Plus, I find it interesting

that a man who owned slaves and sold hemp thinks he can give our Commander in Chief lessons on how to run a war.”

JESUS DENIES NEW WORKOUT REGIMEN IS PRELUDE TO “SECOND COMING”

[Photo of Jesus doing sit-ups on cloud bank]

I’m just trying to get back in shape is all,” the Son of God told an interviewer for *People*. “You know, it’s been almost two thousand years of just the ‘sitting-at-the-right-hand’ kind of thing. Passing judgment doesn’t burn many calories, and how would it look for the King of Kings to return to Earth with a pot belly?”

“So You will be returning soon?” He was asked.

Jesus laughed. “I’m not going to screw up any of Tim LaHaye’s predictions in the *Left Behind* books,” He said, “even though the guy is a serious whacko.”

When asked if He had a favorite candidate in the U.S. presidential election, Jesus said, “Officially, I’m uncommitted, but I’ll be at the Democratic convention.”

“As a superdelegate?”

“Superhuman delegate.”

[End April Fool Insert]

INTELLIGENT? DESIGN?

G. Beer

Intelligent Design (ID) is a concept proposed by some who are unable to accept evolution. They assume that life, with its nearly infinite variety, is far too complicated to be the result of a “series of chance events,” that only an intelligent being could have created life. And that, since evolution does not answer every question about the genesis and progression of life, a totally different scenario should be considered. Although they imagine that the time between the origin of the universe and the present is only several thousand years, so far they have not proposed that we dump the other findings of physics and cosmology, just because these disciplines have not answered every question about the universe.

As to complexity and the need for a “designer,” life, in fact, is even more complex than it appears to be. In addition to the innumerable obvious differences among life forms, life has a seeming infinity of tiny but crucial characteristics, so obscure that they are only now being discovered. It is difficult to imagine that a Supreme Being—Creator of the Universe—would unnecessarily concern itself with such a plethora of minutia. “Unnecessarily” because there is a process that would automatically result in a system having all of life’s variety and complexity. That process is 3,500,000,000 years of accumulating adaptations, to varied and changing environments, along millions of divergent lines (species), each adaptation a potential origin for another line. Or for simpler organisms in the distant past, a potential origin of a more inclusive group, such as genus, family, etc.

A system composed of interacting parts, each of which is essential for the system’s functioning, is said to be irreducibly complex. Without any of these essential parts, the system is useless. ID advocates claim that, since most organisms contain a number, often a large number, of such systems, these organisms/systems cannot have “come into being [evolved] piecemeal.” However, the fact that such systems cannot function without all their necessary parts is no reason to believe that those parts did not develop concurrently from simpler parts of simpler systems. The evidence supporting this, ignored by Creationists, is plentiful and obvious.

ID (actually ersatz Creationism), based on the complexity/designer assumptions and “supported” by a tsunami of delusional evidence and junk science, challenges evolution on the basis of the questions natural selection has not yet answered. But all the observed evidence supports evolution. Evolution is not only a principle of biology, it is, in every sense, the purpose of life, which is to survive by adapting to different and inconstant environments, i.e.: by evolving.

ID proponents point to the “order of the universe” as evidence for a creator. Order? Black holes, exploding stars, dead and dying stars, cosmic rays, colliding galaxies, dark matter, dark energy, quantum mechanics! Most of gravity’s effects are orderly, but except for those, there is no more order in the universe than there is in a house fire.

ID’ers also argue that the earth is so perfectly attuned to our needs that it must have been created with humans in mind. Perfectly attuned? Myriad horrible diseases (infectious as well as DNA errors like cancers, autoimmune and hereditary); plagues and pestilence; parasites and mosquitoes; lethal poverty; famines; and “acts of God” like hurricanes, tornados, droughts, floods, earthquakes, and landslides. For much of the world’s population life is more an infliction than a gift.

One of the obscure characteristics of life mentioned above is found in chromosomes, those incredibly long, slender molecules that carry the DNA instructions for the replication of all living things. Except for the simplest, most primitive organisms, for much of their length (over 90% in primates) these molecules contain no instructions at all. Most of this non-coding DNA has packing or regulatory functions. But between genes there are large sections of repetitive sequences that may be junk; and within genes there are smaller sections called introns that may be obsolete code.

Furthermore, the paleontological record is replete with evidence of thousands of failed species (mistakes?) that no longer exist, as well as with evidence of species that have been greatly modified over time.

Is this design? Where is the intelligence?

LIFE IS EVOLUTION

Brian May

(Excerpted from nytimes.com 10/31/07)

Some of you out there who know me better as a rock guitarist (of Queen, et al.) may also know that I have elected to go back to Imperial College London, after an absence of 30 years or so (I was busy!), as a post-graduate student, re-registering for the Ph.D. in astrophysics that I began around 1970. Laying my cards on the table, I am very aware of my essentially amateur status, but eager to catch up on the last 30 years of astronomical research. I get to go to some pretty high-powered seminars, plus enjoy the privilege of being around scientists who are in touch with the most distant surface of the bubble of knowledge that we are pushing out into the observable universe. And this gives me wonderful opportunities for insight.

But I have an extra secret bonus. I have taken to sneaking into my daughter’s undergraduate biology lectures. The question of life was the part of our journey in writing the book *Bang!* that put us most at odds – and we maintain a healthy dialogue as time goes by. So I find myself drawn to anything that can throw light on the murky question, Are we alone? I’d like to pass on a few thoughts from a recent series of lectures (by Professor Tim Barraclough) that thrilled me, given by the biology department at Imperial College under the title, “What is Life?” The answer, brilliantly put, was in fact, “Life is evolution,” and “Evolution is life.” Let me explain.

I think most people now know that the job of mapping the human genome was recently completed—the genome being effectively a complete “recipe” for a human being—a set of instructions or decisions, if you like, about how to put the basic atoms of nature into the right order. The genomes for many other animals have now been

tabulated, giving great insights into which animals are most closely related in their family histories. This is where we meet the magic of evolution.

The genomes give clear clues as to how one kind of animal, under the influence of natural selection, can evolve into a different species. By the way, it is clear here that all the animals alive on the planet today are the most highly evolved examples of their particular line of descent – otherwise they would not be here. Human beings have no right to consider themselves any more special than any of our fellow survivors on the planet. And as far as being the dominant species, there is no question that bacteria, not us, are way out in front – in their numbers, in the number of environments they inhabit and even in total mass.

The lecturer asked us how we would define life. What distinguishes something that is alive as opposed to something inanimate? Many answers came up: movement, respiration, consciousness, the ability to replicate, the assimilation of energy, self-organization—the property of defying the second law of thermodynamics by making ourselves more ordered—metabolism, birth, death, communication and the ability to evolve. All of these were accepted as valid signs of life. But is there a single thing that characterizes life?

The lecturer reminded us that natural selection can take place only if a) the organism can reproduce itself, and b) the reproduction is subject to mutation, i.e.: “mistakes” are made in the replication so that the offspring is not quite identical to its parents. It is only these mistakes that, by rendering the animal more successful in the struggle for survival and reproduction, can drive evolution forward. Of course, we are all aware that in some quarters in the U.S., shockingly for the scientific community, there is complete denial that evolution exists.

The line of thought above leads us to an interesting comment on this. We know that, for instance, a fruit fly exists. Relative to us, it’s a fairly simple organism. It exists, so how did this come about? There are perhaps three alternatives. One is that fruit flies evolved from less complex organisms over the last 3 billion years or so. This is the view of modern biologists worldwide.

Another possibility is that a fruit fly spontaneously came into existence at some point in time, and it just reproduces. Since the genome of the fruit fly is now mapped, we know that it consists of 122.7 million base pairs, arranged along the DNA helix. The chance that this sequence could happen spontaneously is something like one in 10 to the power of 200 million. This number is beyond astronomical. The number of stars in the Milky Way is reckoned to be about 100 billion, a mere 10 to the 11th. The number of stars in the whole observable universe? About 100 billion times 100 billion, or 10 to about the power of 18. Again – an insignificant number relative to that fruit fly statistic. What does this mean? If the probability of a fruit fly self-creating in our solar system is small, what is the probability that it might come about somewhere else in the universe? Doing the elementary math, still about one in 10 to the power of 200 million.

O.K., there are simpler organisms, but the figure for *E. coli* is still 10 to the power of 8 million. So this is pretty unlikely too, to put it mildly. So the second alternative looks pretty unlikely, right? Is this an argument for some “intelligence” having pulled this off? Absolutely not. Because now that we know the mechanisms by which evolution works, it’s evident that the chance of these complex organisms evolving over the last 3 billion years is wonderfully high. We have even seen evolution in process in our lifetimes.

So what of the third option? That a superhuman being created the fly? But if this being—which we might call a higher power, or God, if we like—made the fly, would he do it in this unlikely way, rather than just letting it evolve? Probably not; as usual in scientific circles, the simplest answer is generally found to be most likely. Divine intervention theories are very unlikely to be correct, simply because we have no evidence

of this kind of interference happening from outside, whereas we have mountains of evidence for evolution.

The conclusion our lecturer came to was quite a revelation to me: that evolution is not something that happens once life exists – it is the definition of life. Life may be defined as matter that undergoes natural selection.

There remains a basic question that no one I know can yet answer satisfactorily: How did life get started? Once we know the answer to this, we will be able to figure out logically the probability of life beginning in other worlds. But we will still not know why the universe produced life at all. This, in my opinion, is where there ought to be no conflict between religion and science. One takes over where the other leaves off. I believe this is a healthy situation.

THERE ARE JUST TOO MANY GODS

Copyright Emily P. Kingsley, 2008

(To the tune of "There is Nothing Like a Dame")

Verse 1

We got Jesus and Jehovah.
We got Allah, and Ganesh.
We got Buddha and Athena,
(You won't find them in a crèche).
 We got Bacchus and Minerva
 We got Loki, we got Thor.
 What don't we need?
 We don't need more.

Verse 2

We got Cupid, Aphrodite,
We got Eros, we got Zeus.
There are just so many of them
They must love to reproduce.
 We got Isis, god of magic
 We got Ra, god of the sun
 Hades's a god
 But he's no fun.
How are we going to decide which god we should follow?
Should it be Osiris, Krishna or Apol-lo?

Chorus

 There are just too many gods,
 How are we to choose?
 You can never beat the odds
 Finding one among all these gods!

Verse 3

We got Shiva and Poseidon,
We got Artemis and Mars,
We got people always saying
Their god's mightier than ours.
 Everyone believes his deity's
 The one worth dying for!
 What do we get?
 Jihad or war!

People nowadays laugh at ancient Romans who believed in Jup-i-ter.
But thinking your particular god is superior in every way, shape or form is even stup-i-der.

Chorus

There are just too many gods,
How are we to choose?
You can never beat the odds
Finding one among all these gods!
And before you make your choice,
When on one you pounce,
Bear in mind there's thousands more
Many, many we can't pronounce.
Ancient Aztecs when they girded up to go into bat-tle,
Prayed for protection from Quetzalcoa-tl.
So suppose that folks are terrified
By lightning from the sky.
They feel small and insignificant
And all are scared to die.
They get promises of Heaven,
They get threats they'll go to Hell.
What happens next?
You know darn well!

Chorus

There are just too many gods,
How are we to choose?
You can never beat the odds
Finding one among all these gods!
No one is feared like a god,
No one revered like a god,
Most folks believe in a god,
They can't conceive there's no god.
None as aloof as a god,
But there's no proof there's a god.
There ain't a thing that's right with anyone here,
That can't be ruined by instilling fear
In a vengeful, glorious, true, omnipotent god!

**MOHAMMED CHANNELS
ARETHA FRANKLIN**

(Reprinted from jesusandmo.net, 2/29/08, "Spect")

Lead singer Mohammed: What you want ...

Back-up singers Jesus and Moses: Ooo ...

Mohammed: Baby, I got it.

Jesus and Moses: Ooo ...

Mohammed: What you need ...

Jesus and Moses: Ooo ...

Mohammed: You know I got it.

Jesus and Moses: Ooo ...

Mohammed: All I'm askin' ...

Jesus and Moses: Ooo ...

Mohammed: ... is for a little respect from you.

Jesus and Moses: Ooo ...

Mohammed: Ooo, your cartoons ain't so funny. They hurt the tender hearts of Shia and Sunni.

Jesus and Moses: Just a little bit.

Mohammed: All I want you to do for me is show a little respect.

Jesus and Moses: Just a little bit.

Mohammed: Yeah, Islam is a religion of peace. And if you say it ain't, you gonna end up deceased.

Jesus and Moses: Ree, ree, ree, ree, ree, ree, ree ...

Mohammed: ... 'Spect!

Jesus and Moses: Just a little bit.

Mohammed: R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Find out what it means to me.

Jesus and Moses: Sock it to me.

Mohammed: R.E.S.P.E.C.T. I'll burn down your embassy.

Jesus and Moses: Sock it to me. Sock it to me.

FLASH LIGHT: A NEW NOMINEE FOR THE BOARD, WITH AN UNUSUAL PLATFORM

I wish to be considered for the SHSNY board because as a pantheist, I have a different approach to the current a/theist debate, which I hope you will find interesting and useful.

Genetic engineering allows science to test questions about life which were heretofore metaphysical. For example, if your cat or dog dies, it is now possible to pay genetic engineers to clone the creature and thus attempt to resurrect it. Resurrection was heretofore a metaphysical question; now it's a question of genetic engineering.

I propose to clone a willing dead atheist, and thereby attempt to resurrect her/him from the dead by means of applied genetic engineering science. I believe if atheists succeed in raising their dead before theists, they can call Pascal's wager, and win converts to science & reason.

I don't intend to attempt this cloning on some remote island, but rather to pursue the right to resurrect dead atheists via cloning through proper legal channels, if only for the sake of addressing fundamental metaphysical questions in a new legal light: that of genetic engineering science." — *Flash Light*

Comment: *Unlike Mr. Light, who has nominated himself for a Board position, I do not intend to file lawsuits or carry out any "provocateur" activities using the SHSNY name. I urge everyone to read the full statement of each nominee.*

—Elaine Lynn, Secretary, SHSNY

WHAT'S THAT YOU HAVE IN THERE? NOTHING. DON'T LIE TO ME, WHAT IS IT? NOTHING, HONEST.

(From "Physicists Successfully Store and Retrieve No-thing," by Adrian Cho, ScienceNOW Daily News, 2/29/08)

Two teams of physicists, one in Calgary and the other in Tokyo, successfully stored nothing within a gas, in the form of squeezed vacuum composed of uncertainty. They then retrieved the nothing a split second later.

Storing a strange form of vacuum builds on earlier efforts in which researchers stopped light in its tracks, and may mark a significant step toward new quantum information and telecommunication technologies. More conceptually, such experiments might help spell out the boundary between the quantum and classical realms.

THE ABSOLUTE AND INERRANT BIBLE TRUTHS OF THE FUTURE

Sam Harris

Imagine a world in which generations of human beings come to believe that certain films were made by God or that specific software was coded by him.

Imagine a future in which millions of our descendants murder each other over rival interpretations of *Star Wars* or *Windows 98*. Could anything—anything—be more ridiculous? And yet, this would be no more ridiculous than the world we are living in.