

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April 2005

Who owns our deaths? Does the state, modern medicine, the long-dead authors of some 2,500 year-old book of “laws” ... or do we? We report on our hugely successful Physician-Assisted Suicide Roundtable last month, interview a legislator at the center of this year’s debate, and offer some palliative (also 2,500 year-old) philosophy. We re-visit “God gene” nonsense, mock a few politicians (and one Supreme), and consider whether God looks like Larry Fine.

PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE: A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

March 10, 2005

Moderated by Wayne G. Whitmore, M.D.

Reported by John Arents

A small (about 12) but knowledgeable and enthusiastic group enjoyed a long, vigorous discussion of this difficult and contentious issue. Dr. Whitmore was known to all of us from his article in PIQUE (March).

Dr. Whitmore, an ophthalmologist, has little direct experience with dying patients, so he approaches this issue as a somewhat detached observer. He believes strongly in individualism and personal responsibility — that human beings should be able to make choices about their lives, including the choice to end them if they are not worth living.

He distinguished physician-assisted suicide from euthanasia, where the doctor (or whoever) actually administers the lethal agent. He considers euthanasia a separate issue and has reservations about a law permitting it. On the other side of the fine line, a patient may refuse life-extending treatment, and that also is not physician-assisted suicide.

North Carolina, Utah, and Wyoming have no law against physician-assisted suicide. It is illegal in all other states except Oregon, which alone has a law permitting it under stringent conditions: The patient must be terminally ill with a life expectancy less than six months, must make two oral requests and one written request, and so on. The Oregon law is representative of what we might want in other states. It is under attack by the Bush administration on the ground that lethal prescriptions violate the Controlled Substances Act. There has been fear that the Oregon law, especially if imitated in other states, would lead to the killing of many poor and uninsured people. The fact is that only 23 people availed themselves of the law in its first year (1998), of whom 15 committed suicide (usually promptly), 6 died of unaided natural causes, and 2 survived the year. Those who have chosen physician-assisted suicide have been well above average educationally and economically. In a three-year period, college-educated people outnumbered those with less than a high school education by a ratio of more than 12 to 1.

Dr. Whitmore feels that physicians should have this role because they are caregivers from the beginning to the end of life. They understand disease and the use of medications, and pass through a long education and apprenticeship which, he hopes, would weed out wackos who might enjoy killing people or encouraging suicide.

The discussion was then thrown open to the audience. This report will not attempt to include everything that was said, but will touch on some highlights.

What has been the European experience? About 80% of the English and more than 90% of the Dutch favor assisted suicide, compared to 60+% in the U.S. He had not found data on the number who have used it in the Netherlands, where it is legal.

What is the effect of religion? In Europe it is not very effective in discouraging physician-assisted suicide. It is much more powerful here, with the right-to-life movement. In Oregon, there was a well-financed campaign against the law, although 70% of the people supported it.

Is there a distinction between assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia? We have the technology to let the patient “push the button,” if by only blinking an eye. There may not be a moral distinction for the person deciding to die, but the technical details may be of paramount importance as a legal issue. Euthanasia may sometimes be justified. It can be done by merely withholding life support, e.g., intravenous fluids in a comatose patient.

When a living will requests that the testator be allowed to die under certain conditions, are such requests likely to be honored in, e.g., a Catholic hospital? The hospital should be legally required to follow the living will. A member of the audience cited a case where this was not done. (Dr. Whitmore later forwarded the following quote from the New York State Dept. of Health guide regarding “Health Care Proxy”: “All hospitals, doctors and other health care facilities are legally required to obey the decisions made by your [the patient’s] agent. If a hospital objects to some treatment options (such as stopping certain treatments) they must tell you or your agent in advance.”

Dr. Whitmore recalled how his father, a urologist, died of prostate cancer metastasized to the bones. It was extremely painful, but he preferred the pain to the mental confusion induced by morphine. He was still an active public speaker until three months before his death. When he decided it was time, he stopped eating and drinking and died in four days. Not everyone has the will power to die that way.

The American Medical Association does not take a position for or against physician-assisted suicide.

John Rafferty presented some opposite ideas (without necessarily supporting them). There is a disability-rights organization called Not Dead Yet. They describe bioethicists as the most dangerous people in America, selling death as health care rationing. The bioethicists, they say, seek cost savings in cheap and early death. NDY’s prediction of a suicide epidemic seems unjustified, but there is a point that deserves consideration. Will health insurance companies offer preferential rates to people whose living wills authorize suicide or euthanasia, driving up the cost for those who opt otherwise? If one company does it, the others will have to follow to remain competitive. Dr. Whitmore did not see a problem as long as it is done openly and the individual has a choice. Mr. Rafferty still wonders what the suicide option will do to health care and morality.

Mr. Rafferty called attention to a question raised in the Netherlands: Should an infant with a condition dooming him to a short life of suffering be euthanized (under strict requirements)? Dr. Whitmore suggested that this case and that of a comatose patient without a living will or health care proxy are essentially the same. Perhaps the parents should make the decision in the child’s case.

The discussion lasted nearly two hours. Everyone was grateful to Dr. Whitmore for his thorough research and his skillful guidance. When the Muhlenberg Library was about

to close, we repaired to a nearby Spanish restaurant to keep ourselves alive with a delicious dinner and a less lugubrious discussion.

STAND UP AND BE COUNTED

Editor: *The following is a distillation of a recent telephone interview with a several-term member of the Vermont legislature, which this year will again consider a bill authorizing physician-assisted suicide. Both participants in the conversation agreed that identifying the legislator by name in these pages (“New York atheists!”) could only hinder passage of the bill.*

Pique: *What’s the proposed bill like? The Oregon law?*

Legislator: It’s called the Death With Dignity Act, and it’s very much modeled on Oregon. Lots of the same safeguards. Doctors can’t initiate the discussion of suicide, patients must, that kind of thing. Of course, that leaves Alzheimer’s patients out in the cold. This is not ground-breaking. We’re deliberately following Oregon because the numbers there are so low. What is it, fewer than 200 physician-assisted suicides in the years they’ve had the law on the books? Far fewer than anyone expected, certainly not an out-of-control situation.

You know, President Bush holds up an ideal of an “ownership society,” and it seems to me that the first and most important thing you can own, *should* own, *must* own, is your own body. Start ownership right there.

I think in a free society people ought to be able to make choices about the end of life, provided they’re of sound mind. We’ve reached a point in health care where people can be kept alive, often in terrible pain, or with an alert mind trapped in a paralyzed body that might as well be a coffin, for months, years. We have to address those people’s needs, their right to their own lives.

Pique: *So you’re in favor?*

Legislator: Oh, yeah, I guess that’s obvious.

Pique: *What do you think its chances are this year?*

Legislator: The sentiment is there. There are a lot of people who want this, who believe it’s the right thing to do, but there is real concern about backlash from the same pressure groups that came out of the woodwork against civil unions a few years ago. A lot of people lost their seats because they did what they thought was the right thing then, and it’s probably going to happen again. By the way, some of those people who lost their seats won them back later. If Death With Dignity comes to a vote, it will probably pass, but then some people are going to get hurt.

Pique: *So it could get bottled up again, like last year?*

Legislator: The first order of business for the majority leadership in any legislature is to preserve its majority. Our leadership does not want to lose its majority, so there is some sentiment to let this die—no pun intended—but you know what? It’s time, just as it was a few years ago on civil unions, to stand up and be counted.

Let me tell you about the courage of a whole bunch of Vermont doctors and nurses a year or so ago. They took out ads, big ones, in local papers around the state, and their message was that the time had come for Vermont to pass this law. These are people who see every day the horrors that most families deal with only on rare occasions; they know what they’re talking about. They made a stand, signed their names, and opened themselves up to some outrageous attacks and even threats. Vermont is a small state, and

when you look at a statement like that, when you read your neighbors' names on it—people who've treated you and your family, people dedicated to good works—that's a powerful argument, powerful stuff. I truly admire them, and I can't do any less than they did.

Pique: Stand up and be counted?

Legislator: Yeah, time to stand up.

DEFYING GOD'S DIVINE PLAN TO MAKE YOU SUFFER

Thomas A. Bowden, The Ayn Rand Institute

(Excerpted from "Assisted Suicide: A Moral Right," on media@aynrand.org, Feb. 24, 2005)

Though John Ashcroft has left the Justice Department, his religious conservative legacy lives on in the form of a lawsuit designed to overturn Oregon's physician-assisted suicide law. The Supreme Court has agreed to hear the case, which up till now has hinged upon legal technicalities instead of addressing the real issue: whether an individual has a right to commit suicide. ...

Back in 2001, Ashcroft decreed that any doctor prescribing [a lethal dose of drugs] would violate federal law against dispensing controlled dangerous substances without a "legitimate medical purpose." So far, Ashcroft's position has been rejected by the federal courts, and now the Bush administration's last chance lies with the Supreme Court.

This case will allow the Court to revisit its 1997 decision in *Washington v. Glucksberg*, which held that individuals have no constitutionally protected right of suicide, and hence no right to obtain assistance in that act. The *Glucksberg* case looks increasingly vulnerable to being overruled, especially in light of the Court's 2003 decision upholding the right of individuals to engage in private homosexual acts, regardless of whether society or God may abhor homosexuality.

What the courts must grasp, if they are to justly resolve the debate over assisted suicide, is that there is no rational, secular basis upon which the government can properly prevent any individual from choosing to end his own life. Rather, it is religious mysticism that energizes the Bush administration into attacking those who dare to defy God's divine plan.

Conservatives' outrage at the Oregon law stems from the belief that human life is a gift from the Lord, who puts us here on earth to carry out His will. Thus, the very idea of suicide is anathema, because one who "plays God" by causing his own death, or assisting in the death of another, insults his Maker and invites eternal damnation, not to mention divine retribution against the decadent society that permits such sinful behavior.

When religious conservatives use secular laws to enforce their faith in God, they threaten the central principle on which America was founded. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed, for the first time in the history of nations, that each person exists as an end in himself. This basic truth—which finds political expression in the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—means, in practical terms, that you need no one's permission to live and that no one may forcibly obstruct your efforts to achieve your own personal happiness.

ON TERRI SCHIAVO'S RIGHT TO DIE IN FLORIDA

(From *The Onion satirical weekly*, March 3-9, 2005)

“If we allow one brain-dead Floridian to die, what’s to stop us from extending that policy to include the rest of the state?”

“I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying.” — *Woody Allen*

EVER WONDER WHY SO MANY COLLEGE-EDUCATED KIDS ARE RIGHT-WING CHRISTIANS?

Year 2000 Budgets

Secular Student Alliance	\$40,000
Campus Crusade for Christ	\$250,000,000

— from secularstudents.org/support/

WHEN DEATH CALLS, CALL EPICURUS - II

David Voron, M.D.

Part 2 of a review of

Facing Death: Epicurus and His Critics,

by James Warren

(Reprinted from E-Skeptic #43: “*Beautiful Evidence and Facing Death*,” copyright Michael Shermer, 2004. Part 1 of this essay appeared in March *PIQUE*.)

Of course, our anxieties about death reflect not just the fear of ceasing to exist, but also the awareness of having something precious taken away from us, of being eternally deprived of an existence that would have continued to yield pleasure. Epicurus’ response to this challenge is that *ataraxia* (the Hellenistic term for tranquility or imperturbability), not duration, is the criterion of a life well lived. Once *ataraxia* has been achieved, happiness cannot be augmented, either by more accomplishments or by a longer life. This notion may be difficult to accept for those who see life as a coherent narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. According to this view, our lives have a “plot,” which must be played out in order to be complete. The fear of death significantly relies on this disposition to see one’s life as an unfolding story.

For Epicurus, this narrative structure—the way many people experience their being in time—is just an arbitrary conceptual construction. The important questions are not “What have I made of my life?” or “What will I make of my life?” but “How am I right now?” It is the present-shaping consequences of the past and our attitude to the future that matter, not the past and future as such. If I am experiencing *ataraxia*, I am a perfected Epicurean, and logging in more months or years, or attaining more goods or honors, is beside the point. From this perspective, death deprives me of nothing and is nothing to be feared. In the words of the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus:

The one who understands, having grasped that he is capable of achieving everything sufficient for the good life, immediately and for the rest of his life walks about already ready for burial, and enjoys the single day as if it were eternity.

Warren notes that Philodemus' observation is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's affirmation that "he lives eternally who lives in the present." They also bring to mind Alan Watts' conclusion that "life requires no future to complete itself, nor explanation to justify itself. In this moment it is finished."

As the subtitle suggests, Warren also engages Epicurus' critics. Perhaps the most effective argument potentially undermining the Epicurean perspective is that it is at odds with our visceral emotions. Warren concedes that logic may simply not be powerful enough to overcome the fear of death. Reason must compete with other intuitive, possibly innate, and unconscious sources of motivation. Warren grants that, "it is possible to claim that the fear of death is a crucial evolutionary product, 'hard-wired,' as it were, into our minds in order to allow us to survive." Of course, if death is in fact bound up in the structure of our brains, we are stuck, and the Epicurean project is dead in the water. However, as Warren puts it, "if it is possible to live a human life without fearing death then fearing death is not essential to being human." Only our own subjective and attentive response to Epicurus' philosophy can answer the question of whether the fear of death can be overcome. Those of us who respond can say to him, along with Diogenes of Oinoanda: "I agree with what you say about death, and you have persuaded me to laugh in its face."

Doubters of Diogenes will say he is whistling in the dark, and that attempting to reason oneself out of the fear of death is folly. They will say that our adult attitudes toward death are too deeply embedded to be modified. But are they? If we recognize that our view of death is molded during childhood and reinforced over many years by the cultures into which we are born, we will see that it is a constructed concept subject to rebuilding. As Warren says, "For the Epicurean, learning to think about death correctly is an integral part of living a good life." Expecting Epicurus to convert us overnight to his "death is nothing to us" perspective may be asking too much, but his project is a worthy one. His reasoning, well explicated by Warren, is sound, and his philosophy, if understood and applied, is literally life-changing. Epicureanism does have the potential to emancipate us from the fear of death. Thus freed, we see life in a new light.

WHAT MATTERS IS THAT WE GET TO BE ALIVE

Greta Christina

*(From "Comforting Thoughts about Death That Have Nothing to Do with God,"
Skeptical Inquirer, March, 2005)*

I don't know what happens when we die. I don't know if we come back in a different body, if we get to hover over time and space and view it in all its glory and splendor, if our souls dissolve into the world-soul the way our bodies dissolve into the ground, or if, as seems very likely, we simply disappear. I have no idea. And I don't know that it matters. What matters is that we get to be alive. We get to be conscious. We get to be connected with each other and with the world, and we get to be aware of that connection and to spend a few years mucking about in its possibilities. We get to have a slice of time and space that's ours. As it happened, we got the slice that has Beatles records and Thai restaurants and AIDS and the Internet. People who came before us got the slice that had horse-drawn carriages and whist and dysentery, or the one that had stone huts and Viking invasions and pigs in the yard. And the people who come after us will get the slice that

has, I don't know, flying cars and soybean pies and identity chips in their brains. But our slice is no less important because it comes when it does, and it's no less important because we'll leave it someday. The fact that time will continue after we die does not negate the time that we are alive. We are alive now, and nothing can erase that.

ANOTHER OPINION ON GOD AND THE TSUNAMI

(From "Ten Questions for Deepak Chopra," Time, 1/24/05)

TIME: Should the deaths of more than 150,000 people from the tsunami affect our image of God?

CHOPRA: Actually, our image of God is outmoded anyway, whether the tsunami occurs or not. Religion has become divisive, quarrelsome and idiotic. Religion is the reason we have all this conflict in the world. We have squeezed God into the volume of a body and the span of a lifetime; given God a male identity; an ethnic background; made him a tribal chief and gone to war. Yet people are not ready to forsake their image of God.

LAMB OF GOD SACRIFICED

(Excerpted from Humanist Network News, 2/16/05)

Owners of the Great Western Forum in Los Angeles cancelled an April 9 performance by the rock group Lamb of God (LOG) because they didn't approve of its former name, Burn the Priest.

Neither of the names "ever really had anything to do with religion," LOG drummer Chris Adler said. "It was kind of metaphoric in the idea of fuck the system, read between the lines, don't always do what you're told, think for yourself."

Editor: *Ooh, now you're really in trouble.*

2001DA42

(Excerpted from "One With the Universe," in the Science Times section of The New York Times, Feb. 15, 2005)

Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and other works of comic science fiction, has been memorialized in the cosmic wrecking yard known as the asteroid belt. A space rock was named after him.

Asteroid Douglasadams was discovered in 2001 by the Lincoln Near-Earth Asteroid Research project. Alan Boyle, science editor of MSNBC, first suggested the name to the official naming agency, the Minor Planet Center, based on the rock's original designation, 2001DA42.

Mr. Adams died (at 49) in 2001, his initials are D.A., and the number 42 is of great significance in the *Hitchhiker's Guide* series. If you want to know why, don't panic. Just read the books.

FRAUDULENT SCIENCE IN THE OP-ED

George Rowell

It was distressing to see the fine columnist Nicholas D. Kristof lap up phony pseudoscience about a non-existent "god gene" in his February 12 *New York Times* column, "God and Evolution."

Kristof seems to have uncritically accepted the premise of the pseudoscientist Dean Hamer in his book, *The God Gene*. This hoaxer even identifies and names a gene that

may be involved. Of course, there is no such gene. Scientists are still working on basic things, such as tracing genes for taste and digestion.

A “god gene” indeed! This is a fraudulent attempt by the religious right to usurp (and corrupt) scientific inquiry. It is really a phony metaphor religionists are attempting to use to convince the scientifically illiterate, which unfortunately includes most Americans. By the way, does the “god gene” encourage human sacrifice and genocide? All history seems to prove it. In that case, this is one gene we should try to breed out.

Religion in some form seems to have been everywhere in primitive society. But this does not prove a “god gene,” only that primitive man tried to appease the forces of nature (and human nature) to be more benevolent toward him. The unknown forces of nature were personalized, a common trait we call “projection.” And only partly bound with religion. We “project” our desires and ill will on almost anything: friends, relatives, cats or dogs, that get in the way of our desires. Storm clouds, too. This is just a basic part of human nature.

The projection urge also serves as very useful to a caste of priests, ministers, rabbis, shamans and other religious manipulators. It allows them to earn an easy living, and sometimes great power, exploiting the gullibility of the average person. Many kings, emperors and pharaohs have enjoyed exploiting the projection urge, too.

With the growth of civilization in many parts of the world, natural forces came to be seen as just that, natural forces. But, unfortunately, when disasters did occur they were bigger and more dangerous, due to population increase, so drought, famine, epidemics were feared and appeased even more. Only in ancient Greece did the scientific approach to reality develop and grow. Unfortunately, it was stymied for about 1,500 years in the West by Christianity, which brought on the Dark Ages.

Kristof mentions “spirituality,” another bit of nonsense. Everybody has moments when they want to transcend the banality of their daily life. So what? Just a part of human nature, not any spurious gene.

Then Kristof mentions a group of fraudulent studies about religious people living longer. Phony modern shamans misuse the methods of science. They are making America a worldwide laughing stock with this fraudulent trash. At least Islamic mullahs and imams don’t try to prove anything when they make a pronouncement. Just believe it, or lose your head.

Whether religiosity is really increasing in America is debatable. But we can say one thing: where it does, it is due to deliberate, lying miseducation of the young. Catch ‘em young, distort their minds. History is twisted, science is perverted. But the danger should not be exaggerated in our technocratic and democratic society.

It never really works for many, many people. That is why religious education in our monotheistic society tends to be shrill, repetitive and coercive, to say the least. The shamanistic martinets may rail and moan, but many people go through a religious education unscathed, and still come out rationalist unbelievers. Others change later. Of course, if there were a “god gene” there would be no such people — atheists, agnostics and unbelievers would have been bred out of the species long ago.

It’s a pity to see such a distinguished columnist as Kristof seduced by unadulterated fraud. Maybe he should sacrifice hard-boiled eggs to Eostre, the Goddess of Spring, do a small religious dance (the Easter Shuffle), and recover his mental acuity.

THE GOD MEME
Richard Dawkins

(Excerpted from The Selfish Gene)

Consider the idea of God. We do not know how it arose in the meme pool. Probably it originated many times by independent “mutations.” In any case, it is very old indeed. How does it replicate itself? By the spoken and written word, aided by great music and great art. Why does it have such high survival value? Remember that “survival value” here does not mean value for a gene in a gene pool, but value for a meme in a meme pool. The question really means: What is it about the idea of a god that gives it its stability and penetrance in the cultural environment? The survival value of the god meme in the meme pool results from its great psychological appeal. It provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence. It suggests that injustices in this world may be rectified in the next. The “everlasting arms” hold out a cushion against our own inadequacies which, like a doctor’s placebo, is none the less effective for being imaginary. These are some of the reasons why the idea of God is copied so readily by successive generations of individual brains. God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture.

“I acknowledge the existence of a higher power, and have therefore installed surge suppressors.” — *Anon*

**A PRESCRIPTION FOR
THE TYRANNY OF A MAJORITY**

Leon Wieseltier

(Excerpted from “God Again,” The New Republic, 3/21/05)

I had come [to the Supreme Court] to hear the oral arguments in the Ten Commandments cases. ... Some troubling things were said. A number of justices declared—dispositively, as they like to say—that “we are a religious nation.” The implication was that there is a quantitative answer to a philosophical question. But what does the prevalence of a belief have to do with its veracity, or with its legitimacy? If every American but one were religious, we would still have to construct our moral and political order upon respect for that one. In its form, the proposition that “we are a religious nation” is like the proposition that “we are a Christian nation” or that “we are a heterosexual nation,” which is to say, it is a prescription for the tyranny of a majority. And if the opposite generalization were the case, if we were not “a religious nation,” if we were a multitude of heretics and voluptuaries, would the case for tolerating a public display of the Mosaic creed be less powerful? The joke here is on the believers. They hold their faith not because it is popular, but because it is true. If they resort to the argument from numbers, however, they will rob their beliefs of philosophical prestige, and abandon them to the netherworld of popular nonsense. There is strength in numbers, but there is not truth.

ANTONIN SCALIA, MEET THOMAS JEFFERSON

The Ten Commandments are “a symbol of the fact that government derives its authority from God.”

— *Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, March 2, 2005*

Governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

— *The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*

JENNIFER MICHAEL HECHT IS HONORED

SHSNY Honorary Member Jennifer Michael Hecht has been awarded the Phi Beta Kappa Society’s Ralph Waldo Emerson Award in the Social Sciences for her book, *The End of the Soul: Scientific Modernity, Atheism, and Anthropology in France*. Ms. Hecht is professor of history at Nassau Community College, is an award-winning poet, and delighted an overflow meeting of our book club last June by leading a spirited discussion of her book, *Doubt: A History*.

IN WHOSE IMAGE?

Ed Poll

(Excerpted from The Humanist Monthly, newsletter of the Capital District Humanist Society, March, 2005.)

Dear President Bush:

On January 20, like millions of Americans, I listened in awe to your inaugural address. Half of us thought it was awesome, the other half thought it was awful.

Presidents have professionals write their speeches, so you may not have understood everything you said. But there was one section on theology that I have a number of questions about. I’m an atheist (I’m not sure if by choice or if it’s genetic), so I must humbly defer to your presidential leadership in matters pertaining to religion. Here’s the text of that section:

“From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth.”

First, an historical issue: I have looked high and low for any proclamation from the day of our founding (July 4, 1776) that contains the word “woman” or that mentions women’s rights. I couldn’t find one.

Second, I know you conservatives don’t like political correctness, but you should defer to African-Americans, who remind us that thousands of human beings lived in slavery on “the day of our Founding.” The new American government didn’t change that— slaves had no “rights” or “dignity.” That little contradiction between principles and practices could be dodged if you propose that African-Americans do not “bear the image of the Maker.” Then, of course, they wouldn’t deserve rights.

The theological points you make, however, intrigue me more than the historical. Big question: Who were you referring to as “the Maker of Heaven and earth”?

I ran a web search on the phrase “the Maker of Heaven and earth” and got a hit on Enki, the great Sumerian God of all Creation, and an ancient prayer that went, “Oh, Enki, Maker of Heaven and Earth, let my enemies bow before me!” It’s funny that you’re using the same terminology Sumerian priests used six thousand years ago. But I don’t think Enki is the God you are talking about because you speak of a God that protects America. Enki would have protected Iraq. ...

Continuing the quest for the generic American God according to George Bush, I can eliminate the gods of the natural religions, such as eagles, bison, turtles and oak trees; we don't look like them. We can also skip the Hindu gods, because no one's got eight arms.

Cutting to the chase, there's only one God left—the Western one. The one we're "under." Big Daddy. Sky King. Jesus' father. Our Father. Who art in Heaven. The one you implored ... to "watch over the United States of America." He's way up there, we're way down here, and did you know all gods are fictional characters?

As an atheist, Mr. President, I'm duty bound to ask religious people quirky questions. First: If there weren't a God, would we still have rights just because we're human beings? If you're stuck for an answer, I suggest you refer to Thomas Jefferson or James Madison, rather than Billy Graham or Jerry Falwell.

Next, if this God is everywhere and loves everyone, wouldn't It watch over not only Americans, but over the people of all countries? Equally? And why, in the phrase "the Maker of Heaven and earth," is the word Heaven capitalized and the word earth in lower case? That one really worries me.

And finally: If people are made in God's image, which one of us looks most like God? I know you're thinking Charlton Heston, and you may very well be right. But suppose it's Larry Fine of The Three Stooges? Answers, please.

Your fellow American,
Edward M. Poll

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #63

The Virginia House of Delegates on February 7 approved, 69-27, an amendment to erase church-state protections from the state constitution and allow officially sanctioned prayer in the public schools.

Next day, the Delegates voted to impose a \$50 fine on anyone (read "black teenagers") wearing pants low-slung enough that a substantial portion of undergarments is showing "in a lewd or indecent manner."

This year, according to the Washington Post, the Virginia legislature "has stood tall against the threat to freedom posed by the use of cameras to enforce the law against running red lights ... made certain that Virginians would not be barred from entering a day-care center with a loaded gun ... and is poised to reject an effort to restrict teenagers' use of cell phones while driving."

But if a teenager wearing low-rider jeans kneels to pray in school and exposes her Calvins ...

#64

Senator Lindsey Graham (R, S.C.) said at a Lincoln Day dinner in Tennessee on March 5: "We don't do Lincoln Day dinners in South Carolina. It's nothing personal, but it takes awhile to get over things."

THE SHSNY BOOK CLUB MEETS

**SUNDAY EVENING, APRIL 10, TO DISCUSS
*ECOHUMANISM***

Edited by Robert B. Tapp, Dean of the Humanist Institute—who will attend our meeting—*Ecohumanism* is a collection of essays that has been called “vital to the agenda for a future of life on planet Earth.”

We’ll meet at 6:00 p.m., Sunday, April 10, at Donna Marxer and John Rafferty’s apartment, 141 East 56 Street (10F) between Lexington and Third. Please call 212-371-8733 or e-mail john@rafferty.net if you plan to come.

From Professor Tapp’s Preface to *Ecohumanism*: “If ecology is the study of interactions of organisms and environments, the bringing of value positions into this knowledge has variously been called conservationism, environmentalism, ecologism. The frequent tendency of those who have taken these positions has been to regard human activities as intrusive, destructive, malicious, undesirable. Many partisans of ‘wilderness’ have ... come to regard humans as lice endangering the welfare of the planet (a view that ignores the right-to-life of lice!). ... [The] ‘population explosion’ alarms appearing in the 1960s tended to be based on views of humans as intruders into a paradise. The biblical allusions were clear, even to the foretelling of apocalyptic doom.

“The positions of humanists, being tempered on the one hand by a commitment to knowledge from the sciences and on the other to the recognition that such knowledge was always tentative, shared a different perspective. Human life in the cosmos was the prime good, and the advancement of this life rather than mere preservation was always the goal. Thus the very early commitment within humanist circles to family planning, for instance. Not to hold down a population that would soon ‘overburden’ the resources of earth but to produce children who would be wanted by parents who would be able to care for them effectively; and to give women choices in life other than becoming breeding instruments. (Or, for that matter, some men from achieving their status simply by their success as studs.)”

***Next on the reading list:*
THE END OF FAITH, BY SAM HARRIS
THURSDAY EVENING, MAY 12**

Sam Harris’s new *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, identifies faith itself, not the so-called “perversions” of faith, as modern civilization’s greatest problem. This is “an important book, on a topic that should not be shielded from the crucible of human reason” (Natalie Angier, *The New York Times Book Review*). “It will strike a chord with anyone who has ever pondered the irrationality of religious faith and its cruel, murderous consequences” (*The Economist*).

We’ll meet at 7:00 p.m., Thursday, May 12, at Donna Marxer and John Rafferty’s apartment, 141 East 56 Street (10F), between Lexington and Third.