

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May 2005

Is humanism Green? We focus on environmentalism: pro, con, and fabled. We consider the limits of science in studying human conduct, the limits religion imposes on human rights, and the limits of our patience with the “liberal media” myth. We applaud an American president, offer some unfashionable opinions of “saintly” John Paul, review a fashion parade in the “holy land,” and wonder whether Jesus is a Cincinnati Reds fan. But, this just in—the election returns, ours and the Vatican’s.

NEW BOARD OF DIRECTORS IS ELECTED FOR 2005-2008 TERM

The 2002-2005 Board of Directors met April 21, and opened and counted 56 ballots returned between March 15-April 15 in SHSNY’s triennial election.

All six candidates on the ballot received at least 80% of the votes cast, and all were certified as elected to the Board for the 2005-2008 term beginning May 1, 2005. They are: current President Conrad Claborne, Treasurer Donna Marxer, Secretary John Rafferty, long-time Board member (and past Vice President) Art Harris, and new Board members Jane Bertoni and Remo Cosentino. Retiring Board members, former SHSNY Secretary /Treasurer (and Editor of PIQUE) John Arents, and former Membership Coordinator George Rowell, were both voted the warm and grateful thanks of their colleagues for their long and distinguished service.

As per the existing SHSNY bylaws, the new Board will elect SHSNY’s officers from among its members at its next meeting, in May.

(Photos of six Board members)

Caption: *The usual (and two new) suspects, left to right: Bertoni, Claborne, Cosentino, Harris, Marxer, Rafferty*

NEXT ORDER OF BUSINESS: CHANGES TO THE BYLAWS

The retiring Board has, over the past several months, drafted several changes to the existing SHSNY Bylaws, originally drafted in August, 1991, and last amended in April, 1993. (For the history minded, SHSNY was founded January 14, 1988.)

“In all cases,” says President Conrad Claborne, “these are just streamlining changes, meant to eliminate redundancies like Second Vice Presidents and mandated committees nobody’s ever served on, as well as language contradictions between one Article and another.”

The proposed changes, with plain-English explanations, will be mailed to all members shortly for approval.

NEW SHSNY PHONE NUMBER

We have a new phone number and messaging system, which we'll try to keep up to date as to announcements of times and places of events. Our new listed number is:

212-308-2165

A FEW DISSENTING OPINIONS ON "SAINTLY" JOHN PAUL II

Instead of mitigating the absurdities of ... papal infallibility, a declaration that stemmed almost wholly from Pius IX's paranoia about the evils ranged against him in the modern world, John Paul II tried to further it. In seeking to impose conformity of thought, he summoned prominent theologians ... to star chamber inquiries and had his grand inquisitor, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, issue condemnations of their work.

But John Paul II's most lasting legacy to Catholicism will come from the episcopal appointments he made. In order to have been named a bishop, a priest must have been seen to be absolutely opposed to masturbation, premarital sex, birth control (including condoms used to prevent the spread of AIDS), abortion, divorce, homosexual relations, married priests, female priests and any hint of Marxism. It is nearly impossible to find men who subscribe wholeheartedly to this entire catalogue of certitudes; as a result the ranks of the episcopate are filled with mindless sycophants and intellectual incompetents. The good priests have been passed over; and not a few ... left the priesthood to seek fulfillment elsewhere.

— *Thomas Cahill, "The Price of Infallibility,"*
The New York Times, April 5

Now, I'm certainly not suggesting that the last week should have been spent trashing the late pontiff. His many achievements—taking on communism, embracing the Third World, speaking out for the poor, and standing up against war—surely deserved recognition and praise. [But] the molestation outrage is a black mark that can't be whitewashed. Over 11,000 children were abused and close to \$1 billion in settlement money has been paid out, but the pope did not go much beyond decrying "the sins of some of our brothers." He never met with any victims, he never offered practical solutions to dealing with the problem, he never addressed the decades-long coverup of the abuse. He even rejected a "zero tolerance" policy calling for the immediate removal of molester priests, concerned that it was too harsh.

Too harsh? This is a man who wouldn't allow priests to become bishops unless they were unequivocally opposed to masturbation, premarital sex and condoms. So in his perverse pecking order, you had to be dead-set against "self-love," but when it came to bugging little kids, there was some wiggle room. ...

The other stain on the pope's legacy is his tireless opposition to the use of condoms — even in places like Africa, where AIDS killed 2.3 million people last year alone, and has driven life expectancy below 40 years in many countries. But even in the face of that kind of suffering, he fought tooth and nail against condoms. Anytime a church official even suggested that people infected with HIV should use condoms, they were either removed from office or censured by the Vatican. We were told again and again last week about how committed John Paul was to promoting a culture of life. I guess the 20 million people who have died from AIDS are the exception that proves the rule.

— Arianna Huffington,
“Whitewashing the pope,” *salon.com*, April 15

A few years ago, it seemed quite probable that Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston would have to face trial for his appalling collusion in the child-rape racket that his diocese had been running. The man had knowingly reassigned dangerous and sadistic criminals to positions where they would be able to exploit the defenseless. He had withheld evidence and made himself an accomplice, before and after the fact, in the one offense that people of all faiths and of none have most united in condemning.

Anyway, Cardinal Law isn't going to face a court, now. He has fled the jurisdiction and lives in Rome, where a sinecure at the Vatican has been found for him. (Actually not that much of a sinecure: ... [he] sits on two boards supervising priestly discipline — yes! — and the appointment of diocesan bishops.) Even before this, he visited Rome on at least one occasion to discuss whether or not the church should obey American law. And it has been conclusively established that the Vatican itself—including his holiness—was a part of the coverup and obstruction of justice that allowed the child-rape scandal to continue for so long.

— Christopher Hitchens,
“Papal Power,” *slate.com*, April 1

Unbelievers are more merciful and understanding than believers, as well as more rational. We do not believe that the pope will face judgment or eternal punishment for the millions who will die needlessly from AIDS, or for his excusing and sheltering of those who committed the unpardonable sin of raping and torturing children, or for the countless people whose sex lives have been ruined by guilt and shame and who are taught to respect the body only when it is a lifeless cadaver like that of Terri Schiavo.

For us, this day is only the interment of an elderly and querulous celibate, who came too late and who stayed too long.

— Christopher Hitchens,
“On Not Mourning the Pope,” *slate.com*, April 8

FLASH! Vatican City, April 19:

The College of Cardinals surprised and shocked the world today by choosing as the next pope an old, white, celibate and reactionary European male who will lead the Church boldly into the Nineteenth Century.

**THE SHSNY BOOK CLUB READS
*ECOHUMANISM***

A Report by Conrad Claborne

Ten of us gathered on April 10 for a lively discussion of *Ecohumanism*, joined by editor Robert B. Tapp, and his lovely wife, Anna. Professor Tapp is University of Minnesota Professor Emeritus of Humanities and Religious Studies who, after retirement, began a second career as Dean of The Humanist Institute. After fifteen years, at age 80 (he could pass for 50!), he recently relinquished that position, and hopes to spend more time writing at home in Minnesota.

Professor Tapp (“Please, ‘Bob’ will do fine”) led off the evening with a fascinating history of the founding in the early 1980s of the North American Committee for Humanism. Founders included people like secular humanism’s Paul Kurtz, representatives of the Unitarian Universalist movement, Humanistic Judaism, and others. To ease long-standing tensions between these groups, it was suggested that a postgraduate program be developed in which “tomorrow’s leaders” would all be in the same program together, an idea that grew into The Humanist Institute. To date there have been more than 100 graduates of this intensive program of study. The Humanist Institute is located in space at the Ethical Culture Society in Manhattan, and its ideas and programs can be viewed at www.humanistinstitute.org.

To give structure to the evening’s discussion, I quoted passages from several of the book’s essays, and from another book I have recently read, *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, by John Perkins, on the inner workings of multinational companies and the anti-environmental effects of globalization.

The discussion ranged over topics as varied as the above-mentioned rivalries between rationalist groups and the sex life of bonobo chimpanzees, but kept returning to the central question: What can humanists do to protect our environment, the Earth, our only home?

This is especially a problem when, as Michael Kami, in his essay in *Ecohumanism*, points out that “Genetically, all of us are naturally driven to selfish pursuit of self-preservation. Why is dieting so difficult? Because billions of cells in our body continuously yell at us: feed me, feed me, *feed me!* Dieting is unnatural. But some of us diet successfully. Why don’t we share more of our own resources with others who may desperately need help? Because billions of cells in our body continuously yell: hoard, hoard, *hoard*. Giving and sharing is unnatural. But some of us give and share their possessions with others, often total strangers. Why do we hate, destroy, kill whatever and whoever stands in our way? Because billions of cells in our body continuously yell: protect yourself, protect yourself, *protect yourself*. But some of us act unselfishly and altruistically and even sacrifice our own lives to save others.

“Because the brain development of men and women progressed beyond instinct and automatic reflex to rational and emotional thought processes and self-analysis, we can, or at least should try, to transcend our genetic imperative!”

Or, even more succinctly, Professor Tapp quoted Julian Huxley: “Once you know how evolution works, you’re responsible for it.”

One reader made the observation that “every species tends to take over its environment, but we are the only species trying to balance ourselves within the environment. We’re learning.” We have to “work small,” he said, to accomplish what we can one small step at a time, because we’re not going to change that genetic imperative, or the multinational system, overnight. “Secular humanism,” I suggested, “can help to challenge our thinking, instead of pretending, as Christianity or Islam does, that life is just a way station to an afterlife.”

In his *Ecohumanism* essay, Michael Werner suggests: “Rather than trying to change or ignore human nature, a better approach is to ask how we can turn our instinctual drives to our benefit in environmental issues ... how can we get our basic instinctual urges to work for environmental benefit rather than against it. A plan might include asking these questions: 1. How can we confer high status to those who live lives without wastefulness

and unbridled consumerism? 2. How can we use sex/survival/social status, etc., to reduce overpopulation? 3. How can we link our personal drive for survival with biosphere survival? 4. How can we promote public awareness that our technological addiction may be a barrier to human and environmental values?

“We will have to find ways to extend our altruistic drives that are genetically reserved for our families and close tribe members, to humanity at large and our biosphere ... to confront the reality that building a sustainable future inherently means giving up something of value to us. These are not easy tasks ... [we need the] wisdom that sees our lives embedded in nature.”

John Perkins, in *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, observes: “We believe the myth that thousands of years of human social evolution has finally perfected the ideal economic system, rather than face the fact that we have merely bought into a false concept and accepted it as gospel. We have convinced ourselves that all economic growth benefits humankind, and that the greater the growth, the more widespread the benefits. ... We cannot bring ourselves to bite the hand of the master who feeds us. ... How do you rise up against a system that appears to provide you with your home and car, food and clothes, electricity and health care—even when you know that the system also creates a world where twenty-four thousand people starve to death each day and millions more hate you, or at least hate the policies made by representatives you elected? How do you muster the courage to step out of line and challenge concepts you have always accepted as gospel, even when you suspect that the system is ready to self-destruct? ...

“How can [we] help our children understand that people who live gluttonous, unbalanced lives should be pitied but never, ever emulated, even if those people present themselves, through the media ... as cultural icons and try to convince us that penthouses and yachts bring happiness? ... These are the essential questions of our time. Each of us needs to answer them in our own way and to express our answers clearly, unequivocally.”

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Michael S. Berliner, The Ayn Rand Institute

(Excerpted from “On Earth Day, Remember: If Environmentalism Succeeds, It Will Make Human Life Impossible,” www.aynrand.org, April 15, 2005)

The fundamental goal of environmentalism is not clean air and clean water; rather, it is the demolition of technological/industrial civilization. Environmentalism’s goal is not the advancement of human health, human happiness, and human life; rather, it is a subhuman world where “nature” is worshipped like the totem of some primitive religion.

In a nation founded on the pioneer spirit, environmentalists have made “development” an evil word. They inhibit or prohibit the development of Alaskan oil, offshore drilling, nuclear power—and every other practical form of energy. Housing, commerce, and jobs are sacrificed to spotted owls and snail darters. Medical research is sacrificed to the “rights” of mice. Logging is sacrificed to the “rights” of trees. No instance of the progress that brought man out of the cave is safe from the onslaught of those “protecting” the environment from man, whom they consider a rapist and despoiler by his very essence.

To save mankind from environmentalism, what’s needed is not the appeasing, compromising approach of those who urge a “balance” between the needs of man and the

“needs” of the environment. To save mankind requires the wholesale rejection of environmentalism as hatred of science, technology, progress, and human life.

If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer. But if he spends his days as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is deemed an industrious and enterprising citizen.

— Henry David Thoreau

THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT

Moses

(as told to John Rafferty)

Thou shalt not pee in the river.

See? It doesn't even sound like a commandment. Well, not like a *commandment*, anyway. Now that you've heard it, are you surprised I forgot it?

I had just gone through a harrowing experience, you'll admit. G-d Himself takes me to the mountain top, speaks to me out of the thunder (you have to hear it to believe it, and believe me, you don't want to hear it), burns His eleven laws into two stone tablets, and sends me back to the Hebrews with instructions that more or less boil down to: 1) reform the Jewish religion; 2) lead the Hebrew nation to the Promised Land and, 3) while you're at it, found Western Civilization.

So here I come down from the mountain pretty much in a state and, well, you know what was going on, the whole nation carrying on around that golden ass. I just lost it. Threw the tablets down into the crowd, and smashed them and the ass into a thousand pieces.

Oh, it was an ass all right, no golden calf. Anyway, by the time I'd calmed down and had the commandments carved on new tablets, I only remembered ten, and didn't realize I was missing one. I'd got the rest of them pretty much right, except for the one about coveting thy neighbor's ass. Should be “goods,” of course, *Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods*. But because I had the golden ass thing on my mind, I made a mistake, and kids in Sunday School have been giggling about the Tenth Commandment for centuries. So what? If Sunday School is like I remember Hebrew School, the kids could use a few laughs.

Now, once the whole nation had gotten hold of “The Ten Commandments” there was no changing them, no way to say, Wait, here's one more. They became an industry. Wherever in the wilderness we made camp, stonecutters carved and potters baked tablets to sell to the locals. Commandments were the rage, and soon every tent in the Sinai had a set.

(By the way, you noticed which one I remembered first? You don't get to lead a mighty nation without learning to play the game.)

Something else, too. I think even He would agree that “Ten” has a nice ring to it, a symmetry that “The Eleven Commandments” never would have had. My opinion? If we'd gone with Eleven they'd never have caught on, and instead of Judeo-Christian, Western Civilization would be Baalish-Molochian.

Anyway, why He didn't say something immediately I don't know. It was weeks later before He called me on it, in the middle of the night.

You forgot one!

Try waking up from a dead sleep with that Voice inside your head. “Forgot one what?” was all I could think of to say.

You forgot about peeing in the river!

“I was supposed to pee in the river?”

It was a commandment!

“There was a commandment about peeing in the river? For or against?”

Silence, the only thing worse than the Voice. I could hear the Anger Of G-d in the silence. The air in my tent actually curdled. Suddenly an invisible hand yanked me off my pallet, flung me out of the tent and into the desert night. After a couple of kicks to my backside, I figured out I was supposed to walk in the direction He was kicking. Which I did, for hours, walking back along the route the whole Hebrew nation had marched a few days before. In fact, from the litter along the way I could tell I was on the very path. Sure enough, at dawn I was back at last week’s campsite.

Look!

I did, but at what I didn’t know. Just broken pottery and tent poles, rags and shards, the odds and ends and chicken bones of forty thousand people eating half a million meals over a few days, the usual. And, of course, the aroma from the communal latrine on the banks of the little stream that had made this spot ideal for our camp.

Well?

I didn’t have a clue. “Um, Lord, what am I looking for here?”

The Eleventh Commandment!

“You mean the ‘peeing in the river’ thing?”

It’s a figure of speech! It means clean up your mess. It means don’t make a trash heap of My gardens, or a pissoir of My sweet flowing streams.

“Okay, got it. But Lord, isn’t ‘Take out the garbage’ really kind of a petty idea for a commandment?”

And that’s when He lost it. Cursed me to the four winds of the Wilderness. Shook the earth, loosed the lightning and swore I’d never lead the Hebrews to the Promised Land, that from then on I’d always be at the end of the march. With the cleanup squad.

Which, of course, is the way it worked out. Never crossed the River Jordan, never tasted the milk and honey. And never, ever, peed in another river. Just as if it had been a commandment.

Which, I guess, maybe it should have been.

MAY 5 IS NATIONAL DAY OF REASON

Coinciding with the (unconstitutionally) federally-supported Day of Prayer, NDR celebrates reason and church-state separation. SHSNY is an endorser. What to do? Read the Bill of Rights to your kids, talk up NDR, and visit nationaldayofreason.org for other ideas.

RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A CFI-Metro New York Forum

Reported by Conrad Claborne

Four members of SHSNY attended a March 15 forum on “Religion and International Human Rights,” sponsored by CFI-MetroNY, at the New York Academy of Sciences.

The moderator was CFI's Susan Jacoby, and the speakers were Judith Goldstein, Executive Director of Humanity in Action, dedicated to promoting the rights of minorities around the world, and Royna Hakakian, author of *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*.

Ms. Jacoby first discussed a March 13 *New York Times* article, "A World of Ways to Say 'Islamic Law,'" by David Rohde, about the ways undemocratic shariah law could be incorporated into Iraq's new constitution.

Ms. Hakakian (born in Iran, but I believe now a U.S. citizen) said her book was about the real story of the Iranian revolution of 1977-79. A questioner asked how secular Iran wound up with a fundamentalist Islamic Republic after the shah. Ms. Hakakian loves to answer this question, and told us how curious she found western journalists who go to Iran and "discover" a young generation of secularists; they seem mystified as to where these secularists came from. She said that when western journalists and camera crews showed up in Tehran in 1977, on one side of the street were secularist demonstrators dressed like the people in this room, on the other side were black-clad mullahs condemning the shah with clenched fists. The mullahs were the best TV drama. The children of the secularists are the young people journalists now find so interesting in present day Iran.

Many Iranians, Ms. Hakakian said, thought the Ayatollah Khomeini was the Muslim Gandhi in 1977. Now, 28 years later, people know how bad a theocracy can be, but this experience was not available then.

I asked Ms. Hakakian about the Canadian/Iranian photojournalist who was arrested and severely beaten by police representing hard-line clerics in 2003, eventually died, and whose body Iranian officials have refused to turn over to the Canadian government. Were there any new developments since the documentary I'd seen the night before had been completed? Ms. Hakakian, it turns out, has led an organization to force the Iranian authorities to own up to their responsibilities, and is on the verge of having two people testify that the abuse was carried out in the presence of the Minister of Justice. The Canadian government is also trying to focus international attention on this issue.

Although the other speakers (and the audience) focused on "what unchecked religion is doing or can do to inhibit human rights," Judith Goldstein took the opposite tack: that secular Europe is discriminating against Arab and Muslim immigrants. The current European welfare state, she said, built on the foundations of previously Christian Europe, is intended to give everyone a cushion of protection, but not those who are considered "other." Protestants and Catholics are considered family, but not Arabs and Muslims.

Most in the audience considered this an entirely different issue from the evening's stated theme.

LIMITS ON THE AUTHORITY OF SCIENCE

John Arents

Editor's note: The following was sent by PIQUE's Editor Emeritus John Arents to Free Inquiry Editor Norm Allen in response to a published article. Mr. Allen, John points out, "exercised free will by choosing not to publish the letter."

The article by Thomas W. Clark ("Crime and Causality," *Free Inquiry*, February/March 2005) demands two comments.

(1) Clark extols “the moral wisdom and practical benefits of siding with science, not tradition.” The authority of science in physics, chemistry, astronomy, and many other areas is unquestioned. However, in studying human thought and interactions, it is extremely difficult to gather representative samples and make reliable observations. The results must be taken with many grains of salt. Overreaching psychiatry has been blamed for four disasters in the last century: lobotomies, sex changes, deinstitutionalization, and “recovered” memories. Moreover, research in the human sciences can impinge on sensitive ideology. Scientists are mere human beings who want to stay alive and continue in their profession. In the same issue, Christopher Hitchens (“Jihad in the Netherlands”) reminds us of the deadly peril of criticizing Islam. One of my colleagues at New York’s City College needed a bodyguard after he questioned racial equality. He would certainly have been dismissed if the tenure law had not stood in the way.

Tradition has no value in deciding whether the Earth is the center of the universe or whether the human species began with Adam and Eve. In matters of human conduct, however, common sense and tradition are the distillations of long experience. They are fallible, but they come with the presumption of some validity. They carry as much weight as shaky and biased “science.”

(2) Human choices may not be uncaused, but the causes are practically infinite in number, extremely complex, and both internal and external to the brain. There is no hope of observing, or computing from, all of them. Whether a choice is uncaused or caused by unknowable causes is an empty distinction because it cannot be empirical. Free will, in the sense of unpredictable choices, is an extremely valuable evolutionary adaptation for both predator and prey.

THE MYTH OF “THE LIBERAL MEDIA”

Massimo Pigliucci

(Excerpted from “And they say liberals are whiny!” in Rationally Speaking No. 59, March 2005)

It is rather amusing (when I’m in a good mood) to hear conservatives (especially religious ones) complain that they are “persecuted” in American society, that they don’t get a say in, that they have constantly to battle against, the liberal media. What persecution? What liberal media*? What are these people talking about?

In the United States, conservatives now control the Presidency, the House of Representatives, the Senate, and a large number of state governorships. If we add to the list that the Supreme Court is increasingly conservative, and may soon become extremely so, in essence these people control the country — and set the agenda for the rest of the world. What, then, is there to complain? Why is this not enough? ...

There is, of course, one little area of American life where conservatives are still by far in the minority: academia. By the latest estimates, about 70% of faculty at U.S. universities consider themselves “on the left” within the current political spectrum. Of course, this has immediately raised the ire of conservatives, who have recently had the audacity to claim that there is a nationwide conspiracy to keep right-leaning faculty out of our campuses. It isn’t clear whether the charge applies only to state universities, or includes the private ones (in the latter case, one wonders how many liberal-leaning faculty are on the payroll at, say, Bob Jones “University”). But the fact remains

indisputable: academia is still a bastion of liberalism, and that ain't gonna change overnight, no matter how widespread the "outrage."

Outside of silly conspiracy theories, why exactly is it that academia is full of liberals, and why is it that the majority of the media used to be equally favorable to moderately progressive positions (at the moment, only *The Onion* and *The Daily Show* are firmly in this category)? As in the case of any search for causal explanations, we must start [by] identifying the characteristics that separate the two groups in question—academia and "the real world"—to see if such differences may be conducive to the formulation of sensible hypotheses about the underlying causal links.

There are three things, roughly speaking, that come to mind: the high diversity (ethnic, and of opinions) on college campuses; the financial independence of faculty (after tenure); and, oh yeah, the fact that the very idea of a "liberal arts" education is to foster critical thinking, dialogue, and the endorsement of positions based on thoughtful consideration of facts and values. Hmm, could it be that this triplet makes for an environment in which ultraconservative ideas just don't flourish? Could it be that religious bigotry simply can't take the challenge of an ongoing open discussion, where ... everything is fair game for public criticism? Could this be why academic freedom tends to be extremely limited in ultraconservative, ultra-religious campuses?

***Comment:**

What "liberal media" are they talking about? Do they mean TV's non-stop talking-head liberals like Fred Barnes, Pat Buchanan, William F. Buckley, Anne Coulter, Newt Gingrich, Bob Grant, Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham, Alan Keyes, Morton Kondrake, Bill Kristol, G. Gordon Liddy, Rush Limbaugh, John McLaughlin, Oliver North, Robert Novak, Bill O'Reilly, Michael Regan, Pat Robertson, Michael Savage, Joe Scarborough, Laura Schlesinger, and John Stoessel? (Maybe Armstrong Williams, Michael Manus, Maggie Gallagher and "Jeff Gannon" don't count because they're only fake journalists.) Do they mean liberal media organizations like the Fox broadcast and cable network and the whole of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.? Or do they mean Viacom, The Tribune Company, the Hearst Corporation, *The New York Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Times*, *National Review*, *The American Spectator*, dozens of other right wing publications, and the dozens, if not hundreds of talk-radio and cable-TV distribution networks that pump reactionary Republican and Christian Right messages into America's airwaves every hour of every day? *Those liberal media?* — *John Rafferty*

MOVING TO CANADA? THINK ARGENTINA. INSTEAD OF BUSH, THINK NESTOR KIRCHNER

Muriel Fraser

(From National Secular Society Newslines (U.K.), 3/24/05)

Argentine President Nestor Kirchner in 2003 suspended the immunity enjoyed by former military leaders responsible for the murders of the 1976-83 junta, liberalized the Supreme Court, and announced that his government intends to legalize abortion.

But the government's new campaign to reduce AIDS by distributing condoms to young people led Bishop Antonio Juan Baseotto (who excused the junta's torture as "unavoidable excess") to declare that "those who scandalize little ones should have a stone tied around their neck and be thrown into the sea." Of course he was merely quoting Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Mark.

Under a concordat signed with the Vatican in 2002, Bishop Baseotto was also Argentina's military chaplain. When President Kirchner asked the Vatican to replace the Military Bishop, his request was refused. So the President informed the Vatican that the taxpayers of Argentina would no longer pay the Bishop's salary, which the Vatican called a violation of international law.

On March 18, President Kirchner cut through the legal entanglements with a decree canceling the concordat. Technically, this violates an international treaty. But no one seems too worried about an attack on Buenos Aires by Swiss Guards brandishing swords and pikes.

JERUSALEM RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN RARE UNITY AGAINST A COMMON ENEMY: HOMOS

Leaders of the three major religions that call Jerusalem a "holy city" met there March 30 to protest a gay pride festival scheduled for August. One rabbi announced, "This is not the homo land, this is the Holy Land."

(Picture of clerics at anti-gay-parade meeting in Jerusalem)

Caption beneath picture:

*The clerics — from left: the deputy mufti of Jerusalem, the Latin and Armenian patriarchs, and the Sephardic and Ashkenazi chief rabbis — all wore tasteful variations of basic black, including several full-length gowns, accessorized with sect-specific millinery (turbans, skullcaps, and one **stunning** thugz-in-the-'hood cowl) in a splash of fun colors, and all accented with simply **tons** of gold pectoral jewelry glittering gaily on black-clad manly chests.*

AS IF BEING A METS FAN ISN'T HARD ENOUGH, OR, WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #116

As New York Mets fans tuned their radios to our heroes' first game of the season, against the Cincinnati Reds on April 4, we were blissfully unaware that in the other broadcast booth, sports-talk host Bill Cunningham was leading into his game broadcast with a fire-and-brimstone sermon extolling the virtues of God, U.S. troops, Pope John Paul II and the Cincinnati Reds.

With "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" playing in the background (we are not making this up), Cunningham intoned: "As God is my witness, as sure as there is a pope in heaven today, as sure as the mighty Ohio River flows in between Ohio and Kentucky ... as sure as I'm sitting here, once again, God will say, '*It is time for the Reds to march.*' One baseball team has been called by God, Who looks down from heaven above, to represent Him.

"And the one team, *the one team* that is best represented is the oldest and the best franchise. Say it loud: *The Reds are Number One.* God bless America, and God bless the Cincinnati Reds on 700, WLW."

Well, at least now we know why the Mets lost.

And although Reds fans can take comfort that God's on their side, wrote King Kaufman in his Sports Daily column on Salon.com April 7, would it be blasphemous to ask why He can't do something about their pitching?

**NEXT ON THE BOOK CLUB SCHEDULE:
THE END OF FAITH, BY SAM HARRIS
THURSDAY EVENING, MAY 12, 7:00 P.M.**

Sam Harris's new *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, 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*).

From Chapter 1, *Reason in Exile*: "The idea that religious faith is somehow a sacred human convention—distinguished as it is, both by the extravagance of its claims and by the paucity of its evidence—is really too great a monstrosity to be appreciated in all its glory. Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible. When foisted upon each generation anew, it renders us incapable of realizing just how much of our world has been unnecessarily ceded to a dark and barbarous past."

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. Please call 212-371-8733 to let us know you are coming — and come join the discussion even if you haven't finished the book yet.