

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October 2005

As bodies floated in the streets, we asked our readers (by e-mail) what humanists can actually do about this American failure. The consensus? Not much—we have the bunglers responsible for three more years—except to open our wallets (see below), and to keep working for science, reason, and a society that will leave no child behind in the floodwaters. Also this month, we analyze (and satirize) “Intelligent Design,” examine political quackery, and catch our Mayor in some quackery of his own.

HELPING HANDS ARE NEEDED, NOT PRAYERS

**Norm R. Allen Jr., Executive Director
African Americans for Humanism**

The sad situation left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina seems to show that, while race still matters in the U.S., class is greatly increasing in significance. Middle-class and rich Blacks, by and large, were as able to flee the damaged areas as were their White counterparts. But the poor, elderly, and sick, regardless of race, were largely left to fend for themselves.

Likewise, wealthy Black defendants such as O.J. Simpson, Michael Jackson, the rappers Snoop Dogg and Puff Daddy, and others have been able to afford expensive attorneys and buy freedom—even with Whites on their juries. However, the jails and prisons are filled with poor people of all races who will never get a legal break.

Though biblical teachings can offer solace for suffering Christians, rescue efforts could have been better spent than by airlifting Bibles to the victims. Just think how many bottles of water and dinners could have been dropped instead. (Moreover, just think of the non-Christian victims filled with disgust at this shameless and opportunistic attempt at proselytizing!)

We humanists don't believe anyone needs to pray for the victims. But how about lending a helping hand? As Robert Green Ingersoll said, “Hands that help are better far than lips that pray.” Indeed, the Secular Humanist Aid and Relief Effort (SHARE) of the Council for Secular Humanism has already raised tens of thousands of dollars for the victims of Katrina.

Let's help the poor with human-centered thought and action, and by working to build a fair and caring society that values its humanity.

How about taking all those Bibles that were airlifted into New Orleans (instead of adequate food and water) and using them to reinforce the levees? — *Emily Kingsley*

**YES, YOU CAN MAKE A
SECULAR HUMANIST CONTRIBUTION**

Paul Kurtz, Chairman,

Center for Inquiry-Transnational

The immense tragedy of Hurricane Katrina is unfolding with brutal intensity. And the need for support for its victims is apparent. I am pleased to say that SHARE, a thoroughly secular, nonreligious charity, at latest count has raised almost \$50,000.

May I thank our friends and readers for their contributions. And may we urge those of you who have not yet given, and those who have but wish to add to it, that we still welcome your donations. AmeriCares, a nonpartisan, public charity, has agreed to distribute the funds that we raise for the benefit of those who have suffered from Katrina. It has been designated for the “Hurricane Relief Fund.” All contributions to SHARE are tax-deductible.

SHARE (Secular Humanist Aid and Relief Effort) is sponsored by the Council for Secular Humanism. It is committed to C.A.R.E.: Caring, Altruism, Responsibility, and Empathy. To make a contribution to SHARE, go to https://secure.ga3.org/05/donate_to_help_katrina_victims.

WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

By Conrad Claborne

If God knows that President George W. Bush looks to His son Jesus Christ for guidance and direction ... and if God knows that the area hit by Hurricane Katarina is the heart of the “Bible Belt,” where probably 90% of the residents of these states worship him every Sunday ... then what was God thinking when he targeted the area for such massive destruction and death?

I wondered why our President looked so disengaged, and did not butter his speech with religious quotes when he cut his five-week vacation short (by two days) and returned to the White House to address the nation on television. Perhaps our President was privately asking himself the same question? Lets face it: it would be difficult to direct prayers to God, if one believes in a personal god, under the circumstances. For what could one pray?

In an era when every kind of communications technology is available, why is it that God has not chosen something off the shelf—say from Radio Shack—with which to communicate with humanity, especially as his followers believe that God had a hand in creating, or inspiring these wonders in the first place?

If modern communications technologies (the products of secular science, thank you very much) make it possible for us to organize and run the most complex society humans have ever known, why doesn't God use them? I can understand the use of prayer (communication *to* God) and supposed miracles (communication *from* God) in ages when other options were not available, but in the modern world those choices seem ludicrous. Why not a simple warning message — “*Katrina's coming - fix the levees or get out of town!*” — beamed via our modern satellite dishes from God to every cell phone, TV and radio on the Gulf Coast. In other words, why can't God communicate with us?

Maybe the answer is simple — that there is no omnipotent being, no God, to communicate.

In addition to comforting the grieving, what can we secular humanists do in such a disaster? First, help and relief must be directed to those affected by this tragedy, and delivered with great urgency. But we must also use our belief in science to explain that

this is precisely what happens in a world where global warming is taking effect, and that we need to make a sea change in corporate America, which itself needs to lead the way to finding our sustainable journey into the future.

As I return to my union classes next week (I teach in the Training & Upgrading Fund of 1199, the Healthcare Workers union), I will ask my students for their thoughts. Our gravest mission is not to let pictures speak volumes but to work for an educational system that enables the voiceless poor to speak and act for themselves. When we ask what America should do, we must remember that America is not just us. — *Carmen Elliott*

So September 16 was declared a National Day of Prayer re: Katrina. Hold on here. Wasn't the hurricane, by definition, an Act of God? So what should we have prayed for, exactly? "Dear Lord, while we'll never know what, in your infinite wisdom, was the message you were trying to send with the hurricane ... we pray to you today in thanks for using this grotesque nightmare to help wake up Americans to the fact that our leaders are incompetent morons. — *David Rafferty*

When there's money on the line, cronies always come first in this White House, no matter how great the human suffering. After Katrina, the FEMA Web site directing charitable contributions prominently listed Operation Blessing, a Pat Robertson kitty that, according to I.R.S. documents obtained by ABC News, has given more than half of its yearly cash donations to Mr. Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network.

— *Frank Rich in The New York Times, 9/18/05*

GEORGE W. BUSH FILMS A TV COMMERCIAL FOR KATRINA RELIEF

Reported by John Rafferty

(Medium Long shot: President Bush in wading boots in thigh-high water on a flooded street in New Orleans. Furniture and bodies float by as camera begins long zoom in. The President, looking deeply concerned, speaks.)

"Hurricane Katrina brought the terrible news of death and destruction to America's Gulf Coast. Hundreds of lives lost, hundreds of thousands homeless, and billions of dollars in damage.

But there's good news, too."

(Zoom in to close-up of GWB smirk.)

"I just saved a bunch of money on my car insurance by switching to GEICO."

AND WE HAVE A NEW CANDIDATE FOR THE SHSNY 2005 DUMBTH AWARD

Rep. Richard Baker (R-LA), who gets 100% approval ratings from all the religious-right lobbies, said of Hurricane Katrina: "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."

Rep. Baker joins the TV personality Star Jones (she for whom God delayed the tsunami so as not to disturb her honeymoon) as a candidate for our horse's-ass trophy award for the dumbest remark of the year.

Who's *your* nominee? Polling in December.

WE ARE THE “INTELLIGENT DESIGNERS” OF HURRICANE KATRINA

Barbara G. Lifton

On August 31, National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” broadcast a commentary by Senior Correspondent Daniel Shorr. The commentary was titled “‘Intelligent Design’ and hard times.” Mr. Shorr, who was 89 years old that day, said in part:

“Into the long-running argument about creationism vs. evolution, there’s lately been added a new catchphrase, a version of creationism called intelligent design. President Bush has staked out a non-position on the subject, which is that both sides ought to be properly taught in the schools of America in case there are some who haven’t made up their minds. But as the president cut short his vacation by two days to deal with the catastrophic effects of Hurricane Katrina, he might well have reflected that if this was the result of intelligent design, then the designer has something to answer for.”

Shorr went on to describe the horrors of the hurricane and its terrible aftermath, and asked, ironically, if hurricanes are part of some “mysterious design.” He pointed out that the severity of the hurricane season varies with “natural changes in temperature” over the oceans. “Natural” he implied, seems to be the opposite of “intelligent,” in describing such phenomena.

Many “intelligent” people I know, not too knowledgeable in the areas of evolutionary biology and the natural history of the universe, sometimes pontificate that since Evolution was a “theory” when proposed by Darwin, there may be room for tolerance of other “theories.” Just as there should be no tolerance for deliberate falsity in the reporting of the results of scientific research, there also should be no tolerance for fuzzy religious theories about how life appeared on this planet. Religious theorists, for example, deliberately confuse the evolution of the species with the origin of the species — there is no controversy in science about the reality of the evolutionary process. And, even though there are still several theories about the process by which organisms capable of reproduction appeared during the early life of the earth, we are closer than ever now to a scientific understanding of how it was done.

Despite the lies told by the religious right, scientific theories can be established as correct with almost the same certainty as arithmetical fact. Two and two always equal four, no matter how you talk about it or twist it around using number theory. This fact has been proven using mathematical processes, and has no spiritual or superstitious interpretation (see, for instance, *Fermat’s Enigma* by Simon Singh, Walker Publishing, 1997). The fact of the origin of life from natural processes can also be established, and will be accepted when somebody produces a theory as elegant as Darwin’s theory of the evolution of the species through natural selection.

As Richard Dawkins points out in his monumental study of the evolutionary history of our species from the primordial ooze to the present, *The Ancestor’s Tale*, (Houghton Mifflin, 2004), we have not yet arrived at the final answer to the riddle of how life arose under the hostile conditions present during Earth’s infancy. A new theory, which has arisen because of the discovery of strange animals and bacteria living in noxious thermal vents at the bottom of the oceans, is that such tiny living creatures could have arisen in early times, under similar conditions existing billions of years ago on the surface of the earth. These early creatures have left no hard fossils. Nevertheless, examples of such primitive bacteria existing today have been discovered in drilling samples taken from

those ocean depths. Scientists have postulated chemical reactions occurring even under such conditions existing on the surface, stimulated by electric current from lightning, as creating creatures capable of reproduction. (*Was Mary Shelly a scientist from outer space, who knew that Baron Frankenstein was right!? Oh well, I am entitled to some hysteria about visitations — how else can I explain the Bush administration?*)

Darwin, Dawkins and others have presented us with a magnificent saga of the pilgrimage of life from its primitive chemical origins to its current complexity. No theory of “pre-cognitive design” has ever explained this evolutionary history with scientifically demonstrated physical evidence. As science has shown conclusively, evidence demonstrating the fact of the evolution of the species is derived from existing dated fossils, from the analysis of DNA (which Dawkins calls “renewed relics”), and from the process of “triangulation,” various analytic techniques for comparing modern organisms. For better or worse, we are who we are because we evolved; my ancestor was not created from a male rib. And no theory of “intelligent design” has yet to explain scientifically how primitive life appeared on earth.

Morally, as Daniel Shorr eloquently implies, a God that pre-designs and brings about the suffering and death of innocent children, either in Auschwitz or in New Orleans (even if by some “miracle” such a transcendental creature could be shown to exist), should not be worshipped. It may be psychologically necessary to religionists that they believe in some entity more powerful than they are, to blame and to apply to for mercy.

However, I don’t think we can get off so easily. As shown in the increase in hurricane activity believed to be caused by the warming of our oceans, and the incredible lack of preparation for disaster in a disaster zone like the Gulf, we, not some insane, vengeful deity, are the designers of our own horrors, and pay the consequences of our creations. *That* is the moral of Katrina.

SHOW ME THE SCIENCE - Part I **Daniel C. Dennett**

(This is the first half of an Op-Ed essay that appeared in The New York Times August 28; the second half will run in November PIQUE. Daniel C. Dennett, a professor of philosophy at Tufts University, is the author of Freedom Evolves and of Darwin’s Dangerous Idea.)

President Bush, announcing this month that he was in favor of teaching about “intelligent design” in the schools, said, “I think that part of education is to expose people to different schools of thought.” A couple of weeks later, Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee, the Republican leader, made the same point. Teaching both intelligent design and evolution “doesn’t force any particular theory on anyone,” Mr. Frist said. “I think in a pluralistic society that is the fairest way to go about education and training people for the future.”

Is “intelligent design” a legitimate school of scientific thought? Is there something to it, or have these people been taken in by one of the most ingenious hoaxes in the history of science? Wouldn’t such a hoax be impossible? No. Here’s how it has been done.

First, imagine how easy it would be for a determined band of naysayers to shake the world’s confidence in quantum physics—how weird it is!—or Einsteinian relativity. In spite of a century of instruction and popularization by physicists, few people ever really get their heads around the concepts involved. Most people eventually cobble together a justification for accepting the assurances of the experts: “Well, they pretty much agree

with one another, and they claim that it is their understanding of these strange topics that allows them to harness atomic energy, and to make transistors and lasers, which certainly do work ...”

Fortunately for physicists, there is no powerful motivation for such a band of mischief-makers to form. They don't have to spend much time persuading people that quantum physics and Einsteinian relativity really have been established beyond all reasonable doubt.

With evolution, however, it is different. The fundamental scientific idea of evolution by natural selection is not just mind-boggling; natural selection, by executing God's traditional task of designing and creating all creatures great and small, also seems to deny one of the best reasons we have for believing in God. So there is plenty of motivation for resisting the assurances of the biologists. Nobody is immune to wishful thinking. It takes scientific discipline to protect ourselves from our own credulity, but we've also found ingenious ways to fool ourselves and others. Some of the methods used to exploit these urges are easy to analyze; others take a little more unpacking.

A creationist pamphlet sent to me some years ago had an amusing page in it, purporting to be part of a simple questionnaire:

Test Two

Do you know of any building that didn't have a builder? [YES] [NO]

Do you know of any painting that didn't have a painter? [YES] [NO]

Do you know of any car that didn't have a maker? [YES] [NO]

If you answered YES for any of the above, give details:

Take that, you Darwinians! The presumed embarrassment of the test-taker when faced with this task perfectly expresses the incredulity many people feel when they confront Darwin's great idea. It seems obvious, doesn't it, that there couldn't be any designs without designers, any such creations without a creator.

Well, yes — until you look at what contemporary biology has demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt: that natural selection — the process in which reproducing entities must compete for finite resources and thereby engage in a tournament of blind trial and error from which improvements automatically emerge — has the power to generate breathtakingly ingenious designs.

Take the development of the eye, which has been one of the favorite challenges of creationists. How on earth, they ask, could that engineering marvel be produced by a series of small, unplanned steps? Only an intelligent designer could have created such a brilliant arrangement of a shape-shifting lens, an aperture-adjusting iris, a light-sensitive image surface of exquisite sensitivity, all housed in a sphere that can shift its aim in a hundredth of a second and send megabytes of information to the visual cortex every second for years on end.

But as we learn more and more about the history of the genes involved, and how they work - all the way back to their predecessor genes in the sightless bacteria from which multicelled animals evolved more than a half-billion years ago - we can begin to tell the story of how photosensitive spots gradually turned into light-sensitive craters that could detect the rough direction from which light came, and then gradually acquired their lenses, improving their information-gathering capacities all the while.

We can't yet say what all the details of this process were, but real eyes representative of all the intermediate stages can be found, dotted around the animal kingdom, and we

have detailed computer models to demonstrate that the creative process works just as the theory says.

All it takes is a rare accident that gives one lucky animal a mutation that improves its vision over that of its siblings; if this helps it have more offspring than its rivals, this gives evolution an opportunity to raise the bar and ratchet up the design of the eye by one mindless step. And since these lucky improvements accumulate — this was Darwin’s insight — eyes can automatically get better and better, without any intelligent designer.

Brilliant as the design of the eye is, it betrays its origin with a tell-tale flaw: the retina is inside out. The nerve fibers that carry the signals from the eye’s rods and cones (which sense light and color) lie on top of them, and have to plunge through a large hole in the retina to get to the brain, creating the blind spot. No intelligent designer would put such a clumsy arrangement in a camcorder, and this is just one of hundreds of accidents frozen in evolutionary history that confirm the mindlessness of the historical process.

If you still find Test Two compelling, a sort of cognitive illusion that you can feel even as you discount it, you are like just about everybody else in the world; the idea that natural selection has the power to generate such sophisticated designs is deeply counterintuitive. Francis Crick, one of the discoverers of DNA, once jokingly credited his colleague Leslie Orgel with “Orgel’s Second Rule”: Evolution is cleverer than you are. Evolutionary biologists are often startled by the power of natural selection to “discover” an “ingenious” solution to a design problem posed in the lab.

This observation lets us address a slightly more sophisticated version of the cognitive illusion presented by Test Two. When evolutionists like Crick marvel at the cleverness of the process of natural selection they are not acknowledging intelligent design. The designs found in nature are nothing short of brilliant, but the process of design that generates them is utterly lacking in intelligence of its own.

I.D. advocates, however, exploit the ambiguity between process and product that is built into the word “design.” For them, the presence of a finished product (a fully evolved eye, for instance) is evidence of an intelligent design process. But this tempting conclusion is just what evolutionary biology has shown to be mistaken.

Yes, eyes are for seeing, but these and all the other purposes in the natural world can be generated by processes that are themselves without purposes and without intelligence. This is hard to understand, but so is the idea that colored objects in the world are composed of atoms that are not themselves colored, and that heat is not made of tiny hot things.

(Part II of this essay will appear in November PIQUE.)

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 9 IS FREETHOUGHT DAY

It’s the anniversary of the Massachusetts colony judicial decision in 1692 that forbade “spectral evidence” in court (claiming to see “angels” and “devils” and “specters”), and ended the Salem Witch Trials.

Feel free to think freely all day.

SCIENCE VS. RELIGION: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WAR Arthur Harris

It is the politics of religion that is the cause of the rift between Religion and Science. Probably for as long as man has existed, religion has been a part of the ruling system. Religious law was and is an integral part of the laws that govern mankind, and any questioning of these laws was akin to treason. Religious leaders are not giving that up easily.

It had been an easy sell. When one considers the miserable existence that mankind has mostly endured through the millenniums, the promise of Heaven or the fear of Hell was enough to keep the population in check. After all, what did one have to lose?

When Galileo opined that the earth circled the sun, the Church felt attacked. But the new theory didn't cause unrest among the masses; few, if any, folks opted out of church attendance because of such a revelation.

But Darwin was different. His theory attacked the very foundations of religion; it even raised the question of whether God existed at all. The Bible had been a case-closed guide as to how the earth began and was populated — and Darwin threw all that out.

With faith now undermined by Darwin - and as evidence began to trickle in in support of the theory - many of the faithful were severely shaken and began to question church teachings in other areas as well. Even a few members of the hierarchy expressed doubts as to whether Christ had even existed.

This was no skirmish, it was out-and-out war.

By the late 1800's the anti-religionist movement had gathered momentum. Lecturers like Robert Green Ingersoll, in his day America's most popular speaker, led the attack on religion, and the Chautauqua circuit bristled with debates. Newspapers, cartoonists, and writers like Mark Twain and H. L. Mencken ridiculed fundamentalist believers. The faithful in the Bible Belt and rural America reacted by legislating protection for their ideas and moral values. Infamously, some school boards forbade the teaching of evolution. Later, flexing their muscle, the religious foisted the Hays office on Hollywood, and Prohibition on all the rest of us.

Today, by successfully appealing to the religious, the Republican Party has gained control of the legislative and executive branches of the government, and is funneling billions in federal money to "faith-based" groups, breaching a 200-year-old American tradition of separation of Church and State.

I hope and believe that the pendulum swing to the right may be nearing its apex, and that the electorate will not much longer accept the encroachments of a theocratic state. At least, that's what I pray for.

SLINGING MUD AT SCIENCE

Hendrik Hertzberg

(Excerpted from "Mired" in The New Yorker, August 22)

Looked at one way [President Bush's suggestion that "intelligent design" should be taught in the nation's schools], is an occasion for national shame, albeit with a whiff of the risible: here is our country's leader, the champion-in-chief of educational standards, blandly equating natural science and supernatural supposition as "different schools of thought." Looked at another way, it represents progress of a sort. Twenty-five years ago, Ronald Reagan, then the Republican candidate for President, endorsed the teaching of "creationism"; five years ago, George W. Bush did the same. ...

But I.D. — whose central (and easily refuted) talking point is that certain structures of living things are too intricate to have evolved without the intervention of an “intelligent designer” (and You know who You are) — enjoys virtually no scientific support. ... If the President’s musings on it were an isolated crotchet, they would hardly be worth noting, let alone getting exercised about. But they’re not. They reflect an attitude toward science that has infected every corner of his Administration. From the beginning, the Bush White House has treated science as a nuisance and scientists as an interest group — one that, because it lies outside the governing conservation coalition, need not be indulged. That’s why the White House — sometimes in the service of political Christianity or ideological fetishism, more often in obeisance to baser interests like the petroleum, pharmaceutical, and defense industries — has altered suppressed, or overridden scientific findings on global warming; missile defense; H.I.V./AIDS; pollution from industrial farming and oil drilling; forest management and endangered species; environmental health, including lead and mercury poisoning in children and safety standards for drinking water; and non-abstinence methods of birth control and sexually-transmitted-disease prevention. It has grossly misled the public on the number of stem-cell lines available for research. It has appointed unqualified ideologues to scientific advisory committees and has forced out scientists who persist in pointing out inconvenient facts. ...

In this White House, science’s name is mud. And, unlike those intelligent designers in the sky, all this crowd knows how to do is sling it.

EVANGELICAL SCIENTISTS REFUTE GRAVITY WITH NEW “INTELLIGENT FALLING” THEORY

(Excerpted from The Onion satirical weekly, 8/17/05)

A new controversy over the science curriculum arose in Kansas. Scientists from the Evangelical Center For Faith-Based Reasoning (ECFR) are now asserting that the “theory of gravity” is flawed, and they have responded to it with a new theory of Intelligent Falling.

“Things fall not because they are acted upon by some gravitational force, but because a higher intelligence, ‘God’ if you will, is pushing them down.” According to an ECFR paper published simultaneously this week in the *International Journal Of Science and God’s Word For Teens!*, there are many phenomena that cannot be explained by secular gravity alone, including such mysteries as how angels fly, how Jesus ascended into Heaven, and how Satan fell when cast out of Paradise.

The ECFR insists they are not asking that the theory of gravity be banned from schools, but only that students be offered both sides of the issue “so they can make an informed decision.”

TEACH I.S. (PASTAFARIANISM), TOO

Sarah Boxer

(Excerpted from “But Is There Intelligent Spaghetti Out There?” in The New York Times, August 29, 2005)

Bobby Henderson, a 25-year-old with a physics degree from Oregon State University, had a divine vision. An intelligent god, a Flying Spaghetti Monster, he said, “revealed himself to me in a dream.”

Mr. Henderson posted an open letter to the Kansas board ... demanding equal time in the classroom and threatened a lawsuit. Soon he was flooded with e-mail messages. 95 percent of those were “in favor of teaching Flying Spaghetti Monsterism in schools.” Five percent suggested that he would be going to hell. Lawyers contacted him inquiring how serious he was about a lawsuit against the Kansas board. His answer: “Very.”

One woman wrote in to say that she had “conceived the spirit of our Divine Lord,” the Flying Spaghetti Monster, while eating alone at the Olive Garden. The Spaghetti Monster, she went on, impregnated her and told her, “You shall name Him ... Prego ... and He shall bring in a new era of love.”

KIDDING ASIDE, GUESS WHO’S WINNING THE “TEACH BOTH SIDES” BATTLE?

A poll conducted in July by the Pew Forum reported that nearly two-thirds of Americans say creationism should be taught alongside evolution in public schools. 64 percent said they were open to the idea of teaching creationism in addition to evolution, while 38 percent favored *replacing* evolution with creationism. Teaching both evolution and creationism was favored not only by conservative Christians, but also by majorities of secular respondents, liberal Democrats and those who accept the theory of natural selection, which the Pew Forum called a reflection of “American pragmatism.”

Comment: One might also call it science illiteracy.

MAYOR BLOOMBERG SUCKS UP TO NEW YORK’S RELIGIOUS RIGHT

John Rafferty

Since February, *mohel* Yitzchok Fischer, who is also an Orthodox rabbi, has been under court order not to perform *metzitzah b’peh* — the practice of sucking blood to clean the circumcision wound after the foreskin is removed from the penis of baby boys — while the city’s health department investigates whether he spread Type-1 herpes to at least three infants (he almost certainly did) — one of whom died.

But, as *The New York Times* reported August 26, “the city’s intervention has angered many Orthodox leaders ...” and Health Commissioner Thomas R. Frieden, being (probably) unintentionally funny, said, “This is a very delicate area, so to speak.”

There is nothing funny, however, about the way politicians in New York and New Jersey have caved in to the Orthodox leaders who tell tens of thousands of their followers exactly how and for whom to vote.

“Pressure from Orthodox leaders on the issue,” the Times reported, “led Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and health officials to meet with them on August 11. The mayor’s comments on his radio program the next day seemed meant to soothe all parties and not upset a group that can be a formidable voting bloc: ‘We’re going to do a study, and make sure that everybody is safe and at the same time, it is not the government’s business to tell people how to practice their religion.’”

“The health department, after the meeting, reiterated that it did not intend to ban or regulate oral suction. But Dr. Frieden has said that the city is taking this approach partly because any broad rule would be virtually unenforceable. ... [and that] the department regarded herpes transmission via oral suction as ‘somewhat inevitable to occur as long as this practice continues, if at a very low rate.’”

Yeah, it's only one kid dead so far, and, what the hell, we'll do a study.

Outside the city, the *Times* continued, "the state health department retracted a request it had made to Rabbi Fischer to stop the practice. And in New Jersey, where Rabbi Fischer has done some of his 12,000 circumcisions, the health authorities have been silent."

And how did those Orthodox leaders Bloomberg met with respond to his (forgive me) sucking up?

"The Orthodox Jewish community will continue the practice that has been practiced for over 5,000 years," said Rabbi David Niederman of the United Jewish Organization in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, after the meeting with the mayor. "We do not change. And we will not change."

(Photo of Mayor Bloomberg with 20 ultra-Orthodox Jews) Caption:

Mayor Bloomberg meets with his science and health advisors, who advise him to get lost.

AND IN NEWS FROM THE OTHER GREAT WORLD RELIGIONS ...

Muhammad Bouyeri, who shot Dutch filmmaker — and critic of Islamic intolerance — Theo van Gogh fifteen times, then slit his throat, told the court at his trial: "I take complete responsibility for my actions. I acted purely in the name of my religion."

And even though Pope John Paul II admitted years ago that maybe Galileo had been right and that the earth really does, you know, revolve around the sun, we learn in a review of *Retrying Galileo, 1633-1992*, by Maurice Finocchiaro, in July 1 *Science*, that in a speech delivered at Parma, Italy, on March 15, 1990, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) opined: "At the time of Galileo the Church remained much more faithful to reason than Galileo himself. The process against Galileo was reasonable and just."

POLITICAL QUACKERY Marvin Schissel Reported by John Rafferty

Half a century ago, a young veteran attended Queens College on the G.I. Bill. Full of postwar hope for worldwide peace and progressive politics in partnership with our wartime Soviet allies, he jumped at the chance to take a writing course taught by an editor of the communist monthly, *New Masses*. In one session, the instructor offered two examples of written dialogue, one good, one bad.

"I think they're both pretty good," the young man argued, "why do you say the second one is bad?" His fellow students sneered and the instructor at first ignored the question, but when the vet persisted, the instructor explained as if to an idiot: "The second example does nothing to advance the cause of the working class." Literary-criticism case closed.

The next morning, the same young man, also a music lover, opened his newspaper to discover that Stalin had denounced as "bourgeois" and "reactionary" the music of Sergei Prokofiev, the Soviet Union's — and perhaps the world's — greatest living composer.

So ended Marvin Schissel's dream of benevolent communism, as he woke to the deceits of distorted language — Political Quackery.

On September 8, Dr. Marvin Schissel presented his illustrated lecture on that subject to a full-house audience at the Muhlenberg Library. A retired dentist, frequent contributor to PIQUE and other freethought publications, Chic Schissel is a nationally-known investigator and exposé of medical quackery and fraud.

Indeed, although referring several times to language-twisting by the Bush administration (e.g.: killing environmental protections with a “Clean Air Act”), and explaining how innumeracy (to numbers what illiteracy is to letters) leads to political manipulation (e.g.: an increase in the incidence of frequency of an event from 0.5% to 0.75% is headlined a “50% increase!”), Dr. Schissel’s talk was more about medical than political quackery.

And on that subject — alternative medicine and practices — Dr. Schissel found a few audience members in disagreement with his ideas. The conversational and argumentative ball bounced back and forth in lively exchange several times, and continued when fifteen of us removed across the street to El Quijote restaurant for dinner that should have been — but wasn’t — as full-flavored as our arguments.

***LOLITA* “BOOK REPORT” NEXT MONTH**

Because of scheduling difficulties, this issue of PIQUE was finalized before the September 22 Book Club meeting on, and discussion of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. A Donna Marxer report on the evening will appear in November.