

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April, 2006

“Welcome sweet Springtime, we greet thee with joy!” We mark the season with Easter mockeries, consider a new membership idea, lower the bar on Limbo, compare Democritus with what passes for American democracy now, and entertain a defense of the American healthcare “system.” And we wonder: are we tripping over our own tolerance in the “cartoon wars,” afraid to criticize those who criticize (and abhor) our humanism? Stand up for relativism! — starting immediately below.

BELIEVING IN DOUBT

Austin Dacey

(Reprinted from the Op-Ed page of the NYTimes, 2/3/06. Dr. Dacey is Executive Director of CFI-MetroNY)

Just before he became pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger warned that Western culture was sliding toward “a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” In his first encyclical, “Deus Caritas Est” (“God Is Love”), Pope Benedict XVI does not use the word “relativism,” but he does fault modern people for missing the transcendent meaning of love and instead caring for one another just because we feel like it.

Is that relativism, and if so, is it wrong? Some varieties of relativism may be confused, or even pernicious. But others are essential to any serious, well-developed worldview – even the pope’s.

Pope Benedict’s worry is that individual autonomy has been elevated above moral absolutes. But ethicists have long distinguished between what they call defeasible and indefeasible moral claims. Defeasible claims are rules of thumb that nevertheless can be overruled for countervailing moral reasons.

Surely many moral duties are defeasible, and in that sense relative. We all recognize that although lying is typically wrong, under certain circumstances—to protect someone’s life, for example—it is justifiable. Yet the fact that one moral claim can sometimes give way for another does not mean that the first claim is groundless, any more than traffic laws are invalidated because ambulances can run red lights.

This is a point the pope can appreciate. In November, he barred those who “practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies, or support the so-called gay culture” from entering the seminary or being ordained. At the same time, the Vatican directive enjoined respect for gays and left open to interpretation the distinction between “deep-seated” and “transitory” tendencies, which has led some to speculate that it would permit the ordination of a sexually mature, celibate homosexual.

Most significantly, it does nothing about current gay priests. If homosexuality is, as the church’s catechism holds, “objectively disordered,” why not an outright ban? One reason might be the priest shortage in America. An objectively disordered priesthood is better than none. Non-absolute standards, anyone?

The pope has used the term “relativism” to describe not only non-absolute standards, but also uncertain ones. The alternative to certainty, however, is not nihilism but the recognition of fallibility, the idea that even a very reasonable belief is not beyond question. If that’s all relativism means, then it is hardly the enemy of truth or morality.

Accepting that we are fallible doesn’t keep us from thinking that we’re right. It just keeps us from thinking that we couldn’t possibly be wrong. And that’s a good thing. The ability to revise beliefs in light of new information is part of what makes having a mind worthwhile. It worked for a young German theologian who (according to his biographer, John Allen) in the late 1960’s began a transformation from Vatican II reformer to enforcer of the faith. Even the church itself has been known to self-correct every once in a while (see Galileo and Darwin).

What Pope Benedict calls relativism are actually the values of secular liberalism: individual autonomy, equal rights and freedom of conscience. But it is easy to conflate what liberals affirm with the way they affirm it. Liberalism tells us that our way of life is up to us (within limits), not that the truth of liberalism is up to us. It entails that we tolerate even claims that we doubt, not that we doubt even the claims of tolerance. Many liberals themselves are guilty of this confusion, which can manifest as all-values-are-equal relativism (especially common among freshmen in ethics classes, at least until the instructor informs them that because all grades are equally valid, everyone will be receiving a D for the course).

True, secular values can turn a civilization inside out. In post-Christian Europe, entire nations have been plunged into endemic health, skyrocketing education and hopelessly low rates of violent crime. Indeed, it’s hard to build a decent society without secular values, and “Deus Caritas Est” acknowledges this: “A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the church,” where politics is “the sphere of the autonomous use of reason.” The role of the church is to “bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good,” not to “impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith.”

Perhaps a future encyclical will concentrate on the truly harmful kind of relativism. This is the misguided multiculturalism that keeps Western liberals from criticizing the oppression of women, religious minorities and apostates in Islamic societies for fear of being accused of Islamophobia. In such cases we should not shrink from the ideals of autonomy and equality but affirm them openly for what they are: objectively defensible principles of conscience.

The important contrast is not between absolutism and relativism, as the pontiff would have it, but between secular values and their traditional religious alternatives. He can accuse secularists of believing in the wrong things. But that’s not the same as believing in nothing.

EUROPE’S MUSLIMS SHOULD BE GRATEFUL FOR EUROPE’S ATHEISTS

Slavoj Zizek

(Reprinted from “Defenders of the Faith,” in the NYTimes, 3/12/06.)

For centuries we have been told that without religion we are no more than egotistic animals fighting for our share, our only morality that of a pack of wolves; only religion, it is said, can elevate us to a higher spiritual level. Today, when religion is emerging as the wellspring of murderous violence around the world, assurances that Christian or Muslim

or Hindu fundamentalists are only abusing and perverting the noble spiritual messages of their creeds ring increasingly hollow. What about restoring the dignity of atheism, one of Europe's greatest legacies and perhaps our only chance for peace?

More than a century ago, in "The Brothers Karamazov" and other works, Dostoyevsky warned against the dangers of godless moral nihilism, arguing in essence that if God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted. The French philosopher André Glucksmann even applied Dostoyevsky's critique of godless nihilism to 9/11, as the title of his book, "Dostoyevsky in Manhattan," suggests.

This argument couldn't have been more wrong: the lesson of today's terrorism is that if God exists, then everything, including blowing up thousands of innocent bystanders, is permitted – at least to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, since, clearly, a direct link to God justifies the violation of any merely human constraints and considerations. In short, fundamentalists have become no different than the "godless" Stalinist Communists, to whom everything was permitted since they perceived themselves as direct instruments of their divinity, the Historical Necessity of Progress Toward Communism.

During the Seventh Crusade, led by St. Louis, Yves le Breton reported how he once encountered an old woman who wandered down the street with a dish full of fire in her right hand and a bowl full of water in her left hand. Asked why she carried the two bowls, she answered that with the fire she would burn up Paradise until nothing remained of it, and with the water she would put out the fires of Hell until nothing remained of them: "Because I want no one to do good in order to receive the reward of Paradise, or from fear of hell; but solely out of love for God." Today, this properly Christian ethical stance survives mostly in atheism.

Fundamentalists do what they perceive as good deeds in order to fulfill God's will and to earn salvation; atheists do them simply because it is the right thing to do. Is this also not our most elementary experience of morality? When I do a good deed, I do so not with an eye toward gaining God's favor; I do it because if I did not, I could not look at myself in the mirror. A moral deed is by definition its own reward. David Hume, a believer, made this point in a very poignant way, when he wrote that the only way to show true respect for God is to act morally while ignoring God's existence.

Two years ago, Europeans were debating whether the preamble of the European Constitution should mention Christianity as a key component of the European legacy. As usual, a compromise was worked out, a reference in general terms to the "religious inheritance" of Europe. But where was modern Europe's most precious legacy, that of atheism? What makes modern Europe unique is that it is the first and only civilization in which atheism is a fully legitimate option, not an obstacle to any public post.

Atheism is a European legacy worth fighting for, not least because it creates a safe public space for believers. Consider the debate that raged in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, my home country, as the constitutional controversy simmered: should Muslims (mostly immigrant workers from the old Yugoslav republics) be allowed to build a mosque? While conservatives opposed the mosque for cultural, political and even architectural reasons, the liberal weekly journal *Mladina* was consistently outspoken in its support for the mosque, in keeping with its concern for the rights of those from other former Yugoslav republics.

Not surprisingly, given its liberal attitudes, *Mladina* was also one of the few Slovenian publications to reprint the infamous caricatures of Muhammad. And, conversely, those who displayed the greatest “understanding” for the violent Muslim protests those cartoons caused were also the ones who regularly expressed their concern for the fate of Christianity in Europe.

These weird alliances confront Europe’s Muslims with a difficult choice: the only political force that does not reduce them to second-class citizens and allows them the space to express their religious identity are the “godless” atheist liberals, while those closest to their religious social practice, their Christian mirror-image, are their greatest political enemies. The paradox is that Muslims’ only real allies are not those who first published the caricatures for shock value, but those who, in support of the ideal of freedom of expression, reprinted them.

While a true atheist has no need to boost his own stance by provoking believers with blasphemy, he also refuses to reduce the problem of the Muhammad caricatures to one of respect for other’s beliefs. Respect for other’s beliefs as the highest value can mean only one of two things: either we treat the other in a patronizing way and avoid hurting him in order not to ruin his illusions, or we adopt the relativist stance of multiple “regimes of truth,” disqualifying as violent imposition any clear insistence on truth.

What, however, about submitting Islam—together with all other religions—to a respectful, but for that reason no less ruthless critical analysis? This, and only this, is the way to show a true respect for Muslims: to treat them as serious adults responsible for their beliefs.

WHO’S AFRAID TO CRITICIZE ISLAM?

Gerald Traufetter

(Excerpted from salon.com, 2/07/06, originally published in Germany’s Der Spiegel)

Somali-born, ex-Muslim Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a member of the Dutch Parliament, is one of the most sharp-tongued critics of political Islam – and a target of Islamic fanatics. Her provocative film “Submission” led to the assassination of director Theo van Gogh in November 2004. The murderer left a death threat against Hirsi Ali pinned to van Gogh’s corpse with a knife. ... In an interview, she spoke about the upheaval over the publication of controversial Danish cartoons, arguing that if Europe doesn’t stand up to extremists, a culture of self-censorship and fear of criticizing Islam—one that she says already pervades Holland—will spread across Europe. ...

Was apologizing for the cartoons the wrong thing to do?

Once again, the West pursued the principle of first turning one cheek, then the other. In fact, it’s already a tradition. In 1980, privately owned British broadcaster ITV aired a documentary about the stoning of a Saudi Arabian princess who had allegedly committed adultery. The government in Riyadh intervened and the British government issued an apology. We saw the same kowtowing response in 1987 when Dutch comedian Rudi Carrell derided the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini in a comedy skit. In 2000, a play about the youngest wife of the prophet Mohammed, titled “Aisha,” was canceled before it ever opened in Rotterdam. Then there was the van Gogh murder and now the cartoons. We are constantly apologizing, and we don’t notice how much abuse we’re taking. Meanwhile, the other side doesn’t give an inch. ...

But shouldn't Muslims, like any religious community, also be able to protect themselves against slander and insult?

That's exactly the reflex I was just talking about: offering the other cheek. Not a day passes, in Europe and elsewhere, when radical imams aren't preaching hatred in their mosques. They call Jews and Christians inferior, and we say they're just exercising their freedom of speech. When will the Europeans realize that the Islamists don't allow their critics the same right? After the West prostrates itself, they'll be more than happy to say that Allah has made the infidels spineless. ...

What will be the upshot of the storm of protests against the cartoons?

We could see the same thing happening that has happened in the Netherlands, where writers, journalists and artists have felt intimidated ever since the van Gogh murder. Everyone is afraid to criticize Islam. Significantly, "Submission" still isn't being shown in theaters.

UPDATES ON THE CARTOON WARS

Take That, Infidels!

"Iranians love Danish pastries," according to an A.P. dispatch of February 16. But, taking a cue from idiot right-wing U.S. legislators who renamed French fries "Freedom Fries" on the congressional cafeteria menu, Tehran's bakers have renamed their flaky sweets "Roses of the Prophet Muhammad."

Ed: You can't make these things up.

Think It Can't Happen Here?

On March 29, an NYU-approved Objectivist student group (think Ayn Rand) held a panel, "Unveiling the Danish Cartoons," at which the cartoons were to be shown and discussed. They weren't.

The university administration had prior knowledge of the event, had even been involved in its planning. But after Muslim groups protested and threatened demonstrations, the administration, citing "security concerns," gave the panel organizers a choice: close the panel to the public, or don't show the cartoons.

And ...

On March 31 the Borders and Waldenbooks stores announced they will not stock the April-May issue of *Free Inquiry* (published by the Council for Secular Humanism – that's us!) that includes four of the cartoons.

And just for fun ...

London, March 6: 15,000 atheists rioted here today after a blank sheet of paper was found on a cartoonist's desk.

EASTER GETS VERY WEIRD INDEED

(Excerpted from Salon.com Audiofile, "Easter gets very weird indeed," 1/27/06; and mediaguardian.co.uk 1/26/06, "Jesus Sings 'Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now.'")

The BBC plans to mark the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ this Easter with a televised hour-long live procession through the streets of Manchester, England, on Good Friday, using "popular music from the cream of Manchester bands" in "a contemporary retelling of the last few hours of Jesus' life."

Highlights, according to *The Guardian*, will include Jesus singing "the legendary Joy Division anthem 'Love Will Tear Us Apart'" before "dueting" with "his arch-betrayer

Judas on the New Order hit ‘Blue Monday.’” Mary Magdalene will then “sing the Buzzcocks hit ‘Ever Fallen in Love (With Someone You Shouldn’t Have)?’ accompanied by a string band” while “the climax of the event sees Jesus sing the Smiths’ classic song ‘Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now’ as he is being flayed by Roman soldiers. He will then come face to face with his Roman prosecutor Pontius Pilate, with the two of them singing a duet of the Oasis hit ‘Wonderwall.’”

BBC3 insisted the event was inspired by “the way Bach and other composers fused music and the Passion story.” The “contemporary retelling” of Jesus’ last hours will begin with the messiah singing the Robbie Williams hit “Angels,” which will mark his procession into Jerusalem.

In this case, Jerusalem will be represented by Manchester’s gay and red light area near Canal Street. The march will be followed by members of the public who will be encouraged to join in the singing of relevant anthems, which include the M People hit “Search for a Hero Inside Yourself.”

The crowd will carry a large white cross and the public will also be asked to bring a symbol of their own burden – “something they are personally concerned about.” The crowd will be joined by Bez – the entertainer famous for shaking his maracas on stage with the Happy Mondays. He will be accompanied by former Stone Roses frontman Ian Brown and Black Grape saxophonist Martin Slattery. The event will end with the resurrected Jesus singing an as yet undisclosed song from the top of Manchester’s town hall.

Ed: I repeat, you can’t make these things up.

A THOUGHT FOR EASTER

Stephen Colbert

My own church, the Catholic Church, is against capital punishment, which I think is hypocritical, because if it wasn’t for the death penalty, they wouldn’t even have a religion. – *“The Colbert Report,” 12/1/05*

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE ...

John Rafferty

Consider Mitchell Pashkin, a lawyer who sued the town of Huntington, Long Island, last December, saying a nativity scene and menorah on the town’s village green violated his First Amendment rights. “The message of Peace on Earth is a message specifically connected to Christmas and to Jesus Christ,” he said. “The presence of a menorah appears as nothing more than a token attempt to be inclusive to the Jewish population.”

Sounds like one of us, right? But before we hand him any Hero of Humanism awards, consider another of Mr. Pashkin’s causes, as reported in the January 19 edition of the *Daily News*.

Last April Pashkin was outraged that the Flower Hill Elementary School bake sale—to raise money for tsunami orphans—was scheduled during Passover. In a letter to the sale’s organizer about how the sale would alienate Jewish students, he wrote, “A bake sale or a pizza party during Passover makes children celebrating Passover feel badly (sic) and out of place. The children think, ‘Why do they have to do it during Passover when I can’t have it? Why? Why do I have to be different? Why?’”

The bake sale was cancelled – no reason given, but one assumes the school board wanted no part of a court fight with a lawyer with attitude who can also imitate a whiny little kid.

When asked to explain his hypocrisy—the town may not celebrate Christmas but must observe Passover?—by a *News* reporter who questioned him about the anti-bake sale letters that he signed and that were printed on his firm’s letterhead, Mr. Pashkin explained, “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR BUILDING SHSNY MEMBERSHIP

Flash Light

Considering the recent unanimous Supreme Court decision that the Brazil-based sect, *O Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao do Vegetal*, known as UDV, can use *hoasca*, a sacramental tea that contains the hallucinogen DMT, it occurred to me that it might help attendance at our meetings if we could find a lawyer willing to argue that SHSNY is entitled to the same religious freedom recently accorded UDV.

The argument would go something like this:

1. As secular humanists we have been unconvinced by all logical arguments attempting to prove that God exists. However, we recognize that some religious leaders were persuaded to their beliefs not by logical argument but by “divine revelation,” such as Saul’s encounter on the road to Damascus (*Acts 26:12*).
2. Although such revelations have not heretofore appeared to us, we understand that ingesting hallucinogens such as DMT can produce a variety of hallucinations. The argument before the Supreme Court that UDV required such hallucinogens to commune with God has made us aware that we have not heretofore had recourse to such medicinal aids for producing divine revelations.
3. Being logically minded and wanting to scientifically consider all the possibilities pertaining to our religious beliefs, we are petitioning the court to be able to exercise the same religious freedom granted to UDV: to use such hallucinogens at our meetings in order to experimentally determine if they are indeed what we have been missing that would enable us to see God and believe in Him.
4. We are sure the Bush administration would not want to stand in the way of anyone finding God.

Therefore ... we request that all organized groups of secular humanists, atheists and agnostics be accorded this religious freedom forthwith.

In an informal poll, only 68 of 200 Anglican priests polled could name all Ten Commandments, but half said they believed in space aliens. — *ThisIsTrue.com*

TO HELL WITH LIMBO

John Rafferty

“Children who die without baptism go into limbo, where they do not enjoy God, but they do not suffer either.” – Pope Pius X, 1905

It was interesting and amusing for this ex-Catholic (do I qualify as an ‘ex-Catholic’ if I never was one as an adult?) to read in the Times of December 30 that:

This month, 30 top theologians met at the Vatican to discuss, among other quandaries, the problem of what happens to babies who die without baptism. They do not like the word for it, but what they were really doing, as advisers to Pope Benedict XVI, was finally disposing of limbo—a concept that was never official church doctrine but has been an enduring medieval theory of a blissful state among the departed, somehow different from both heaven and hell.

I was introduced to the fanciful conception of Limbo at the age of six or seven during “Religious Instruction,” a weekly two-hour indoctrination at the local Catholic school for infidel children, like me, who attended public school. We were “excused” from P.S. 127 at 2:00 p.m. on Wednesdays and marched three blocks to Saint Gabriel’s — a certainly unconstitutional promotion of religion, but never mind; in New York in the 40’s every politician kissed the ring of Francis Cardinal Spellman.

In the spotless classrooms of Saint Gabriel’s we were treated like Untouchables and rote-drilled in the verities printed between the blue covers of the Baltimore Catechism (“*Who made the world? God made the world. Who is God? God is the creator of all things ...*” etc.).

On one of those interminable afternoons (the kids back at “real school” were doing Art—drawing Spitfires and P-38s shooting down Stukas and Messerschmidts) the nun who drew Infidel Duty with my class announced that we were about to learn about Limbo, and I swear she smiled. I’ve long since forgotten her name—something like Sister Passiva Aggressiva—but I know she knew she was about to scare the bejesus out of us.

Limbo, she explained, was where babies who weren’t baptized wound up. They’d never committed a sin, but they’d never go to Heaven. They’d spend eternity in, well, Limbo. And, Sister P.A. emphasized, it could happen to any baby, in any family, unlucky enough to die before a priest got to the bedside.

My family? It could have happened to *my* baby sister? Could have happened to *me*? Just rotten luck, and eternity in Heaven is shot to Hell – well, almost to Hell. You see, the whole point of Religious Instruction—any religion, any instruction—was to convince us that if we followed the rules, did what we were told, and not only gave no backtalk but didn’t even backthink, we’d wind up in Heaven. We were taught that the whole thing was in our hands – the free will thing, which was tough love, but at least fair.

And now, just because Augustine, Aquinas and the rest of that lot couldn’t logically reconcile the imperative of baptism for salvation with neonatal innocence, eternity was a crapshoot for millions of newborns, and the world was a much scarier place. *What*, a seven-year-old mind wondered, was God *thinking*?

Later, of course, long after I had ceased to care, I learned that Limbo was even more complicated. The Church’s logicians, inheritors of Augustine and Aquinas, constructed exquisite rationales: they found room in Limbo for the just “Fathers” like Moses and Aristotle who had had the misfortune to live before the truth of Christianity was revealed;

they tortured language with their explanations of the fate of hundreds of millions who lived after Christ, but in Africa or Siberia or the “New World,” and so never heard of Him. And now, since updated Catholic doctrine says every fertilized human egg is a living human being [See “*Trick Question*,” below, Ed.], Limbo has become the eternal home of untold billions of microscopic “people” whose eight- or sixteen-celled “bodies” lost the race to the uterine wall.

Where are they all going to go when Limbo goes?

What are those “30 top theologians from around the world” gathered at the Vatican going to say?

Oops? Our bad? Do over?

The Church, trying for 1600 years (since Augustine) to reconcile two incompatible articles of doctrine, keeps stretching reason out of any recognizable shape to first concoct, then amend, expand, interpret something that didn’t make sense half a century ago to a seven-year-old, and that just keeps getting weirder and weirder.

The problem, Aquinas (and Stephen J. Gould) notwithstanding, is that religion and reason are basically, fundamentally, essentially – *always* – incompatible.

A “TRICK QUESTION” ON ABORTION

If you believe life begins at conception and you’re forced to choose, do you rescue a two-year-old child or five blastulas in a Petri dish? – *salon.com*, 3/8/06.

SAVING HEALTH CARE

Wayne G. Whitmore, M.D.

Re: “An Improved Healthcare System,” by Martin Reichgut, M.D., PIQUE, March, 2006.

I cringe every time I hear a physician get excited or resignedly wish for a single payer system as the solution to a perceived healthcare “crisis” in our country. More government regulation and a coercive, intrusive single-payer system is not the answer to providing healthcare in our country. As a full time practicing physician (and also as a patient), I can sympathize and have had my share of frustration dealing with what I perceive as a poorly responsive and restrictive healthcare insurance market with perverse incentives. No system will ever be perfect, but the “free market” (that so-called “faceless, inexorable, profit-motivated market from which there is no appeal”) has repeatedly shown itself to be the most efficient way to maximize services and goods, and it is the only way to preserve our liberty.

Our country was founded on the principles of liberty (with enumerated individual rights which included freedom from the tyranny of government – the main reason we fought for their independence), personal responsibility, free enterprise, the right to private property and the rule of law. Most people think of us as a democracy, but we are really a constitutional republic with democratically elected representatives who are supposed to uphold our Constitution. Our founding fathers understood human nature (which, by the way, has not changed much in the past few thousand years, let alone from the time of our country’s founding). They crafted a constitution with checks and balances to limit and control the power of the government.

Even if the majority of us want something, we are not supposed to be able to impose it on other people unless we can get a super-majority of our legislators to amend our Constitution. I would include in this list of no-no’s, forcing all of us to pay for someone

else's health care through a tax. Of course, thanks to FDR (Social Security) and LBJ we've already trampled over the Constitution and instituted a tax for a national health care plan (Medicare), so in fact it seems that our Constitution has become an historical document we can pay lip service to when it's convenient. Whether one perceives this as an infringement on our liberty (by being enslaved to work for the benefit of others) or as a necessity justified by the "general welfare" clause in our Constitution (and the beneficial transformation of our government to a European style of socialism), is the fundamental issue at play. Despite so-called "Progressive Era" thinking on this issue, entitlement programs (although not conceived of at the time of our country's founding) are certainly of such a subjugating and substantial tax burden on our population as to warrant a constitutional amendment. It becomes obvious with a modicum of thought that the "progressive" interpretation of this "general welfare" clause can be used to justify anything that the majority of legislators pandering to their constituents want (i.e. a true democracy or "mob rule"). This is antithetical and defeats the whole purpose of our Constitution.

Healthcare statistics can be manipulated to demonstrate almost anything and opinion polls are of questionable relevance in the politically charged issue of government's role in health care. Just as politically charged, though, is the perception of whether or not there really is a healthcare "crisis" in our country. The fact that 15 percent of our population lack healthcare insurance can be perceived as a serious problem, but perhaps before we provide healthcare to everyone, we should provide adequate food and shelter. These would seem to me to be much more important for human well-being, and would go a long way toward improving health in the poor population and in reducing the cost of their health care due to poor nutrition, poor hygiene, and substandard living conditions. My point here is not that our government needs to do these things, but that perceived human needs (heating and plumbing in one's shelter, and a refrigerator to keep food in, etc., etc.) are potentially unlimited, and as our unconstitutional entitlement programs have already shown us, government (and therefore our elected representatives) has no inclination to be fiscally responsible in their rush to pander to voters' desire for more entitlements. The government is not accountable and has never been honest when it created any of its social entitlement programs (politicians of the times knowing full well with expert advice, that all these programs were essentially pyramid schemes from the start that would allow immediate benefits, but would burden future generations—well after these politicians were out of office, of course—with huge, unfair, and unpayable financial obligations).

Life is a struggle despite fairy tales to the contrary. Yes, it is more of a struggle for some people than for others. But economic inequality is the price we pay for liberty. We in the U.S. are fortunate to have a country that is rich in natural resources. We also have a diverse population of industrious people from all over the world. But, most importantly, it is our system of free enterprise that generates most of the world's medications, its sophisticated medical devices, and the majority of the world's best-trained physicians (who train other physicians around the world). It is individual citizens of the U.S. pursuing their own self-interest that generate this particular wealth of knowledge, goods and services: Our government role should be to facilitate this and not to take it over. We can all help other people less fortunate than ourselves (and it is in our nature to do so as

science and past history have shown, both before and after the institution of government entitlement programs) by donating our material wealth or personal aid to charity.

As physicians, we can provide our services as teachers and caregivers without expecting remuneration (which I believe the great majority of physicians, including myself, do some of the time). But TANSTAAFL (“There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch”), and as much as we would like to see everyone happy in our country, it’s not going to happen with any system. Creating a single payer health care system is a back door approach to instituting socialism and a command (or coercive) government-run system for a large segment of our economy. It would inevitably stifle progress and development in the healthcare industry and, as investment in the infrastructure dwindled over time (as so well demonstrated by the socialist Canadian health care system), the quality would deteriorate.

The hubris of the intelligentsia in our government and at our leading academic institutions, thinking that they can do a better job by running and setting up a “system,” is belied by the example of repeated failures in the past and the current stagnation of socialist systems in place today. They all feed off the medical progress here in the U.S., by benefiting from new medications, new medical devices, and new techniques developed because of our free enterprise system. Of course, the intelligentsia thinks that the average American is too stupid to make the complex decisions regarding their healthcare, and that having a paternalistic system run by the government is needed to protect the consumer. It is true that healthcare decisions can be extremely complex, but if the market were totally free, these paternalists could start informative organizations to fulfill this perceived gap in knowledge. Abuse of “contracts” between businesses, insurance companies, physicians, etc., and their patients or clients, can always be enforced as they should be by our legal system. We have good laws to prevent fraud, theft, extortion, coercion, assault and murder, and a legal system already in place which is up to the task! We can do our best only if we protect our liberty (both personal and economic) and a single payer coercive system will just be another entitlement program to send us down Hayek’s “road to serfdom.”

CONFUCIUS AND DEMOCRITUS ON GOVERNMENT

Samuel Milligan

In this time of tax cuts for the very rich and the erosion of social services for the poor, it is instructive to consider the following account:

T’an Kung relates that Confucius, traveling with his disciples, came upon a woman weeping and wailing beside a grave. The master asked as to the cause of her extreme grief. “Alas,” she said, “My father-in-law was killed here by a man-eating tiger. After that, my husband and my son were both killed here by the same tiger.”

“But then,” said Confucius, “why do you not move from this place?”

“If I go somewhere else, I may find a government that oppresses the poor,” the woman explained. “Here, the government is not oppressive.”

Turning to his disciples, Confucius said, “Remember that. A bad government is more to be feared than a man-eating tiger.”

Responsible citizens must keep an eye on government, lest it become oppressive. Stobaeus (*IV I:43*) preserved the following from Democritus: “One should attach the

very greatest importance to good government ... for the polis being well run is the greatest good. Everything is contained in that. If good government is preserved, all is preserved. If good government is destroyed, all is destroyed.”

UPDATES IN THE RIGHT-WING WAR ON REASON

Science:

George C. Deutsch, the 24-year-old NASA public relations appointee whose credentials for the job were a degree from Texas A&M and work in the Bush re-election campaign, and who, as we reported last month in PIQUE: 1) insisted that NASA scientists tone down warnings about global warming; 2) forbade them giving interviews to (“most liberal”) National Public Radio; 3) demanded that the word “theory” be added to every mention of the Big Bang because it was “not proven fact; it is opinion,” adding, “It is not NASA’s place, nor should it be, to make a declaration such as this about the existence of the universe that discounts intelligent design by a creator” ... has resigned.

Seems his degree was as bogus as his science.

The Environment:

President Bush nominated Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne, who raised \$86,000 from the timber, mining, and energy industries during his last campaign, to oversee the Department of the Interior.

And ...

UNESCO met to discuss how to preserve world heritage sites from the effects of global warming; the United States representative said the organization had no brief to discuss an unproven theory.

Ethics in Government:

Representative John Boehner (R., Ohio), whose political-action committee took money from Jack Abramoff but did not return it after Abramoff was indicted, and who in 1995 handed out checks from tobacco-company lobbyists on the House floor, was elected via instant runoff voting to replace Tom DeLay as House Majority Leader. The Republican Party, Boehner said, “must act swiftly to restore the trust between Congress and the American people.”

Then, before DeLay’s ex-deputy chief of staff pleaded guilty to corruption charges and DeLay himself decided he’d better resign, House Republicans welcomed him back to Congress by awarding him a seat on the Appropriations subcommittee that oversees the Justice Department, which is investigating Abramoff, including his connections to DeLay.