

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York
December, 2006

Ho, ho, ho. 'Tis the season (Q: Did the first "Buy This Crap Quick" Christmas commercials really start running the day after Halloween? A: No, a week before.) to take a long, learned look at the first Noel. In the spirit of the season (overabundance) we have a year-end miscellany, but we also ask the Big Questions: Is America a theocracy? Is religious indoctrination child abuse? Who should win our Dumbth Award? But let's begin with our reaction to the November elections: Ha, ha, ha. — *JR*

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK, NEW JERSEY, AND CONNECTICUT

John Rafferty

We published a "Secular Crib Sheet for Voting this November" in October PIQUE, listing the 0-100% ratings for 29 congressmen and women and all six senators (only three were up for re-election) in our NY-NJ-CT SHSNY neighborhood, based on ten measured votes on issues of importance to secularists (discrimination by the Boy Scouts and "faith-based" organizations, proselytizing at the Air Force Academy, etc.). So, how did the election turn out for those 32 politicians up for re-election?

In secular-interests terms, all of the (generally) good guys won (as did Bush-toady Joe Lieberman), and three of the (altogether) bad guys were dumped. Not bad.

All the New York congressmen in our neighborhood with Secular Coalition approval ratings of 60% or better were re-elected, several with 80% of the vote or better. And while Republicans King of the 3rd Congressional district (0% Coalition approval rating) and Fossella of the 13th (20%) were re-elected (albeit with much smaller majorities than in 2004), Kelly of the 19th (30%) was sent packing. And as you may have heard, Senator Hilary Clinton (100%) was re-elected.

Representatives in five neighboring New Jersey districts had Secular Coalition ratings of 80 or 90 percent; all were re-elected easily. Unfortunately, so were Republicans Frelinghuysen of the 11th (30%) and Ferguson of the 7th (0%), although the latter just did squeak in. Senator Menendez (100%) held on to his seat.

In Connecticut, Democrat DeLauro of the 3rd (90%) was re-elected, as was Republican Shays of the 4th (60% – and he's the only remaining Republican congressman from the six New England states), but Republican Johnson of the 5th (50%) was drowned in the anti-Bush tide, while Senator Joe Lieberman (60%) managed to keep both his faces above water.

Elsewhere, John Jacob—the Utah congressional candidate who announced that the Devil was trying to keep him out of Congress (PIQUE, September: "Why We Live in New York #46")—very narrowly lost the Republican primary to incumbent Chris Cannon, who won easily on November 7. From Georgia's 3rd district, Lynn Westmoreland's sole accomplishment in two years in Congress was a suggestion that the Ten Commandments be displayed in the House and Senate. He was subsequently

humiliated on Comedy Channel's "The Colbert Report" when he could (and only with difficulty) name just three of the commandments (PIQUE, August: "Why We Live in New York #8"). But he was re-elected by 68 percent of his Bible Belt constituents.

Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina, who advocates teaching "intelligent design" in the public schools because evolution, "the idea of there being a, you know, a little mud hole and two mosquitoes get together and the next thing you know you have a human being is completely at odds with, you know, one of the laws of thermodynamics, which is the law of, of, in essence, destruction" (PIQUE, May: "Why We Live in New York #57"), was re-elected by 56% of the good—and presumably educated—people of the Palmetto State.

**BUMBLING THROUGH HISTORY
WITH TOO MANY PREACHERS**
A review of Kevin Phillips' *American Theocracy*
Conrad Claborne

The subtitle of *American Theocracy*, our SHSNY Book Club selection for October, is "The peril and politics of radical religion, oil and borrowed money in the 21st Century." You could also say it chronicles the end of U.S. hegemony. It appears that we are on or near the brink of our collapse.

This book, so dense with information that I hope it becomes a text for future college and university courses, is in three parts: "Oil and American Supremacy"; "Too Many Preachers (the role of radical religion); and "Borrowed Prosperity" (about our soaring debt). We all now know the general history of Part I; it is Part II on which I will dwell. But I strongly urge everyone to study Part III, because we need to fully understand the role of debt in our downfall, and to understand Phillips' argument against "financialization."

A country, he says, must have a healthy domestic manufacturing sector if it is to have a healthy democracy, a healthy middle class, and be viable. We have all heard arguments from the owners of industry that it is better for their shareholders for them to ship manufacturing overseas to benefit from lower wages. The problem is that this eviscerates a country, as business makes finance, rather than production, its core activity.

Phillips builds strong arguments that colonial Spain, then the Dutch and the British, followed this path to their downfall. The countries that go against this grain are "the Germans, Japanese, and Swiss [who] do this with workforce wages and benefits and industrial-production costs as high as or higher than those in the United States. ... Needless to say, all three countries are net creditor nations, enjoy strong current-accounts surpluses, and have citizens who achieve relatively high savings rates. During the quarter century after 1980, while the U.S. economy was undergoing financialization, the Organization for Economic Cooperation credited all three with stronger growth rates than the United States. One would not guess that from American media coverage; 'Old Europe,' in particular, is supposedly verging on economic palsy."

One of the things we hear regularly is that Americans have been chosen by God for a special national mission. Phillips points out that the Spanish, Dutch and British, too, believed this before us.

"Too Many Preachers" describes how radicalized religion is "as American as apple pie." "Since at least 1776 the upstart sects have grown [rapidly] as mainline American

denominations have declined. ... Yesteryear's supposed fringes are taking over American Protestant-ism's main square" ... and "economic conservatives often warm to sects in which a preoccupation with personal salvation turns lower-income persons away from distracting visions of economic and social reform." ...

"Conversion on the part of adults—the deep personal experience of being 'born again' in Christ—is also far more important in the United States, with its emphasis on individual choice and personal experience, than elsewhere." During the last four decades of the 20th Century the Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches, the United Church of Christ, and the Methodists all lost substantial membership, while the Southern Baptist Convention, the Mormons, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of God had huge increases in worshipers. These changes "proved to be harbingers of broader political and societal changes."

Phillips argues that the role of religion in both American politics and war has been widely underestimated and reported. He examines the "historical and political dynamics of the three principal civil wars among English-speaking peoples—the English Revolution of the 1640's, the American Revolution of 1775-1783, and the 1861-1865 War Between the States—and shows religion as a major factor, often the decisive one, in how individuals and communities chose sides. "Indeed we still see the major Protestant denominations split along geographic lines. ... In the case of the Confederate flag-waving Southern Baptist Convention, the consequences ... still resonate."

This leads Phillips into a long discussion of America viewing itself as a chosen people and nation under God's guidance. This belief is deeply held by the Southern Baptist Convention, which, Phillips argues at length, has taken over the Republican Party. The problem is that this army of voters does not believe in the role of traditional government, they believe instead that we should be preparing for the second coming of Christ with what little time we have left before Armageddon. "The belief that society can be reformed only by saving souls, not by embracing government welfare or manipulation, has become a tenet of evangelical religion."

This block of voters strongly supports President George W. Bush because "Bush positions himself as a prophet, speaking for God." The divide in current U.S. politics is a divide between those who believe "there are human solutions to our problems [and those who believe in] faith-based solutions."

What's next?

Phillips compares us to Europe. "Few historians have paid much attention to the loss of faith [in Europe], but one explanation may be safely ventured. Organized religion did not profit from the great disillusionment when the various chosen peoples turned out not to be so ... But when the Armageddon of 1914-1918 brought forty million deaths instead of Christ's return, the embarrassment was not limited to flag-bedecked Anglican churches or nonconformist chapels that had joined in the parade. Religion in general seemed to have failed, and British church attendance shrank – and then shrank again. It is not hard to imagine something happening in the United States as two or three decades of cynicism claim religious as well as economic and political victims. Evangelism under George W. Bush probably expanded to levels of adherence and belief that it will be unable to sustain ... [but] that will certainly not happen overnight, because the end-times imagery of the early twenty-first century—from tsunamis and terrible hurricanes and the AIDS crisis to the rise of Iraq, followed by China, the trauma of oil, and even financial panic—lends

itself too well to end-times explanation to dissipate in the face of anything less than a World War I equivalent.”

“Unfortunately, the history of past leading world economic powers is that they have not been able to throw up the sort of leadership needed to reverse the tides involved. ... The lesson of the past is that timely reforms do not emerge, and deep, unanswerable national issues generate weak and compromising politicians or zealous bumlbers. ... Depending on how history looks back from the 2010s and 2020s, the two Bush presidents could be associated with U.S. decline.”

“For those of us who grew up thinking that the United States was different, the prospect that it probably is not different is a chastening one.”

This book is big, heavy, and important. Read it.

WHAT IN HELL HAPPENED TO THE PEOPLE IN LIMBO?

Arthur Harris

A few months ago (as predicted in April PIQUE) the Vatican eliminated Limbo. This has been gnawing at me ever since. It’s not a big gnaw, but it’s there and I’d like some sort of closure.

First, how could they eliminate Limbo? Do they have a special conduit to the powers above? I mean, I understand prayers and communications going up to heaven but are they really getting answers?

It all reminds me of John Edward, who speaks to the dead. Yes, he does, I’ve seen him do it. But, do the dead answer? I’m sure they don’t.

Also, what has happened to the millions of souls put in Limbo in the past millennia? Where are they? Are they floating out somewhere, or being judged now and assigned to Heaven or Hell?

Do you think the priest on “Religion on the Line” might have an answer? It might be worth a call.

Or not.

SAM HARRIS GETS LETTERS

(Reprinted from his book, Letter to a Christian Nation.)

Since the publication of my first book, *The End of Faith*, thousands of people have written to tell me that I am wrong not to believe in God. The most hostile of these communications have come from Christians. This is ironic, as Christians generally imagine that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own. The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ’s love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism. While we may want to ascribe this to human nature, it is clear that such hatred draws considerable support from the Bible. How do I know this? The most disturbed of my correspondents always cite chapter and verse.

ATHEIST ARGUMENT ON PRIME-TIME TV

NBC’s Monday-night comedy-drama, “Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip” does an interesting variation on the backstage-romance plot cliché. He’s the producer/head writer of the show and an atheist, she’s the star and a born-again Christian, and they broke up (but are

both still madly in love while trading zingers) when she did a guest appearance on Pat Robertson's 700 Club.

On the October 30 episode, after she accuses him of condescending, the atheist gets off this line: "Your side hates our side because your side thinks our side hates your side because our side thinks your side is stupid. Our side hates your side because your side is stupid."

NO IDIOTS, WE

"I don't think it's saying we're a nation of idiots," says Robert Thompson, director of the Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, speaking of the Zogby International survey he helped design which showed that three times as many Americans can name at least two of Snow White's dwarfs as can name two Supreme Court Justices, and that many more of us can identify fictional Krypton as Superman's home planet than can identify Mercury as the real planet closest to the real sun ("What the Hell is Wrong With Us?" PIQUE, October).

What those results mean, he says, is not that we're idiots, but that "We're a nation of pop-culture geniuses."

Well ... okay! USA! USA! USA!

GIVE PIQUE FOR THE "HOLY DAYS"

Even secularists give and get gifts for the holidays—Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or Human Light Day. A gift that will please any freethinker on your list is a gift subscription to PIQUE, just \$30 for a one-year (11 issues) non-member subscription. Call Editor John Rafferty, at 212-371-8733, to take care of the details.

DARWIN'S ROTTWEILLER BITES – Part 2

Richard Dawkins

(Excerpted from "The Flying Spaghetti Monster," an interview of Richard Dawkins – sometimes called "Darwin's Rottweiler" – by Steve Paulson on the subject of Dawkins' new book, The God Delusion, on salon.com 10/23. Part 1 of this excerpt appeared in November PIQUE.)

Paulson: Are you saying if parents belong to a particular church, they should not teach their children about that religion?

Dawkins: I would say that parents should teach their children anything that's known to be factually true – like "that's a bluebird" or "that's a bald eagle." Or they could teach children that there are such things as religious beliefs. But to teach children that it is a fact that there is one god or that God created the world in six days, that is child abuse.

Paulson: But isn't much of parenting about teaching values to children? Just as a family of vegetarians will teach their children about the evils of killing animals and eating meat, can't parents who believe in God teach their children the values of a religious upbringing?

Dawkins: Children ask questions. And when a child says, "Why is it wrong to do so and so?" you can perfectly well answer that by saying, "Well, how would you like it if somebody else did that to you?" That's a way of imparting to a child the Golden Rule: "Do as you would be done by." The world would fall apart if everybody stole things from everybody else, so it's a bad thing to steal. If a child says, "Why can't I eat meat?" then

you can say, “Your mother and I believe that it’s wrong to eat meat for this, that and the other reason. We are vegetarians. You can decide when you’re older whether you want to be a vegetarian or not. But for the moment, you’re living in this house, so the food we give you is not meat.” That I could see. I think it’s child abuse not to let the child have the free choice of knowing there are other people who believe something quite different and the child could make its own choice. ...

Paulson: Once you get past the biblical literalists, I think most people assume that science and religion are actually quite compatible. Stephen Jay Gould famously argued that they were “non-overlapping magisteria”: Science covers the empirical realm of facts and theories about the observable universe, and religion deals with ultimate meaning and moral value. But you’re very critical of this argument, right?

Dawkins: Yes, I think religious belief is a scientific belief, in the sense that it makes claims about the universe which are essentially scientific claims. If you believe the universe was created and inhabited by a supreme being, that would be a very different kind of universe from the sort of universe that wasn’t created and does not house a creative intelligence. That is a scientific difference. Miracles. If you believe in miracles, that is clearly a scientific claim, and scientific methods would be used to evaluate any miracle that somebody claimed evidence for.

Suppose, hypothetically, that forensic archaeologists, in an unlikely series of events, gained evidence—perhaps from some discovered DNA—which showed that Jesus did not really have an earthly father, that he really was born of a virgin. Can you imagine any theologian taking refuge behind Stephen Jay Gould’s non-overlapping magisteria and saying, “Nope, DNA evidence is completely irrelevant. Wrong magisterium. Science and religion have nothing to do with each other. They just peacefully coexist.” Of course they wouldn’t say that. If any such evidence were discovered, the DNA evidence would be trumpeted to the skies.

Paulson: What about the old adage that science deals with the “how” questions and religion deals with the “why” questions?

Dawkins: I think that’s remarkably stupid, if I may say so. What on earth is a “why” question? There are “why” questions that mean something in a Darwinian world. We say, why do birds have wings? To fly with. And that’s a Darwinian translation of the evolutionary process whereby the birds that had wings survived better than the birds without. They don’t mean that, though. They mean “why” in a deliberate, purposeful sense. So when you say religion deals with “why” questions, that begs the entire question that we’re arguing about. Those of us who don’t believe in religion—supernatural religion—would say there is no such thing as a “why” question in that sense. Now, the mere fact that you can frame a sentence beginning with the word “why” does not mean that sentence should receive an answer. I could say, why are unicorns hollow? That appears to mean something, but it doesn’t deserve an answer.

Paulson: But it seems to me the big “why” questions are, why are we here? And what is our purpose in life?

Dawkins: It’s not a question that deserves an answer.

Paulson: Well, I think most people would say those questions are central to the way we think about our lives. Those are the big existential questions, but they are also questions that go beyond science.

Dawkins: If you mean, what is the purpose of the existence of the universe, then I'm saying that is quite simply begging the question. If you happen to be religious, you think that's a meaningful question. But the mere fact that you can phrase it as a sentence doesn't mean it deserves an answer. Those of us who don't believe in a god will say that is as illegitimate as why are unicorns hollow? It just shouldn't be put. It's not a proper question to put. It doesn't deserve an answer.

Paulson: I don't understand that. Doesn't every person wonder about that? Isn't that a core question, what are we doing in this world? Doesn't everyone struggle with that?

Dawkins: There are core questions like, how did the universe begin? Where do the laws of physics come from? Where does life come from? Why, after billions of years, did life originate on this planet and then start evolving? Those are all perfectly legitimate questions to which science can give answers, if not now, then we hope in the future. There may be some very, very deep questions, perhaps even where do the laws of physics come from, that science will never answer. That is perfectly possible. I am hopeful, along with some physicists, that science will one day answer that question. But even if it doesn't—even if there are some supremely deep questions to which science can never answer—what on earth makes you think that religion can answer those questions?

(Note: Our two-part excerpt covers only about a third of the original interview. For the full text — recommended — go to www.salon.com/books/int/2006/10/13/dawkins/print.html)

HELL HATH NO FURY LIKE A NUN SCORNED

(Excerpted from ThisIsTrue.com 10/15)

Roman Catholic nun Sister Silvia Gomes De Sousa, 39, has been charged with arson and threatening to murder after allegedly setting fire to the house of the village priest in Roccalumera, Sicily. Why? She stopped by the house where Father Carmelo Mantarro, 70, lives and, "I just flipped when I came to the house and caught him in bed with another woman who is married," she testified in a court proceeding. "We had been together four years and I had even had two abortions because of him."

APPEASING RELIGIOUS WACKOS WON'T WORK

John Rafferty

(Based on "Don't Bring That Booze into My Taxi," by Daniel Pipes, in the New York Sun, 10/10/06.)

Citing their religious beliefs and the Koran, Muslim taxi drivers at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (MSP) have been refusing, since 2000, to transport passengers visibly transporting alcohol, i.e.: people coming off international flights carrying easily-spotted duty-free bags.

"This is our religion," one of the Muslims who now make up three-quarters of MSP's 900 cabbies explains. "We could be punished in the afterlife [for transporting alcohol]. This is a Koran issue. This came from heaven." On one occasion, 16 drivers in a row refused to carry a passenger engaged in the perfectly legal act of trying to take his alcoholic beverages home. Like any others who refuse a legitimate fare, all 16 had to go to the end of line.

But now the Muslims are demanding that they be allowed to discriminate, and the local governing authority is trying to appease them—an idea to allow them to have

additional, “No Alcohol” lights on their cabs was quickly dropped—as if appeasement of religious wackos would ever work.

What’s next, they be allowed to refuse to pick up women with bare arms? With uncovered hair? Without veils? Deny rides to homosexuals, Hindus, unmarried couples, Jews? Why not, if “heaven” says they should?

There used to be a sign in New York taxis that said the driver was obliged by law to take any orderly person anywhere in the city limits he/she wanted to go. I haven’t noticed the sign in years, but I’m sure the rule remains in force – and I’m sure there’s a similar one in the Twin Cities.

Driving a cab is a government-licensed activity, and no government agency in this country has any business sanctioning any religious belief that interferes with the lawful activity of any citizen. No government can put the principles of *sharia* law ahead of the U.S. Constitution.

The answer to the cabbies should be: “You refuse the fare, you go to the end of the line; you continue to discriminate against law-abiding citizens, you lose your hack license.”

The larger lesson—for us in New York and for the rest of the country, too—is that fundamentalist religion is militant, none more so than Islam.

WHAT ABOUT NOVEMBER 4?

An objective, impartial review by John Rafferty of his presentation, “Is America a Christian Nation” (to a rapt full-house audience), at the Muhlenberg Library last month will appear in January PIQUE.

For those whose curiosity is great but who were not in attendance November 4, the significance of the date is that it was the 210th anniversary of the signing in 1796 of a Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the new United States and the Bashaw of Tripoli, in which our government assured the Bashaw that “... the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion ...”

FIRST CENTURY PULP FICTION

R. Joseph Hoffman

(Excerpted from Humanist Network News, 12/21/05)

Once again the American media and a few scholarly mercenaries have tried to focus attention on New Testament mythology as though startling historical facts are waiting to be discovered beneath the layers of legend.

It happens every year, at Christmas and Easter: new revelations, startling discoveries (often described as “archaeological” to give a scientific ring), the latest scholarly finds, expert opinion. Given the lineup on CBS’s recent “48 Hours” special on the birth of Jesus—John Crossan, Elaine Pagels, Michael White, and Ben Witherington (appropriately the gamut from skeptical to credulous in their approaches)—the ready supply of expertise (read: informed opinion) is not in doubt. But the opinions are.

Quoth Witherington, for instance: “[Mary] was very young at the time of the annunciation, barely a teenager. ... We’re talking about a small town girl here.” But the basis for this is nowhere to be found in the gospels; it’s based on guesses about marriageable age in Jewish tradition, spliced together with a prophecy from Isaiah 7 about a “young woman bringing forth a child,” spliced further with an event which defies

historical explanation: an “announcement” of a virgin birth by one of God’s favorite messengers.

As with so much network (and general) docu-drivel, the scholarly shovels are out digging holes in air as though solid ground were beneath them.

Other class one errors: Elaine Pagels playing the Gnostic card, saying that the Gospel of Philip questions the concept of the virginity of Mary. Actually, the GP says that Mary is the “virgin whom no power defiled” and denies the historical Jesus (including his physical birth) completely. Relevance to this discussion: nil.

Witherington on the slaughter of the children by Herod described in Matthew’s gospel: “From what we can tell about the ruins of first century Bethlehem, a few hundred people lived there. I think we’re talking about six to ten children [slaughtered] max.” Queried as to why the event isn’t recorded outside the gospel account, Witherington says “it was a minor event” by the standards of the time. So minor, in fact, that no other gospel writer mentions it, and New Testament critics have known for ages that while Herod may have been a no-gooder, the “massacre of the innocents” is just another case of Matthew milking prophecy to exploit his notion that Jesus was the “true” king of the Jews, Herod an evil imposter.

In another instance, CBS took its crew to Egypt to ask the visually tantalizing question, “Did the holy family actually live there for a while?” Matthew says they did. He says so because he is “reenacting” the Exodus scenario and gives his hand away by linking the sojourn to Hosea 11.1. Great story. Terrible history. ...

Here is what we really know.

1. The Story is late – very late.

The original gospel was communicated orally, chiefly by illiterate peasants. It possessed no story of the birth of Jesus because no one was interested in that part of the story until later. Paul has never heard of Jesus “of Nazareth,” or Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, or kings from eastern provinces, or a distant guiding star, or a virgin named Mary. He knows a story about a semi-divine messianic “man from heaven” (Philippians 2.5-11) whom he names Jesus Christ, “born of a woman [unnamed, unhusbanded], under [Jewish] law” (Galatians 4.4).

2. The earliest Gospel and its copies had no birth story.

When the basics of the story of Jesus were written down, the earliest literature still contained no story of the birth of Jesus. The earliest and (we think) the latest gospels—Mark (ca. 70, at earliest) and John (ca. 95, at earliest)—also know nothing of the birth of Jesus. Well, that’s almost right: the Fourth Gospel, John, knows a story similar to the one Paul knows, fancified a bit using ideas borrowed from popular Stoic philosophy, so that the semi-divine man becomes the “divine Word” of God, “who became flesh.”

But still, no manger, no virgin birth – a mother he addresses, in fact, as “Woman” (John 2.4), no angels singing “Gloria,” and instead of Bethlehem, active embarrassment that he hails from Galilee (John 7.40-2). To add to the confusion, Matthew knows nothing of Jesus being from Nazareth; the family resides in Bethlehem and end up in Nazareth because it’s part of an escape route (Matt. 2.23).

Luke on the other hand has the family living in Nazareth and ending up in Bethlehem because of an otherwise unknown Roman tax census (Luke 2.4f.). No historical memory here, and not even the Nazareth tradition is secure since despite all the very energetic attempts to find references to it no such “village”—not even an outpost of Empire—

existed in the first century. Discussions of the inscription from Caesarea Maritima have not alleviated our ignorance of this location – thus discussions of the implications of its proximity to the Hellenistic mini-city of Sepphoris are completely conjectural.

The solution espoused by some scholars, of making this man of mystery Jesus of Bethlehem from Nazareth near Sepphoris makes him less a mystery than a cipher. In fact, the birth in Bethlehem is legendary and the “hometown” (or refuge) of Nazareth was, if anything, a large farm.

3. *The Stories are legends based on other legends.*

The birth stories are pious legends appended to the gospel of Mark by later writers whom tradition names “Matthew” and “Luke,” — but probably not by the authors known by those names. Scholars know that the original gospel of Luke did not have its familiar nativity story because our earliest version of it, used by the famous second century heretic, Marcion, did not have it.

And as Marcion was writing and quoting away from his version of “Luke” in 120 AD or so in complete ignorance of the tale (just like Paul), we can assume that the nativity story came later. It arose at around the same time many other legendary accounts of the birth and infancy of Jesus were being written: The Pre-Gospel of James, for example, or the famous Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which are full of entertaining stories about the birth of Jesus.

In the Infancy Gospel, Thomas’ Jesus makes sparrows out of clay, then brings them to life, and smites his playmates – dead – for being rude to him. In some of the apocryphal tales he performs cures in the manger as a newborn. The tendency in the early church was to make Jesus “miraculous” from the get-go. The sources of these stories are tales told about emperors like Alexander the Great (whose mother was thought to be a virgin), Augustus (emperor, allegedly, when Jesus was born), Vespasian, heroes such as Herakles/Hercules (another virgin birth), Apollonius of Tyana, and Jewish folktales, like those associated with Chaninia ben Dosa.

The story of the star is taken from Virgil’s praise-hymn (Eclogue IV) in honor of the “Peace” of Augustus. Nothing in the story is original, but its popularity was ensured by having its roots in a hundred other famous myths and legends. The point was to show Jesus the equal of the cultural heroes of the time.

4. *What about the Genealogies?*

Another reason for knowing that the nativity tales are legendary is that because like all legends they are uneven, flamboyant (even by the standards of miracle tales, which were the favorite form of 1st century pulp fiction), and contradictory.

The two tales, Matthew’s and Luke’s, were not written very far apart in terms of chronology – perhaps Matthew’s coming first. But they were written to satisfy different audiences, different tastes, and for different religious reasons. There are too many of these discrepancies to list here but there’s no need to dig very deep.

Both Matthew and Luke provide “genealogies” of Jesus designed to defend their savior from the Jewish calumny that he had been the illegitimate child of a Roman soldier (another proof of the lateness of the tales).

But the genealogies themselves are out of synch. Among many discrepancies, Matthew (1.16) knows Jesus’ grandfather as Jacob, Luke (3.23) as Heli, and neither writer seems aware that the whole genealogy is negated by the doctrine of the virgin birth, which makes Joseph’s paternity irrelevant in any case. This shows to biblical critics

that the genealogies originally served a different purpose from the virgin birth story – the first to prove the Jewish/Davidic pedigree of Jesus, the second to prove his divinity, mainly to gentile converts. Even the earliest Jewish Christians, the Ebionites, rejected the genealogies as forgeries, and the gospels of Mark and John know nothing about them.

5. *Virgin Birth, manger, and the rest of it.*

As Christianity forged ahead, the church became less interested in the Davidic/Jewish pedigree of Jesus than in arguing his supernatural status — as son of God (*filius dei*, the designation used by Roman emperors from the time of Augustus, and conditioned by their belief that Jesus was their true lord and king).

The miraculous birth was the culmination of this belief, the stage at which the virginity of Mary is introduced into the picture (Matthew 1.13-25 and Luke 1.5-8). Matthew tells a Jewish story and links the birth to prophecy by misusing, or misunderstanding, a verse from Isaiah (7:14, which in Hebrew simply reads, “A young woman [not a virgin] shall conceive and bear a child.”) Luke tells a Greek story, with awe-struck shepherds and harp-playing angels singing in the skies.

The Christians who adhered to the earliest tradition long enough to be regarded as heretics in the second century, the Ebionites, regarded the virgin birth story as heresy. The earliest Christians seem to have followed Mark’s opinion that Jesus was promoted by God to lieutenant godship at the moment of his baptism (Mk 1.11), but the idea of a divine child sent by God for the salvation of his people was a part of the mythological picture of the late first and second century, Christianity’s formative decades. It was too tempting to leave aside: wondrous manifestations of light, cave-births, hidden divinity made manifest to trembling onlookers. They were all part of the story of the birth of the gods and heroes before Christianity came onto the scene to share them.

In Buddhist tradition, at Gautama’s birth, a great light shines over the world. Persians marked the birth of the Sun, symbol of the god, in the cave of Mithras at the winter solstice, and the Roman co-option of the cult of the sun god, Helios (combined with Mithras in the pre-Christian pantheon) made the solstice the date the birth of Jesus, “the light of the world.”

In Greek tradition, Zeus as the Sun divinely illuminates the birth chamber of Herakles (Hercules) in the stable of Angras. And the poet Ovid presents Hercules as the child Horus, who shares a midwinter birthday with Zeus, Apollo, and other calendar gods. The Greek god Hermes was born in a cave in swaddling clothes. The story of the annunciation in Luke 1.30-33 is itself a borrowing of the Egyptian idea that impregnation can be effected through a ray of light falling from heaven, or a word (*logos*) spoken in the ear, a legend associated with the birth of Apis. The list goes on.

In summary, the stories of the birth of Jesus are late, legendary, and totally without historical merit. They are the additions of devotional writers who are at cross-purposes over whether to understand Jesus in messianic or heroic context and end up doing both. The failure to iron out contradictions is not their problem, because they were doubtless unaware that such contradictions existed. That the contradictions do exist, however, gives us important insight into the mythological foundations of the nativity tale.

Scholars need to pay closer attention to the origins of religious myth and story and in communicating their opinions to have fuller regard for their role as reporters of reasoned conclusions.

Looking for the manger, like looking for Noah's ark, will probably continue to transfix believers once a year, but historians and biblical scholars should have no part in that quest.

R. Joseph Hoffmann is professor and chair of Religious Studies at Wells College in Aurora, N.Y. He is chair of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion at the Center for Inquiry International in Amherst, NY.

UH, OH ... WE'RE IN BIG TROUBLE

Cover headline of the November 13 edition of the supermarket tabloid *Sun*:

CHRIST WILL RETURN ON XMAS DAY!

Comment: Don't you love that "Xmas"? Can you picture Christ appearing to the Sun editors December 25 and announcing, "This is 'X,' and I'm here to fry your Lord's-name-in-vain asses in eternal hellfire."

IN THE NAME OF THE LAGER

(Excerpted from the Associated Press, 9/14)

A miraculous image of Jesus Christ in the froth of an almost empty pint of beer is to be used as an advert to encourage Britons to go to church this Christmas. The poster — which shows a glass with the words "Where will you find him?" — will spearhead the Churches Advertising Network (CAN) campaign to boost attendance in the run-up to the Christian festive season. ...

The poster is a nod to the discoveries of holy images in everyday objects, from the face of Jesus in a frying pan, toast or fish finger, his mother Mary on a toasted cheese sandwich, and Mother Teresa in a sticky bun.

Previous CAN campaigns include a poster depicting Jesus as the revolutionary leader Che Guevara and one suggesting Mary was having a "bad hair day" when she discovered she was pregnant.

Comment: *You can't make these things up.*

AND FINALLY, A MERRY PAN-CHRISTIAN XMAS

Bob Murtha

A woman goes to the post office to buy stamps for her Christmas cards. She says to the clerk, "May I have 50 Christmas stamps?"

The clerk says, "What denomination?"

The woman says, "God help us. Has it come to this? Give me 6 Catholic, 12 Presbyterian, 10 Lutheran and 22 Baptists."

[ballot insert]

AND THE 2006 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD GOES TO ... YOU CHOOSE!

Comedian/Secular Humanist Steve Allen coined "dumbth" to describe the willfully witless among us, and in 1992, then-PIQUE Editor Warren Allen Smith proposed that SHSNY give Dumbth Awards to "those who deserve to have their illogic pointed out."

Who deserves a Dumbth Award? Mr. Smith suggested, as an example, "a person who falls five floors down an elevator shaft, is rescued by a policeman who crawls into the dark hole unaided, is saved by EMS personnel who rush to the scene, is operated on

by a skilled surgeon, is nursed back to health by therapists, and who then credits God with ‘a miracle’.”

Or the recipient of our first award, 2005 winner and ex-TV talk-show personality Star Jones, who claimed that she was “blessed” by God, Who, she implied, delayed the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed over 200,000 people until after her honeymoon vacation in the Maldives.

For your consideration this year we have a fine crop of four dunderheads, any of whom would be worthy of the not-so-coveted horse’s-ass statuette.

PAT ROBERTSON, who keeps reading God’s mind (and keeps mangling the message), on January 4 declared that Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who had just suffered a massive stroke, was ... **“at the point of death [because] he was dividing God’s land, and I would say woe unto any Prime Minister of Israel who takes a similar course.”**

SENATOR JAMES INHOFE (R-Oklahoma) this summer attacked Al Gore’s film “An Inconvenient Truth,” global warming science in general, and Al Gore personally as “full of crap.” Then, deliberately misrepresenting the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, he announced that **“all of the recent science ... it confirms that I was right on [global warming]. This thing is a hoax.”**

MICHAEL PALMER, the general manager of both the ABC and Fox affiliate TV stations in Bangor, Maine, doesn’t believe 1) in global warming, or 2) that TV news should cover global warming stories. When his news staffs did reports this summer on “An Inconvenient Truth,” Mr. Palmer dictated, **“When Bar Harbor is underwater, then we can do global warming stories. Until then, no more.”**

MICHAEL SAVAGE, the slightly-to-the-right-of-Genghis-Khan bigmouth whose show on more than 300 stations is the third most-listened-to radio talk show in the nation, on November 16 signed off his program with this fervent wish: **“With God’s will and your listenership, we shall nuke Iran.”**

Who gets the un-coveted horse’s ass award for 2006? Mail this ballot (or a copy) to: SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-1913, or email your choice to john@rafferty.net by December 31, 2006. The winner will be announced in February PIQUE.