

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February 2006

Is morality possible without religion? While most of us assume it is, most (otherwise rational) people assume it is not. Can we test to find out? Yes, and you can participate. On the same subject, we consider the current administration's tortured ethics (especially compared to those of a previous President named George), the moral questions raised in a current hit film and in a best-selling book, and the ethics of some old guys in Brooklyn in black hats. But first, we have a winner. In fact, a Star.

WE HAVE A WINNER

[Photo of Star Jones]

And it's Star Jones, who wins the First Annual SHSNY Dumbth Award for stupid and/or clueless anti-rational, anti-humanist public remarks.

The supremely self-satisfied TV talk-show personality is also a licensed attorney who thinks the Constitution bars atheists from public office because they can't swear on the Bible. The remark that won her the un-coveted horse's-ass trophy? Her claim last January that she was "blessed" by God because He delayed the December 2004 tsunami—that killed 230,000 people—until after her honeymoon vacation in the Maldives.

Our Star won with 20 votes over Congressman Richard Baker of Louisiana, who garnered 15 votes for saying of the thousands of poor, black Americans made homeless by Hurricane Katrina that God "finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans." Former First Lady Barbara Bush also received 15 votes for her remark that Katrina refugees sheltering in the Houston Astrodome "... were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them."

SHSNY Election Central also reports two write-in votes for Tom Cruise, and one each for the Kansas School Board, Bill O'Reilly, and John Kerry (We don't get that one either).

Nominations for the 2006 award are now open, and will remain so until December 1, after which we'll vote by email or postcard until December 31. Send your nominations on a postcard or letter to the P.O. box below, or email john@rafferty.net before December 1.

AND THE FIRST NOMINEE FOR THE 2006 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD

[Photo of Pat Robertson]

... is perennial foot-in-mouth-favorite Pat Robertson, who on January 4 declared that 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." The Reverend Pat's subsequent apology came only after he was the butt of late-night comics' jokes for a week or so (and when he realized

that the theme park he wants to build near the Sea of Galilee was in jeopardy), and so doesn't count.

Anyway, how could we possibly pass up the opportunity this year to nominate the chowderhead who in 1998 warned the city of Orlando that it could expect God-directed hurricanes because it was staging a Gay Pride Festival ... said of the 2001 terrorist attacks that, "We have insulted God at the highest levels of our government and God Almighty is lifting his protection from us" ... and in 2004, predicting a "blowout" reelection of George W. Bush, said, "It doesn't make any difference what he does, good or bad. God picks him up because he's a man of prayer and God's blessing him."

More?

"There is no such thing as separation of church and state in the Constitution. It is a lie of the Left."

"Many of those people involved with Adolph Hitler were Satanists, many of them were homosexuals — the two things seem to go together."

"The Constitution of the United States is a marvelous document for self-government by the Christian people. But the minute you turn the document into the hands of non-Christian people and atheistic people they can use it to destroy the very foundation of our society. And that's what's been happening."

"The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians."

"How can there be peace when drunkards, drug dealers, communists, atheists, New Age worshipers of Satan, secular humanists¹, oppressive dictators, greedy money changers, revolutionary assassins², adulterers, and homosexuals are on top?"

¹*Us.*

²*Very few of us.*

WHAT GOD DO THE "FAITH-BASED" HAVE FAITH IN? IT SEEMS TO BE MAMMON.

Frank Rich

(Excerpted from "Is Abramoff the New Monica?" in The New York Times, Jan. 15, 2006)

The Abramoff scandal's pious trappings ... adhere to the Karl Rove playbook that wraps every hardball White House tactic in godliness and exploits "faith-based" organizations as political machines to deliver the G.O.P.'s religious right base. ...

Look at the Alexander Strategy Group, the lobbying outfit that is ground zero for the scandal (and that went kaput last week). Founded by [House Majority Leader Tom] DeLay's former chief of staff and personal pastor, an evangelical minister named Edwin Buckham, its early big client was Enron. And like Enron, which laundered money through sham financial entities with "Star Wars" names like Chewco and JEDI, it benefited from a shell organization with a fanciful, albeit faith-based, name: the U.S. Family Network.

The U.S. Family Network was formed by Mr. Buckham on the side, ostensibly as a grass-roots advocacy organization to promote, among other virtues, "moral fitness." As The Washington Post discovered last month, its financial backers were amoral, favor-seeking Abramoff associates, from casino operators to Russian oil businessmen. The U.S.

Family Network's contribution to moral fitness and U.S. families, meanwhile, was close to nil—except for the DeLay family. The Post reported that hundreds of thousands of the network's dollars were siphoned into Mr. Buckham's lobbying shop, which in turn put Mr. DeLay's wife on salary. U.S. Family money also purchased a Washington town house used by Mr. DeLay for fund-raising. ...

The U.S. Family Network was only one of several phantom Enron-style shams spawned or fronted by Mr. DeLay, Mr. Abramoff or their sometimes clerical cronies, from Celebrations for Children (a "charity" whose good works remain a mystery) to the American International Center (a "think tank" manned by a lifeguard in Rehoboth Beach, Del.). The Capital Athletic Foundation, supposedly set up to provide sports programs for needy urban kids, underwrote a 2002 golf outing to Scotland for Mr. Abramoff, Congressman Bob Ney of Ohio, Ralph Reed (an Enron consultant in his post-Christian Coalition days) and David Safavian, the Bush administration's top procurement official, who resigned in September just before being indicted on charges of lying and obstruction of justice in the Abramoff investigation.

... As fate would have it, the court appearances of Mr. Lay [Kenneth Lay of Enron], Mr. DeLay, Jeff Skilling [of Enron], Mr. Safavian and Mr. Abramoff could all overlap on 24/7 cable in the months ahead. There will surely be much talk of God along the way. Mr. DeLay's pastor, Mr. Buckham, and Mr. Reed were not the only prayerful players in the Abramoff casino. So were the Rev. "Lucky Louie" Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition and the right-wing Rabbi Daniel Lapin, whose Toward Tradition organization received a \$25,000 check (all in innocence, we're told) from the Abramoff client eLottery. In 2002, the good rabbi welcomed the lobbyist onto the board of his American Alliance of Jews and Christians, along with Jerry Falwell and the man who loves Israel literally to death, Pat Robertson.

GEORGE W. BUSH: GOD'S MAN

Seymour M. Hersh

(Excerpted from "Up In The Air," The New Yorker, 12/5/05)

Current and former military and intelligence officials have told me that the President remains convinced that it is his personal mission to bring democracy to Iraq, and that he is impervious to political pressure, even from fellow-Republicans. They also say that he disparages any information that conflicts with his view of how the war is proceeding.

Bush's closest advisers have long been aware of the religious nature of his policy commitments. In recent interviews, one former senior official, who served in Bush's first term, spoke extensively about the connection between the President's religious faith and his view of the war in Iraq. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the former official said, he was told that Bush felt that "God put me here" to deal with the war on terror. The President's belief was fortified by the Republican sweep in the 2002 congressional elections; Bush saw the victory as a purposeful message from God that "he's the man," the former official said. Publicly, Bush depicted his reelection as a referendum on the war; privately, he spoke of it as another manifestation of divine purpose.

**WOULD THE FIRST GEORGE W.
HAVE AUTHORIZED TORTURE?**

David Hackett Fischer

(Excerpted from “Hard Choices” and “The Policy of Humanity” in Washington’s Crossing, Mr. Fisher’s account of the forming of the American army—and mind—in 1776-7.)

Always [in 1776] some dark spirits wished to visit the same cruelties on the British and Hessians that had been inflicted on American captives. But Washington’s example carried growing weight, more so than his written orders and prohibitions. He often reminded his men that they were an army of liberty and freedom, and that the rights of humanity for which they were fighting should extend even to their enemies. ... Even in the most urgent moments of the war, these men were concerned about ethical questions in the Revolution. ...

In 1776, American leaders believed that it was not enough to win the war. They also had to win in a way that was consistent with the values of their society and the principles of their cause. One of their greatest achievements in the winter campaign of 1776-77 was to manage the war in a manner that was true to the expanding humanitarian ideals of the American Revolution. It happened in a way that was different from the ordinary course of wars in general. In Congress and the army, American leaders resolved that the War of Independence would be conducted with a respect for human rights, even of the enemy. This idea grew stronger during the campaign of 1776-77, not weaker as is commonly the case in war.

In Congress, John Adams ... resolved that the guiding principles of the American Republic would always be what he called the policy of humanity. He wrote, “I know of no policy, God is my witness, but this—Piety, Humanity and Honesty are the best Policy. Blasphemy, Cruelty and Villainy have prevailed and may again. But they won’t prevail against America, in this Contest, because I find the more of them are employed, the less they succeed.” ...

The most remarkable fact about the American soldiers and civilians in the New Jersey campaign [of 1776-77] is that ... in a desperate struggle they found a way to defeat a formidable enemy ... they reversed the momentum of the war ... they improvised a new way of war [fighting not for glory or plunder but to win, and at minimum cost in lives] that grew into an American tradition ... and they chose a policy of humanity that aligned the conduct of the war with the values of the Revolution.

They set a high example, and we have much to learn from them. Much recent historical writing has served us ill in that respect. In the late twentieth century, too many scholars tried to make the American past into a record of crime and folly. Too many writers have told us that we are captives of our darker selves and helpless victims of our history. It isn’t so, and never was. The story of Washington’s Crossing tells us that Americans in an earlier generation were capable of acting in a higher spirit— and so are we.

STOP THE TORTURE - NOW!

Andrew Sullivan

(Excerpted from “The Abolition of Torture: Saving the U.S. from a totalitarian future,” in The New Republic, 12/19/05)

What our practical endorsement of torture has done is to remove that clear boundary between the Islamists and the West and make the two equivalent in the Muslim mind.

Saddam Hussein used Abu Ghraib to torture innocents; so did the Americans. Yes, what Saddam did was exponentially worse. But, in doing what we did, we blurred the critical, bright line between the Arab past and what we are proposing as the Arab future. We gave Al Qaeda an enormous propaganda coup, as we have done with Guantanamo and Bagram, the “Salt Pit” torture chambers in Afghanistan, and the secret torture sites in Eastern Europe. In World War II, American soldiers were often tortured by the Japanese when captured. But FDR refused to reciprocate. Why? Because he knew that the goal of the war was not just Japan’s defeat but Japan’s transformation into a democracy. He knew that, if the beacon of democracy—the United States of America—had succumbed to the hallmark of totalitarianism, then the chances for democratization would be deeply compromised in the wake of victory.

No one should ever underestimate the profound impact that the conduct of American troops in World War II had on the citizens of the eventually defeated Axis powers. Germans saw the difference between being liberated by the Anglo-Americans and being liberated by the Red Army. If you saw an American or British uniform, you were safe. If you didn’t the terror would continue in different ways. Ask any German or Japanese of the generation that built democracy in those countries, and they will remind you of American values — not trumpeted by presidents in front of handpicked audiences, but demonstrated by the conduct of the U.S. military during occupation. I grew up in Great Britain, a country with similar memories. In the dark days of the cold war, I was taught that America, for all its faults, was still America. And that America did not, and constitutively could not, torture anyone. ...

The war on terrorism is, after all, a religious war in many senses. It is a war to defend the separation of church and state as critical to the existence of freedom, including religious freedom. It is a war to persuade the silent majority of Muslims that the West offers a better way—more decency, freedom, and humanity than the autocracies they live under and the totalitarian theocracies waiting in the wings. By endorsing torture—on anyone, anywhere, for any reason—we help obliterate the very values we are trying to promote. ...

If we legalize torture, even under constrained conditions, we will have given up a large part of the idea that is America. We will have lost the war before we have given ourselves the chance to win it.

MORALITY WITHOUT RELIGION

Marc Hauser and Peter Singer

(Reprinted from www.project-syndicate.org)

Is religion necessary for morality? Many people think it is outrageous, or even blasphemous, to deny that morality is of divine origin. Either some divine being crafted our moral sense during the period of creation or we picked it up from the teachings of organized religion. Both views see the same endpoint: we need religion to curb nature’s vices. Paraphrasing Katharine Hepburn in *The African Queen*, religion allows us to rise above that wicked old mother nature, handing us a moral compass.

In the United States, where the conservative right argues that we should turn to religion for moral insights and inspiration, the gap between government and religion is rapidly diminishing. Abortion and the withdrawal of life-support—as in the case of Terri Schiavo—are increasingly being challenged by the view that these acts are strictly against

God's word—thou shalt not kill (note: originally translated as “murder”). And religion has once again begun to make its way back into public schools, seeking equal status alongside a scientific theory of human nature.

Yet problems abound for the view that morality comes from God. One problem is that we cannot, without lapsing into tautology, simultaneously say that God is good, and that he gave us our sense of good and bad. For then we are simply saying that God is in accordance with God's standards. That lacks the resonance of “Praise the Lord!” or “Allah is great!”

A second problem is that there are no moral principles shared by all religious people (disregarding their specific religious membership) but no agnostics or atheists. This observation leads to a second: atheists and agnostics do not behave less morally than religious believers, even if their virtuous acts are mediated by different principles. They often have as strong and sound a sense of right and wrong as anyone, including involvement in movements to abolish slavery and contribute to relief efforts associated with human suffering. The converse is also true: religion has led people to commit a long litany of horrendous crimes, from God's command to Moses to slaughter the Midianites, men, women, boys and non-virginal girls, through the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, innumerable conflicts between Sunni and Shiite Moslems, and terrorists who blow themselves up in the confident belief that they are going straight to paradise.

The third difficulty for the view that morality has its origin in religion is that despite the sharp doctrinal differences between the world's major religions, and for that matter cultures like ancient China in which religion has been less significant than philosophical outlooks like Confucianism, some elements of morality seem to be universal. One view is that a divine creator handed us the universal bits at the moment of creation. The alternative, consistent with the facts of biology and geology, is that we have evolved, over millions of years, a moral faculty that generates intuitions about right and wrong. For the first time, research in the cognitive sciences, building on theoretical arguments emerging from moral philosophy, has made it possible to resolve the ancient dispute about the origin and nature of morality.

Consider the following three scenarios. For each, fill in the blank with morally “obligatory,” “permissible” or “forbidden.”

1. *A runaway train is about to run over five people walking on the tracks. A railroad worker is standing next to a switch that can turn the train onto a side track, killing one person, but allowing the five to survive. Flipping the switch is _____.*

2. *You pass by a small child drowning in a shallow pond and you are the only one around. If you pick up the child, she will survive, but your pants will be ruined. Picking up the child is _____.*

3. *Five people have just been rushed into a hospital in critical care, each requiring a different organ to survive. There is not enough time to request organs from outside the hospital. There is, however, a healthy person in the hospital's waiting room. If the surgeon takes this person's organs, he will die but the five in critical care will survive. Taking the healthy person's organs is _____.*

If you judged Case 1 as “permissible,” Case 2 as “obligatory,” and Case 3 as “forbidden,” then you are like the 1500 subjects around the world who responded to these dilemmas on our web-based moral sense test (<http://moral.wjh.harvard.edu>).*

On the view that morality is God's word, atheists should judge these cases differently from people with religious background and beliefs, and when asked to justify their responses, should bring forward different explanations. For example, since atheists lack a moral compass, they should go with pure self-interest, and walk by the drowning baby. Results show something completely different. There were no statistically significant differences between subjects with or without religious backgrounds, with approximately 90% of subjects saying that it is permissible to flip the switch on the boxcar, 97% saying that it is obligatory to rescue the baby, and 97% saying that it is forbidden to remove the healthy man's organs. When asked to justify why some cases are permissible and others forbidden, subjects are either clueless or offer explanations that cannot account for the differences in play. Importantly, those with a religious background are as clueless or incoherent as atheists.

These studies begin to provide empirical support for the idea that like other psychological faculties of the mind, including language and mathematics, we are endowed with a moral faculty that guides our intuitive judgments of right and wrong, interacting in interesting ways with the local culture. These intuitions reflect the outcome of millions of years in which our ancestors have lived as social mammals, and are part of our common inheritance, as much as our opposable thumbs are. These facts are incompatible with the story of divine creation.

Our involved intuitions do not necessarily give us the right or consistent answers to moral dilemmas. What was good for our ancestors may not be good for human beings as a whole today, let alone for our planet and all the other beings living on it. But insights into the changing moral landscape (e.g., animal rights, abortion, euthanasia, international aid) have not come from religion, but from careful reflection on humanity and what we consider a life well lived. In this respect, it is important for us to be aware of the universal set of moral intuitions so that we can reflect on them and, if we choose, act contrary to them. We can do this without blasphemy, because it is our nature, not God, that is the source of our species morality. Hopefully, governments that equate morality with religion are listening.

** By all means, go to <http://moral.wjh.harvard.edu> and take the ten-minute Moral Sense Test. It's interesting and fun, and you'll be helping the project. — John Rafferty*

“MUNICH”

Giles Kelly

Steven Spielberg's long new film is full of suspense, action, schemes, and history, as well as personal tragedy and remorse, yet it does not answer the difficult question it raises about the appropriateness of state-sponsored, retaliatory violence.

How should the state of Israel have responded to the terrorist murder of their athletes participating in the 1972 Olympic games in Munich? Parallels to the question of the proper U.S. response to the 2001 terrorist attack on New York—and to the never ending Israeli and Palestinian mutual violence—is surely intentional on Spielberg's part.

Eleven Israeli athletes were killed in Munich. So were two Palestinian terrorists, but five got away. The Israeli government of Golda Meir decided on lethal retaliation: an official mission was authorized to hunt the killers down and summarily execute them. Execute, not murder, we are assured, because the killings were state sanctioned.

We then see how a patriotic, idealistic Israeli was recruited to lead the mission, and how the government's supporting hand was hidden from the public. After identifying the targets, then tracking them down he—and we—count in turn, one, two, three, four, five killings. And yes, “collateral damage” — innocent deaths.

On a personal level, we also witness how carrying out the killings tragically changes the leader of the mission, a man with a wife and young child himself.

Spielberg's Munich seems to extol the ability and will of the state of Israel to successfully run stealth operations as they did so well at Entebbe and in Argentina. So I wonder if maybe there is an Israeli message here: “Don't mess with us.”

But the main question the film raises is: should the response to terrorism be “an eye for an eye”? And if so, how should it be carried out? Just turning the other cheek cannot be an option, but is government-sponsored vigilantism a proper response?

In my opinion, no.

A more proper response would be to have brought the terrorists to trial before an international tribunal (the assassinations occurred at an international event). In Munich—and in real-life Israel—that option apparently was not considered. Instead the government launched a violent series of reprisals — extra-legal “executions” that can as easily be described as murder.

Do we not yet know by now that violence only begets more violence?

Note: Mr. Kelly is a retired U.S. Foreign Service officer.

RABBI FISCHER, RABBI NIEDERMAN, MEET MARY MALLON

John Rafferty

A century ago, there really was a “Typhoid Mary” in New York. Mary Mallon, an Irish immigrant, was the first known healthy carrier of typhoid in the U.S. She worked as a cook, and between 1900 and 1907 she infected 22 people in various houses around New York with the disease, one of whom died.

When she was identified as the carrier, she refused to cooperate with city health authorities, and became convinced she was the victim of anti-Irish persecution. Eventually she was arrested and isolated for three years at a hospital for infectious diseases on North Brother Island in the East River. She was released on condition she not work with food, but in 1915 returned to cooking and infected 25 people while a cook at New York's Sloan Hospital, no less. Two died. She was again confined on North Brother — for life. She died in 1938, of pneumonia.

Today, in New York, an Orthodox rabbi named Yitzchok Fischer has infected five infant boys with herpes while performing *metzitzah b'peh*, the practice of sucking blood—orally, with his herpes-infected mouth—to clean the circumcision wound after the foreskin is removed from the penis. One child has died, another has brain damage, and Fischer is (or was, it's difficult to determine his current status) under court order not to perform the ridiculous ritual.

But the Hasidic (i.e.: fundamentalist) Jews who insist on continuing the practice are so well organized politically that the Bloomberg administration, which should have banned the barbaric practice outright, is instead planning “a study” and, according to the

January 5 *NYTimes*, “would recommend against the procedure and begin a public education campaign about its risks.”

Absolutely not, say the rabbis, led by Rabbi David Niederman, who met December 30 with Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, the city’s commissioner of Health and Mental Hygiene. Their suggestions to make the practice safer? None. Instead, according to the *Times*, they presented three demands: that the city “cease its educational drive, that it stop investigating possible cases, and that it stop investigating rabbis it suspects of transmitting herpes.”

In other words, don’t even *think* about applying New York’s health and sanitation laws to us.

I have a suggestion: North Brother Island is still between the Bronx and Rikers Island. It’s available, uninhabited, and I’ll volunteer to row the rabbi there.

RELIGIOUS VS. SECULAR VALUES

Conrad Claborne

I was invited by the Rainforest Alliance to hear Lester R. Brown speak about his new book, *PLAN B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble*, at their offices on a cold and windy January evening in Manhattan. Mr. Brown is one of the founders of the environmental think tank Worldwatch Institute, and more recently of the Earth Policy Institute. (I wore my new SHSNY “I Love Darwin” button to this event.)

What I find so puzzling about the religious right is that they have built their “right to life” movement on a foundation of “family values,” but in the process these groups sit on the sidelines of life, encouraging their followers to propagate in heterosexual coupling, pretending that the growing number of humans have no impact on planet Earth. I am reminded of the old image of the three monkeys who will not see, speak or hear evil while everything around them degenerates into chaos.

Mr. Brown observed that so far in history most human conflict has been either racial or religious in nature. He made a new prediction, that if conditions on this planet continue to degenerate, there will be a new battlefront, a war between human generations. Mr. Brown said that young people will be able to read the same scientific analyses we do today, and will ask themselves why our older generation did not stabilize human population at a lower number, and use the mass media to help all of us—around the world—to join forces to create the political will for humanity to learn to live sustainably on the Earth with myriad other species.

Mr. Brown argues that the planet will survive, it is civilization that will die. If so, what is the value of the “values” of the religious right? As I continue to say, the values that underpin secular humanism shine a bright light on positive alternatives. I believe this is the greatest role we can play in the modern world.

FAITH DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN

Brad Wheeler

In “Is God an Accident?” in December ‘05 *Atlantic Monthly*, Paul Bloom examines the emerging theory that yes, human beings come into the world with a predisposition to believe in supernatural phenomena, but this predisposition is an incidental by-product of cognitive functioning gone awry.

Bloom's instinctual/psychological accident theory goes a long way toward explaining the foundations of, and to some extent the persistence of, belief in gods.

However, I think the theory alone is insufficient to answer humanity's most vital question regarding deity beliefs: Why do so many generally knowledgeable, modern people continue believing medieval notions about life after death and god, while they simultaneously dismiss all other "bodiless soul" claims (ghosts, the tooth fairy) for want of evidence? To answer this question fully, cultural and religious indoctrination must be given greater due than Bloom admits. And answering the question is paramount. As Sam Harris describes in *The End of Faith*, it is otherwise modern religious "moderates" who unwittingly perpetuate the circumstances in which true-believers find support and cheer while they murder and oppress with ever more modern technology.

Follow-Up:

**MORE "JESUS LOVES ME"
(BUT HE CAN'T STAND YOU)**

Brad Wheeler informs us that the "anonymous" lyrics in January PIQUE are actually by "one or two members of the Austin Lounge Lizards, and they're even funnier when you hear them sung." Which you can at www.austinlizards.com.

I know you smoke, I know you drink that brew.
I just can't abide a sinner like you.
God can't either, that's why I know it to be true
That Jesus loves me, but he can't stand you.
I'm going to heaven, boys, when I die,
'Cause I've crossed every "t" and I've dotted every "i."
My preacher tell me that I'm God's kind of guy;
That's why Jesus loves me, but you're gonna fry.
God loves all his children, by gum,
That don't mean he won't incinerate some.
Can't you feel those hot flames licking you?
Woo woo woo.
I'm raising my kids in a righteous way,
So don't be sending your kids over to my house to play
Yours'll grow up stoned, left-leaning, and gay;
I know, 'cause Jesus told me on the phone today.
Jesus loves me, this I know.
And he told me where you're gonna go.
There's lots of room for your kind down below.
Whoa whoa whoa.
Jesus loves me but he can't stand you.

**AND THE PERFECT ACCOMPANIMENT:
A FINE SACRAMENTAL MERLOT**

According to the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, as quoted in ThisIsTrue.com, January 8, the latest snack fad in Quebec is bags of communion wafers. "My son can eat a whole bag while he's watching TV," said one man. "He's had more of them outside of church than he ever did inside one."

Not everyone likes the trend, of course. “They’re not distinguishing between the body of Christ and something you nibble on at home,” complained a former Catholic missionary. “We don’t respect anything. Nothing is sacred.” But sales are still growing. “They melt in your mouth, and they’re not fattening,” said one woman. “I’m Catholic. This reminds us of mass.” For a more vivid reminder of mass, ThisIsTrue.com suggested, “you could go to mass.”

Comment: *For a vivid reminder of PIQUE past, readers with long memories may recall September ‘03, wherein we reprinted an ad that had made the Archdiocese of New York go, well, crackers. It showed a priest distributing Holy Communion to congregants, one of whom awaits his eucharist wafer with a bowl of Lipton Onion Dip in his hand. —John Rafferty*

CONGRATULATIONS, CHILE

On January 15, the people of Chile elected Michelle Bachelet, a woman and an open agnostic, as President, firsts on both counts in the western hemisphere. She handily defeated her billionaire opponent, who campaigned in conservative, religious Chile as a “Christian humanist.”

On the same day, in more good news for feminists and humanists, Condoleeza Rice again said that she would not run for President of the U.S. in 2008. *Whew.*

THE BOOK CLUB READS CHRIS HEDGES’ *WAR IS A FORCE THAT GIVES US MEANING*

Donna Marxer

Our January 12 meeting brought out a healthy attendance to discuss this small but jam-packed volume in which author Chris Hedges passionately discusses his views on war.

Hedges proffers full credentials as a war reporter, including five years covering insurgencies in El Salvador, as well as the first intifada in the West Bank and Gaza, the civil wars in the Sudan and Yemen, the uprisings in Algeria and the Punjab, the fall of the Romanian dictator Ceausescu, the Gulf War, the Kurdish rebellion in southeast Turkey and Northern Iraq, the war in Bosnia, and, finally, Kosovo. He is scarred by his experiences and expresses deep feeling in recounting them and arriving at his conclusions.

Beginning with the provocative title, Hedges believes that, horrible as war is, it is addictive. He explains that war strips us bare when it comes to the “fundamental questions of the meaning, or meaningless, of our place on the planet ... it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us a purpose, meaning, a reason for living.” Those who have been to war may look back on it as the most profound experience of their lives, even as they sit around with missing limbs and often ruined lives. (Betty Nicholson recalled the collective feeling of letdown after the high of World War II.)

Hedges de-glamorizes war. He points out the pitfalls of nationalism, of patriotism—“often a thinly veiled form of self worship.” He shows us that war is too often based on lies, too often fought for reasons other than the real ones, some invented after the fact. Sound familiar?

Although written by a scholar, this is not a scholarly book, and Hedges draws on anecdotal experience of his own and others, as well as much literary and historical example. He describes the difference between “mythic reality” and “sensory reality.” The

former is the high-flown idealism that is bandied about as justification for war, and the latter, the actual experience of war, is that borne by the soldiers and civilians involved. The myth is usually kept alive by the reporters, whose job it becomes to support the myth, to boost morale, to not tell the brutal facts, to not show the actual horror and anguish. Hedges says flatly that in the Gulf War, “the press was not duped, it was complicit.”

In spite of many examples he gives of other destructive aspects of war—the ruin of culture, the punishment of dissidents (the first to suffer), the conflict between and compliance of Eros and Thanatos (love and death)—Hedges is finally not a pacifist. He believes that evil exists in the world and must be dealt with, but is too frequently ignored, as in Darfur today.

The only antidote to war he offers is to develop a kind of humanism that comes from understanding the truth about war and its causes and, in the final analysis, belief in love. A couple of readers were less than enamored of the book, especially of that believe-in-love summation. Said Ed Henrion: “It’s the dumbest book written this year, with a John Lennon ending.”

War Is ... stimulated a lot of discussion, the most important question being, “Is there such a thing as a just war?” Half of us said Yes, and most of the rest shrugged. Former art critic Lisa Mulleneux thought the book was too subjective, and would have been better titled, “War Is a Force That Gives *Me* Meaning.”

Interestingly enough, the following evening I met Steve Mumford, the young combat artist who has been covering Iraq and published recently in *Harper’s*, and asked him what he thought of the book. “I wish Hedges had made it more personal,” he said, “without bringing up all those high-flown ideas, myth and so forth.” For myself, I found *War Is*—and Hedges himself, whom I have met—refreshingly authentic and balanced. And that is what makes horse races, book clubs, worthwhile discussion and the continuing dialogue that creates understanding and helps promote peace, not war. Or let us hope so.

A man passes a small courtyard when he hears murmuring voices. He goes in and sees an altar with a large zero in the middle and a banner that says “NIL.”

White-robed worshippers kneel before the altar chanting hymns to The Great Nullity and The Blessed Emptiness.

The man turns to a white-robed congregant beside him and asks, “Is nothing sacred?”