

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

March, 2006

This month, we celebrate our celebration of Darwin Day, consider the Deity in court in Italy and Pennsylvania, and teen sex on trial in (where else?) Kansas. We are instructed in Confucius' "Silver Rule," and the religious right's rule over reason. We introduce a topic new to these pages, but one we think of humanist interest: what to do about poor health care in the world's richest country. But first an old, a never-ending problem: righteous religion run amok in the streets.

BUY SOMETHING DANISH

John Rafferty

The lunatic escapees from the 11th century are rampaging through the streets again, flags are being burned, embassies sacked, the Jews are being blamed, again, for being behind it all (whatever the hell "it" is) and Muslims are dying in mob violence, again, this time in protest over some cartoons they've never seen, published in a newspaper they've never heard of.

One can only wonder what they would do if they could see the new cartoon in the French satirical weekly, *Charlie Hebdo*, that shows the Prophet Muhammad complaining, "It's hard to be loved by morons."

We now know that the right-wing Danish newspaper that originally published the cartoons last September did so with the deliberate intention of offending Denmark's Muslim community, sort of teaching them a lesson about freedom of the press.

We now also know that politically militant Danish Muslims, after two months of unsuccessfully trying to get the Danish government to punish the paper, took their case to various imams and mullahs in Arab countries. They brought with them a "dossier" on the case that included even more offensive cartoons that had never been published, and they also cited a far-out proposal by a far-right Danish political party to ban the Koran (because of verses "encouraging violence") as if it was Danish government policy. Both exaggerations, the militants later said, were "misunderstandings."

But their hard work paid off. Many of the world's Muslim nations officially protested and/or recalled their ambassadors and initiated boycotts of Danish goods. Some of those governments actively encouraged the storming of Danish and other Western embassies (when was the last time you heard of a "spontaneous" street demonstration in Damascus or Tehran?), and so are responsible for the ensuing destruction and death.

In response, most of the democratic governments of Europe have defended press freedom, but just barely, making wussy noises like France's President Jacques Chirac, who condemned "all manifest provocations that might dangerously fan passion."

But—giving credit where it's due—President Bush, in the Oval Office and in the presence of King Abdullah II of Jordan, said on February 8, "We reject violence as a way to express discontent over what is printed in the free press." Condoleeza Rice went even further, naming Iran and Syria as having "gone out of their way to inflame sentiments and to use this for their own purposes."

Good. Now let's go further. Humanists can show support for democracy by countering the boycotts.

Buy something Danish. (No, not a pastry!) If a new Bang & Olufsen sound system is a bit pricey for a political statement, how about Lego blocks for the kids? Order an Aquavit the next time you eat out. Pick up a six-pack of Carlsberg beer at the market, and some excellent cheese: Danish Blue or Cream Havarti. Indulge in a tin of Advantus Danish Butter Cookies, or bake your own with super-premium Lurpak butter. Need something for the tabletop? Nobody designs better than Dansk or, for traditionalists, Royal Copenhagen, and they're online.

Now, where can I buy a Danish flag?

DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT IDEAS

David Brooks

(Excerpted from "Drafting Hitler" in The NYTimes, 2/9/06.)

[Mr. Brooks describes an Arab European League cartoon of Hitler in bed with Anne Frank that is supposed to make us in the West "know how you feel" about the Danish cartoons.]

At first I sympathized with your anger at the Danish cartoons because it's impolite to trample on other people's religious symbols. But as the rage spread and the issue grew more cosmic, many of us in the West were reminded of how vast the chasm is between you and us. There was more talk than ever about a clash of civilizations. We don't just have different ideas; we have a different relationship to ideas.

We in the West were born into a world that reflects the legacy of Socrates and the agora. In our world, images, statistics and arguments swarm around from all directions. There are movies and blogs, books and sermons. There's the profound and the vulgar, high and low. ... We believe in progress and in personal growth. By swimming in this flurry of perspectives, by facing unpleasant facts, we try to come closer to understanding.

But you have a different way. When I say you, I don't mean you Muslims. I don't mean you genuine Islamic scholars and learners. I mean you Islamists. I mean you young men who were well educated in the West, but who have retreated in disgust from the inconclusiveness and chaos of our conversation. You've retreated from the agora into an exaggerated version of Muslim purity. ...

Our mind-set is progressive and rational. Your mind-set is pre-Enlightenment and mythological. In your worldview, history doesn't move forward through gradual understanding ... history is resolved during the apocalyptic conflict between the supernaturally pure jihadist and the supernaturally evil Jew. ...

In my world, people search for truth in their own diverse ways. In your world, the faithful and the infidel battle for survival, and words and ideas and cartoons are nothing more than weapons in that war.

So, of course, what started in Denmark ended up for you with Hitler, the Holocaust and the Jew. But in your overreaction ... your defensiveness is showing. Democracy is coming to your region, and democracy brings the conversation. Mainstream leaders like Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani are embracing democracy and denouncing your riots as "misguided and oppressive."

You fundamentalists have turned yourselves into a superpower of dysfunction, demanding our attention week after week. But it is hard to intimidate people forever into

silence, to bottle up the conversation, to lock the world into an epic war only you want. While I don't share your rage, I do understand your panic.

THE HECKLER'S VETO

Tim Gordinier, Ph.D.

(Excerpted from HumanistNetworkNews.org, 2/8/06.)

The recent violent riots ... vividly illustrate a fundamental difference between open societies and those we can charitably characterize as being dominated by a medieval mindset. ...

Ridiculing religion, or even making narrow-minded statements, is a protected right in societies that pride themselves on secularist principles. While the aggrieved parties have the right to be outraged, they need to express that anger in peaceful ways, not react violently. ...

It reminds me of the so-called Heckler's Veto. In the not-so-distant past, when an unpopular speaker was practicing her First Amendment rights, thugs in the crowd would often threaten to start trouble if the police did not shut her up.

It was a tactic that segregationists used against the civil rights movement to stop legal protests and marches. Law enforcement was only too glad, on some occasions, to stop the protesters and even make arrests if the protest was not canceled. They did this under the guise of keeping the public order. All you need to do is raise the specter of public disorder and we have effectively chilled freedom of speech and press.

Is that what is happening here? Are all these violent demonstrations a threat of a *fatwa* on a much grander scale than Salman Rushdie had to experience? Should we put up with this? Or should we remember the cautionary tale of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, who was murdered last year for offending militant Muslims?

While we should be concerned about safety, we need to be careful that we don't allow the mindset of self-censorship to become the order of the day. ...

Have we already succumbed to the fear?

Humanists are especially sensitive to this issue because while we respect everyone's right to legal protection for their beliefs, we criticize religion—in general and usually gently—for its supernatural assumptions. We may also harshly criticize particular beliefs in some cases, for the harmful practices certain sects' belief systems often engender. These groups may have a right to their beliefs — but acting on those beliefs is an entirely different matter. Nor should they be allowed to intimidate others from expressing their beliefs, even when those beliefs are based on an atheistic worldview. ...

It may seem paradoxical, but in a civilized society you do not have a right to not be offended. Or the right to respond with violence if you don't like what someone says. In a humanist world there would be no such thing as blasphemy. But I would be willing to settle for a secular world where people have the right to blaspheme and no harm would come to them.

FOR THOSE OF US LIVING IN GLASS HOUSES

Iman Osman

(Mr. Osman's letter is reprinted from 2/9/06 NYTimes.)

I am tired of reading scores of letters and commentaries attacking the beliefs of one billion Muslims because of the actions of a few.

Let's set the record straight: we did not vote for Osama bin Laden or any of his followers. In fact, we suffered from their actions more than anyone else.

Let's examine the actions of those who are attacking us. They twice elected a self-proclaimed born-again Christian president who invaded another country in a war that has taken many civilian lives and that has involved torture, spying and the detention of people without due process.

Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones.

AND FOR THE LAST WORD ...

“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

— *Thomas Jefferson*

AN IMPROVED HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Martin Reichgut, M.D.

According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, national healthcare spending in 2003 accelerated 7.7 percent to \$5,670 for each adult and child. The U.S. has consistently spent far more for healthcare than any other country in the world.

Nonetheless, the World Health Organization ranked the U.S. health system's overall performance 37th in the world, behind most European nations and Japan, as well as Chile, Colombia, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore. The U.S. ranked 23rd in infant mortality and 21st in male life expectancy. Part of the reason was poor accessibility to healthcare. According to the U.S. Census Bureau the percentage of working adults (18 to 64) who were uninsured climbed to 19 percent in 2004, an increase of over 750,000 people. In 2004, 45.8 million adults and children were without health insurance.

The survey counted only those adults and children with no insurance for the entire year. Millions of others lost their coverage for a portion of the year. If they were included, the numbers of uninsured would be much higher. The survey also counted as insured many more who are underinsured in the sense that they lack adequate coverage for all contingencies.

Many ask why our healthcare ranks so low in the world when we spend at least twice what most other nations spend per capita. The two reasons most often cited are:

1. We alone treat healthcare as a commodity distributed according to ability to pay, rather than as a service distributed according to need. In our market-driven system, investor-owned firms compete, not by increasing quality or lowering costs, but by avoiding unprofitable patients and shifting costs back to patients. This creates the paradox of a healthcare system based on avoiding the sick.

2. Hundreds of billions of dollars in overhead are siphoned out of healthcare annually by insurance companies. Additional billions are needlessly expended by the healthcare providers who must deal with these insurance companies. Based on predictions of 2003 spending, the Public Citizen's Health Research Group at Harvard reported that our health bureaucracy now consumes at least \$399.4 billion annually. They estimate that a national health insurance plan would save \$286 billion, enough to provide health coverage for all the un-insured and full drug coverage for the nation's seniors.

Additional studies conducted by the Congressional Budget Office, the General Accounting Office, the Lewin Group, and Boston University School of Public Health all

confirm that under a single-payer system, comprehensive care can be provided for everyone without spending any more than is currently being spent.

Many worry that a government-run single-payer system would not work well in the U.S. They cite the delays experienced in receiving elective healthcare services in the United Kingdom and Canada. Our circumstances are considerably different. Don R. McCanne of Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP) points out that the U.K. and Canada spend much less per capita than we do. We spend more than enough to run a single-payer system without delays and have far more healthcare capacity. Orange County, California, for example, has more MRI scanners than all of Canada. Blue Cross in Massachusetts employs more people to administer coverage for 2.5 million New Englanders than Canada employs to administer coverage for 27 million Canadians. McCanne concludes that with our current funding and our tremendous capacity, delays for services will not be a factor.

Substantial money can also be saved by taking good care of people. The millions of adults and children who are unable to afford routine healthcare seek help late in the course of an illness. They are likely to go to emergency rooms or require hospitalization, alternatives that are far more costly than treatment in a doctor's office. The higher costs are paid by us all, either as higher insurance premiums, higher taxes, or both. Increasing overall access to healthcare would reduce our burden of illness and reduce the accompanying cost.

As the current crisis broadens, the attitude of the medical community appears to be changing. The August 13, 2003 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published an article calling for a government based single-payer national healthcare system. An editorial in the same issue stated, "Although American medicine may fear government's exercise of arbitrary power, government is accountable. The real danger lies in the faceless, inexorable, profit-motivated market, an institution from which there is no appeal."

Public attitudes have also shifted. In a 2003 *Washington Post-ABC News* poll, 80 percent of respondents favored health care coverage for all Americans, even if it meant raising taxes. Sixty-two percent preferred a tax-financed, government-run, universal health insurance program like Medicare over the current health insurance system, where some have no insurance at all. The percentages would certainly have been even higher if the respondents had known that their own protection would also improve.

And it would improve. For what government, corporations, and individuals already spend on healthcare, we could provide universal coverage, which includes choice of private providers, hospital care, medical care, mental-health care, some home care and nursing home care, and full prescription drug coverage for seniors.

People will vote to protect themselves. No other issue is as universally compelling. Millions of unregistered voters will have an incentive to register, and the 45 percent currently registered who don't vote will have a concrete, meaningful, up-close-and-personal reason to do so.

President Bush and many members of Congress propose varying combinations of tax credits and increased use of private health care programs. Tax credits are of little benefit to the poorest Americans and increased privatization adds layers of bureaucracy, which decreases effectiveness and siphons off more money for overhead. The new Medicare drug bill is a glaring case in point.

Meanwhile Federal Bill HR 676, which provides a remedy for the healthcare problem, languishes in Congress, awaiting Congressional action. HR 676, advocated by Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich, would create a publicly financed and privately delivered healthcare system by expanding the current Medicare program to cover all Americans.

According to Physicians for a National Health Plan, HR 676 would be financed as follows:

1. Keep the current public funding for Medicare and Medicaid.
2. Add a 7.7 percent payroll tax on employers, replacing current business healthcare expenditures, which approximate 8.5 percent. Small employers, who don't offer health insurance now because it costs as much as 25 percent of their payroll, would have a new expenditure, but would receive the same low health insurance rate as larger firms.
3. Add a 2 percent income tax on individuals, replacing their current insurance premiums, co-pays, and deductibles, which usually amount to more.

The need is undeniable. The infrastructure is in place. The money is available. The voter understands the issue. It's time to make the change.

Note: The text of Dr. Reichgut's above article, including all footnotes and a complete bibliography, will be available on the SHSNY website (www.shsny.org) shortly.

Question: Should a "government-based single-payer national healthcare system" be the subject of a SHSNY Roundtable? Mail to the PO Box, or e-mail john@rafferty.net.

“LIBERAL MEDIA BIAS”? HOW ABOUT A STUPIDITY BIAS?

Tiya Madden

(Reprinted from The Humanist Monthly, newsletter of the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society, February, 2006)

My nomination for “stupidest headline of the year” so far goes to USA Weekend's January 13-15 edition, for the following headline on the “Science” column:

Newly Charted Territory: With the discovery of a new “planet” in our solar system, some people may wonder: Will this affect my horoscope?

The article is eleven paragraphs long; only one of those paragraphs contains scientific information about the new planet (tentatively named Xena), while the other ten are devoted entirely to the concerns of astrology. Makes one wonder why they bother to call it the “science” column.

Comment: Also makes one wonder why the editors at USA Today resent it being called “McPaper.” — John Rafferty

What does the executive director of the Skeptics Society do? I sit around and think of things not to believe in.” — Michael Shermer, interviewed in *Time Out New York*, 1/5/06.

SHSNY CELEBRATES DARWIN DAY

We celebrated Darwin Day on February 2, ten days early, because that was the day—evening, actually—on which we were able to persuade Richard Milner to give the world premiere performance of his new lecture, “Charles Darwin & Associates: Ghostbusters.”

Mr. Milner did not disappoint. Historian of science, Darwin authority, guest Editor of *Natural History* magazine and entertainer, Richard delighted a SHSNY audience two years ago with his performance of “A Musical Voyage of Discovery With Charles Darwin,” and wow-ed the standing-room-only audience in the Muhlenberg Library’s community room again this year.

Richard began his talk with an overview of Darwin’s life, then turned to the “Ghostbusters” subject. Based on his own research, Richard’s presentation detailed Darwin’s behind-the-scenes—and until now unpublicized—involvement in a famous, even lurid trial that exposed the frauds of one of the more notorious Victorian-era “spiritualists.” (*In a footnote to the trial that could be applied to any of today’s celebrity scandals, the fake didn’t mind being exposed at all — the notoriety would only bring him more business.*)

In spite of several computer/projector glitches, Richard’s enthusiasm and wit carried the evening, and the audience—which included famed neuroscientist Oliver Sacks and Darwin great-great grandson and author (see page 6) Matthew Chapman—was delighted.

[Photo of Matthew Chapman]

Darwin descendant and screenwriter (“Runaway Jury,” “Color of Night”) Matthew Chapman is the author of “Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir.”

[Photo of Oliver Sacks]

Neuroscientist and best-selling author (several times over) Oliver Sacks enjoyed the show from a front-row seat.

[Photo of Richard Milner in front of picture of Darwin]

Richard Milner evoked the spirit, as well as the image, of Charles Darwin.

Our Darwin Day Dinner and the Dumbth Awards

When we first reserved a room for 30 at East of Eighth restaurant for our Darwin Day Dinner after Richard Milner’s lecture, we crossed our fingers and hoped we’d fill the space.

We shouldn’t have worried. We squeezed in 32 and, if we had been able to expand the room, could have accommodated about a dozen more members and guests who waited a little too long to reserve.

But the food was good, the cash bar was busy, and the recipient of the first annual SHSNY Dumbth Award for anti-rationalist, anti-humanist remarks in 2005—TV personality Star Jones, who thinks God delayed the December, 2004 tsunami until after her honeymoon—was cheered to the rafters. The horse’s-ass trophy is hers whenever she wants to claim it.

[Photo of audience at Milner lecture]

Next year — bigger and better! Let’s start planning Darwin Day 2007 now — any and all ideas are welcome.

MR. MEHRING, WELCOME TO OUR WORLD

Matthew Chapman

(Mr. Chapman, the great-great grandson of Charles Darwin—whom many of us met at our Darwin Day Winter Dinner—spent the weeks of the Dover, PA, “Intelligent Design” trial observing the courtroom proceedings and interviewing participants and ordinary citizens, recording their often fascinating, sometimes illuminating opinions. From those experiences, he wrote “God or Gorilla, A Darwin Descendant at the Dover Monkey Trial,” for Harper’s Magazine, February, 2006, from which the following, the conclusion of the article, is excerpted.)

When I returned to the Comfort Inn on the last day of the trial, I did not know that I had one more treat in store. Sitting outside the hotel was a man named Scott Mehring. ...

Mehring, of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, is forty-eight years old, the onetime owner of a business that had something to do with performance cars. He wore a tight leather motorcycle jacket with no visible shirt underneath and had a Rod Stewart haircut. He liked to party, he told me, and was ready to go out and party hard, but because he’d lost his license for various reasons he had no car and his cab had not yet arrived. So, sure, he’d be happy to share his views. I took out my recorder.

“If you go back to the Big Bang,” he said, speaking rapidly, “the elements, I’m not sure exactly what they actually were, but whatever the elements were—the atom, the neutron, the proton neutron, whatever it was that created the Big Bang—*where* did that stuff come from? Spontaneous generation is a dead theory—at one time they thought it was true—left a piece of meat on the ground maggots appeared, they thought the maggots came out of the meat, but actually they just came out to eat the food, so you can’t say spontaneous generation created it. ... Now if you believe in physics, you got the eleventh dimension—it’s a new theory, the eleventh dimension—and inside the eleventh dimension they say that there’s an infinite number of universes. So my take is that if you die on the earth, we just somehow hop over to the eleventh dimension, and hop from universe to universe to universe forever inside the eleventh dimension. So that means the Bible could be right with everlasting life after we die. *But*, okay, the elements that started the Big Bang, if that was an intelligent designer? Then you’ve got another complication. If there was, like, one dude somewhere at the very top that created everything? Well, *where did he come from?* Who created him? And who created the God who created God? It gives me goose bumps. It’s a loop, like in computer programming — it’s an endless loop.”

He paused and shook his head. His cab had arrived.

“If you think about this too much,” he concluded, “you can go insane.”

DOING (OR NOT) UNTO OTHERS

Samuel Milligan

Christians make much of what they call the Golden Rule that instructs us to “do unto others as we would have them do unto us” (Matt. 7:12, Luke. 6:31). On the face of it, this looks like very good advice, but on investigation, I think I can detect a rather serious flaw.

As an example: Christians believe that they have a soul that they are busy trying to get into heaven after they die, avoiding the eternal punishment of hell that their all-loving and all-forgiving God has allotted them if they die in sin. Unbelievers will also suffer the

same punishment, since disbelief ranks pretty high on the Richter scale of sin. Convinced Christians believe without any doubt whatsoever that this is the absolute dead-level truth and so gaining salvation is, consequently, a really serious matter with them.

This being so, we can assume that the Christian will think that, were he an unbeliever, it would be a good thing if a practicing Christian were to convert him to the true way, using whatever it takes in order to save his soul from the fires of perdition.

This then gives Christians in their turn the right to work on converting unbelievers, using whatever it takes, since they would want to be similarly converted if they were themselves unbelievers. Regrettably, this “whatev-er it takes” has, in the past, included all sorts of wicked-ness, up to and including torture and incineration at the stake. (The theory, as I understand it, being that it is better to burn at the stake than to burn eternally in hell.)

At the least, “doing unto others” consists of meddling in their affairs.

Now, curiously, the Confucians have a similar rule. In the *Lunyu* (15:24) we read that “Zi Gong asked, ‘Is there one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one’s life?’ The Master replied, ‘There is *shu* (reciprocity—putting yourself in another’s place).’ Confucius went on to clarify, ‘Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want.’” In effect, do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.

Christians, of course, denigrate the Confucian version, saying that it is negative, and often refer to it as the “silver rule,” with sweetly tolerant condescension. But it is, I think, much better than the “golden” version. What Confucius tells us is to avoid poking our noses into the business of others, to basically leave them alone. This does not, however, relieve one of the responsibility of helping others to achieve their goals whenever possible. Again, the *Lunyu* tells us that “One who wishes to establish oneself must first establish others; one who wishes to become prominent must first help others to achieve prominence (6:30).”

All this is consistent with Confucian humanism and much more conducive to harmony. I expect it might even contribute to that good will among men that the Christians are always talking about, but so often sabotage in actual practice.

TAKING JESUS TO COURT

Anicole Winfield

(Excerpted from *The Toronto Star*, 1/21/06.)

Viterbo, Italy: Lawyers for a small-town parish priest have been ordered to appear in court after the cleric was accused of unlawfully asserting what many take for granted: that Jesus Christ existed.

The Rev. Enrico Righi was named in a complaint by Luigi Cascioli after Righi wrote in a parish bulletin that Jesus did indeed exist, and was born of a couple named Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem and lived in Nazareth.

Cascioli, a lifelong atheist, claims Righi—his boyhood schoolmate—violated two Italian laws by making the assertion: so-called “abuse of popular belief” in which someone fraudulently deceives people; and “impersonation” in which someone gains by attributing a false name to someone.

Cascioli says that for 2,000 years the Roman Catholic Church has been deceiving people by furthering the fable that Christ existed, and ... gaining financially. He also

asserts the Gospels are full of errors and biased, and that other evidence from the time doesn't hold up. ...

Cascioli is quick to stress he has no problem with Christians freely professing their faith. Rather, he says, he wants to “denounce the abuse that the Catholic Church commits by availing itself of its prestige in order to inculcate ... facts that are really just inventions.” ...

Cascioli says he fully recognizes that his case has a slim chance of succeeding in overwhelmingly Catholic Italy, but not because his argument is lacking. He says he is merely going through the necessary legal steps in Italy so he can ultimately take the matter to the European Court of Human Rights, where he intends to pursue the case against the church for “religious racism.”

“GOD” IS IN LEGAL TROUBLE, TOO

(Excerpted from news.bbc.co.uk, 2/15/06)

The Pennsylvania Department of Transport has told Paul Sewell, a bond enforcement agent, that he cannot use the name “God” on his driver’s license.

Sewell says he uses the name because people often cried, “Oh, God” when he tracked them down. “Whenever I go to arrest somebody, they say, ‘Oh, God, give me another chance. Oh, God, let me go.’”

Sewell can’t see why his signature is a problem—“I have a credit card with it”—and has filed an appeal.

Which he signed “God.”

TODAY TEEN DOROTHY MIGHT THANK GOODNESS SHE’S “NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE”

Lynn Harris

(Excerpted from “I can give you condoms, but I’ll have to tell the cops” on salon.com, 1/31/06.)

A federal trial began yesterday over a Kansas law that would prohibit “virtually all sexual activity” by people under age 16, which would stop teens from having sex — I’m sorry, which would stop sexually active teens from seeking contraception or getting STD treatment.

Because what’s specifically at issue in the case is this: whether, under the law, healthcare “professionals and educators must report [teens’ sexual] behavior to state authorities.”

This creepy case stems from a 2003 opinion by Kansas attorney general Phil Kline, who you may remember from such controversies as the “I’ll be needing the names of women and girls who’ve had late-term abortions” lawsuit, which is pending in the state Supreme Court. Kline has also challenged—unsuccessfully, I might gloat—Kansas’ use of Medicaid for abortions. Last year he got the Legislature to require abortion providers to collect fetal tissue from patients younger than 14 and turn it over to law enforcement officials (so that they can find out who the father is and press charges if necessary).

According to *The New York Times*, “Kline’s interpretation of the law focused mainly on the reporting duty of abortion providers, arguing that any pregnant, unmarried minor had by definition been the victim of rape or abuse. But it included a broad mandate for

reporting whenever ‘compelling evidence of sexual interaction is present.’” N.B.: That’s compelling evidence of “interaction,” not abuse. ...

Steve Alexander, an assistant attorney general, [said] that “the Kansas statute meant that those younger than 16 could not consent to sex, and that those violating the law forfeited any privacy rights.”

“Illegal sexual activity by minors can lead to STD’s, unwanted pregnancies, abortion, depression, mental illness,” he continued. “To pretend otherwise is foolish.”

OK, take out “illegal” and read his statement again. Right, so now let’s deter teens from getting information that could help reduce those consequences. Who’s foolish now?

...

The law would cover not only vaginal and anal intercourse and oral sex but also “lewd fondling or touching” with “the intent to arouse.” Which, yes, could include what I believe they now call Freedom kissing. “The doctors, nurses, counselors and educators suing over Mr. Kline’s interpretation of the reporting law say it goes far beyond abortion to include every teenager who requests birth control pills or H.I.V. testing, or who in a group therapy session even discusses ‘heavy petting’ with a boyfriend or girlfriend,” says the Times.

“If they know what they tell me is reported, they simply won’t talk,” said Beth McGilley, a Wichita therapist who is one of the plaintiffs. “You have two 15-year-olds mashing in the back seat of the car — who’s the criminal here? Do we really need Big Brother to decide whether or not that needs to be judiciously pursued?”

IT SEEMS SCIENCE *DOES* MATTER TO THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT IN WASHINGTON

Dennis Overbye

(Excerpted from “Someday the Sun Will Go Out and the World Will End (but Don’t Tell Anyone)” in The New York Times, February 14.)

A 24-year-old NASA political appointee with no scientific background, George C. Deutsch ... told a designer working on a NASA Web project that the Big Bang was “not proven fact; it is opinion,” and thus the word “theory” should be used with every mention of Big Bang.

It was not NASA’s place, he said in an e-mail message, to make a declaration about the origin of the universe “that discounts intelligent design by a creator.”

In a different example of spinning science news last month, NASA headquarters removed a reference to the future death of the sun from a press release about the discovery of comet dust around a distant star known as a white dwarf. ...

“We are seeing the ghost of a star that was once a lot like our sun,” said ... a statement that was edited out of the final news release. An e-mail message from Erica Hupp of NASA headquarters to the authors of the original release said, “NASA is not in the habit of frightening the public with doom and gloom scenarios.”

Never mind that the death of the sun has been a staple of astronomy textbooks for 50 years. ...

Personally, I can’t get enough of gloom-and-doom scenarios. I’m enchanted by the recent discovery, buttressed by observations from NASA’s Hubble Space Telescope, that an antigravitational force known as dark energy might suck all galaxies out of the

observable universe in a few hundred billion years and even rip apart atoms and space. But I never dreamed that I might be frightening the adults. ...

Apparently, science does matter.

Update, Feb. 18: *To solve the problem of political appointees in NASA's public affairs office who know nothing about science—or who are opposed to real science—the White House has added another political appointee, the fifth, to NASA headquarters. This one comes straight from work as a spokesman for the Office of Surface Mining in the Interior Department.*

“Surface mining.” The rest of us might call it “strip mining.” Want to take a guess about the new guy's environmental opinions and attitudes?