

PIQUE

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

We try to remain politically neutral about non-humanist topics, but the anti-democratic, faith-based unreason of the Current Occupant of the White House, and the corruption and hypocrisy of his religious-right outriders compels comment, demands condemnation—and we have it here, in plenty. Happily, we have Richard Dawkins and Garrison Keillor, too, a new numbskull nominee for our Dumbth Award, and a brand-new religion. But remember it's November: vote early and often.— *JR*

THE DEATH OF HABEAS CORPUS

(Reprinted from "A Dangerous New Order," an editorial in The New York Times, October 19.)

Once President Bush signed the new law on military tribunals [the Military Commissions Act], administration officials and Republican leaders in Congress wasted no time giving Americans a taste of the new order created by this unconstitutional act.

Within hours, Justice Department lawyers notified the federal courts that they no longer had the authority to hear pending lawsuits on behalf of inmates of the penal camp at Guantánamo Bay. They cited passages in the bill that suspend the fundamental principle of habeas corpus, making Mr. Bush the first president since the Civil War to take that undemocratic step.

Not satisfied with having won the vote, Dennis Hastert, the speaker of the House, quickly issued a statement accusing Democrats who opposed the Military Commissions Act of 2006 of putting "their liberal agenda ahead of the security of America." He said the Democrats "would gingerly pamper the terrorists who plan to destroy innocent Americans' lives" and create "new rights for terrorists."

This nonsense is part of the Republicans' scare-America-first strategy for the elections. No Democrat advocated pampering terrorists — gingerly or otherwise — or giving them new rights. Democratic amendments to the bill sought to protect everyone's right to a fair trial while providing a legal way to convict terrorists.

Americans will hear more of this ahead of the election. They also will hear Mr. Bush say that he finally has the power to bring to justice a handful of men behind the 9/11 attacks. The truth is that Mr. Bush could have done that long ago, but chose to detain them illegally at hidden C.I.A. camps to extract information. He sent them to Guantánamo only to stampede Congress into passing the new law.

The 60 or so men at Guantánamo who are now facing tribunals — out of about 450 inmates — also could have been tried years ago if Mr. Bush had not rebuffed efforts by Congress to create suitable courts. He imposed a system of kangaroo courts that was more about expanding his power than about combating terrorism.

While the Republicans pretend this bill will make America safer, let's be clear about its real dangers. It sets up a separate system of justice for any foreigner whom Mr. Bush chooses to designate as an "illegal enemy combatant." It raises insurmountable obstacles for prisoners to challenge their detentions. It does not require the government to release prisoners who are not being charged, or a prisoner who is exonerated by the tribunals.

The law does not apply to American citizens, but it does apply to other legal U.S. residents, and chips away at the foundations of the judicial system in ways that all Americans should find threatening. It further damages the nation's reputation and, by repudiating key protections of the Geneva Conventions, it needlessly increases the danger to any American soldier captured in battle.

In the short run, voters should see through the fog created by the Republican campaign machine. It will be up to the courts to repair the harm this law has done to the Constitution.

YOUR WORDS ARE LIES, SIR

Keith Olbermann

(Excerpted from a "Special Comment" on "Countdown" on MSNBC, October 18.)

We have lived as if in a trance. We have lived as people in fear. And now — our rights and our freedoms in peril — we slowly awake to learn that we have been afraid of the wrong thing. ...

We have handed a blank check drawn against our freedom to a man who has insisted again that "the United States does not torture. It's against our laws and it's against our values," and who has said it with a straight face while the pictures from Abu Ghraib prison and the stories of waterboarding figuratively fade in and out, around him. ...

And if you somehow think habeas corpus has not been suspended for American citizens but only for everybody else, ask yourself this: If you are pulled off the street tomorrow, and they call you an alien or an undocumented immigrant or an "unlawful enemy combatant" — exactly how are you going to convince them to give you a court hearing to prove you are not? Do you think this attorney general is going to help you? ...

President Bush, your words are lies, sir. They are lies that imperil us all.

AND SPEAKING OF LIES ...

(Excerpted from Salon.com, 10/3, in a review of Bob Woodward's new book, State of Denial.)

[picture of Bush with "Mission Accomplished" banner behind him]

When it turned out that the mission in Iraq hadn't been wrapped up as neatly as the White House suggested, George W. Bush said it was the Navy, not his own staff, who put that "Mission Accomplished" banner up on the USS Abraham Lincoln. But Bob Woodward told Larry King that the words were actually going to be included in Bush's speech that day in May 2003—until Rumsfeld intervened. "I almost died because 'mission accomplished' was in the speech," Rumsfeld said. "I got it out of the speech but I didn't get the sign down."

We don't know whether he tried to stop Bush from saying, on the deck of the carrier, "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended," and "In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed."

2,600 U.S. troops have died in Iraq since then.

Comment: *The war in Iraq has now lasted longer than our WWII conquest of Nazi Germany. Before the end of this month it will have lasted longer than the war with Japan.*

— JR

BALANCING EVILS

John Arents

(The following is in response to "If You Let The Culprit See The Evidence, He Might Find Out What He Did" in October PIQUE, about Wagih H. Makky, who was suspended from his job as an electronics engineer with the Transportation Security Administration based on a classified F.B.I. file that the government will not let him see.)

"Innocent until proven guilty," the right to confront witnesses, and the right to see evidence are principles of the criminal law. They are not principles of employment law or immigration law. For employment, it is more like "unsuitable until proven suitable." Mere suspicion is ample ground for suspension, and if it is more than mere, for dismissal. There are some areas, notably civil service and academia, where law or custom protects

employees from arbitrary dismissal after a probationary period. These protections should not apply to positions involving secrets or large sums of money.

Some of the protections for the defendant may need reexamination even for ordinary criminal trials. Defense counsel is entitled to know the names of prosecution witnesses in advance, laying them open to intimidation or murder. The right to a public trial is problematic when the public consists of gang members in their colors.

International crimes like espionage and terrorism, which can threaten the existence of the nation, are much more serious. There may have to be tradeoffs between defendants' rights and national or world security. Relaxation of protections may result in injustices like wrongful conviction, long detention, dismissal, and deportation. Vigilance is needed against both excessive disdain and excessive concern for civil liberties. The reputation of the United States must be factored in on the side of concern. As Aristotle said, "Virtue is a just mean." I suspect that this paragraph would provoke little opposition among liberals if the enemy were Nazism instead of godless Communism or godly Islam.

For me, a lifelong civil libertarian — a member of both the ACLU and its conservative counterpart, the Center for Individual Rights — these admissions are extremely painful. The deaths in New York, Madrid, and London are no less painful.

AN OPEN LETTER TO JERRY FALWELL, PAT ROBERTSON, PAT BUCHANAN, ET AL

October 2, 2006

Subject: The resignation of Congressman Mark Foley

Gentlemen:

Let me tell you something about myself. I am a godless sodomite and secular humanist who finds the actions of former Republican Congressman Mark Foley completely reprehensible. And yet the God-fearing Christian Righteous can't seem to find their voice on this matter.

I'm sorry to know that child predation is an acceptable part of your package of 'family values'.

If Mark Foley were a significant member of the Democratic Congressional power apparatus, you, Rush Limbaugh and the right wing's other attack dogs would be screaming that the Democratic Party is so rotten to its very core that voters should throw Democrats out of office at the mid-term election.

This lack of action on your part reeks of complicity, like that of Dennis Hastert and others in Congress in their cover-up!

Conrad Claborne, President

Secular Humanist Society of New York

HYPOCRISY UNBOUND

Focus on the Family's James Dobson on the Mark Foley scandal: "As it turns out, Mr. Foley has had illicit sex with no one that we know of, and the whole thing turned out to be what some people are now saying was a – sort of a joke by the boy and some of the other pages."

TIME TO CLEAN SOME CONGRESSIONAL CLOCKS

Garrison Keillor

(Excerpted from "The Miracle Drug of Anger," on Salon .com, 10/4/06)

Pick up a newspaper and read about Congress and you will find yourself yelling at walls and terrifying the cat. Last week, Congress moved to suspend habeas corpus, one thing that distinguishes a civil society from a police state. Reaction was muted.

Then the Party of Family Values was revealed to have protected a sexual predator until finally a reporter asked some pointed questions and the honorable gentleman resigned and ran off to recovery camp. This level of hypocrisy takes a person's breath away. You thought that Abramoff, Norquist, Reed & DeLay had established new lows, but the elevator is still descending.

The power of righteous vexation is what keeps so many old Democrats hanging on in nursing homes long past the time they should have kicked off. Ancient crones from FDR's time are still walking the halls, kept alive by anger at what has been done to our country. Old conservationists, feminists, grizzled veterans of the civil rights era fight off melanoma, emphysema, thanks to the miracle drug of anger. Slackers and cynics abound, not to mention nihilists in golf pants and utter idiots. Time to clean some clocks. As Frost might have written, "The woods are lovely, dark and thick. But I have many butts to kick and some to poke and just one stick."

THE "JUDEO-CHRISTIAN VALUES" RACKET

Conrad Claborne

A basic tenet of today's Republican Party is that individuals and corporations should be left alone to self-moderate and police themselves. According to this philosophy there should be no laws on the books, or funds spent, to influence anyone's actions.

Any five-year-old knows that's an invitation to the crooks, liars, and predators to run wild, and now even Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert admits he was duped – duped, I tell you – by Mark Foley.

Why is it that the people running our country have so little concern for the effects of their policies on the well-being and health of our great country and all of its citizens? By not requiring healthy oversight our government is sold to those who can shovel, or launder, money to the right places. Bill Moyers' October PBS special, "Capitol Crimes," showed how the system works, and how those in charge can get away with almost anything. Yes, lobbyist Jack Abramoff has been taken out of play, and so has his power broker, Tom Delay. But there are plenty more where they came from.

They promote a laissez-faire marketplace—wherein money rules society—as a core value in their philosophy of government. That's why this group has done everything possible to gut the middle class and unions; the rich are getting richer, while jobs are flowing out of the country like water downhill.

The problem the Moyers program underlined was the rank hypocrisy of the people at the heart of the conservative movement running the country. Yes, Democrats also have weaknesses, but it's Republicans who publicly claim the moral high ground. Behind the scenes – as Moyers observed in an interview with Lou Dobbs on CNN, "If you had invested in hypocrisy eight or nine years ago you'd have retired like Warren Buffett. ... Tom Delay, pious Christian ... Ralph Reed, the right hand of God and Time Magazine cover boy ... and Jack Abramoff, who talked about being a good orthodox Jew ... all used religion as the cloak for their plunder. ... Reed, Abramoff, Grover Norquist, and Karl Rove came to Washington in the 1980s to run a revolution, and they wound up running a racket. ... Reed and Norquist have not been indicted or accused of anything illegal, but that, in fact, is the heart of the scandal – that you can get away with this without being accused of a crime."

These people are frauds hiding behind "Judeo-Christian values." They have complete contempt for government and the people they are supposed to serve. And the result of this contempt and hypocrisy is bad policy and bad government for the American people, and for all the other people who are affected by what happens in America—everyone in the world.

CONSERVATIVE SULLIVAN AND

LIBERAL HARRIS: BOTH WRONG

Remo Cosentino

Though much discussed—as in the two lead articles in October PIQUE (“A Conservative Christian Defines and Defies Christianity,” by Andrew Sullivan; and “Head-In-the-Sand Liberals” by Sam Harris)—the role of religion in our public life, was not made any clearer by these essays. The subject is far too complex to discuss in short statements without creating more conundrums.

Is Sullivan saying that the Conservative Right’s only sin is to conflate religion and politics? Their politics, without the weight of God, would still be inhospitable to democracy. How do they differ in their involvement and control of the political agenda from Islamists? Their aims are the same, even if they differ in their methods and viciousness, with the prize for the latter going to the Islamists.

As to the means and intent that Harris discusses, how do we know that all Muslims want to slay all infidels? Harris finally admits that the Iraq war was a mistake, but was it not also a provocation to the Muslim world? As any street kid knows, “Leave me alone and I’ll do the same; touch me and I’ll kick your teeth in.”

In their last great ascendancy in the 12-15th centuries Islam did not manage to wipe out all the world’s “infidels.” But now that Islamists have, or will have, atomic weapons the world should be very afraid. Of course we have no moral authority on that subject since we’re the only country that ever used such weapons. That’s our tragedy, and maybe the world’s.

Ultimately, both Sullivan’s and Harris’s analyses of present conflicts concentrate on politics and religion, as if economics was not a factor in the current crises. Our American right wing, for all its Christianity, is intent on maintaining worldwide American hegemony, culturally and financially. The Islamists may want to send us to our heaven without the virgins, but they won’t do it as long as they need us gas guzzlers to buy their oil.

To both writers I say, religion is the problem, not the solution.

“DARWIN’S ROTTWEILER” BITES - Part 1

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.)

Paulson: You’ve written about going to church as a boy. When did you become an atheist?

Dawkins: I started getting doubts when I was about nine and realized that there are lots of different religions and they can’t all be right. And which one I happened to be brought up in was an arbitrary accident. I then sort of went back to religion around the age of 12, and then finally left it at the age of 15 or 16.

Paulson: Did God and religion just not make sense intellectually? Is that why you turned against religion?

Dawkins: Yes, purely intellectually. I was never much bothered about moral questions like, how could there be a good God when there’s so much evil in the world? For me, it was always an intellectual thing. I wanted to know the explanation for the existence of all things. I was particularly fascinated by living things. And when I discovered the Darwinian explanation, which is so stunningly elegant and powerful, I realized that you really don’t need any kind of supernatural force to explain it.

Paulson: Why do you call yourself an atheist? Why not an agnostic?

Dawkins: Well, technically, you cannot be any more than an agnostic. But I am as agnostic about God as I am about fairies and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. You cannot actually disprove the existence of God. Therefore, to be a positive atheist is not

technically possible. But you can be as atheist about God as you can be atheist about Thor or Apollo. Everybody nowadays is an atheist about Thor and Apollo. Some of us just go one god further.

Paulson: When you're talking about God, are you really talking about the God of the Bible – Yahweh of the Old Testament?

Dawkins: Well, as it happens, I am because I have an eye to the audience who's likely to be reading my book. Nobody believes in Thor and Apollo anymore so I don't bother to address the book to them. So, in practice, it's addressed to believers in the Abrahamic God. ...

Paulson: What is so bad about religion?

Dawkins: Well, it encourages you to believe falsehoods, to be satisfied with inadequate explanations which really aren't explanations at all. And this is particularly bad because the real explanations, the scientific explanations, are so beautiful and so elegant. Plenty of people never get exposed to the beauties of the scientific explanation for the world and for life. And that's very sad. But it's even sadder if they are actively discouraged from understanding by a systematic attempt in the opposite direction, which is what many religions actually are. But that's only the first of my many reasons for being hostile to religion.

Paulson: My sense is that you don't just think religion is dishonest. There's something evil about it as well.

Dawkins: Well, yes. I think there's something very evil about faith, where faith means believing in something in the absence of evidence, and actually taking pride in believing in something in the absence of evidence. And the reason that's dangerous is that it justifies essentially anything.

If you're taught in your holy book or by your priest that blasphemers should die or apostates should die – anybody who once believed in the religion and no longer does needs to be killed – that clearly is evil.

And people don't have to justify it because it's their faith. They don't have to say, "Well, here's a very good reason for this." All they need to say is, "That's what my faith says." And we're all expected to back off and respect that. Whether or not we're actually faithful ourselves, we've been brought up to respect faith and to regard it as something that should not be challenged. And that can have extremely evil consequences. The consequences it's had historically—the Crusades, the Inquisition, right up to the present time where you have suicide bombers and people flying planes into skyscrapers in New York—all in the name of faith.

Paulson: But don't you need to distinguish between religious extremists who kill people and moderate, peaceful religious believers?

Dawkins: You certainly need to distinguish them. They are very different. However, the moderate, sensible religious people you've cited make the world safe for the extremists by bringing up children—sometimes even indoctrinating children—to believe that faith trumps everything and by influencing society to respect faith. Now, the faith of these moderate people is in itself harmless. But the idea that faith needs to be respected is instilled into children sitting in rows in their *madrassahs* in the Muslim world. And they are told these things not by extremists but by decent, moderate teachers and *mullahs*. But when they grow up, a small minority of them remember what they were told. They remember reading their holy book, and they take it literally. They really do believe it. Now, the moderate ones don't really believe it, but they have taught children that faith is a virtue. And it only takes a minority to believe what it says in the holy book – the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Quran, whatever it is. If you believe it's literally true, there's scarcely any limit to the evil things you might do.

(Part 2 of the interview will appear in December PIQUE.)

YOUR GOD IS SO ... *DIFFERENT!*

Jerry Large

(Excerpted from "Your God is likely supremely different from anyone else's God," in the Seattle Times, 9/17/06)

Some folks like to say everyone worships the same God. But we know that isn't exactly so, and now we have a description of how American conceptions of God differ.

The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion and the Gallup organization recently finished a study that went beyond the usual questions, "Do you believe in God?" and "Do you go to church?" They tried to dig more deeply and find out how people see God, how they see themselves in relation to God and how that affects their ideas and behavior. What they found is that when Americans say "God," they are not necessarily talking about the same deity.

The researchers asked 29 questions about God's character and behavior, sifted through the answers they got from 1,721 participants and identified "two clear and distinct dimensions" to people's ideas about God.

Those are God's level of engagement and God's level of anger at human sins. People see God as engaged or not, angry or not. The four combinations of those two traits yield more information about the believer than the usual denominational labels.

Americans see God as: engaged and angry (a god involved in world and individual affairs who metes out punishment for bad behavior); engaged but not angry (involved in individual lives and the world, but behaving benevolently without anger); disengaged and angry (withdrawn from intervening in human affairs, but unhappy with the state of the world and likely to punish bad deeds in the afterlife); or disengaged and not angry (a god who set things in motion, then went fishing). Basically what we have are Lightning-bolt God, Smiley-face God, Bummed-out God and Whatever, dude God. The researchers assigned them letters: A (authoritarian), B (benevolent), C (critical) and D (distant). The combination you choose says more about you than about God.

The researchers found "a clear disconnect between how the media and academics identify American believers and how they identify themselves." Few people use the term "evangelical," for instance, even when they belong to churches that have "evangelical" in their name. But when the data are organized by type of God, it's clear which groups people belong to.

Only evangelical Protestants showed consistency in their political views. "They agree with conservative agenda items and disagree with liberal ones." They tend to believe in an authoritarian God. Other groups crossed political lines depending on the topic.

It didn't matter whether people were Catholic, Protestant or Jewish; what determined their views on a number of topics was the version of God they believed in. A Catholic who believed in the authoritarian God was as conservative as any evangelical.

They also found that women leaned toward more engaged versions and men toward less engaged. People with lower educations and lower incomes also tended to believe in a more engaged God, who answers prayers. Most black people believed in a more engaged God. Southerners tend toward an authoritarian God, West Coasters are more into a distant God and Midwesterners lean toward the benevolent God.

Interestingly, not a single black person in the survey claimed to be an atheist. Asked whether they believed without any doubt that God exists, black Protestants were the only group in which 100 percent said yes. ...

Americans overwhelmingly say they believe in God, it's just that folks have different ideas about who God is and what God wants from us. The differences have social and political impacts – who we vote for and which programs we support all affected by the way we see God, including the small portion of the population that filled in "atheist" on the survey. ...

If the government backed a religion, which version of God would it push? Looking at the survey will remind you why separation of church and state makes sense.

A MUSLIM WOMAN AGAINST THE VEIL

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown

(Excerpted from "Nothing to Hide," on TIMEEurope.com, 10/13)

Jack Straw, a leading member of Tony Blair's Cabinet ... came out against the *niqab*, the full body and face veil worn by some Muslim women. The *niqab*, Straw wrote, makes him uneasy and hampers communication. He now asks women, respectfully, to consider taking it off when they come to seek his help. ...

Feminists have denounced Straw's approach as unacceptably proscriptive, and reactionary Muslims say it is Islamophobic. But it is time to speak out against this objectionable garment and face down the obscurantists who endlessly bait and intimidate the state by making demands that violate its fundamental principles. That they have brainwashed young women, born free, to seek self-subjugation breaks my heart. Trained creatures often choose to stay in their cages even when released. I don't call that a choice.

I would not propose that Muslim women should be stopped from wearing what they choose as they walk down the street, although, to be sure, there are practical problems with the *niqab*. I have seen Muslim women who had been appallingly beaten and forced to wear it to keep their wounds hidden. Veiled women cannot eat in restaurants, swim in the sea or smile at their babies in parks. But the most important reason for opposing the veil is one of principle. So long as it ensures genuinely equal standards for all, a liberal nation has no obligation to extend its "liberalism" to condone the most illiberal practices. State institutions as well as private companies should have the right to stipulate that a person whose face cannot be seen need not be served. That would not discriminate against Muslims; it would, for example, also affect men whose faces were obscured by motorcycle helmets. The principle expressed would not be anti-Muslim, but one in favor of communication.

The example of France is salutary here. In 2004, the government banned the *hijab*, the headscarf, in public schools. ... Protests soon died down and many Muslim French girls were happily released from a heritage that has no place in the modern world. Belgium, Denmark and Singapore have taken similar steps. ... Few Britons realize that the *hijab*, now more widespread than ever, is, for Islamicist puritans, the first step on a path leading to the *burqa*, where even the eyes are gauzed over. ...

Western culture, it is true, is wildly sexualized and lacking in restraint. But there are ways to avoid falling into that pit without "withdrawing" into the darkness of a *niqab*. The robe is a manifestation of the pernicious idea of women as carriers of original sin; it assumes that the sight of a cheek or a lock of hair turns Muslim men into predators. The *niqab* rejects human commonalities. The women who wear it want to observe fellow citizens, but remain unseen, as if they were CCTV cameras.

As a modern Muslim woman, I fast and pray; but I refuse to submit to the *hijab* or to an opaque, black shroud. Exiles who fled such practices to seek refuge in Europe now find the evil is following them. ... Millions of progressive Muslims want to halt this Islamicist project to take us back to the Dark Ages.

AND SPEAKING OF MUSLIM DARK AGES ...

A 3-year-old Somali refugee brought Kenya its first polio infection in 22 years this month, bringing to 26 the number of countries reinfected since a 2003 vaccine boycott by Islamic clerics who claim the inoculations are part of a U.S. plot to make Muslims infertile.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #28

In Frisco, Texas, Sydney McGee, an elementary-school art teacher with 28 years experience, was suspended after taking fifth-grade students on a trip to the Dallas Museum of Art, during which they caught glimpses of some nude sculptures.

Never mind that her principal had authorized the trip, that McGee and the children were accompanied by four other teachers and twelve parents—none of whom made any complaint about statues by Auguste Rodin or Jean Arp, or the “nude” torso of a Greek youth from a funerary relief—all that mattered was that one kid told his parents he’d seen nude sculpture, and that the peckerhead parents complained.

Slam, dunk, McGee suspended, then (October 24) eased out of her job.

And “the beauty part”? When Dallas TV news shows ran the story, with much jolly banter, they blacked out the “offensive” anatomical areas of the statues.

SHSNY HOSTS MICHAEL SHERMER, AND BUYS SOME BOOKS Reported by John Rafferty

On October 11, SHSNY hosted Michael Shermer, best-selling author, founder of the Skeptic Society and of Skeptic Magazine (which, he says, “takes out the trash of junk science”) and most recently, author of *Why Darwin Matters: The Case Against Intelligent Design.*)

[photo of Shermer reading from his book]

An audience of about 40 (on a rain-drenched night) filled the room at Shetler Studios on West 54 Street, and was thoroughly entertained by Mr. Shermer’s discourse on Darwin’s (and his own) adventures in the Galapagos; on the great naturalist’s intellectual journey from creationist believer to agnostic (his friend Huxley’s neologism); on the history of the creationism-vs.-evolution struggle in America (I never knew that one reason John Scopes took on Tennessee in 1925 was that he had his eye on a local girl – evolutionary sexual selection in action!); and on how hard, even counter-intuitive, science is compared to faith.

Mr. Shermer offered suggestions for countering creationist’s arguments. One of their favorites is that there is no evidence for the evolution of any complex social system. On the contrary, he argued, there are three: the law, which grows from experience; language, which grows from use (no one designed a syntax that has everyone in California in the 21st century using “like” every third word); and the economy, which actually resists design – the more it’s tinkered with, the worse it gets.

In a vigorous Q&A period, Mr. Shermer suggested that to overcome the argument that only the religious are moral, atheists immoral, we can argue factually that only seven percent of members of the National Academy of Science believe in God, and zero percent are in jail.

About half the audience lined up to have Mr. Shermer autograph their newly-purchased copies of *Why Darwin Matters*, which is the SHSNY Book Club selection for November 30.

WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH US? – CONTINUED

(Excerpted from October 2006 The Voice of Sanity, newsletter of the Upstate S.C. Secular Humanists)

A survey of 10,000 members of Belief.com indicates that many Americans believe they can communicate with the dead. The survey, published in October 16 Newsweek,

indicates that 20 percent of responders to the survey believe they can communicate with the dead and 77 percent said they had felt the presence of a spirit, angel or dead soul.

Forty-six percent of women believe that the dead protect the living and act as their guides, compared with 27 percent of men. Strong minorities of the responders believe in guardian angels and that talking with the dead is something we all have the potential for. “*There shall not be found among you any one that consulteth a ghost or familiar spirit, or a necromancer.*” (*Deut, 18:10*)

WE HAVE ANOTHER NOMINEE FOR THE 2006 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD

Since 2003 Sen. James Inhofe, Republican from big-oil state Oklahoma—chair of the Senate’s Environment and Public Works Committee—has called the threat of catastrophic global warming “the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people.” To back up that assertion, he invited science-*fiction* writer Michael Crichton to offer testimony to the committee last fall.

[photo of Sen. Inhofe]

This summer Inhofe attacked Al Gore, Gore’s film “An Inconvenient Truth,” and global warming science in general. First, he said Gore was “full of crap” on global warming. Then, on CNN, that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—which involved thousands of scientists from over 120 countries, and which concluded that global warming was real and caused by humans—used only “one scientist,” adding, “all of the recent science ... it confirms that I was right on this thing. This thing is a hoax.”

Senator Inhofe joins perennial foot-in-mouth-favorite Pat Robertson—who in January declared that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a massive stroke because God didn’t like Sharon’s politics

Senator Inhofe joins perennial foot-in-mouth-favorite Pat Robertson—who in January declared that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a massive stroke because God didn’t like Sharon’s politics—on our 2006 ballot for the Second Annual Dumbth Award for stupid and/or clueless anti-rational, anti-humanist public remarks. Our first winner of the not-so-coveted horse’s-ass statuette was TV personality Star Jones, who claimed that God delayed the December 2004 tsunami that killed more than 200,000 people until after her honeymoon in the Indian Ocean.

Nominations for the 2006 award will remain open 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 SHSNY P.O. Box (see front page), or email john@rafferty.net before December 1.

I’m not a Theist and I’m not a Deist. I’m a Meist — I’m God. — *Donna Marxer*

SCIENTOLOGY LOSING GROUND TO NEW FICTIONOLOGY

(Excerpted from Nov/Dec 2006 Skeptical Inquirer, originally published in The Onion satirical weekly.)

According to a report by the American Institute of Religions, the Church of Scientology is steadily losing members to the much newer religion —Fictionology.

“Unlike Scientology, which is based on empirically verifiable scientific tenets, Fictionology’s central principles are essentially fairy tales with no connection to reality,” the AIR report read. “Fictionology offers its followers a mythical belief system free from the cumbersome scientific method to which Scientology is hidebound.”

Created in 2003 by self-proclaimed messiah Bud Don Elroy, Fictionology's principles were first outlined in the self-help paperback, *Imaginetics: The New Pipe-Dream of Modern Mental Make-Believe*.

Fictionology's central belief, that any imaginary construct can be incorporated into the church's ever-growing set of official doctrines, continues to gain popularity. Believers in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy are permitted – even encouraged – to view them as deities.

“My personal savior is Batman,” said Beverly Hills plastic surgeon Greg Jurgenson. “My wife follows the teachings of the Gilmore Girls. Of course, we are still beginners. Some advanced-level Fictionologists have total knowledge of every lifetime they have ever lived for the last eighty trillion years.”

While the Church of Fictionology admits that its purported membership of 450 billion is an invented number, the AIR report estimates that as many as 70 percent of the church's followers are former Scientologists.

Church of Scientology spokesman Al Kurz said he was “shocked” to learn that Fictionology is approaching the popularity of his religion. “Scientology is rooted in strict scientific principles, such as the measurement of engrams in the brain by the E-Meter,” Kurz said, “using scientific methodologies to undo the damage done seventy-five million years ago by the Galactic Confederation's evil warlord Xenu;. We offer our preclear followers procedures to erase overts in the reactive mind. Fictionology is just make-believe nonsense.”

Actor David McSavage, who converted to Fictionology last year, attempted to explain. “Scientology can only offer data, such as how an Operating Thetan can control matter, energy, space and time with pure thought alone. But truly spiritual people don't care about data, especially those seeking an escape from very real physical, mental, or emotional problems. As a Fictionologist, I live in a world of pretend. It's liberating.” “Fictionology preys on the gullible with fanciful stories and simple-minded solutions,” Scientology's Kurz said, “depriving legitimate churches of the revenue they need to carry out charitable works worldwide—like clearing the planet of body-thetan implants.”