

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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Summer silliness: we look at Satan in Utah, murderous virtual missionaries in New York, missionary-fed dogs in England, witchcraft in Romania, SuperJesus in the movies, and a MovieStar in traffic court. More seriously, we analyze how weather makes gods, revisit the pros and cons of uncomfortable research, and weigh the impact of America's religiosity on our health, well-being and politics — starting with the best-selling words of a former right-wing true believer.

CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA: PREACHED, PUNCHED, AND PROSELYTIZED

Kevin Phillips

(Excerpted from American Theocracy: The Perils and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century, by Kevin Phillips ... which is the SHSNY Book Club selection for October – see the calendar insert.)

Few questions will be more important to the twenty-first century United States than whether renascent religion and its accompanying political hubris will be carried on the nation's books as an asset or as a liability. While sermons and rhetoric propounding American exceptionalism proclaim religiosity as an asset, a somber array of historical precedents—the pitfalls of imperial Christian overreach from Rome to Britain—tip the scales toward liability.

Christianity in the United States, especially Protestantism, has always had an evangelical—which is to say, missionary—and frequently a radical or combative streak. Some message has always had to be preached, punched, or proselytized. Once in a while that excitability has been economic, most notably in the Social Gospel of the 1890s, which searched through Scripture to document the Jesus who emphasized caring for the poor and hungry. In the twentieth century, though, religious zeal in the United States usually focused on something quite different: individual pursuit of salvation through spiritual rebirth, often in circumstances of sect-driven millenarian countdowns to the so-called end times and an awaited return of Christ. These beliefs have often been accompanied by great revivals; emotionalism; eccentricities of quaking, shaking, and speaking in tongues; characterization of the Bible as inerrant; and wild-eyed invocation of dubious prophecies in the Book of Revelation. No other contemporary Western nation shares this religious intensity and its concomitant proclamation that Americans are God's chosen people and nation. George W. Bush has averred this belief on many occasions. ...

In contrast to the secular and often agnostic Christianity dominant in Europe, Canada, and Australia, the American view encompasses a very different outlook – one in which a large minority is in key ways closer to the intensity of seventeenth-century Puritans, Presbyterian Covenanters, and earlier Dutch or Swiss Calvinists ... these are not comforting analogies. The world's leading economic and military power is also—no one can misread the data—the world's leading Bible-reading crusader state, immersed in an Old Testament of stern prophets and bloody Middle Eastern battlefields.

SO, HOW IS RELIGION WORKING OUT FOR AMERICA?

John Rafferty

Last fall, a serious scholarly study made tabloid headlines the likes of “Societies Worse Off When They Have God On Their Side” and “Religion Bad For Your Health?” Too bad, because those snarky oversimplifications made it easy for the American religious right, along with its talk-radio pit bulls and talking-head lap dogs on TV to dismiss this important study out of hand as “biased” and “flawed.”

It’s not, and it’s worth a closer look.

Identification first. “Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies: A First Look,” by social scientist Gregory S. Paul, was published in *The Journal of Religion & Society*, The Kripke Center, Vol. 7 (2005), and can be read in its entirety on the Web at <http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2005/2005-11.html>.

So, what does C-NC do? To examine whether the widely accepted (in the U.S.) assumption that “belief in a creator is beneficial to societies,” it correlates existing, accepted research on religious belief/observance and acceptance/rejection of evolution in eighteen western developed democracies (Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and, of course, the United States) with eight measures of societal “cultural and physical health.” What are those measures?

- * Homicides per 100,000 population
- * 15-24-year-old suicides per 100,000
- * Under-age-5 mortality per 100,000 births
- * Life expectancy
- * Age 15-19 gonorrhea infections per 100,000
- * Age 15-19 syphilis infections per 100,000
- * 15-19-year-old abortions per 1,000
- * 15-17-year-old births/pregnancies per 1,000

Why some different age ranges? Because Mr. Paul is correlating *existing* research from dozens of different studies, including some cross-national surveys that polled as many as 23,000 people. (I counted 82 sources in the bibliography, about half of which were published research.)

What does C-NC *not* do? Contrary to the right-wing attackers, it does *not* “attempt to present a definitive study that establishes cause versus effect between religiosity, secularism and societal health. It is hoped that these original correlations and results will spark future research and debate on the issue.”

What are “these original correlations and results”?

While religion has receded and secularism and acceptance of human evolution has increased in first-world western democracies, the opposite is true in the U.S. While we’re grouped with Italy, Ireland, and Spain at the top of the chart for regular religious-services attendance, the U.S. has, by far and away, the greatest proportion of adults who “Absolutely believe in God,” by far the greatest proportion who “Take the Bible literally,” and who “Pray at least several times a week.” (In several instances I couldn’t at first find the little “U” for U.S. on the charts because it was, literally, off the charts.)

Also, by wide, wide margins, the U.S. has the fewest “Agnostics and Atheists” and the smallest proportion of adults who “Accept human evolution.”

So, how do those findings correlate with the eight measures of societal “cultural and physical health”? Hold on tight.

Homicides? Here, too, the U.S. is almost off the charts, with homicide rates six and seven times the other western democracies.

Teen suicide? Americans, whether absolute believers or atheists, are about in the middle of the pack.

Infant mortality? U.S. rates are two, three, and four times that of other developed nations, exceeded only by nearly-second-world Portugal.

Life expectancy? We’re at the bottom of the list, with only Italy, Denmark and Portugal suffering shorter life spans. Top of the list? Most-secular-of-all Japan.

Teen gonorrhea and syphilis? The five other countries measured sit all together at the very bottom of the charts on which the U.S. soars.

Teen abortions? As much as double the rate of the other seven countries measured. Teen births and pregnancies? If this were track-and-field, the U.S. would lap the field of twelve other countries.

Mr. Paul says: “In broad terms the hypothesis that popular religiosity is socially beneficial holds that high rates of belief in a creator, as well as worship, prayer and other aspects of religious practice, correlate with lowering rates of lethal violence, suicide, non-monogamous sexual activity, and abortion, as well as improved physical health. Such faith-based, virtuous ‘cultures of life’ are supposedly attainable if people believe that God created them for a special purpose, and follow the strict moral dictates imposed by religion. ... The corresponding view [is] that western secular materialism leads to ‘cultures of death’. ... In the United States popular support for the cultural and moral superiority of theism is so extensive that popular disbelief in God ranks [along with acceptance of evolution] as another major societal fear factor.”

But what Americans *should* fear are our observable, measurable quality-of-life failures. As Paul says in conclusion ...

“The United States’ deep social problems are all the more disturbing because the nation enjoys exceptional per capita wealth among the major western nations. Spending on health care is much higher as a portion of the GDP and per capita, by a factor of a third to two or more, than in any other developed democracy. The U.S. is therefore the least efficient western nation in terms of converting wealth into cultural and physical health.

“Understanding the reasons for this failure is urgent, and doing so requires considering the degree to which cause versus effect is responsible for the observed correlations between social conditions and religiosity versus secularism. It is therefore hoped that this initial look at a subject of pressing importance will inspire more extensive research on the subject. Pressing questions include the reasons, whether theistic or non-theistic, that the exceptionally wealthy U.S. is so inefficient that it is experiencing a much higher degree of societal distress than are less religious, less wealthy prosperous democracies. Conversely, how do the latter achieve superior societal health while having little in the way of the religious values or institutions? There is evidence that within the U.S. strong disparities in religious belief versus acceptance of evolution are correlated

with similarly varying rates of societal dysfunction, *the strongly theistic, anti-evolution south and mid-west having markedly worse homicide, mortality, STD, youth pregnancy, marital and related problems than the northeast where societal conditions, secularization, and acceptance of evolution approach European norms.** It is the responsibility of the research community to address controversial issues and provide the information that the citizens of democracies need to chart their future courses.”
And it is the responsibility of humanists and rationalists to give the lie to the outworn and obsolete idea that society needs religion. As the Gershwins wrote eighty years ago, “the things that you’re liable, to read in the Bible, ain’t necessarily so.”
*My blue-state, elitist, latte-drinking liberal emphasis — JR

IS BEING AMERICAN BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH?

Paul Krugman

(Excerpted from “Our Sick Society,” on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times, 5/5/06)

It’s not news that something is very wrong with the state of America’s health. International comparisons show that the United States has achieved a sort of inverse miracle: we spend much more per person on health care than any other nation, yet we have lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality than Canada, Japan and most of Europe. ...

A new study [in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*], “Disease and Disadvantage in the United States and in England” ... offers strong evidence that there’s something about American society that makes us sicker than we should be.

The authors of the study compared the prevalence of such diseases as diabetes and hypertension in Americans 55 to 64 years old with the prevalence of the same diseases in a comparable group in England. Comparing us with the English isn’t a choice designed to highlight American problems: Britain spends only about 40 percent as much per person on health care as the United States, and its health care system is generally considered inferior to those of neighboring countries, especially France. Moreover, England isn’t noted either for healthy eating or for a healthy lifestyle.

Nonetheless, the study concludes that “Americans are much sicker than the English.” ... What’s even more striking is that being American seems to damage your health regardless of your race and social class.

That’s not to say that class is irrelevant. (The researchers excluded racial effects by restricting the study to non-Hispanic whites.) In fact, there’s a strong correlation within each country between wealth and health. But ... *the richest third of Americans is in worse health than the poorest third of the English* [italics added].

So what’s going on? Lack of health insurance is surely a factor in the poor health of lower-income Americans, who are often uninsured, while everyone in England receives health care from the government. But almost all upper-income Americans have insurance.

What about bad habits? The stereotypes are true: the English are much more likely to be heavy drinkers, and Americans much more likely to be obese. But a statistical analysis suggests that bad habits are only a fraction of the story. In the end, the study’s authors seem baffled by the poor health of even relatively well-off Americans. But let me suggest a couple of possible explanations.

One is that having health insurance doesn't ensure good health care. For example, a *New York Times* report on diabetes pointed out that insurance companies are generally unwilling to pay for care that might head off the disease, even though they are willing to pay for the extreme measures, like amputations, that become necessary when prevention fails.

It's possible that Britain's National Health Service, in spite of its limited budget, actually provides better all-around medical care than our system because it takes a longer-term view than private insurance companies.

The other possibility is that Americans work too hard and experience too much stress. Full-time American workers work, on average, about 46 weeks per year; full-time British, French and German workers work only 41 weeks a year. ... Our workaholic economy is actually more destructive of the "family values" we claim to honor than the European economies in which regulations and union power have led to shorter working hours.

Maybe overwork, together with the stress of living in an economy with a minimal social safety net, damages our health as well as our families.

What we know for sure is that although the American way of life may be, as Ari Fleischer famously said back in 2001, "a blessed one," there's something about that way of life that is seriously bad for our health.

How about we try replacing "blessings" with a healthcare system that isn't run by the insurance companies? — JR

WHO'S FOR FAMILY VALUES? BLUE-STATE, LIBERAL, GODLESS US

Michele Miller

(Excerpted from "Pick your battles and don't dwell on the rest," in the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times, 6/12/06)

Choose an issue you'd like to be paying your legislators to go to the wall for. Chances are it isn't gay marriage. While our president and his cohorts were wasting time and money duking it out, most of us just weren't all that hopped up about it. ...

But suddenly, the discussion about whether two people of the same sex can legally commit themselves to each another was pressing business. More important than trying to fix Iraq, Darfur, the mounting deficit, nuclear disarmament, homeland security, AIDS, global warming, world hunger, etc.

Some say this virtual battle was a way to get the vote out—the right kind of vote—for midterm elections while rejuvenating the president's political base and keeping at bay groups such as Focus on the Family.

So, they figured, let's regurgitate the gay marriage issue of the 2004 election. While they're at it, perhaps they should dredge up some of those "other" issues.

Like the statistics that showed that 50 percent of those legal heterosexual marriages fail in the United States. And the others from the latest census that cited the state of Massachusetts—the one that recently legalized gay marriage—as having the lowest divorce rate in the country. That blue state was followed [on the list] by others – Connecticut, New Jersey, Rhode Island and New York. The highest? Those would be the red states: Nevada, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Wyoming. Colorado, which happens to be the home of Focus on the Family, came in at No. 33.

Then there are the other numbers from the George Barna Research Group, based in Ventura, California. The Associated Press reported on its national survey that showed agnostics and atheists actually had a lower divorce rate than Baptists, Jews, and mainstream and nondenominational Protestants.

Being born again, evidently, does not always bode well for the betrothed.

Focus on the Family ministry founder James Dobson spoke in support of Mel Gibson and his film, “The Passion of the Christ,” saying Gibson’s drunken anti-Semitic tirade during a traffic stop had nothing to do with “one of the finest films of this era.”

Dobson said in a statement that “Mel has also indicated his willingness to seek help to overcome his alcoholism, and has asked the Jewish community for forgiveness. What more can he do?”

Ed: How about going away and not coming back?

THE COMPANY WE KEEP

Anna Quindlan

(Excerpted from Newsweek, 6/26/06)

Americans still live in one of the few countries that kill people to make clear what a terrible thing killing is. Hardly any other civilized place does this anymore. In the past three decades, the number of nations that have abolished the death penalty has risen from 16 to 86.

Last year, four countries accounted for nearly all executions worldwide: China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States of America.

As my Irish grandmother used to say, you are known by the company you keep.

THE NEO-NEOLITHICS AND THEIR DROUGHT GOD

George Rowell

Etymology—the study of the origins, history, and development of words and other linguistic forms—is more than just a diversion, it is a telescope into our distant past, giving us glimpses of the Stone Age and human prehistory, and it can be applied to any language. The Germanic word “god,” according to the eminent etymologist Eric Partridge, is cognate with a Sanskrit word meaning “the invoked one.” (Both English and Sanskrit are Indo-European languages.)

Invoking a spirit is part of the shamanism of the Stone Age, although many primitive tribes throughout the world are still in this stage. Shamanism differs from religion as we know it in that “the invoked one” is subject to human command (or bribe), not vice versa; the nature spirit is ordered or cajoled to do something. Often a few sacrifices help: a pig, a goat, a human, whatever – you have to slip the invoked one a bribe.

To read *History Begins at Sumer*, by Samuel Noah Kramer, is to understand that our Western culture (and most of its problems) began in the Middle East. A fine concatenation of 1) the presence of wheat (in its early wild form), 2) the ancestors of our present domesticated animals, and 3) a benign climate, led to the rise of the first cities, along with their temples. Shamans evolved into “colleges” of priests and priestesses to administer the rites of a more complex society.

Then the scourge of the Middle East slowly developed. Some 4,000 to 5,000 years ago, the Drought God began to dry up the region, and the gentle grasslands of the “fertile crescent” gradually turned into desert. (When Abraham left Ur, the crescent was still mostly fertile grasslands.)

As their world got drier, the priests of certain sky gods began to increase their power, promising the people that they would implore or bribe the Drought God to bring rain. Sometimes that worked, and sometimes it didn’t, and the sky spirit became an ominous, baleful, and powerful deity – “the invoked one” became a god. His power increased with every drought and the increasing population pressures and wars that accompanied them. Specialists in the history of the region date the Neolithic invention of an omnipotent deity to that period of drought 4,000 - 5,000 years ago.

So the so-called omnipotent deity we know is really a Stone Age invention of drought in the Middle East. His priests became more and more powerful, and competitors, including the old fertility gods and goddesses, were deposed (in Israel, Yahweh lost his queen and consort, Asherah). All power to the Drought God.

You can search the earth’s mythologies and they are all polytheistic — except for the Middle East. Of course they may have a Zeus or a Wotan or a Brahma as Top God, but he is not omnipotent, and is generally part of a family (often competing) of gods and goddesses.

It is time we now call the present day’s pious god believers for what they are: Neo-Neolithic believers in an outdated Neolithic Middle Eastern Drought God – part of their minds are still in the Stone Age.

This belief in an omnipotent, wrathful deity is not a natural one, it is a Stone Age invention that must be vigorously indoctrinated into each generation – starting early. If religion were natural (or rational) it would not have to be pounded into childish brains; it would not have to be pounded in at every Christian, Jewish or Islamic rite. And sometimes it never takes. The religious enforcers of the Drought God know that if they let slip, this Neolithic belief will wither away. And sometimes it does – or we secular humanists, atheists and agnostics wouldn’t be here. The brainwashing works less well now that the persuasion of burning at the stake is no longer allowed.

Indeed, the natural state of humankind is atheism; the “Drought God” invention is a dead concept that can only live by continual indoctrination. Secular humanists should not be too worried that large percentages of Americans believe in a god. In most cases, this so-called “belief” is just a fragment of former indoctrination stuck somewhere in their brains. Just there, but mostly ignored and misunderstood. If you were to question the average person on his or her belief, their “god” would turn out to be very much just an acceptance of what fate has meted out to them. The average believer is probably too involved with reality to be swept up into fanaticism.

We can only guess at what percentage of Americans are real Neo-Neolithics. Possibly a depression or natural disaster could jar many of them into a sense of reality. Or into fascism – those tainted by religious obscurantism might veer either way. (Hopefully, American democratic values would prevail.) We should combat Stone Age primitivism in a balanced way: with reasoned arguments and biting invective. We need a new Voltaire to give us a modern American version of “Écrasez l’infâme.”

But I am optimistic: the Neo-Neolithics are bucking the tide of modernism and will, in time, be consigned to irrelevance.

I am appalled that you published an article so blatantly false. George Rowell (PIQUE, August) claims he is descended from Jesus and Mary Magdalene. So how come I never see him at the family reunions? – *Chic Schissel*

Response:

**SO-WHAT-RESEARCH
IS A WASTE OF TIME AND RESOURCES**

Chic Schissel

I completely agree with John Rafferty (“The Two-Front War on Science,” PIQUE, August) that we must defend science against the stupidity of the political extremes, both right and left. It is outrageous that important scientific projects are impeded or derailed because of religious dogma or paranoid knee-jerk reactions to the “nefarious” operations of big business. Opposition to stem-cell research and over-the counter birth control pills, the Terry Schiavo nonsense, the irrational fear of vaccinations and of dental fillings that use mercury, the refusal of some school districts to teach evolution – these are a few of the roadblocks that, combined with the general public’s profound ignorance of scientific protocol, hamper the progress of science and the accumulation of useful knowledge and, ultimately, threaten our very existence.

But I disagree with John’s take on the desirability of research focusing on the intellectual ability of groups, groups that are identified by race or other imprecisely defined criteria.

Scientific research is stimulated not simply by curiosity but, more importantly, by utility. Results of an investigation should have a value; a study leading to a “so what?” result is a waste of time.

Some years ago a book (called, if memory serves, *The Bell Curve*) was published that described alleged research showing the intellectual inferiority of blacks. This book and its cited research were criticized on many details: socio-economic issues were not given enough heed, and defining “black” as a group is difficult, since the U.S. black population includes very few “pure-blooded” blacks. Moreover, such “research” is of the “so-what?” variety. Even if the results were valid, what use would it have? If I hired a Princeton Ph.D., would I put him downstairs to sweep out the cellar because he was black? Human beings must be evaluated as individuals, not as members of a group. Attributing characteristics by group leads to prejudice and bigotry.

Rafferty mentions the alleged intellectual superiority of Jews: “Something has to explain all those Nobel Prizes.” Of course, there are persuasive explanations that are cultural rather than genetic; in addition, any research done on the subject would be of the “so what” variety. If I were looking to hire someone for a job requiring high intellect, I would evaluate the prospect, not hire someone just because he was Jewish (some Jews I know yield to no one in the magnitude of their stupidity).

In defense of “Bell Curve” type of research, Rafferty quotes Steven Pinker: “Ideas are connected to other ideas, often in unanticipated ways.” But isn’t it more productive to investigate something that has an anticipated utility? I would rather spend precious research money on whether or not a drug works; this would have immediate valuable use. To expend scarce resources leading to a possible result that might remotely develop “unanticipated” utility is foolish.

But I think John is right to be outraged by what happened to the president of Harvard, whose remarks amounted only to speculation. Also the defining criteria for the groups speculated about (men and women) are very tight and universally accepted, with extremely few exceptions. Other groups are not as well defined, and not as amenable to speculation.

Response to the Response:

“SO WHAT?” IS AN OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

John Rafferty

Perhaps I should have quoted Pinker (“Groups and Genes: The lessons of the Ashkenazim,” in the June 26 *The New Republic*) more fully. Here’s more Pinker, at the crux of the argument:

“The appearance of an advantage in average intelligence among Ashkenazi Jews is easier to establish than its causes. Jews are remarkably over-represented in benchmarks of brainpower. Though never exceeding 3 percent of the American population, Jews account for 37 percent of the winners of the U.S. National Medal of Science, 25 percent of the American Nobel Prize winners in literature, 40 percent of the American Nobel Prize winners in science and economics, and so on. On the world stage, we find that 54 percent of the world chess champions have had one or two Jewish parents.

“Does this mean that Jews are a nation of meinsteins [“my son, the genius”]? It does not. Their average IQ has been measured at 108 to 115, one-half to one standard deviation above the mean. But statisticians have long known that a moderate difference in the means of two distributions translates into a large difference at the tails. In the simplest case, if we have two groups of the same size, and the average of Group A exceeds the average of Group B by fifteen IQ points (one standard deviation), then among people with an IQ of 115 or higher the As will outnumber the Bs by a ratio of three to one, but among people with an IQ of 160 or higher the As will outnumber the Bs by a ratio of forty-two to one.

“Even if Group A was a fraction of the size of Group B to begin with, it would contribute a substantial proportion of the people who had the highest scores.”

So, yes, of course there are colossally dumb Jews just as there are brilliant ones, but on average the American descendants of Ashkenazi Jews score a half to a full standard deviation above the mean – which results in a superabundance of geniuses at the upper tail of the bell curve. The researchers of the University of Utah team would like to know why, and are investigating seven different hypotheses for the over-representation of Ashkenazi Jews among the brilliant—including some of the cultural factors I believe Chic Schissel alludes to (Jewish “love of learning,” centuries of marrying only their own, natural selection for the mercantile professions to which Jews were restricted in Europe for a millennium, etc.)—but the researchers are denounced for even *considering* a genetic explanation. How is that different from the African-Americans who will not hear of a genetic link to certain breast cancers, or the knuckle-draggers of the religious right yowling against stem cell research?

And “so what” if their research comes to conclusions some people don’t like, or comes to no conclusion at all? Who is to judge the “anticipated utility” of proposed research, an Academy of “right thinkers?” A Committee for the Prevention of Offense?

What's more, the history of science is rife with examples of the unexpected results of research. Many "right thinkers"—including many readers of PIQUE, I'm sure—would have strangled research into nuclear fission in the 1940s before it could produce an atom bomb – but today nuclear medicine kills cancer cells.

Steven Pinker has it right, that ideas are connected to other ideas, some of which we haven't yet anticipated, whose "utility" we can't guess at.

The value of unfettered research is that "ideas are like rabbits," as John Steinbeck said. "You get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen."

Note: I have downloaded the complete Steven Pinker article from The New Republic (and forwarded it to Chic Schissel). If you'd like to read it, send me an email at john@rafferty.net.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU DID NOT LOVE JESUS?

(From "HNN Readers Share Stories of Morality without God" in Humanist Network News, 8/2/06)

I very much resent the religious dictum that one cannot be moral without religion. ... In a debate, Herb Silverman, president of the Secular Coalition for America, asked a fundamentalist preacher, "What would you do if you did not love Jesus?"

The preacher answered that if he did not love Jesus, he might cheat on his wife.

Mr. Silverman said, "That's interesting, because I do not cheat on my wife because I love my wife."

I have no report of the reaction of the preacher's wife. — *Hank Kocol, Humanists of Sun City*

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #46

John Jacob, a Utah Congressional candidate, says that Satan is trying to keep him out of office. It wasn't a muttered aside – he said it at a public rally, and then again at a meeting with the staff of the *Salt Lake Tribune*. "There's a force that wants to keep us from going to Washington, D.C. It's the devil is what it is. I don't want you to print that, but it feels like that's what it is."

The problems he blames on the Devil include business deals gone sour, allegations that he aided illegal immigrants, and revelations that the devout Mormon used to gamble. "I don't know who else it would be if it wasn't him," Jacob said, referring to the Great Deceiver. "Now when that gets out in the paper, I'm going to be one of the screw-loose people."

Yeah, maybe.

And now comes what S.J. Perelman used to call "the beauty part" – although Jacob is a political neophyte trying to unseat a five-term congressman, a recent poll says that his talk of being opposed by Satan may indeed win him the Republican nomination.

ROMANIA MARCHES INTO THE 7TH CENTURY

According to the Sofia News Agency, Romania in April recognized witchcraft, and 31-year-old Gabriela Chukur, who fought a long good fight against the bureaucrats

(probably liberal rationalists), is the country's first legal witch. Her new company will deal with "astrology and contacts with the spiritual world."

AND THERE'LL ALWAYS BE AN ENGLAND, HOWEVER PECULIAR

(From The Telegraph (U.K.), 7/28/06)

A woman has been told by police that she must remove a sign on her garden gate that reads "Our dogs are fed on Jehovah's Witnesses" because it is "distressing, offensive and inappropriate."

Jean Grove has displayed the sign for 32 years. Her late husband, Gordon, put it up after members of the church banged on their door on Christmas Day, 1974.

Mrs. Grove, from Bursledon, Hants, said that police officers had taken her details and insisted that she remove the sign.

Once they had left, she put it back.

CHRISTMAS FOR CHRISTIAN DOMINIONIST KIDS

(Excerpted from a June '06 salon.com article)

Imagine: you are a foot soldier in a paramilitary group whose purpose is to remake America as a Christian theocracy, and establish its worldly vision of the dominion of Christ over all aspects of life. You are issued high-tech military weaponry, and instructed to engage the infidel on the streets of New York City. You are on a mission—both religious and military—to convert or kill Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, gays, and anyone who advocates the separation of church and state – especially moderate, mainstream Christians. Your mission is "to conduct physical and spiritual warfare"; all who resist must be taken out with extreme prejudice. You have never felt so powerful, so driven by a purpose: you are 13 years old.

You are playing a video game whose creators are linked to the empire of mega-church pastor Rick Warren, best selling author of *The Purpose Driven Life*.

This latest "Left Behind" game, slated for release in October in advance of the Christmas shopping rush ... immerses children in present-day New York City – 500 square blocks, stretching from Wall Street to Chinatown, Greenwich Village, the United Nations headquarters, and Harlem. The game rewards children for how effectively they role play the killing of those who resist becoming born again Christians. The game also offers players the opportunity to switch sides and fight for the army of the AntiChrist, releasing cloven-hoofed demons who feast on conservative Christians and their panicked proselytes (who taste a lot like Christians).

Is this paramilitary mission simulator for children anything other than prejudice and bigotry using religion as an organizing tool to get people in a violent frame of mind? The dialogue includes people saying, "Praise the Lord," as they blow infidels away.

LOOK, UP IN THE SKY! IT'S A BIRD! IT'S A PLANE! IT'S ... JESUS!

Mark I. Pinsky

(Excerpted from "Superman: A Stand-in for Jesus?" in the Orlando Sentinel, 7/16/06)

Lots of fans are excited about “Superman Returns,” but few with as much fervor as Steve Skelton. For this Nashville writer and amateur theologian, it is almost spiritual. Skelton first received the revelation of what he calls the Man of Steel’s “super-secret identity” in 1978. He was 6, watching “Superman: The Movie.”

“It was like a religious experience,” he writes in *The Gospel According to World’s Greatest Superhero*. “It was epic, mythic, even evangelistic. A heavenly father sends his only son to save the Earth,” in what the 1978 movie’s screenwriter described as “a space-age manger.”

For years, writers and theologians have been divining Christian messages from comic-book superheroes, particularly Superman. ... In the past five years, dozens of books have been published exploring the religious themes in pop culture, from “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” to ... “The Matrix.” Critics charge that ... some authors are stretching to find things that aren’t there.

However, Skelton’s latest entry takes the greatest leap – over more than tall buildings. He argues that Superman is a kind of stand-in for Jesus. “Superman is not Jesus Christ,” he writes. “But he is a Christ figure, a figure resembling Christ - as we all should be.”

Skelton’s is the latest of no less than five books exploring the Christian message of superheroes. ... Leo Partible, a comic-book author who contributed to *Who Needs a Superhero?* says the new Superman movie is really a discussion of the nature of Jesus. “The question is, ‘Who is Jesus, and why does he matter?’”

Partible, who has seen “Superman Returns,” says that in the film, “the world is in a huge crisis, and the movie shows you what it would be like to have a super savior in the real world. It’s not just about a super-savior, but also a model for the Christian struggle.” In an August, 1939 issue of *Action Comics*, Superman is described as “savior of the helpless and oppressed.” In the new movie’s trailer, the voice of Superman’s father is heard, “They can be a great people. They only lack the light to show them the way. For this reason, above all—their capacity for good—I have sent them you, my only son.” Director Bryan Singer told *Wizard* magazine, “Superman is the Jesus Christ of superheroes.”

With all these Christian interpretations, it is logical to ask, What did Superman’s creators intend?

Rabbi Simcha Weinstein, author of *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*, has a theory about what two Jewish teenagers, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, might have had in mind when they created the superhero in 1938.

Weinstein thinks the Man of Steel is drawn from the biblical Moses, whose family set him adrift in a basket of reeds to save his life. Until he became an adult, he had the identity of an Egyptian prince.

“The creators of Superman grew up in a Jewish culture, very rich in storytelling and biblical archetypes,” says Weinstein. “Their notions of heroes are of Jewish heroes. Siegel and Shuster were tapping into a very rich tradition inside themselves. If anyone is claiming Superman, then I want to claim him as Jewish.”

Ed: Take him, he’s all yours.

**MORE (AND BETTER)
COMIC-STRIP RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY**

It's hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by bolts of lightning.
— *Six-year-old Calvin in the Bill Watterson comic strip, "Calvin & Hobbes."*