

PEEK

Newsletter of the Sexual Humorist Society of New York

April 1, 2007

On this auspicious date, when we have changed the name of our newsletter and of our organization (see above), we turn aside from frivolities like church-state separation, encroachments on the First and Fourth Amendments, terror, torture, and war, to celebrate a life of achievement, the space-age good sense of the American people, democracy triumphant over science in Kansas, an ex-President's confession and repentance, and coming-out parties in the Republican party. — JR

ROBERTSON ACCEPTS SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD: "GREATEST HONOR EVER!"

[faked photo of Robertson holding SHSNY Dumbth Award]

At a gala SHSNY St. Patrick's Day Dinner at east-side Temple Emanu-el, televangelist, Christian Broadcast-ing Network founder and three-time presidential candidate Pat Robertson accepted the 2006 Dumbth Award of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, calling it "the greatest honor I've ever received."

When presented with the horse's-ass statuette for "a lifetime of foot-in-mouth bigotry, narrow-minded fundamentalism, hypocritical money-grubbing, shameless exploitation of his audience and followers, failed predictions, and complete misreadings of the Bible, the Gospels, and American history," Reverend Pat appeared to fight back tears.

"I didn't know you godless heathens cared," he managed to say.

The packed-house crowd of secular humanists, atheists and other freethinkers gave a standing ovation to the "old friend" and "sentimental favorite" who beat out three other Dumbth candidates with his January, 2006 announcement that God gave Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a near-fatal stroke for considering partition of the West Bank. So far, his January, 2007 prediction that—according to what he says God told him—the U.S. would be the target of a "mass killings" terrorist attack this year, has not happened.

"But I predict here and now," he told the cheering crowd, "that in the next few months I will come up with another insane prediction that will make me even more worthy of this prestigious prize — and win it for me and my ministry for the second year in a row."

Breaking News:

GOD DENIES TALKING TO PAT ROBERTSON Supreme Being Calls Televangelist "Delusional"

(Based on The Borowitz Report, 1/5/07)

Appearing on the NBC "Today" show the morning after the Rev. Pat Robertson was awarded the SHSNY 2006 Dumbth Award and again claimed that God warned him of "mass killings" in the U.S. in 2007, God made a rare public appearance to deny having spoken to the controversial televangelist.

For the usually publicity-shy King of the Universe, the appearance signaled a sharp break with tradition. But appearing in His trademark robes and white beard, God said, "I had to set the record straight about this."

"I want to make it clear that at no time at the end of the year did I have any conversation with the Rev. Pat Robertson," the Supreme Being said. "Personally, I think the guy is delusional." God then showed "Today" host Matt Lauer His personal phone logs for December to prove that He had no contact with the Rev. Robertson.

God acknowledged that with war raging around the globe, 2006 had been a "difficult year" for the forces of goodness, but He remained upbeat, pointing to some of His accomplishments in the year just past.

"At least I got Judith Regan fired," He said.

NASA "DANGEROUS" SAY MOST AMERICANS

(Adapted from "Looking Forward to Looking Back" by Bruce Handy in the The NYTimes 1/5/07)

In anticipation of the 50th anniversary this October of the launching by the Soviet Union of the first artificial satellite, Sputnik, marking the dawning of the space age and prompting a huge investment in science education in this country, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) conducted a nationwide poll of American attitudes toward space exploration.

The poll shows that most Americans are disenchanted with NASA because of fears that space shuttle launchings may scare angels or punch holes in heaven.

KANSAS OUTLAWS PRACTICE OF EVOLUTION

(Excerpted from The Onion, 11/28/06)

[Faked photo of two politicians at rostrum w/anti-evolution poster]

Kansas lawmakers have passed emergency legislation outlawing evolution, the highly controversial process responsible for the development and diversity of species and the continued survival of all life.

"From now on, the streets, forests, plains, and rivers of Kansas will be safe from the godless practice of evolution, and species will be able to procreate without deviating from God's intended design," said Bob Bethell, a member of the state House of Representatives.

The new law prohibits all living beings within state borders from any willful adaptation to changing environmental conditions. And it strictly limits any activity that may result in enhanced health or survival be-yond the current average lifespan of their species.

Violators of the law may face punishments that include jail time, fines, and rehabilitative training to rid organisms suspected of evolutionary tendencies. Repeat offenders could face chemical sterilization.

Although the full impact of the new law will not be felt for about 10 million years, most Kansans say they are relieved that the ban went into effect this week, claiming that evolution may have gone too far already.

More Breaking News:

IRAN PRESIDENT DECLARES WAR ON SPARTA

(Based on The Borowitz Report, 3/21/07)

In what foreign policy experts believe to be a direct response to the hit movie “300”—about the victory, in 480 B.C., of 300 Spartans over an invading Persian army of as many as a million—President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran (formerly known as Persia) today declared war on Sparta.

Even for the mercurial Mr. Ahmadinejad, the move struck many diplomatic insiders as extraordinary, since the consensus in the international community is that the city-state of Sparta no longer exists.

CLINTON FINALLY TAKES RESPONSIBILITY FOR BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S FAILURES

(Excerpted from The Onion Radio News, 12/12/06)

Former President Bill Clinton has announced his intention to “wipe the slate clean.” Clinton publicly owned up to the fact everything the Bush administration has done wrong was, in fact, his fault.

“I’m responsible,” Mr. Clinton said, “for everything from the Iraq War to failed Social Security reform and North Korea. It’s all my fault, and I’m deeply, deeply ashamed.”

Mr. Clinton said he approached the White House about correcting some of his mistakes, but was told to “buzz off.”

LEADING REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDERS WOO GAY VOTERS

After a new nationwide poll of likely Republican primary voters revealed that 86% of Christian Right conservatives would not vote for any of them under any circumstances, the three leading contenders for the party’s presidential nomination have each decided to distance themselves from Ann Coulter’s recent remarks, and to solicit the support of gay voters.

[Photo of Rudy Giuliani in drag]

Rudolph Giuliani, pictured here, attended a California fund-raising party last night in drag. Mitt Romney boasted at a press conference that his home state of Massachusetts was the first to legalize gay marriage. And on “Larry King Live” John McCain confessed that he’d always harbored “a secret little letch” for Senate colleague Orrin Hatch.

In what is widely seen as a response, Focus on the Family leader James Dobson announced today the formation of a committee to draft Ann Coulter for the Republican presidential nomination. Coulter is understood to have said that she would not accept the nomination if the Democratic nominee is John Edwards. “I’m not running against anyone better looking than me,” she reportedly said.

Other Names in the News:

Evangelical preacher **Ted Haggard**, seeking to illustrate the “completely heterosexual” success of four weeks in gay-denying reparative therapy, has not only reconciled with his wife, but married three more women.

Pope Benedict XVI called for a new Vatican III council of the world’s Catholic bishops “to redefine the church for the 21st century,” by repealing Pope John XXIII’s 1962-65 Vatican II, as well as the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Former independent counsel **Kenneth Starr**, in a rare interview, revealed that as soon as he met **Monica Lewinsky** he knew **President Clinton** was “guilty as sin.”

“Those luscious lips, those perky young breasts,” Mr. Starr reminisced, “you could imagine him imagining those milky-white thighs; I just knew he did it.”

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April, 2007

Books by the godless! As they climb the best-seller lists, and as articles fill the not-about-Britney magazines, we wonder: are Americans becoming more rational, or are they just up-to-here with two decades of Christian-Right blather? We smack down the Right's blondest anti-gay, stand up for alcoholics and pedophiles in court, kick Islam all around the Middle East again, introduce a new member, and salute our first 2007 Dumbth Award nominee. And oh, yes, April Fool! — JR

[Box]

THE SHSNY WEBSITE IS BACK IN BUSINESS

Go to www.shsny.org for postings on upcoming events, contact and membership how-to information, and links to many other freethought sites. Complete issues of PIQUE from 2002-2004 are reproduced and indexed, and 2005-to-the-present soon will be.

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ATHEISM ON THE BEST-SELLER LISTS

Peter Steinfels

(Reprinted from “Books on Atheism Are Raising Hackles in Unlikely Places” in the Beliefs column, NYTimes, 3/3/07)

Hey, guys, can't you give atheism a chance? Yes, it is true that *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins has been on *The New York Times* best-seller list for 22 weeks and that *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris can be found in virtually every airport bookstore, even in Texas.

So why is the new wave of books on atheism getting such a drubbing? The criticism is not primarily, it should be pointed out, from the pious, which would hardly be noteworthy, but from avowed atheists as well as scientists and philosophers writing in publications like *The New Republic* and *The New York Review of Books*, not known as cells in the vast God-fearing conspiracy.

The mother of these reviews was published last October in *The London Review of Books*, when Terry Eagleton, better known as a Marxist literary scholar than as a defender of faith, took on *The God Delusion*.

“Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*,” Mr. Eagleton wrote, “and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.”

That was only the first sentence.

James Wood's review of *Letter to a Christian Nation* in the Dec. 18, 2006, issue of *The New Republic* began, “I have not believed in God since I was fifteen.” Mr. Wood, a

formidable writer who keeps picking the scab of religion in his criticism and fiction, confessed that his “inner atheist” appreciated the “hygienic function” of Mr. Harris’s and Mr. Dawkins’s ridiculing of religion and enjoyed “the ‘naughtiness’ of this disrespect, even if a little of it goes a long way.”

But, he continued, “there is a limit to how many times one can stub one’s toe on the thick idiocy of some mullah or pastor, “or be told that “Leviticus and Deuteronomy are full of really nasty things.”

H. Allen Orr is an evolutionary biologist who once called Mr. Dawkins a “professional atheist.” But now, Mr. Orr wrote in the Jan. 11 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, “I’m forced, after reading his new book, to conclude that he’s actually more of an amateur.”

It seems that these critics hold several odd ideas, the first being that anyone attacking theology should actually know some. [Editor: See Harris, below.]

“The most disappointing feature of *The God Delusion*,” Mr. Orr wrote, “is Dawkins’s failure to engage religious thought in any serious way. You will find no serious examination of Christian or Jewish theology” and “no attempt to follow philosophical debates about the nature of religious propositions.”

Mr. Eagleton surmised that if “card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins” were asked “to pass judgment on phenomenology or the geopolitics of South Africa, they would no doubt bone up on the question as assiduously as they could.” He continued, “When it comes to theology, however, any shoddy old travesty will pass muster.”

Naturally, critics so fussy as to imagine that serious thought about religion exists, making esoteric references to Aquinas and Wittgenstein, inevitably gripe about Mr. Harris’s and Mr. Dawkins’s equation of religion with fundamentalism and of all faith with unquestioning faith. “Not even the dim-witted clerics who knocked me about at grammar school thought that.”

In *The New Republic* last October, Thomas Nagel, a philosopher who calls himself “as much an outsider to religion” as Mr. Dawkins, was much more patient. Extracting a theoretical kernel of argument from the thumb-your-nose-at-religion chaff, Mr. Nagel nonetheless had to point out that what was meant by God was not, as Mr. Dawkins’s argument seemed to assume, “a complex physical inhabitant of the natural world.” (Mr. Eagleton had less politely characterized the Dawkins understanding of God “as some kind of chap, however supersized.”)

Nor was belief in God, Mr. Wood explained two months later, analogous to belief in a Celestial Teapot, the comic example Mr. Dawkins borrowed from Bertrand Russell.

If this insistence on theology beyond the level of Pat Robertson and biblical literalism was not enough, several reviews went on to carp about double standards.

Mr. Orr, for example, noted the contrast between Mr. Dawkins’s skepticism toward traditional proofs for God’s existence and Mr. Dawkins’s confidence that his own “Ultimate Boeing 747” proof demonstrated scientifically that God’s existence was highly improbable.

Mr. Eagleton compared Mr. Dawkins’s volubility about religion’s vast wrongs with his silence “on the horrors that science and technology have wreaked on humanity” and the good that religion has produced.

“In a book of almost 400 pages, he can scarcely bring himself to concede that a single human benefit has flowed from religious faith, a view which is as a priori

improbable as it is empirically false,” Mr. Eagleton wrote. “The millions who have devoted their lives selflessly to the service of others in the name of Christ or Buddha or Allah are wiped from human history — and this by a self-appointed crusader against bigotry.”

In Mr. Orr’s view, “No decent person can fail to be repulsed by the sins committed in the name of religion,” but atheism has to be held to the same standard: “Dawkins has a difficult time facing up to the dual fact that (1) the 20th century was an experiment in secularism; and (2) the result was secular evil, an evil that, if anything, was more spectacularly virulent than that which came before.” [Editor: See Rafferty, below.]

Finally, these critics stubbornly rejected the idea that rational meant scientific. “The fear of religion leads too many scientifically minded atheists to cling to a defensive, world-flattening reductionism,” Mr. Nagel wrote.

“We have more than one form of understanding,” he continued. “The great achievements of physical science do not make it capable of encompassing everything, from mathematics to ethics to the experiences of a living animal. We have no reason to dismiss moral reasoning, introspection or conceptual analysis as ways of discovering the truth just because they are not physics.”

So what is the beleaguered atheist to do? One possibility: take pride in the fact that this astringent criticism comes from people and places that honor the honest skeptic’s commitment to full-throated questioning.

ON ROTTEN EGGS AND RELIGION

Arthur Harris

As to Steinfeld’s “Books on Atheism are Raising Hackles in Unlikely Places” [see above], one does not have to eat an egg that stinks in order to determine that it is bad. Likewise one does not have to be a Biblical scholar or an expert in theology to attack religion. A short knowledge of history will suffice.

Mankind has suffered under the most miserable conditions from the time we stood erect. Early death, political upheaval, disease, war, famine and oppression were our lot. Religion promised a better hereafter and so people embraced it in hopes of that promise.

That unproven promise that offers milk and honey or 72 virgins or whatever gave, and still gives, hope to countless folks who figure they have nothing to lose

The esoteric theological arguments that intellectuals and theologians have debated over the centuries rarely trickled down to the average uneducated individual who was taught dogma and rote and had neither the time nor the education to understand and discuss them.

It is readily conceded that religion has uplifted many, has helped the poor and downtrodden, but rarely if ever has religion been in the forefront in the fight for democracy or personal freedom.

As physicist Steven Weinberg famously said, “With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”

Say what you will about the sweet miracle of unquestioning faith, I consider a capacity for it terrifying and absolutely vile. — *Kurt Vonnegut*

DON'T BLAME THE 20TH CENTURY ON SECULARISM

John Rafferty

Critic H. Allen Orr [see Steinfelds, above] says, “Dawkins has a difficult time facing up to the dual fact that (1) the 20th century was an experiment in secularism; and (2) the result was secular evil, an evil that, if anything, was more spectacularly virulent than that which came before.”

That conveniently ignores Dawkins’s (and Harris’s) arguments that the problem with Nazism, communism and the insane cults of Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and Kim Il Sung was/is not that they were secular (and Hitler was no atheist, by the way) but that they substituted political dogma and leader-worship for religious dogma and god-worship – that they were too much like religion.

As Sam Harris says in *Letter to a Christian Nation*, “Auschwitz, the Soviet gulags, and the killing fields of Cambodia are not examples of what happens to people when they become too reasonable. To the contrary, these horrors testify to the dangers of political and racial dogmatism. ... The problem with religion—as with Nazism, Stalinism, or any other totalitarian mythology—is the problem of dogma itself. I know of no society in human history that ever suffered because its people became too desirous of evidence in support of their core beliefs.”

YES, YOU DO HAVE TO PROVE GOD EXISTS, AND NO, YOU CAN'T

A Review of *God: The Failed Hypothesis*,

by Victor Stenger

Barbara G. Lifton

I have read many books over the past few years about religion and science, but none as good as this one. Stenger brings a physicist/philosopher’s clear-headed approach to the history of religionists’ misrepresentation and manipulation of scientific fact regarding whether a supernatural god exists in the universe. He also shows finally and conclusively why the world is worse off as a result of religious faith. I especially enjoyed Stenger’s curt refusal to adhere to the claim that religion should not be the subject of scientific investigation; he then proceeds to conduct such an investigation, using scientific methods and processes. After applying these methods and examining the evidence for and against the existence of a transcendental god, he ineluctably concludes that no such god exists.

One of the strongest parts of the book, in my view, is the Preface, in which he reminds us that empirical testing of hypotheses is the crux of the scientific method, and that in science, no “theory” is accepted as fact, unless the evidence to support that theory is confirmed by completely objective re-testing. Stenger looks at the claim by pseudo-scientific religionists that certain “proofs” have been found that god exists – especially arguments that the “complexity of life cannot be reduced” to natural processes, that the laws of physics are so “fine-tuned” that they could not have come about naturally, and that the origin of the physical universe and the law it obeys cannot have “come from nothing” without supernatural intervention. Stenger demolishes all these “arguments” by rightly placing the burden of proving their credibility on the shoulders of those who assert them and, taking them one by one, shows that scientific models consistent with material elements and processes exist for each, and that therefore the claims fail.

God: The Failed Hypothesis does not reiterate the philosophical and logical arguments why there is no god, because ways out of purely logical arguments can always be found, for example by relaxing premises or changing definitions. Stenger instead creates a model, as do such sciences as physics and astronomy, which objectifies and if possible, quantifies, the observation to be described, thus providing what he calls “a rational means for distinguishing between what works and what does not.” The measuring procedure for testing the model must be repeatable, so that if a conclusion is reached about the truth of the model, another scientist not connected with the model-builder can test it objectively. Stenger points out that gods are human inventions based on human concepts and that we do not need to “know” about the “true” nature of a god, as theologians claim we cannot know as “mere mortals”– we just need to be satisfied that our model agrees with the data.

Thus, if our god model successfully predicts empirical results that cannot be accounted for by any other known means, then we would be rational in tentatively concluding that the model describes some aspects of objective reality that such a god exists.

Stenger reminds us that the god model (in which 70% of Americans believe), is formulated in terms of human qualities that we can comprehend – these are created as models that can be empirically tested and if it does not agree with the data, discarded.

The book, organized in chapters and written in language easy for a moderately educated person to understand, then proceeds to demolish each and all of the models created by religionists to “prove” that a god exists, from the “creation” argument, to the argument from evil.

We all know those arguments, having heard them ad nauseum from theists who tell us condescendingly that we are denying beliefs that have “stood the test of time” and that are confirmed by the words of the god who populates the Hebrew, Christian and Muslim bibles. This short review cannot do justice to the clearly set out, closely reasoned, progressive arguments applied by Stenger to the “god models.” This is a book that should be read by any intelligent person who is honest enough to want to test his beliefs using the same scientific models and logical processes by which we test the natural world.

WE HAVE OUR FIRST NOMINEE FOR THE SHSNY 2007 DUMBTH AWARD

[pic of Rohrabacher]

On February 8, after four of the world’s leading physical scientists told a Congressional committee that there is “little doubt” that the world is getting warmer because of mankind’s influence, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.), who doesn’t believe in global warming, opined that warming might be cyclical, and that past warming might have been caused by (are you ready for this?) “dinosaur flatulence, who knows?”

26 THINGS CNN WILL NEVER TELL YOU ABOUT CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

R. Joseph Hoffmann

(Reprinted from November, 2006 FIG Leaves, the newsletter of Free Inquiry Group (Cincinnati, OH). Mr. Hoffmann is currently senior fellow and Chair of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion, at the Center for Inquiry. From 2000-2003, he was Professor of Civilization Studies at the American University of Beirut.)

1. That there is no God.
2. That you will not live forever.
3. That Noah's ark will never be found because it never existed.
4. That Christianity began as a violent first century messianic sect that learned to cope peaceably when its messiah didn't show up.
5. That most fundamentalists are rather stupid, Muslims and Christians alike.
6. That most evangelical Christians cannot describe what they mean by "inerrant" – speaking of the Bible.
7. That the vast majority of Christians opposed to stem cell research think it means killing babies for their brains.
8. That biblical Israel ceased to exist in 720 BCE, lasted for less than 200 years, and that modern Israel didn't exist again until 1948.
9. That virtually no Jews use the phrase "Judeo-Christian," applied to ethics or anything else.
10. That Mohammed, a delusional seventh-century Arab who thought the God of the Jews was speaking to him, was not a Muslim.
11. That Jesus, a delusional first-century Jew who, if he existed, thought that the God of Abraham was his father, was not a Christian.
12. That most Arabs don't like Palestinians.
13. That most Lebanese who are not Shi'a would rather be called Phoenicians than Arabs.
14. That religion is the cause and not the cure for Middle Eastern violence.
15. That the intellectual tradition in Arabia that is supposed to have given us everything from astronomy to the zero and algebra – didn't.
16. That the word "Islam" does not derive from the Arabic word for peace, but from the term for "Give up?"
17. That the term "jihad" historically has never meant an inner struggle for spiritual perfection, but for killing the enemies of Islam before they can hurt you.
18. That almost no one in the Middle East believes the region's future resides with "moderate" Muslims.
19. That atheism, secular humanism, and agnosticism are essential ingredients of the pluralist culture of modern Europe and America.
20. That when secularism and humanism fail, democracy fails.
21. That religious tolerance is not possible in the Middle East.
22. That unless "freedom and democracy" includes the construct "secular," neither term is meaningful.
23. That prior to the war, the American president did not know that Iraq was biblical Mesopotamia, Eden.
24. That the American president thinks the distinction between Shi'a and Sunni is similar to the distinction between Methodist and Presbyterian.
25. That the new "democratic" regime in Iraq (of Iraqi Shi'a) – not Syria or Iran – were the staunchest supporters of Hezbollah prior to the invasion of Iraq.
26. That this means that the people we are calling the bulwark of freedom and democracy in Iraq are the terrorists of southern Lebanon.

HIGHLY ENRICHED ISLAM

Thomas L. Friedman

(Reprinted from "The Silence That Kills" on the OpEd page of The NYTimes, 3/2/07)

On Feb. 20, The A.P. reported from Afghanistan that a suicide attacker disguised as a health worker blew himself up near "a crowd of about 150 people who had gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to open an emergency ward at the main government hospital in the city of Khost." A few days later, at a Baghdad college, a female Sunni suicide bomber blew herself up amid students who were ready to sit for exams, killing 40 people.

Stop and think for a moment how sick this is. Then stop for another moment and listen to the silence. The Bush team is mute. It says nothing, because it has no moral authority. No one would listen. Mr. Bush is losing a P.R. war to people who blow up emergency wards. Europeans are mute, lost in their delusion that this is all George Bush's and Tony Blair's fault.

But worst of all, Muslims, the very people whose future is being killed, are also mute. No surge can work in Iraq unless we have a "moral surge," a counternihilism strategy that delegitimizes suicide bombers. The most important restraints are cultural, societal and religious ... but the Arab-Muslim village today is largely silent. The best are indifferent or intimidated; the worst quietly applaud the Sunnis who kill Shiites.

Nobody in the Arab world "has the guts to say that what is happening in Iraq is wrong, that killing school-kids is wrong," said Mamoun Fandy, of the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "People somehow think that killing Iraqis is good because it will stick it to the Americans, so Arabs are undermining the American project in Iraq by killing themselves."

The world worries about highly enriched uranium, but "the real danger is highly enriched Islam," Mr. Fandy added. That is, "highly enriched Sunnism" and "highly enriched Shiism" that eats away at the Muslim state, the way Hezbollah is trying to do in Lebanon or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or Al Qaeda everywhere.

One result: there's no legitimate, decent, accepted source of Arab-Muslim authority today, no center of gravity "for people to anchor their souls in," Mr. Fandy said. In this welter of confusion, the suicide bombers go uncondemned or subtly extolled.

Arab nationalist media like Al Jazeera "practically tell bin Laden and his followers, 'Bravo,'" Mr. Fandy said. "The message sent to bin Laden is that 'You are doing to the West what we want done, but we can't do it.' This is the hidden message that the West is not privy to. Unless extreme pressure is applied on Muslims all over the world to come up with counter-fatwas and pronounce these men as pariahs, very little will happen in fighting terrorism.

"The battleground in the Arab world today is not in Palestine or Lebanon, but in the classrooms and newsrooms," Mr. Fandy concluded. That's where "the software programmers" reside who create symbolic images and language glorifying suicide bombers and make their depraved acts look legitimate. Only other Arab-Muslim programmers can defeat them.

The Muslims say, "There is no god but Allah," and they are half right. — *Dan Barker, Freethought Radio*

AND NOW, MUSLIM RATIONALITY

(Excerpted from "Broadsheet" on Salon.com, 3/6/07, and forwarded by Colin Rafferty)

Egypt's Grand Mufti Aly Gomaa issued a fatwa declaring it religiously acceptable for a woman to have her hymen surgically reconstructed On the surface that might not seem grounds for celebration, but consider that in certain regions, an unmarried woman who loses her virginity might very well become the target of an "honor killing." Even better, though, is that Gomaa scoffed at the idea of considering a torn hymen as evidence that a woman has lost her virginity: "It is not rational for us to think that God has placed a sign to indicate the virginity of women without having a similar sign to indicate the virginity of men."

Gomaa had even more to say to guys who might take issue with this radical idea. "Any man who is concerned about his prospective wife's hymen should first provide a proof that he himself is virgin. . . . Islam does not care for the feelings of ignorant people, just as the law does not protect the idiots."

Here's to progress, even if tiny bit by tiny bit.

**REMEMBER WHY YOU BECAME
A MEMBER OF SHSNY?
Gordon King**

February 25, 2007

Dear John and Donna:

Thank you so much for your thoughtful and absorbing copies of PIQUE, which I've read and reread cover to cover. Not only are you producing a fine newsletter – but you're doing a needed public service. Damn, but we need more voices like yours!

And of course, I want to become a member—my check is enclosed. Does it matter I'm not a New Yorker?

A myriad of thoughts course through my mind as I read. Such as: when did we, the people, stop thinking of the crew in Washington (and their counterparts across the nation) as "public servants"? And of GWB as # 1 public servant? Which is what he is. We're paying his wages. He works for us. Simple as that – but we, the public, have let ourselves be hornswoggled. One of the most depressing things about Bush & Co. is that the U.S. voting public elected the guy (well, not really, but that's another story).

"Secular humanism"— so *that's* what I believe in. I didn't have a name for it until now. I want to locate co-believers here in this university town in the western reaches of Virginia. I'll spread the word here as well as I can – for example, I coffee every Thursday morning with several retired Virginia Tech professors and will try to rope them in. PIQUE is just plain damned refreshing and I wish you dear people all the best in your efforts.

Right now, my BIG worry about GWB & crew is that they may decide to attack Iran. You'll remember that I spent four big years of my life there, and at one time was fluent in the language (I can still manage a little of it). Any invasion of Iran would turn into a debacle — like Viet Nam but worse.

(Gordon King is a retired Foreign Service officer who was Principal Officer and Consul General at the American Consulate General in Lahore, Pakistan ... and is now a member of SHSNY.)

**CONDEMNED TO PRAY
Martine B. Reed**

In cases which involve crimes committed under the influence of alcohol, judges frequently make attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings a condition of probation. This means that failure to attend the required number of AA meetings each week will be considered a violation of probation and will cause the violator to go to jail.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a program of recovery from alcohol abuse that has a religious foundation. It is a Twelve Steps program with strong reliance on a “higher power,” also called “the god of your understanding.” A number of courts, in fact, including New York State courts, and the Second Circuit Federal Appeals Court, which encompasses New York, have ruled that AA is religious in nature. (See, e.g. DeStefano vs. Emergency Housing Group, a 2001 decision)

The Establishment clause of the First Amendment mandates separation of church and state. It can be said that by recommending AA to some defendants the courts provide governmental support to religion and are therefore violating the First Amendment. The DeStefano decision concluded that coercing or mandating defendants on probation to attend AA meetings would indeed be impermissible under the Establishment Clause. However, it is permissible to make AA programs part of a probation sentence provided that participation is on a “voluntary basis.” The fundamental question of whether a defendant on probation is indeed “free” to refuse to attend AA, if refusal means return to jail, has not been resolved and begs for further examination.

Alcoholics Anonymous has proven to be a successful program of recovery from alcohol abuse and is available almost anywhere in this country and abroad. At many meetings, an overwhelming majority of the members profess their belief in god. Many meetings end with the Lord’s Prayer, an unmistakably Christian prayer. However, AA also has a tradition which states “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking” (Third Tradition). No member of AA is ever actually forced to pray or to declare belief in any god.

In the past few years, a number of Agnostic AA groups have been formed, mostly in larger urban areas. An offender sentenced to attendance at AA meetings in such an area would evidently be able to comply both with his sentence and with the dictates of his conscience. For others not so fortunate, the situation creates a dilemma. Since Alcoholics Anonymous is by far the most effective and credible program, the most obvious solution would be for both the courts and Alcoholic Anonymous to make sure that Agnostic meetings are more widely available. Given the current climate of this country, that is not likely to happen any time soon.

(Editor: If this article seems legally authoritative, perhaps it’s because Ms. Reed is a recently-retired attorney.)

THE MOST UNPOPULAR COLUMN I’LL EVER WRITE FOR PIQUE

John Rafferty

On my list of societal concerns, fair play for child molesters is pretty far down the page. I worried about predators all through the raising of four sons, and now have eight granddaughters and sons to worry about. Do I have to say that if one of them was molested I’d tear the sick bastard’s throat open?

With my teeth.

But now our state legislature has passed (and Governor Spitzer surely will have signed by the time this is printed) a bill that will make New York the 20th state to require “civil commitment” for convicted sex offenders *who have completed their prison sentences*.

“Commitment” for how long? Oh, as much as life.

While 53 New York State senators voted for the bill, eight New York City Democrats dissented. Why? Senator Schneiderman of Manhattan pointed out that the new law could apply to people convicted of nonviolent crimes, even some who were never convicted of sex crimes – including people who were *accused* of sex crimes but pleaded guilty to other crimes.

The new law also creates a new “sexually motivated felony” that applies to those who *intended* to commit a sex crime but did not. Didn’t *do* it, didn’t *conspire* to do it, didn’t *attempt* to do it (all existing felony categories), but—in the opinion of a zealous prosecutor—*intended* to do it. How can we possibly know that the burglar caught in the dining room with the silverware *intended* to rape the woman in the bedroom? How in hell can we conceivably know what someone is or was thinking?

This law disturbs me deeply. The first piece I ever wrote for PIQUE, in 1999, was in rebuttal to a letter urging the extension of the scope of already-existing (and in my view deplorable) hate crime laws. I said then, and still say, “This is America, we don’t punish people for what they think.” I vented again in these pages in 2001, when I read of a 22-year-old Ohio pedophile whose probation officer found pornographic musings in his computer diary during a surprise inspection. The pervert hadn’t sent or shown them to anyone, they were private (probably masturbatory) fantasies. No matter, a judge gave him eighteen months for violating probation, and a new seven-year sentence for possession of pornography – and letter writers in the *NYTimes* praising the sentences cited “dangerousness” as justification for imprisonment.

“Dangerousness” as a crime? Why not, if the crime is as hot-button heinous as rape or child molestation? If you’ve done it before, you’re “dangerous” and – oh, hell, just throw away the key.

Now “intention” will be a crime, too, upending a criminal justice system that, Senator Parker of Brooklyn reminded us while voting No, was set up to let a hundred guilty people go free so as not to jail one innocent. “We’re saying,” he said, “Put a hundred innocent people in jail to make sure we get the one guilty one.”

And, via “civil commitment,” throw away the key. So, why not treat the ghetto gang member—who we know is going to try to finish the job as soon as he completes his sentence for attempted murder—the same way? How about any convict who we know is going to return to the same criminal environment from which he came? What about the arsonist, another “compulsive” offender, according to psychiatrists? How about *any* offender whose behavior is dictated by compulsion? Hell, how about *anyone* convicted of *anything*?

The idea of convicted pedophiles on the street makes me sick. The steady erosion of due process and individual liberties in America makes me weep.

ATHEISM ON THE 86TH STREET CROSSTOWN
Conrad Claborne

On a cold mid-March after-school afternoon I was on a crowded bus with a bunch of teenagers I couldn't see, but whom I definitely could hear.

"I'm an atheist Jew," one of the disembodied voices declared, capturing my attention immediately. (He also announced that "some poll" said that 75% of people were atheists – dream on, kid.) There then followed a loud discussion as to whether or not these young people believed in a life after death. One girl said she believed that "something" lasted beyond the grave, but more vehement voices insisted that death was the end of life, period. And when the current president's religious views were mentioned, the ragging really began. The clincher? "Bush should get with reality."

Interesting to hear, and maybe there's hope.

A little late for St. Pat's Day, but an Irish saying: "There is no devil; it's just God when he's drunk."

OUR FAVORITE GAY CONSERVATIVE BITCH-SLAPS ANN COULTER

Andrew Sullivan

(Reprinted from "Faggot" in The AtlanticOnline, 3/5/07)

I watched Ann Coulter last night in the gayest way I could. I was on a Stairmaster at a gym, slack-jawed at her proud defense of calling someone a "faggot" on the same stage as presidential candidates and as an icon of today's conservative movement. The way in which Fox News and Sean Hannity and, even more repulsively, Pat Cadell, shilled for her was a new low for Fox, I think – and for what remains of decent conservatism. "We're all friends here," Hannity chuckled at the end. Yes, they were. And no faggots were on the show to defend themselves. That's fair and balanced.

I'm not going to breathe more oxygen into this story except to say a couple of things that need saying. Coulter has an actual argument in self-defense and it's worth addressing. Her argument is that it was a joke and that since it was directed at a straight man, it wasn't homophobic. It was, in her words, a "school-yard taunt," directed at a straight man, meaning a "wuss" and a "sissy." Why would gays care? She is "pro-gay," after all. Apart from backing a party that wants to strip gay couples of all legal rights by amending the federal constitution, kick them out of the military where they are putting their lives on the line, put them into "reparative therapy" to "cure" them, keep it legal to fire them in many states, and refusing to include them in hate crime laws, Coulter is very pro-gay. As evidence of how pro-gay she is, check out all the gay men and women now defending her.

Her defense, however, is that she was making a joke, not speaking a slur. Her logic suggests that the two are mutually exclusive. They're not. And when you unpack Coulter's joke, you see she does both. Her joke was that the world is so absurd that someone like Isaiah Washington is forced to go into rehab for calling someone a "faggot." She's absolutely right that this is absurd and funny and an example of p.c. insanity. She could have made a joke about that – a better one, to be sure – but a joke. But she didn't just do that. She added to the joke a slur: "John Edwards is a faggot." That's why people gasped and then laughed and clapped so heartily. I was in the room, so I felt the atmosphere personally. It was an ugly atmosphere, designed to make any gay man or woman in the room feel marginalized and despised. To put it simply, either

conservatism is happy to be associated with that atmosphere, or it isn't. I think the response so far suggests that the conservative elites don't want to go there, but the base has already been there for a very long time. (That's why this affair is so revealing, because it is showing which elites want to pander to bigots, and which do not.)

Coulter's defense of the slur is that it was directed at an obviously straight man and so could not be a real slur. The premise of this argument is that the word "faggot" is only used to describe gay men and is only effective and derogatory when used against a gay man. But it isn't. In fact, in the schoolyard she cites, the primary targets of the f-word are straight boys or men. The word "faggot" is used for two reasons: to identify and demonize a gay man; and to threaten a straight man with being reduced to the social pariah status of a gay man. Coulter chose the latter use of the slur, its most potent and common form. She knew why Edwards qualified. He's pretty, he has flowing locks, he's young-looking. He is exactly the kind of straight guy who is targeted as a "faggot" by his straight peers. This, Ms Coulter, is real social policing by speech. And that's what she was doing: trying to delegitimize and feminize a man by calling him a faggot. It happens every day. It's how insecure or bigoted straight men police their world to keep the homos out.

And for the slur to work, it must logically accept the premise that gay men are weak, effeminate, wusses, sissies, and the rest. A sane gay man has two responses to this, I think. The first is that there is nothing wrong with effeminacy or effeminate gay men – and certainly nothing weak about many of them. In the plague years, I saw countless nelly sissies face HIV and AIDS with as much courage and steel as any warrior on earth. You want to meet someone with balls? Find a drag queen. The courage of many gay men every day in facing down hatred and scorn and derision to live lives of dignity and integrity is not a sign of being a wuss or somehow weak. We have as much and maybe more courage than many – because we have had to acquire it to survive.

And that is especially true of gay men whose effeminacy may not make them able to pass as straight – the very people Coulter seeks to demonize. The conflation of effeminacy with weakness, and of gayness with weakness, is what Coulter calculatedly asserted. This was not a joke. It was an attack.

Secondly, gay men are not all effeminate. In the last couple of weeks, we have seen a leading NBA player and a Marine come out to tell their stories. I'd like to hear Coulter tell Amaechi and Alva that they are sissies and wusses. A man in uniform who just lost a leg for his country is a sissy? The first American serviceman to be wounded in Iraq is a wuss?

What Coulter did, in her callow, empty way, was to accuse John Edwards of not being a real man. To do so, she asserted that gay men are not real men either. The emasculation of men in minority groups is an ancient trope of the vilest bigotry. Why was it wrong, after all, for white men to call African-American men "boys"? Because it robbed them of the dignity of their masculinity. And that's what Coulter did to gays. She said—and conservatives applauded—that I and so many others are not men. We are men, Ann.