

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

March, 2007

Evolution — displayed, described, de-volved and done in doggerel — is our defining theme this month, as we celebrate a major new permanent natural history exhibition in our town. We define and defend atheists, too (some of our best friends), welcome a new

Board member, plug a TV show (and decry some recent TV “news”), slap around political evangelicals, laugh at Baptists, and direct your attention to the Calendar insert for some social events you won’t want to miss.— *JR*

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DON’T MISS

Our first Sunday Brunch — March 25

Spring Roundtable, “The God Delusion” — April 19

Our first Movie Night — April 23

Spring FriendRaiser Party — May 11

See the Calendar insert for details

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MEET THE RELATIVES, THEY’RE FULL OF SURPRISES

**A Review of the Museum of Natural History’s new Anne and Bernard Spitzer Hall
of Human Origins.**

John Noble Wilford

(Excerpted from The New York Times, February 9)

Our ancestors have arrived at the American Museum of Natural History. They are very old, and we are only beginning to recognize them and ourselves in them. They remind us of our origins long ago and how we have emerged as modern humans in the fullness of time.

The museum’s new permanent exhibition on human origins merges notable achievements in paleontology and genetics, sciences that have made their own robust evolutionary strides in recent years. Each introduces evidence supporting the other in establishing a genealogy extending back to protohuman species that arose in Africa from earlier primates some six to seven million years ago.

These two scientific threads run through the exhibition like the strands of the DNA double helix.

Ellen V. Futter, the museum’s president, said the “mutually reinforcing evidence” was organized in the exhibition to address three fundamental questions: Where did we come from? Who are we? And what lies ahead for us?

Turn right at the entrance of the new installation, the Anne and Bernard Spitzer Hall of Human Origins, and you see paleontology’s side of the story. More than 200 casts of prehuman and human fossils and artifacts illustrate stages in physical and behavioral evolution.

Four life-size tableaus depict scenes in the lives of human predecessors, the realism stamped by the presence of pesky flies on their shoulders.

Some of the most striking displays are reconstructions from fossil and other evidence of what these ancestors probably looked like. Museum scientists and technicians have recreated the faces and bodies of the famous Lucy skeleton and Neanderthals, even the controversial Hobbits, the tiny specimens of what may be a previously unknown extinct species found recently in Indonesia.

The reconstruction of Turkana Boy is especially evocative. Based on one of the most complete ancestral skeletons ever excavated, the fleshed-out *Homo ergaster*, a species that lived in Africa 1.9 to 1.4 million years ago, is almost six feet tall, with a body form remarkably like that of modern humans.

“The fossils on which the reconstructions are based are witnesses to a dynamic history,” said Ian Tattersall, a paleoanthropologist at the museum and co-curator of the exhibition. “Now we have a much larger story to tell, with the addition of what we are learning from molecular biology.”

Bear left in the hall, and there is the sign “DNA Tells Us About Human Origins.” Below are three tubes containing particles of DNA in a milky white solution. The samples are not particularly impressive, until you think that this is the stuff of encoded information shaping an entire organism and the material that has transformed the study of genetics, or genomics, and revealed the place of humans in the rest of life.

One of the vials holds human DNA, and another a chimpanzee’s. The analysis of their genetic material has confirmed what comparative anatomy predicted, that human DNA is 98.8 percent identical to that of chimps and bonobos, our closest living relatives. And our DNA is, on average, 96 percent identical to our most distant primate kin, some of which are mounted on the wall.

The third vial contains a DNA sample from a 40,000-year-old Neanderthal, the extinct close cousin of *Homo sapiens*. The discovery of a Neanderthal skull in 1856 led to the recognition that different kinds of humans once lived on Earth. This rare DNA specimen, on display in this country for the first time, was donated by the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig, Germany, the first laboratory to succeed in extracting the genetic material from Neanderthal bones.

Standing nearby are the skeletons of a chimpanzee, a Neanderthal and a modern human, and stations with interactive electronic displays are ready, at the touch of a screen, to explain the differences and similarities between the bones, brains and DNA of the three species.

Other computer animations offer insights into how scientists decode the hereditary information, how it is transmitted through generations, and how mutations of mitochondrial DNA, the traits inherited through the mother’s lineage, reveal relationships through time and migrations. A video of a “tree of life” changes before your eyes, like a kaleidoscope, showing the branching interrelationships among 479 species. ...

Some of the cast of fossil characters may be familiar to regular museum visitors, but they have been revitalized in new settings. For example, the *Australopithecus* couple that left tracks walking 3.5 million years ago across a plain at Laetoli, Tanzania, appear here. The surprise is that they are so small, no more than three feet tall. Yet the discovery of their footprints was the first clear evidence that prehumans were walking upright well before they made tools.

In the habitat displays, two Homo ergasters butcher a carcass and fight off a vulture and a jackal trying to steal the meat, and a Homo erectus, Peking Man, crouches and is about to be pounced on by a hyena. The curators said these were reminders that human ancestors were prey rather than predator for much of their history.

Toward the back of the gallery, the cultural aspects of evolution are illustrated. An exact reproduction of the painted animals from the cave art at Lascaux in France stretches across the wall. Other displays include a replica of a 75,000-year-old piece of ochre decorated with geometric patterns, a recent discovery in South Africa and one of the earliest examples of symbolic thinking and creativity in modern humans.

In this context the exhibition reviews the elements that make humans different from other life: tool use, language, music and writing, as well as art and other forms of creative expression. ...

One issue cannot be entirely sidestepped in any public presentation of human evolution: that many people in this country doubt and vocally oppose the very concept. In a corner of the hall, several scientists are shown in video interviews professing the compatibility of their evolution research with their religious beliefs.

Standing nearby at the end of a tour of the exhibition, Michael J. Novacek, a paleontologist and the museum's senior vice president, said that a previous show on Darwin had been a reassuring test case. The exhibition was popular, he said, and provoked "very little negative response."

Dr. Novacek said the new hall was "an emphatic statement about the theory of evolution and its power to tell us our origins and history."

"We emphasize that a scientific theory is an argument that is very carefully tested against scientific evidence ... and this one has withstood much scrutiny."

The modern human capacity for symbolic and creative expression has brought forth different narratives to explain where we came from, drawn from myth, religion and pre-Darwin science. The exhibition's parallel lines of fossil and molecular evidence have the cumulative effect of solidifying the foundation for the more recent scientific narrative of human evolution.

There are still many gaps in knowledge, and unsolved mysteries. But seeing ourselves in the train of preceding species, we also recognize the degree of our separation from other animals, even our earliest ancestors. Only modern Homo sapiens in our time could present with such newfound authority the epic narrated through the museum's Hall of Human Origins.

Comment: See the Calendar for Exhibition times and prices.

ELAINE LYNN REVIEWS ON THE NYC ATHEIST BOOK CLUB ON CABLE TV

Elaine Lynn, our own newly-installed Book Club chair, is also the Book Reviewer on the NYC Atheist Book Club cable TV show, Thursday evenings at 7:30 on Manhattan Neighborhood Network, Ch. 67. The shows can also be seen anywhere, at the same time, via streaming video on your computer, at www.mnn.org.

WHAT EVOLUTION IS Michael Shermer

(Excerpted from Why Darwin Matters, and reprinted on Mr. Shermer's eSkeptic Darwin Day column, February 12)

Ever since Darwin, much has been written about what, exactly, evolution is. Ernst Mayr was arguably the greatest evolutionary theorist since Darwin. His extensive body of work and considerable longevity (when I phoned Ernst on his 100th birthday he was working on several articles and two more books) led to his authoritative history, theory, and synthesis of evolutionary thought. Mayr offers this technical definition:

“Evolution is change in the adaptation and in the diversity of populations of organisms.” This reveals the dual nature of evolution. “It deals, so to speak, both with the ‘vertical’ phenomenon of adaptive change and with the ‘horizontal’ phenomenon of populations, incipient species, and new species.” And I’ll never forget Mayr’s definition of a species, because I had to memorize it in my first course on evolutionary biology: “A species is a group of actually or potentially interbreeding natural populations reproductively isolated from other such populations.”

Mayr outlines five general tenets of evolution, followed by five specific points about how natural selection works.

1. *Evolution*: Organisms change through time. Both the fossil record of life’s history, and nature today document and reveal this change.

2. *Descent with modification*: Evolution proceeds via branching through common descent. Offspring are similar to but not exact replicas of their parents. This produces the necessary variation to allow for adaptation to an ever-changing environment.

3. *Gradualism*: Change is slow, steady, and stately. Given enough time, evolution accounts for species change.

4. *Multiplication of speciation*: Evolution does not just produce new species; it produces an increasing number of new species.

5. *Natural selection*: The process of evolutionary change, co-discovered by Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, which operates in the following manner:

5.1. Populations tend to increase indefinitely in a geometric ratio: 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024 ...

5.2. In a natural environment, however, population numbers stabilize at a certain level.

5.3. Therefore, there must be a “struggle for existence” because not all of the organisms produced can survive.

5.4. There is variation in every species.

5.5. In the struggle for existence, those individuals with variations that are better adapted to the environment leave behind more offspring than individuals that are less well adapted. This is known as differential reproductive success. ...

Natural selection operates primarily at the local level. It is the process of organisms struggling to survive and reproduce in order to propagate their genes into the next generation. The Oxford evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins succinctly defined evolution as “random mutation plus non-random cumulative selection.” Dawkins especially emphasizes the nonrandom element in the process in order to counter the myth that evolution is completely random, as in the creationists’ specious argument that evolution is the equivalent of a warehouse full of parts randomly assorting themselves into a jumbo jet. If evolution were truly random there would be no biological jumbo jets. Genetic mutations and the mixing of genes in offspring may be random, but the selection

of genes through the survival of their hosts is anything but random. Out of this process of self-organized directional selection emerges complexity and diversity.

Natural selection is a description of a process, not a force. No one is “selecting” organisms for survival or extinction, in the benign sense of dog breeders selecting for desirable traits in show breeds, or in the malignant sense of Nazis selecting prisoners at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Natural selection, and thus evolution, is unconscious and non-prescient — it cannot look forward to anticipate what changes are going to be needed for survival. The evolutionary watchmaker is blind, says Dawkins, *pace* Paley.

By way of example, once when my young daughter inquired about how evolution works, I used the polar bear as an example of a “transitional species” between land mammals and marine mammals, because although they are land mammals they spend so much time in the water that they have acquired many adaptations to an aquatic life. But this is not correct, because it implies that polar bears are on their way (in transition) to becoming marine mammals. They aren’t. Polar bears are not “becoming” anything. Polar bears are well adapted for their lifestyle. If global warming continues, perhaps polar bears will adapt to a full-time aquatic existence, or perhaps they will move south and become smaller brown bears, or perhaps they will go extinct. Who knows? No one.

LEE LOSHAK JOINS THE SHSNY BOARD

Retired (but very active) psychologist Lee Loshak was elected unanimously to the SHSNY Board of Directors at a board meeting February 21. Lee will serve as our Events chair, and is busy planning monthly membership brunch meetings and movie nights.

“And that’s just for starters,” he says.

THE DE-VOLUTION OF AN IDEA

David Brooks

(Excerpted from “Human Nature Redux” on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times, 2/18/07)

Sometimes a big idea fades so imperceptibly from public consciousness you don’t even notice until it has almost disappeared. Such is the fate of the belief in natural human goodness.

This belief, most often associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, begins with the notion that “everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.” Human beings are virtuous in their natural state ... only corrupt institutions make them venal. They are happy in their simplicity, but social conventions make them unwell. ...

Over the past 30 years or so, however, this belief in natural goodness has been discarded. It began to lose favor because of the failure of just about every social program that was inspired by it, from the communes to progressive education on up. But the big blow came at the hands of science.

From the content of our genes, the nature of our neurons and the lessons of evolutionary biology, it has become clear that nature is filled with competition and conflicts of interest. Humanity did not come before status contests. Status contests came before humanity, and are embedded deep in human relations. People in hunter-gatherer societies were deadly warriors, not sexually liberated pacifists. As Steven Pinker has put it, Hobbes was more right than Rousseau.

Moreover, human beings are not as pliable as the social engineers imagined. Human beings operate according to preset epigenetic rules, which dispose people to act in certain ways. We strive for dominance and undermine radical egalitarian dreams. We're tribal and divide the world into in-groups and out-groups.

This darker if more realistic view of human nature has led to a rediscovery of different moral codes and different political assumptions. Most people today share what Thomas Sowell calls the Constrained Vision, what Pinker calls the Tragic Vision and what E. O. Wilson calls Existential Conservatism. This is based on the idea that there is a universal human nature; that it has nasty, competitive elements; that we don't understand much about it; and that the conventions and institutions that have evolved to keep us from slitting each other's throats are valuable and are altered at great peril.

Today, parents don't seek to liberate their children; they supervise, coach and instruct every element of their lives. Today, there really is no antinomian counterculture – even the artists and rock stars are bourgeois strivers. Today, communes and utopian schemes are out of favor. People are mostly skeptical of social engineering efforts and jaundiced about revolutionaries who promise to herald a new dawn. Iraq has revealed what human beings do without a strong order-imposing state.

This is a big pivot in intellectual history. The thinkers most associated with the Tragic Vision are Isaiah Berlin, Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Friedrich Hayek and Hobbes.

Many of them are conservative. And here's another perversity of human nature. Many conservatives resist the theory of evolution even though it confirms many of conservatism's deepest truths.

INTELLIGENT? DESIGN?

Phil Appleman

(To the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic")

Your eyes have seen a blurry scene
That's only known to man:
Your optic nerves are backward and
Have been since time began.
That's what the preachers tell you is
God's very special plan:
Intelligent Design!

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
The Great Designer knows what's due ya,
Nothing else can stick it to ya
Like Intelligent Design!

You wish a guy's urethra did
The jobs that were proposed:
Both lover's clout and waterspout
Is what you had supposed.
Alas, the Great Designer squeezed

A prostate 'round your hose:
Intelligent Design!

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Nowhere does the Bible clue ya
That your glands would soon subdue ya:
Intelligent Design!

Your tummy's sick, your heart goes tick,
Your hips are giving in.
Childbirth is a horror 'cause
Your pelvis is too thin.
When your appendix ruptures, the
Designer only grins:
Intelligent Design!

Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!
Making-do will have to do ya.
Flimflammers cooked this up to screw ya:
Intelligent Design!

10 MYTHS (AND 10 TRUTHS) ABOUT ATHEISM

Sam Harris

(Reprinted from The Los Angeles Times, 12/24/06)

Several polls indicate that the term “atheism” has acquired such an extraordinary stigma in the United States that being an atheist is now a perfect impediment to a career in politics (in a way that being black, Muslim or homosexual is not). According to a recent Newsweek poll, only 37 percent of Americans would vote for an otherwise qualified atheist for president.

Atheists are often imagined to be intolerant, immoral, depressed, blind to the beauty of nature and dogmatically closed to evidence of the supernatural.

Even John Locke, one of the great patriarchs of the Enlightenment, believed that atheism was “not at all to be tolerated” because, he said, “promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human societies, can have no hold upon an atheist.”

That was more than 300 years ago. But in the United States today, little seems to have changed. A remarkable 87 percent of the population claims “never to doubt” the existence of God; fewer than 10 percent identify themselves as atheists — and their reputation appears to be deteriorating.

Given that we know that atheists are often among the most intelligent and scientifically literate people in any society, it seems important to deflate the myths that prevent them from playing a larger role in our national discourse.

1) Atheists believe that life is meaningless.

On the contrary, religious people often worry that life is meaningless and imagine that it can only be redeemed by the promise of eternal happiness beyond the grave. Atheists tend to be quite sure that life is precious.

Life is imbued with meaning by being really and fully lived. Our relationships with those we love are meaningful now; they need not last forever to be made so. Atheists tend to find this fear of meaninglessness ... well ... meaningless.

2) *Atheism is responsible for the greatest crimes in human history.*

People of faith often claim that the crimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were the inevitable product of unbelief. The problem with fascism and communism, however, is not that they are too critical of religion; the problem is that they are too much like religions. Such regimes are dogmatic to the core and generally give rise to personality cults that are indistinguishable from cults of religious hero worship.

Auschwitz, the gulag and the killing fields were not examples of what happens when human beings reject religious dogma; they are examples of political, racial and nationalistic dogma run amok. There is no society in human history that ever suffered because its people became too reasonable.

3) *Atheism is dogmatic.*

Jews, Christians and Muslims claim that their scriptures are so prescient of humanity's needs that they could only have been written under the direction of an omniscient deity. An atheist is simply a person who has considered this claim, read the books and found the claim to be ridiculous.

One doesn't have to take anything on faith, or be otherwise dogmatic, to reject unjustified religious beliefs. As the historian Stephen Henry Roberts (1901-71) once said: "I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours."

4) *Atheists think everything in the universe arose by chance.*

No one knows why the universe came into being. In fact, it is not entirely clear that we can coherently speak about the "beginning" or "creation" of the universe at all, as these ideas invoke the concept of time, and here we are talking about the origin of space-time itself.

The notion that atheists believe that everything was created by chance is also regularly thrown up as a criticism of Darwinian evolution. As Richard Dawkins explains in his marvelous book, *The God Delusion*, this represents an utter misunderstanding of evolutionary theory.

Although we don't know precisely how the Earth's early chemistry begat biology, we know that the diversity and complexity we see in the living world is not a product of mere chance. Evolution is a combination of chance mutation and natural selection. Darwin arrived at the phrase "natural selection" by analogy to the "artificial selection" performed by breeders of livestock. In both cases, selection exerts a highly non-random effect on the development of any species.

5) *Atheism has no connection to science.*

Although it is possible to be a scientist and still believe in God — as some scientists seem to manage it — there is no question that an engagement with scientific thinking tends to erode, rather than support, religious faith. Taking the U.S. population as an example: most polls show that about 90% of the general public believes in a personal God; yet 93% of the members of the National Academy of Sciences do not. This suggests that there are few modes of thinking less congenial to religious faith than science.

6) *Atheists are arrogant.*

When scientists don't know something — like why the universe came into being or how the first self-replicating molecules formed — they admit it. Pretending to know things one doesn't know is a profound liability in science. And yet it is the life-blood of faith-based religion. One of the monumental ironies of religious discourse can be found in the frequency with which people of faith praise themselves for their humility, while claiming to know facts about cosmology, chemistry and biology that no scientist knows. When considering questions about the nature of the cosmos and our place within it, atheists tend to draw their opinions from science. This isn't arrogance; it is intellectual honesty.

7) *Atheists are closed to spiritual experience.*

There is nothing that prevents an atheist from experiencing love, ecstasy, rapture and awe; atheists can value these experiences and seek them regularly. What atheists don't tend to do is make unjustified (and unjustifiable) claims about the nature of reality on the basis of such experiences. There is no question that some Christians have transformed their lives for the better by reading the Bible and praying to Jesus.

What does this prove? It proves that certain disciplines of attention and codes of conduct can have a profound effect upon the human mind. Do the positive experiences of Christians suggest that Jesus is the sole savior of humanity? Not even remotely — because Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and even atheists regularly have similar experiences.

There is, in fact, not a Christian on this Earth who can be certain that Jesus even wore a beard, much less that he was born of a virgin or rose from the dead. These are just not the sort of claims that spiritual experience can authenticate.

8) *Atheists believe that there is nothing beyond human life and human understanding.*

Atheists are free to admit the limits of human understanding in a way that religious people are not. It is obvious that we do not fully understand the universe; but it is even more obvious that neither the Bible nor the Koran reflects our best understanding of it. We do not know whether there is complex life elsewhere in the cosmos, but there might be. If there is, such beings could have developed an understanding of nature's laws that vastly exceeds our own. Atheists can freely entertain such possibilities. They also can admit that if brilliant extraterrestrials exist, the contents of the Bible and the Koran will be even less impressive to them than they are to human atheists.

From the atheist point of view, the world's religions utterly trivialize the real beauty and immensity of the universe. One doesn't have to accept anything on insufficient evidence to make such an observation.

9) *Atheists ignore the fact that religion is extremely beneficial to society.*

Those who emphasize the good effects of religion never seem to realize that such effects fail to demonstrate the truth of any religious doctrine. This is why we have terms such as “wishful thinking” and “self-deception.” There is a profound distinction between a consoling delusion and the truth.

In any case, the good effects of religion can surely be disputed. In most cases, it seems that religion gives people bad reasons to behave well, when good reasons are actually available. Ask yourself, which is more moral, helping the poor out of concern for their suffering, or doing so because you think the creator of the universe wants you to do it, will reward you for doing it or will punish you for not doing it.

10) Atheism provides no basis for morality.

If a person doesn't already understand that cruelty is wrong, he won't discover this by reading the Bible or the Koran — as these books are bursting with celebrations of cruelty, both human and divine. We do not get our morality from religion. We decide what is good in our good books by recourse to moral intuitions that are (at some level) hard-wired in us and that have been refined by thousands of years of thinking about the causes and possibilities of human happiness.

We have made considerable moral progress over the years, and we didn't make this progress by reading the Bible or the Koran more closely. Both books condone the practice of slavery — and yet every civilized human being now recognizes that slavery is an abomination. Whatever is good in scripture — like the golden rule — can be valued for its ethical wisdom without our believing that it was handed down to us by the creator of the universe.

MISQUOTING ATHEISTS: WHO'S NOT GOD?

Elaine Lynn

(The following is Elaine's January 19 letter published in the New York Sun in response to the Sun's January 15 article about NYC Atheists, "Atheist Outreach: Group Coaxes Unbelievers Into the Open.")

It was disturbing to read the misleading and inappropriate comments of the priest you interviewed in this article, Father Richard John Neuhaus. He painted with a broad brush people who are primarily figments of his imagination – or his public relations strategy. "There's this compulsive need to rage against something," he said. One of the things his imaginary atheists are raging against is "believing you're not God." This sounds like an adolescent retort, but clearly these are public talking points.

Having known numerous atheists and agnostics, I have yet to meet one with a compulsive need to rage and, with all due respect, it must be said the closest I have come to people who don't want to face the fact that they're not God are the many clergymen who presume to speak for God, who tell us what "he said," what "he wants," and what "he'll do" to us if we don't follow "his" desires as handed down to us by the clergy. I think the editor you quoted, Suzy Lanza, raised an important fact when she said that atheist groups are not trying to convert believers, but to show unaffiliated atheists and those who question their faith traditions that an intellectual and social community exists for them. Belief in gods is common, but not universal. Advances in science and education have diminished those beliefs greatly. If all atheist groups do is provide an intellectual and social community for atheists and agnostics, they will eventually show the vast extent to which supernatural beliefs are fading and the extent to which remarks like those of Neuhaus are presumptuous beyond what common sense can sustain.

**EVANGELICALS, POLITICS,
ABORTION AND SLAVERY**

Alan Wolfe

(Excerpted from "The God That Never Failed: A Golden Age of Credulity, in Politics and in Religion," in The New Republic, 11/06/06, a review of Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction by David Kuo)

The hoopla surrounding Kuo's book focuses on his tell-all tidbits about what the insiders in the Bush administration really thought about all those crazy Christians who happened to make Bush president. These believers, Kuo tells us, were seduced by power. They put aside their religious ideals—especially the elusive truth that Jesus speaks to deeper and more permanent things than tax cuts and tariffs—in return for trinkets: presidential paperweights that they could show their friends, or, for the most influential souls, private meetings in the Oval Office. In so doing, says the penitent Kuo, they got their priorities all wrong. ...

Kuo, whose goodness is as self-evident as it is a tad creepy, continues to defend Bush after this most self-professed of Christian presidents robbed the poor to pay the rich, broke his covenant with the Framers who wrote the Constitution, launched the first war of choice in our history since Polk attacked Mexico or McKinley attacked Spain, justified torture without a qualm of conscience, and, to top it all off, wound up treating his Christian supporters with a contempt that would put the most determined secular humanist to shame. ...

Unlike people from religious traditions with long histories of involvement with politics, evangelicals have no firm foundation in history, theology, or experience against which they can judge the words that so easily come out of the mouths of politicians. Sincerity, for them, is everything, which is another way of saying that facts are nothing. The proof of their faith is its credulity.

Without foundations for making judgments, evangelicals such as Kuo can persuade themselves about matters of significance that cannot pass even the most basic historical or philosophical tests. ...

The fact that Kuo saw an equivalence between opposition to slavery and opposition to abortion says volumes about the difficulty that so many evangelicals have in making sharp distinctions. Many evangelicals insist to this day that their campaign against abortion is the moral equivalent of the abolitionist campaign against slavery. They point to such figures as Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose father was indeed the leading evangelical preacher of his era. They also sided with the weak against the powerful. They were as uncompromising with respect to their principles as leaders of the religious right are today. Regrettably, some anti-abortion activists resort to violence, but so, after all, did John Brown. Right-wing Republicans today are finishing the business begun by yesterday's social reformers.

Are they really? Equating abortion and slavery is the kind of analogy that appeals to people who prefer sincerity to reality. ... Slavery was a social system that trapped its victims through coercion and custom; abortion is the result of a decision made by an individual. People argue about whether a fetus is a full human being; but no one, as Abraham Lincoln liked to point out, disputed whether a slave was. Abortion represents a clash between two goods, the right of personal autonomy and the potential birth of a human being; slavery was evil and represented no good at all. Pro-life activists have every right to mobilize themselves on behalf of their political beliefs, but they do not have the right to claim historical predecessors so different from themselves. True of any contemporary group in general, this is especially true of evangelicals in particular. White Southerners whose favorite politicians appeal to latent Confederate sensibilities are not exactly in the best position to claim the moral mantle of those who understood, quite

correctly, that the existence of slavery in the Southern states was a rebuke to every principle for which America stood.

SAVING LIVES, BAPTIST-STYLE

Bill Moyers

(Excerpted from a January 12 speech at the National Conference for Media Reform, at which Mr. Moyers announced that he is giving up retirement and returning to public TV.)

Reformers often remind me of Baptists. I speak as a Baptist. I know whereof I speak. One of my favorite stories is of the fellow who was about to jump off a bridge, when another fellow ran up to him crying, “Stop, stop, don’t do it.”

The man on the bridge asks, “Why not?”

“Well, there’s much to live for.”

“What for?”

“Well, your faith. Your religion.”

“Yes?”

“Are you religious?”

“Yes.”

“Me, too. Christian or Buddhist?”

“Christian.”

“Me, too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

“Protestant.”

“Me, too. Methodist, Baptist or Presbyterian?”

“Baptist.”

“Me, too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Savior?”

“Baptist Church of God.”

“Me, too. Are you Original Baptist Church of God or Reformed Baptist Church of God?”

“Reformed Baptist Church of God.”

“Me, too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1879, or Reform Baptist Church of God Reformation of 1917?”

“1917.”

Whereupon, the second fellow turned red in the face and yelled, “Die, you heretic scum,” and pushed him off the bridge.

WHY I READ *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

John Rafferty

Donna and I were in Miami when, one evening, my sister Pat told me she couldn’t get any financial news because all the TV channels were reporting that Anna Nicole Smith had just died. All the channels? Yep – we surfed, and ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, CNN and, of course, FoxNews, were all slavering over a big-breasted, bottle-blond woman famous for taking off her clothes, marrying a billionaire three times her age, and putting on and taking off weight on a TV “reality” show whose premise was her own ignorance and vulgarity.

While the Iraq War, genocide in Darfur and the Scooter Libby trial were all put on hold all across the media spectrum, the Anna “coverage” went on and on. Wolf Blitzer mourned, Geraldo Rivera insinuated foul play, and a clueless “reporter” on CNN (which,

I later learned, went 90 minutes without commercials) referred to “this woman who had such an impact on our culture.”

The next morning, I visited the *New York Daily News*, the *Post* and *Newsday* online, and all three filled their front pages with cleavage shots of Ms. Smith. The print edition of the *Miami Herald* delivered to my sister’s front door did pretty much the same.

But when I picked up *The New York Times* (also delivered), there, among the references to other secondary stories in the “Inside” box at the bottom of Page 1, was: “*Anna Nicole Smith Dies. Page A14.*”