

# PIQUE

## Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

### May, 2007

What does a citizen, a humanist, owe the nation? We lead, this month, with a hard question for these times. We update the right-wing “war on science” (with and without quote marks), debate “the god delusion,” consider milk-chocolate sculpture, and review freedom of choice at both the beginning and end of life. We re-examine received wisdom on the Middle East, and we say good-bye to the friend who founded the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. So it goes. — *JR*

#### **BRING BACK THE DRAFT?**

**Andy Rooney**

*(Transcript of comments on CBS's "60 Minutes," 3/11/07)*

There have been stories recently about the problem the Pentagon is having recruiting enough soldiers to do the fighting that we're committed to do in Iraq. In an attempt to get the soldiers they need, recruiters have reduced the standards for getting into the Army or Navy.

They have reduced the educational standards, for example, so that they're getting more soldiers who didn't go to high school, let alone graduate from high school.

Recruiters are granting thousands of what they call “moral waivers.” A “moral waiver,” it turns out, means they'll take someone who has committed a crime or even someone who has been in prison. Last year, a total of 8,129 “moral waivers” were given to men who volunteered for the Army.

Are these the people we want representing us? As American soldiers, they're going to give the people they meet around the world the impression that they are what all Americans are like, and if they have been taken from the bottom of the barrel, they are not what we're all like.

In August of 1941, I had just finished my junior year in college when I was drafted into the Army. Hundreds of my classmates were drafted at the same time.

I hated everything about Army life. I hated the Field Artillery regiment I was assigned to. Most of the guys in it were high school dropouts and the Army wasn't using the term “moral waiver” yet, but a lot of them would have needed it.

They had joined before the draft so they had already been promoted to being corporals or sergeants and they were in charge of the rest of us.

In 1942 we were at war with Germany and it wasn't long before drafted college students and high school graduates dominated our military. It changed the United States Army for the better and in two years made it the best fighting force there has ever been. The Army and Navy were no longer made up of losers.

Now comes the part of this I never thought I'd hear myself say: Whenever we, as a nation, decide to fight a war—in Iraq or anywhere else—it should be fought by average Americans who are drafted.

#### **WHY I AGREE WITH ANDY ROONEY**

**John Rafferty**

I am not a disinterested observer of the bring-back-the-draft question. I have two grandsons who will be 17 this month, and six more grandchildren right behind them.

But as a humanist and an American I am ashamed for my country that the young people we ask to sacrifice for us are overwhelmingly the children of the poor and the disenfranchised, while the sons and daughters of the men who send them in harm's way go to Lauderdale on Spring Break.

I believe in national service for everyone, whether in the army, an inner-city soup kitchen, or a national park – the details can be worked out, as long as everyone serves (if you're in a wheelchair, you can run a computer).

And when everyone serves, our leaders may be more careful about sending their own children to war.

Your comments (like those I have already solicited from service veterans, below) are invited. Write to the SHSNY P.O. box or e-mail [john@rafferty.net](mailto:john@rafferty.net).

### **“ASK NOT ...”**

I would charge into this discussion waving my banner requiring national service for all, either after high school or during or just after college. Yes, for a draft, or ROTC.

I think Rooney's points are well taken. And I feel that we all owe some service to our country. As Kennedy said, “Ask not ... but rather ....”

Another point, a favorite of mine, is that a year out of the classroom between high school and college is a good time for the student to get some practical experience and mature a bit more before going on to college.

About the bottom of the barrel? Offer free practical training, say for a year, to those bottom dwellers in exchange for military service. That is the way we do it for officer training at West Point and in ROTC.

We would thus lift up and reduce the number of dregs, and that, too, would be good for the country.

— *Giles Kelly, Washington, D.C.*

### **NO EXEMPTIONS**

I favor a draft only if there are no exemptions! If someone who is handicapped can hold down a job and if that job has an equivalent in the military, that person should be drafted. It does not require the physical ability of a Ranger to do the job of a clerk.

No exemptions means that theological students serve as well. While I oppose the use of chaplains, I recognize the need. They can serve and attend to their chaplaincy training after basic training.

The military would draft medical students and others with “essential job” status under a program similar to the ASTP in WWII. If you breathe you serve.

Rooney should also mention that there are plenty of people now serving who are college grads who want a military career. My son is one.

— *Art Harris, NYC*

### **DAY OF PRAYER?**

#### **MAKE IT A DAY YOU GIVE THE GIFT OF LIFE**

May 3 is the so-called “National Day of Prayer,” but humanists and other rationalists can turn it into “Gift of Life Day” by giving blood. Find your local blood bank by accessing [www.americasblood.org](http://www.americasblood.org) or [www.givelife.org](http://www.givelife.org). Then visit [www.atheistvolunteers.org](http://www.atheistvolunteers.org) to register your donation.

For more information, or to join a blood-donating group, e-mail centerforatheism@aol.com.

## **A FEW THINGS YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN TOLD “ABOUT CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, AND THE MIDDLE EAST” IN APRIL PIQUE**

**Evelyn Shakir**

What prompts this note is April PIQUE, and specifically “26 Things CNN Will Never Tell You About Christianity, Islam, and the Middle East,” by R. Joseph Hoffmann. I won’t address each claim, but just the few I find most wild. (Though it’s hard to choose.)

#12: “... *most Arabs don’t like Palestinians.*” How on earth does he know that? And why is he so pleased to trumpet it as a fact? He may not like Palestinians and may be glad to have met Arabs who also don’t like them—in Lebanon, he would not have a hard time finding such—but even if all Lebanese felt that way (and they don’t), that hardly translates into “most Arabs.”

#13: “... *most Lebanese who are not Shi’a would rather be called Phoenicians rather than Arabs.*” Not true. Only certain right-wing Christians (not all Christians, mind you) feel this way. We’re talking of a minority, and it’s often the same folk who tend not to like Palestinians. Once again, Hoffmann takes a small part for the whole.

#16: “... *the word ‘Islam’ does not derive from the Arabic word for peace, but from the term for ‘Give up.’*” Well, he’s right that it’s not from “peace”; it means submission (to God). Why he chooses to translate this as “give up” is beyond me, but clearly his intentions are not friendly.

#25 and #26: “... *the people we are calling the bulwark of freedom and democracy in Iraq are the terrorists of southern Lebanon.*” The logic here is convoluted, apparently to make a political point. That aside, one need not be a fan of Hezbollah to recognize that summing them up as terrorists is more than a bit reductive. Like so much that Hoffmann says, it speaks to an inability or disinclination to recognize complexity and nuance. (Incidentally, I believe that only three countries have labeled Hezbollah as terrorists—Israel, the United States, and Canada.)

Of course, the real stuff that you won’t hear on CNN or encounter in American media in general is hard-hitting criticism of Israel. That is the real taboo in political discussion of the Middle East.

I think PIQUE’s readers should know that, whatever his resume, Hoffmann is not a reliable guide to the Middle East in general or Lebanon in particular.

*Editor: Ms. Shakir’s knowledge of Lebanon derives from being the daughter of Lebanese immigrants to the U.S., growing up in a Lebanese-American community, visiting Lebanon several times, and teaching there for a semester, as well as from interviews for her first book, Bint Arab: Arab and American Women in the United States. She is the author of a recently-published collection of short stories, Remember Me to Lebanon.*

## **BOB MURTHA JOINS THE SHSNY BOARD**

*[Head shot photo of Murtha]*

At an April 17 meeting, the SHSNY Board of Directors grew to an all-time high (we think) of nine, with the unanimous election to the Board of long-time member (1996) Robert A. Murtha, Jr., a practicing attorney specializing in immigration.

Welcome, Bob. Now get to work.

**THE SHSNY BOOK CLUB READS**  
***THE REPUBLICAN WAR ON SCIENCE (2005)***  
**BY CHRIS MOONEY**

**A Review by Robert A. Murtha, Jr.**

*The Republican War on Science* was discussed at our book club meeting at the Muhlenberg on March 22, 2007. There were eighteen in attendance. The discussion was animated and far ranging.

The first question was why “Republican”? Don’t the Democrats also abuse science? And if they do, why would it be of special interest to us? The book in fact, is not a general attack on Republicans but rather an indictment of the conservative industrial and religious right. The problem is rooted in their own conservatism and science’s relentless assault on old orthodoxies. The second ingredient is politics. These two powerful constituencies of the Republican right have vital interests in the results of scientific research in certain areas. Industry seeks to invoke “science” to protect its bottom line. Religious conservatives seek to use “science” to bolster their own agenda. The Bush White House bends over backward for both groups, and in doing so systematically “seeks to undermine, alter and otherwise interfere with the scientific process or scientific conclusions for political or ideological reasons.” Mooney labels this as “science abuse.”

A whole panoply of conservative institutions have arisen to attack in Orwellian language the scientific consensus as “junk science” and push sundry views from the scientific fringes, always favorable to industry or the religious right, which are labeled as “sound science.”

Industry and religious conservatives, of course, have always pushed their own agendas. Organized Christian fundamentalism predates World War I. Apologists for industry have always pretended that tobacco was harmless, that they had nothing to with acid rain, etc. Likewise, religious conservatives have freely pursued their agendas. In recent years, however, they have combined to seize control of the Republican Party and set its agenda. This was achieved by Newt Gingrich and the “Republican Revolution” of 1994. This had swift repercussions. Prior to 1995 Congress relied primarily on the scientific consensus for advice about scientific issues. A Congressional Office of Technology Assessment was established in 1971. OTA worked from the results of the scientific process institutionalized at leading universities, research faculties and peer reviewed scientific journals. At its core the process features the testing and retesting of hypotheses to ensure that they withstand the most withering scrutiny. In its twenty four years, OTA produced 750 “consensus body of information” studies on many scientific topics. The OTA was very well reputed and widely copied in other countries.

Conservatives, however, did not like its message and, following ancient tradition, they killed the messenger wanting, they said, to create a “free market” for scientific expertise. They were successful. With OTA out of the picture, Gingrich and crew quickly brought in their own favored experts from the scientific fringes to attack the scientific consensus. Members of Congress, rather than scientists, were supposed to judge whose views were right. Apparently they think that science is a democracy. Subsequently they have, among other things:

\* Rejected scientific consensus on global warming and suppressed an EPA report of that consensus.

- \* Stacked numerous advisory committees with industry representatives and the Religious Right.
- \* Begun deploying a missile defense system despite evidence that it can't work.
- \* Produced false evidence to justify its opposition to needle exchange programs.
- \* Banned funding for embryonic stem cell research except on a claimed 60 cell lines "already in existence." Most of these turned out not to exist.
- \* Forced the National Cancer Institute to say that abortion may cause breast cancer, a claim refuted by good studies.
- \* Ordered the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to remove information about condom use and efficacy from its Web site.
- \* Enacted the "Data Quality Act," which raises the standard of scientific evidence to the point that industry can tie up regulatory legislation for years through spurious attacks on the evidence.
- \* Encouraged the teachings of "Intelligent Design" as an alternate to evolution ... etc, etc, etc.

All of this evidences the corruption of the policy process for ideological reasons. The danger is obvious. Decisions based on false premises will almost certainly be flawed and likely disastrous.

The author believes that this problem must be solved (mostly) through political means and suggested that support for moderate Republicans would not be a bad place to start.

## **THE WAR ON LIVING WILLS**

**Barbara Coombs Lee**

*(Excerpted from The Secular Circular, Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara (CA), April, 2007)*

The Terri Schiavo debacle warned most Americans to prepare a living will as written evidence of their end-of-life wishes. But it also warned moral conservatives that popular, stronger living wills could thwart their campaign to force tube feedings on comatose people indefinitely. So now they are waging a war on living wills.

You probably think I'm exaggerating. I wish I were.

It is a little recognized, but incontrovertible fact that religious conservatives want to roll back principles of autonomy and self-determination that form bedrock law in end-of-life decisions. These principles underlie court decisions in Cruzan and Quinlan and advance directive laws in every state. Autonomy sets the terms of inquiry: "What would this patient want us to do if she could awaken, evaluate her situation and make a decision about life support?"

Moral conservatives don't want courts to ask that question. They want to ask, "How have the needs of this person changed since she wrote her living will? What do we think is best for her now?" They think that what the patient thought she would want, so long ago, can't be best, since it would lead to her death. And they believe death is never in the best interest of a living being.

End of their story. Everybody gets forced to endure feeding tubes and other life-sustaining therapies, irrespective of their level of dementia or coma, and irrespective of wishes they formerly expressed.

This conservative agenda ... found full flower when the President's handpicked Council on Bioethics published its report, "Taking Care: Ethical Caregiving in Our Aging Society" in September of 2005. [Ed: *The Council was then chaired by Leon Kass, opponent of embryonic stem cell research and even birth control, who lectures on Genesis and "the supreme virtue of modesty in women."*] The report is less a comprehensive treatise than an exhaustive polemic on autonomy as an inferior value, unworthy of deference once our minds are lost. They even have a demeaning term for it. They call it "precedent autonomy."

The lone voice of moderation on the council, Dr. Janet Rowley, put it in perspective. She wrote in her dissent, "The clear message from this report is if you feel strongly about not living in a decerebrate state, you better kill yourself while you have control over your fate!"

Most Americans want to strengthen, not weaken, the force of their opinions and desires formed while they are thinking, rational beings. They want living wills expanded and given the force of law ... [and don't want] end-of-life decisions in the hands of a religious minority.

## THE SIDEWALK OF THE GOOD CHRISTIANS

**Martine Reed**

On one side of the chain-link fence: the parking lot. On the other side: the sidewalk. In the parking lot: two women with bright orange vests that say *ESCORT*. On the sidewalk: four men with signs depicting dismembered babies, and that say in English and Spanish, *This is the Killing Place*.

A taxi turns into the entrance to the lot and stops. Two young women get out. One of the men starts shouting, "*Don't do it! Don't kill your baby! Help is available!*" The women look frightened but walk toward the door of the clinic. Another man shouts, "*If your mother had been here, you would not be here now!*" One of the women is now weeping. The other gently nudges her through the door.

On many Saturdays, I am one of the people with the orange vest. Our job is to make sure that access to the clinic remains unobstructed, as the law says. The demonstrators try from time to time to stand squarely in the driveway so that the automobiles will have to slow down or stop and they can hand leaflets to the passengers. The leaflets give phone numbers of "good Samaritans" who will help pregnant women. They also cite "scientific research" which supposedly shows that after an abortion you will suffer from depression and crushing remorse, and that your chances of having breast cancer will be greatly increased.

Today, two men try to block the driveway. I speak sharply to them and tell them to move aside. I hold my hand up so they can see my cell phone; I am ready to call the police if they refuse to obey the law. One man says, "*Yes Ma'am!*" and then, "*Heil Hitler!*" and makes a Nazi salute in mockery. But they move aside.

I am standing very close to the fence. One demonstrator invites me to pray with him. I say nothing. I never say anything. He then starts praying very loudly, to the effect that perhaps today he will be instrumental in saving one baby, just one, who maybe will then grow up to become a good Father or Brother of the Church.

Some women arrive, six of them – it looks like one grandmother, two middle-aged women and three teenagers. They stand on the sidewalk with rosaries in hand and start reciting Hail Marys.

This is a fairly typical Saturday. Overwhelmingly, the sign carriers are men and the rosary holders are female. They are all white. We know they come from a nearby parish which has made the fight against abortion its major business. We, the escorts, have been instructed not to argue with the demonstrators, no matter what.

I futilely dream of inviting the demonstrators to stop into the clinic for a minute. There is a wall there, covered with pictures of smiling babies. Babies that were born because their mothers found good prenatal care at the clinic, care they could not afford anywhere else. Terminating pregnancies is just a small part of the medical work done at the clinic.

I happen to be an agnostic. Once, though, on a day where the demonstrators were particularly loud and agitated, I folded my hands as if in prayer and marched back and forth on my side of the fence. One of the anti-abortion men was incensed and screamed at me that I had no right to pray.

And that is really what offends me most. It is the notion that they, the so-called “pro-life” people, have a monopoly on prayer, and therefore moral superiority. I know many people of faith who support the right of women to choose an abortion, even Catholics. At a huge demonstration in D.C. two years ago, I saw people marching under a banner, “Catholics for choice.”

Sometimes a patient or a friend of a patient goes to the sidewalk and tries to argue. I overheard one of the praying women, when asked if she had any children, reply that No, she could not have children, she had too many cats to care for. Another time, one of the men explained that God does not want either abortion or birth-control; abstinence is the only way.

We think these demonstrators are deranged and represent just a small vocal minority. But the only “sex education” in public schools supported by our present government is “abstinence only” programs. A bill, the Healthy Teens Act, is now pending in our New York legislature to offer rational sex education. But it is, of course, opposed by the same kind of people who march on the sidewalk. We think they are just a few isolated nuts. But the bill is being vigorously opposed and is not going anywhere fast.

I now know by sight all the “regulars” who occupy the sidewalk on Saturdays. I even know some of their names. I know all the words they shout and the words they say in prayer. What I still do not know, is why such a small number of ignorant befuddled men can be so powerful.

I can only stand and keep the driveway clear.

### **MOTHER’S RIGHTS, CHILD’S RIGHTS: WHERE TO DRAW THE LINE IN HIV TESTING?**

**Tracy Clark-Flory**

*(Excerpted from BroadSheet on salon.com, 3/23/07)*

There’s a complicated debate raging in New Jersey over a proposal to mandate HIV testing for mothers and newborns. The argument, of course, is that early detection and treatment of HIV is essential. The man behind the bill, Senate President Richard J. Codey, said, “For newborns this can be a lifesaving measure.”

In addition to testing all newborns, the measure would “require that pregnant women be tested for HIV as early as possible in their pregnancy and again during their third trimester,” reports the Associated Press. And, in fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that treatment of an HIV positive pregnant woman reduces the transmission rate to 2 percent. (Comparatively, the transmission rate is 13 percent if the baby is only treated after birth, and 25 percent without medical intervention.)

Part of the impetus for the bill is that New Jersey has the third-highest incidence of pediatric HIV cases and fifth-highest rate of AIDS cases among women. “In a state with some of the highest HIV rates among women, this move should be a no-brainer,” Codey told the AP. “The additional benefit of testing every woman is that it reduces the stigma associated with testing only those based on their risk behaviors and should, as statistics show, make women less inclined to refuse the test.”

But, some feminist organizations argue that the measure impinges on women’s right to privacy and to making personal medical decisions without the interference of the state. “What’s really needed is good counseling, preventative education and conversations with respectful medical personnel and counselors about HIV,” said Leslie Wolfe, president of The Center for Women’s Policy Studies.

In some ways this bill seems akin to slapping a few patches on a punctured, rapids-bound river raft and crossing one’s fingers. Clearly, with New Jersey’s soaring HIV/AIDS rates, the first goal should be preventive education. But, on the other hand, by testing all pregnant women there’s the chance to reduce the chances of HIV positive women passing the virus onto their child. There might also be some comparisons to be made to the debate over mandating the HPV vaccine; everything possible should be done to give a newborn a shot at a healthy, disease-free life, right?

But, if we start mandating HIV tests for mothers and newborns, next we’ll require that all people are tested. (And that’s just the start of it.) Where to draw the line?

### **THERE IS NO GOD BUT GOD, AND LUKE SKYWALKER IS HIS PROPHET**

*(Excerpted from the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society’s newsletter, The Humanist Monthly, April, 2007)*

The United Nations rejected a call by “Jedi Knights” in England for recognition of the Jedi faith as an official world religion. 390,000 people listed “Jedi” as their faith in the 2001 census, and in addition to official recognition of their religion, the Jedi believers want the name of the U.N. International Day of Tolerance changed to “Inter-stellar Day of Tolerance.”

A U.N. spokesman said, “The UN does not certify religions ... with or without light sabers.”

### **A SHSNY ROUNDTABLE EVALUATES RICHARD DAWKINS’S *THE GOD DELUSION***

**Reviewed by John Rafferty**

You might guess that if Richard Dawkins’s best-selling *The God Delusion* could get a positive reception anywhere, it would be before a full-house audience of New York humanists, atheists and other rationalists.



Guess again. Our April 19 Roundtable panel at the Muhlenberg Branch Library, led by lawyer/artist and longtime SHSNY member Barbara Lifton, had serious reservations. {Photo of Lifton}

In her opening remarks, Ms. Lifton pointed out the contradiction in Dawkins's argument "that he believes the question of whether or not God exists is a scientific question, while at the same time, in the same sentence [in an NPR interview], Dawkins also claims that the existence of God '... is not an issue that science can prove one way or the other.'"

And, she argued, "Dawkins's major argument in favor of his thesis that belief in God is a delusion is not scientific, it is philosophical and logical"—a conclusion with which both her fellow panelists agreed.

[Photo of Pigliucci]

Massimo Pigliucci, Professor of Ecology and Evolution (SUNY Stony Brook), summarized and criticized what he called Dawkins's five major points. Professor Pigliucci agreed with the first two: 1) that criticism of religion should be a normal part of democratic discourse; and 2) that we need to raise awareness of the controversial issues surrounding religion (e.g. intolerance of atheists). That 3) mainstream religion is complicit with fundamentalism?—well yes, but even though you can disagree with both John Paul II and the Ayatollah Khomeini, you can't equate their fundamentalisms. That 4) religious upbringing is child abuse?—come on, be serious.

Most importantly, that 5) science can refute the God hypothesis? Not exactly, Prof. Pigliucci says. Science can refute specific claims—the earth is not 6,000 years old, no matter what your book says—but science cannot test statements that do not admit of empirically relevant evidence. If someone says that God created the laws of the universe and then went off to enjoy life somewhere else, there is absolutely nothing that science can argue to contradict that claim. Indeed, Dawkins's main argument—that to invoke an intelligent designer to explain the origin of the universe is unparsimonious because it requires an even more complex entity than the universe itself—is a *philosophical* (and, incidentally, perfectly valid) argument known as Occam's razor, but it's not scientific.

[Photo of Bronstein]

New York City Atheists President Ken Bronstein called *The God Delusion* good but "unsatisfying." Dawkins is at his best, he said, refuting a personal god, but is weaker with abstract religious concepts, and is least convincing in arguing that the world would be a better place without religion.

What is most important about the book, Mr. Bronstein claimed, is "its great timing," its appearance—and Dawkins's hugely successful lecture and TV tour—at exactly the time when Americans are looking for a response to the excesses (and the corruptions) of the Religious Right. Dawkins himself has had more positive impact than his book.

The discussion that followed was lively and, at times, heated—but was guided with a firm hand by Ms. Lifton ("Off!" she commanded when a cell phone rang), who made sure that everyone who wanted to speak was heard. Many did speak, from this reporter, who suggested to Mr. Bronstein that Dawkins's tour was an example of what *The Wall Street Journal* is calling a new "missionary secularism" ... to the Objectivist acolyte of Ayn Rand who asked Ms. Lifton incredulously, "You give compassion to just *anyone*?" ... to the woman who announced that she was "not scientific" and that the book "bored" her ... and the young man who "shared" with us the opinion of U2 lead singer Bono that

“religion is a perversion of faith”—an idea Professor Pigliucci jumped on. “Why is faith a positive value?” he asked. “At best you’re believing random things, at worst wrong things.”

All in all, an excellent evening that continued for another hour or so for eighteen of us at an Indian restaurant around the corner where, miraculously, the one-check-for-all and the money collected came out even.

Skepticism’s bad rap arises from the impression that ... it can only be regarded as a negative removal of fake claims. Not so. Proper debunking is done in the interest of an alternate model of explanation, not as a nihilistic exercise. The alternate model is rationality itself, tied to moral decency — the most powerful joint instrument for good that our planet has ever known.

— *Stephen Jay Gould*

### **KURT VONNEGUT, HUMANIST**

**1922-2007**

#### **SO IT GOES**

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., author and humanist who died April 11, had been an honorary member of the Secular Humanist Society of New York since 1993. He was also honorary President of the American Humanist Association, and was that organization’s choice for Humanist of the Year in 1992. Vonnegut’s political liberalism, it has been noted, was rooted in a deep conservatism, and both in a lifelong commitment to the ideals of humanism. So it goes.

*[Repro of Vonnegut cartoon of himself with handwriting: “List me by all means, but, in the last words of Shakespeare, disturb not these bones. Kurt Vonnegut, may 25, 1993.”*  
*Caption under cartoon: “Mr. Vonnegut accepts honorary membership in SHSNY.”]*

*Interviewer:* Did the study of anthropology later color your writings?

*Vonnegut:* It confirmed my atheism, which was the faith of my fathers anyway. Religions were exhibited and studied as the Rube Goldberg inventions I’d always thought they were.

Say what you will about the sweet miracle of unquestioning faith, I consider a capacity for it terrifying and absolutely vile. — *Mother Night, 1961*

“Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It’s hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It’s round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you’ve got about a hundred years here. There’s only one rule that I know of, babies – ‘God damn it, you’ve got to be kind.’” — *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, 1965*

“Where am I?” said Billy Pilgrim.

“Trapped in another blob of amber, Mr. Pilgrim. We are where we have to be just now — three hundred million miles from Earth, bound for a time warp which will get us to Tralfamadore in hours rather than centuries.”

“How – how did I get here?”

“It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply is. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I’ve said before, bugs in amber.”

“You sound to me as though you don’t believe in free will,” said Billy Pilgrim.

“If I hadn’t spent so much time studying Earthlings,” said the Tralfamadorian, “I wouldn’t have any idea what was meant by ‘free will.’ I’ve visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will.” — *Slaughterhouse Five, 1969*

The visitor from outer space made a serious study of Christianity, to learn, if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel. He concluded that at least part of the trouble was slipshod storytelling in the New Testament. He supposed that the intent of the Gospels was to teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low.

But the Gospels actually taught this: Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn’t well-connected. So it goes. — *Slaughterhouse Five*

Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round, was shot two nights ago. He died last night. ...

Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes. And every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes. — *Slaughterhouse Five*

Do you know what a Humanist is? I am honorary president of the American Humanist Association, having succeeded the late, great science fiction writer Isaac Asimov in that functionless capacity. We Humanists try to behave well without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife. We serve as best we can the only abstraction with which we have any real familiarity, which is our community.

We had a memorial services for Isaac a few years back, and at one point I said, “Isaac is up in Heaven now.” It was the funniest thing I could have said to a group of Humanists. I rolled them in the aisles. It was several minutes before order could be restored. And if I should ever die, God forbid, I hope you will say, “Kurt is up in Heaven now.” That’s my favorite joke. — *In These Times, 2003*

## **SWEET JESUS**

**Joan Walsh**

*(Excerpted from salon.com 3/29 and 3/30/07)*

*Naked Jesus! Genitals Exposed! Crucified!* Yikes. That’s the headline on an e-mail I woke up to this morning, from big bad Catholic League president Bill Donohue. He’s complaining that just before Easter New York’s Roger Smith Hotel gallery will display a “6-foot tall anatomically correct sculpture of Jesus in milk chocolate; the figure is depicted as crucified.” ...

Admittedly, I didn't get the full effect of artist Cosimo Cavallaro's work "My Sweet Lord" looking at a photo on the Web. But somehow, it wasn't nearly as disturbing as billed. It's not gory or sadomasochistic or pornographic, as Donohue's headline suggested. Chances are Jesus was naked when he was crucified, although most Catholic iconography shows him draped with cloth. The real issue seems to be depicting a chocolate Jesus, which to me slyly plays on the near-certainty that Jesus was more chocolate-colored than the vanilla man depicted in Western church art, as well as the commercialization of Easter, in which most Christians eat yummy chocolate eggs and bunnies rather than ponder the troubling mysteries of Christ's life and death.

Ah, but no troubling mysteries for Big Bill Donohue! No suggesting Catholics and other Christians have commercialized Easter! No suggesting that Jesus was chocolate-colored! There are anti-Catholic bigots to fight, or better yet, to invent. Cavallaro's "My Sweet Lord" struck me as, well, sweet. ... But then, like so much art, it's a bit of a Rorschach test, and Donohue's horror at the big chocolate Jesus gives us much more disturbing insight into his character than into Cosimo Cavallaro's.

*Next day:*

The Roger Smith Hotel gallery canceled its display of Cosimo Cavallaro's 6-foot-tall chocolate Jesus ... and gallery director Matt Semler quit over the flap.

To the hotel owners who say they got death threats and canceled the show because they couldn't keep guests safe, I have to say: Toughen up. If you really received death threats from Donohue's minions, I hope you'll work with police to find the thugs who made them. But I don't understand people who do provocative things, and then cave when they manage to provoke. ...

It's a bad day for the Jesus I personally believe in, the slightly swarthy, all-loving, hardworking guy who realizes he's going to have to spend yet another weekend not reading or playing golf or watching baseball, but trying to get Donohue to start acting like a good Christian, finally, and not a bully.

### **A NOT-SO-FUNNY PSYCHIATRIST JOKE**

*(From Harper's Weekly, 3/20/07)*

Scientists at NYU are deleting frightening experiences from the memories of rats. "This," says neurophysiologist Greg Quirk, "is the future of psychiatry."