

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

March, 2008

It's spring, and our thoughts turn to secularism in Spain, stupidity in England, American evangelicals in Europe, and "Muslim terrorists" in the Air Force Academy. We conclude that the Copernican system is probably a good idea after all, and that cloned food isn't.

We welcome a new Honorary Member, dump on our Dumbth Award winner (*She's pointing that pistol at you, godless freak!*), send a letter to the next generation, another to the Times, and celebrate our own celebration. — JR

WHAT A SWELL PARTY THAT WAS!

Seventy-five members and families and friends gathered at The Players club on February 10 to celebrate SHSNY's 20th Anniversary (Jan. 28), and Darwin Day (Feb. 12, the 199th anniversary of his birth). See what you missed—or re-visit the fun—on page 5.

We met and mingled and sipped complimentary Bloody Marys and Mimosas in the Great Hall of America's oldest theatrical club, founded by, among others, humanists Edwin Booth, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) and Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman. We dined on delights from a variety of buffet stations and carved-to-order roast beef, while theater greats like Helen Hayes and James Cagney smiled down on us from their portraits on the walls.

We moved to the Booth Room (that's him life-size above the fireplace) to hear brief, witty talks by poet-historian (and SHSNY Honorary Member) Jennifer Michael Hecht, and Darwin great-great grandson (and screenwriter and author) Matthew Chapman, who was elected an Honorary by acclamation. And to present our not-so-coveted 2007 Dumbth Award to the voting membership's runaway favorite.

We set a goal, too. Not only an even bigger Anniversary/Darwin Day party next year (cheers!) but the formation of a "Darwin Day New York" committee (approved by acclamation) to lobby the Bloomberg administration and the City Council for an official celebration of Darwin's 200th birthday on February 10, 2009. The committee needs volunteers. Ready to help? Call 212-308-2165, or e-mail editor@shsny.org.

ANN COULTER SWEEPS THE FIELD FOR THE 2007 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD

[photo of Coulter at pistol range, pointing gun toward camera]

No contest! With more votes than the other three candidates combined, professional right-wing harridan Ann Coulter led the field from the first few ballots, and handily trounced her competitors for the not-so-coveted horse's-ass trophy.

From the remarks accompanying more than a few of the ballots and e-mails, Annoying Ann seems to have been the favorite not just for the "*All-Americans-should-be-Christians*" and "*We just want Jews to be perfected*" opinion for which she was nominated, but for a busy lifetime of calumny and slander. "My vote for Ann is based on the sheer number of people she offends," Phil Winegar wrote, "a majority of the world's population."

Just 47 of us—one more than last year—voted (We *told* you every vote counted!), but the outcome was never in doubt. With 27 votes, our Miss Ann easily surpassed radio comedian Rush (*the Virginia Tech gunman “had to be a liberal”*) Limbaugh (9 votes), Congressman Dana (*past global warming might have been caused by “dinosaur flatulence”*) Rohrbacher (7), and right-wing blogger Debby (*liberal congressmen “are more likely to have slutty daughters”*) Schlusser, this Editor’s personal fave (4).

Colin Rafferty argued that Rohrbacher deserved the award because “he’s the only one of the group who is hired to act in the people’s best interests.” But Brad Wheeler suggested a write-in for “the California voters who keep Congressman Rohrbacher in office.”

Write-in votes were cast for White House Press Secretary Dana Perino, who couldn’t identify the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Miss Teen South Carolina, who opined (see her on YouTube) that American high-schoolers can’t find America on a map because we suffer from a shortage of maps. Clueless and funny, both, but they don’t meet the Dumbth standard of against-all-reason ignorance, or to-hell-with-the-facts bias.

Speaking of which, a conservative subscriber complains that the selection of nominees betrays the “liberal Democrat” bias of PIQUE and SHSNY. I hope not. I rejected three or four suggestions during the year that were simply anti-Bush/Republican, and I believe I looked for “willful witlessness” wherever on the political spectrum it was to be found. I hope conservative readers (all readers, actually) will supply us with unworthy liberal candidates for the 2008 SHSNY Dumbth Award.

Nominating for the 2008 award begins now (write to the P.O. box, or e-mail editor@shsny.net) and will continue until December 15. Nominees will be published in January, 2009 PIQUE, and balloting will take place by snail- and e-mail throughout that month.

A FARMER’S PERSPECTIVE ON CLONED FOOD AND EVOLUTIONARY DIVERSITY

Verlyn Klinkenborg

[Reprinted from Editorial Observer, “Closing the Barn Door After the Cows Have Gotten Out,” in The New York Times, January 23, 2008.]

Last week, the Food and Drug Administration cleared the way for the eventual sale of meat and dairy products from cloned animals, saying, in effect, that consumers face no health risks from them. The next day, the Department of Agriculture asked farmers to keep their cloned animals off the market until consumers have time to get over their anticloning prejudice. That is one prejudice I plan to hold on to. I will not be eating cloned meat.

The reason has nothing to do with my personal health or safety. I think the clearest way to understand the problem with cloning is to consider a broader question: Who benefits from it? Proponents will say that the consumer does, because we will get higher quality, more consistent foods from cloned animals. But the real beneficiaries are the nation’s large meatpacking companies – the kind that would like it best if chickens grew in the shape of nuggets. Anyone who really cares about food—its different tastes, textures and delights—is more interested in diversity than uniformity.

As it happens, the same is true for anyone who cares about farmers and their animals. An agricultural system that favors cloned animals has no room for farmers who farm in

different ways. Cloning, you will hear advocates say, is just another way of making cows. But every other way—even using embryo transplants and artificial insemination—allows nature to shuffle the genetic deck. A clone does not.

To me, this striving for uniformity is the driving and destructive force of modern agriculture. You begin with a wide array of breeds, a truly diverse pool of genes. As time passes, you impose stricter and stricter economic constraints upon those breeds and on the men and women who raise them. One by one, the breeds that don't meet the prevailing economic model are weeded out. By the beginning of the 21st century, you've moved from the broad base of a genetic pyramid to its nearly vanishing peak, which is to say that the genetic diversity present in the economically acceptable breeds of modern livestock is minute. Then comes cloning, and we leave behind all variation.

Cloning is not unnatural. It is natural for humans to experiment, to try anything and everything. Nor is cloning that different from anything else we've seen in modern agriculture. It is another way of shifting genetic ownership from farmers to corporations. It is another way of creating still greater economic and genetic concentration in an industry that has already pushed concentration past the limits of ethical and environmental acceptability.

It always bears repeating that humans are only as rich as the diversity that surrounds them, whether we mean cultural or economic diversity. The same is true of genetic diversity, which is an essential bulwark against disease. These days there is less and less genetic diversity in the animals found on farms, and farmers themselves become less and less diverse because fewer and fewer of them actually own the animals they raise. They become contract laborers instead.

It is possible to preserve plant and crop diversity in seed banks. But there are no animal banks. Breeds of animals that are not raised die away, and the invaluable genetic archive they represent vanishes. This may look like a simple test of economic efficiency. It is really a colossal waste, of genes and of truly lovely, productive animals that are the result of years of human attention and effort. From one perspective, a cloned animal looks like a miracle of science. But from another, it looks like what it is: a dead end.

The planet is fine. The people are screwed. The planet will shake us off like a bad case of fleas. — *George Carlin*

WHY NOT “SOFT-CORE” ATHEISM?

(Excerpted from “America’s Religious Right” (unsigned) in the U.K.-based The Economist, 12/11/07)

According to figures compiled by the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), almost 30 million people claimed “no religion” in 2001, a doubling from 1991. This dwarfs America’s 2.8 million who describe themselves as Jews, according to the same survey (although other estimates suggest that the Jewish population is much larger, at about six million). Catholicism, the country’s largest Christian denomination, boasts 51 million followers. In other words, irreligion claims a surprisingly large number of adherents.

Mitt Romney’s attack on disbelievers prompted Christopher Hitchens, a well-known polemicist and the author of *God Is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything*, to describe him as “entirely lacking in dignity or nobility (or average integrity).” Others

cited Thomas Jefferson's ruder comments about religion. Even some conservative columnists chided Mr Romney for not saying, as George Bush has, that people of no faith at all are Americans too.

And yet those with no religious beliefs are shut out from political power. Earlier this year [2007], a secularist group offered \$1,000 to the highest-ranking politician in the land who would publicly proclaim no belief in God. This turned out to be Peter Stark, a Democratic congressman from the San Francisco area. He is the only congressman, of 535, who professes no belief in the Almighty.

Mr. Stark suspects that many of his colleagues secretly agree with him. But they dare not do so publicly, even Democrats. And every one of the Democratic presidential contenders has talked about God; they even submitted to an awkward debate on religion, in which they were asked about their biggest sin and their favorite bible verses. The Republicans were not put through a similar inquisition; their religious bona fides are apparently not in any doubt.

What accounts for the failure of atheists to organize and wield influence? One problem is that they are hardly a cohesive group.

Another issue is simply branding. "Atheist" has an ugly ring in American ears and it merely defines what people are not. "Godless" is worse; its derogatory attachment to "communist" may never be broken.

"Humanist" sounds too hippyish. A few have taken to calling themselves "Brights" for no good reason and to widespread mirth. And "secular" isn't quite the word either; one can be a Christian secularist.

But another failing of the irreligious movement has been its tendency, frequently, to pick the wrong fights. Keeping the Ten Commandments out of an Alabama courthouse is one thing. But attacking a Christmas nativity scene on public property does more harm than good. Such secular crusades allow Christians—after all, the overwhelming majority of the population—to feel under attack, and even to declare that they are on the defensive in a "War on Christmas." When a liberal federal court in California struck the words "under God" from the pledge of allegiance, religious conservatives rallied. Atheists might be wise to accept the overwhelming majority's comfort with such "ceremonial deism."

If atheists, agnostics and secularists could polish their image they might prove powerful, and increasingly so. If the number of people declaring "no religion" can double over the ten years to 2011, who knows how many more there are now or might be in years to come? Polls have shown that eight years of Mr Bush's mix of piety, divisiveness and incompetence have pushed young people toward the secular in higher numbers than before.

If these growing ranks concentrate on areas where American religiosity can do harm—over-aggressive proselytizing in the armed forces, undermining science or AIDS programs, alienating minorities at home and Muslims abroad—they could wield the sort of influence that any other minority representing 10% of the country might do. An unbelieving president still seems an unlikely prospect. On the other hand, only 53% of Americans still say they would not vote for an otherwise well-qualified atheist.

Comment: "Humanist" too "hippyish"? The U.K. and the U.S. truly are, as Shaw said, "two countries separated by a common language." — JR

COPERNICUS WAS RIGHT

John Arents

I used to agree with Edward Goldsmith (“Thoughts on Galileo and the Pope,” PIQUE, February): “Neither the Ptolemaic nor the Copernican system presents absolute truth. The adoption of each system merely serves a certain purpose.” However, his article impelled me to rethink the matter.

It is possible to describe any given set of motions by choosing any point as origin and any three non-coplanar directions as the coordinate axes. No experiment can tell you whether your reference frame is stationary or in uniform rectilinear motion because the question is meaningless: there is no absolute stationarity (Einstein’s Principle of Relativity). That a motion can be described does not make it physically possible.

“Acceleration” means not only speeding up, but any change per unit time of velocity, in magnitude (speed) or direction. Acceleration, unlike velocity, is an absolute truth. Accelerated coordinate systems introduce pseudo-forces of their own (like the centrifugal force associated with a rotating system), so we will avoid them. If you are riding on a perfectly smooth, quiet elevator, you cannot tell whether it is ascending, descending, or at rest. But when the elevator starts to go up, your weight (downward force) increases momentarily; when it starts down, your weight decreases. The possible confusion here is that you cannot distinguish acceleration from gravity (Einstein’s Principle of Equivalence). When you think you are starting up, maybe God is playing a trick by momentarily increasing gravity at your position. An astronaut is weightless not because the Earth has ceased to attract him—he would be cast into outer darkness— but because he is falling toward the Earth with an acceleration that just cancels the force of gravity. If his orbit is circular, his speed is constant and his acceleration is entirely a change of direction. He does not fall into the Earth because he also has a forward component of velocity. This was all known to Newton; Einstein’s contribution was to apply it to light as well as matter, leading to surprisingly profound changes in our concepts.

The Ptolemaic description requires that the Sun revolve around the Earth in a tight (by cosmic standards) orbit at high speed. If we do not even allow the Earth to rotate on its axis, the Sun must complete an orbit in 24 hours; otherwise, we can give it a whole year. The Sun must be accelerating rapidly toward the Earth. $\text{Force} = \text{mass} \times \text{acceleration}$. There has to be an enormous force imparting this Earthward acceleration to the extremely massive Sun. Where could this force come from? Not from the puny Earth. On the other hand, if the Earth revolves around the Sun, a much weaker force is needed to keep the lightweight Earth in orbit, and the Sun’s gravity does it. Another way of looking at it is that if you want an unaccelerated coordinate system, you must pin the origin to an unaccelerated point and the axes to non-rotating directions. The center of the Sun and the directions to three specified distant (“fixed”) stars are good approximations.

These arguments are anachronistic because Copernicus and Galileo lived before Newton was born. It is a measure of their greatness that they had an intuitive grasp of the laws that Newton later formulated precisely. It now seems like common sense to choose the most massive body as the stationary center, but it was uncommon sense in 1540.

At 81, I am still learning - by reading PIQUE, no less!

**A POINT OF (WORLD) VIEW IS MORE
THAN A POINT ON A GRAPH**

Giddian Beer

In “Thoughts on Galileo and the Pope” [PIQUE, February], Edward Goldsmith says that in comparing the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems (or any worldviews) “. . . it all depends on where you want to place the zero point [the origin] of your graph.”

That’s true only for rectilinear (i.e.: Cartesian) systems. It is not true for rotating systems. To set the earth as the center of rotation for the sun requires that it also be the center of rotation for the whole solar system, the galaxy, the entire universe. Furthermore, rotation of mass—particles or bodies—involves acceleration towards the center of rotation. It cannot be that the motion of all the bodies in the universe is determined, or influenced, by the gravitational attraction of the earth.

There is no equivalence between the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems.

**MATTHEW CHAPMAN:
OUR NEWEST HONORARY MEMBER**

[head-shot photo of Matthew Chapman]

After Matthew Chapman fascinated an overflow audience at our 20th Anniversary/Darwin Day luncheon with a short talk about growing up in Cambridge, England, a direct descendant of the revered Charles Darwin, then moving to America in the 80’s to discover that his great-great grandfather was regarded by many as the anti-Christ, Barbara Lifton proposed him for Honorary Membership. Irv Millman seconded, and the assembly elected him unanimously.

Mr. Chapman, who now lives in the U.S., has written and directed five independent movies and written several mainstream pictures, but is best known to humanists and other freethinkers for two books: *Trials of the Monkey: An Accidental Memoir*, his account of the Scopes Trial told in the form of a road trip he took to the town where the trial took place, along with a memoir of his childhood growing up as a descendant of Charles Darwin; and his latest, *40 Days and 40 Nights – Darwin, Intelligent Design, God, OxyContin, and Other Oddities On Trial in Pennsylvania*, his first-hand story of the 2005 Kitzmiller v. Board of Education “intelligent design” trial.

Mr. Chapman joins author and futurist Sir Arthur C. Clarke, poet/historian Jennifer Michael Hecht, editor/rationalist Leon Jaroff, and philosopher and evolutionary biologist Massimo Pigliucci on the SHSNY roster of Honorary Members, which in the past has included Isaac Asimov, Paul Edwards, Albert Ellis, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

An atheist’s biggest sexual problem: No one to talk to during orgasm.

“What an elegant, swell-egant party this is!” — Cole Porter

[page of photos and captions of February 10 SHSNY 20th Anniversary/Darwin Day Luncheon at The Players, including this list of attendees]

75 FOR LUNCH

Jay Appleman

Derek Araujo

Gabriele Arents

John Arents

Maria Astifidis

Giddian Beer

Patricia Berger

Jane Bertoni

John Chaneski

Denise Chapman

Matthew Chapman

Susan Chen

Denise Cherry

Norman Cherry

Remo Cosentino

Molly Dricot

Ellen Duncan

Ronald Duncan

Henry Eiser

Tom Falvey

Edith Finell

Barbara Friedberg

Harry Graber

Lorraine Gudas

Eliane Hahn

Max Hahn

Roslyne Hahn

Art Harris

Jennifer Michael Hecht

Irving Jacks

Elizabeth Kiehner

Ora Koch

Dr. Joseph Lieberman

Barbara G. Lifton

Dr. Philip Livingston

Lee Loshak

Marsha Lowenthal

Elaine Lynn

Karen Maros

Donna Marxer

Kevin McKenzie

Dennis Middlebrooks

Samuel Milligan

Irv Millman

Carlos Mora

Claudia Moyne

Dr. John Moyne

Robert Murtha

Sylvia Murtha

Betty Nicholson

Jerry Nierenberg

Juliet Nierenberg

Keith Olwell

Sean O'Malley

Robert Ondricek

Justine Ondricek

Ellen Peckham

Claire Perkins

Brian Rafferty

Emma Rafferty

John Rafferty

Chris Reed

Martine B. Reed

Dr. William Reed

Carolyn Roxon

Caroline Rubinstein

Jason Rubinstein

Rich Sander

Pamela Saunders

Nanette Scofield

Joan Slomanson

Woody Slomanson

John Wagner

Phillip Winegar

Paul Wollman

SHSNY ELECTION — SECOND NOTICE

The triennial election for the Board of Directors of SHSNY will take place this spring. Candidate statements and ballots will be mailed to all members on April 15, and returned ballots will be due May 15. The next three-year Board term will begin June 1.

Who is eligible?

All members are eligible for election. You may nominate yourself or another member(s)—by letter to the PO Box or via e-mail to editor@shsny.org—any time before April 1. Please include a brief statement summarizing the candidate's/your qualifications and vision for SHSNY. If you nominate someone else, please include a statement by the nominee that s/he is willing to serve.

Who will stand for election?

All nine current Board members will stand for re-election. Who else? Since our SHSNY By-laws require a minimum of five directors, but mandate no maximum, the answer to “Who will stand for election?” is, we hope, you.

Herewith, the statements of five of the current Board members seeking re-election. Four more (at least) will follow next month.

Remo Cosentino

As a naturalized citizen, I came to believe fervently in the promise of American citizenship offered by the Constitution: equality for all citizens. Even more precious was the promise of freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. My reading of history confirmed for me that all good does not derive from the state, and a government united with religion is toxic.

The last eight years (or longer) of Republican rule, bolstered by faith-based initiatives, and the clamor for putting God and religion back into American life, has undermined this separation. More troublesome, it flouts and betrays the enlightened humanist goals of the founders who created the Constitution.

As a citizen I feel compelled to oppose any further erosion of this separation of church and state: being a member of SHSNY is one way, the other is to remain vigilant against the erosion of privacy by government. I have no desire to limit others' belief in a deity, or religious practice. My aim is to advance the goals of humanism whenever and wherever possible and resist society's imposition of dubious religious values in our lives.

Arthur Harris

I am pleased to run for re-election to the Board for another term. I promise to continue to be a gadfly, biting the rump of both organized and disorganized religion. At a time when faith-based initiatives include the destruction of the Twin Towers, we must continue to gently lead those blinded by faith into enlightenment. Critical thinking must be encouraged. “Faith may be wonderful,” Wilson Mizner said, “but it's doubt that gets you an education.”

Lee Loshak

As a clinical psychologist, I possess both the objective view of a scientist and a compassionate or humanist outlook toward society and the individual. I have been an atheist for most of my life. My conviction has strengthened over time, in part due to my increasing respect for the physical and social sciences. I have been a humanist since early childhood because my parents instilled in me respect and compassion toward others, and the importance of free thought rather than rigid indoctrination. My identification as a humanist became stronger as I observed the growing influence of the religious right, blindness toward the rights of others, prejudices, and the mentality of war.

Through SHSNY, there is the opportunity for more exchange on questions of atheism, belief systems, and religions. I would like to hear speakers who hold ideas similar to those of most of our members, as well as to extend a hand to those of differing view, by scheduling debates between people of our philosophy and prominent supporters of other persuasions. As free thinkers, perhaps some of the personal views of our members will be modified; hopefully members of these other groups will attend such debates, with some of them rethinking their personal beliefs and ideas.

Donna Marxer

As an environmental artist and humanist who grew up in the South, I am deeply concerned about the religious right's threatened dominance in our society today. I've seen first hand the stranglehold it can have on civil rights, freedom of all kinds, creative thinking.

This is a time when we must all make time to answer back, to make our views known. There are more of us out there than we know; they're just afraid to make themselves heard. Let's help them by our own example.

Robert A. Murtha, Jr.

The religious right has run hog wild in recent years and its agents have imposed its agenda on us in many areas such as stem cell research, reproductive rights, HIV prevention, and much more. If you ask them (or don't ask), they will tell you that we are unfit to serve in public office or even belong to the polity. My hope is that as a member of the Board I can help restore the "wall of separation" between church and state. My qualifications include a law degree, an M.A. in History and considerable political experience.

**WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A COUNTRY GIVES UP RELIGION?
IN SPAIN, NOTHING MUCH**

Martin Varsavsky

(Based on an article on HuffingtonPost.com, 1/30/08)

During Franco's dictatorship (and for centuries before) Spain was a very Catholic country. After three decades of democracy Spain is not a Catholic country anymore.

Loss of religion first became apparent with the legalizations of divorce and contraceptives, and the promotion of sex education, all opposed by the Church. Those were followed by the decriminalization of abortion, the acceptance of drug possession for personal consumption (drug users are not criminals in Spain, but treated instead as medical patients) and a general acceptance of premarital sex in society. Later, more controversial activities were legalized, like gambling in public places, prostitution and, recently, gay marriage.

Presently, other than euthanasia there's nothing left for the Church to oppose. All the battles were lost, including the one for the hearts and minds of the Spanish people. While 95 percent of Spanish youth declared in the 60's that religion played some role in their life, now only a third do. And that is only "some" role. ...

In the meantime, Spain's abandonment of religion has been accompanied by tremendous economic and social development. Spain is now ten times richer per capita than it was three decades ago. Cultural production is thriving, and Spanish science, nearly

non-existent during centuries of a tough ban on scientific research by the Catholic Church, is now beginning to develop, with the number of papers written and patents filed growing every year. During the last decade Spain has been the fastest-growing of the large countries in Europe. Indeed, the economy grew so fast that Spain accepted six percent of its population in the form of immigrants in the last five years in order to cope with labor shortages.

If anything, Spain proves that societies do not fall apart when they give up religion and almost everything that was illegal for religious reasons becomes legal. Moreover I believe that if Spain had not given up on religion it would not have been the success that it is now, as the Catholic Church in Spain was deeply involved in most state activities and acted as a deterrent for progress. For those, mostly in America, who believe that religion somehow makes countries more ethical, Spain proves just the opposite. With a good secular and free kindergarten-to-university education system Spain has less violent crime, fewer people in jail and fewer policemen per inhabitant than mostly religious U.S.A. While most people in Spain—and Europe generally—dislike the same activities that people in America dislike, in Europe we don't make what we don't like illegal. Moreover, in Europe more people behave ethically than in America, not because they fear God, but because they personally believe in doing what is right.

OUR CHRISTIAN RIGHT OPENS A SECOND FRONT IN THE “CULTURE WAR”: EUROPE

Catherine Price

(Excerpted from “Memo from U.S. Christian conservatives to Europeans: Have more babies!” in Broadsheet on salon.com 2/19/08)

There's a long article in *The Nation* about how the American Christian right is hoping that Europeans' demographic concerns might give it a toehold in its fight against, among other things, women's rights. As the subhead puts it, “Conservatives predict disaster as birthrates in the ‘West’ fall. Their solution? Take away women's rights [and] compel reproduction.”

The article refers to the idea that so-called liberal ideas, like women's rights, gay rights and, you know, access to any form of contraception, are contributing to the supposed population crisis faced by Western Europe. The feared result would be a “demographic winter” where, to put it bluntly, Europe would run out of white people. By not having enough children, the doomsayers say, Western civilization is “laying itself down to die.”

American religious conservatives are trying to convince European secularists that to solve some of their demographic woes, they might want to rethink their position on women's rights. As author Kathryn Joyce explains, “The real root of racial tensions in the Netherlands and France, America's culture warriors tell anxious Europeans, isn't ineffective methods of assimilating new citizens but, rather, decades of ‘anti-family’ permissiveness—contraception, abortion, divorce, population control, women's liberation and careers, ‘selfish’ secularism and gay rights—enabling ‘decadent’ white couples to neglect their reproductive duties.” They have, she explains, defied the biblical command to “be fruitful and multiply.” ...

Among the many things about this movement that I find frightening is the idea that one of the most threatened species of all is the “secular humanist,” a “sterile elite” that

some conservatives think is “too self-absorbed to reproduce.” (It’s like I’m reading a description of myself and all my friends.) I doubt that the Christian right—or religious conservatives of any faith—would be particularly upset to see us go, but considering my own possible extinction makes me understand, for a moment, what it must be like to worry about your own “demographic winter.” This leaves me with two choices: Try to support rights and contraceptive access for all women, not just my fellow secularists. Or, alternatively, I could decide to have a lot of babies.

LODGING ONE’S HEAD WHERE THE SUN WILL NEVER, EVER SHINE

John Rafferty

Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the most important prelate in the Church of England, on February 7 said in a BBC4 interview that Britain’s 1.5 million Muslims should be allowed to let *sharia* law govern matrimonial, financial and such-like questions within their own communities. The U.K., he said, had to “face up to the fact” that some of its citizens “did not relate to” the U.K. legal system.

The good bishop was flabbergasted by the near-universal outcry against his idiotic idea. Even leading Muslim organizations point out that only 40 percent of Britain’s 1.5 million Muslims (out of a total U.K. population of 60 million) want *sharia* law adopted in Britain – and 60 percent don’t want it.

One can only wonder what Dr. Williams’ reaction would be (assuming he got his way) if he read in his newspaper one day that a British Muslim man, quoting *sharia* law, had summarily divorced and kicked his wife into the street because she watched a man on a television program without a male relative attending her (it happened in Saudi Arabia a few months ago). Or if a *sharia* court somewhere away from London’s media focus decided that a local Muslim man’s shady business dealings amounted to theft, and cut off his hand.

Dr. Williams has since, of course, backpedaled furiously, claiming he had no intention of allowing the horrors suggested above. But it’s exactly his kind of idiocy — caving in to the loud, militant and disciplined Islamic extremists who do “not relate” to the U.K.’s rationalist Enlightenment tradition—that gives liberalism and multiculturalism a bad name.

And the name Dr. Williams deserves is a Yiddish one that also happens to be the German for “jewelry.”

EVANGELISM GETS BOLDER (AND CRAZIER) AT THE AIR FORCE ACADEMY

Neil MacFarquhar

(Excerpted from “Speakers at Academy Said to Make False Claims” in The New York Times, February 7, 2008)

The Air Force Academy played host February 6 to three speakers who critics say are evangelical Christians falsely claiming to be former Muslim terrorists. ...

Members of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a group suing the federal government to combat what it calls creeping evangelism in the armed forces, said it was typical of the Air Force Academy to invite born-again Christians to address cadets on terrorism rather than experts who could teach students about the Middle East. ...

The three men were invited to talk about being recruited and trained as terrorists, not religion, although one of them did tell students that converting to Christianity from Islam saved his life. ...

Experts who have heard the three men speak said some of their stories border on the fantastic, like one's account of how, as a child, he infiltrated Israel to plant bombs via a network of tunnels underneath the Golan Heights. No such incidents have ever been reported.

Prof. Douglas Howard, who teaches Modern Middle East History at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., said his doubts about their authenticity grew after stories like the Golan Heights saga as well as something on another of the men's Web site claiming that he was descended from the grand wazir of Islam. "The grand wazir of Islam is a nonsensical term," he said.

Arab-American civil rights organizations question why, at a time when the United States government has vigorously moved to jail or at least deport anyone with a known terrorist connection, the three men, if they are telling the truth, are allowed to circulate freely. A spokesman for the F.B.I. said there were no warrants for their arrest.

ANOTHER BLEEDING-HEART LIBERAL SECULARIST ON POLITICS AND RELIGION

(From the Congressional Record of September 16, 1981, and forwarded by Edith Amster)

On religious issues there can be little or no compromise. There is no position on which people are so immovable as their religious beliefs. There is no more powerful ally one can claim in a debate than Jesus Christ, or God, or Allah, or whatever one calls this supreme being. But like any powerful weapon, the use of God's name on one's behalf should be used sparingly. The religious factions that are growing throughout our land are not using their religious clout with wisdom. They are trying to force government leaders into following their position 100 percent. If you disagree with these religious groups on a particular moral issue, they complain, they threaten you with a loss of money or votes or both. I'm frankly sick and tired of the political preachers across this country telling me as a citizen that if I want to be a moral person, I must believe in A, B, C, and D.

Just who do they think they are? And from where do they presume to claim the right to dictate their moral beliefs to me? And I am even more angry as a legislator who must endure the threats of every religious group who thinks it has some God-granted right to control my vote on every roll call in the Senate. I am warning them today: I will fight them every step of the way if they try to dictate their moral convictions to all Americans in the name of "conservatism." — *Barry Goldwater*

ART HARRIS WRITES HIS SON (AND GRANDDAUGHTERS) ON RELIGION

(Long-time SHSNY Board member Art Harris has recently become twice a grandfather. The following is a letter to his son Mike, a captain in the U.S. Army.)

Dear Mike :

I'm writing to dispel, if I can, the idea that I'm some sort of a nut case regarding religion. I don't think I am but do acknowledge that early exposure and lifelong study has left me disenchanted with and very aware of the malevolence that underscores organized religion.

While there are many positive aspects of religion—the magnificent cathedrals and churches, the charity that most profess, the art, literature and music and much philosophy that is well regarded—I am very much aware that not too deep beneath the surface is a concept that has shackled mankind since its beginning.

That concept is the desire for absolute power. The Church sorely misses the power it wielded during the Middle Ages, and works ceaselessly to restore as much of it as they can. (Today, I read that Pope Benedict called for the expansion of the office for exorcism. Welcome to 1208 A.D. Do we again burn witches?)

The Church is not alone. Evangelicals here are politically active in attempting to turn the U.S. into a theocracy, and Muslim radicals have succeeded to a very large degree wherever they rule.

Just recently, Britain's Archbishop of Canterbury said that the U.K. should consider accepting some *sharia* law because of its large Muslim population, and some British Muslims have said publicly that they will raise the Green Crescent flag over Britain to replace that hated symbol of Imperialism, the Union Jack.

Most of the clergymen I have met are affable, intelligent and quite friendly, and I've found them great for having discussions. But sadly, they seem to stultify as they grow older.

Mike Huckabee, a very pleasant fellow, ignores evidence but believes that the Earth is 8000 years old. Do we need another scientific ignoramus to lead our nation? Would he outfit our military with the latest in swords and shields or simply issue the jawbones of asses? If so, I know where he can obtain them.

We have fallen so far behind in science in the last seven years because of governmental religious opposition to research that our scientific lead is threatened. India and China are producing more scientists than we are. With more manufacturing and science jobs shipped overseas daily, our industry seems to be primarily entertainment. What will sustain our lead in the future?

Since our nation began, the idea of separation of church and state has been fundamental to our country. Religious leaders fabricate and lie about the Founding Fathers and their attitudes toward religion. Those men were Deists. They set up a structure of laws so as to make sure that while religion could be practiced freely, it was not to dominate our government. While the Declaration of Independence mentions "Nature's God," the Constitution pointedly does not, and Article VI specifies that there will be no government-sponsored religion or any test for it for public office.

Our current presidential candidates seem to have forgotten Article VI, as each of them wraps him/herself in a church altar mantle, telling us how god-fearing and church-attending they are.

All religions have malevolent and oppressive pasts. Given an opportunity, they would surface and again wreak the havoc they caused when in power. Now they fight doggedly to restore that power by legislation.

Not content with preaching to their own, they would regulate all the rest of us. They would enforce their religious laws on those who disagree or are indifferent to them. Laws passed by the religious have been abject failures — think of Prohibition, and consider the "blue stocking" laws that closed stores on Sunday.

But those are mere pinpricks. What if the clergy could send thugs into your home to pull you and your family into a torture chamber because you were suspected of heresy or

blasphemy? (It's happening in Iran.) Or that you expressed an opinion that might be considered in opposition to Church doctrine? (Galileo and Copernicus come to mind.) What if a mullah condemned your wife because some children she taught named a puppet "Mohammed"? Or your daughter was imprisoned because she didn't wear a headscarf, or did wear a short skirt? Or was stoned, according to some rabbinical beliefs, because she'd had a disagreement with you?

Think it can't happen here? Nobel laureate physicist Steven Weinberg wrote, "With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion."

Mike, if I can't leave you a large inheritance (although I work on it daily), at least allow me to make you aware of what I've learned in my lifetime.

Probably 90% or more of all the world's strife is caused by beliefs for which there is not one iota of evidence, or by myths that are better faded away but instead are used to murder those with differing myths.

Don't be misled into accepting religion's benign claims. Men invented religion. Men wrote its laws and histories, not Gods. Priests from ancient times onward have always found it easier to lead a flock than to work in the fields under a hot sun, and their rulers tolerated them as long as they agreed with and sustained them.

Be skeptical at least, is my hope for you and ours. Teach the girls that, too.

AS (ALMOST) SEEN IN THE NEW YORK TIMES

John Rafferty

The Times ran an Op-Ed piece in late January by two former staffers of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, who urged the next president to spend even more taxpayer money supporting religion. I wrote a 300+ word Letter to the Editor in response, but had to cut it to fit the Times' 150-word rule. They printed the short version February 4 (Thanks for the many e-mail encouragements), but here is the original version.

To the Editor:

President Bush "promised much" but did not put enough "energy" behind his programs of government support for "faith-based initiatives" seven years ago, according to David Kuo and John J. DiIulio, Jr. The next president, they contend, must heed the "large majorities" of Americans (according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life) that "favor using federal money to support the work of faith-based organizations."

Unfortunately, in their excitement over that majority (most of whom, it is safe to assume, are unaware of the Constitutional questions involved in supporting religion), the authors neglect to mention an important minority: the 14 percent of Americans who profess No Religion. One of every seven Americans, the third-largest group in surveys (behind only Catholics and Baptists)—as well as tens of millions of constitutionally-minded Americans who do profess a religion—are forced to watch as the "no establishment" clause of the First Amendment is systematically dismantled.

Pusillanimous politicians, including all the leading presidential contenders, terrified of casting a vote or even speaking out "against religion," vow to expand the programs in spite of mountains of evidence of rampant abuse and corruption. In some states, juvenile offenders of any or no religion are offered the no-choice choice of either entering Christian-indoctrination "boot camps" (that get paid per juvenile head) or going to jail.

Prison inmates hoping for parole get the message loud and clear: join the prison ministry and be “born again” or serve your full term. Church groups have used federal money earmarked for social programs to buy Bibles, to fund proselytizing, to offer social services only in Bible-study groups or indoctrination sessions, and even to invest in real estate. In 2002, \$500,000 went to Pat Robertson’s Operation Blessing International, which the *Norfolk (Va.) Virginian-Pilot* discovered was investing in African diamond mines.

In spite of narrowly-defined (and decided) decisions by a now right-wing Supreme Court, government support for “faith-based initiatives” violates both the letter and the very spirit of our secular Constitution. It was a bad idea, it hasn’t worked, it fosters corruption, and it should be junked.