

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

**November, 2008**

As we enter the holiday season (secular this month, religious next), we consider the science of ghosts, guardian angels and super colliders. We wonder if anyone way, way out there is listening to us listening for them, define agnosticism and ourselves, weigh the merits of cigarettes and religion, follow one long-ago boy's journey to The Dark Side, offer a Thanksgiving "prayer," and ask whether we are, collectively or individually, the Grinch. But first, some civility and reason.— *JR*

## **CONFUCIANISM AS A SECULAR ETHICAL SYSTEM**

**Samuel Milligan**

*SHSNY Board member Sam Milligan spoke to an overflow crowd at the Muhlenberg Library September 8, and in an hour and a half gave the roomful of freethinkers an enlightening primer on the basic tenets and history of an ethical system that has endured and even defined a civilization for two-and-a-half millennia, and which, in the form of Neo-Confucianism, is gaining new adherents in Asia and around the world.*

*The full text of the lecture, complete with notes and several appendices, is available on the SHSNY website, at [www.shsn.org](http://www.shsn.org)*

*Herein is a summary of the lecture, starting with some caveats regarding what Confucianism is not, followed by some of the First Teacher's teachings, and explanations of Confucianism's five principal virtues.*

*In Sam's own words ...*

— *JR*

Confucianism is not a religion, and attempts to make it so invariably end in failure.

Confucius was not a god or saint. He specifically stated that he was only a human striving for moral perfection.

Confucianism does not insist on obedience to corrupt and oppressive political authority. In fact, it is the duty of oppressed people to overthrow such governments.

It is not incompatible with science, democracy or industrial capitalism. *And ...*

It has nothing whatever to do with the offensive "Confucius say" fortune cookie mentality ascribed to it.

Confucianism is, on the other hand, a sophisticated system of social ethics, and has a great deal to offer this troubled age, as it did for a similar age two and a half millennia ago.

What if one could have an ethical system not encumbered by religion and its endemic tendency toward wickedness? The religious will immediately claim that such a system is impossible. One cannot, they say, behave ethically without the fear of some divinity or other to keep one from sin. Religion, they claim, is our only defense against moral chaos.

This is not true.

### ***The First Teacher***

Roughly two and a half millennia ago Confucius—Kong-zi, or Master Kong (551–479 BCE)—presented exactly such a system, complete in itself, in which ethical conduct

is pursued with no dependence whatever on the supernatural. We learn from the oldest Confucian source available to us, the *Analects* (*Lunyu*), that he had no interest in the spirit world or with life after death. In fact when a disciple asked how the spirits were to be served, Confucius answered, “If you don’t know how to serve your fellow man, how can you serve the spirits?” The disciple asked about death, and Confucius continued, “If you don’t know anything about the living, how can you be concerned with death?”

We also learn that he “did not speak about strange phenomena (i.e., omens, such as comets, etc.), feats of strength, disorders (such as earthquakes, floods and so on), or spirits.” Since none of these things—including spirits, please note—pertain to ethical conduct, they were of no use or interest to him.

But what are the teachings on which the system rests? What is Confucianism all about, exactly?

While Confucianism is often called a philosophy, as I suppose it is in some sense of the word, it is more accurately a system of social ethics. Confucius had little regard for the ascetic who would abandon society and thereby selfishly avoid his social obligations. Neither does the Confucian have time to putter about nature with the Daoists, nor contemplate his navel with mystics of whatever persuasion.

The Confucian realizes that someone has to bring in the harvest, bury the dead, educate the children, feed the pigs, wash the dishes, defend the state, pay the taxes and do all the ordinary everyday things that keep the social structure intact and functioning. However—and this is the telling point—the Confucian believes that one can do all these things and at the same time achieve a deeply satisfying ethical life of contentment and beauty.

But how to go about it? Confucianism begins and ends with the people around us. When asked to give a simple definition of his system, Confucius said that the one single word “reciprocity” (*shu*) would cover it. “Don’t do anything to anybody else that you wouldn’t want them to do to you.”

To aid in this, Confucianism stresses the cultivation of virtues, the five cardinal ones being the following:

The first, and by far the most important of the virtues is *Ren*. The word has been translated in a number of ways, such as love, kindness, compassion, humanity, philanthropy, agape and so on. None of these fit, exactly. I myself like the term human-heartedness, which, I think, gives a good general idea of what it’s all about—that is, a natural, caring concern for the welfare of others.

The second virtue is *Yi*. As the American writer on Confucianism, H.G. Creel, defines it, its sense is not simply that of what is right or righteous in the ordinary definitions of these words, because it has the further meaning of that which is fitting and suitable. “Thus when the disciple Yu Jo said, ‘If in making promises one stays close to *Yi*, his words can be fulfilled,’ he meant that before one agrees to do something one should consider all the circumstances and promise only what is proper and suitable. It was with a similar intent that Confucius approved the conduct of one who ‘seeing an opportunity for gain, thinks of *Yi*. Such a man reflects upon whether, by taking possible profit he will violate a trust, wrong another person, or in any respect act in a way that is unsuitable under the given circumstances.

“Obviously, this concept of *Yi* is an extremely important moral force. It is a regulator of conduct ... and one that constantly places [one’s] own responsibility squarely before the individual.”

*Yi* also implies justice. A student came to Confucius with the news that another teacher was maintaining that one should repay evil with good. “With what, then,” Confucius asked, “shall we repay good? No. Repay good with good, but repay evil with justice.”

The original meaning of *Li* was “ritual sacrifice.” Then the primary meaning became simply “ritual.” Then by extension it became “ritual propriety” or “proper social conduct.”

We live in a crowded world and need some rules of the road in order to negotiate it. In all your dealings with others, Confucius told a student, “behave as if you were receiving a highly honored guest, and if you are so fortunate as to find yourself in a position of authority over others, discharge that trust with solemn care, “as if you were assisting at a great ceremony.” One must always act with respect when dealing with others, particularly with those under our authority.

Naturally, if one is to get by in a society, one must work within the conventions of that society. Discretion is allowed in modifying those conventions when the situation warrants, but being careful not to violate the principles of *Ren* or *Yi*.

On the other hand, one should not err in the direction of spinelessness. When standing up for our principles we are not obliged to suffer fools gladly.

*Li*, then, is a sort of modifier of conduct, preventing excess in either direction, maintaining a balanced norm.

*Zhi* is the wisdom of accumulated knowledge. We can always acquire more knowledge in order to learn more effective ways to practice *Ren*. In fact, the two are interdependent. Bertrand Russell gives a valuable illustration of this. During the European Middle Ages, when plague struck, compassionate people encouraged everyone to crowd into the churches to pray for relief from the pestilence. This, of course, just enabled the disease to spread more easily. Russell points this out as an example of love without knowledge (the result was death on a large scale) and gives war as an example of knowledge without love. Again, the result is death on a large scale.

As an appalling example of applying knowledge without love, the Tuskegee Experiment comes to mind, in which syphilitic patients were deceptively given ineffective placebos in order to study the effects of the disease if left untreated. Science is essential in learning about the cosmos and our place in it, but to do science without human-heartedness is a sure road to disaster—to death on a large scale. But, knowledge coupled with human-heartedness will result in wisdom (and, I might add, better science).

*Xin* is sincerity or realness, without which all the other virtues are worthless. Again, H.G. Creel — “It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Confucius did not consider such accomplishments as *Li* and music to be primary. The basic point that he pounded at his students, again and again and again, was sincerity, sincerity, sincerity. ‘If sincerity is lacking,’ he told them, ‘I don’t know how one can get on, any more than a wagon could without a yoke for attaching the horses.’ The disciple Zizhang asked how one should conduct oneself. The Master told him, ‘In everything you say, be sincere and truthful, in all your actions be honorable and careful, and you will get along very well, even among

the barbarians.’ He praised those who were not ashamed to seek enlightenment from those inferior to them in rank, and honest enough to cause their meritorious inferiors to be raised to a rank on a par with their own. He was scornful of hypocrisy; he would be ashamed, he said, to stoop to ‘clever talk, meretricious manners and simulated respect.’ The man who covers his inner weakness with a harsh and overbearing manner is no better, he declared, than a thief.” This is a remarkable insight into the mind of the bully wherever found—from the schoolyard to the seats of government.

True sincerity is also displayed in action. We must learn what is right and then act on it. To fail to do so is cowardice. We are reminded of those Confucians who, standing by their principles, were buried alive during the Qin Dynasty. Like them, we must be ready to give up our lives for our principles if need be.

### **RELIGION IS A LOT LIKE TOBACCO** **Steve Neubauer, President, PA Nonbelievers**

*(From October Panviews, newsletter of PA Nonbelievers)*

Religion is a lot like tobacco, isn't it? Some people can use it for most of their lives with no apparent ill effects. Others become seriously sick while refusing to acknowledge, or even staunchly defending, the cause of their disability. Some folks become so seriously addicted that they cannot imagine life without it. Some are able to keep it, and the effects of it, to themselves, while others insist they have not only a God-given right to use it, but that their right to use it supersedes the right of others around them to live without it.

Perhaps it would be more correct to say that religion is in much the same position as smoking was about 40 or 50 years ago. Back then, it was considered polite to offer someone a cigarette, and blowing smoke in someone's face wasn't seen as anything very serious. Some people knew, or at least suspected that smoking was bad for humans, but most insisted there was no compelling evidence. Of course, those who were the most addicted and those who stood to lose the most money were the most fanatical in both denying the harm of smoking and defending the “right” of smokers to light up wherever and whenever they wanted.

The “Imagine No Religion” billboards that have gone up recently in Chambersburg and Harrisburg (PA) are a bit like the first anti-smoking messages that appeared back in the 1960s. While non-smokers welcomed a positive message advocating good health and personal responsibility, the addicts and pushers were outraged that someone would have the unmitigated gall to suggest that the world might, just might, be a better place without cigarette smoke. ...

We need more messages advocating the positive benefits of kicking the habit of delusional thinking while embracing reality and rational thinking.

I do not understand those who take little or no interest in the subject of religion. If religion embodies a truth, it is certainly the most important truth of human experience. If it is largely error, then it is one of monumentally tragic proportions and should be vigorously opposed. — *Steve Allen*

### **SPOOKY SCIENCE:** **DOES A FEAR OF GHOSTS KEEP US HONEST?**

*(From Scientific American 60-Second Psych, 9/15/08)*

Ghosts. We're drawn to them, yet they frighten us, we feel better knowing one is not lurking. Do perceived specters have a real effect on our behavior? Does the fear of "someone watching" help put us on the straight and narrow path?

A 2005 study published in *Human Nature* revealed what happens when students believe their surroundings are haunted. 127 students took a test, with one caveat: They had an opportunity to cheat. A "computer glitch" caused the correct answer to be displayed on-screen unless subjects immediately tapped the space bar, clearing the solution.

The experimental group was also told the lab was haunted, that scientists recently had seen the ghost of a dead grad student in the test room.

Turns out, the "haunted" group was less likely to cheat—hitting the space bar nearly 40 percent faster (and thus removing the opportunity to see the correct answer) than the control group.

The researchers wrote that fear of wraith wrath existed in hunter-gatherer days, rivaling adaptive fears such as those of snakes and spiders. They proposed that supernatural belief has value, preventing social deviance because we fear "someone may be watching."

Maybe, but the idea that superstition has a social purpose, as opposed to merely being a by-product of consciousness, will require further study—and ultimately may never be scientifically provable.

### **MORE SPOOKY: DO ANGELS KEEP US SAFE?**

**David Van Biema**

*(Excerpted from TIME Magazine, 9/18/08)*

More than half of all Americans believe they have been helped by a guardian angel, according to a new poll by the Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion. In a poll of 1,700 respondents, 55 percent answered affirmatively to the statement, "I was protected from harm by a guardian angel." ...

The guardian angel encounter figures were "the big shocker" in the report, says Christopher Bader, director of the Baylor survey that covered a range of religious issues, parts of which are being released in a book titled *What Americans Really Believe*. In the case of angels, the question is a little stronger than just belief. Says Bader, "If you ask whether people believe in guardian angels, a lot of people will say, 'sure.' But this is different. It's experiential. It means that lots of Americans are having these lived supernatural experiences." ...

Randall Ballmer, chairman of the religion department at New York's Barnard College, says that the Baylor angel figures are one in a periodic series of indications that "Americans live in an enchanted world," and engage in a kind of casual mysticism independent of established religious ritual, doctrine or theology." ...

The Baylor study tested other statements that might indicate a similar belief in the supernatural intruding into everyday personal experience – "I heard the voice of God speaking to me"; and "I received a miraculous physical healing." But far fewer people claimed to have had those experiences. This raises the possibility that guardian angels, which famously support an industry of sentimental accessories, are just so darned attractive that they exist in a charmed belief niche of their own.

## **THINK OF THIS THE NEXT TIME YOU THINK “REAL SCIENCE” HAS ALL THE ANSWERS**

Although it had to be shut down for adjustments after only a couple of weeks, the Large Hadron Collider—the “super collider” that physicists hope will be able to replicate conditions at the moment of the Big Bang—began operations this summer, firing a beam of protons through a 17-mile-long tunnel that runs under the Franco-Swiss border.

A few scientists—and a lot of media alarmists—had serious concerns, worrying that the collision of protons at nearly the speed of light might create a “mini black hole” that would, um, swallow and obliterate the Earth and maybe, you know, like the whole solar system.

When the button was pushed (or the switch was thrown, or whatever) and the system started, an engineer in the Swiss control room was overheard by reporters to say: “Oh, wow, it worked.”

## **THE ORIGIN OF MODERN AGNOSTICISM**

**Richard Milner**

Sorry to quibble with a fellow agnostic, but James Zimmerman’s definition of the term from the *Minnesota Atheist*, reprinted in your last issue, was incorrect. “Agnostic” does not mean simply “without knowledge,” as he states, but “without revealed knowledge” (*gnosos*), which is an important distinction. It’s a question of degrees of certainty and doubt, versus the claim of absolute (i.e., revealed) certainty.

Charles Darwin and his intellectual champion, the evolutionary biologist Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895), were trying to establish the idea of provisional (scientific, ever-changing) truth to replace the oppression of traditional religious (faith-based, unchanging) truth. Or, as William Jennings Bryan put it at the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925: “Do you believe in the Rock of Ages, or the age of rocks?”

PIQUE readers may be interested in how and why Huxley coined the word. Here’s the story in his own words, as summarized in my forthcoming book, *Darwin’s Universe: Evolution from A to Z*, which will be published by the University of California Press early next year.

Huxley may not have been the first agnostic, but he was the first to call himself one. Comparative physiologist, innovative educator, and “Darwin’s bulldog,” Huxley’s interests ranged widely over science, religion, and philosophy. He coined the term “agnostic” in 1869, when he joined London’s Metaphysical Society, a group of theologians, scientists and writers who met to explore questions of belief.

When asked whether he was an atheist, a Christian, a theist, a materialist, an idealist, a freethinker, or a pantheist, Huxley was at a loss. He hadn’t “a rag of a label to cover [myself] with” and felt like the proverbial fox without a tail who was disowned by his fellows.

“The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed,” he wrote, “was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain ‘gnosis’—that is, a revealed knowledge of the truth about existence.”

So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of “agnostic,” (meaning without revealed knowledge). It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the “gnostic” of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at

our Society, to show that I, too, had a tail, like the other foxes. To my great satisfaction, the term took.”

Agnosticism, Huxley took pains to point out, “is not a creed but a method,” a skeptical, experimental approach to personal belief. “In matters of the intellect,” he advised, “follow your reason as far as it will take you [and] do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.” Nevertheless, he had “a deep sense of responsibility” for his actions, and nurtured a profound religious feeling without relying on organized religion. When Huxley’s young son died in 1860, the Reverend Charles Kingsley asked if he now regretted his lack of belief in the soul’s immortality.

In an uncompromising and moving letter, Huxley replied:

*“If a jeering devil asked me what profit it was to have stripped myself of the hopes and consolations of the mass of mankind ... [I should answer] truth is better than much profit. ... I refuse to put faith in that which does not rest on sufficient evidence, I cannot believe that the great mysteries of existence will be laid open to me on other terms.”*

### **DEFINE YOURSELF: READERS RESPOND**

At the end of last month’s article on “Atheism,” which Richard Milner references above, we asked: How do you define your secularity, your humanism, atheism, agnosticism? How do *you* answer the question, “Well, what *do* you believe in?” when asked?

As usual, you/we surprised us.

I’m an atheist, and when asked how I can be so sure of my atheism, my response is: “I know there is no god the same way I know there is no Santa Claus.”

— *Harry Greenberger, New Orleans Secular Humanists*

I think that the word “atheism” can be defined in so many ways we should avoid using it. Although I don’t believe there is a “personal god,” as the word atheism implies, I also don’t believe in impersonal gods either—such as the deists and pantheists believe in. I think that it’s best for us to say we’re agnostics and let it go at that.

— *Robert F. Dickhoff*

I do not define myself as anything. “Belief” in anything is dangerous if it is not based on fact. I know, not believe, that there is no supernatural power operating in the universe. I am dedicated to the established, verifiable fact. In my life, I try very hard to do justice every day (and to insist that I myself am justly treated). I try to do as much good (and to cause as little suffering) to the universe and all life in it, including the planet which we share, as I possibly can, given my limitations as a person.

“Meaning” is not as important to me as the relationships I have with all creatures with whom I come in contact. I have tried to effect positive change to our society by organizing in a wider arena to bring justice, and the power and influence to achieve it, to all citizens of this wonderful country, especially women and minorities.

If I can, I aim to leave this world a little better place for all people, (including my children and grandchildren) to live in, than it was when I was born.

I joined the Secular Humanist Society in order to enjoy the company of, and to learn from, like-minded people.

— *Barbara Lifton*

When asked, I avoid answering the question better than Sarah Palin could ever steer her answers.

If I had to give it a name, I'd say I am a theoretical Deist. Translation: I don't believe there is a God, but I believe that if there was, He wouldn't give two shits about the lives or thoughts of men.

The afterlife is just as lively as the beforelife.

Is it possible that there is a higher intelligence that designed things? Possibly. It is an infinite universe with infinite possibilities.

What is the likelihood that a higher entity that got the ball rolling gives the same two turds about the thoughts of some primitive sentient beings on a little speck of a blue planet in an obscure part of the universe?

Not bloody likely.

Is there a snowball's chance in Hell that any of man's religions have a clue?

No.

—*Brendan Rafferty*

Not original, but I don't have an attribution: "I am a practical atheist but a philosophical agnostic." I mean, I don't believe in prayer, or god, or in anything supernatural, but I have no idea of how or why life began. Nor does anyone else. I believe so thoroughly in evolution that I don't feel intelligence has evolved enough to know this yet. Or if being "knowable" is even applicable.

—*Donna Marxer*

I define my humanism by a combination of two ideas. First, a humanist attitude, including kindness, empathy and fellowship towards my fellow human beings, and the principles of morals and ethics laid out in Paul Kurtz's book *The Forbidden Fruit*.

Second, with a scientific view of the world, including relying on evidence, the scientific method, Occam's razor, and skepticism of any claims of beings outside of or beyond nature.

With a look towards the future, I would add that we should include all the higher order animals in our values and priorities. The expanding numbers of the human species, and our increasing exploitation of the world's resources—water, land for farming, cutting down the forests, polluting the seas—have put mounting pressure on the planet's wildlife.

—*Brian Lemaire*

I am an atheist, defined as someone who rejects all the gods that have been described to him so far. As much as possible I avoid belief based on faith without evidence. And I consider evidence valid only within the sharply-defined parameters of science.

I believe that the scientific method is the best available way to get at the "truth." I reject all the gods that, up to now, have been described to me. This is subject to revision should new valid scientific information be produced.

—*Chic Schissel*

Off the top of my head, I'd say that religion is basically for children who need to believe in an outside authority who will take care of them (if they're good) until such time they become their own authority, having arrived at a somewhat cohesive sense of identity. In other words, it has to do with ego development.



Salman Rushdie has said that there is strong evidence that human beings have an innate sense of morality due to socialization occurring through evolution -- that there is no reason for "religion" to instill it. At the same time, I personally like some of the aspects of Buddhism as having compassion for others actually emanating from compassion for one's self.

In addition, the Jesuits have made some contributions along these lines, as with forgiveness that can only be arrived at after anger is sufficiently worked through. From the standpoint of being a humanist, I'd agree with Auntie Mame: "Life is a banquet, and most poor sons of bitches are starving to death!" — *Pamela Saunders*

I don't choose to live by someone else's fairy tales. Institutionalized fairy tales may provide comfort and fellowship, but narrow the human potential. — *Seymour Storch*

When a friend asks, "Well, what do you believe in?" I usually answer, "I believe I have a moral obligation to do good, even without any hope of a reward such as paradise, and to avoid doing evil, even without any fear of punishment such as hell."

The last person I said that to appeared quite offended by that response, by the way. — *Martine Reed*

**Believer:** Do you believe in God?

**Me:** I find the God concept to be unhelpful in understanding the world or in managing my affairs.

**Believer:** That's not an answer!

**Me:** I thought you might have been able to deduce one. Oh, well. — *Bill Lindley*

I always say "atheist." If asked why, I say it's based on my evaluation of the evidence for and against the supernatural. I believe in the power of critical thinking applied to the best available evidence. It's not perfect but there's nothing better. — *G. Beer*

I believe in reason, common sense, and the cultivation of wisdom and ethical excellence. I believe in striving toward objectivity, no matter how unreachable many believe that goal to be. The effort is always well worth it. I believe in the natural world and the laws that govern it. I believe we should always try to understand the world by drawing upon naturalistic disciplines such as biology, astronomy, paleontology, etc.

I despise the term "agnostic," or in the words of James Zimmerman in October PIQUE, "without knowledge." Who honestly has knowledge of God? There are only people who *believe* they have knowledge of God. Truthfully speaking, we are all agnostics.

People usually ask if you believe in God before they ask what you believe in. If you ask for a definition of God and get one, there are three honest ways to answer the question. You may either say, 1) I do believe in God, 2) I do not believe in God or, 3) I am simply not sure whether to believe because there is strong evidence for and against the existence of God (or each position has great strengths and great weaknesses). No other responses to that question seem necessary to me, regardless of what you call yourself.

Zimmerman writes that the agnostic “either has not looked into the evidence for and against the evidence of a god, or believes that not enough such evidence exists to make a decision.” If this is so, when does the agnostic plan to start looking into the evidence and what the hell is she waiting for? If she has started looking, how long before she thinks she will have enough evidence to make a decision? Her soul could be riding on the decision. She had better get moving. You only live so many years.

I am a secular humanist. However, I also like the term moral atheist, used by Dutch philosopher Floris van den Berg in his review of *Irreligion* by John Allen Paulos in the October/November 2008 issue of FREE INQUIRY: “... if religion did not have such bad effects on morality, I would just be a nonbeliever who pays no attention to religion. Unfortunately, religion does exert a great evil influence on morals and truth-seeking worldwide. ... I actively strive to fight religion (not believers but their ideas) by liberal, nonviolent means.”

I do not strive to fight the positive aspects of religion. However I always strive to fight its negative or “evil” aspects.

— Norm R. Allen Jr., Associate Editor, FREE INQUIRY

### **IS THE DEFINITION YOU SENT MISSING?**

We'll print more in future issues. Keep sending.

### **ARE WE ALONE?**

**Giddian Beer**

*Sometimes I think we're alone.*

*Sometimes I think we're not.*

*In either case, the thought is staggering. —R. Buckminster Fuller*

The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project is, as its name implies, the ongoing attempt to make contact with intelligent beings on other worlds. This is done by listening for their signals and also by transmitting signals of our own in the hope of eliciting a response. What are its chances of success?

Consider our galaxy, the Milky Way. Among its 400 billion (that's 400,000,000,000) stars, it is likely that many of them have planets, sometimes more than one. Among those billions of planets, it is probable that many are capable of supporting life in some form. We can assume that wherever conditions are suitable for its genesis, life will arise. And, wherever it exists it will evolve, because that is the “purpose” of life – to adapt to changing environments and thereby to survive and to thrive.

However, except for a general tendency towards greater complexity, evolution has no goal, no prescribed direction. It is life's response to its environment — an environment that is subject to random perturbations and catastrophes. (For example, a huge meteor impact 65 million years ago ended the reign of dinosaurs and enabled mammals to flourish.) We cannot reasonably expect that evolution in any place will replicate evolution in any other place, even if the environments in both places are initially identical, or that evolution will again produce a species like us, or like one that we might imagine. This means that, despite the expected abundance of life in the Milky Way, the probability of intelligent life elsewhere is very small.

Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, let's suppose that at this time there are a few other technologically adept species scattered throughout the galaxy, species at least

capable of receiving and sending radio signals. Because of the great size of the Milky Way, the distances between these special places would have to be tens of thousands of light years. But, suppose that there is one only 5,000 light years from us; that's about one sixth of the way from earth to the center of the galaxy. (The smaller the radius the less likely that another technologically adept species will exist within it.) Suppose also that we happen to aim our "hello" directly at it, and that, five thousand years later, when our greeting arrives, the inhabitants (if any remain) reply immediately. The reply would reach us after another five thousand years. Who would receive it? 10,000 years is the time that it has taken for humans to progress from the advent of the New Stone Age, from the very beginning of agriculture and animal husbandry, to the present advanced state. What can be expected in the next ten thousand years?

A meteor impact, such as the one that destroyed the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, will happen someday. But within the next 10,000 years it's only a maybe.

So far we have avoided nuclear annihilation. Can we avoid it for another 10,000 years, or even 1,000 years?

It is a principle of biology that no organism can thrive in an environment of its own products. Highly successful species will affect their environments, often in ways that are detrimental to them. A technologically adept species, like us, is likely to have a very profound environmental effect. It must create vast amounts of energy, most of it by chemical or nuclear processes. It must exploit, use and deplete resources, some of which are necessary for its survival. In the process, it will create new substances, many of them toxic, which must be discarded. These effluents and effusions will, in time, permeate and upset the systems and cycles that support the environment in which it has evolved — a process that may be delayed, but cannot be stopped.

Could it continue for 10,000 years, or even 1,000 years? After all, it was only about 100 years ago that we earthlings became a "technologically adept" species, according to our definition of it, when Guglielmo Marconi transmitted the first radio message across the Atlantic. See what we have done (<http://www.itanjo.com/moloch.html>) in that short time.

In short, if there is another technologically adept species somewhere in the galaxy, it will be very remote, in time as well as space, and it will not exist for very long in astronomical terms. Contact is not possible. Visits are pure fantasy. We really are alone.

**Arthur C. Clarke rebuts:**

*If we have learned one thing from the history of invention and discovery, it is that, in the long run—and often in the short one—the most daring prophecies seem laughably conservative. — 1951*

*At the present rate of progress, it is almost impossible to imagine any technical feat that cannot be achieved—if it can be achieved at all—within the next few hundred years. — 1983*

*When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong. — Clarke's First Law*

## **ANOTHER DASTARDLY ATTACK IN THE WAR AGAINST CHRISTIANITY**

*(From PA NonBelievers' Panviews, September, 2008)*

*This is a case that shows the horrible condition of our country and the open hatred for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and those men of God who will stand preaching the salvation of Jesus Christ. ...While this has been a direct attack upon myself, I believe it has really been a direct attack against the truth that I preach and stand for.*

So said the Rev. Scott Allen Snyder, minister of the New Beginnings Bible Fellowship Church in Windsor, PA, after police charged him with two counts of corruption of a minor after he allegedly sent a 13-year-old girl of his church over 2,100 text messages and kissed her in his church van after church services, and allegedly sent another 14-year-old girl from his church over 1,200 text messages and a photo of his penis.

### **DIDN'T WE SETTLE ALL THIS IN 1865?**

#### **(Or, Why we're not moving to South Carolina)**

*(Excerpted from The Humanist Monthly, newsletter of the Capital District (Albany) Humanist Society. September '08)*

***From the ChristianExodus.org website ...***

ChristianExodus.org is an association of Christians who no longer wish to live under the unjust usurpation of powers by the federal government, and therefore resolves to ... disassociate itself from this tyrannical authority, and return to the model of governance of a constitutional republic. We seek a republican government constrained by constitutionally delegated powers. If this cannot be achieved within the United States, then we believe a peaceful withdrawal from the union to be the last available remedy.

ChristianExodus.org intends to move thousands of Christian constitutionalists to the sovereign state of South Carolina in multiple phases of 12,000. We have selected a County for Phase One and the first move of members has commenced. We believe that the relocation of 100 dedicated Christian activists, when combined with the present Christian electorate, will enable constitutionalists to win the city and county councils, elected law enforcement positions, and elected judgeships. We will then be able to protect our God-given and constitutionally protected rights within our local community.

A second group of members will then concentrate on another county (Phase Two). Then another county (Phase Three). We will continue this process until we've made enough of an impact statewide to put the General Assembly of the State in the hands of Christians who obey the federal and State Constitutions regardless of court orders to the contrary.

### **MY CONVERSION TO HEATHEN**

#### **Arthur Harris**

I was born into an Orthodox Jewish household that followed Judaism without the trappings of the Ultra Orthodox Hasidim and such groups, now known as the "Black Hats." My family and friends dressed, worked, socialized and fit into their surroundings — unlike those who wore clothing that had been stylish when Napoleon was in charge and who insisted on going the extra mile that would guarantee them a place in Paradise. When and if. Or probably not at all.

I accepted and followed our faith as a matter of course, as most of my non-Jewish friends did theirs. We accepted what we were told.

But fate has a way of upsetting the applecart.

We began to go to school. Not one but two. Daytime was for secular education, and afternoon for religious.

Daytime was fine. I learned arithmetic, writing and best of all, reading. We had wood shop, played games and did projects for history and geography, and in regard to the seasons, sang, learned Christian hymns and had Old Testament Bible readings daily.

Afternoons were spent in religious instruction. We learned to read Hebrew. Not to speak or understand it, but simply to read and write it. Here underpaid, much-put-upon teachers taught a bunch of active, restless and very bored boys who longed to be outdoors. Discipline was administered by a hard hand upside the head.

In retrospect, I believe that had we learned to use it as a language, we would have been less inclined to resist. But Hebrew was the “Holy Tongue,” reserved only for prayer. The ultra religious fought its use as the speaking language when Israel was founded.

Before we learned to read in public school the teachers selected and read passages from the Bible. But as soon as we could, the pupils did the selection and reading in turn. So a few miscreants studied the Bible for the “hot parts.” (This was well before *Playboy* and we had to find our soft-core porn where we could.)

We recited the stories of Lot and his daughters, Noah, and the Song of Solomon. The teachers fumed, but we were safely on base, and there was nothing they could do. A few waited us out and, at the slightest misstep, pounced. But the reading was not in vain. We picked up on contradictions and when we asked our priests or rabbis for clarification, we received evasive answers, outright lies or a cuff along the head. We didn’t think a lot about it, though. This was grownups’ world and our interest was short lived.

But my epiphany in reverse was about to happen. My aunt and uncle owned a candy store and most Saturday afternoons was my time to visit. They fed me ice cream and I read all the comic books, and later, found the sexy pulp magazines.

They, of course could not remain closed on the Sabbath; theirs was a 15-hour day, seven days a week including all regular and most Jewish holidays. As a result they drifted further away from religion, rarely attended synagogue and ate non-kosher food.

One Saturday I turned up as my cousins were leaving for the movies. My aunt asked if I would like to go along. Greed overcame my religiosity and off we went. I don’t recall the film but still remember cowering in my seat, waiting for the lightning bolt that was sure to eradicate this poor, weak sinner who desecrated the Sabbath by going to a movie.

It didn’t happen. I emerged into the sunlight and a doubt began to well up within me. I was often taken to Saturday afternoon Torah study at my grandfather’s *shtibble*, (a small synagogue paid for and attended by men in a similar trade). Grandfather was a *shechet* (a ritual kosher slaughterer of animals). Here, these men, almost all immigrants, would put aside the cares of the week and debate fine points of the Torah.

For them it was a grand escape and for me it meant wine and cake—and sometimes candy—and playing with the other boys. For a little boy it was pleasant, until one time when they discussed Job. I sat and listened and finally asked, “How could God do such things to Job on a bet with the devil?”

They patiently turned to me and explained it was a test and after all, didn’t God replace his family with a new one?

I asked, “But didn’t he miss his old family?”

For this I received an angry retort and perhaps a smack alongside my head.

I now no longer asked questions. But the doubts now began building about a God who could be so mean.

God and I parted company after the Holocaust, when a friend's brother asked me to accompany him to visit his baby, who'd been born with cancer and was slowly dying, painfully.

We passed through ward after ward of children, most in pain. I had been an Army medic and thought that I was inured against such horrors. But the whimpering of these babies reached deep within and I thought that if God could stop this, and didn't, He was wicked. If He couldn't, he was impotent. At that point I knew that I wanted nothing in regard to religion.

I neither know nor care if God exists. I prefer to believe that He doesn't, because He would be too depraved to worship.

### **OCTOBER PIQUE PROMPTED LETTERS**

*To the Editor: Happy Which Birthday, World?*

I think you may (PIQUE, October, "Celebrate October 23: Happy 6012th Birthday, World!") have fallen into the same trap that had so many thoughtless people insisting that the 21st century CE began on 2000-01-01 rather than 2001-01-01. Our calendar started with year 1, not year 0 (any assembler programmer will tell you what a bad idea it is to number things starting from 1). It's 4003 years from 4004 BCE to 1 BCE, 1 year from 1 BCE to 1 CE, and 2007 years from 1 CE to 2008. If the world had been created on 10-23 of 4004 BCE, we would be approaching its 6011th birthday, not its 6012th.

— *Harvey Wachtel*

*To the Editor:*

1. Re: "Pulpit Freedom Sunday: The Religious Right's Latest Assault on the Constitution," in October PIQUE, what about the Religious Left? No bad guys preaching politics?

2. As for Arthur Harris' "Conservative Humanism," Wow, being a SHSNY board member and atheist doesn't cut him any slack. Well, he is a conservative.

3. And the Editor's note at the end of his piece was so condescending, given its triviality and unimportance to the overall piece, just shows that you are cannibals, you eat your own.

Your liberal slip is showing; no, it's dragging on the ground. LOL. Cheers.

— *Bill Lippe*

*The Editor replies:*

1. As I said in a footnote, Bill, if anyone can send me a comparable left-wing example, I'll be glad to publish it. I have not found one — aside from the occasional goo-goo UU minister doing *Kumbaya* sing-ins for Obama. Nothing like the Religious Right examples printed.

2. Not cutting Art any slack? I printed his piece as he wrote it, and he had no complaint. What's yours?

3. You're right about the Ed. note — it was trivial and unimportant. I just get so ticked off at the attention-span-of-a-mayfly media that can't get past its own headlines.

### **FOX NEWS' BILL O'REILLY DISCOVERS**

**A NEW PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE.  
IT'S BILL O'REILLY!**

*(Reprinted, word-for-word, from Mr. O'Reilly's new self-congratulatory book, A Bold, Fresh Piece of Humanity.)*

[Head-shot picture of O'Reilly. Caption: *Bill O'Reilly is rich; ergo, God exists.*]

Next time you meet an atheist, tell him or her that you know a bold, fresh guy, a barbarian who was raised in a working-class home and retains the lessons he learned there.

Then mention to that atheist that this guy is now watched and listened to, on a daily basis, by millions of people all over the world and, to boot, sells millions of books.

Then, while the non-believer is digesting all that, ask him or her if they still don't believe there's a God!

The folly of mistaking a paradox for a discovery, a metaphor for a proof, a torrent of verbiage for a spring of capital truths, and oneself for an oracle, is inborn in us.

*—Paul Valery, poet*

**JESUS AND MO AT  
THE THANKSGIVING TABLE**

*(From "Feast" at [www.JesusandMo.net](http://www.JesusandMo.net), 11/22/07)*

**Mohammed:** So, let me get this straight. The Pilgrims were driven out of England and embarked on a grueling voyage across the Atlantic. Two died along the way. They were blown off course, and finally landed in New England at the beginning of a long, harsh winter. Food was scarce, and by the end of the winter, half of them had died of a mixture of scurvy, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. Then those who survived through the summer had a big feast as a way of saying ... thanks?

**Jesus:** Don't mention it.

**SAYING GRACE AT THANKSGIVING**

**John Rafferty**

Trapped at the Thanksgiving table by that in-law who wants everyone to join hands, bow their heads and "thank the Lord for what we are about to receive"?

Offer to say "grace" yourself, with this from America's "Great Agnostic," Robert Ingersoll:

*The time to be happy is now.*

*The place to be happy is here.*

*The way to be happy is to make others happy.*

In a dozen or more years, Donna and I have never had a complaint, and indeed have "converted" several families' rituals. *And no head bowing!* Everyone look up and smile at loving friends and family.

**HERE COME CHRISTMAS AND HANUKAH.  
SO WHAT?**

Okay, none of us believe the myths, and we're certainly not planning to go to midnight mass, but in America there is no escaping the most important commercial event of the year — or in New York its Jewish-come-lately Doppelgänger.

So what *do* you do?  
[cartoon of “The Grinch” in Santa Claus hat]

How do you—as a secular humanist, an atheist, agnostic, rationalist, whatever—spend (dare we say “celebrate”?) the holy-days? Do you soap the store windows and put coal in the kids’ stockings? Is your idea of *hanukah gelt* old buttons and bus transfers? Do you run away to the ski slopes, or hole up for the season with Marx Brothers movies and a box of Malomars? Or do you, like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, just relax and go with the flow?

For our December holiday (sort-of) issue of PIQUE, tell us how you spend the “holly-jolly” season.

Snide, smart-ass, and sarcasm earn extra credit. – *JR*

### **DECEMBER PIQUE WILL (PROBABLY) BE LATE**

The entire staff of PIQUE—editorial, production, and distribution—needs to have his left knee replaced, and so will be in hospital and rehab a good part of November. December PIQUE may be a little late.