

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December 2005

To the questions Does evil exist? and Will we ever understand the fundamentalists (or they us)? we offer some insight (you expected answers?) in reports on two important new books. We introduce a distinguished new Board member and, for your evaluation, three twits distinguished by their cluelessness. And since we can't avoid them, we wish you happiness for the holy-days, consider the pitfalls of politically correct celebration and, first, offer secular humanist suggestions for gift giving.

A Gift Idea for the Holidays – #1:

SUPPORT OUR TROOPS ... NO, REALLY

John Rafferty

You can hate the immoral and unjust war, as most of us do, and still empathize with the young men and women who are putting their lives on the line every day in Iraq (and still in Afghanistan), as most of us also do. They didn't start the war, didn't lie about WMDs or Iraqi "ties to Al Qaeda," and the overwhelming majority of them had nothing to do with Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib. They are the under-equipped, under-manned, underpaid grunts/G.I.s/jarheads who are simply, sometimes heroically, trying to do the dirty duty their country (and its mendacious President) has asked of them.

Now you can do something for them and their families, and it'll cost you nothing. You can turn your unused frequent flier miles into holiday trips home for those young people who are thousands of miles from their families. If you have frequent flier miles with virtually any U.S. airline, you can participate by going to <http://heromiles.org>.

Here's how moveon.org explains it: "Operation Hero Miles was created by Congressman C.A. (Dutch) Ruppertsberger (D-MD) in cooperation with close to a dozen U.S. airlines. The program allows troops stationed in Iraq or Afghanistan to fly home on leave for free, and also gives family members of wounded servicemen and women free plane tickets to visit their loved ones recovering at military hospitals across the country.

"The program is brilliant in its simplicity. Travelers donate their unused frequent flyer miles to the Pentagon and troops and families use them to get free tickets. In the first six months of the program, 540 million miles were donated — enough for 22,000 free tickets."

The chest-thumping jingoes can paste yellow-ribbon decals on their gas-guzzling Saudimobiles and shout along with hillbilly ditties about "Eye-rack 'n roll" on saloon jukeboxes, but you can give truly humanist support to some of our best young Americans. You can make it possible for a kid in Fallujah or Kabul to be with his/her family in Ohio or Oklahoma this holiday season. It'll cost you nothing, and make you feel pretty damn good. Go to <http://heromiles.org>.

A Gift Idea for the Holidays – #2:

GIVE PIQUE FOR THE “HOLY DAYS”

Even secular humanists give and get gifts for the holidays – take your pick of Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or our own new Human Light Day (Dec. 23). A gift that will please any freethinker on your list—and certainly please SHSNY—is a gift subscription to PIQUE. A year (11 issues) costs only \$30 for a non-member subscription. One phone call to Editor John Rafferty, at 212-371-8733, will take care of all the details.

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS EVE

Chris Matthews of MSNBC’s “Hardball” says Nelson Mandela told him this story of how Joseph begged the innkeeper for a room:

Joseph: “My wife is pregnant, really pregnant.”

Innkeeper: “That’s not my fault.”

Joseph: “Well, it’s not mine either.”

A Gift Idea for the Holidays – #3:

A GIFT FOR A LITTLE GIRL?

CONSIDER AN “AMERICAN GIRL” DOLL

(Excerpted from “The Politics of Playtime,” by Susannah Meadows, in Newsweek, November 14, 2005)

Tracie and Richard Cross have four daughters, who have seven American Girl dolls between them. ... The girls adore them, but their parents, like so many other conservative Christians, love them too. Unlike curvaceous Barbie or the torted-up Bratz dolls, an American Girl doll, which comes with a whole book about who she is and the period of American history she hails from, teaches wholesome values.

[Then] Tracie read on the company’s Web site that it was donating \$50,000 and proceeds from its I CAN bracelet to Girls Inc., which sounded like the kind of nice thing American Girl would do. But when she clicked on www.girlsinc.org, Tracie was crushed to find an endorsement of Roe v. Wade and language supportive of homosexuals. It struck her that politics had invaded playtime. “I feel like there’s nowhere safe,” says Tracie, who has vowed not to buy anything from American Girl as long as it’s affiliated with Girls Inc. “I have to have a clear conscience.”

By the time Tracie told her girlfriends about the Girls Inc. link ... a tempest was brewing among other conservative Christians around the country. Last week the outrage had spilled onto a half-dozen Christian Web sites—including James Dobson’s influential Focus on the Family site. “Girls Inc.,” one mother warned, “is pro-abortion and pro-contraception and pro all the other lies the secular world wants our girls to believe.”

American Girl, which prides itself on being the antidote to our Paris Hilton impulses, was blindsided by the reaction. ... but intends to sponsor math, science and athletic programs at Girls Inc.

Girls Inc. was caught off guard, too. ... Founded 141 years ago, Girls Inc., which used to be known as Girls Clubs, offers after-school programs to underprivileged girls on subjects ranging from pregnancy prevention to substance abuse. And on its vast Web site, amid proclamations of empowerment, Girls Inc. states its support for girls who might be questioning their sexuality, as well as a woman’s right to an abortion.

American Girl is standing by its commitment to Girls Inc.

Comment: And An American Girl Place in New York stands at 609 Fifth Avenue, at 49th Street.

An Evening of Good & Evil

A great turnout at the Muhlenberg Library on October 20 for our second-ever SHSNY Roundtable—“Does Evil Exist in the Modern World”—focused on our Book Club selection, *The Science of Good and Evil*, by Michael Shermer. The discussion was led by Austin Dacey, Director of the Center for Inquiry-Metro New York, whose analysis of the book—and the question—follows.

THE NON-SCIENCE OF GOOD AND EVIL

Austin Dacey

One can only admire the writing ability of the celebrated skeptic Michael Shermer, who has produced almost 300 pages of *The Science of Good and Evil* despite there being no such thing as a science of good and evil. There is such a thing as science (the methods and aggregate knowledge of the sciences), and there are such things as good and evil. There is even something we could call knowledge of good and evil, or moral knowledge. It is just that this knowledge is not scientific. There are theories of ethics—in the sense of accounts that are systematic, rigorously reasoned, and responsive to real-world consequences—and they may even draw on the knowledge of the sciences. That does not make them scientific theories. Similarly, there are accounts of effective corporate management, sound pedagogy, and how to be a good friend or spouse that are based on careful reflection and practical wisdom. But it would be little more than a marketing gimmick to say that there is a “science of friendship” or a “science of marriage.”

Like many of us with a naturalistic outlook on the world, Shermer is convinced that the evolutionary sciences in particular are the key to mapping the human universe. He sees the main project of the book as rehabilitating the tradition of “evolutionary ethics.” In order to evaluate the success of this project, it will be helpful to distinguish four quite different kinds of evolutionary ethics (which I’ll abbreviate as “EE”). Broadly speaking, the different approaches can be broken down into the empirical, which attempt to describe why we are the way we are or how we got that way, and the normative, which attempt to prescribe what ways it would be rational, morally right, or otherwise warranted for us to be. I’ll argue that while some forms of EE are no-brainers, others are non-starters.

Consider empirical EE. Evolutionary psychology might be able to explain why we have the faculties that make moral thinking and feeling possible at all. For example, perhaps there is a “sense of fairness” module in the brain that was shaped by natural selection among our ancestors to tip them off to violations of reciprocal social arrangements. I’ll call this kind of claim an instance of general empirical EE. A specific empirical thesis states that the evolutionary sciences can explain why we have some particular moral beliefs or practices. For instance, maybe the culturally ubiquitous rule forbidding incest is a product of selection.

There is a broad and flourishing scientific literature on general empirical EE, so understood, going back as least as far as Darwin’s *Descent of Man*. Shermer provides a nice survey of this literature (although it could be said that Robert Wright covered most of the same territory more concisely in *The Moral Animal*). Some of the science is

merely promising, while some of it is relatively well-developed. Taken together, all this research makes it overwhelmingly plausible, obvious even, that the faculties enabling our moral thinking and feeling were significantly shaped by our evolutionary history somehow, and so as a general empirical approach, EE makes a lot of sense. Does that mean there is a “science of good and evil”? Not exactly, since general empirical accounts only say how it is that we can make moral judgments. They say very little about the content of those judgments themselves—what is good, bad or indifferent—let alone whether any of them are true (e.g., incest really is wrong). General empirical EE is weighty on the science, but light on the good and evil.

Specific empirical EE gets us closer to good and evil because it tries to explain the judgments that we make of particular things, like incest. Unfortunately, here the science is still in the nursery. Shermer rattles off a list of practices culled from the anthropologist Donald Brown’s survey of human universals, things like marriage, proscription of murder, and “government” (62-63). But there is no attempt to empirically substantiate or even formulate the adaptationist hypotheses that would explain any of these things. The reader is invited to infer that because they are universal, they must be products of selection. But especially when it comes to human beings, universality does not by itself imply evolutionary adaptation. As Daniel Dennett points out, one doesn’t need to invoke evolution to account for why across cultures people have thrown spears with the pointy end first—it’s just a good idea. Specific empirical EE is heavier on the good and evil, but lighter on the science.

A third, and most daring form of evolutionary ethics, is based on the idea that knowledge from the evolutionary sciences can provide warrant or justification for specific moral norms or values, and hence claims about what we morally ought to do. Call this the substantive normative version of evolutionary ethics. Shermer attempts this in Part II of *The Science of Good and Evil*. The glaring, fatal defect in this project is that the fact that something evolved does not make it morally right or permissible (and the fact that something is non-evolved does not make it morally wrong or indifferent). If that were so, then in-group out-group aggressors would be laudable and non-procreators suspect. Curiously, Shermer doesn’t deploy the evolved=right formula when it comes to the darker aspects of our nature, such as male control of female sexuality, although they have no less evidentiary claim to origins in natural selection. Instead he uses it to cherry-pick things that seem acceptable for independent reasons, like The Golden Rule (which, by the way, is indefensible as a criterion of rightness since it is satisfied by grossly immoral actions so long as the actor is consistent: the Nazi executioner who, upon discovering that he is in fact Jewish, wishes done unto him what he would do unto other Jews).

On what grounds, then, do we evaluate the soundness of moral principles? Whatever they may be, “scientific” they are not, a point that part II of the book illustrates, albeit unwittingly. For here Shermer abruptly stops citing psychology and anthropology studies and begins asserting moral principles that seem “reasonable” to him, like the Moderation Principle (“When innocent people die, extremism in the defense of anything is no virtue, and moderation in the protection of everything is no vice” [190]). This is an exercise in normative ethics, which should draw on some systematic, rational theories about how one morally ought to live, or what is really valuable in life. Here there is a rich body of

twentieth century philosophical ethics to engage. Unfortunately, like many would-be biologizers of ethics, Shermer barely mentions it.

Today analytic philosophers are working on rigorously reasoned and evidence-guided theories of ethics. The best of this work is done in constant dialogue with the natural and social sciences. This is a more modest and defensible variety of evolutionary ethics, what might be called analytic normative EE. It holds that knowledge from the evolutionary sciences can guide the construction of theories in philosophical ethics. But unlike substantive normative EE, analytic normative EE does not attempt to read our moral duties off of the genome. An example of analytic normative EE can be found in Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, where he argues that one species of objection to a proposed theory of ethics is that it asks moral reasoners to perform cognitive tasks that human brains simply aren't up to.

For purposes of full disclosure I should admit that I am a philosopher, and so I have a stake in protecting this corner of the intellectual market for my kind. But until physics uncovers, alongside quarks, gluons, electrons, and protons, a new fundamental moral particle—call it the moron—and MIT labs patent the Rightometer to measure its quantity in everyday actions, I'll keep placing my stock in the ability of ethical theory to illuminate the nature of good and evil.

SAMUEL MILLIGAN JOINS THE SHSNY BOARD

Samuel Milligan heard the call for members willing to work for SHSNY, volunteered, and was selected to the Board by unanimous vote of the sitting members at the September 20 meeting.

Sam was for many years a harpist and musical instrument technician (harps) in the New York City area, and now spends much of his retirement time reading, mainly the Greek atomists and the Confucianists. He also spends as much time as he can afford in Greece, looking under every ancient rock from Olympia to Brauron, Crete to Thermopylae.

ART HARRIS HAS A BLOG

For those of you who enjoy Art Harris's curmudgeonly rants—and you/we are many—Art has started a blog, appropriately named Crusty Codger. Just go to:
<http://crustycodger.journalspace.com/>

DEFINING FUNDAMENTALISM: GUESS WHICH RADICAL ATHEIST SAID THIS

(Reprinted from an e-posting by Edd Doerr published in The Humanist Monthly, newsletter of the Capital District (NY) Humanist Society, Nov., 2005)

I would describe fundamentalism as, first of all, a movement led almost invariably by authoritarian males who consider themselves to be superior to others and who have an overwhelming commitment to subjugate women and to dominate their fellow believers. Second, fundamentalists draw clear distinctions between themselves, the true believers, and others. They are convinced that they are right and that anyone who contradicts them is inferior and beyond the purview of God's full blessing.

Third, fundamentalists are militant in fighting against any challenge to their beliefs, are often angry and sometimes resort to verbal or even physical abuse against those who

oppose the implementation of their agenda. Finally, they tend to make their self-definition narrow, to isolate themselves, to demagogue social and emotional issues and to view change, cooperation, negotiation or other efforts to resolve differences as signs of weakness.

— *From remarks made in July at the assembly of the Baptist World Alliance, in Birmingham, UK, by former U.S. President (and born-again Christian) Jimmy Carter.*

1-1/2 VICTORIES FOR OUR SIDE IN THE NOVEMBER ELECTIONS

John Rafferty

While the federal judge presiding over the recently-concluded “Intelligent Design” lawsuit in Dover, PA, mulls and writes the opinion he will deliver in January that will, in all probability, drive a stake into the heart of that Creeping Creationism movement, the voters of Dover, in a Frank Capra movie moment, rose up on November 8 and kicked out the whole school board that had made their school district the first in the nation to promote the teaching of ID over evolution, and their community a laughingstock.

Not that winning was easy. According to the November 10 NYTimes, local election rules forced all eight of the pro-science, pro-evolution Dover Cares candidates to run on the Democratic line—in a district where 70 percent of voters are registered Republicans. Then, *“the incumbent board members sent out a mass mailing accusing the Dover Cares slate of allying with the ACLU, a group, it said in the mailing, that had also defended terrorists and the North American Man/Boy Love Association.”*

Hey, it’s not gutter politics if it’s God’s work, is it?

But the people of Dover who really do care about education considered, debated, crossed party lines, and elected all eight of the Dover Cares candidates. Who will probably, when they take office in early December, not wait for the judge’s ruling, but immediately revoke the current anti-science policy.

Score one for our side.

Also, most of us applauded the results of the Virginia gubernatorial election, wherein anti-death penalty Democrat Timothy Kaine soundly defeated right-wing Republican Jerry Kilgore, who was actively supported by George W. Bush. Dubya even made an in-person election-eve pitch for Kilgore in red-state Virginia.

Another win for our side, right?

Um, well ... as the November 10 NYTimes reported in “A Democrat Of Faith Turns Tables” ... *“One of the first things ... Kaine did after entering the race for Virginia governor last spring was to go on evangelical Christian radio to talk about faith in politics. And one of his early advertisements spotlighted his work as a Christian missionary in Honduras during a break from law school two decades ago. ...*

“Mr. Kaine’s advisers and some top Democratic strategists say their victory in Virginia shows that Democrats, including liberals, can win in culturally-conservative states if they talk about deeply held religious beliefs.

“That lesson is likely to be studied by many Democrats across the country as they head into next year’s mid-term elections, political analysts and party officials say.”

And as they head toward another nationwide defeat by offering nothing but “Me too” religious-right-ism.

THESE THREE VIEWS OF LIFE

Edward O. Wilson

(Reprinted from "Darwin's Difficult Legacy" in *The Reading File* in The New York Times, November 6)

This week, W. W. Norton will publish *From So Simple a Beginning*, a two-volume edition of four books by Charles Darwin, including *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*. In an afterword, Edward O. Wilson, the prominent entomologist who edited the texts, considers why the theory of evolution remains so controversial.

Why does such intense and pervasive resistance to evolution continue 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, and in the teeth of the overwhelming accumulated evidence favoring it? The answer is simply that the Darwinian revolution, even more than the Copernican revolution, challenges the prehistoric and still-regnant self-image of humanity. ... In the more than slightly schizophrenic circumstances of the present era, global culture is divided into three opposing images of the human condition. ... The dominant one, exemplified by the creation myths of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), sees humanity as a creation of God. He brought us into being and He guides us still as father, judge and friend. We interpret His will from sacred scriptures and the wisdom of ecclesiastical authorities.

The second worldview is that of political behaviorism. Still beloved by the now rapidly fading Marxist-Leninist states, it says that the brain is largely a blank slate devoid of any inborn inscription beyond reflexes and primitive bodily urges. As a consequence, the mind originates almost wholly as a product of learning, and it is the product of a culture that itself evolves by historical contingency. ...

Both of these worldviews, God-centered religion and atheistic communism, are opposed by a third and in some ways more radical worldview, scientific humanism. Still held by only a tiny minority of the world's population, it considers humanity to be a biological species that evolved over millions of years in a biological world, acquiring unprecedented intelligence yet still guided by complex inherited emotions and biased channels of learning. Human nature exists, and it ... forms the behavioral part of what, in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin called the indelible stamp of our lowly origin.

HERE THEY ARE: THE NOMINEES FOR THE 2005 FIRST ANNUAL SHSNY DUMBTH AWARDS

In 1992, then-PIQUE Editor Warren Allen Smith proposed that SHSNY give Dumbth Awards to "those who deserve to have their illogic pointed out." "Dumbth" is the coinage of secular humanist and humorist Steve Allen, and the title of his book, *Dumbth, the Lost Art of Thinking, With 101 Ways to Reason Better and Improve Your Mind*.

Who deserves a Dumbth Award? Mr. Smith suggested, as an example, "a man who falls five floors down an elevator shaft, is rescued by a policeman who crawls into the dark hole unaided, is saved by EMS personnel who rush to the scene, is operated on by a skilled surgeon, is nursed back to health by therapists, and who then credits God with 'a miracle'."

No one seems to remember why the Dumbth Awards didn't catch on 13 years ago, but we're launching them now, and we have three outstanding candidates to be the first-ever recipient of our not-so-coveted Horse's Ass statuette. Here—in all their clueless, self-absorbed glory—they are:

Star Jones, the egregious TV talk-show personality and shoe saleswoman, who says atheists are not qualified to be president, and who claimed in January that she was “blessed” by God because He delayed last December’s tsunami that killed 232,000 people until after her November honeymoon vacation in the Maldives.

Congressman Richard Baker, the Louisiana Republican who gets 100% approval ratings from all the religious-right lobbies, and who said of the tens of thousands of poor, mostly black Americans made homeless by Hurricane Katrina: “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”

Barbara Bush, the former First Lady who, on a visit to a Katrina refugee shelter in the Houston Astrodome, said, “What I’m hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. ... And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.”

Which horse’s ass wins the horse’s ass? You decide!

Cast your vote on a postcard or letter to P.O. Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-1913, or email john@rafferty.net before December 31.

READING THE BOOKSELLER OF KABUL, ANALYZING THE BOOKSELLER

John Rafferty

The SHSNY Book Club met at the Muhlenberg Library November 10 to discuss Asne Seierstad’s best-selling *The Bookseller of Kabul*, her memoir of a season—spring, 2002, after the Taliban was driven out of Kabul—spent living with the family of Sultan Khan, the bookseller.

I called on Sultan in his bookshop and told him my idea.

“Thank you” was all he said.

“But this means that I would ... come and live with you.”

“You are welcome.”

“I would have to go around with you, live the way you live. With you, your wives, sisters, sons.”

“You are welcome,” he repeated.

“I wonder if it’s true,” Jane Bertoni asked our group, and sparked a discussion among us about how a Western woman could fit in, could even be accepted, in a traditional Afghan household ...

... where the belief in male superiority was so ingrained that it was seldom questioned.

I imagine they regarded me as some sort of “bi-gendered” creature. As a Westerner I could mingle with both men and women. Had I been a man, I would never have been able to live so close to the women of the household ...I was the only one able to circulate freely between the groups. ...

I also wore the burka to discover for myself what it is like to be an Afghan woman; what it feels like to squash into the chockablock back rows reserved for women when the rest of the bus is half empty, what it feels like to squeeze into the trunk of a taxi because a man is occupying the back seat ...

We discussed the horror stories Seierstad recounts of the mistreatment, even murder of women (the girl smothered by her three brothers, at their mother’s direction, for the crime of riding in a taxi with a boy), and when Betty Nicholson related the story of her

Trinidadian friend imprisoned in her husband's family home in Pakistan, Lizzie Pickard posed the question that dominated our evening: Why is the subjugation of women so nearly universal? Is it the product of natural selection on a societal scale, i.e.: the more women are restricted, the more babies they produce, and the greater the society grows? Our two psychologists, Lee Lorshak and Perry Faithorne, demurred, contending that since "more babies" is not always a societal plus—is there enough food for them?—that nurture, in the form of evolving societal norms, is probably more important than nature in terms of gender roles.

Gender roles and family relationships, individual freedom and parental and societal authority—these are the themes that dominate this fascinating, disturbing book. Despite the publisher's blurb that it is the story of "... a proud man who, through three decades and successive repressive regimes, heroically braved persecution to bring books to the people of Kabul ..." *The Bookseller of Kabul* is really more about a society—even without the Taliban—so different from ours that our reading group wondered if we will ever understand them, or they us.

We want to understand, even embrace the cultured, worldly, middle-class and politically liberal Sultan Khan.

"First the communists burned my books, then the Mujahedeen looted and pillaged, finally the Taliban burned them all over again," he told me.

I spent hours listening to the bookseller's stories about his battles against the ... censors, how he launched his personal fight, hiding books from the police, lending them out to others – and finally going to prison for it. He was a man who had tried to save the art and literature of his country while a string of dictators did their best to destroy them.

But when Seierstad brings us into Sultan Khan's personal space, introduces us to the four-generation family of which he is the autocratic ruler, we meet a man who, without warning or apology, takes a teenaged second wife, disgracing the woman who has borne and raised his children, exiling her to Pakistan. Who gives work and shelter to a nephew whose widowed mother (the bookseller's sister) cannot support him, then coldly dismisses the boy from his employ and his home as a business cost-cutting measure. And whose authority is so absolute that none of his extended family dare mention, let alone question, Sultan Khan's actions.

Except once. When a carpenter—who along with his wife and children is literally starving (there is no work or welfare in war-ravaged Kabul)—steals postcards from Sultan's shop to resell for a profit of pennies, even a telephoned plea for mercy from his own favored first-born son, Mansur, can stay Sultan's self-righteous wrath.

"He might get six years! His children might be dead when get gets out," Mansur shouts back.

"If he gets sixty years, I couldn't care less. He is going to suffer until he tells me who he sold the cards to."

"That's something you can say because your stomach is full," Mansur yells. "I cry when I think of those scraggy children of his. His family is finished."

"How dare you contradict your father!" Sultan screams into the phone. ... "What sort of son are you? You are to obey me in everything, everything. What's wrong with you? Why are you rude to your father?"

Obey me in everything, everything.

Absolute authority, unquestioning obedience. How will we ever understand them ... or they us?

This reader offered to the group his opinion that this fascinating book is, finally, simply depressing.

No one disagreed.

A 21ST CENTURY OFFICE CHRISTMAS PARTY

FROM: Pat Lewis, Human Resources Director

TO: Everyone

RE: Christmas Party

DATE: December 1

I'm happy to inform you that the company Christmas Party will take place December 23, starting at noon in the banquet room at Luigi's Open Pit Barbecue.

No-host bar, but plenty of eggnog! We'll have a small band playing traditional carols; feel free to sing along. And don't be surprised if our CEO shows up dressed as Santa Claus!

FROM: Pat Lewis, Human Resources Director

TO: Everyone

DATE: December 2

RE: Christmas Party

In no way was yesterday's memo intended to exclude our Jewish employees. We recognize that Hanukkah is an important holiday that often coincides with Christmas, though unfortunately not this year. However, from now on we're calling it our "Holiday Party." The same policy applies to employees who are celebrating Kwanzaa at this time. Happy now?

FROM: Pat Lewis, Human Resources Director

TO: Everyone

DATE: December 3

RE: Holiday Party

Regarding the note I received from a member of Alcoholics Anonymous requesting a non-drinking table, you didn't sign your name. I'm happy to accommodate this request, but if I put a sign on a table that reads "AA Only," you wouldn't be anonymous anymore. How am I supposed to handle this? Somebody?

FROM: Pat Lewis, Human Resources Director

TO: Everyone

DATE: December 7

RE: Holiday Party

What a diverse company we are! I had no idea that December 20 begins the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which forbids eating and drinking during daylight hours. There goes the party! Seriously, we can appreciate how a luncheon this time of year does not accommodate our Muslim employees' beliefs. Perhaps Luigi's can hold off on serving your meal until the end of the party — the days are so short this time of year — or else package everything for take-home in little foil swans. Will that work?

Meanwhile, I've arranged for members of Overeaters Anonymous to sit farthest from the dessert buffet, and pregnant women will get the table closest to the rest rooms. Have I missed anyone?

FROM: Pat Lewis, Human Resources Director

TO: Everyone

DATE: December 8

RE: Holiday Party

So December 22 marks the Winter Solstice, what do you expect me to do, a tap dance? Fire regulations at Luigi's prohibit the burning of sage by our "earth-based Goddess-worshipping" employees, but we'll try to accommodate your shamanic drumming circle during the band's breaks. Okay???

FROM: Pat Lewis, Human Resources Director

TO: Everyone

Date: December 9

RE: Holiday Party

People, people, nothing sinister was intended in having our CEO dress up as Santa Claus! Even if the anagram of "Santa" does happen to be "Satan," there is no evil connotation to our own "little man in a red suit." It's a tradition, folks, like sugar shock at Halloween or family feuds over the Thanksgiving turkey, or broken hearts on Valentine's Day. Could we lighten up?

FROM: Pat Lewis, Human Resources Director

TO: Everyone

DATE: December 10

RE: Holiday Party

Vegetarians? I've had it with you people! This party is at Luigi's Open Pit Barbecue whether you like it or not. So you can sit — QUIETLY — at the table farthest from the "grill of death," and you'll get your goddamn salad bar, including hydroponic tomatoes. But you know they have feelings, too. Tomatoes scream when you slice them. I've heard them scream. I'm hearing them scream right now!

FROM: Teri Bishops, Acting H.R. Director

TO: Everyone

DATE: December 14

RE: Pat Lewis and the Holiday Party

I'm sure I speak for all of us in wishing Pat Lewis a speedy recovery, and I'll continue to forward your cards to her at the sanitarium.

In the meantime, management has cancelled our Holiday Party, and is giving everyone the afternoon off.

**... AND FURTHER ON THE
MULTIPLICITY OF RELIGIONS**

Science can destroy religion by ignoring it as well as by disproving its tenets. No one ever demonstrated, as far as I am aware, the non-existence of Zeus or Thor – but they have few followers now. — *Arthur C. Clarke*

Readers Respond To November PIQUE:

HAVING FUN WITH INTELLIGENT DESIGN

Flash Light

Another great issue of PIQUE! I was impressed especially by Daniel C. Dennett's well-reasoned article describing what a scientific theory of intelligent design would need to prove. Then I had a chilling thought. There's another test of Dennett's hypothesis that humans were engineered by intergalactic genetic engineers: any good engineer would want to follow up and check on the progress of such a genetic experiment.

Therefore intelligent design theorists should look for hard evidence of such follow up visits, for example a crashed UFO buried in the same rock strata as early humans. Now put that thought together with Erich von Daniken's Chariots of the Gods "evidence" that UFOs can be seen in cave paintings, and current UFO abductee "eyewitness testimony," and Dennett may have unwittingly forged a truly frightening alliance.

ARE RELIGIONISTS AND CRIMINALS THE SAME PEOPLE?

John Arents

"Is Fundamentalist Religion the Worst Thing That Can Happen to a Society?" by Ruth Gledhill (PIQUE, November) conveys the implication that religion causes crime. *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*.

The U.S. is unique among advanced industrial countries in having a large underclass, or several of them, which contribute disproportionately to both religion and crime (but have no monopoly on either). Before we conclude that one causes the other, we need to study the correlation between religion and crime within one demographic group. In other words, are the religionists and the criminals the same people? It is a good bet that the correlation will turn out to be negative. One beneficial feature of religion is that it seems to deter common crimes like robbery, arson, rape, and murder. It is less effective against crimes of passion and white-collar crimes. These are not what people are thinking of when they talk about the crime rate. They mean unsafe streets, schools, and homes. Then there are religiously motivated crimes, where Islam is the undisputed world champion. People are frightened by them, but under the separate heading of "terrorism."

The religiosity and criminality of the underclasses can be explained away by such causes as poverty, poor education, and unjust discrimination. Causality works both ways. Crime causes discrimination which causes poverty which causes crime. Gunnar Myrdal called it "multiple circular causation." The same causes can push some people toward crime and others, more benignly, toward religion. Breaking into the causal circle at any point may reduce both, but eliminating religion will not alleviate the mundane criminality that most of us worry about.