

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York
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Where are the young humanists? We have a report on the state of secularism on campus (and a sidelight on how the young think differently than you and me). We consider political advances for secularism at the U.N. and in Washington ... the 10 Commandments in Texas, and 34 exemptions to alternate-side commandments right here. But first, we continue our analysis of Intelligent Design, and extend the argument: Is fundamentalism actually bad for society; should it be tolerated?

YES, WE'RE LATE. SORRY.

Ordinarily, you'd have received this issue of PIQUE a week or more earlier than this. However, our entire editorial staff had to have his knee replaced, and spent the better part of October in hospital and rehab. Sorry. It'll only happen one more time (the other knee), some time next year.

SHOW ME THE SCIENCE – Part II

Daniel C. Dennett

(This is the conclusion of an Op-Ed essay that appeared in The New York Times, 8/28/05; the first half ran in October PIQUE, and will shortly be available at shsny.org. Daniel C. Dennett, a professor of philosophy at Tufts University, is the author of Freedom Evolves and Darwin's Dangerous Idea.)

The focus on intelligent design has, paradoxically, obscured ... genuine scientific controversies about evolution that abound. In just about every field there are challenges to one established theory or another. The legitimate way to stir up such a storm is to come up with an alternative theory that makes a prediction that is crisply denied by the reigning theory – but that turns out to be true, or that explains something that has been baffling defenders of the status quo, or that unifies two distant theories at the cost of some element of the currently accepted view.

To date, the proponents of intelligent design have not produced anything like that. No experiments with results that challenge any mainstream biological understanding. No observations from the fossil record or genomics or biogeography or comparative anatomy that undermine standard evolutionary thinking.

Instead, the proponents of intelligent design use a ploy that works something like this. First you misuse or misdescribe some scientist's work. Then you get an angry rebuttal. Then, instead of dealing forthrightly with the charges leveled, you cite the rebuttal as evidence that there is a "controversy" to teach.

Note that the trick is content-free. You can use it on any topic. "Smith's work in geology supports my argument that the earth is flat," you say, misrepresenting Smith's work. When Smith responds with a denunciation of your misuse of her work, you respond, saying something like: "See what a controversy we have here? Professor Smith and I are locked in a titanic scientific debate. We should teach the controversy in the classrooms." And here is the delicious part: you can often exploit the very technicality of

the issues to your own advantage, counting on most of us to miss the point in all the difficult details.

William Dembski, one of the most vocal supporters of intelligent design, notes that he provoked Thomas Schneider, a biologist, into a response that Dr. Dembski characterizes as “some hair-splitting that could only look ridiculous to outsider observers.” What looks to scientists—and is—a knockout objection by Dr. Schneider is portrayed to most everyone else as ridiculous hair-splitting.

In short, no science. Indeed, no intelligent design hypothesis has even been ventured as a rival explanation of any biological phenomenon. This might seem surprising to people who think that intelligent design competes directly with the hypothesis of non-intelligent design by natural selection. But saying, as intelligent design proponents do, “You haven’t explained everything yet,” is not a competing hypothesis. Evolutionary biology certainly hasn’t explained everything that perplexes biologists. But intelligent design hasn’t yet tried to explain anything.

To formulate a competing hypothesis, you have to get down in the trenches and offer details that have testable implications. So far, intelligent design proponents have conveniently sidestepped that requirement, claiming that they have no specifics in mind about who or what the intelligent designer might be.

To see this shortcoming in relief, consider an imaginary hypothesis of intelligent design that could explain the emergence of human beings on this planet:

About six million years ago, intelligent genetic engineers from another galaxy visited Earth and decided that it would be a more interesting planet if there was a language-using, religion-forming species on it, so they sequestered some primates and genetically re-engineered them to give them the language instinct, and enlarged frontal lobes for planning and reflection. It worked.

If some version of this hypothesis were true, it could explain how and why human beings differ from their nearest relatives, and it would disconfirm the competing evolutionary hypotheses that are being pursued.

We’d still have the problem of how these intelligent genetic engineers came to exist on their home planet, but we can safely ignore that complication for the time being, since there is not the slightest shred of evidence in favor of this hypothesis.

But here is something the intelligent design community is reluctant to discuss: no other intelligent-design hypothesis has anything more going for it. In fact, my farfetched hypothesis has the advantage of being testable in principle: we could compare the human and chimpanzee genomes, looking for unmistakable signs of tampering by these genetic engineers from another galaxy. Finding some sort of user’s manual neatly embedded in the apparently functionless “junk DNA” that makes up most of the human genome would be a Nobel Prize-winning coup for the intelligent design gang, but if they are looking at all, they haven’t come up with anything to report.

It’s worth pointing out that there are plenty of substantive scientific controversies in biology that are not yet in the textbooks or the classrooms.

The scientific participants in these arguments vie for acceptance among the relevant expert communities in peer-reviewed journals, and the writers and editors of textbooks grapple with judgments about which findings have risen to the level of acceptance—not yet truth—to make them worth serious consideration by undergraduates and high school students.

So get in line, intelligent designers. Get in line behind the hypothesis that life started on Mars and was blown here by a cosmic impact. Get in line behind the aquatic ape hypothesis, the gestural origin of language hypothesis and the theory that singing came before language, to mention just a few of the enticing hypotheses that are actively defended but still insufficiently supported by hard facts.

The Discovery Institute, the conservative organization that has helped to put intelligent design on the map, complains that its members face hostility from the established scientific journals. But establishment hostility is not the real hurdle to intelligent design. If intelligent design were a scientific idea whose time had come, young scientists would be dashing around their labs, vying to win the Nobel Prizes that surely are in store for anybody who can overturn any significant proposition of contemporary evolutionary biology.

Remember cold fusion? The establishment was incredibly hostile to that hypothesis, but scientists around the world rushed to their labs in the effort to explore the idea, in hopes of sharing in the glory if it turned out to be true.

Instead of spending more than \$1 million a year on publishing books and articles for non-scientists and on other public relations efforts, the Discovery Institute should finance its own peer-reviewed electronic journal. This way, the organization could live up to its self-professed image: the doughty defenders of brave iconoclasts bucking the establishment.

For now, though, the theory they are promoting is exactly what George Gilder, a long-time affiliate of the Discovery Institute, has said it is: “Intelligent design itself does not have any content.”

Since there is no content, there is no “controversy” to teach about in biology class. But here is a good topic for a high school course on current events and politics: Is intelligent design a hoax? And if so, how was it perpetrated?

FAITH AND CREATIONISM

Arthur Harris

The definition of faith is having a belief in something for which there is no proof. The basic problem in teaching evolution is that science has not attacked but only responded to the continuing assault on it by religion.

The time is past due for public discussion of God’s existence. In the thousands of years of human history, no demonstrable proof has ever been offered to prove the existence of any of the deities humans have worshipped.

Yet the religious, relying solely on faith, thwart reasonable discussion and exploration of scientific matters for which some evidence exists.

Let the religious offer one iota of evidence to support “creationism” — or get out of the way of progress.

NO FAIR, THEY’RE USING THEIR BRAINS

Pastor Ray Mummert, of Dover, Pa., explaining to his followers why Intelligent Design is not taught in public schools: “We’ve been attacked by the intelligent, educated segment of the culture.”

SHOULD FUNDAMENTALISTS BE TOLERATED?

Bob Carroll

(Excerpted from Skeptic's Dictionary Newsletter 60, 10/23)

If we apply the fundamentalists' own standards, they should be stopped at every opportunity from advancing their anti-science, anti-progress agenda. We won't apply those standards, of course, so the question is what should we be doing if we care about rationality, progress, scientific understanding, technological advances, and extending the opportunity of a happy and peaceful life to more people?

I don't know that *New Scientist* (NS) has an answer to that question, but in a special report on fundamentalism in the October 8 issue it asks, "Does religious fundamentalism really pose a threat to the scientific world view?" You can guess at their answer by the title of the article in which that question appears: "End of Enlightenment."

What is a fundamentalist? Christian fundamentalists prefer the label "evangelical," according to NS. I don't know what Islamic fundamentalists prefer to be called, but both share a belief in an inerrant revelation that represents the infallible truth. Both believe in the direct creation of everything by God. And both believe that God expects them to live according to the rules set down in the inerrant text. Fundamentalists see the world as a cosmic struggle of good against evil. Anyone who does not accept their beliefs is an enemy of God. Finally, fundamentalists believe they are to be missionaries for God and that can mean anything from proselytizing to strapping a bomb to one's midriff for later detonation at a pre-school.

"Meeting of Minds" by Michael Brooks, another article in the NS special report, notes that scientific studies have found that "there is no real difference between fundamentalists and everybody else" when it comes to personality traits, modes of thinking, or psychological flaws. Contrary to appearances, "fundamentalists do not have an abnormally high regard for, or willingness to acquiesce to, authority figures." They don't tend to be prejudiced or racist. However, "homophobic is a different matter."

Some grumpy skeptics may be displeased to find out that fundamentalists "seem to be well-balanced people. They score highly on subjective measures of marital happiness, optimism and self-control, and have a low incidence of depression and anxiety." In short, the bastards (at least the Christian ones) seem to be "happy, sincere and healthy." On the bright side, Brooks thinks that fundamentalist Christianity is "widely considered as irrelevant to modern theology as it is to modern science." The latter jab is at the attempt to "science-up" religion by such bogus projects as intelligent design. But as Mike Holderness says in his article, "Enemy at the Gates," the idea isn't to do science but to overthrow scientific materialism and its cultural legacies.

Starting with "the wedge strategy," the folks at the Discovery Institute set out to systematically make war on science. A wedge when applied at a tree trunk's weakest point can cause it to split up. The weak points the fundamentalists have focused on are well-known: evolution; abortion; euthanasia, homosexuality, and now stem cell research. One reason the religious right and the political right make such cozy bedfellows is that the political right can build from the successes of the religious right. "One of the fruits of a faith-based approach to science will be a dismissal of what [Discovery Institute Senior Fellow George] Gilder calls the 'chimeras of popular science': ideas such as global warming, pollution problems and ozone depletion." Gilder, a promoter of supply-side economics during the Reagan era, sees faith as essential to human achievement. He

seems to measure human achievement in terms of destroying modern science, expanding new markets, and promoting global capitalism. Improving the quality of life for the masses of people does not seem to be one of Gilder's concerns or measures of human achievement.

According to Scott Appleby, the force that drives fundamentalism is modernity, best exemplified by science. Science emphasizes empirical evidence rather than revelation, progress and change rather than stable anchoring in eternal truths, argument and evidence rather than traditional authority, and science has bumped off many religious myths by its discoveries. For many people, the uncertainty, complexity, and confusion ("dread and anxiety") produced by science is just too much for them and they retreat to an infallible sacred text, a belief in the superiority of their own religious views and in the inadequacy of reason. They resign themselves to the will of God. This view may seem to contradict the view offered by Brooks, who restricted his observations to Christian fundamentalists in the U.S. Appleby's assessment is based on a massive five-volume study of worldwide fundamentalism. However, fundamentalism eases the anxiety for its adherents, so the two views aren't really incompatible.

NS points out that "not everyone who holds fundamentalist religious views can necessarily be characterized as anti-science or anti-progress." Indeed, polls indicate that there are many non-fundamentalists who agree with their views on evolution, global warming, abortion, drilling for oil in Alaska, homosexuality, and stem cell research. The wedge strategy is working. The campaign against science, led by theologians like William Dembski, is working. Will there be a new world order of faith-based politics united with faith-based science? Maybe it is Armageddon time. The forces of good (science, progress, care for the planet and its occupants) against evil (fanatical fundamentalist religions, nostalgia for a pre-scientific Eden, expansion of globalization without regard for reality-based science or expansion of suicide bombings without regard for reality). I don't think that's what the folks waiting for the rapture have in mind. In any case, this is war and war is no laughing matter. The stakes are as high as they get: the future of the planet and the people who live on it.

IS FUNDAMENTALIST RELIGION THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN TO A SOCIETY?

Ruth Gledhill

(Excerpted from The Times (London) 9/27/05)

Religious belief can cause damage to a society, contributing to high murder rates, abortion, sexual promiscuity and suicide, according to a new study that compares the social performance of relatively secular countries, such as Britain, with the U.S., where the majority believes in a creator rather than evolution.

Gregory Paul, author of the study, published in the *Journal of Religion and Society*, used data from the International Social Survey Program, Gallup and other research bodies to reach his conclusions. "In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy and abortion in the prosperous democracies. The United States is almost always the most dysfunctional of the developing democracies, sometimes spectacularly so."

The study concluded that the U.S. was the world's only prosperous democracy where murder rates were still high, and that the least devout nations were the least dysfunctional. Rates of gonorrhea in adolescents in the U.S. were up to 300 times higher than in less devout democratic countries. The U.S. also suffered from "uniquely high" adolescent and adult syphilis infection rates, and adolescent abortion rates, the study suggested.

Paul said that the disparity was even greater when the U.S. was compared with other countries, including France, Japan and Scandinavia. These nations had been the most successful in reducing murder rates, early mortality, sexually transmitted diseases and abortion.

"The non-religious, pro-evolution democracies contradict the dictum that a society cannot enjoy good conditions unless most citizens ardently believe in a moral creator. The widely held fear that a Godless citizenry must experience societal disaster is therefore refuted."

**"WHEN I USE A WORD, IT MEANS JUST WHAT
I CHOOSE IT TO MEAN" – *Humpty Dumpty***

Charles Kluepfel

In "Moses' Top Ten" in the July 16 *New York Times*, Sarah Vowell notes that Texas's newly-ruled-constitutional plaque dedicated to the Ten Commandments, forbidding stealing and killing, shares a campus with a memorial to Confederate soldiers who killed union soldiers at Gettysburg, and one to those who stole Texas (more killing) from the Mexicans, who stole it from the Spanish, who stole it from Native Americans.

My thoughts involve the use of language. The proponents of the Ten Commandments offer that the word translated as "kill" really means "murder," so only wrongful killing is wrong – pretty much of a tautology, and leaving it up to the individual to determine which killings are "wrong."

But that got me thinking about other words with changed meanings. There's a commandment translated as "Thou shalt not commit adultery." But what was meant in the days in which it was originally written was not what the dictionary defines as "adultery" today. What the commandment was forbidding was a man having sex with someone else's wife; a married man having sex with a single woman was not adultery. Adultery was wrong in the same way as stealing, because the other man's wife was that man's property, as evidenced by the other commandment, forbidding coveting, of "your neighbor's house ... your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." (Exodus 20:17)

Likewise the injunction to "keep holy the sabbath day." That was the last day of the week – *sabbados* – coincident with the day the Romans honored Saturn, Saturday. But Christianity, to "fit in" with Mithraists who celebrated Sunday, rationalized a switch to make that the "Sabbath," a switch even more brazen than their decision to celebrate Jesus's birth at the winter solstice, also to fit in with Saturnalia celebrations, in the same manner as Judaism's reinvention of Hanukkah as a gift-giving feast, or the more recent invention of Kwanzaa.

So "hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue," but sometimes it's hard to tell which is the vice and which is the virtue.

AND SPEAKING OF PUBLIC DISPLAYS OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS ...

John Rafferty

The religious right makes much of the fact that the Big 10 are displayed in a frieze in the Supreme Court itself, as if that somehow “proves” the Constitution is based on “Christian principles.” But like so many of their arguments, it’s a half-truth. First off, the frieze depicts Magna Carta, the Code of Hammurabi and other legal landmarks, not just the 10 Commandments. Second, as I’ve learned from the July issue of *The Humanist Monthly* newsletter of the Capital District (NY) Humanist Society:

“The religious commandments of the Decalogue do not appear in the oft-cited frieze contained in the chambers of the U.S. Supreme Court. Only commandments six through ten (written in Hebrew) are partially visible on the overlapping tablets. The remaining commandments—such as prohibitions on worshipping other gods, idol veneration, keeping the Sabbath holy, or taking the Lord’s name in vain—have no place in guiding Court proceedings or deliberations.”

ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS? THE THEISTS, THE THINKERS AND TODAY’S YOUTH

**Lisa Swinehart, Secular Student Alliance
Campus Organizer**

“You’ve gotta hook ‘em while they’re young!” avowed Cardinal Glick in Kevin Smith’s 1999 film *Dogma*, a comedic commentary on the state of Catholicism and religion in the United States today. Smith’s astute observations of Catholic strategy to warp the minds of today’s youth are set against the backdrop of the late ‘90s hubbub regarding the cigarette industry’s use of addictive substances and ad campaigns geared towards youth. To typical moviegoers, this is perceived as a comedic farce and play on words.

However, the reality is not far from the Hollywood dramatization portrayed in this film. Many religious organizations aim recruitment at youth in order to fill their ranks and coffers and to secure a new generation of devout followers. Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC) has 1,298 active campus groups and 3,200 staff members nationwide. Its website boasts that in 2004 18,000 students “accepted Christ.” CCC is not alone in youth recruitment: The Navigators, Veritas Forums, and Intervarsity Christian Fellowship all have burgeoning campus fellowship programs.

For today’s youth the road to enlightenment is riddled with theistic landmines. From religiously conservative parents, friends, community members and teachers to politics and pop culture, America’s youth are fighting an uphill battle for reason.

For many students, college is the first time they feel free to express their individuality and to develop ideas independent of the microcosm in which they were raised. Discussions of religion, or lack thereof, generally take center stage on college campuses. However, today’s students have fewer opportunities for such intellectual growth as religiously-gearred college groups pop up on American campuses. Fortunately, organizations such as the Secular Student Alliance are dedicated to providing an alternative for independently thinking students.

In 2000, a group of dedicated and enthusiastic young people—determined to meet the increasing demands for an autonomous national student organization—founded the

Secular Student Alliance (SSA). Since then, the SSA has focused primarily on providing college and high school students with the tools necessary to establish and maintain secular campus organizations. An educational non-profit, SSA seeks to educate students about the broader movement, unite youth with likeminded peers, and link them with scholars and leaders in the movement. The SSA also offers unparalleled personal staff support to its 43 affiliate groups nationwide.

Youth involvement in organizations such as the SSA provides long-term benefits for both students and the movement as a whole. Many active individuals in the movement have kept a wary eye on what has been dubbed the “graying” of the movement. Youth involvement provides a new generation of eager activists and a new demographic pool of subscribers, donors and talent. The SSA’s aim is to secure a place at the table for high school and college-aged secularists — while also building a foundation of secular-minded youth to populate existing organizations in the movement.

As an independent organization, the SSA is dedicated to working with many different groups within the movement. Currently, the SSA has strategic agreements with the American Humanist Association and the Atheist Alliance International, in addition to partnerships with many other organizations such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

The Institute for Humanist Studies (IHS) has also been fundamental to the formation and continuation of the SSA. IHS has made a profound investment in the future of the movement via four grants it generously awarded to the SSA over the years. Without funding and support from the IHS, a secular student movement would be only a shadow of what it has become.

The SSA is organized around the Broad Base program. This plan seeks to establish 250 robust, sustained, and well-connected student groups on college and high school campuses throughout North America. It is not the numbers that the SSA is concerned with, but rather the projected outcomes of having so many active free-thought groups. College groups not only encourage students to be openly atheist, agnostic or humanist, but also allow them to advocate on behalf of the movement. College affiliates engage in informal recruitment for the movement while disproving negative stereotypes by educating their peers about the realities of atheism, agnosticism and humanism. SSA affiliate groups are truly the voice of the movement on college campuses.

The most essential product of the Broad Based program is the SSA’s development of what it dubs the “Citizen Freethinker.” The hope is that as students graduate and become active members of society at large, they take with them the values, skills and lessons that they learned as members of these campus groups. A Citizen Freethinker is an SSA alumnus who is incorporated into the movement and civic life after graduation. These students not only become part of other freethought groups, but also contribute to them and become the next generation of leaders in the movement. They also take the lessons learned from their experiences as freethinkers with them to the polls and civic dialog at large.

Editor: And, we hope, into the ranks of organizations like SHSNY. More info? Go to lisa@secularstudents.org.

**AND ... JUST IN CASE YOU THINK
YOU UNDERSTAND TODAY'S COLLEGE KIDS ...**

(Excerpted (and edited) from Beloit College's Mindset List for the Class of 2009, as reported on ThisIsTrue.com)

Most students who entered college this fall were born in 1987. For them ...

Andy Warhol, Liberace, Jackie Gleason, and Lee Marvin have always been dead.

Heart-lung transplants have always been possible.

Cable TV has always existed, and Pay-Per-View television has always been an option.

Iran and Iraq have never been at war with each other, and Al-Qaeda has always existed.

Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker have never preached on television.

"Baby M" may be a classmate, contracts with surrogate mothers have always been legal, RU486 has always been on the market, and condoms have always been advertised on television.

They have no memory of the Soviet Union.

Black Americans have always been known as African-Americans, and Salman Rushdie has always been looking over his shoulder.

The Hubble Telescope has always been up there, and stem cell research has always been a possibility.

They were never thrown into the back of a station wagon with six other kids (and told to hold the noise down back there), and they never went for a walk in the woods without thinking about Lyme Disease.

**THE BOOK CLUB READS
"READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN"**

Donna Marxer

The SHSNY Book Club met at the Muhlenberg Library on September 22 to discuss *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi's memoir of life, literature and the condition of women during the Iranian Revolution, from 1980, when, an Oxford fellow and former anti-Shah student activist in America, she returned to her native Iran to teach at the University of Tehran, until 1997, when, barred by the ayatollahs from teaching and refusing to wear the veil, she left her native land with her husband and children and returned to America, where she teaches Western and Persian literature at Johns Hopkins University.

Reading Lolita in Tehran opens in 1997 in Nafisi's spacious apartment in Tehran. She is a fired, retired and disillusioned teacher of literature, fed up with the Iranian revolution of 1979 and all its manifestations. Yet, there is hope (as springs eternal throughout this remarkable book) in her new, secret and dangerous project. She has assembled her seven most gifted female former students to attend a weekly book club to discuss, along with Persian literature, selected forbidden great Western authors, including Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Jane Austen. And so the sections of her memoir are titled, "Lolita," "Gatsby," "James," and "Austen." You may never have considered these writers political before. You will when you finish this book.

One critic said, "Nafisi's writing has painterly qualities," and as a painter myself I instantly appreciated this. From the moment her "girls" (note the parallel to Muriel

Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*) come to their first meeting and remove their black chadors and scarves to reveal their modern, casual and colorful clothing beneath (jeans, an orange tee-shirt), she paints the scene that begins the metamorphosis.

The past and present flow together as the literature and events from Nafisi's and the other women's histories intertwine. This is a complex book. I immediately gave up trying to sort out the different women, and allowed them to meld, along with Nafisi herself, into one archetypal woman – deeply damaged by the regime she lived under, yet gifted and strong beneath the chador.

Beginning with *Lolita*, a new offering to these special students, one immediately sees the parallel between Irani women and the character of Lolita, imprisoned by Humbert, robbed of her childhood as they are of their womanhood by their subjugation. Nafisi refers to the metaphor of the half-alive butterfly pinned to the wall, representing Lolita. In Nafisi's words, "And more and more I thought of that butterfly, what linked us so closely was this perverse intimacy of victim and jailer."

Nafisi begins the section on "Gatsby" by recounting a humiliating body search she undergoes in the Tehran airport, as Iran's guardians of morality frisk her for Western contraband. (It is impossible not to compare this search with the ones we experience at LaGuardia and JFK today.) Of all the novels Nafisi reads with her girls or teaches in the university, *The Great Gatsby* is the most controversial. The memoir flashes back to her university teaching days, when fundamentalist students were outraged by the "immorality" of all the novel's major characters. So Nafisi allowed them to put the novel itself "on trial" in the classroom. What is heartening for us is how many students agree with Nafisi, the "defense attorney," who sees great morality in Jay Gatsby as a character. Yes, he has a dirty and perhaps violent past, but he redeems himself through love and his pursuit of the American Dream. Nafisi appreciates the dream and identifies with it herself. What she comes to realize is "*how similar our own fate was becoming to Gatsby's. He wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and in the end he discovered that the past was dead, the present a sham, and there was no future. Was this not similar to our [Iranian] revolution, which had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream?*"

The eight-year, million-casualty war with Iraq that started in 1980 (let's not forget that the U.S. encouraged and backed Saddam Hussein's attack on Iran) frames the memoir's section on "James." As the war and its culture of death and martyrdom take over every aspect of life in Iran, and as Iraqi rockets explode in her residential neighborhood, Nafisi quits teaching in disgust (and in rebellion against the chador). She copes with the restrictions on her dress by convincing herself that her body is "invisible," then realizes that in the "new" Iran she is irrelevant. She turns to books, and to her two small children, and begins her writing career, mostly as a translator and critic. Eventually a new friend and mentor persuades her to return to teaching. So Nafisi began to teach Henry James, wherein she finds heroism in the unlikely title character of *Daisy Miller*. Why Daisy? Because she is true to herself and literally dies because the man she loves doesn't begin to understand her. Again, the parallels with the inequality of the sexes in Iran.

Jane Austen "political"? Nafisi sees the structure of Austen's writing, particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*, as a dance – an elaborate dance that mirrors the complex society of

upper-middle class, early 19th-century Britain that is on the verge of modern times, of new freedoms, even of democracy.

Nafisi finds sexual tension in Austen, but a tension expressed in words, in dialogue layered with subtexts. Nafisi finds the promise of democracy in those complex, dancing dialogues – and in the uninhibited, joyful Persian dance that erupts among her “girls” in the middle of their discussion of Austen, there in Nafisi’s living room in her apartment in Tehran.

But in 1997, Nafisi came to the decision that she must leave Iran and her girls, who go their separate ways, forever changed by their subversive, liberating book club. As for Nafisi herself, *“I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me ... I read the writings of young students and former revolutionaries, the slogans and demands for democracy, and I know now as much as I will ever know anything that it is this dogged desire for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness by young Iranians today, the children of the revolution, and the anguished self-criticism of former revolutionaries that will determine the shape of our future.”*

AND HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED IN IRAN?

TEHRAN, Oct. 26, 2005 – Iran’s new “moderate” president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, quoted and repeated Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s pronouncement that Israel “must be wiped off the map.”

WE (NOT THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION) ARE REPRESENTED AT THE U.N. ...

The Center for Inquiry-Transnational (CFI), devoted to science, reason, and free inquiry in all areas of human interest, has been granted “special consultative status” as a non-governmental organization or NGO by the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

This entitles CFI to designate official representatives to UN headquarters in New York and UN offices in Geneva and Vienna. CFI can participate in conferences and briefings open to NGOs, and present the scientific, skeptical, and secular humanist perspective to the international community.

The Center for Inquiry-Transnational is a nonprofit educational, advocacy, and scientific-research think tank based in Amherst, New York. It is home to the Council for Secular Humanism (that’s us), the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), and the Commission for Scientific Medicine and Mental Health. For more info, go to: www.centerforinquiry.net/newsrooms/080305.html

... AND NOW IN BUSH’S WASHINGTON, TOO

On September 19, Lori Lipman Brown began work as the Secular Coalition’s first director and Congressional lobbyist, representing the interests of America’s humanists, atheists, and other freethinkers. A former Nevada State Senator, Brown is a long-time activist with experience in the constitutional and cultural challenges that face America’s secular community. For more info, go to <http://www.secular.org>

NOTICE THE DIRTY STREETS? THANK GOD.

(Excerpted from “Ye of Any Faith, Don’t Fear the Sweeper,” by Clyde Haberman, in The New York Times, 10/04/05)

Don't be surprised if trash piles up on your street this month, starting today (October 4) with Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. This is when Jews in the city, to steal an old line from an Associated Press writer, observe ancient tradition by praying, reflecting and parking on both sides of the street.

By October's end, alternate-side parking rules will have been suspended on eight days. As a consequence, normal street cleaning will also have been suspended on those days. From today through Veteran's Day, Nov. 11, the parking rules will be scrapped a total of 14 days in little more than a month.

No street sweeping means more trash. Figure it out.

A series of Jewish holy days account for many of the suspensions, seven days in all. But we also have Columbus Day, All Saints' Day, the final day of the Hindu festival Diwali, the three-day Islamic feast known as Id al-Fitr, Election Day and Veterans Day.

Certain Jewish holidays have long been prime beneficiaries of this type of civic acknowledgment. The reason is simple: Observant Jews are forbidden to perform many routine tasks on those days. That includes moving their cars to conform with alternate-side rules.

But "Me, Too" could serve as New York's motto. ... Jews get a break? How about us? Christians said. Us, too, Muslims asked as their numbers rose. Don't forget us, Chinese-Americans said. Steadily over the years, the number of days when New York streets stayed unswept grew and grew, to 33 holidays, stretching this year across 39 working days. ...

Yet there is nothing about these holidays—Purim, Ash Wednesday or the Asian Lunar New Year—that prevents the faithful from moving their cars. [And] last week the City Council added Diwali to the honor roll, Holiday No. 34.

What a city! Is there any other that honors its people by keeping their streets dirty? *Comment: Should we push for Darwin Day, Feb. 12? To Mayor Bloomberg's credit, he keeps vetoing these holiday bills, but our craven City Council keeps overriding him.*

DUMMIES: FIRST YOU BUILD THE CHURCH, THEN YOU STEAL

(Excerpted from Rationalist International Bulletin, 8/19/05)

Two men in Nigeria confessed to robbing a bank in order to raise funds to build their own church. Pastor Matthew Adeniji and Pastor Akeem Anjorin were among a gang of seven who robbed the NBN bank in the state capital Akure of 25 million naira (\$188,000).

"I bought three cars with my share of the money," Pastor Akeem told journalists proudly after his arrest.

The two "pastors" met and planned their new careers as church fathers – where else? – in jail.