

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

June, 2006

This month we examine the varieties of irreligious experience, from skepticism to agnosticism (pro and con), and on to atheism and anonymous unbelief. We discuss “spirit,” answer two common questions about evolution, question tolerance, champion blasphemy, sympathize with the Vatican, and celebrate Olympus. We have Jerry Falwell and George W. Bush anecdotes and—speaking of the Antichrist—in case you didn’t know, doomsday is due next week. — J.R.

THE ECLECTIC SKEPTIC

Russell Dunn

There is nothing wrong about being a skeptic. In fact, without some degree of skepticism, it is virtually impossible to navigate the real world of half-baked truths, misassumptions, and outright prevarications without falling into the pit of being exploited by others who are either well-intending or larcenous.

Strangely enough, most people rarely apply skepticism when the subject turns to religion. What’s more, throwing skepticism to the wind is actually considered to be a good thing. It’s called faith.

For a moment, let’s be skeptical and perfectly candid, and see how religious claims hold up under the glare of critical inquiry.

1) *Does a benevolent God exist?* The presence of pathogens and parasites, constantly evolving to torment us in new ways, provides a ready answer to this question. Surely, what kind of intelligent, benevolent deity would create sentient beings and then inflict them mercilessly with diseases and predatory creatures?

2) *Does God answer prayer?* There is not, and never has been, one shred of credible evidence that prayers are answered. This is not to say, however, that people don’t feel better after praying. But that’s the equivalent of confessing your mistakes and wrong-doings to another person and feeling good for having gotten something off your chest.

People often talk about how God answers prayers, but whether you pray or don’t, things usually turn out all right in the end (unless you happen to die outright!) because it’s the nature of the human spirit to endure and overcome. As the old maxim states: “God helps those who help themselves.” Without question, your chances improve greatly when you take charge of your own life.

3) *Are humans a product of evolution?* Creationists and Intelligent Designers, to be sure, say no. But if God is so intelligent and represents perfection personified, then how is it that humans are so imperfectly designed? No one disputes, for instance, that the human spine is not fully evolved for bipedal locomotion – hence the backaches we are plagued with. Nor is the optic nerve leading to the retina correctly placed – it leaves us with a blind spot. And why are we designed to eat and breathe through the same initial passageway, causing untold numbers of “cafe coronaries”?

And if humans aren't the product of random evolution, then why are there so many mutations and imperfect transmissions of DNA from one generation to the next?

Such skeptical blind spots are enough to make one ask whether humans are ever capable of evaluating reality in a dispassionate, objective manner. There are strong indications that our brains are hot-wired to be superstitious, hence our religious proclivities. We seem to be suckers for such frivolous, superstitious notions as Big Foot, UFO Abductions, crystal power, ghosts, ESP, precognition, etc. No matter who you are—scientist, layman or philosopher—you cannot escape from this programming, for it permeates our very essence. There is no single person on this planet who doesn't hold on to some superstitious notion or unproven belief, and that includes both you and me.

4) *Is there meaning beyond whatever meaning we give to our existence?* Science is not able to answer this question, and probably never can, since it lies within the realm of metaphysics.

It is certainly fair to ask, however, whether religion fills the bill here. To be sure, if there was a ready answer that could be arrived at quickly, then shouldn't all religions essentially have arrived at the same answer? A quick read of the literature tells you that they haven't. This alone should make the wary a bit cautious about accepting one particular brand of religious truths.

At a time when global problems require global solutions, it is dismaying to see that religion, like nationalism, race, color, creed, ethnocentricity, culture, etc., keeps us from becoming a unified world.

No, skepticism is not a bad thing. In the end, it may be the only thing that will ultimately lead us to a better, more tolerant world.

AGNOSTICISM: THE POWER OF NOT KNOWING (AND ENJOYING IT)

Doug Thomas

(Excerpted from HumanistNetworkNews.org, 3/8/06)

Every once in a while someone takes a swipe at agnosticism based on the mistaken impression that we agnostics are just unable to make up our minds.

Atheists attack because they think we are soft on theists and theists attack because they think we are just lost people who, with the right encouragement, will find our way back into the theist fold.

Both miss the point completely.

That point is that we agnostics are very definite about our philosophy and very definite in our views. Since we are unique in our philosophy, but not necessarily our politics, we often find ourselves perplexing both atheists and theists with our participation in humanism.

You see, when it comes to discussions of truth, we agnostics hold fast to one solid principle. The only way to arrive at truth is through empirical science and its tests. Without any empirical evidence, one cannot claim absolutely to know the truth. When theists claim the existence of a supreme being or beings, we demand empirical evidence (objective, observable, repeatable and so on). Of course, they cannot provide that evidence and their repetitive, groundless exhortations fall on deaf ears.

I wish the situation were so clear with atheists, but it is complicated by the existence of at least two types of atheist: traditional – “There is no supreme being”; and modern – “I don’t believe in a supreme being.”

The former is easier for us to deal with because of our assertion that they, like the theists, must prove their case with empirical evidence. Remember, the onus of proof is on the person who makes the statement. I didn’t say our stance makes us popular with traditional atheists. The latter position is almost impossible for us to refute. All modern atheists are saying is that they do not believe there is a supreme being. That is very different from the traditional statement and the position is tenable, although one might like to determine why they do not believe. However, it is not a definitive statement of knowledge about the supreme being(s), but a simple observation of a lack of belief.

The definitive center of agnostic philosophy is the clear requirement that there must be empirical evidence either directly or indirectly for something to be true. Contrary to the views of some atheists and most theists, then, we agnostics are very much centered and decided. Direct evidence is the immediate precursor of a statement. “If I hold this egg out at arm’s length and let go, it will fall to the floor.” – plop.

In really picky terms, of course, the egg and the Earth actually attract each other and come together somewhere in the universe. But, the inertia of the Earth is so great compared to the egg’s that the egg does most of the moving. Indirect empirical evidence works because of the principle of extrapolation – “If I let go of a brown egg, it will fall to the floor just as the white egg did.” The two eggs are different, but share the trait that makes them fall. By the way, there is no survival of the fittest in this case.

Atheists often take the stand that since it is up to theists to prove that there is a supreme being, and since theists have not done so in several millennia, there is no supreme being. The flaw in this is that just because no one has presented evidence does not mean that something does not exist. For example, when Louis Pasteur postulated that tiny microscopic living organisms caused disease, he was not able to prove it immediately. Bacteria did not fade out of existence while waiting for him to develop the technology to prove that they existed. They were always there even when there was no scientific evidence of their existence. To repeat the cliché, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence (great example of chiasmus too).

The atheist must, then, avoid making a statement like “There is no god” or the weight of proof changes to that atheist.

Agnostics are comfortable not knowing. I don’t know why that is so, I just know that my comfort zone lies in simply saying that I do not know and I cannot know about the existence of a supreme being. I do not know because no one has presented any empirical evidence one way or the other regarding the existence of such a being or beings, and I can not know because we are incapable, at this stage of our evolution, of even devising a test that would generate the objective, repeatable, evidence that I would regard as definitive in answering the question.

The problem, linguistically and culturally, is that saying that one “does not know” is interpreted as meaning that one is uncertain as in, “I do not know how to get to Lower Hangbasket,” or “I don’t know how to operate the photocopier.”

The big difference between these cases of uncertainty and the agnostic statement is that these things are knowable – we can look at a map or ask directions and we can find someone who knows how to operate the plagiarism machine to show us how to use it.

In the question of the existence of a supreme being, the agnostic understands that we do not know and we do not know how to know. There is no empirical evidence and no way to gain empirical evidence. In other words, we *really* do not know. There is no uncertainty about it.

Politically, we agnostics are much more flexible in our approach. On a probability scale, we rate the chances of the theists being right instead of the atheists as very slim. Since the theists have been working to demonstrate the existence of their supreme being(s) for thousands of years, it is reasonable (setting aside the agnostic understanding that we can not know) that they should have found something by now and that we should accept the probability that there is no supreme being. We agnostics, then, generally go about our affairs as if there is no such being. That is why our natural alliance is with atheists, even though this makes some of them uncomfortable.

The power of not knowing comes from our ability to simply set the question aside. While it can be the basis of interesting intellectual exercise and debate, it is not central to our political actions. This freedom leaves us undistracted from getting on with life and pursuing humanist lives (except on those occasions when we feel the need to remind others of our lack of interest).

We are free to co-exist with theists and atheists alike without that constant stone of uncertainty in our shoe. This comfort with not knowing empowers us to enjoy the instinctive good feeling when we can make positive contributions to our communities.

Humanism works for us well. We know that we feel better when we help our fellow earthlings. We understand that we can be good without being goaded into being good by the fear of some hypothetical supreme being, and we feel no pressing need to confront those who believe in some kind of external force. This is empirical evidence, albeit somewhat subjective empirical evidence, of the benefits of humanism.

Agnostics, then, are not undecided. We are very much decided. Empirical evidence of the existence of a supreme being is required [for belief] and at the same time it is impossible to obtain. We do not know and we cannot know and that is just fine with us.

IT'S AGNOSTICS WHO STICK IN MY CRAW

Yann Martell

(Excerpted from the novel Life of Pi)

“There are no grounds for going beyond a scientific explanation of reality and no sound reason for believing anything but our sense experience. A clear intellect, close attention to detail and a little scientific knowledge will expose religion as superstitious bosh. God does not exist.”

Did [my teacher] say that? Or am I remembering the lines of later atheists? At any rate, it was something of the sort. I had never heard such words. ... He became my favorite teacher. ... I felt a kinship with him. It was my first clue that atheists were my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them – and then they leap.

I'll be honest about it. It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ played with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the Cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” then surely we are

also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.

THE ATHEIST'S PROBLEM WITH FAITH

Sam Harris

(Excerpted from Atheist Manifesto)

Religion is the only area of our discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give evidence in defense of their strongly held beliefs. And yet these beliefs often determine what they live for, what they will die for, and—all too often—what they will kill for. This is a problem because when the stakes are high, human beings have a simple choice between conversation and violence. Only a fundamental willingness to be reasonable—to have our beliefs about the world revised by new evidence and new arguments—can guarantee that we will keep talking to one another. Certainty without evidence is necessarily divisive and dehumanizing. While there is no guarantee that rational people will always agree, the irrational are certain to be divided by their dogmas.

If ignorance of nature gave birth to gods, knowledge of nature is made for their destruction. — *Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Nature of Atheism*

A.A. FOR NON-BELIEVERS

Jane D.

When George Bush announced his “Faith-Based Initiatives” at the beginning of his presidency, A.A. was frequently mentioned as the poster child for religion-inspired programs because of its well-recognized success in helping alcoholics to become sober.

Billions are being spent by our god-loving president to support his faith-based programs. But, you will notice, A.A. is not among them. For one thing, it is strictly against the rules for self-supporting A.A. to take government money, or indeed any money that has strings attached. There is even a cap on how much an individual can donate or bequeath the organization. So, in spite of a recognized Christian bias, A.A. is not for sale.

That fact aside, there are a lot of people with drinking problems who harbor serious doubt about the Almighty, and are put off by the A.A. 12-Step rhetoric that can become pretty insistent on the necessity of Belief. They either never go to an A.A. meeting or, once there, can be put off by a “Step Nazi,” often an alcoholic’s sponsor, who might proclaim, “You’ll never get sober unless you embrace a Higher Power!” It is clear from the stories of people who find A.A. Agnostics that there are many alcoholics who do not find help because of the perceived religious aspect of A.A.

This aspect, though prevalent, by no means describes A.A. in full. Few people know that there is a haven in A.A. for atheists. It’s called Agnostic A.A. and the meetings are fully recognized by A.A. This authority draws the line at the word “atheist” but will accept “agnostic.” Some meetings are labeled “Freethinker” or “Humanist.”

More than eighteen years ago, the late John Y., a prominent member of New York Atheists, founded Agnostic A.A. in New York City. He used to declare, “I’ve been sober for 40 years and never said a prayer in my life!” He was one of the kindest men and best humanists I have ever known.

A.A. is described as a “Fellowship,” and within that there is a “Program” that emphasizes 12-Step study and sponsorship by another individual with a track record in sobriety. Agnostics usually refer to Program followers as “traditionalists” or, in a worst-case scenario, “fundamentalists.” Also, Agnostic A.A. meetings welcome drug abusers (often excluded from traditional meetings) as well as alcoholics, seeing addiction as one problem, not a Balkanized set.

At an unbelievers’ meeting, following the basic A.A. format, alcoholics confirm “My name is _____, and I am an alcoholic,” and go on to tell their drinking stories. Agnostics don’t usually “do the steps” or go in for individual sponsorship. Mainly, this latter duty is shared by the group, who freely hand out their phone numbers in a kind of collective help line. Free speech is encouraged and all are welcome, including believers, doubters and card-carrying atheists. There are no prayers and the slogan “Live and let live!” is usually the concluding line shouted out while holding a circle of hands. And it is heartfelt.

There are never any statistics available for success rates in A.A. because of the anonymity issue, but it appears that the agnostics fare just as well as the traditionalists who follow the Program. Agnostics tend to tell you that they follow the Fellowship but not the Program.

To quote from the A.A. Preamble, spoken before every A.A. meeting of any kind, “The only qualification for membership is a sincere desire to stop drinking.”

Why is this article appearing here? For one thing, I think that A.A. is a striking example of humanism in action, peopled by those who care about one another and are willing to act on it. Add agnosticism to this mix and you have Secular Humanism in action.

Whether or not any PIQUE readers are addicted, everyone knows someone or some others who may need help, but who may be put off by propaganda about A.A. – and it’s good to know about this alternative.

Agnostic A.A. is a growing national movement. To learn more, see their website www.agnosticAAnyc.org, or call A.A. Intergroup at 212-647-1680.

Are there any laughs at Agnostic meetings? Plenty. Recently, Charlie C. related that he died during surgery, flatlined for ten seconds before being resuscitated. “There was no tunnel, no white light,” he reported, “just dead! Period!”

A visiting agnostic priest (no kidding) quipped back, “Charlie, the white light doesn’t kick in until 15 seconds!”

PRAYING FOR LOWER GAS PRICES

Various Christian clergy convened around a Washington, D.C., gas station April 27 in a “national prayer rally” to lower the numbers at the pumps. Christians from around the country joined Pray Live’s efforts on a live Internet site and a toll-free phone line.

In a release, Pray Live said that people “are overlooking the power of prayer when it comes to resolving the energy crisis.” And the group’s founder, Wenda Royster, said, “It is our hope that seeing and hearing some of the nation’s most powerful preachers gathered around a gas station and the United States capital as a backdrop, will remind everyone who is really in charge of our world – God.”

Comment: Curiously, as of May 15 there is no news at the praylive.com website of the prayer rally’s success.

IN DEFENSE OF BLASPHEMY

Paul Kurtz and Tom Flynn

(Excerpted from Secular Humanist Bulletin, Spring, 2006)

[Editor's note: The April/May issue of Free Inquiry, published by the Council for Secular Humanism, reprinted four of the twelve cartoons that have sparked riots around the Muslim world. A number of bookstores and other outlets removed the issue from their shelves. Paul Kurtz and Tom Flynn are Editor in Chief and Editor of Free Inquiry.]

We stand by the decision to publish four of the Danish cartoons. The basic question is whether editors should be intimidated by the possible violent reactions by religious militants, who have no compunction about criticizing and defaming anyone who disbelieves in their faith. We should not retreat for fear that we might offend them.

The Danish editor who first published the Muhammad cartoons has been hounded out of his position and forced into hiding in order to save his life. Many editors in the Arab world who published the cartoons have been forced to resign or have been imprisoned, and dozens of innocent bystanders have been killed in riots.

The objection of Muslims is not simply to the cartoons but to anyone who attempts to depict Muhammad. If Muslims have a right to inflict violent *jihad* against innocent people—in the name of Allah—then we have a right to caricature those who would commit crimes and demand immunity from criticism.

The right of expression is precious and needs to be defended. Political satire is a vital part of any exchange of ideas and values in a democratic society. The pen is mightier than the sword. It should not be censored.

There is currently a movement worldwide to prohibit any form of expression that blasphemes a religion; cartoons critical of religion would no doubt be considered blasphemous. We need to ... affirm the right to blaspheme by exercising it. Would that we lived in a polite world of scholarly debate. It is clear that one cartoon may be worth a thousand syllogisms.

If *Free Inquiry* had not printed these caricatures, that would betray the principles that we believe in. The previous issue of *Free Inquiry* has drawings of Jesus wearing a crusader's helmet. Should we not have published that because it may offend some people? To cave in would be to concede the case of those who wish to silence us.

GIVING THE DEVIL HIS DUE

Michael Shermer

(Excerpted from eSkeptic 3/2/06)

British author David Irving was sentenced February 20 to three years in an Austrian jail for violating an Austrian law that says it is a crime if a person “denies, grossly trivializes, approves or seeks to justify the National Socialist genocide or other national socialist crimes against humanity.”

That David Irving has been, and probably still is, a Holocaust denier is indisputable. ... The important question here is not whether Irving is a Holocaust denier (he is), or whether he offends people with what he says (he does), but why anyone, anywhere should be imprisoned for expressing dissenting views or saying offensive things. Today, you may be imprisoned or fined for dissenting from the accepted Holocaust history in the following countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech

Republic, France, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, New Zealand, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Switzerland.

Given their disastrous history of being too lenient with fringe political ideologues, it is perhaps understandable that countries like Germany and Austria have sought to crack down on rabble-rousers whose “hate speech” can and has led to violence and pogroms. In some cases, the slippery slope has only a few paces between calling the Holocaust a “Zionist lie” to the neo-Nazi desecration of Jewish property.

And as we have witnessed repeatedly, Europeans have a different history and culture of free speech than we do in this country. In Germany, for example, the “Auschwitz-Lie” law, makes it a crime to “defame the memory of the dead.” In May of 1992, Irving told a German audience that the reconstructed gas chamber at Auschwitz was “a fake built after the war.” (It is, in fact, a post-war reconstruction made by the Soviets running the camp museum.) The following month when he landed in Rome, he was surrounded by police and put on the next plane to Munich where he was fined 3,000DM. Irving appealed the conviction but it was upheld and the fine increased to 30,000DM (about \$20,000) after he publicly called the judge a “senile, alcoholic cretin.”

In England, libel law requires the defendant to prove that he or she did not libel the plaintiff, unlike U.S. law that puts the onus on the plaintiff to prove damage, and they recently debated the merits of banning religious hate speech. In France, it is illegal to challenge the existence of the “crimes against humanity” as they were defined by the Military Tribunal at Nuremberg; and another law, on the books until just a few weeks ago, required that France’s colonial history (which was not always “humane”) has to be taught in a “positive” light.

In the traditionally liberal Canada there are “anti-hate” statutes and laws against spreading “false news.” In late 1992, Irving went to Canada to receive the George Orwell award from a conservative free speech organization, whereupon he was arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, led away in handcuffs, and deported on the grounds that his German conviction made him a likely candidate for future hate speech violations.

Even in the land of Thomas Jefferson and the First Amendment, freedom of speech does not always ring. On Friday, February 3, 1995, Irving was invited by the Berkeley Coalition for Free Speech to lecture at the University of California, Berkeley. More than 300 protesters surrounded the hall and prevented Irving and the 113 ticket holders from entering. (That, however, is quite different from passing a law to bar him from speaking.)

Austria’s treatment of Irving as a political dissident should offend the same people who defend the rights of political cartoonists to express their opinion of Islamic terrorists, and of the civil libertarians who leapt to the defense of the U. of Colorado Professor Ward Churchill when he exercised his right to call the victims of 9/11 “little Eichmanns.” Why doesn’t it? Why aren’t freedom lovers everywhere offended by Irving’s conviction?

Freedom is a principle that must be applied indiscriminately. We have to defend David Irving in order to defend ourselves. My freedoms are inextricably tied to Irving’s freedoms. Once the laws are in place to jail dissidents of Holocaust history, what’s to stop them from spreading to dissenters of religious or political histories, or to skepticism of any sort that deviates from the accepted canon?

No one should be required to facilitate the expression of Holocaust denial, but neither should there be what the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis called the “silence coerced by law – the argument of force in its worst form.” The point was poignantly made in Robert Bolt’s play, “A Man for All Seasons,” in which William Roper and Sir Thomas More debate the relative balance between evil and freedom (Act 1, Scene 6):

Roper: So now you’d give the Devil benefit of law.

More: Yes. What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?

Roper: I’d cut down every law in England to do that.

More: Oh? And when the law was down—and the Devil turned round on you—where would you hide? Yes, I’d give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety’s sake.

Call David Irving the devil if you like — the principle of free speech gives you the right to do so. But we must give the devil his due. Let David Irving go, for our own safety’s sake.

As a democratic society, we cannot tolerate intolerance, suppression of independent thought, homophobia, or racism in any of their guises.

— Khoren Arisian, *Ethical Outlook*, December 2000.

Now, suppose that someone’s independent thought leads to “intolerance,” “homophobia,” or “racism.” Do we suppress that independent thought? — *John Arents*

BOYCOTTING THE DAVINCI CODE ISN’T CENSORSHIP, IT’S GOOD TASTE

John Rafferty

A couple of years ago a woman told me she’d just flown home from Rome a few hours before. At first she’d been annoyed that she couldn’t get a direct flight, but her stopover in London had given her time to finish reading *The DaVinci Code*. I told this educated, sophisticated woman that I’d heard the book was indeed a fascinating page-turner, but I was amused that so many people who read it thought the Jesus-Mary Magdalene-Opus Dei “history” behind the plot was true.

She looked as if I had kicked her dog.

One can almost sympathize with the Vatican officials urging a boycott of the film that opened May 19. First, they are not, unlike some of their cartoon-obsessed Muslim brethren, inciting bloody riots or directing mobs to burn embassies and movie theaters. Second, with all the real problems the Church is facing, the men in the red hats must be wondering, “How in the name of sweet Jesus did this silliness happen?”

The basic premise of Christianity is that Jesus of Nazareth died and came back to life. After that “fact,” all else, including all the different beliefs of all the different Christian sects, past and present, is—to borrow a trope from another religious tradition—“commentary.”

You don’t believe He died and came back? You’re not a Christian, period. You do believe that thousands of Christians have engaged in a 2,000-year-long conspiracy to cover up the falsity of their religion, while sprinkling clues to the truth (why?) in world-famous paintings and scientific works? You’re not a rational adult, period.

It’s a work of *fiction*, people!

Of course even the Vatican winds up looking almost liberal compared to the right-wing fundamentalists who see the book/movie as one more assault in the War on Christianity being waged by a vast left-wing conspiracy headquartered in Hollywood and “Jew York.”

But one of those fundamentalists, Robert H. Knight, of the Culture and Family Institute, made the most appropriate point, perhaps inadvertently, when he said:

“Christians are under no obligation to pay for what Hollywood dishes out.”

Exactly. Just say No at the box office. Or, like me, buy some popcorn and go for the laughs.

I can’t see the fuss that some Christians are making about the fictional *The DaVinci Code*. It simply adds to (or detracts from) another fictional story that has no basis in fact and no evidence to prove its veracity, although millions have died because of it. To all those who are upset by the book and film, I advise: “Fuhgedaboutit.”

— Arthur Harris

**LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,
PLEASE WELCOME BACK THE ONE AND ONLY ... ZEUS!**

Helena Smith

(Excerpted from The Guardian, 5/5/06)

An Athens court has ordered that the adulation of Zeus, Hera, Hermes, Athena, et al, is to be unbanned, paving the way for a comeback of pagans on Mount Olympus. The gods’ followers say they “defend the genuine traditions, religion and ethos” of the ancients by adhering to a pre-Christian polytheistic culture.

About 98 percent of Greeks are Orthodox Christian, and all other religions except Judaism and Islam had been banned. Yet the pagans say as many as 2,000 Greeks have signed up to their movement.

But Greece’s Orthodox Church accuses the worshippers of idolatry and “poisonous New Age practices.” A spokesman said, “They are a handful of miserable resuscitators of a degenerate dead religion who wish to return to the monstrous dark delusions of the past.”

Comment: As opposed to sticking with the monstrous dark delusions of the present.

**TWO QUESTIONS, TWO ANSWERS
ABOUT EVOLUTION**

Laura Kasman

(From The Separationist, newsletter of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry (Charleston, SC), May, 2006)

*“If humans evolved from apes,
why are there still apes?”*

In the past few weeks, as the intelligent design debate heated up in South Carolina, I read or heard this question several times, including from people I normally consider intelligent and sensible. I endeavor here to give a concise explanation of why this question is not at all a meaningful challenge to evolution.

First, and foremost, evolutionary theory does not and never has suggested that modern humans evolved from modern apes. It postulates, and overwhelming evidence

demonstrates, that modern humans and modern apes had a common ape-like ancestor. This ancestor is now extinct. However, and this leads to the second part of the answer, if the common ancestor were still alive that would still pose no contradiction with an evolutionary origin for human beings! It is quite possible for one species to evolve from another without the first one becoming extinct, in the same way that British colonists became Americans without British people becoming extinct. One population can split into two groups that become genetically isolated from one another. One is subjected to new selection pressures and evolves over many generations into a new species. The other does not experience new selection pressures and remains relatively unchanged.

“Why aren’t we (humans) still evolving?”

This is a second common question of evolution doubters. I suspect it is based on the mistaken idea that individuals evolve. They don’t. Populations evolve, not individuals. The definition of evolution is, simply, a change in gene frequencies in a population over time. And the answer to this question, of course, is that we still are evolving. Several studies reported in the popular press recently have proven this by genetic tests made possible by the human genome project. We now know, for example that the European trait of being able to digest lactose as an adult appeared only in the last few thousand years. And that the lighter skin color of Asians relative to Africans evolved by a different set of mutations than the ones that produced lighter skin in Europeans. In fact all human ethnic groups not currently from Africa—every Native American tribe, every Pacific island group, Scottish highlanders to Japanese samurai—all descended from one small band of East Africans that left the African continent only 50,000-70,000 years ago. If such diversity can appear in humanity over such a short period of time, how is it conceivable that we could have stopped changing now? In fact it can be safely assumed that HIV resistance is being selected for throughout the world, as is the ability to resist diabetes on a high-carb diet. Perhaps in a few years, heat tolerance will be the next big thing. But no change? No way.

**THE GAMUT OF POLITICAL DIVERSITY,
FROM A TO B**

In a May 7 Op-Ed piece in the *Times*, Jerry Falwell, of the Moral Majority Coalition and Liberty University, explained why he invited Senator John McCain to speak at the school’s commencement ceremonies this year. “While Liberty maintains its evangelical Christian roots,” he explained, “there is a healthy religious, political, geographic and racial diversity within an atmosphere of academic excellence. Part of our tradition is to expose students to outstanding leaders from all walks of life, including some who may not completely agree with Liberty’s philosophy.”

Diverse speakers such as?

“George H. W. Bush, Clarence Thomas, Billy Graham and Ed Meese have all shared their wisdom with our students.”

FISH STORY

According to the *Daily News* of May 8, when “asked in an Oval Office interview with the German newspaper *Bild* to name the ‘most wonderful moment’ of his presidency, President Bush came up with a fish story.

“I don’t know, it’s hard to characterize the great moments. They’ve all been busy moments, by the way,’ Bush said, apparently trawling his memory for good times since 2001. “I would say the best moment was when I caught a 7-1/2-pound largemouth bass on my lake,’ he said eventually.”

Gee, we’d have thought it was when he caught Osama bin Laden and destroyed Al Qaeda. Or when the Iraqi people welcomed American troops with cheers and flowers, or when those troops destroyed Saddam’s WMD’s. Or maybe when his administration saved hundreds of lives and the city of New Orleans with its rapid response to the early warnings on Hurricane Katrina.

On the other hand, probably none of those can compare with catching a 7-1/2 pound fish.

**“WHAT ROUGH BEAST,
ITS HOUR COME ROUND AT LAST,
SLOUCHES TOWARD BETHLEHEM
TO BE BORN” ... NEXT WEEK?**

According to *The Times* of London, many expectant mothers in Britain with about-now due dates are worried about their offspring being born on June 6. “The prospect of giving birth on 6/6/06 has prompted talk of spawning devil children on Armageddon day.” Some women are asking doctors to ensure that they will not deliver on “a day of satanic power” – 666 being the biblical “mark of the beast.” Of course others are planning to name their children Damien, after the satanic boy in “The Omen,” or Regan, after the possessed little girl in “The Exorcist.”

And also, of course, the fact that the calendar has read “6/6/6” nineteen or twenty times since Revelation predicted the apocalypse seems to have escaped the notice of the whole demented lot of them.

SAGAN ON SPIRIT

SHSNY Book Club attendees on May 25 met to discuss their favorite Carl Sagan books. Here’s an excerpt from The Demon-Haunted World:

“Spirit” comes from the Latin word “to breathe.” What we breathe is air, which is certainly matter, however thin. Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word “spiritual” that we are talking of anything other than matter (including the matter of which the brain is made), or anything outside the realm of science. On occasion, I will feel free to use the word. Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. So are our emotions in the presence of great art of music or literature, or of acts of exemplary selfless courage such as those of Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. The notion that science and spirituality are mutually exclusive does a disservice to both.