

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December, 2007

'Tis the season, variously called Christmas, Hanukah, Kwaanza, and Bloomingdale's. We get news and gossip from Bethlehem, celebrate Xmas with atheists, recommend gifts for humanists, and (the real heresy) consider stopping Christmas shopping. We examine idolatry in Peru, barbarism in Arabia, the power of prayer in Boston, and media idiocy in America. We look at the state of the secular society and the future of the human genome (Part 2), and 18 of us take books to prison. — JR

## **GOD'S LOVE CHILD BORN IN BARN!!**

*Exclusive to Weekly World News, 12/26/1*

*(Based on "God Has Affair with Worshipper" by H. S. Aditya, Hindu-Atheist Reporter, forwarded by Edith Amster)*

Turmoil rocked Heaven this morning as allegations arose that God has had an affair with a young worshipper. The scandal began when a teenager known only as "Mary" claimed that she had given birth to "God's only son" in a barn in the hamlet of Bethlehem.

Sources close to Mary, reportedly married to an elderly carpenter, claim that she "has loved God for a long time," that she talks about her relationship with Him constantly, and is "thrilled to have had His child."

In a press conference this morning, God issued a vehement denial, saying, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman ... Mary," and that "the facts of this story will come out in time, verily."

Independent Seraphic Counsel Kenneth Beelzebub immediately filed a brief with the Divine Justice Department to expand his investigation to cover questions of whether any commandments may have been broken, and whether God had illegally funneled laundered money to His illegitimate child through three foreign operatives known only as "the Wise Men." Beelzebub has issued subpoenas to several angels who are rumored to have acted as go-betweens in the affair.

Critics have pointed out that these allegations have little to do with the charges that Beelzebub was originally appointed to investigate, i.e.: whether God had created large-scale global flooding in order to cover up evidence of a failed land deal.

## **WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF THREE WISE JEWISH WOMEN HAD GONE TO BETHLEHEM INSTEAD OF THREE WISE MEN?**

*(Forwarded by Ellie Karr)*

They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, hired someone to clean the stable, and made a brisket.

***And what would they have said after they left?***

"That baby looks nothing like Joseph."

"Virgin? Please, I knew her in high school."

"Can you believe they let all those disgusting animals in there?"

“Did you see the sandals Mary was wearing with that *schmatta*?”  
“I heard Joseph doesn’t have a job.”  
“Let’s see if you get your brisket dish back.”

## AN ATHEIST CAN BELIEVE IN CHRISTMAS

Randy Kennedy

(Excerpted from “*The Grinch Delusion: An Atheist Can Believe in Christmas*,” in *The NYTimes*, 12/17/2006)

If last holiday season charitably could have been described as the War-On-Christmas Christmas—with Bill O’Reilly of Fox News declaring war on the warriors and others declaring war on him—maybe it’s not such a stretch to think of this year’s prevalent yuletide theme as the War-On-Christ Christmas.

And not just Christ by himself, of course. Also God and Allah and every other version of an omnipotent, unseen deity who inspires annual celebrations, love, obedience, and occasional fanaticism among untold millions.

At least such a theme is the message that book buyers seem to be sending [by buying] *The God Delusion*, a jeremiad against religious belief by Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary biologist at Oxford, [and] *Letter to a Christian Nation*, another spirited defense of atheism, by its American standard-bearer, Sam Harris . . . .

With all this high-profile atheism in mind, it might come as something of a surprise to learn what sort of tree Mr. Harris has sitting in his living room right now. Let’s just say that it is not a ficus, that it tapers to a little peak practically begging for a star and that it is currently sporting some lovely ornaments on its branches.

In a recent phone interview, Mr. Harris explained that as a “full-time infidel” these days, with book-tour and speaking duties, he didn’t have time to pick out his tree personally. And it was really not his idea but a result “of a lost tug of war with my wife,” who likes Christmas trappings and insisted on buying it. But he added that his reluctance “was good-natured all the while.”

In other words, he is having a (relatively) holly, jolly atheistic Christmas, one that will include presents and a big family party. And Mr. Harris, who was raised by a Jewish mother and a Quaker father, sees no glaring contradiction in doing so, at least not one he feels the need to spend much time thinking about.

“It seems to me to be obvious that everything we value in Christmas—giving gifts, celebrating the holiday with our families, enjoying all of the kitsch that comes along with it—all of that has been entirely appropriated by the secular world,” he said, “in the same way that Thanksgiving and Halloween have been.”

Mr. Dawkins, reached by e-mail somewhere on a book tour, was asked about his own Christmas philosophy. The response sounded almost as if he and Mr. Harris—and maybe other members of a soon-to-be-chartered Atheists Who Kind-of Don’t Object to Christmas Club—had hashed out a statement of principles. Strangely, these principles find much common ground with Christians who complain about the holiday’s over-commercialization and secularization, though the atheists bemoan the former and appreciate the latter.

“Presumably your reason for asking me is that *The God Delusion* is an atheistic book, and you still think of Christmas as a religious festival,” Mr. Dawkins wrote. “But of course it has long since ceased to be a religious festival. I participate for family

reasons, with a reluctance that owes more to aesthetics than atheistics. I detest “Jingle Bells,” “White Christmas,” “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer,” and the obscene spending bonanza that nowadays seems to occupy not just December, but November and much of October, too.

”So divorced has Christmas become from religion that I find no necessity to bother with euphemisms such as “happy holiday season.” In the same way as many of my friends call themselves Jewish atheists, I acknowledge that I come from Christian cultural roots. I am a post-Christian atheist. So, understanding full well that the phrase retains zero religious significance, I unhesitatingly wish everyone a ‘Merry Christmas.’”

Such obliging feelings toward Christmas will undoubtedly serve as another piece of evidence for those like Mr. O’Reilly and conservative Christians who feel that the holiday has been hijacked—so much so that even atheists are now comfortable getting into the spirit. But to listen to Mr. Harris and other nonbelieving Christmas celebrators, you sometimes get the feeling that their accommodation stems from the fact that Christmas—no matter how religious it still is or is not—has become such a juggernaut that it is simply impossible to ignore entirely. So why not grin, bear it and have yourself a double eggnog?

Even hardliners like David Silverman, of American Atheists ... says that, as with his mother’s Passover, some seasonal participation is just too hard to avoid.

Besides, he admitted, “I do like to go to the parties.”

Mr. Harris does, too. As for the tree, he assures his nonbelieving friends that it was a miniature: “This is a tree that even an atheist would be comfortable with.”

**WHAT WOULD JESUS BUY?**  
**(Here’s a preacher we might actually like.)**  
**Emily Watson**

*(Excerpted from “The Commercialization of Christmas: What Would Jesus Buy?” on AlterNet.org, 11/23/07.)*

Bill Talen, known as Reverend Billy, doesn’t mind making a fool of himself. He is happy to throw himself on the floor in a fit of religious ecstasy, perform cash register exorcisms or go caroling with the 35 members of the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir, singing such favorites as “Fill the malls with wealthy people,” to the tune of “Deck the Halls.” He does all this and much, much more in the new documentary film about him and his Church of Stop Shopping, “What Would Jesus Buy?”

Ten years ago Talen came to New York and, struck by the commercialization in Times Square, wanted to do something. He saw the people getting the most attention were the street preachers, so getting into his role, he bought a clerical collar to go with his white caterer’s jacket, dyed his hair blond, combed it into a tall pompadour and started preaching against over-consumption.

Now Talen is known for his protests against, among others, Disney (the “High Church of Retail”), Victoria’s Secret, and Starbucks. The coffee chain has banned Talen from going into any of the stores in California, and he is the subject of a memo to its employees, “What Should I Do If Reverend Billy Is In My Store?” When he decided to take his church across the country in two biodiesel buses in December 2005 to face the Christmas season head on and preach against the Shopocalypse, filmmaker Rob VanAlkemade and his crew tagged along.

[photo of Talen preaching]

If people can change how they act at Christmas, Talen says, that could bleed over into the rest of the year. And he thinks people are ready for change. He sees it with all the emails the church gets supporting its anti-consumer message and in other ways, such as the dozens of communities across America that have successfully resisted Wal-Mart. He points to the town of Hercules, in California, that used eminent domain to take the land that the giant retailer planned to build on. In the city council's definition, a Wal-Mart store is "urban blight." ...

Savitri Durkee, the choir director and Talen's wife, says she is also feeling optimistic. She emphasizes that small changes are important. "I know that people are going to shop one way or another," she says. "I just hope they'll think about what they buy and try and support local economies. Utopian ideas are really important, but if I can get 100 people to shop less, that's great."

In the movie, shoppers, the recently homeless, ministers, and consumer specialists face the camera and talk about what they think about Christmas, shopping, and where the products we buy come from. Both Talen and Durkee say they learned a lot from these people and hearing their stories made them more compassionate.

Talen was surprised and gratified by the response from the Christian community to the movie, which he says has been overwhelmingly supportive, particularly from the youth Christian movement. He says the movie's message of Christmas being a time to connect with family and friends and remember what matters most resonates with them.

In a scene that Talen and Durkee call the heart of the movie, three teenage girls from the Upper East Side start to wonder about where their clothes come from. They check the labels on their shirts. "A little kid probably made that," one says to another. They do research online and read about workers in Bangladesh forced to work overtime and getting burns from hot glue machines.

That is a moment where a connection is made, Talen says. "We want to collapse the distance between the product and labor," he says. "Our present economy is based on alienation from products."

## **THE CHURCH OF BLOOMINGDALE'S**

**Ken Bronstein**

*(Excerpted from "Religion is a Business; It Should be Taxed," in the November, 2007 issue of the newsletter of NYC Atheists, of which Mr. Bronstein is President.)*

The church is basically a business enterprise selling packages of goods to its customers. Just as in other retail outlets, you can buy the whole package and get a special deal (shall we call that wholesale?) or you can pay a one-time retail fee for, say, your Mom's funeral. You can even charge it (some churches even allow members to use charge cards to donate), you can bargain with them, you can run up a tab. So are we talking about the Catholic Church here or Bloomingdale's? It's hard to tell.

The main difference seems to be that when you leave Bloomingdale's you are usually holding a package; with the church, you are usually left holding the bag.

## **A HOLIDAY GIFT SUGGESTION**

**John Rafferty**

In a week, on December 7, a blockbuster Hollywood movie will open – “The Golden Compass,” a filmed adaptation of the first book of Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy. The advance word? Compared to the book, the movie is eminently skip-able.

However, all three of the books—*The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*—are now available in a paperback (and in a boxed set), and will make a great holiday present for any reading-oriented eight-or-older kid on your gift list – and especially girls, who will delight in the adventures of “young, feisty, and thoroughly engaging Lyra Belacqua and her ‘daemon familiar,’ Pantalaimon, who just may hold the future of the universe in their hands.”

Why? Because Pullman has created a secular humanist epic fantasy, a “Lord of the Rings” with anti-religious, anti-authoritarian ideas. As the *Washington Post Book World* review put it, “*The Golden Compass* offers moral complexity as well as heart-stopping adventures. What do you do when people you love turn out to be evil? Do admirable goals ever justify despicable means? What is the proper place of religion and science in civil life? How does one deal with betrayal? The novel ends ... with a sublime vision: a little girl dreaming that she was being carried by bears to a city in the stars.”

*The Golden Compass* won Britain’s Carnegie Medal for Children’s Fiction in 1995, and *The Amber Spyglass* won the Whitbread Prize in 2001. But how’s this for a recommendation, humanists? The entire right-wing lunacy lobby, from the Catholic League and the Family Research Council to the Pope, condemns *The Golden Compass* and the whole trilogy as “godless atheism.”

### **ANOTHER GIFT SUGGESTION: GIVE “PIQUE” FOR THE “HOLY DAYS”**

Even secularists give and get gifts for the holidays. One that will please any freethinker on your list is a gift subscription to PIQUE, just \$30 for a one-year (11 issues) non-member subscription. Send an e-mail to editor@shsny.org, or call 212-308-2165, with your name, and the name and address of your gift recipient(s). We’ll take care of the details (including a “You’ve been gifted by ...” letter to the recipient), and we’ll bill you later.

### **THE SECULAR SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES**

**Derek C. Araujo**

**Executive Director, CFI-NYC**

*(Excerpted from Mr. Araujo’s November 9 opening remarks to the Center for Inquiry-New York City’s 2007 conference, “The Secular Society and Its Enemies.”)*

Recent years have seen a growing array of challenges to secular democracy. It is fitting, if ominous, that this conference should overlook the site of the appalling slaughter of 3,000 innocents by pitiless religious extremists. Astonishingly, in the wake of this unprecedented and ruthless assault on secular democracy and its liberties, we have witnessed calls for more—not less—religion in government and in public affairs.

I can speak most knowledgeably about challenges to the secular society from the perspective of my own field of American law. From that perspective, the challenges are daunting. Today, our nation’s historic separation of church and state stands threatened by a host of newly appointed federal judges who care little for claims of establishment

clause violations. Many violations, though pronounced illegal in the lower courts, go unpunished because of the fear that our reconstituted Supreme Court, which now includes two right wing Bush appointees, will gut the First Amendment's Establishment Clause if given the opportunity. The Sixth Circuit court of appeals recently approved a Ten Commandments display installed in a Kentucky courthouse that is virtually identical to the Kentucky courthouse display the Supreme Court declared illegal just two years ago. And no one dares to seek review of that decision after Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's replacement by the conservative Catholic Samuel Alito.

It is easy for proponents of church-state separation to forget the other half of the First Amendment's religion clauses, the Free Exercise clause. Free Exercise, too, has been abused by the courts, and its protections greatly expanded upon through ill-advised legislation, to the point of creating a two-tiered system of justice that exempts religiously motivated conduct from the rule of law. Many have sought to hide behind the fig leaf of "religious liberty" to excuse their wrongdoing, from odious Catholic bishops who actively hide known child molesters from the authorities, to Christian Scientists who make martyrs of their own children, leaving them to die of medical neglect. Behavior that would be clearly illegal if committed by anybody else goes unpunished, simply by chanting the mantra of "religious liberty."

The secular society faces a multitude of additional challenges. From tax exempt, pulpit-based electioneering to religiously-inspired censorship of government scientists; from woolly multiculturalist relativism to hard Christian nationalism; from tyrannical mullahs' imposition of *sharia* to Pope Benedict XVI's demand for a retrograde Christianization of Europe; and from the infusion of Islamic law into Afghanistan's new constitution to a U.S. Supreme Court Justice's incredible insistence that government derives its moral authority not from "We the People," but from God, secularism is under challenge, from left and right, and from East and West.

The secular society is not necessarily a society of atheists and agnostics, though it very well might be; and it certainly is not one that banishes religion by law or by force. Rather, it is a society that respects the crucial separation of religion from government, and the liberty this separation guarantees. It is a society that guides the ship of state by the star of reason, not by the dark and drifting clouds of revelation. It is one that informs its public policy by science rather than ignorance, and that cherishes individual rights rather than conformity. It is the society of Paine and Jefferson and Madison, of Robert Ingersoll and Bertrand Russell. In brief, the secular society is the hard-won legacy of the Enlightenment — a legacy well worth guarding.

## **THE SAME ENEMIES, EIGHTY YEARS AGO**

**Clarence Darrow**

*(Excerpted from a 1927 essay by Clarence Darrow in Closing Arguments. Forwarded by Edith Amster.)*

In the face of the onslaught of the Fundamentalists, some scientists are content to repeat over and over that they believe in evolution, but that there is no conflict between science and religion. They only obscure the real issue. . . . The time is past due for the scientist to speak in no uncertain terms. The Fundamentalist does not quibble or dodge. He is honest if not intelligent. He is using every means in his power to place the bible and his interpretation of religion in the field of learning. The battle has been fought many times

in the history of the world. Once more the combat is upon us. It cannot be won by quibbling and dodging. Science must openly and fairly meet the issue. The question to be determined is whether learning should be hampered and measured by dogma and creeds.

### WHAT FIVE BOOKS WOULD YOU TAKE TO PRISON?

We posed the above question last month, based on the Federal Bureau of Prisons rule that prisoners were “permitted to keep only five books of their own.”

So, humanists, if you were about to spend years in prison, or on a desert island, what five books would you take, and why?

#### **Norm R. Allen, Jr.**

1. *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, Tom Flynn, editor
2. *The Best of Robert Ingersoll*, Roger Greeley, editor
3. *Some Mistakes of Moses*, Robert Green Ingersoll
4. *The Age of Reason*, Tom Paine
5. *Why I Am Not a Christian*, Bertrand Russell

#### **Giddian Beer**

1. *Biology* (textbook), Neil Campbell, Jane Reece & Lawrence Mitchell: the whole story, very big, very detailed, endlessly fascinating, wonderful illustrations. If I had only one choice, this would be it!
2. *Past Worlds: Atlas of Archaeology* (Harper Collins). 2,500,000 years of human prehistory and life, detailed and well illustrated.
3. *The Demon-Haunted World*, Carl Sagan. The problems caused by superstition, especially religion.
4. *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan—the companion book to the TV series.
5. *Living Religions*, John Hinnels, editor. A survey of world religions, good for comparisons; the monotheistic are the worst.

#### **Remo Cosentino**

*Crime & Punishment*, Dostoyevsky. Brilliant excavation of our consciousness at work. Despite the “Christian message” of redemption through Christ, it is the rationalist policeman who is the voice of human reason.

*Bread & Wine*, Ignazio Silone. For personal reasons, as a narrative that has echoes of my own life in Fascist Italy, but also for the humanist’s answer to Catholicism’s indifference to Fascism and authoritarianism.

*The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil. A broad sweep of man’s consciousness in the sea of everyday events and how our relationships and culture shape us and navigate us through life.

*Ulysses*, James Joyce. Obviously its length and complexity would keep us occupied for many a day. In the company of a fecund mind drunk on words and loquaciousness sufficient to entertain and intrigue for many a day.

*Confessions of Zeno*, Italo Svevo. Delightful and zany acquaintance with a most quixotic individual—human, intelligent and with all his shortcomings one of us, if not us.

### **Jane Everhart**

Five books that changed my life (and which I would read over and over again):

1. *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn. A perspective on American history a bit different from the tidying-up done by official history books. It's written from the viewpoint of Indians, labor and the common man.
2. *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Herbert Aptheker (his Columbia Ph.D. thesis). The first book ever to report the efforts of African-American people to free themselves from slavery.
3. *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky. With its pro-and-con arguments about God between the monk and the atheist brother, it made me an atheist at age 13.
4. *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir, which made me a feminist activist.
5. *Marriage and Morals*, Bertrand Russell, which saved me from becoming a suburban housewife. So did Betty Friedan, but that's another story.

### **Ed Goldsmith**

1. *The Completely Mad Don Martin*
2. *Three-Upmanship*, Stephen Potter
3. *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Arthur Conan Doyle
4. *The Day of the Jackal*, Frederick Forsyth
5. *The Sea Wolf*, Jack London

### **Art Harris**

With rare exceptions, I now read fiction, adventure and humor, but if shipwrecked, being the pragmatist that I am my first two books would be:

1. *The Boy Scout's Handbook*, and a good book on ...
2. *Small Boat Building*. Then, I think ...
3. *A Complete Shakespeare*. I've always promised myself to read the complete works.
4. *god is Not Great*, Hitchens\*, just in case I decide to rail against "Him" what put me there, and a thick notebook so I could sell my memoirs, a la Defoe.
5. Anything by Pat Robertson, for comic relief—its many twists and turns will aid in calisthenics.

\**Actually, I think every prison library ought to have Hitchens's book, if only to prevent even one inmate from finding Jesus or Allah. I'm always impressed with the percentage of believers behind bars.*

### **Ed Henrion**

Is an impossible question for me—like which five fingers would you least like to have removed from your hands? All books is created equal! Looking forward to whatever youse get, I tink. Good luck.

### **Rowena Johnston**

5. *Ulysses*, James Joyce. I can imagine no other circumstances under which I could be induced to read this monstrosity than as a captive audience. In the meantime I'll take "their" word for it that it's worth the effort.
4. *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*. From Gilgamesh to the late 20th century, and a whole lot in between, this could keep a girl busy for a while.



3. *Science and Technology in World History*. I don't actually know if this is the best book for the job, but I'd want a comprehensive history-of-mankind book, especially if there's an emphasis on the interplay between science and history. If anyone has better suggestions, bring 'em on!

2. *Kama Sutra*. Come on now, I'm in prison/island. Need I say more?

1. "My Diary." Quote marks because it doesn't exist yet. Ideally it already has entries covering my adult life, and plenty of blank pages to record more of what happens while I'm in prison/island. I imagine during my incarceration I'll want to do some reflecting on my life, and at some point in the more distant future will also want to reflect back on my thoughts and actions in prison/island.

### **Bill Lindley**

Thanks for the challenge. I accept it only in part. At this time I recommend only one book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, by Daniel C. Dennett. It is outstanding, and shows early on that the "idea" is dangerous not only to the "religions of the book," but to humanists as well. Ideas from the humanist movement of the 1920's, like the self-perfectibility of humankind, could end up in the ashcan. Not necessarily, but ...

My thinking is that we'll never be perfect, but we can improve without limit, but only if civilization survives. That it may not is obvious.

### **Lee Loshak**

Regardless of one's political or economic beliefs, the first book on the list for humanists should be Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*. After all, Marx does say, "Religion is the opiate of the people."

Following Marx should be Karl Popper, *The Open Society* (2 volumes but available as a single bound book). Popper devotes a complete section to Marx, although earlier in the text he notes that the Christian concept of the chosen people, or the "historical philosophy of racialism or fascism on the one hand (the right) and the Marxian historical philosophy (the left) on the other" is a shared value. As such, he presents the ideas of Marx from a different perspective. Popper also writes of the differing opinions of Aristotle and Plato on the concept of devolution vs. evolution, an issue central to humanist thinking.

Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, describes the experience of a rich man from 1887 who awakens in 2000 to find himself in a socialist utopia. This book influenced, and is referred to by, many Marxist writers of the time, although its optimism for humankind, rather than its reliance on socialism to achieve this, makes for provocative reading, regardless of one's political or economic beliefs.

Edwin Abbot, *Flatland: A Parable of Spiritual Dimensions*, also makes for provocative reading, raising the possibility that we are missing something, unaware of, or blind to, some aspects of the universe. It is also a satire on class distinctions in Victorian England, and was first published in 1884, four years prior to *Looking Backward*.

Finally, Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, completes the list. The book is a plea for humane treatment of the downtrodden, and evokes compassion and sympathy in any reader. (For someone suffering the indignity of prison, the realization that there are those possessing such a caring quality should be a comfort.)

In retrospect, I realize that my choices address social issues rather than issues involving the nexus of science, cosmology and philosophy. Perhaps I see the direction of the latter

to be dictated by the social climate; perhaps I feel that the same trials and tribulations, the inner struggles we face, will always be present, so that technology should take a backseat.

### **Donna Marxer**

1. *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust. I read it over a two-year period in my 20's and cried when it was over because I missed the characters so much. I want to read it again as a septuagenarian now that I have lived some of it.
2. *The Once and Future King*, T. H. White—in praise of the child in all of us and the adult we become. The ideal mix of fantasy and fate.
3. *The Golden Bowl*, Henry James—just to be reminded of a time when people were really classy.
4. *Atonement*, Ian McEwan—the very best recent novel for its mystery, style and great humanity.
5. *The Art of Eating*, by M. F. K. Fisher. If I can't have great food, I'm damn sure going to read about it!

### **Sam (The Sham) Milligan**

1. *The Confucian Analects* (probably the Legge translation)—available in a cheap edition from Dover, by the way.
2. *Confucius, the Man and the Myth*, H. G. Creel (to let me know what Confucius really said, sorting out all the semi-mystical garbage that the Neo-Confucians added), The John Day Company, reprinted by Kessinger's Rare Reprints.
3. *Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (R.D. Hicks translation), Loeb Library Edition).
- 4-5. I can't think of anything else. Maybe I would take along *some porn* to help me while away the idle moments until somebody floats in on a barrel. Enjoy the day.

### **Bob Murtha**

*The Norton Anthology of English Literature* is a wondrous treasure that could keep a man happy for years. Sadly, we'd have to leave one of the volumes out since there are six of them at over 1,000 pages each.

### **John Rafferty**

1. *The Encyclopedia of World History* (6th Edition)—1,079 pages of facts only, so many they need a 163-page index.
2. *The Bible*, King James version—because how can one not?
3. *Shakespeare*, any good *Complete Works*—“Words, words, words,” and the best ever written.
4. *Ulysses*, Joyce. Time for a third reading, and around year five, another “... yes, I said yes I will yes.”
5. *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust, because with all that time I might finally get past page 10.

### **Chic Schissel**

Were I on a desert island I wouldn't look for books to reinforce my humanist thinking: I no longer have to be reassured that I'm right. I would look to books for entertainment

(and instruction is a form of entertainment). But since I'm required to single out five books here they are, although dozens of other books would be equally desirable, and the thought of having to give up those books would be mighty upsetting.

1. *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain
2. *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens
3. *The Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce
4. *Innumeracy*, John Allen Paulos
5. And a *short story collection* that included Ring Lardner, P.G. Wodehouse, Saki (H.H.Munro), O. Henry, and S.J. Perelman.

### **Barry F. Seidman**

For fun, David Gerrold's *War Against the Chtorr*. Possibly a book on consciousness or determinism by Susan Blackmore or Ted Honderich (and if in prison, Honderich's *Punishment: The Supposed Justifications*, would be cool. Also in prison, *Our Enemies in Blue*, by Kristain Williams). Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. A good book on anarchism or libertarian socialism, or Michael Martin's *Atheism*. But you can't beat some escapism sci fi!

### **Sibanye**

1. & 2. The Nortons: *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* and *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*—everything in one big place: biographies, novel excerpts, poems, essays, etc.
3. *From Slavery to Freedom*, John Hope Franklyn — a comprehensive history of America objectively told.
4. *Black Athena*, Vol. 1, by Martin Bernal. Classical civilization has deep roots in Afroasiatic cultures. No room for the second volume, much to my dismay.
5. *Ulysses*, James Joyce. I have not read it. This would be the perfect time to see what the hype is all about.

### **Wayne Wilson (Humanists of Utah)**

Boy this is a tough one ... only five?

1. Hmm, I guess the best place to start is my favorite author, Kurt Vonnegut. But which book? My personal favorite is *Slapstick, or Lonesome No More*.
2. Next choice is easier: *Shakespeare*, I'll take a good volume of his *Complete Works*.
3. Carl Sagan is also one of my heroes. *Cosmos* is great, but I really like *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, *The Demon Haunted World*, *Pale Blue Dot*, etc., etc.
4. Isaac Asimov, either the *Robots* or *Foundation* series.
5. For the last one, since I've already imposed the notion of a series, I think I'll go for the *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien.

Thank you for this challenge, it has been fun even if I failed miserably!

The avowed aliterate has relinquished an activity that is uniquely human. Apes can watch TV. — Linton Weeks

## **EARTHQUAKE-PROOF IDIOCY IN PERU**

**Terry Wade**

*(Excerpted from Reuters, 11/1/07)*

After a recent devastating earthquake, tens of thousands of Peruvians marched, crawled and wept in Lima to pay homage to a religious icon beloved for surviving centuries of temblors.

The “*Señor de los Milagros*,” a mural painted in a shrine by a slave, has attracted Roman Catholic worshippers seeking miracles since it emerged unscathed from the rubble of a quake that flattened Lima in 1655.

Since then, what is affectionately called the “Brown Christ” has survived hundreds of others, including an 8.0 magnitude earthquake three months ago that rattled Lima and killed more than 500 people south of the city.

“It’s amazing that he has survived all the big ones here,” said Pedro Olivera, 43, dressed in a purple robe like thousands of other worshippers.

Peru’s religious and seismic histories have intertwined for centuries. During major quakes, churches built centuries ago by Spanish colonialists tend to collapse, killing the faithful as they pray.

In the August quake, the San Clemente church that towered over the plaza of Pisco, a coastal city, caved in during a funeral mass, killing 140. Rescue workers wept and declared a miracle when they pulled intact statues of Jesus and other saints from the ruins.

*Comment: So, 140, or 500, or thousands of living, breathing, loving people at a time are crushed to death – even as they worship at mass. Yet the faithful rejoice that a mural and some statues “miraculously” survive the earthquakes. Don’t any of them wonder about God’s priorities? - JR*

## **MORE BARBARISM IN SAUDI ARABIA**

**Tracy Clark-Flory**

*(Excerpted from salon.com, 11/16/07)*

Remember the “Girl of Qatif,” the 19-year-old who admitted in a Saudi court that prior to being gang-raped by seven men 14 times, she had been alone in a car with a man? (He was an old boyfriend and she, now engaged to another man, was trying to retrieve photos.) Remember how as a result, she, the rape victim, was sentenced to 90 lashes? Well, this week, her punishment was more than doubled—she will receive 200 lashes. She’ll also spend six months in jail.

Why? Because her lawyer appealed the sentence. Saudi judges frown upon any questioning of the *sharia* system. While the attackers received stricter sentences—ranging from two to nine years—the Girl of Qatif was sentenced to prison time and 110 more lashes. Because, the court said, of “her attempt to aggravate and influence the judiciary through the media.” Her attorney had his license revoked and will face trial later this month.

## **HERE’S A TIP: LISTEN TO THE WAITRESS**

**John Rafferty**

*“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” — Thomas Jefferson*

Yeah, well, maybe. In its quest to inform the electorate about the most important issues of the 2008 presidential race, America's 21st century media— from network TV and NPR to teen bloggers in their underwear in their parents' basements—made a 24-hour sensation last month of an accusation that Senator Hillary Clinton and some aides did not leave a tip after eating in a Maid-Rite diner in central Iowa.

The next day, the restaurant manager confirmed that the group did, indeed, leave a \$100 tip on a \$157 check, but not before pundits and blowhards of every political stripe weighed in with opinions about how the alleged incident would affect Senator Clinton's chances in the primaries, any Democrat's chance of capturing the White House, and the future of Western civilization.

In the middle of the short-lived frenzy, a waitress who had helped serve Senator Clinton's party, Anita Esterday, told *The New York Times* on the phone:

*"You people are really nuts. There's kids dying in the war, the price of oil right now – there's better things in this world to be thinking about than who served Hillary Clinton at Maid-Rite and who got a tip and who didn't get a tip."*

Indeed, while many of us want to know where the candidates stand on the war, the price of oil, health care, global warming, education, immigration, and church-state separation, the media have instead told us:

- \* John Edwards once spent \$200 for a haircut;
- \* Rudy Giuliani switched his baseball loyalties;
- \* Mike Huckabee lost over 100 pounds;
- \* Dennis Kucinich's wife has a tongue stud;
- \* Fred Thomson's wife dresses sexily;
- \* Mitt Romney used to strap his dog's carrier to the roof of his station wagon on family vacations;
- \* Barack Obama has bad morning breath;
- \* Hillary Clinton showed cleavage in the Senate.

*"I do not take a single newspaper, nor read one a month, and I find myself infinitely the happier for it." – Thomas Jefferson*

We live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups. I ask, in my writing, What is real? Because unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudorealities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. I do not distrust their motives. I distrust their power.  
— novelist Philip K. Dick

*"If we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes, why shouldn't we?" — James Watson, Nobel prize-winning co-discoverer of the structure of DNA.*

## **LEARN FROM HISTORY'S LESSONS**

**Norm R. Allen Jr., Executive Director**

**African Americans for Humanism**

A better question might be: "If we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes without dangerous side effects, why shouldn't we?"

It is understandable that many people would be reluctant to trust governments and wealthy companies that would probably control such knowledge and its use. History provides us with examples of genuine conspiracies in ostensibly democratic nations (the Tuskegee syphilis experiment on Blacks in the U.S. from the 1930's until the 1970's, radioactive experiments carried out on thousands of U.S. citizens beginning in the 1940's, sterilization of 60,000 "inferior" people by the Swedish government between 1935 and 1976, etc.) Incidentally, if Hitler could have had access to such knowledge, and if his side had won WWII, how would he have applied it? In any event, it would seem foolish, if not downright idiotic, to assume that the abuses of the 20th century could never occur in the 21st century or beyond.

Just because humanity has the knowledge and the ability to add genes and make other modifications to the human body, is it necessarily right to do so? This is what medical ethics is all about. To answer this question we must use reason, but we must always think about the possible implications and consequences such changes could have to society, the environment, future generations, other species, etc.

Today there are many powerful and influential people throughout the Western world who are afraid of immigration—legal and illegal. They believe there are too many Arabs, Asians, Africans, Latinos, and other non-Whites coming into their countries. Might some of them not be inclined to join White supremacist eugenics advocates, seeking to add genes only to Whites in an attempt to make better White human beings to the exclusion (and subjugation) of non-Whites? How many genes would be added to the peoples of poor and non-White nations? What would be the geopolitical ramifications of adding genes to certain groups and not to others? Or would the genes be distributed evenly across the board? How likely would that be to occur? Who would distribute them?

That raises another point to consider. On September 28, 2007, the Council for Secular Humanism's executive director, David Koepsell, gave an excellent presentation at the Center for Inquiry/Transnational titled, "Rights to Your Genes: Or Who Owns You?" He noted that genes are already being patented. He believes this is both unethical and absurd. Who will own us if we start adding genes?

If we could add genes without experiencing harmful side effects, without having parts of ourselves patented, and with reasonable assurances that the addition of genes would never be used in efforts to create a master race, we should probably add them. But I'm highly skeptical that such assurances could be made. At this point, I am wary of the idea of adding genes. This wariness is not rooted in reactionary thinking or Ludditism. It is rooted in a desire to learn from history and a warranted distrust of the powers that be.

## **IT COULD EVEN BACKFIRE ON THE RICH**

### **Giddian Beer**

Adding genes could only be done on a case-by-case basis, probably at considerable expense. Therefore, mainly the progeny of those who are privileged could become "better human beings." These people rarely interbreed with the less privileged. To the extent that it is successful, it would lead to a "super race."

Suppose, by some unimaginable process, we add "better human beings" genes to many millions of people, of all races and classes, on all continents; the hope being that these traits will propagate through the generations so that, eventually, they will become characteristics common to all humans. Evolution does not select for "better human

beings”; it selects only for survivability. Rather than propagate the “better human beings” trait, evolution might rarefy it.

Anyway, how many more generations of humans do you expect? My best educated guess is: about ten.

## **GENES AND GENIUS**

**Donna Marxer**

I say “No,” and here is one example why. Recently I caught a discussion on NPR about Asperger Syndrome (AS), which has been described as “high functioning autism.” Among the characteristics of people with AS are poor social skills, motor clumsiness, and language idiosyncrasies. The upside of the disorder is the ability to focus strongly, usually in a limited area that may result in great achievement. Aspergers are attracted to math, physics and computer careers and, at opposite end of the spectrum, the arts and the military—the first for the latitude given to eccentricity and the latter for the discipline.

Achievers thought to suffer from AS were Lewis Carroll, Einstein and today, Bill Gates.

First identified in the early ‘40s, AS is considered though not proven to be genetic and linked to autism. When asked if their gene could be eliminated, would they choose to do so, the NPR radio panelists gave a resounding “No.” They thought important contributions to society would be lost.

I concur. Although it sounds appealing to eliminate the heartbreaking and ever more prevalent appearance of autism and its offshoots, I wonder if it wouldn’t contribute to a leveling, a smoothing out, a deadening of society. And AS is just one example of a host of “inconveniences” to be eliminated.

Science, though, is seemingly unstoppable, and it should be. We need all the reason we can muster. However, controlling science lags far behind. As societies go, IQ outdistances EQ, or common sense for that matter. Power to control genes would have to fall into the right hands. The problem is that there are no right hands. Even if there seem to be, the “law of unforeseen consequences” is always lurking, ready to corrupt the best intentions.

So, although I vote in the negative, until humanism catches up with greed I fear I am whistling in the wind.

## **MORE GENES: WHAT THE HELL FOR?**

**Lee Loshak**

There is great deal of conjecture, debate, and dispute by geneticists on the integral extent to which specific genes, groups of genes working in concert, number of genes or chromosomes, etc., determine species characteristics, and about what makes a given species “superior” to another species. Watson’s jocular remark, regrettably, comes from one of the founders of modern genetic research, and probably reflects his lack of appreciation of the enormousness of the questions and research that evolve from his finding. In that sense, he was ignorant, though only relatively so. Most genetic researchers today are not ignorant of the enormity of the potential findings to which this will lead, but are relatively ignorant as to the interweaving mechanisms for such processes, and the social and ethical implications—still a murky matter.

The concept that “bigger is better,” applicable when higher life forms are compared to lower life forms may, at first, appear clearly evident. Nonetheless, plant genes, for example, are superior to those of well-developed human beings, (who possess a much greater number of genes than plants), in terms of protection from environmental threats: the plant genes have evolved into sturdy defenses against the perils of nature. Some researchers see increase and loss of genes as “a revolving door,” in which gains and losses of genes can result in changes in flora and fauna, though the “plus or minus” of this is relative. Regardless of how far research takes us, the ultimate answer to the question posed by Watson hinges on what one considers “superior.”

Implicit in Watson’s remark is that *Homo sapiens sapiens* are the highest life form at this time. One must then ask how this is defined. Consciousness? Conscience? Social Awareness? Intelligence? Technology? Dogmatism? Religious or spiritual feelings? Parenthetically, the way in which these concepts are themselves defined lacks clarity and they are regarded by some as negative qualities. Few disagree that the potential “payoffs” of these (presumed) positive attributes can lead to chaos, pain, possible destruction of our species or even world destruction. Global warming and a continuing decrease in the number of species are rampant, along with other negatives to the environment, some of which have no doubt not even been recognized yet.

If birds can fly, then why shouldn’t I? We do, and our airplane flights contribute to global warming. Would biological wings stop humankind from all other possible forms of self annihilation? Already we have stealth bombers. Dogs have olfactory sense superior to ours. For what purpose are dogs used by humankind? For friendship, companionship? Or also to “sniff out” explosive materials and illicit drugs? And if we were to manipulate our gene structure to increase our olfactory abilities, would technology produce threats and vices which were more difficult to detect in this manner?

If we are the most “advanced” species, our further development or improvement should come first from introspection, reflection, and a recognition of our limitations, not from looking outward to our greatness or our potential “greatness” in material terms, lest we open another Pandora’s box.

## **BETTER THAN WHO AND WHAT?**

**Irv Millman**

How do we decide what qualities are required to accomplish this objective? Who decides? My hope is that gene technology will advance science to cure so many of the horrible diseases we have to deal with. But the concept of “making better human beings” scares me. How long do they remain better? Better than who and what? It smacks of a “Master Race” society, and it’s been tried before. Remember?

## **WE’RE ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION**

**David Rafferty**

You can argue this from several different positions, but in fact, the question itself is flawed. The problem is: Who decides what is “better?” The traditional argument is usually the other way around: If we could remove the flaws in human design by messing with genes, should we? That’s more answerable, since only the most conservative among us would argue for keeping a malignant gene causing cancer or Down syndrome if it can



be eradicated. But to try to say what would make a perfectly healthy/normal person “better” is open to deeper interpretation.

How about adding genes allowing us to breathe underwater? It might be fun, but is it better? Would it then even be human? Maybe the answer is more about when it becomes necessary to do so (ozone layer fails, need a gene to withstand radiation), than it is our obligation to add genes.

**BEAM ME UP, SCOTTY,  
THERE’S NO INTELLIGENT LIFE DOWN HERE**

**Jerome Mendel**

Looking ahead a few centuries — a spaceship of advanced aliens orbits Earth. The captain to his first mate: “We landed on Earth 10,000 years ago and the planet looked promising. Go see where they stand now.”

The first mate does, and returns. “I see progress,” he says, “but there is still no life on Earth. I recommend we return in another 10,000 years.”

No life? Explanation: The Earth is a teeming, festering cesspool of creatures struggling with each other in a dog-eat-dog, red-in-tooth-and-claw existence—not life.

Not until at least one creature (us, we hope) is able to control its own evolution, pursuing perfection, will there truly be “life on Earth.”

**WHY THE BOSTON RED SOX SWEPT  
THE WORLD SERIES OVER THE  
CHRISTIANITY-BASED COLORADO ROCKIES ...**

*“I won’t claim that prayers to Ba’al resulted in the Red Sox sweep of the Rockies. However, using the ‘logic’ of the theists, I’ll point out that they can’t disprove it either.” — Flash Light*

*“Just look at the World Series results: our prayers have been answered. Who says prayers have no effect??!!” — Chic Schissel*

**... OR NOT**

The above missives were occasioned by this editor’s early October e-mail suggestion that during the then-upcoming baseball playoffs we all pray against the Rockies\* — an organization owned by super-Christian Pete Coors that has a policy of seeking out and hiring “morals-oriented” (i.e.: “Evangelical Christian”) athletes.

The Rockies almost embarrassed all of us on The Dark Side by winning seven straight games to get to the World Series — but were then trounced four straight by the Red Sox. Vindication, however negative, right?

Um, no.

Some post-Series reading turns up the fact that even without ownership encouragement the Red Sox are the second most evangelically Christian team in the big leagues. Sorry, my bad, and that’s it for prayer. — JR

*\*It was a joke, people!*