

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2007

In this month's delayed edition (apologies again, and not much point in including a February calendar insert, is there?) we offer arguments on the idiocy of faith and on the intolerance of the faithless; on the similarities between men-of-faith Moses and Mohammed Atta, and on the passing of Limbo and the coming of Google. We celebrate a 20th century American iconoclast and an American icon for the ages. But first, it's Awards Season: Grammy, Oscar, and Dumbth. — *JR*

“SENTIMENTAL FAVORITE” ROBERTSON WINS 2006 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD

Only 46 of us voted in the 2006 SHSNY Dumbth Awards election (*We told you every vote counted!*), but the outcome, in spite of the as-close-as-it-can-get margin of “victory,” was never really in doubt.

Pat (“God gave Ariel Sharon a stroke”) Robertson led by narrow margins from the first ballots and finished with sixteen, just two more than Michael (“Nuke Iran”) Savage, and four more than Senator James (“Global warming is a hoax”) Inhofe who, thank Google (see page 5) is no longer chairman of the Senate’s Environment and Public Works Committee. Trailing all three was Maine TV executive Michael (“We’ll do global warming stories when Bar Harbor is underwater”) Palmer, with only four votes.

Several voters wanted the prize horse’s-ass statuette awarded to all four, and David Rafferty (before voting for Inhofe) argued for Florida politico Katherine Harris “on general principles and across-the-board stupidity.” But Harvey Offenhartz evoked the sympathy many seemed to feel for “old friend” Reverend Pat, and Dennis Horvitz correctly called the always-wrong preacher-prognosticator the “sentimental favorite.”

Best of all? Sam Milligan cast his vote for Robertson not just for 2006, but for the Reverend Pat’s “lifetime achievement” in the field of dumbth.

Nominating for the 2007 award begins now—write to the P.O. box below, or email john@rafferty.net—and will continue until November 30. Balloting will take place by snail- and e-mail December 1 through 31.

About that Lifetime Achievement in Dumbth ...

On the New Year’s Day 2007 edition of his “700 Club” on the Christian Broadcasting Network, the Rev couldn’t resist another prediction. The Lord told him, he said, to expect a terrorist attack on the United States by the end of 2007 that will result in “mass killing.”

“I’m not necessarily saying it’s going to be nuclear. The Lord didn’t say nuclear. But I do believe it will be something like that” ... and “chaos will rule” ... unless we do “a lot of praying.”

Last year, he claimed that God told him the Pacific Northwest would get slammed by a tsunami in 2006.

**THE CASE AGAINST FAITH
Sam Harris**

(Reprinted from "The Case Against Faith," in "The Politics of Jesus" special cover report in Newsweek, 11/13/06.)

Despite a full century of scientific insights attesting to the antiquity of life and the greater antiquity of the Earth, more than half the American population believes the cosmos was created 6,000 years ago. This is, incidentally, about a thousand years after the Sumerians invented glue. Those with the power to elect presidents and congressmen—and many who themselves get elected—believe that dinosaurs lived two by two upon Noah's Ark, that light from distant galaxies was created en route to the Earth and that the first members of our species were fashioned out of dirt and divine breath, in a garden with a talking snake, by the hand of an invisible God.

This is embarrassing. But add to this comedy of false certainties the fact that 44 percent of Americans are confident that Jesus will return to Earth sometime in the next 50 years, and you will glimpse the terrible liability of this sort of thinking. Given the most common interpretation of Biblical prophecy, it is not an exaggeration to say that nearly half the American population is eagerly anticipating the end of the world. It should be clear that this faith-based nihilism provides its adherents with absolutely no incentive to build a sustainable civilization – economically, environmentally or geopolitically. Some of these people are lunatics, of course, but they are not the lunatic fringe. We are talking about the explicit views of Christian ministers who have congregations numbering in the tens of thousands. These are some of the most influential, politically connected and well-funded people in our society.

It is, of course, taboo to criticize a person's religious beliefs. The problem, however, is that much of what people believe in the name of religion is intrinsically divisive, unreasonable and incompatible with genuine morality. One of the worst things about religion is that it tends to separate questions of right and wrong from the living reality of human and animal suffering. Consequently, religious people will devote immense energy to so-called moral problems—such as gay marriage—where no real suffering is at issue, and they will happily contribute to the surplus of human misery if it serves their religious beliefs.

A case in point: embryonic-stem-cell research is one of the most promising developments in the last century of medicine. It could offer therapeutic breakthroughs for every human ailment (for the simple reason that stem cells can become any tissue in the human body), including diabetes, Parkinson's disease, severe burns, etc. In July, President George W. Bush used his first veto to deny federal funding to this research. He did this on the basis of his religious faith. Like millions of other Americans, President Bush believes that "human life starts at the moment of conception." Specifically, he believes that there is a soul in every 3-day-old human embryo, and the interests of one soul—the soul of a little girl with burns over 75 percent of her body, for instance—cannot trump the interests of another soul, even if that soul happens to live inside a petri dish. Here, as ever, religious dogmatism impedes genuine wisdom and compassion.

A 3-day-old human embryo is a collection of 150 cells called a blastocyst. There are, for the sake of comparison, more than 100,000 cells in the brain of a fly. The embryos that are destroyed in stem-cell research do not have brains, or even neurons. Consequently, there is no reason to believe they can suffer their destruction in any way at all. The truth is that President Bush's unjustified religious beliefs about the human soul

are, at this very moment, prolonging the scarcely endurable misery of tens of millions of human beings.

Given our status as a superpower, our material wealth and the continuous advancements in our technology, it seems safe to say that the president of the United States has more power and responsibility than any person in history. It is worth noting, therefore, that we have elected a president who seems to imagine that whenever he closes his eyes in the Oval Office—wondering whether to go to war, for instance—his intuitions have been vetted by the Creator of the Universe. Speaking to a small group of supporters in 1999, Bush reportedly said, “I believe God wants me to be president.” Believing that God has delivered you unto the presidency really seems to entail the belief that you cannot make any catastrophic mistakes while in office. One question we might want to collectively ponder in the future: do we really want to hand the tiller of civilization to a person who thinks this way?

Religion is the one area of our discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give good evidence and valid arguments in defense of their strongly held beliefs. And yet those beliefs regularly determine what they live for, what they will die for and—all too often—what they will kill for. Consequently, we are living in a world in which millions of grown men and women can rationalize the violent sacrifice of their own children by recourse to fairy tales. We are living in a world in which millions of Muslims believe that there is nothing better than to be killed in defense of Islam. We are living in a world in which millions of Christians hope to soon be raptured into the stratosphere by Jesus so that they can safely enjoy a sacred genocide that will inaugurate the end of human history. In a world brimming with increasingly destructive technology, our infatuation with religious myths now poses a tremendous danger. And it is not a danger for which more religious faith is a remedy.

THE GOLDEN CALF AND 9/11 **Sol Abrams**

There is a remarkable similarity between the terrorists who murdered 3,000 victims at the Twin Towers on the orders of Bin Laden and the 3,000 Israelites who were murdered on the orders of Moses for worshipping a golden calf.

Neither Bin Laden nor Moses believed in religious freedom. The 3,000 Twin Towers victims were classified as infidels by Bin Laden because they did not believe in a god called Allah, whom Bin Laden claimed was the only true god. Anyone who believed in any other god, like Yahweh, the Trinity God, or no god, was an infidel and killing him was justified.

What amazes me is that there is a 100 percent correlation between Bin Laden’s actions and those of Moses in the golden calf massacre. What amazes me even more is that those of the Judeo-Christian tradition either can’t see it or don’t want to see it.

Let’s look closely at the Golden Calf massacre, but begin with a famous Thomas Jefferson quote: “The legitimate powers of government [with regard to religion] extend only to actions that are injurious to others, but it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” Some people held that Jeffersonian belief thousands of years ago, but not Moses then or Bin Laden today.

According to the Scriptures, Moses had been away from his flock for 40 days, spending his time with the God of Israel (who was known as Yahweh but who said that he was a jealous God and that his name was “Jealous”). Meanwhile, Moses’ flock became restless and apprehensive without their leader, feeling that Moses was not coming back and that their God had deserted them. So they decided to either worship another god or make a symbol of a golden calf idol as a symbol of their lost god. Moses’ brother Aaron made the golden calf from the gold collected by the flock.

When Moses returned he was furious and ordered his Levite commander: “Put ye every man his sword upon his thigh, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion and every man his neighbor.” And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses; and there fell people that day about three thousand men. And Moses said, “Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, for every man that hath been against his son and against his brother; that he may also bestow a blessing on you this day.” (Exodus 32: 27-29)

It is interesting to note that Cecil B. DeMille made several changes in the biblical story when he produced his movie, “The Ten Commandments.” He omitted the slaughter scene ordered by Moses and instead showed the Golden Calfers dying as a result of a terrible storm produced by Yahweh; apparently DeMille felt that a slaughter scene would portray Moses in a very unfavorable light. DeMille also accused the Golden Calfers of performing human sacrifice. Not so, according to Exodus, which says that they sacrificed lambs just as the other Israelites did. In effect DeMille tried to give the impression that his hero Moses had nothing to do with the killing of the Golden Calf worshippers. The fact is that Moses was just as guilty of murder of 3,000 fellow Israelites as the 9/11 bombers were of the murder of 3,000 innocent people. The motive for the murders was the same: Either you believe in my God or you are an infidel who deserves to be executed.

Both Moses and Bin Laden were monotheists. The problem with monotheism is that it often leads to the conclusion, “You must believe that my God is the one and only God.” My question is: What does the word “God” mean? To the Jews it is the God of Israel, known usually as “Yahweh.” To most Christians it is the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For Jehovah’s Witnesses, it is Yahweh (Jehovah) whose son is Jesus. To Muslims it is Allah. To the ancient Canaanites it was Baal.

Is this the same God with different names or are they all different Gods? Did Moses’s successor Joshua slay the Canaanites because they believed in a different Creator or because they must call the Creator Yahweh? Did Bin Laden order 9/11 because the victims believe in a different Creator or because His name wasn’t Allah?

Either way, both monotheists, Moses and Bin Laden, felt justified in killing anyone who did not accept their definition of God.

ONE MORE TIME: PRAYER DOESN’T WORK

(Reprinted from October 2006 The Voice of Sanity, the Newsletter of the Upstate S.C. Secular Humanists)

Another major study has confirmed that praying for ill or injured patients has no effect on their outcomes. The July/August, 2006 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer* details the study that involved 1,802 cardiac bypass patients from six hospitals and which randomly assigned them to two Protestant and one Catholic prayer groups.

The patients were divided into three groups: Group I patients, who did not receive prayers after being informed they may or may not receive prayers; Group II patients, who did receive prayers after they were informed they may or may not receive prayers; and Group III patients, who were informed that they definitely would receive prayers.

The results were quite clear. There were no benefits to Group I or Group II patients, and Group III patients actually had worse outcomes. These results confirm previous studies completed over a ten-year period by the Mayo Clinic, Harvard and other stuffy groups.

Bob Barth of Silent Unity, a prayer group in Missouri, said the results did not shake his confidence in the benefits of prayer for the sick: “People of faith don’t need a prayer study to know that prayer works.”

THE POPE’S MESSAGE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

“In his Christmas message, Pope Benedict urged mankind to worship God instead of technology. While he was saying that, his message was broadcast around the world via satellite.” – *Jay Leno*

ATHEISTS AGONISTES

Richard A. Shweder

(Reprinted from the NYTimes OpEd page 11/27/06)

One of the surest ways to bring a certain type of dinner party to a halt is to speak piously about “God.” Earnest reference to sinners, apostates or blasphemers, or to the promise of salvation offered in evangelical churches, is likely to produce the same effect. Among the cosmopolites who live in secular enclaves, religion is automatically associated with darkness, superstition, irrationality and an antique or pre-modern cast of mind. It has long been assumed that religion is opposed to science, reason and human progress; and the death of gods is simply taken for granted as a deeply ingrained Darwinian article of faith.

Why, then, are the enlightened so conspicuously up in arms these days, reiterating every possible argument against the existence of God? Why are they indulging in books—Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*, Sam Harris’s *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Richard Dawkins’s *God Delusion*—in which authors lampoon religion or rail against the devout under the banner of a crusading atheism? Books dictated or co-written by God sell quite well among the 2.1 billion self-declared Christians and 1.3 billion self-declared Muslims of the world. What explains the current interest among secularists in absolutely, positively establishing that the author is a fraud?

The most obvious answer is that the armies of disbelief have been provoked. Articulate secularists may be merely reacting to the many recent incitements from religious zealots at home and abroad, as fanatics and infidels have their ways of keeping each other in business.

A deeper and far more unsettling answer, however, is that the popularity of the current counterattack on religion cloaks a renewed and intense anxiety within secular society that it is not the story of religion but rather the story of the Enlightenment that may be more illusory than real.

The Enlightenment story has its own version of Genesis, and the themes are well known: The world woke up from the slumber of the “dark ages,” finally got in touch with the truth and became good about 300 years ago in Northern and Western Europe.

As people opened their eyes, religion (equated with ignorance and superstition) gave way to science (equated with fact and reason). Parochialism and tribal allegiances gave way to ecumenism, cosmopolitanism and individualism. Top-down command systems gave way to the separation of church from state, of politics from science. The story provides a blueprint for how to remake and better the world in the image and interests of the West's secular elites.

Unfortunately, as a theory of history, that story has had a predictive utility of approximately zero. At the turn of the millennium it was pretty hard not to notice that the 20th century was probably the worst one yet, and that the big causes of all the death and destruction had rather little to do with religion. Much to everyone's surprise, that great dance on the Berlin Wall back in 1989 turned out not to be the apotheosis of the Enlightenment.

Science has not replaced religion; group loyalties have intensified, not eroded. The collapse of the cold war's balance of power has not resulted in the end of collective faiths or a rush to democracy and individualism. In Iraq, the "West is best" default (and its discourse about universal human rights) has provided a foundation for chaos.

Even some children within the enclave are retreating from the Enlightenment in their quest for a spiritual revival; one discovers perfectly rational and devout Jews or Hindus in one's own family, or living down the block. If religion is a delusion, it is a delusion with a future, which it may be hazardous for us to deny. A shared conception of the soul, the sacred and transcendental values may be a prerequisite for any viable society.

John Locke ... almost everyone's favorite political philosopher at the time of the founding of our nation, was a very tolerant man. In his 1689 *Letter Concerning Toleration*, he advocated a policy of live and let live for believers in many faiths, even heretics. But he drew the line at atheists. He wrote: "Lastly, those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of God. Promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human societies, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all."

Instead of waging intellectual battles over the existence of god(s), those of us who live in secular society might profit by being slower to judge others and by trying very hard to understand how it is possible for John Locke and our many atheist friends to continue to gaze at each other in such a state of mutual misunderstanding.

Atheists Agonistes: Times Readers Reply

To the Editor:

Richard Shweder, like most who rail against atheism, doesn't address what atheists today actually think.

One thought is that belief in the Golden Rule and the binding nature of an oath does not require a belief in God and the threat of eternal damnation. Another is that while it may be more pleasant to believe that we live in a world guided by the gentle hand of a supreme being, that does not make it so.

Assuming Mr. Shweder's premise that the conflicts of the 20th century have had little to do with religion, it is also fair to say that the existence of billions of believers did not keep a lid on the violence.

Nor does it today. — *Sandra Osborne, San Francisco*

To the Editor:

Atheists can prove that Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins wrote their books.

Who can prove that there are books “dictated or co-written by God?”

That’s what it’s all about. — *Patricia Berger, NYC*

The problem with being sure that God is on your side is that you can’t change your mind, because God sure isn’t going to change His. — Roger Ebert

THE CHURCH OF GOOGLE’S PROOFS THAT GOOGLE IS GOD

(Edited from <http://churchofgoogle.frih.net/forums/>)

Proof #1: Google is all-knowing (Omniscient). She indexes over 9.5 billion WebPages, more than any other search engine on the Web today. Not only is Google all-knowing, but She also sorts through this vast amount of data using Her patented PageRank method, making said data accessible to us mere mortals.

Proof #2: Google is everywhere at once (Omnipres-ent). Google’s search engine is virtually everywhere on earth at the same time, billions of indexed WebPages hosted from every corner of the earth. With the proliferation of Wi-Fi networks, searchers will eventually be able to access Google from anywhere on earth, truly making Her an omnipresent entity.

Proof #3: Google answers prayers. One can pray to Google by doing a search for whatever question or problem is plaguing one. You can find information on alternative cancer treatments, ways to improve your health, new and innovative medical discoveries, and generally anything that resembles a typical prayer. Ask Google and She will show you the way, but showing you is all She can do; you must then help yourself.

Proof #4: Google is immortal. She cannot be considered a physical being like us. Her Algorithms are spread across many servers; if any were taken down or damaged, another would undoubtedly take its place. Google can theoretically last forever.

Proof #5: Google is infinite. The Internet can theoretically grow forever, and Google will forever index its infinite growth.

Proof #6: Google remembers all. Google caches WebPages regularly and stores them on Her massive servers.

Proof #7: Google can “do no evil” (Omnibenevo-lent). Part of Google’s corporate philosophy — [www .google.com/corporate/tenthings.html](http://www.google.com/corporate/tenthings.html) — is the belief that a company can make money without being evil.

Proof #8: Evidence of Google’s existence is abundant. There is more evidence for the existence of Google than for any other God worshiped today.

GRANDFATHERED INTO HELL

Chuck McMellon

Arthur Harris’s concern for those lost souls of Limbo in the December issue of PIQUE raises another issue. Not that the millions of Limbo-ized souls aren’t important. What confuses me is the fate of all the Catholic souls who ate meat on Fridays, myself included.

It was pretty clear when I was a kid (eat meat on Friday and go to Hell), but now there seems to be some confusion about this interesting ritual. Many people believe that

Vatican II changed the rule in 1966 to not eating meat only Ash Wednesday and Lenten Fridays. It didn't. In 1983, Canon Law #1251 stated that it was all Fridays, I guess just to make sure everybody got it right. Yet my confusion lingers. I found another discussion of this on the Internet (<http://www.catholic-pages.com/life/fridaymeat.asp>).

"It's very interesting to note that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (the United States' Episcopal Conference) is currently debating whether to rescind the determination and require all Catholics to abstain from meat on all Fridays of the year. The Bishops are considering that a return to meatless Fridays for all Catholics would be of benefit because: It is an expression of one's Catholicity; and in reparation for the grave sin of abortion."

Is that everybody's abortions or just Catholics' abortions? So the confusion goes on, yet there is a serious issue in all of this. The good souls who ate the steak tartare, the hamburgers, or the other white meat (does pork count?) on Friday committed a mortal sin. And what about all the good, church-going Catholics who eat meat on Friday because they think Vatican II set them free? Is ignorance of the law an excuse? Many of them never confessed (like me) and, apparently, will be sent straight to Hell for the sin when they die. I guess I will be grandfathered into Hell. Also, are the souls that already died still in Hell? Do they get a "get out of Hell" free card if the Church changes the law again?

MENCKEN'S BIGOTRY

Chic Schissel

I've just read *The Skeptic*, by Terry Teachout, a biography of H.L. Mencken, the notorious freethinker and skeptic who has been attacked as an anti-Semite. This is upsetting to me since I'm a Mencken fan.

Bigotry is reinforced by identity. It is human nature to dislike those who get in our way – a genetic paranoia that had primitive survival value. Others get in our way and it annoys us, but if we can identify the annoyer as a member of a group we blame the group.

If we see an incompetent driver delaying or even endangering us we reflexively growl "bad driver." But if the car has MD plates we generalize and conclude that doctors are miserable drivers. Asians, blacks, and religious and other groups identified by complexion or apparel are common targets of bigotry. And Jews, as a socially conspicuous minority, have always been readily identified and easy targets.

I have always enjoyed Mencken, especially his diatribes against religion, medical quackery, and psychics. I don't think he deserves to be called an anti-Semite. A great many of his friends were Jews, he campaigned for the U.S. to forget the quotas and accept Jewish refugees from Hitler, and he worked to help Jews escape the Nazis. It's true that, especially in his private, not-for-publication writings that were recently unearthed, there are many nasty and discourteous remarks about Jews. But he also wrote nasty and discourteous harangues against Christians, blacks, politicians, most races and nations. He simply fell into the universal error of confusing the individual with the group. And he never intended these remarks to be made public.

Comment: Since college I, too, have enjoyed Mencken's out-rageous attacks on bishops and boobs (see below). But even as I love the music of Wagner and the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Chic, I can't wish away their (and Mencken's) anti-Semitism.— JR

H.L. MENCKEN ON THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

(From www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/qframe.htm)

Religion is fundamentally opposed to everything I hold in veneration — courage, clear thinking, honesty, fairness, and, above all, love of the truth.”

“The Jews fastened their religion upon the Western world, not because it was more reasonable than the religions of their contemporaries — as a matter of fact, it was vastly less reasonable than many of them — but because it was far more poetical.”

“The Catholic clergy seldom bother to make their arguments plausible; it is plain that they have little respect for human intelligence, and indeed little belief in its existence.”

“The chief contribution of Protestantism to human thought is its massive proof that God is a bore.”

“Whenever a reporter is assigned to cover a Methodist conference, he comes home an atheist.”

“Puritanism: The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

“We must respect the other fellow’s religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.”

“People say we need religion when what they really mean is we need police.”

“The Creator is a comedian whose audience is afraid to laugh.”

“ALL POSSESS ALIKE LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE”

John Rafferty

“The most sublime picture in American history is of George Washington on his knees in the snow at Valley Forge. That image personifies a people who know that it’s not enough to depend on our own courage and goodness; we must also seek help from God, our Father and Preserver.” — Ronald Reagan.

Mm, yeah, except that the picture isn’t history, it’s fiction. All the paintings, the etchings, the woodcuts, the two-penny stamp, were done decades after Washington’s death, by men who had never even seen him, and who were all illustrating a fairy tale. Where did they get their fairy tale? From the totally-fabricated and best-selling *Life of Washington* written and rushed into print after Washington’s death by Mason Locke Weems in 1800 — the same “Parson Weems” who, in a later edition, added his famous tale of the hatchet and the cherry tree, featuring an insufferable, priggish little George telling his father, “I cannot tell a lie, I did it with my little hatchet.”

(And ever after, millions of schoolchildren who were fed that story thought, “Jesus, what a little creep.”)

George Washington, the victorious commanding general of the Revolution (the “glorious cause”), the unanimously-elected and re-elected first President of the United States, the man who could have been president-for-life or *king* if he’d wished it, was—and is—a figure like no other in American history. In a post-ironic age in which we assume our leaders have feet of clay (and recently heads of the same material), it’s difficult to imagine the awe in which Washington was held by his contemporaries and by Americans for a century after his death. It took the steadily-growing cynicism and disillusion of the 20th century (How about the slaves? and losing more battles than he

won? and didn't his screw-up start the French and Indian War? and *wooden teeth*?) that gradually transformed him into the gray eminence so much less witty than Franklin, so much less intellectual than Jefferson, so much less tragic than Lincoln. But for Americans of an earlier time, George Washington personified the American ideal, *was* America.

Which is why the historical revisionists of the Christianist Right have spent more time revising Washington's biography and beliefs than they have spent on all the other founding fathers combined. And by "time" I mean 200 years, because the Christianizing-of-Washington industry began immediately after his death in 1799.

Some relatives of Washington claimed that he was really a believing Christian and a member of the Episcopal church in good standing. His widow Martha, who was a believing Christian and an Episcopalian in good standing, was *not* one of them.

As Washington lay dying for a couple of days, lay *knowing* he was dying, conscious and in full command of his faculties, he never asked for a clergyman, never uttered a prayer, never once spoke of a god or an afterlife. He did tell his physician, "I am not afraid to go." A man of the Enlightenment to the very end, one of the last things he did was to take his own pulse and monitor it as it slowed down.

But according to one of today's leading Christianists, Tim LaHaye, the author of the *Left Behind* novels, "Were George Washington living today, he would fully identify with the Bible-believing brand of evangelical Christianity that is having such a positive influence on our nation."

The utter, bald-faced mendacity of that statement is breathtaking. Washington was a Deist and a Freemason. In the thousands of his speeches, proclamations, public and private letters and private conversations that have been recorded, the words "Jesus Christ" never appear in a believing or worshipful context. Not once. George Washington was not a Christian in any ordinarily accepted sense of the word.

But isn't it at all possible that Washington did kneel in the snow and slush of Valley Forge every day to get divine guidance? No, not possible, because in keeping with his non-beliefs as a Deist and his practices as a Freemason, he did not kneel in church – or anywhere else. There are dozens of eyewitness accounts that testify to his upright position in church while most of the congregants knelt.

Where else did he not kneel? In the army, at Valley Forge – or anywhere else. When Weems made up his Washington-in-the-snow story, complete with detailed eye-witness accounts that turned out to be utterly bogus, he was either ignorant of or ignored a fact of eighteenth-century military life.

Washington was commander-in-chief of the army throughout the Revolution, and so would be senior to any other officer at any religious service, including the chaplain conducting the service. According to military protocol of the time, the senior officer did not kneel.

[Painting of Washington kneeling in prayer – caption: *Baloney*]

He attended church services during the Revolution because he wanted to set an example for the men. Like Franklin and Adams, Washington believed that most men needed religion to keep them in line, and keeping his ragtag army in line was as much a problem for him as was fighting the British. And although Washington attended church on occasion with Martha while he was president and during his retirement, he did so because, one, it was a small favor he could do for his wife, and two, it was part of the

established social routine of an eighteenth-century Virginia gentleman, the noblesse oblige of setting a good example for the community.

But Episcopal services in those days included a communion service for the devout, usually held one Sunday a month, after the regular service. It is a matter of more than one record that Washington always left church before communion. In New York, during his presidency, when one sermonizing pastor made a point of criticizing public figures who avoided the communion service, Washington made a point of avoiding that church ever after.

And yes, he was a vestryman of his Mount Vernon Episcopal church, as was the Deist Jefferson at Monticello, and probably Madison and Monroe at their homes in Virginia. But that, too, was a gentleman's obligation in the days when churches, not government, ran the schools and charities, supervised by the vestrymen. The vestry at that time was also the local court, so being a vestryman was an obligation no man in political life could ignore.

Because he was an intensely private man who kept his personal opinions very much to himself, the historical revisionists have used every even-offhand reference he ever made to "Providence" or "the Creator" as proof that he was a real and practicing Christian. But Thomas Jefferson knew better. After Washington's death, Jefferson wrote in his private journal that when some clergymen had sent the new first president a set of questions, trying to pin him down as to whether or not he was a Christian, "the old fox was too cunning for them. He answered every article of their address particularly, except that, which he passed over without notice."

Today we call that "spin control."

Among his other services to the country, Washington presided—as the unanimously-elected President of the Constitutional Convention—over the writing of our nation's founding document. More than a few clergymen were outraged that the new Constitution (our "Magna Carta") made no mention of Jesus. Washington offered a classic defense of the First Amendment even before that amendment was written.

"I am persuaded," he wrote to some complaining ministers, that "... the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction. To this consideration we ought to ascribe the absence of any regulation, respecting religion, from the Magna-Carta of our country."

(When Hamilton was asked why the Constitution made no mention of God, he wisecracked, "We forgot.")

With the Constitution approved, an election held, and Washington the unanimous choice of the Electoral College, the great man was inaugurated. And, according to the revisionists, swore to "... preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States, so help me God," then kissed the Bible on which he swore.

No, he didn't say that. And no, he didn't do that.

The presidential oath of office—in Article II, Section 1, paragraph 9 of the Constitution—does *not* include the words "so help me God." *But*, the revisionists claim, Washington added the words at his first inauguration, and every president since has carried on the tradition.

In fact, there are dozens of eyewitness accounts of Washington's inaugurations, including verbatim-text newspaper articles, and not one of them mentions "so help me God" or any kissing of any Bible. Not one.

And all the other presidents? There is not a single mention of the phrase “so help me God” until Chester Alan Arthur was sworn in in 1881, ninety-two years and twenty presidents after Washington. Even since then most presidents have not deviated from the text of the Constitution. “So help me God” is not in the Constitution or in most of our Presidential history.

But was it Washington’s intention, as the revisionists claim, to help found “a Christian nation”?

No. In 1790, he wrote an extraordinary letter to the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island, a group that would have much to fear from a “Christian establishment” in America. They had congratulated him on the religious liberty guaranteed by the new Constitution.

Washington, Susan Jacoby writes in *Freethinkers*, saw this liberty not as a grudging concession, or even as a generous gift from the American government, but as an inalienable right of American citizenship:

“All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunity of citizenship,” he wrote the Jews of Newport. “It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens. May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

May you, George Washington, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of all freethinking Americans. Happy 274th Birthday.