

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

January, 2007

Happy—albeit secular and skeptical—New Year. We trust that the coming months will be better for all of us than the past twelve (although November '06 wasn't bad), and we consider first in these pages the question of trust itself. We don't trust Christians meddling in the military or our history books. We disbelieve in spirits, we do believe in Darwinism, and we won't swear on the Bible. We have a few laughs, and we nominate someone named Mikey for President. Peace now. — *JR*

FEBRUARY PIQUE WILL BE LATE

Apologies in advance, but the entire editorial staff of PIQUE will be out of the country for almost a month, so February PIQUE will not mail until the third week of that month.

— *JR*

TRUST

Conrad Claborne

Among the ideas inherent in the definition of this word in the *American Heritage Dictionary*, Second College Edition, are these: *confidence in the integrity, ability, character, and truth of a person or thing ... reliance on something [now or] in the future; hope. ... to rely; depend.*

Think: Do you trust the people who are running our government and our major corporations today? Do you trust that they will put the needs and concerns of America and all Americans before their own particular interests or profits?

Neither do I.

The American economic rollercoaster—to which no governmental brakes were applied as it raced from robber-baron greed in the 1890's to the stock market madness of the Roaring '20s—finally spun out of control and crashed in 1929, bringing on the Great Depression of the '30s. Our country was so dysfunctional that Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal put legal brakes and strictures on the economy so we could slowly pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Without these changes we might never have risen from the ashes. Our parents and grandparents learned – and remembered – that lesson.

In *Wealth and Democracy*, Kevin Phillips observes that the United States remembered that hard-learned lesson until around 1980, and then slowly began to dismantle the old safe model to fashion a racier and much less dependable “new and improved” model. For instance: the savings-and-loan system—a product of the New Deal—gave working and middle-class Americans a safe, insured place to save their money, while earning a modest return. But in the '80s, Wall Street's go-go hotshots, enviously eyeing the billions tucked safely away in savings-and-loan vaults, convinced a compliant (and sometimes corrupt) Congress to relax the rules and let those Masters of the Universe play with those government-insured deposits. The result? The greatest financial default in our nation's history, and we the taxpayers, not the hotshots, paid the bill.

Did anyone learn anything? We learned to trust our government a little less; we'd already been lied to about Vietnam, and found out that one of our presidents was, indeed, "a crook." But did the new Masters of the Universe who were responsible for the savings-and-loan debacle learn anything? Or did they just last year try to open up the trillions in the Social Security system to strip mining by a new generation of their friends in stock market boiler rooms?

Who are they? People like anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist, who have made it their life's work to dismantle the nation built by FDR. Who are offended by the restrictions the old-fashioned model places on economic race car drivers who want to strip away government power so they can throw what's left in the trash. In fact, Norquist is famous for saying that his goal is to shrink government "down to a size where we can drown it in the bathtub."

The FDR model put together a government-and-business economy that worked for everyone, rich, middle class and poor alike. The Norquist unfettered free-market model is a fast track for the rich, while the rest of us are left behind and ignored. In the end the rich—who encourage unchecked global population growth because they want expanding markets for the crap they sell us—will run through all our natural resources, and a global population glut will mean that hundreds of millions, perhaps billions, will be without the jobs they need to be able to buy the gadgets and baubles. But that's not their problem – it's your grandchildren's.

In the FDR economy, we all have an honored role to play in American democracy; in the Norquist model we're merely market units in the service of those with great wealth and great power.

Such power needs an architect. Norquist's architect is Karl Rove, an until-lately unelected senior official in the George W. Bush administration, the President's principal advisor, whose salary you and I paid. President Dubya could not do the amount and degree of damage to American society that he has without Karl Rove filling his ear with bad ideas which led to bad policy. I have complained bitterly that George Herbert Walker Bush had no ideas for the future of our country, and that George W. Bush has all the wrong ones!

Bush, Rove, Norquist and their minions in Congress have further eroded our trust by corrupting the very language we use. To trust, we must believe that the people talking to us are at least telling us what they think is the truth, even if we don't agree. But they write laws allowing industrial polluters to foul the air even more, and for longer periods, and call those laws the President's "Clear Skies" initiative. "No Child Left Behind," without any real federal money behind it, is just another betrayal of the public-school system, and is leaving more children than ever behind. Sinking deeper into the Iraq quagmire was called "staying the course" until it wasn't called that anymore, and "No, we never called it 'staying the course'." "Supporting our troops" means windy rhetoric and yellow ribbons, while cutting funds for the veterans' hospitals that treat the tens of thousands of troops who have been maimed in Iraq.

They are the Masters of Dirty Tricks, who pass laws in the middle of the night; who shut their opponents out of congressional committee meetings and then complain of "partisan politics"; who, when their lies are exposed go after the leakers rather than the bad guys, and then piously complain that every exposure more than a week old is "old news" that no one would pay attention to if it wasn't for a "liberal media conspiracy."

Do you trust them? Any of them? I don't.

Paul Kurtz, the grand old philosopher of secular humanism, believes trust to be one of a society's core values. Without this at our bedrock, we cannot function properly. Yet contemporary American society has completely lost its grip on this simple fact. We assume that our government—of either party—lies. We take it for granted that big business lies. The media, which Thomas Jefferson assumed would be the guarantors of our freedom, are at best the government's and business' timid lap dogs, at worst complicit in their lies. We are in societal free fall.

How do we restore honesty to our public life and discourse? Whom can we trust?

JUST IN CASE YOU THOUGHT GEORGE W. BUSH LEARNED ANYTHING FROM THE ELECTION

(Excerpted from "Family Planning Farce," an editorial in The New York Times, 11/24/06)

It sounds like a late-night parody of President Bush's bad habit of filling key posts with extreme ideologues and incompetents. To head family planning programs at the Department of Health and Human Services, Mr. Bush has tapped Eric Keroack, a doctor affiliated with a group vehemently opposed to birth control and someone nationally known for his wacky theory about reproductive health.

Before his appointment, Dr. Keroack served as the medical director of A Woman's Concern, a network of pregnancy counseling clinics across Massachusetts whose method of trying to dissuade women from having an abortion includes spreading the scary and medically inaccurate myth that having an abortion steeply increases the risk of breast cancer. The group also has a policy against dispensing contraception even to married women. It has stated on its Web site that the distribution of contraceptive drugs or devices is "demeaning to women, degrading of human sexuality and adverse to human health and happiness." ...

To the Bush White House, apparent opposition to contraceptives, abortion and science was the opposite of disqualifying. It was a winning trifecta.

Comment: *As advised in these pages earlier, the Right will go after contraception just as soon as they've outlawed abortion.*

PRAY OR DIE

(From The NYTimes 12/7/06)

As of December 9 last, said Sheik Hussein Barre Rage, chairman of the Islamic court in Bulo Burto, Somalia, anyone in town who does not pray five times a day in compliance with Islamic law will be beheaded.

A HUMANIST AMONG THE SPIRITS

Russell Dunn

I've borrowed my headline, slightly altered, from a book about the famous American magician, Harry Houdini, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, which focuses on the later years of Houdini's life, which he spent investigating and debunking spiritualists.

Houdini deeply wanted to believe in a spirit world for his own personal reasons (making contact with his beloved, deceased mother was one) but knew, as a professional

magician, exactly how gullible and easily fooled humans could be. As a result, he maintained a liberal dose of skepticism throughout his career, and made every effort to evaluate the claims of spiritualists in as dispassionate a manner possible. This led him into lively debates with the famous Sir Arthur Conan Doyle—an ardent believer in spiritualism—who contended that Houdini was secretly a spiritualist disguised as a magician. Despite Houdini’s efforts, he could never convince Conan Doyle that spiritualism was a sham.

How times have stayed the same! Despite humanity’s living today in an unparalleled age of science, with remarkable advances in all fields of knowledge, skepticism remains in short supply. There are literally millions of neo-Conan Doyles who still believe in virtually all kinds of claptrap. In fact, the list of nonsensical beliefs has grown longer, with more Americans than ever believing in such unproven and suspect notions as angels, therapeutic touch, magic crystals, demons, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, poltergeists, pyramidology, ghosts, alien abductions, demonic possession. Satan, channeling, reincarnation, human auras, ESP, crashed saucers, and — need I go any further?

Is it any wonder then, given the present context of society’s irrational beliefs, that religiosity is far more pervasive than any of our forebears could possibly have imagined? In the Age of Reason, they believed that religion was on the way out, and would ultimately die a natural death within the next century. Religion, however, is thriving seemingly at an all-time high, with a record breaking 90 percent of the population espousing a belief in some kind of higher power.

What I find particularly interesting about paranormal phenomena is that until a colorful label is applied, there is little thought given to the subject. Prior to 1947, for instance, few reports were made concerning Unidentified Flying Objects. Then, after a supposed space vehicle was observed and an astute newspaper man in 1947 likened it to a “flying saucer,” UFOs have been seen in unparalleled numbers, and the fanatic UFO/flying saucer cult grew enormously.

Likewise, until several decades ago, angels were rarely seen, even by religious fanatics, or mentioned in everyday conversation. They were just spoken of in the abstract as entities in the Bible. Then, all at once, angels became popular around the time a TV show called “Highway to Heaven” aired, and dozens of movies about angels have since been produced, including “City of Angels,” “Michael,” and “What Dreams May Come.” Now, it’s all that you can do just to go to a party and not hear someone espousing a belief that angels are protecting people on earth, much like spiritual bodyguards.

As a secular humanist, I find talk about angels and spirits a bit mystifying and incomprehensible, and sometimes I wonder if maybe I’m the one who’s out of tune with everyday reality.

Quite candidly, in all the years I have lived, I have never seen an angel or a ghost – not even once! Nor have I felt the presence of an invisible entity or guiding spirit. Never! To show you just how much of a materialist I am, when I go hiking alone in the woods, it never occurs to me that I might have a retinue of spirits trailing along behind me, ready to lend spiritual assistance at a moment’s notice. When I go alone, I feel alone!

Inevitably the label “disbeliever” gets applied to me whenever I express credulity or skepticism about such matters. I don’t know about you, but to me the word “disbeliever” has a negative ring to it, implying a wide range of negative attributes, i.e.: untrusting,

doubting, pessimistic, impossible to satisfy, and non-intuitive, whereas “believer” suggests a wide range of noble qualities, such as trusting, intuitive, loyal, and faithful.

The fact that “disbelieving” in the unproven can be made into a negative is more than just a trick of language. As humans, we seem to be hot-wired to respond to the mystical and superstitious, be they ghosts, witches, God, or ESP. Those of us who don’t believe in such manifestations may be the exception, going against what evolution has programmed into us over billions of years – which can be perceived by the majority of humans as a threat to their sense of underlying reality.

Call it a deficiency of the imagination or lack of proper genetic programming, but I simply cannot believe in something that I cannot see, hear, feel, intuit, or accept as intellectually probable. And though it may feel strange at times, I find myself living in a world where most people believe in a whole host of things I cannot see or accept. And so I remain – a secular humanist among the spirits.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #83

(Excerpted from NY Daily News “That’s Odd” 12/15/06)

A Nevada state senator and also-ran in this year’s Republican primary for governor (Bob Beers, R-Las Vegas) will introduce a bill in the state legislature in February allowing teachers to carry guns in classrooms to stem a rise in school violence.

“Part of the problem,” Beers says, “is a small percentage of the population is brought up without a knowledge of and respect for guns.”

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #84

(Excerpted from AP 12/10/06)

A lawmaker in firearm-friendly Texas wants to help more people get the chance to shoot live animals – even if those people can’t see.

A bill filed for the 2007 legislative session would permit legally blind hunters to use laser sights, or lighted pointing instruments. (A sighted companion can then tell them when they’re on target.) “This opens up the fun of hunting to additional people, and I think that’s great,” said Republican Edmund Kuempel, the bill’s sponsor.

MIKEY WEINSTEIN FOR AIR FORCE CHIEF OF STAFF

(Excerpted from “These people should be court-martialed,” an interview of Mikey Weinstein by Alex Koppelman on salon.com, 12/13/06)

When a Christian group shot a video inside the Pentagon that featured uniformed senior military officers talking about their evangelical faith, Mikey Weinstein went on the attack. Himself a former Air Force lawyer and Air Force Academy grad (PIQUE, “Separation of Church and Air Force,” June, ‘05), Weinstein, who is Jewish, is the founder and president of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation. He founded the MRFF earlier this year to oppose the spread of religious intimidation in a military increasingly dominated by evangelical Christians. In his own words ...

“We have a virulently dominionist, fundamentalist evangelical Christian element within the Pentagon. They would prefer this to be the ‘Pentecostalgon,’ not the Pentagon. They’re trying to turn the Pentagon into a frickin’ faith-based initiative, and that is not what our military is about.

“These are the people who, when I talk to senior members of the military at the flag-level rank [admiral or general] that have looked at me and said, ‘Come on, Mikey, what’s your problem? We have the cure to cancer. If you had the cure to cancer, wouldn’t you want to spread the word?’ They ... don’t have the mental wherewithal to understand that to a person who isn’t an evangelical Christian, you’re calling our faith a cancer. ...

“[The video] is absolutely violative of a mountain of Department of Defense internal regulations, guidelines, core values, instructions, making it very clear that members of the military cannot endorse any one particular political position, partisan religious view, they can’t hold up a tube of toothpaste like Colgate and push it. Irrespective of that, it’s also blatantly violative of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, and at least as important it’s violative of Clause 3, Article 6 of the Constitution – which states that we will never have a religion test for any position in the federal government, which was brilliantly prescient of our Founding Fathers.”

**NO, WAIT ... MIKEY WEINSTEIN
FOR SECRETARY OF DEFENSE**

“This, to me, constitutes as much of a national security threat to this country as al-Qaeda. In fact, the video itself, to me, would be the No. 1 recruiting tool that I would expect bin Laden ... to get angry young Islamic men and women in Iran, Syria and Lebanon to join the insurrection and jihadi terrorist activities. This would be a perfect accelerant to create even further conflagration.

“Now, I was a JAG [judge advocate general, the lawyers who act as prosecutors and defense attorneys within the military] lawyer in the Air Force. I spent three and a half years as a lawyer for President Ronald Reagan in the West Wing, I’ve been Ross Perot’s general counsel. I know the religious right would love to vilify me as a tree-hugging Northern California Sierra Club membership, chardonnay-sipping liberal—not that there’d be anything wrong with that, to wax Seinfeldian—but I’m not. I’m a Republican. And my family has a very, very long and distinguished military history. We have three consecutive generations of military academy graduates, and my youngest son, who’s at the Air Force Academy now ... is the sixth member of my family to attend the academy. We have 115 years of combined active-duty military service to this country in my immediate family from every combat engagement from World War I to the current one, and this is a pernicious torturing of what our military is supposed to be about.

“Of course, I realize people have religious rights ... and these people can pray all they want to themselves, like kids in school can pray to themselves, but when you’re in the military, and you’re coming in like Catton [a General who appears in the video], whom I knew when I was a kid at the (Air Force) Academy, and he goes, ‘I share my faith, that’s who I am, and let me tell you right now, the hierarchy as an old-fashioned American is that your first duty is to the Lord, second to your family and your third is to your country.’ That is the exact opposite of what is taught, and for anyone who understands anything about the military, it is always the country first. When you’re told, ‘Troopers, we’re going to go take that hill,’ you can’t stop, fall to your knees and see what your particular version of Moses, Vishnu, Satan, Jesus, Mohammed, Allah, whatever they’re going to say, and then quickly make a cellphone call to your family. So it is beyond-the-pale egregious, it is a national security threat every bit as bad as al-Qaeda, and these people should be court-martialed.” ...

OKAY, MIKEY WEINSTEIN FOR PRESIDENT!

“Many [evangelical Christians] tell me, ‘Mikey, OK, Anne Frank, Dr. Seuss, Jack Benny, Gandhi, they’re all burning eternally in the fires of hell.’ And here’s the distinction they just don’t fucking get ... I would give my last drop of blood and my last breath, and I would commend my three children in the Air Force—one of whom’s going to be heading to Iraq in a few months—to give their last drop of blood and their last breath to support the rights of these people to believe that Anne Frank is burning eternally in hell ... If they want to believe that their version of Jesus has her burning eternally in hell, I’d give my life for that. But I will not do that if my government tells me who are the children of the greater God and who are the children of the lesser God or no God at all. And that’s what these monsters are doing. ...

“When you have the leadership believing that to be a good soldier, good Marine, good airman or sailor you have to be not just a Christian but the right type of Christian, we’re no better than al-Qaeda. And it’s hideous, beyond belief. My kids were called ‘fucking Jews’ and accused of total complicity, they and their people, in the execution of Jesus Christ, by superiors up and down the chain of command at the Air Force Academy.

“Look, Sinclair Lewis said it best in the 1930s. He came back from Germany ... and he said that he had seen fascism up close and personal, and he knew that when it came to America it would be wrapped in the American flag, carrying a cross. And you know what? He’s right. ...

“This is not a Christian-Jewish issue, and it’s also not a political spectrum, left or right issue, it’s a Constitutional right-and-wrong issue. These officers, and what’s happening in that video, simply by appearing in a video that is blatantly and vociferously sectarian ... they should be court-martialed.”

FINDING JESUS

(Excerpted from Panviews, the newsletter of PA Non-Believers, November, 2006)

A man, drunk and lost, is stumbling through a wood when he comes upon a preacher baptizing people in a river. He wades into the water and bumps into the preacher. The preacher grabs the drunk by the collar and demands, “Are you ready to find Jesus?”

“Sure,” the drunk says, “sure I am.”

The preacher pushes the drunk’s head underwater, pulls him up and asks, “Brother, have you found Jesus?”

“No,” the drunk says between gasps.

The preacher is shocked, but dunks the drunk again, holds him under longer, pulls him up, and asks again, “Brother, have you found Jesus?”

“No,” the drunk repeats, spitting water.

Determined, the preacher shoves his head back underwater, holds it under as long as he dares, then pulls the drunk up out of the water. “Brother,” he shouts, “have you found Jesus yet?”

Gasping, the drunk shouts back, “No, I haven’t found Jesus. Are you sure this is where he fell in?”

IT WASN’T A RIB

(Excerpted from “The Way Eve Tells It”, in Nov 2006 FIG Leaves, the newsletter of Ohio’s Free Inquiry Group.)

After a week in the Garden of Eden, God came to visit Eve. “So,” he asked, “How’s everything going?”

“Oh, God, it’s all so beautiful,” Eve said. “The sunrises and sunsets are breathtaking – everything is wonderful. But I have one problem, these breasts you’ve given me. The middle one pushes the other two out and I’m constantly knocking them with my arms, catching them on branches and bushes – they’re a real pain.” Since many other parts of her body came in pairs, she said—limbs, eyes, ears—having just two breasts might leave her more “symmetrically balanced.”

“Okay,” God replied, “but remember, this was my first shot at this; I’ll fix it right away.” So God removed Eve’s middle breast and tossed it in the bushes.

A few weeks later, God visited Eve in the Garden of Eden again. “Well, Eve, how is my favorite creation?”

“Fantastic,” she replied, “except for one oversight. All the animals are paired off – they all have mates except me. I feel so all alone.”

God thought for a minute, then said. “You know, you’re right again. How could I have overlooked this? You do need a mate, and I will immediately create a man from a part of you that you don’t need. Now, let’s see ... where did I put that useless boob?”

SCIENTISTS: SCIENCE IS HARD

(Transcribed from The Onion Radio News, www.theonion.com/content/radionews/8/27/06)

ANNOUNCER: It’s The Onion Radio News. The National Science Foundation concludes: science is hard. This is Doyle Redland reporting. The National Science Foundation’s annual symposium wrapped up in Indianapolis today, with 1500 scientists reaching the conclusion that science is hard. NSF Chairman Louis Ferria:

FERRIA: This newly-discovered law of difficulty holds true for all branches of science, especially my area of particle physics. Christ, particle physics is hard.

ANNOUNCER: The Science-Is-Hard theorem has been gathering momentum since the 1997 publication of physicist Stephen Hawking’s breakthrough paper titled *Lorentz Variation and Gravitation is Just About the Hardest Friggin’ Thing in the Known Universe*.

Doyle Redland for The Onion Radio News.

A CHRISTIAN NATION? NOT NOW, NOT EVER.

John Rafferty

(The following is an outline of my hour-long presentation, “Is America a Christian Nation?” delivered to a full house – thank you all – at the Muhlenberg Library November 4, the 210th anniversary of the signing in 1796 of the U.S.-Tripoli Treaty of Peace and Friendship, about which see below.)

Whether it’s Pat Robertson thundering, “There is no such thing as separation of church and state in the Constitution. It is a lie of the Left and we are not going to take it anymore,” or Laura Bush cooing that “The Bill of Rights says that our rights came from our Creator” (almost certainly confusing the ten amendments with the Ten Commandments), we’ve all heard it so many times that many Americans—perhaps most—accept the idea of America as a “Christian nation” as fact when, in fact, it isn’t.

Many of those Americans are innocents who just don't understand why they can't have organized prayer in public schools and Christmas crèches in town halls. But many are historical revisionists whose "Christian nation" claims are based on five arguments: 1) That America was settled by Christians, most famously the Pilgrim Fathers; 2) That Americans have always been overwhelmingly Christian, and have wanted their government to reflect their religion; 3) That the founding fathers' intention was to create a Christian nation; 4) That our founding documents, including the Constitution, are based on Christian principles; and 5) That only in recent years has our Christian heritage been subverted by liberals and secular humanists.

The first two arguments are only half truths; the other three are blatant falsifications.

1. The Pilgrim Fathers are, indeed, the best-known of the early settlers, and yes, they did come here to practice their religion. But freebooters and pirates in Jamestown preceded them by 13 years, and the Virginia charter was all about making money. What's more, the first African slaves—including Muslims—landed in Virginia a year *before* the pious Puritans landed on Plymouth Rock.

And although the Pilgrims' Mayflower Compact was a revolutionary pre-democratic document, as soon as the Puritans became an overwhelming majority in Massachusetts they instituted a theocracy that in 1646 made religious "heresy" punishable by death, and found full fanatic flower in the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

By the way, the historical revisionists argue that the Mayflower Compact *did* establish the Christian religion in the new land. So it did, but it also reaffirmed the Puritans' loyalty to the English king. If the Compact makes the argument *for* a Christian nation, it also makes the argument *against* the American Revolution.

So much for the United States.

2. Yes, most immigrants to America were Christians, but "Christian" in the eighteenth century meant pretty much the same thing "American" means today. And of the thirteen colonies at the time of the Revolution, four—Rhode Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware—uniquely in Western civilization at the time, had no established Christian church at all.

In fact, according to historians Richard Hofstadter and James MacGregor Burns, by 1790 as many as *90 percent* of Americans were not members of *any* church.

So, was America settled by Christians, populated by Christians? Of course, but while some of the people who came here were driven by religion, many, many more of them came for free land, for better opportunities, or to escape privation and even starvation back in Europe.

Christian? Yes, but not very.

3. What about the Founding Fathers? The historical revisionists claim them as Christians, citing their every use of the word "God," for instance, even those uttered in the sense of "God only knows." But here's what the founders actually had to say about Christianity.

Benjamin Franklin: "*Lighthouses are more helpful than churches,*" and "*I have found Christian dogma unintelligible. Early in life I absented myself from Christian assemblies.*"

John Adams: "*The question before the human race is, whether the God of nature shall govern the world by his own laws, or whether priests and kings shall rule it by fictitious miracles?*"

Thomas Jefferson, the man who coined the term “wall of separation”: “*Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, and imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch toward uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make one-half the world fools and the other half hypocrites. To support roguery and error all over the earth.*”

James Madison: “*During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What has been its fruits? More or less, in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, superstition, bigotry, and persecution.*”

And what about the big guy? **George Washington** kept his religious opinions private, but that hasn't stopped the revisionists from claiming him, even though the first president did not take the sacraments when he accompanied Martha to church (he was a Deist), would never have knelt in the snow to pray at Valley Forge or anywhere else (he was a Freemason), did not swear the presidential oath on a Bible, or add the words “so help me God” ... and never asked for a clergyman, or even mentioned God as he lay peacefully dying.*

In 1831, the Reverend Doctor Bird Wilson, an Episcopal minister and serious historian who interviewed many survivors of the Revolutionary and founding years, concluded, “The founders of our nation were nearly all Infidels, and of the presidents thus far elected, not one has professed a belief in Christianity.”

Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Quincy Adams, and Jackson — “not one Christian.”

4. But was the Constitution based on “Christian principles”? In fact, our Constitution is the first political charter in the history of Western civilization to omit the words “God” or “Jesus Christ.” Instead, it begins with the famous words, “*We, the people of the United States ...*” No claim of divine sanction, no appeal to heaven for guidance, no mention even of the Deistic “Providence” that had appeared in the Declaration. Not even an appeal to “natural law,” in spite of what Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia says over and over. On whose authority does the Constitution depend? *We, the people.*

Does Christianity, or any religion, have a place in our government? Not according to Article VI, Section 3 of the Constitution, which says “... *no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.*”

Slam, dunk.

5. Is secularism a recent “heresy” in American life? As Susan Jacoby writes of the founding era in *Freethinkers*, “The first eight years of the American republic were characterized by a de facto expansion of liberty for nonbelievers as well as for dissident religious believers, for non-Christians and Christians alike.”

One after another the states began dis-establishing religions as they replaced their colonial charters with new constitutions ... and in 1796 the government of the United States *officially disavowed Christianity.*

To explain: 210 years ago Barbary pirates run by the Bashaw of Tripoli were hijacking American ships and enslaving American sailors. The Quran allowed him to do this, the Bashaw said, because America was a Christian nation, and therefore the sailors were infidels, who could and should be enslaved.

The U.S. was only a few years old in 1796, and certainly no great sea power, so the Washington administration used diplomacy while beginning to build an American navy.

On November 4, 1796, the American consul to the Barbary States signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship with Tripoli, Article 11 of which reads:

“As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion”

That was written during the Washington administration (he saw it and approved it) while Jefferson was Secretary of State, and signed the next year by the new president, John Adams, after being approved unanimously by the Senate on June 7, 1797 — *not a Christian nation!*

George W. Bush may believe America is a Christian nation, and Laura may think Jesus was the inspiration for the Bill of Rights. Pat Robertson may lie that separation is a lie of the Left, and the other revisionists and liars may falsify history, but the truth abides.

The Constitution remains. It can be sometimes ignored, as it is in the White House today, but it cannot be airbrushed away, and will not be forgotten. Because, thanks to the foresight of its founders and the abiding good sense of its citizens—even most of its Christian citizens—the United States is not a Christian nation.

It is a free nation.

**A detailed debunking of the Washington-as-Christian myths will run in PIQUE in February, his birthday month – JR*

ANOTHER PHONY ISSUE, ANOTHER REWRITING OF AMERICAN HISTORY

John Rafferty

When Congressman-elect Keith Ellison (D-MN) announced that he would swear the oath of his new office on a Quran instead of a Bible (he's the first Muslim ever elected to Congress), the Christian Right loony bin erupted.

Radio ranter Michael Savage (a candidate for SHSNY's 2006 Dumbth Award) on November 28 raged, “So what's next? A witch gets elected, and she says she's gonna only be sworn in with her hand over a pentagram? Where does this end? Tell me when this ends, the tyranny of the psycho, whacked-out minority. Tell me when it ends.”

It was just getting started, Michael.

Dennis Prager, another rightist bloviator, foamed, “[Ellison] should not be allowed to do so ... because the act undermines American civilization. ... Insofar as a member of Congress taking an oath to serve America and uphold its values is concerned, America is interested in only one book, the Bible. If you are incapable of taking an oath on that book, don't serve in Congress.”

Prager went on to say that the “multiculturalists” who would support Ellison should also allow a racist elected to swear on “Mein Kampf.”

Donald Wildmon picked up Prager's rant for an American Family Association Action Alert headlined, “*A first for America ... The Koran replaces the Bible at swearing-in oath,*” and urged his millions (after first cautioning them that Prager is “a Jew”) to spread Prager's word of the “Islamicization of America,” and demand that Congress ban this un-Christian, un-American act.

And so this nonsense became December's hottest non-Iraq subject in the right-wing blogosphere.

Facts:

1. The swearing-in ceremony for the House of Representatives never includes a religious book. The Office of the House Clerk confirms that the swearing-in ceremony consists only of the Members raising their right hands and swearing to uphold the Constitution. A Clerk spokesperson says neither the Christian Bible, nor any other religious text, has ever been used in an official capacity during the ceremony. Occasionally, Members pose for symbolic photo-ops with their hand on a Bible.

2. Article VI, Section 3 of the Constitution says that federal elective and appointed officials "... shall be bound by oath *or affirmation* to support this Constitution" Those two words ... "*or affirmation*" ... mean that no office holder is required to swear his loyalty on a Bible, a Quran or any other book. Article VI then concludes, "... no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

None, nada, zip.

THE BOOK CLUB READS
WHY DARWIN MATTERS: THE CASE
AGAINST INTELLIGENT DESIGN, BY MICHAEL SHERMER
Reported by Robert Murtha

Recent years have seen an intensification of the struggle against evolution with a focus on school boards, curriculum committees and the classroom. Creationism's latest disguise is called "Intelligent Design." Shermer, a former fundamentalist, has an empathetic understanding of evangelical Christianity and its fears about evolution. In *Why Darwin Matters* he explains the scientific basis of evolution—which he describes as the most well-founded of sciences—and the fears that lead the religious to deny evolution. These are not scientific, but rather speculative about the effects of accepting evolution on human psychology and behavior. He then examines their arguments against evolution one at a time and deconstructs them respectfully.

He explains that intelligent design is entirely lacking in scientific basis and in large part is motivated by a political agenda. Having lost the scientific argument, the creationists are trying to legislate their ideas into the classroom and force teachers to teach it. This has led to a series of court cases in which the courts have defined science and concluded that creationism and intelligent design are not scientific, but rather religious beliefs and therefore unconstitutional to teach in the classroom.

Shermer then goes on to develop a "non-overlapping magisteria" argument that science, which explains the natural world, and religion, as an institution of social cohesiveness and a guide to finding personal meaning and spiritually, are not mutually exclusive. He explains that our positive moral values were developed by evolution and identified by religion as important in order to accentuate them and attenuate the negative. A God who is found outside of time and space, Shermer argues, cannot be disproved by science.

Finally Shermer reviews the most important open questions in evolutionary theory and suggests that if intelligent design theorists are really interested in "teaching the controversy" these would be a good place to start.