

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

June, 2007

An “olio” this month—defined as “a hodgepodge, a stew” (we even have a recipe). We debate the draft, consider liberal complicity in fundamentalism, conservative celebration of Darwinism, humanist good manners, and the “thought crime” of “hate crime.” We find a new cultural delight in our city, nominate another fathead for a Dumbth Award, parse “Christian” nomenclature and historical revisionism, compare atheists (no!) and murderers (yes!), and cover the party scene. — JR

THIS IS AMERICA, WE DON'T PUNISH PEOPLE FOR WHAT THEY THINK

John Rafferty

I know I'm out of step with 90 percent or more of the readers of PIQUE — and I cringe to think I'm on the same side of a free-speech/anti-discrimination issue as George Bush, Chuck Colson, Tony Perkins and James Dobson — but I think the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act recently passed by the House, extending protection from violent or discriminatory acts of hate to gay and lesbian Americans, is a rotten idea.

In fact, I think *all* hate crime law is a totally misguided liberal attempt (hey, *I'm* a liberal!) to change people's hearts and minds through legislation, with the courts as judges of right thinking and the police as its enforcers—an idea that has more in common with fascism than liberalism. For the fourth time in these pages, I'm going to say it: This is America, we don't punish people for what they think.

What to do about the thugs who attack gays and lesbians? We have laws on the books in every state against violent behavior (assault, battery, attempted murder) that can put the bastards in prison for years, even decades. What does tacking on an additional charge—“hate crime”—do for justice?

It perverts the very idea of justice. It says: We know this guy is extra bad because he's a bigot, so we're going to slap an extra “crime” on him. Even though we cannot know what even the most outspoken bigot was thinking while he was committing the assault (how in hell can we know what someone is or was *thinking?*). We *know* he's a bigot, so let's bust him twice.

So now “hate” is a crime. As far as I know it has only been tacked on so far in violent-crime cases, giving some thugs an extra five or ten years to think about changing their attitudes toward African-Americans, Jews or Muslims. And I'm sure that works.

But if hate's a crime, won't some prosecutor chasing headlines sooner rather than later go after some bigmouth bigot not for anything he does, but just for the hate he preaches? Say Fred Phelps of the Westboro (KS) Baptist Church, who spews hatred of gays at funerals.

If you just thought “Good” when reading that last sentence, think again. How about jailing actor Michael Richards for his anti-black rant a few months ago? Or anti-Semite Mel Gibson? They didn't *do* anything, but if hate is a crime, why aren't these monsters in prison?

Or as one of our least favorite people, James Dobson, warned his super-Christian audience about the new legislation on Focus on the Family Radio, “If you read the Bible a certain way with regard to morality [i.e.: biblical injunctions against homosexuality], you may be guilty of committing a ‘thought crime’.”

“Thought crime.” Has a certain ring to it, hasn’t it?

My point is John Donne’s (“*Ask not for whom the bell tolls ...*”) and Martin Niemöller’s (“*First they [the Nazis] came for the communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist ... the Jews ... the trade unionists ... the Catholics ... then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up*”): we must speak up for free speech, even for those who preach hate.

Hate speech is the price we pay for free speech.

BRING BACK THE DRAFT?

(The following are prompted by a May PIQUE article by Andy Rooney—and three supporting letters—urging a reinstating of the draft or some form of national service.)

Don’t

The Supreme Court has found the draft to be constitutional only by torturing the meaning of “involuntary” or “servitude.” More importantly, being drafted into the army requires leaving one’s conscience at the door.

While it is claimed that soldiers have the right, or rather the duty, to disobey unlawful orders, discerning the difference between lawful and unlawful orders is something that takes military legal scholars months to decide, if ever, and the soldier is expected to decide in a split second. If decided in the “wrong” direction, he or she may expect a court martial.

Further, psychological experiments have shown that people placed in an Abu Ghraib type situation will behave like the others at Abu Ghraib. Soldiering is dehumanizing. It is said that it takes religion to make a good person do bad things; but add to religion membership in a military hierarchy of command, and being given power over other people’s lives.

As for forced national service, government is not the best at getting jobs done. The private sector works more efficiently. If you think a Wal-Mart job is bad, where people choose to work, think how bad a job will be when the alternative is prison.

— *Charlie Kluepfel*

It’s Not a Humanist Question

I don’t think the material on the draft should be included in PIQUE. This is not a comment on the draft issues; it’s reaffirming our organization’s policy—we don’t use PIQUE for political commentary on something that’s not a humanist issue. There is a temptation to treat any social or political issue as a humanist one because each of us brings our humanist perspective to bear on it. But that should not lead us to use PIQUE for particular political issues when there is no reason why humanists should have similar views. — *Elaine Lynn*

Yes, It Is

Yes, we don’t use PIQUE for political commentary on non-humanist issues, but I see this as not about current politics, but a discussion of what the citizen does or does not owe the state, and the rightness or wrongness of a) the state imposing its will (a draft) on a free

people, and/or b) the inequality inherent in the poorest people bearing the heaviest load of service. And that's all humanist territory, in my opinion. — *John Rafferty*

Bring it Back

Let's discuss the draft. Bringing it back would force people to confront the issue of war or peace rather than ignore it as someone else's problem. This is not a question of politics but rather of responsibility. — *Bob Murtha*

GOD'S DUPES

Sam Harris

(Excerpted from The Los Angeles Times, 3/15/07)

Pete Stark, a California Democrat, appears to be the first congressman in U.S. history to acknowledge that he doesn't believe in God. In a country in which 83% of the population thinks that the Bible is the literal or "inspired" word of the creator of the universe, this took political courage.

Of course, one can imagine that Cicero's handlers in the 1st century BC lost some sleep when he likened the accounts of the Greco-Roman gods to the "dreams of madmen" and to the "insane mythology of Egypt."

Mythology is where all gods go to die, and it seems that Stark has secured a place in American history simply by admitting that a fresh grave should be dug for the God of Abraham—the jealous, genocidal, priggish and self-contradictory tyrant of the Bible and the Koran. Stark is the first of our leaders to display a level of intellectual honesty befitting a consul of ancient Rome. Bravo.

The truth is, there is not a person on Earth who has a good reason to believe that Jesus rose from the dead or that Muhammad spoke to the angel Gabriel in a cave.

And yet billions claim to be certain about such things. As a result, Iron Age ideas about everything—sex, cosmology, gender equality, immortal souls, the end of the world, the validity of prophecy, etc.—continue to divide our world and subvert our national discourse. Many of these ideas, by their very nature, hobble science, inflame human conflict and squander scarce resources.

Of course, no religion is monolithic. Within every faith one can see people arranged along a spectrum of belief. Picture concentric circles of diminishing reasonableness: At the center, one finds the truest believers — the Muslim jihadis who not only support suicidal terrorism but who are the first to turn themselves into bombs; or the Dominionist Christians, who openly call for homosexuals and blasphemers to be put to death.

Outside this sphere of maniacs, one finds millions more who share their views but lack their zeal. Beyond them, one encounters pious multitudes who respect the beliefs of their more deranged brethren but who disagree with them on small points of doctrine—of course the world is going to end in glory and Jesus will appear in the sky like a superhero, but we can't be sure it will happen in our lifetime.

Out further still, one meets religious moderates and liberals of diverse hues—people who remain supportive of the basic scheme that has balkanized our world into Christians, Muslims and Jews, but who are less willing to profess certainty about any article of faith. Is Jesus really the son of God? Will we all meet our grannies again in heaven? Moderates and liberals are none too sure.

Those on this spectrum view the people further toward the center as too rigid, dogmatic and hostile to doubt, and they generally view those outside as corrupted by sin, weak-willed or unchurched.

Moderate believers give cover to religious fanatics — and are just as delusional.

The problem is that wherever one stands on this continuum, one inadvertently shelters those who are more fanatical than oneself from criticism. Ordinary fundamentalist Christians, by maintaining that the Bible is the perfect word of God, inadvertently support the Dominionists—men and women who, by the millions, are quietly working to turn our country into a totalitarian theocracy reminiscent of John Calvin’s Geneva. Christian moderates, by their lingering attachment to the unique divinity of Jesus, protect the faith of fundamentalists from public scorn. Christian liberals—who aren’t sure what they believe but just love the experience of going to church occasionally—deny the moderates a proper collision with scientific rationality. And in this way centuries have come and gone without an honest word being spoken about God in our society.

People of all faiths—and none—regularly change their lives for the better, for good and bad reasons. And yet such transformations are regularly put forward as evidence in support of a specific religious creed.

President Bush has cited his own sobriety as suggestive of the divinity of Jesus. No doubt Christians do get sober from time to time—but Hindus (polytheists) and atheists do as well. How, therefore, can any thinking person imagine that his experience of sobriety lends credence to the idea that a supreme being is watching over our world and that Jesus is his son?

There is no question that many people do good things in the name of their faith—but there are better reasons to help the poor, feed the hungry and defend the weak than the belief that an Imaginary Friend wants you to do it. Compassion is deeper than religion. As is ecstasy. It is time that we acknowledge that human beings can be profoundly ethical—and even spiritual—without pretending to know things they do not know.

Let us hope that Stark’s candor inspires others in our government to admit their doubts about God. ... Every one of the world’s “great” religions utterly trivializes the immensity and beauty of the cosmos. Books like the Bible and the Koran get almost every significant fact about us and our world wrong. Every scientific domain—from cosmology to psychology to economics—has superseded and surpassed the wisdom of Scripture.

Everything of value that people get from religion can be had more honestly, without presuming anything on insufficient evidence.

The rest is self-deception, set to music.

PAGANS 10, CHRISTIANS 0 AT THE MET

Donna Marxer

Among the gifts of spring this year is the bounty to be found at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s newly restored Greek and Roman galleries. The final renovation of the additional space completes a long plan to house the widest collection of this art in the world and present it in an accessible way.

And the result is that one comes away awed by the sophistication, the variety, the modernity of these ancient civilizations. Pantheistic or not, the overall impression one arrives at is the sheer humanism portrayed.

There are all the familiar so-skillfully-carved white marble figurative works, from statuary to sarcophagi, the well-known vases depicting the life and times (and glimpses of the faces) of the ruling classes and their familiars. But the real revelation here is in the small, the everyday objects and the stories they tell about the quality of life.

For example: five hundred years before Christ the Etruscans were making exquisite jewelry and tchotchkes. Even the fibulae (safety pins) were fabulous.

[photo of comic figurine]

Humor was abundant. Fifteen little comedic actors prefigure Shakespeare's clowns — I swear I saw the model for Sir Toby Belch. A witty cockerel suggests a Disney animal to come millennia later.

I was surprised to learn that spectators at gladiatorial events bought souvenirs just as we do today, except that theirs were classy. The equivalent of today's beer-filled paper cup was a mass-produced wine-bearing mold blown glass cup. And so on.

But the Roman Empire fell, leaving its high style behind. Turn left in the Met upon leaving all this light and joy and you'll come smack up against the Dark Ages. The light literally dims as faith intensifies. With some notable exceptions—great Gothic architecture like the cathedral of Chartres, brilliant stained glass relieving all that grey stone, and some fanciful mythological (unicorn) tapestries—art gets pretty grim. The human figure has lost its naturalism and sensuality, becoming stiff, its movements repetitive. Dancers disappear, to be replaced by bloody and mutilated saints. Life loses its luster and day-to-day objects their style.

The humanism and sophistication expressed in the ancient world bite the medieval dust.

RICHARD DAWKINS ANSWERS “WHAT IF I’M WRONG?”

(Transcript of remarks at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Lynchburg, VA, 10/26/06. The 1-1/2 minute video is available on YouTube.)

Student: This is probably going to be the simplest for you to answer, but what if you're wrong?

Dawkins: Well, what if I'm wrong? I mean, anybody could be wrong. We could all be wrong about the Flying Spaghetti Monster or the Pink Unicorn or the Flying Teapot. You happen to have been brought up, I would presume, in the Christian faith. You *know* what it's like not to believe in a particular faith because you're not a Muslim, you're not a Hindu. *Why* aren't you a Hindu? Because you happen to have been brought up in America, not in India. If you had been brought up in India you'd be a Hindu. If you were brought up in Denmark in the time of the Vikings you'd believe in Wotan and Thor. If you were brought up in classical Greece, you'd believe in Zeus. If you were brought up in central Africa, you'd believe in the Great Ju-Ju Up the Mountain. In fact, there is no particular reason to believe in the Judeo-Christian God, in which [belief] by the sheerest accident you happen to have been brought up, and to ask me the question, What if I'm wrong? What if *you're* wrong about the Great Ju-Ju at the Bottom of the Sea?

(Wild applause)

SO WHO ARE YOU GOING TO THANK?

Giles Kelly

Right here and now let me say I am a card-carrying secular humanist and perhaps an agnostic. But I have a problem.

Most of us were brought up learning how to be courteous and appreciative. Saying “Thank you” and “You’re welcome” was part of the drill. And when things were tough we were told to “count our blessings.” I still count my blessings, even when things are going well. So I often marvel at my good luck, like being an American or finding a parking space. When I think about my good luck I want to say “thanks,” but to whom? That’s the problem.

Too often I’m inclined to use the expression everyone else uses, like “Thank God you’ve come” to the plumber when all the drains are clogged, or “Thank God, I had the key to get in” or, “Thank God, I found the earring.” But I feel this kind of talk is wrong for a devout secular humanist like me. Without a god I have nobody to thank for certain things.

I feel something is missing in my life. I have many things to be thankful for, but goddammit, who am I going to thank when I feel the need?

Saying, “Thanks Lady Luck” doesn’t cut it!

THE “NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER” WAS A BUST, BUT THEN LOOK WHO WAS PROMOTING IT

Dana Milbank

(From “Let us Pray” in The Washington Post, 5/4/07)

Let us pray that, on next year’s National Day of Prayer, there is better attendance at the “Bible Reading Marathon” on the West Front of the Capitol.

Organizers put out 600 folding chairs on the lawn—the spot where presidents are inaugurated—and set up a huge stage with powerful amplifiers. But at 9:30 a.m. yesterday, not one of the 600 seats was occupied. By 11 a.m., as a woman read a passage from *Revelation*, attendance had grown, to four people. Finally, at 1 p.m., 37 of the 600 seats were occupied, though many of those people were tourists eating lunch.

Where was everybody?

“This isn’t that kind of event,” alibied Jeff Gannon, spokesman for the host, the International Bible Reading Association. “Gannon,” a pseudonym for James Guckert, had earned fame in 2005 representing a conservative Web site at White House briefings until it was revealed that he posted nude pictures of himself on the Web to offer his services as a \$200-an-hour gay escort.

Let us pray for the power to understand how Gannon made his way from HotMilitaryStud.com to the International Bible Reading Association.

CONCERNING THE WORD “CHRISTIAN”: HOW MANY OF US COULD PARSE THESE DISTINCTIONS?

Mark Kleiman

*(Reprinted from The Reality-Based Community blog on CrooksandLiars.com, 4/8/07,
forwarded by Bill Mitchell)*

The mass media have been deeply complicit in the attempt by evangelical Protestants to appropriate the word “Christian” for themselves. (Don’t look for Byrd motets or the Bach Mass in B-Minor in listings of “Christian” music, or St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summas* in “Christian” bookstores.) And political reporters have been only too willing to use terms like “Christian right.”

It made news when James Dobson said of Fred Thompson, a baptized member of the Church of Christ, that “I don’t think he’s a Christian.” But his spokesman explains Dobson’s point: “We use that word ‘Christian’ to refer to people who are evangelical Christians.” So it’s not just Catholics and Mormons: now all of mainstream Protestantism is “non-Christian” in the view of the Republican ayatollahs. It would be nice if political reporters made that clear to their readers.

But of course it would be nice if political reporters knew anything about religion. Everyone agrees, now, that it’s important to know a Shi’a from a Sunni. But my guess is that not one political reporter or blogger in ten could explain the difference between fundamentalism and Pentecostalism, or explain the contrast between the mega-churches and the Southern Baptist Convention. This stuff matters to people, and therefore it matters to the world. Being proud of the fact that it doesn’t matter to you is no excuse for not understanding it.

KURT VONNEGUT, HUMANIST CHEF

Joan Slomanson

(Excerpted from SHSNY member/author Slomanson’s forthcoming Atheist Book of Holidays cookbook. Kurt Vonnegut’s birthday – his holiday – was November 11.)

Kurt Vonnegut was not only a writer of many popular novels, but a novel believer in many religious persuasions. While he has been called the patron saint of secular humanism and served as Honorary President of the American Humanist Association, he is also listed as a Unitarian Universalist. Although he said that he understood the apprehensions of theists and doubters, he personally confirmed his atheism, which he claimed was the faith of his fathers.

With typical whimsical humor, Vonnegut even invented religions, e.g.: “The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent “and “Bokonism, filled with bittersweet lies.” In *Cat’s Cradle*, his Bokonists believe that humanity is organized into teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Also, in a poem, he has someone who appears to be a worshipping beggar say, “I belong to an unholy disorder. We call ourselves Our Lady of Perpetual Astonishment.”

Admitting that he did not want to give aid and comfort “to the lunatic fringe of the Christian religion,” Vonnegut called humanism his ancestral belief, and said that his family has been skeptical of organized religion for at least four generations. In *Mother Night* he wrote, “This is a hard world to be ludicrous in, with so many human beings so reluctant to laugh, so incapable of thought, so eager to believe and snarl and hate.” ... His brilliantly unconventional *Deadeye Dick* is chockfull of recipes, which he said are “intended as musical interludes for the salivary glands.” One seems to be linked to a real hotel, the Grand Hotel Oloffson in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Just in time for his birthday party, here’s the recipe, just as Vonnegut wrote it.

HAITIAN BANANA SOUP

Stew 2 pounds of goat or chicken with 1/2 cup of chopped onions, a teaspoon of salt, 1/2 teaspoon of black pepper, and a pinch of crushed red pepper in 2 quarts of water. Stew for 1 hour. Add 3 peeled yams and 3 peeled bananas cut in chunks. Simmer until the meat is tender, then take out the meat. What's left is 8 servings of Haitian banana soup. So it goes.

RUSH LIMBAUGH MAKES HIS BID FOR THE 2007 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD

[Photo of Limbaugh with huge cigar]

Our second nominee for this year's Dumbth Award is public blatherer Rush Limbaugh, for his day-after-the-shooting pronouncement on nationally-syndicated radio that Cho Seung-Hui, the deranged kid who killed 32 people on the campus of Virginia Tech, was a liberal. *"This guy had to be a liberal. You start railing against the rich, and all this other — this guy is a liberal. He was turned into a liberal somewhere along the line. So it's a liberal that committed this act."*

Comedian Limbaugh thus joins Congressman Dana ("global warming may have been caused by 'dinosaur flatulence'") Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) in the race for this year's bottom honors (the horse's-ass statuette) for public figures who need to have their cluelessness or pig-headedness pointed out to them.

MURDER, YES. ATHEISM, NO.

Alice A.

I met a woman at one of our Agnostic A.A. meetings who told me she had recently attended one of the traditional Alcoholics Anonymous "higher-power"-centered meetings. It was her birthday, there was no Agnostic meeting that day, and she wanted to share her good feelings about her hard-won sobriety with people who would understand.

Before she spoke a man, also new to this traditional meeting's regulars, testified that he was just released from a prison term for murder. He credited his conversion to Christianity for his sobriety, and was cheered and applauded by the group. When the woman spoke, she mentioned her atheism in passing and announced her birthday happily. Silence.

At the end of the hour, the group invited the murderer out for coffee. The atheist was ignored.

UH-OH

(Excerpted from HarpersWeekly.com, 5/1/07)

Researchers investigating the collapse of honeybee colonies in Europe and the Americas identified several possible reasons for the catastrophe. ... Grapes, which self-pollinate, and olives, which are pollinated by the wind, will not be affected by the bees' disappearance.

Christians have been quick to point out that Revelation predicts that a famine sparing grapes and olives will precede the apocalypse.

CAPITAL CRIMES: THE RE-WRITING OF AMERICAN HISTORY NEVER STOPS

John Rafferty

One of the “urban legends” regularly circulating on the Internet is the baloney that the Supreme Court building itself “proves” that our Constitution and laws are based on the Ten Commandments. In the past few years I’ve received a few variations of this:

As you walk up the steps to the Capitol Building which houses the Supreme Court you can see near the top of the building a row of the world’s law givers and each one is facing one in the middle who is facing forward with a full frontal view? It is Moses and the Ten Commandments!

As you enter the Supreme Court courtroom, the two huge oak doors have the Ten Commandments engraved on each lower portion of each door. As you sit inside the courtroom, you can see the wall right above where the Supreme Court judges sit a display of the Ten Commandments!

Leaving aside the clumsy writing, let’s just look at the assertions of “fact.”

The Capitol Building does not house the Supreme Court, which has had its own building since 1935.

You don’t see Moses when you “walk up the steps” because he’s depicted on the back (east side) of the building, along with Confucius and Solon—who are *not* looking at Moses. All three figures are “full frontal view,” looking straight ahead. And Moses is not holding the Commandments—the tablets are blank.

The “huge oak doors” are not engraved with the Commandments, either, but with a symbolic depiction: two tablets bearing the Roman numerals I through V and VI through X—which can also, according to Adolph Weinman, one of the building’s designers, stand for the ten Amendments of the Bill of Rights.

A display of the Commandments on “the wall right above where the Supreme Court judges sit”? Well, yeah, if you count only half-visible bits of Commandments six through ten (the non-religious ones), in Hebrew, held by Moses. And he’s not by himself, but is third in a lineup of eighteen lawgivers from the pharaoh Menes to Napoleon—all chosen, according to the Office of the Curator of the Supreme Court, to represent *secular* law.

What to do about Internet claptrap like the above? I recommend snopes.com, the “Urban Legends” site that deconstructs the myths (alligators in the NYC sewers; George H.W. Bush “amazed” by supermarket scanners) and the deliberately myth-leading (Al Gore laughed when Oliver North warned Congress about Osama bin Laden; Jane Fonda ratted out an American POW to his North Vietnamese jailers). When you get one that smells even a bit fishy, check it out, then send back the email with a Reply to All, advising them of the Snopes site.

Just don’t forward the damn thing to me.

GEORGE WASHINGTON AND FIG TREES

Bill Lindley

Wonderful article on George Washington in February PIQUE (“All Possess Alike Liberty of Conscience”). It did the job of ripping away the fake Christianity attributed to GW. (You can use my gr-gr-gr-grandmother’s “I heard Washington laugh hearty” sometime.)

There’s more Bible in Washington’s writing (quoted at the end of the article) than might at first appear. His reference to “... safety under his own vine and fig tree” echoes I Kings 4:25, and also Zechariah 3:10.

Washington was knowingly speaking directly to the Jews in their own terms. He may have also been suggesting indirectly that this new nation would even protect them from

the Jesus of Matthew 21:18-20 and Mark 11:12-14, 20-21, verses that have been interpreted as anti-Jewish—the fig tree is a metaphor for the Jews.

Thanks again for a good one.

GENEROUS AND AFFECTIONATE RELIGION

Longtime SHSNY Board member George Rowell found this list of the titles of 19th century Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II in an April 22 *NYTimes* review of *The Last Mughal*, by William Dalrymple:

*“King of Delhi, Refuge of the Inhabitants of the World,
Generous and Affectionate Killer of the Degenerate Infidels.”*

Perhaps, the reviewer wrote, that sounds better in Persian.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #76

On March 20, the Mississippi Senate voted 31 to 20 against cutting the state’s 7 percent sales tax on groceries (the highest in the nation) and against raising the state’s piddling 18 cents-a-pack tax on cigarettes (the nation’s third lowest).

We’re going to take a guess that the logic of that august deliberative body is that encouraging Mississippians to smoke more low-tax cigarettes will reduce their appetite for high-tax food, thereby saving the poor and middle class money while fighting obesity.

SOCIABLE DARWINISM

Natalie Angier

(Excerpted from a review of Evolution for Everyone: How Darwin’s Theory Can Change the Way We Think about Our Lives, by David Sloan Wilson, in The NYTimes Book Review, 4/8/07)

In Wilson’s view, Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection has the beauty of being both simple and profound. Unlike quantum mechanics or the general theory of relativity, the basic concepts behind evolutionary theory are easy to grasp; and once grasped, he argues, they can be broadly applied to better understand ourselves and the world—the world both as it is and as it might be, with the right bit of well-informed coaxing.

Wilson has long been interested in the evolution of cooperative and altruistic behavior, and much of the book is devoted to the premise that “goodness can evolve, at least when the appropriate conditions are met.”

As he sees it, all of life is characterized by a “cosmic” struggle between good and evil, the high-strung terms we apply to behaviors that are either cooperative or selfish, civic or anomic. The constant give-and-take between me versus we extends down to the tiniest and most primal elements of life.

Short biochemical sequences may want to replicate themselves ad infinitum, their neighboring sequences be damned; yet genes get together under the aegis of cells and reproduce in orderly fashion as genomes, as collectives of sequences, setting aside some of their immediate selfish urges for the sake of long-term genomic survival.

Cells further collude as organs, and organs pool their talents and become bodies. The conflict between being well behaved, being good, not gulping down more than your share, and being selfish enough to get your fair share, “is eternal and encompasses virtually all species on earth,” he writes, and it likely occurs on any other planet that

supports life, too, “because it is predicted at such a fundamental level by evolutionary theory.” How do higher patterns of cooperative behavior emerge from aggregates of small, selfish units? With carrots, sticks and ceaseless surveillance. In the human body, for example, nascent tumor cells arise on a shockingly regular basis, each determined to replicate without bound; again and again, immune cells attack the malignancies, destroying the outlaw cells and themselves in the process. The larger body survives to breed, and hence spawn a legacy far sturdier than any tumor mass could manage. ...

Of course, even as humans bond together in groups and behave with impressive civility toward their neighbors, they are capable of treating those outside the group with ruthless savagery.

Wilson is not naïve, and he recognizes the ease with which humans fall into an us-versus-them mind-set. Yet he is a self-described optimist, and he believes that the golden circles of we-ness, the conditions that encourage entities at every stratum of life to stop competing and instead pool their labors into a communally acting mega-entity, can be expanded outward like ripples on a pond until they encompass all of us—that the entire human race can evolve the culturally primed if not genetically settled incentive to see our futures for what they are, inexorably linked on the lone blue planet we share.

THE AGE OF DARWIN

David Brooks

(Excerpted from The NYTimes Op-Ed page, 4/15/07.)

It occurs to me that while we postmoderns say we detest all-explaining narratives, in fact a newish grand narrative has crept upon us willy-nilly and is now all around. Once the Bible shaped all conversation, then Marx, then Freud, but today Darwin is everywhere.

Scarcely a month goes by when Time or Newsweek doesn't have a cover article on how our genes shape everything from our exercise habits to our moods. Science sections are filled with articles on how brain structure influences things like lust and learning. Neuroscientists debate the existence of God on the best-seller lists, while evolutionary theory reshapes psychology, dieting and literary criticism. Confident and exhilarated, evolutionary theorists believe they have a universal framework to explain human behavior.

Creationists reject the whole business, but they're like the Greeks who still worshiped Athena while Plato and Aristotle practiced philosophy. The people who set the cultural tone today have coalesced around a shared understanding of humanity and its history that would have astonished people in earlier epochs.

According to this view, human beings, like all other creatures, are machines for passing along genetic code. We are driven primarily by a desire to perpetuate ourselves and our species.

The logic of evolution explains why people vie for status, form groups, fall in love and cherish their young. It holds that most everything that exists does so for a purpose. If some trait, like emotion, can cause big problems, then it must also provide bigger benefits, because nature will not expend energy on things that don't enhance the chance of survival.

Human beings, in our current understanding, are jerry-built creatures, in which new, sophisticated faculties are piled on top of primitive earlier ones. Our genes were formed during the vast stretches when people were hunters and gatherers, and we are now only

semi-adapted to the age of nuclear weapons and fast food. Furthermore, reason is not separate from emotion and the soul cannot be detached from the electrical and chemical pulses of the body. There isn't even a single seat of authority in the brain. The mind emerges (somehow) from a complex light show of neural firings without a center or executive. We are tools of mental processes we are not even aware of.

The cosmologies of the societies represented in the Rockefeller Museum [*in Jerusalem, celebrating "human progress"*] looked up toward the transcendent. Their descendants still fight over sacred spots like the Holy of Holies a short walk away. But the evolutionary society is built low to the ground. God may exist and may have set the process in motion, but he's not active. Evolution doesn't really lead to anything outside itself. Individuals are predisposed not by innate sinfulness or virtue, but by the epigenetic rules encoded in their cells.

Looking at contemporary America from here in Jerusalem and from the ancient past, it's clear we're not a postmodern society anymore. We have a grand narrative that explains behavior and gives shape to history. We have a central cosmology to embrace, argue with or unconsciously submit to.

PEANUT BUTTER, THE ATHEIST'S NIGHTMARE!

(Go to YouTube.com, type the above headline into the search box, and watch "A Question of Origins," which proves once and for all that evolution is nonsense.)

(Voice-over Announcer)

Evolution teaches that energy, such as lightning or heat, plus matter can, occasionally, create new life.

(Pan supermarket shelves, to close-up of peanut butter jar)

Yet our entire food industry rests on the fact that this can never happen. If we examine a jar of peanut butter, it contains matter, and is exposed to light and heat. But we never find new life inside ...

(Ant crawling on open jar of peanut butter)

... unless an outside life contaminates it.

(Mold on peanut butter. Cut to close-up of "Chuck Missler Engineer & Author," holding a jar of peanut butter)

If the theory of evolution were viable, then I should, occasionally, by subjecting this to energy, end up having new life. Now we go down to the store and ... *(opening jar)* ... if I open this jar of peanut butter and look inside — maybe not often, but on some occasions, I should find new life inside. When we open the jar and look inside, there's no new life *(laughing)*, and aren't you glad!

Okay, now you may smile at this, but hopefully you'll never forget it—because you and I conduct approximately over a billion experiments every year, and we've done that for virtually a hundred years. And we never encounter new life. In fact, the entire food industry of the world depends on the fact that evolution doesn't happen.

(Okay class, lesson learned? Now scroll to (or type in) "The Atheist's Nightmare: the Banana," for a hilarious explanation of how that fruit proves God's handiwork in the universe.)

WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH US?

On May 3, in the first Republican “debate” of the insanely early presidential primary season, moderator Chris Matthews asked the lineup of ten men, “How many of you *don’t* believe in evolution?” Three men who want to be President of the United States in the 21st century—former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, and Representative Tom Tancredo of Colorado—raised their hands.

And no one laughed.