

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

November 2007

A “perfect” issue of PIQUE, in this editor’s opinion, would consist entirely of member essays; this issue comes close. We ask what the best-selling of atheism means to our future, nominate a dead humanist to membership and a brain-dead blonde to Dumbth infamy, wonder why “intelligent design” won’t stay dead, consider Bible-literalist idiocy, murderous intent and suicidal masochism in the clergy, and take on the really big question: Where does humanity go from here?—Part I. — JR

[box on page 1]

NEXT QUESTION: FIVE BOOKS?

Excellent response to last month’s question on genetic manipulation (See Pages 7-10) encourages us to ask another.

In a September 21 NYTimes article on a Federal Bureau of Prisons “approved list” of religious-themed books for prison libraries (such censorship denounced right and left in Congress), an inmate who participated in a lawsuit against the Bureau said that prisoners were “permitted to keep only five books of their own.”

Which suggests a question: what would humanists read? Put yourself in the prisoner’s place (or a desert-island castaway’s). What five books would you choose if they were all you could read for several years — or decades? (Yes, all of *Remembrance of Things Past* is one book; no, the Harvard Classics Library is not.)

Send your list, plus short reasons-why explanations if you wish, to editor@shsny.org, or to the PO Box below.

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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Sibanye, Director, CFI-Harlem

Atheists have received unprecedented media attention over the past two years; it has really been “equal time for freethought.” Christopher Hitchens’s book, *God Is Not Great*, is still on the NYTimes best-seller list; Richard Dawkins announced at an atheist conference in Washington this fall that *The God Delusion* has sold over a million copies; Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* has sold over 64,000 copies; Sam Harris’s *Letter to a Christian Nation* has sold 185,000; and Victor J. Stenger’s *God: The Failed Hypothesis* has sold 60,000 (numbers from *The Wall Street Journal*, 7/16). And we cannot forget the apostate and declared atheist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, whose fascinating book, *Infidel*, was on the best-seller list this summer. These brilliant intellectuals have been all over the cable shows. The national newspapers, *The Washington Post* and *NYTimes*, have printed numerous articles on the subject. Even *The Wall Street Journal* weighed in on the subject, though not favorably. What does it all mean?

Apparently, nothing. The general public has heard of these books, but they are not reading them. Atheists and agnostics are reading them—it’s called preaching to the choir. Nothing has changed in terms of the perception of the “New Atheist”—atheists are still

the most unpopular group in America (gays are next). And just as important, poll after poll shows that voters would vote for a woman or an African-American before they would for an atheist.

So where do we go from here?

If you know atheists like I know atheists, you know that there is not a more diverse demographic group in the country. They are highly educated and gainfully employed. The group I administer in Harlem boasts professors and instructors, doctors of science, journalists, Ivy League graduates, computer programmers, Ph.D. candidates, documentary filmmakers, etc. This intellectual muscle needs to be harnessed. And while another characteristic of atheists is that they are very articulate, they have been far too passive (and in these “New Atheist” days, far too smug). Our Harlem group, sponsored by The Center for Inquiry, is more frustrated by the spell that religion has over the black community (Boy, did Dennett get that right).

Several articles have addressed “where do we go from here,” but their advice has been very general. In the venerable *The Nation*, “The New Atheist” did a flattering job, but it is the perfect example of our lack of solid direction. I propose three specific steps.

Contribute. Even though many atheists disdain the political process, (fundraising of obscene amounts can do that—talk about ethically challenged, gee), we must put our money where our collective mouth is—contributing money to politicians who agree with us on our issues, like the war. We need to harness our financial clout to persuade willing politicians—they don’t have time for empty-handed intellectuals. Like it or not, you can’t play if you don’t pay.

We should also raise our profile by donating organs. It could be considered a bit morbid, but I would like to see atheists run a national campaign called the “Gift of Life.” Organ donation would give us a high profile. We should be able to boast that all of our co-non-religionists (those two million who have purchased the books mentioned above) are on the organ-donor rolls.

Recruit. Secondly, we need to go on a serious recruiting effort. The membership of atheist, humanist, and rationalist organizations is long in the tooth and mostly consists of Caucasian males. Conducting meetings on college campuses monthly, and using MySpace, YouTube and FaceBook—the main organs of communication for the young—should be our focus. Youthful exuberance is what we need a shot of. We have to take it to that demographic. They have proven that they will not come to us.

Educate. Lastly, we need to let the general public know that we are not ogres – what they’re taught by their religions. New York City Atheists has a tabling program from spring until fall that engages passersby—many of whom have never met a non-theist—in, for them, eye-opening conversations. They were able to see non-theists (I participated on a summer day) as intellectually engaging and civil people. It’s the best kind of public relations.

If we want to be respected, we have to show some effort. We have to spend some time and money. We cannot be content.

GETTING INVOLVED POLITICALLY, CAREFULLY

Elaine Lynn

There are a lot of good ideas in Sibanye’s proposal (above), and a lot of familiar frustration. I know the feeling well.

First of all, recruitment of younger people is really key, and ways to reach them in this computer age are legion. It's important to remember (I, personally, can barely remember my youth) that atheism and agnosticism are most common in teenagers and young adults. It comes naturally with that stage of life – youthful rebellion, rethinking what “the old folks” are saying. People are very receptive to new ideas during that time. We need a sustained, positive program helping them to organize their doubts into coherent ideas and philosophies they can live by. I would put a heavy emphasis on special programs directed to young people, showing them they can become part of a community that values life and rational thought.

Another thing we might usefully do for younger kids is improve scientific education through science clubs or programs at public libraries. I think we have both scientists and teachers among our members who might step up to help. Reorienting kids to see how exciting the world looks the more you know about science would get them off to an early start.

I would be against contributing money to politicians, especially on an issue that's, as Sibanye says, popular, like the war—that's radioactive. For one thing, if everybody on our side is against the war, how does that make our contribution meaningful to a candidate?

And what's your plan for getting us out of the war?

Political contributions and political involvement are toxic, unless we focus on our own issues, e.g., the rights of freethinkers and atheists; keeping religious people from getting funding to proselytize or discriminate against people of no religion. We have a lobby now in Washington, the Secular Coalition for America. Director Lori Lipman Brown and her staff seem to be most effective, keeping up with the constant religionist trash being proposed in Congress, and precisely crafting action where it will be most effective at different stages of a bill's progress. She knows the chairs and ranking members of each committee in Congress and where an earmark or a bill is at any particular time, then acts exactly when her impact is needed.

I went early to the fall atheist convention in Washington so I could spend a day lobbying with her, which she has well organized. A volunteer like me is not required to be an expert on the issues because one is with a professional lobbyist, but the Congressperson or Senator and their staff are impressed to see a voter from their own district, part of the public they especially need because we're politically active on our issues and we vote – so we were very well received. I think that many members of Congress from New York and Northern New Jersey are well disposed toward us and more likely to act in our favor knowing there are a lot of voting citizens who would back them up on freedom of religion and church/state issues.

We can make modest financial contributions directly to our lobbyists, using our money in a very targeted and effective way. I send them a small contribution automatically every month, <http://www.secular.org/>.

P.S.: You may have noticed that Hillary Clinton is the one presidential candidate who occasionally uses the expression, “the rights of people of all faiths and those of no faith,” reflecting her acceptance of us as a significant part of the American public.

ZOMBIES “APPEAR ABRUPTLY” IN AMERICA

John Rafferty

(Based on and excerpted from “New Euphemisms vs. Evolution,” by Ruth N. Geller, HumanistNetworkNews.org, 10/10/07.)

Like zombies in some horror flick, the creationists won't stay dead, no matter how many legal stakes are driven through their un-dead brains.

Their most successful tactic in their war against evolution and science is the seizure of local school boards and village and town councils in off-year elections (while the electorate is voting for the next “American Idol”), which then enables them to re-write school curricula to conform to their Stone Age beliefs, at least until they get voted out – or taken to court, again.

Their long-term strategy is attrition, wearing down the scientists, teachers, rationalists, and even thoughtful religionists who are the bulwark of the defense of reason, with a year-round, 50-states campaign. With lavish funding from tax-exempt Christian front organizations and full-time paid lecturers, as well as lawyers and in-house “scientists” to defend their case in court, they can wage a never-ending campaign, while the volunteer defenders of evolution—who have jobs, families, and lives—must argue against the same nonsense in Kansas, then in Ohio, then in Georgia, then in ... on and on.

The 2005 ruling by U.S. District Judge Jones in the Dover, PA, case that “intelligent design is not science,” but rather a religious theory that has no place in public school classrooms, should have been a death blow for creationism. Instead, the zombies have risen yet again.

“Creationism,” held unconstitutional decades ago, became “Intelligent Design” (“*Who said ‘God’? We didn’t say ‘God,’ we said ‘an intelligence’*”) which, after Dover, began morphing into “Sudden Emergence Theory,” and now “Abrupt Appearance Theory.”

“Sudden emergence,” it seems, was a hedge bet by creationists in case “intelligent design” was struck down. During the Dover trial a lawyer asked a witness why a textbook the witness had helped to write substituted “intelligent design” for “creationism” in a later edition, and with “sudden emergence theory” in a draft of a future edition, implying that these labels were just rewordings of the same anti-evolutionary thinking, and asking if “we won’t be back in a couple of years for the sudden emergence trial?”

(“Not on my docket,” Judge Jones said.)

Eugenie Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education, says that “sudden emergence theory” is most akin to “abrupt appearance theory,” and that both are merely attempts by the intelligent design movement to make the concept “more legally palatable” to the courts.

But Dr. Kevin Anderson, director of the Creation Research Center of the Creation Research Society, says that even he isn’t quite sure what “abrupt appearance theory” means or how it differs from “sudden emergence theory,” and that the vagueness of the terms on both the atheist and the religious fronts make it that much harder for the sides to talk with each other.

Vague? What’s vague about “natural selection” or “descent with modification”? What is less vague, more self-evident than the fact that organisms change over time, that evolution proceeds via branching through common descent, and that, given enough time, evolution changes species and produces new ones?

Prediction: As we learn to alter our genetic makeup and manage our own evolutionary future—as almost surely we will (see pp 7-10)—the intellectual descendants of today's

“intelligent designers” and “abrupt appearancers” (or maybe the very same brain-dead zombies) will howl that “Evolution is God's handiwork and you're interfering with it.”

SPITZER'S STUPID IDEA

Matt Cherry

(Based on and excerpted from “N.Y. Gov. Wants Special Rights for Religion,” HumanistNetworkNews.org, 7/13/07)

Pandering to religious fundamentalists who vote monolithically, Governor Eliot Spitzer introduced a Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) to the state legislature on June 11. The bill, according to the governor, is modeled after the federal RFRA of 1993, and would ensure that all statutes, regulations or other government actions that “substantially burden” religious exercise must be justified by a compelling governmental interest, and be narrowly tailored to meet that interest.

One little problem: the federal RFRA was declared unconstitutional by a unanimous Supreme Court in 1997. Justice Stevens opined that RFRA violated the establishment clause, and provided churches, mosques, temples or other religious groups with a legal instrument “which no atheist or agnostic” could obtain. Hear, hear.

The biggest danger with the RFRA is that people will start using religion as an excuse for illegal conduct, violating laws that were made not to suppress religion but to protect society. When the state of Maryland considered passing a state RFRA, the constitutional scholar Professor Marci Hamilton warned that “Providing extremely demanding scrutiny of every generally applicable, neutral law that burdens religious conduct” can and will prompt challenges to and undermine an untold number of laws governing everything from abortion regulation and physician-assisted suicide regulation, to child neglect, abuse and support laws, and on to statutory rape and minimum age marriage laws, laws against domestic violence, and even zoning and building codes, including height, lot-size, and building size restrictions (“*It's a house of worship, the law doesn't apply!*”).

Simply put, RFRA places anyone's religious beliefs beyond the reach of the laws that apply to everyone else.

Spitzer's bill found no sponsors in the legislature this summer, but he may try to resubmit it in the new term beginning in January. Write your Assemblyman and State Senator—kill this monstrosity now.

GOOD THING THE POWER OF PRAYER IS ZERO

(From the A.P., 8/17/07)

The Rev. Wiley S. Drake of First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park, California, used church stationery and an Internet radio program to endorse presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, a Southern Baptist minister.

So Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed a complaint against him with the Internal Revenue Service for using the church's tax-exempt funds for political purposes—a Constitutional no-no.

In righteous retaliation, Drake called for “imprecatory prayer” by his congregation to bring down “the death penalty” on Barry Lynn, Joe Conn, and Jeremy Leaming of Americans United. “Let his days be few,” read the prayer, “and let another take his

office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg.”

“The prayer does call for serious, serious punishment on people,” admitted Mr. Drake, who was until recently second vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention. “But I didn’t call for that, God did.”

OK, NOW THE SPECULATION CAN START

When the Rev. Gary Michael Aldridge, 51, of the Thorington Road Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, was found dead in his home a few months ago, his parishioners might have wondered why church officials urged that the community “refrain from speculation” about his death until the police finished their investigation.

Speculation about what? Well, the autopsy report is finally in, revealing that Aldridge, a good friend of the late Jerry Falwell, died alone of “accidental mechanical asphyxia.” He had bound his own hands and feet behind his back after inserting a condom-wrapped dildo in his anus, and donning two rubber wet suits.

One would love to have been able to overhear his interview with St. Peter.

BEN FRANKLIN NOMINATED FOR HONORARY MEMBERSHIP IN SHSNY*

Art Harris

I was watching the Discovery Channel or History Channel a recent evening and they presented an hour-long bio of Ben Franklin.

I really believe that we can add him to our list of secular humanists. We know he was a Deist, and at best gave only lip service to religion. He also was a scientist during the Enlightenment, and this was a major factor in his lack of piety.

What I didn’t know was that he changed that all-important line of Jefferson’s in the Declaration of Independence from, “We hold these Truths Sacred and Divine,” to “We hold these Truths to be self evident,” which was a quote from Newton. What a change!— from a reliance on God to the authority of human reason.

All hail a new member of the Secular Humanists— we can claim him as one of our own.

**Ed: Just kidding — only live humans allowed in SHSNY.*

SCIENCE FOR SALE OR RENT

Wiley Miller

(From the Non Sequitur comic strip, 10/2 and 10/5/07)

Little-girl protagonist Danae sits behind her desk labeled “Danae’s Think Tank: Theories on Demand!”

Jeffrey: Uh ... you’re selling theories?

Danae: Yep, that’s where the big bucks are in science.

Jeffrey: OK, so how does it work?

Danae: Simple. If some industry needs proof that what they do isn’t bad, we provide it for a nice chunk of cash.

Jeffrey (stunned): That’s not how science works!

Danae: Yeah ... but that’s how it pays.

Days later, Danae and her father listen to a TV talk show featuring one of her industry-spokesman “experts.”

Real Scientist: ... and decades of research proves this product is lethally toxic.

TV Host: OK ... now let’s get a response from an industry spokesman.

Industry Spokesman: Thanks, Matt. Our research shows that people who don’t use our product will turn into ugly, screaming booger-brains.

Real Scientist: WHAT?!

Industry Spokesman: See?

TV Host: That’s the last word, as we’ve run out of time.

THE “CHRISTIAN NATION” LIE LIVES ON ...

Sixty-five percent of Americans believe that the nation’s founders intended the U.S. to be a Christian nation and 55 percent believe that the Constitution establishes a Christian nation, according to the “State of the First Amendment 2007” national survey.

First Amendment Center Senior Scholar Charles Haynes says, “Four decades after the Supreme Court declared state-sponsored religious practices unconstitutional in public schools, 58 percent of respondents support teacher-led prayers and 43 percent favor school holiday programs that are entirely Christian. Moreover, 50 percent would allow schools to teach the Bible as a factual text in a history class.

“The strong support for official recognition of the majority faith appears to be grounded in a belief that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, in spite of the fact that the Constitution nowhere mentions God or Christianity. ... Almost one-third of respondents believe the religious views of the majority should rule: 28 percent would deny freedom to worship to any group that the majority considers ‘extreme or on the fringe.’”

... BUT IT DOESN'T SEEM TO MATTER MUCH.

According to a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey in August of 3,002 adults, the presidential candidates viewed by Americans as “least religious” are leading the popularity polls.

Those candidates would be Democratic Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Republican Rudy Giuliani. “As in the past,” the report says, “most Americans continue to say that it is important for a president to have strong religious beliefs. ... But the latest Pew survey finds that candidates for the White House need not be seen as very religious to be broadly acceptable to the voting public.”

Participants were asked “how religious” each candidate is. The percentages who said these candidates are “very” religious: Giuliani (the leading Republican), 14 percent; Clinton (the leading Democrat), 16 percent; Fred Thompson, 16 percent; John McCain, 19 percent; Barack Obama, 24 percent; John Edwards, 28 percent; and Mitt Romney, 46 percent.

Go figure.

DUMBTH NOMINEE ANN COULTER WANTS TO “PERFECT” JEWS

Wicked Witch of the Right Ann Coulter appeared on adman Donny Deutsch’s “The Big Idea” show on CNBC October 8, and when he asked her what America would look like if

her dreams could come true, she said, “It would look like New York City during the Republican National Convention ... happy, joyful Republicans in the greatest city in the world.”

When (practicing Jew) Deutsch asked her if she believed we should all be Christians, she answered, unequivocally, “Yes,” then explained that Christians were “perfected Jews,” that Christianity is “the fast track” to heaven, and that she’s not anti-Semitic, but that “We just want Jews to be perfected.”

[head-shot pic of Coulter]

Ms. Coulter has in the past called for the forceable conversion of all Muslims and the revocation of women’s suffrage in America, called liberals and Democrats traitors, said that her only problem with Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was that he didn’t target the *New York Times* building instead, and she insulted gays and the grieving widows of September 11 victims. Would anyone pay attention to this harridan if she weren’t a long-legged blonde?

Ms. Coulter joins such notables on the SHSNY 2007 Dumbth Award ballot as right-wing blogger Debbie Schlusel, who opined that liberal Congressmen “are more likely to have slutty daughters”; Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, who thinks past global warming may have been caused by “dinosaur flatulence”; and radio blatherer Rush Limbaugh, who contends that the Virginia Tech mass-murder gunman “was a liberal.”

One of them (or someone still to be nominated) will be the winner of the Third Annual SHSNY Dumbth Award for a stupid and/or clueless anti-rational, anti-humanist public remark, joining 2005 winner Star Jones, the TV talker who said God “blessed” her by postponing the Indian Ocean tsunami until after her honeymoon, and 2006 winner televangelist Pat Robertson, who claimed God gave Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a stroke for negotiating with the Palestinians.

Nominations for the 2007 award will remain open until December 15 — email yours to editor@shsny.org, or by mail to the P.O. box address shown on page 1. We’ll vote until January 31 by email or on a ballot that will appear in January PIQUE.

The winner of the not-so-coveted horse’s-ass trophy will be announced at our 20th Anniversary/Darwin Day Luncheon February 10, and in March PIQUE.

Biblical literalism in America — on network TV:

FLAT-EARTH “BRAIN POOPIES”

A remark worthy of nomination for the SHSNY 2007 Dumbth Award? No, what minor-league actress and comedian Sherri Shepherd said on the September 18 edition of “The View,” was spectacularly dumb and clueless, but it wasn’t mean-spirited.

On only her second day as a co-host of the most-watched morning show in America (and sitting in the seat once occupied by our 2006 Dumbth Award winner, Star Jones), Shepherd made known her disbelief in evolution. In the ensuing conversation she was challenged on biblical literalism by Whoopi Goldberg.

Whoopi: Is the world flat?

Sherri: I don’t know.

Whoopi: What do you think?

Sherri: I never thought about it. ... Is the world flat has never been an important thing to me.

The next day, after suffering the jokes of hundreds of bloggers and every late-night comedian, Ms. Shepherd explained that of course she didn't believe the world is flat, but that she was flustered and anxious, and "I just made a brain poopie."

Biblical literalism in America — on campus:

**GOD FORBID A COLLEGE EDUCATION
SHOULD UPSET CHRISTIAN COLLEGE KIDS.
NO, REALLY, GOD FORBID!**

Steve Bitterman, an adjunct professor at Southwestern Community College in Red Oak, Iowa, was fired in mid-September because some of his students threatened to sue the school after Bitterman "upset" them when, in his Western Civilization class, he told them to question all religious beliefs and called the Bible's Adam and Eve story a fairy tale that should not be interpreted literally.

Biblical literalism in America — in national politics:

**BILL MAHER ON RELIGIOUS TESTS
FOR POLITICAL OFFICE**

(Excerpted from "Real Time with Bill Maher," 9/21/07)

Just because the Constitution doesn't have a religious test for office doesn't mean that I can't. ... Article VI, Section 3, says "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States." And I agree.

No one should ever be disqualified for their religion, even the funny ones — like *all* of them.

But the problem is that there *is* a religious test in this country. According to a recent poll, seven in ten Americans say it's important to have a president with strong religious beliefs. The other three couldn't take the poll because it was Friday night and Yahweh wouldn't let them answer the phone.

But fair is fair, and so for myself and the other 15 to 20 percent of Americans whom the majority call non-believers, but who I call rationalists, here is our religious test for office: If you believe in Judgment Day, I have to seriously question your judgment.

If you believe you're in a long-term relationship with an all-powerful Space Daddy who will, after you die, party with your ghost forever, you can't have my vote, not even for Miss Hawaiian Tropic. I can't trust you with the levers of government because there's an electrical fire going on in your head.

Maybe a president who didn't believe our soldiers were going to heaven might be a little less willing to get them killed.

Candidate Mitt Romney, a Mormon, believes in spiritually-blessed underwear that can protect him. ... And he has every right to run for president while believing in magic underpants, and believing that Jesus survived his own death ... and I have every right to take that into account in the voting booth.

And at the end of the day, is magic underwear that much crazier than giant arks, or virgin births, or talking bushes? You're either a rationalist or you're not, and the good news is that a recent poll found 20 percent of adults under 30 say they are rationalists, and have figured out that Santa Claus and Jesus are really the same guy.

Now 20 percent is hardly a majority, but it's a bigger minority than blacks, Jews, homosexuals, NRA members, teachers, or seniors. Enough to stop being shy about expressing the opinion that *we're not the crazy ones!*

Just because the vote is four to one doesn't mean the minority is wrong. The majority used to believe the world was flat. But if you believe that today, you'll be packed off to Bellevue, or asked to co-host "The View."

REMEMBER THOSE REPORTS OF GRADUAL "LIBERALIZATION" IN SAUDI ARABIA?

A man in the ultra-conservative kingdom divorced his wife on the grounds of "immorality" in September. What had she done? Watched a television program hosted by a man, without an accompanying male relative in the room with her — she was "alone" with another man.

FIND GOD? UM, LET'S WAIT 'TIL WE'RE ON THE GROUND

Arthur Urrows

The Vatican has instituted a low-cost charter airline to ferry pilgrims from Rome to religious sites around the world. Vatican Air Charter's slogan, imprinted on headrest covers throughout the 150-seat cabin, is "I'm Searching for Your Face, Lord." So, "Fly Vatican Air, and meet your maker."

***"If we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes,
why shouldn't we?"***

— James Watson, Nobel Prize-winning co-discoverer of the structure of DNA.

The above question was posed in the October issue of PIQUE, and an unprecedented thirteen readers took the time to craft responses—long and short, science-, history- or ethics-oriented, but all thoughtful—so many that we have to divide them between this and the next issue. Rest assured that if you have submitted an article or letter (you still can!), it will run.

SADLY, HOWEVER ...

... as this issue of PIQUE is being prepared for printing, *The Sunday Times* (London) reports that in an interview Dr. Watson said he was "inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa" because "all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours – whereas all the testing says not really." He said he hoped that everyone was equal, but that "people who have to deal with black employees find this not true."

We should not discriminate on the basis of color, he says, because "there are many people of color who are very talented, but don't promote them when they haven't succeeded at the lower level." And "there is no firm reason to anticipate that the intellectual capacities of peoples geographically separated in their evolution should prove to have evolved identically. Our wanting to reserve equal powers of reason as some universal heritage of humanity will not be enough to make it so." He claims genes

responsible for creating differences in human intelligence could be found within a decade.

In the past, we now discover, Dr. Watson has said that a woman should have the right to abort her unborn child if tests could determine it would be homosexual ... theorized that black people have more active libidos ... and claimed that beauty could be genetically manufactured, saying: "People say it would be terrible if we made all girls pretty. I think it would be great."

Comment: Yes, he's a secular humanist, and yes, he apologized abjectly two days later, but Dr. Watson's remarks speak for themselves, and he joins the long, sad list of those who have distinguished themselves in one area—Richard Wagner, Ezra Pound, H.L. Mencken, Henry Ford, Ty Cobb, Mel Gibson—who'd have been better off keeping their mouths shut on social issues.

Of course, as rationalists, we have to keep our own minds open to the repellent possibility that science may yet prove that Dr. Watson is right—the 40-year-old Rolling Stones lyric forever defines scientific research: You can't always get what you want.

And even if Dr. Watson is—as I fervently hope—spectacularly wrong about race, his question about genes remains a legitimate, important one for humanists—and humans. Therefore, let us proceed. — JR

WE WILL, WON'T WE?

John Rafferty

In October PIQUE, we called James Watson's question "perhaps the most important ethical question of the 21st century." And perhaps it is, but that opening phrase, "If we could ..." with its conditional future implication, is already outdated. The future is here.

Pre-marital couples now undergo genetic scans to locate problems lurking in their recessive genes. Obstetricians now routinely scan for Tay-Sachs, Down Syndrome, and other genetic glitches. Would we deny prospective parents the right to such knowledge and, as medical technology progresses, the right to manipulate fetal genes so as to avoid lifelong disability or disease?

Well, some people would — the intellectual descendants of the eighteenth-century know-nothings who decried Ben Franklin's invention of the lightning rod because it thwarted God's bolts sent to blast sinners. (By the same reasoning, Ben answered, roofs on houses thwart God's rain.) They have resisted every advance in Western medicine—vaccination, anesthesia, blood transfusion, organ transplants, in-vitro fertilization, stem-cell research—that subverted their view of the human body as the perfect mirror of God's own sacred image (while at the same time being the repository of dirty, disgusting sin), and therefore not to be tampered with in any way, even to alleviate pain and suffering.

Their main argument, that the human body is "sacred" and therefore immutable, doesn't hold up to any rational examination (start with, "What the hell does 'sacred' mean, anyhow?"). But they do have another.

Most of us would—already do—welcome "gene therapy" that eases prospective parents' anguish. But what about the baby step (pun intended) from "gene therapy" to "gene selection" and "designer babies" in the very near future? Is there something immoral, unethical, about the prospective parents who will try to produce the next Heifitz? Are we okay with that?

How about the next Mohammed Ali? *Hmm.*

The next Miss Teen America?

Getting queasy yet? Good, because it wouldn't be an ethical question if it didn't make people uncomfortable.

Yes, some people with far too much money will try to engineer "perfect" babies, and others will attempt to eliminate "imperfections" (the "gay gene," should one ever be discovered, comes immediately to mind) – and there will ever be doctors to take their money.

But here's the hard fact: As with every other advance (heart transplants) and mistake (H-bombs) in human history, if we can do it, we will.

WHY NOT?

Chic Schissel

If we can genetically engineer our progeny to live longer, happier, and easier lives we should do it. They'll thank us for it, and better to be thanked than condemned for the miserable state of the planet that we're handing over to them. And if this results in a race of robot-like monsters, so what? It still would be an improvement over what we have now.

IT'S ABOUT CHOICE AND FREEDOM

Martine Reed

The issue may indeed be of paramount importance, but I fear the question itself is academic. If it can be done, then it probably will be done.

There were outcries against any technological advances: industrialization displaced skilled craftspersons; anesthesia during labor and delivery ran afoul of biblical injunctions; railroads were dangerous to cattle grazing nearby; atomic bombs would annihilate man-kind, etc., to name but a few debates about leaps in science and technology. Yet factories and railroads and bombs were surely built, and even Queen Victoria was put to sleep while giving birth. So don't think genetic engineering won't happen — it is happening right now.

But, you ask, should we?

Are you asking: Should we play God? Try to make a better creature than what we have now—longer-living, free of pesky inherited diseases or malformations?*

That's not really what we should be wondering about, since the answer (to me at least) is obvious. Because the question is, rather: Who will decide what is a desirable human being?

What if it becomes so easy to fashion such beautiful and talented creatures that when a less beautiful one ends up being born anyway, it is then put to death, or assigned an inferior status?

Perhaps genetic engineering is just the next step in evolution. And the only real debate about it should concern its intrusion on personal choices and basic freedom.

**Who decides what a "malformation" is? I remember a controversy concerning a procedure which apparently "cures" or prevents deafness. Some deaf parents, proud of their culture and language, born of a long and painful struggle, were up in arms against what they perceived as the possible eradication of all deaf people.*

WHAT IS "BETTER"?

Irving Jacks

Who is to decide? Hitler and Mengele were sure they knew the answers.

I suspect GWB is sure also, judging from his response to embryonic stem-cell research.

GENETIC TINKERING **Wayne G. Whitmore, M.D.**

The meaning of “we” in this “most important ethical question” conjures up collectivist thoughts (Hitler Youth) and human experimentation (Tuskegee), so that right off the bat I must say that for any person or group of people (or institution or government) to have any say in another individual’s choices (where those choices have no direct material consequences on other individuals), is inappropriate.

However, let’s presume that Watson was talking about us as individuals. Individual liberty, as enshrined in our Constitution, should rule the day on this issue. If an individual can correct cystic fibrosis, retinitis pigmentosa, breast cancer, or any other of hundreds of genetic diseases (or diseases with genetic predispositions), can improve intelligence in his offspring, and/or can change any traits he considers undesirable by altering his genes, so that he or his offspring can live longer and happier, and that individual, being fully apprised of the risks of the treatments involved, decides that he would like to take those risks, then who has the right to deny him that choice? Obviously, there will be dictators and “believers” with dogmatic baggage who will proselytize and give some “rationalization,” but I can promise you that it will not be rational.

Now if, after his choice of treatment, an individual were to become a Frankenstein monster, or Dr. Jekyll’s Mr. Hyde, and start inappropriately befriending little children or killing other human beings, then I would expect the hand of justice to deal with him appropriately. The same laws of our land would hold true for his super-smart, 8-foot tall, green-colored offspring who would be human beings too. Such would be one of the risks open to us risk-takers, as would, possibly, suffering, pain, or even death.

Much of human progress has been possible because people are willing to take calculated (rational) risks based on current knowledge. Dogma and dictators have been obstacles to the advancement of human knowledge and progress throughout history. This is not the time or the country, and we (as individuals) should not stick our heads in the sand on this issue.

FROM BIBLE TO “BLADE RUNNER” **Ed Goldsmith**

In soliciting articles on this topic, you are, as it were, and in the abstract, challenging man to create future generations of mankind in an experimental modality.

I recall seeing a movie about the island of Atlantis having sunk because man had the audacity to screw around with issues like these, producing monstrous mutants, men with dog’s noses, tails, etc. Unfortunately, the title of the flick escapes me, but I clearly remember the gist of its intimidating moral message, i.e.: Man should not dare to knock on heaven’s door.

Remember what happened to:

The Tower of Babel, in Genesis 11:1-9, and ...

Prometheus, in Greek myth, for having brought fire down to mankind against the will of Zeus, and ...

Icarus, who dared to fly too high in the sky, against the advice of Daedalus, his father, and ...

Phaeton, the youth who dared to drive the chariot of the sun across the heavens, without either the strength or the knowledge of how to do the task, and who was struck down by a lightning bolt from Zeus, and ...

Doctor Frankenstein, Mary Shelley's fictional "mad" (?) scientist who overreached, reaping disaster.

In these days of genetic modification of food and the ecological movement against it—with some European countries fighting what they call "Frankenfoods"—the question raised by Watson concerns even more scary meddling with the natural order by human scientists. Who knows what freaks will be produced by overly ambitious, bumbling scientists – two-headed humanoids with antlers?

And what will be their legal status? Will we kill off these mistakes, as in the movie "Blade Runner," in which Harrison Ford "retires" (exterminates) "replicants"? Or will our characteristically liberal Supreme Court say these mutants possess "human rights"? Will we then keep them alive and, as a compromise, ship them off somewhere away from normal human society?

You certainly have picked a lively topic! This is much more exciting, in my opinion, than the usual Church-and-State arguments.

SOME REGULATION IS NECESSARY

Barbara G. Lifton

There are critical biological and anthropological reasons why genetic manipulation of our cells should be regulated, if not banned outright. At present, we cannot predict the outcomes of such manipulation in humans as we can, at least at present, in other life forms such as corn and sheep.

As far as genetic treatment of disease is concerned, we are already attempting to do it. But most deadly diseases have not as yet been successfully treated genetically even when contributing genes are actually located, because of various technical difficulties. For example, although research continues, such deadly diseases as Huntington's chorea and cancer (a complex disease that takes many forms), are not as yet genetically treatable.

Research into the possible insertion of stem cell genes into the zygote, or in the chromosomes of each parent before fertilization, or even in the fetus *in utero* to avoid genetic disease, continues. However, as a secular humanist, I contend that part of the problem may be solvable by simply informing ourselves of our genetic history. It is clear that such genetic treatment may be unnecessary in many cases if parents know their families' medical history and avoid inter-breeding between individuals with similar recognized genetic diseases.

That is why, for example, I have expressed vehement opposition within my own family to restrictions on who a Jew may marry. The strictly observed law of Orthodox Judaism, the religion in which I was raised, mandates that all Jews marry only other Jews. But this rule fails to take into account that there are over 20 serious and/or fatal genetic diseases suffered primarily by Ashkenazi Jews. Genetic and anthropological research shows that this unfortunate phenomenon was probably caused by a genetic bottleneck in

Europe after the second Diaspora of Jews expelled from Palestine in the first and second centuries. After years of controversy in the Orthodox community, genetic testing for these diseases was finally allowed by the religious authorities. It is too late for those of us who have multiple “Jewish” diseases, but not for our children and grandchildren.

There are other ways to avoid genetic disease. In the case of the devastating disease, Huntington’s, where tragically only one parent can pass on the dominant gene, those carrying the gene should not have children at all. (I had a friend who, along with her father, brother, and sister had Huntington’s; all died in their 40’s or 50’s.)

The issue of whether we should interfere in genetic structure to avoid or treat disease is one thing. To do it so that all our children would have blue eyes or would be boys, is another; that idea is heinous. And such research in the wrong hands (as was true in Nazi Germany) could end up again with calls for the “improvement” of the species. Unlike some famous microbiologists, I have little faith in the selflessness of the human race. Despite increasing scientific evidence that the ancestors of all humans are genetically identical, and that we are still very closely related (all of our ancestors came out of Africa about 70-80,000 years ago), racism and religious prejudice still exist in the world, indeed are rampant in some countries, (see Russia!).

Opposition to genetic manipulation of food sources has arisen periodically over the years, and then subsided as it became evident that, first, research and experimentation is itself not harmful, and second, there is as yet no evidence that genetically altered food sources will cause health or environmental problems down the road. However, that doesn’t alter the fact that insertion of genes or stem cells into a living organism to replace a specific diseased gene has not as yet been shown to be harmless. Indeed, there is some preliminary evidence that it could be harmful. Research should continue; there have been successes when genetic abnormalities are recognized, and some rare genetic diseases that appear during routine blood tests after birth, such as PKU, are now treated nutritionally. It is generally accepted among geneticists and other biologists that it will take years of research into the molecular triggers that cause a cell to develop in one direction or another before safe treatments on the cellular level can be developed.

There still remains the broader question of whether such manipulation would negatively interfere with the advantages of random selection in the fertilization process during the propagation of the species. Natural selection on random partners in procreation enriches the next generation with beneficial mutations that result from the Darwinian “struggle for existence” within a species. Some biologists and lay people fear that interference with this random process may negatively alter that result. Many molecular biologists, such as the legendary Dr. James D. Watson, believe that such concerns are irrational and the effect of genetic manipulation on the overall welfare of our species minimal. Dr. Watson’s concerns are primarily with alleviating the suffering of those who are the victims of genetically-based diseases, and for various reasons, he doesn’t believe that random natural selection is only beneficial; he thinks the advantages of genetic manipulation currently outweigh any possible harm. But research has not progressed far or long enough to determine whether such concerns are valid.*

(Because sequencing of personal genomes is continuing, we may soon have the ability to diagnose all genetic diseases. The issue of whether we should submit to such genetic screening—and be told of the results before having children because our parents

or siblings suffer from genetically-based diseases—is still controversial, and would take an entire issue of PIQUE to discuss.)

Like Dr. Watson, I support the gathering of information by all potential parents on the genetic dangers that may be facing their unborn children, and that knowledge of the truth revealed by DNA is beneficial. Unlike Dr. Watson however, I don't believe the question of whether we should proceed with genetic manipulation of individual genomes is closed, (although I certainly agree with him that the decision whether or not to carry a damaged fetus to term is solely the right of the mother). Even he agrees that techniques for somatic gene therapy are far from good enough for scientists to be confident enough that they would not cause damage.

For all of the reasons discussed, manipulation of our genome should continue to be carefully monitored within the scientific community.

**See DNA, The Secret of Life, James D. Watson with Andrew Berry, Knopf, 2003. One of the several things that disturb me about Dr. Watson's discussion is that he gives only cursory attention to the issue of the effect of intermarriage on the genetic inheritance of disease, (page 4).*