

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October, 2007

So, who can we offend this month? While we salute faithless reason and parse faith-based stupidity, we contemplate super-Christian Jerry Fallwell in a hellish Heaven and soon-to-be-Saint Teresa in an existential quandry. We mock Hebrew plagiarists and Hindu aircraft repairmen, but heap most of our scorn on the “religion of peace.” Do we “slime-snake-monkey people” (page 8) and others like us offend too many people, asks Michael Shermer? Nope, not nearly enough. — JR

[front-page box]

## PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT ETHICAL QUESTION OF THE 21ST CENTURY

*“If we could make better human beings by knowing how to add genes,  
why shouldn’t we?” — James Watson*

That quote, from one of the co-discoverers of DNA, is posted on a wall devoted to speculation about the future of human evolution in the new Hall of Human Origins at the American Museum of Natural History.

The opinions of PIQUE readers about the question—surely one of, if not the most important the human race has ever faced—are solicited for these pages. Please e-mail your essays or letters to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org).

[close box]

## RATIONAL ATHEISM

Michael Shermer

*(Excerpted from ScientificAmerican.com 8/19/07)*

### ***An open letter to Messrs. Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens:***

Since the turn of the millennium, a new militancy has arisen among religious skeptics in response to three threats to science and freedom: (1) attacks against evolution education and stem cell research; (2) breaks in the barrier separating church and state leading to political preferences for some faiths over others; and (3) fundamentalist terrorism here and abroad. Among many metrics available to track this skeptical movement is the ascension of four books to the august heights of the New York Times best-seller list—Sam Harris’s *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*, Christopher Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great*, and Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*—that together, in Dawkins’s always poignant prose, “raise consciousness of the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one. You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral and intellectually fulfilled.” Amen, brother.

Whenever religious beliefs conflict with scientific facts or violate principles of political liberty, we must respond with appropriate aplomb. Nevertheless, we should be cautious about irrational exuberance.

I suggest that we raise our consciousness one tier higher for the following reasons.

1. *Anti-something movements by themselves will fail.* Atheists cannot simply define themselves by what they do not believe. As Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises warned his anti-Communist colleagues in the 1950s: “An anti-something movement displays a purely negative attitude. It has no chance whatever to succeed. Its passionate diatribes virtually advertise the program they attack. People must fight for something that they want to achieve, not simply reject an evil, however bad it may be.”

2. *Positive assertions are necessary.* Champion science and reason, as Charles Darwin suggested: “It appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against Christianity & theism produce hardly any effect on the public; & freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men’s minds which follow[s] from the advance of science. It has, therefore, been always my object to avoid writing on religion, & I have confined myself to science.”

3. *Rational is as rational does.* If it is our goal to raise people’s consciousness to the wonders of science and the power of reason, then we must apply science and reason to our own actions. It is irrational to take a hostile or condescending attitude toward religion because by doing so we virtually guarantee that religious people will respond in kind. As Carl Sagan cautioned in *The Burden of Skepticism*, a 1987 lecture, “You can get into a habit of thought in which you enjoy making fun of all those other people who don’t see things as clearly as you do. We have to guard carefully against it.”

4. *The golden rule is symmetrical.* In the words of the greatest consciousness raiser of the 20th century, Martin Luther King, Jr., in his epic “I Have a Dream” speech: “In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline.” If atheists do not want theists to prejudge them in a negative light, then they must not do unto theists the same.

5. *Promote freedom of belief and disbelief.* A higher moral principle that encompasses both science and religion is the freedom to think, believe and act as we choose, so long as our thoughts, beliefs and actions do not infringe on the equal freedom of others. As long as religion does not threaten science and freedom, we should be respectful and tolerant because our freedom to disbelieve is inextricably bound to the freedom of others to believe.

As King, in addition, noted: “The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.”

Rational atheism values the truths of science and the power of reason, but the principle of freedom stands above both science and religion.

## **PASSIONATE AGNOSTICISM**

**Matthew Parris**

*(Excerpted from "Shout your doubt out loud, my fellow unbelievers," in The Times (London, U.K.), 4/21/07, and reprinted in May, 2007 Fig Leaves, newsletter of The Free Inquiry Group of Cincinnati.)*

For heaven's sake, wail many of my correspondents [in the U.K.] ... What are you so het up about? You don't believe. Fine. Well, why not shut up, then? Tell us about things you do believe in. Surely it is those who believe who should be proclaiming. How can one be a passionate non-believer, they ask, hinting that, like Saul, I may be battling against my own inner faith. ...

Proselytisers for atheism such as Richard Dawkins will be as familiar as am I with the lament. I heard it most memorably from a Conservative Chief Whip ... who remarked to me that he had never believed in God, but felt absolutely no imperative to jump to his feet in church and broadcast this fact to his astonished constituents.

How do we reply? An ad hominem response would be to remark that when the Church had the upper hand it was happy to persecute, imprison or behead non-believers and fight crusades against other religions. Now that it has lost its boss status, it simply asks us to keep our opinions to ourselves (but still wants laws to criminalize us for mocking its pretensions). On the back foot at last, it discovers (first) a brotherhood between all its sects. Then as the situation deteriorates Christianity discovers within itself a respect first for Judaism (suddenly we are all "Judeo-Christians"), then for women with a Christian vocation, then for divorcees, and finally finds a common purpose with religions such as Islam, too (the "faith" community). Needs must.

And as the Devil (or falling church attendance) drives, these "members of the faith community" cease enforcing their moral imperatives upon a secular world and retreat into whimpering about their "freedom of conscience" to carry on persecuting the minority groups upon whose sinfulness they can still find a consensus. Freedom of conscience, my eye! ... As mainstream Christian church attendances fall farther still I predict that the Church of England, and finally the Roman Catholics, will be driven to conclude that they cannot even afford to make enemies of homosexuals, unmarried couples and family planners, and start welcoming them in too. I expect they'll call it the "love community." In truth it's the "can't afford to be choosy" community. But there I go again. Getting passionate, fighting dirty. But we have a better argument than "you'd do the same to us if you could" — though they would, and until about half a century ago they did.

They will again, unless we non-believers are watchful, and energetic and—yes—passionate. I hate ending up in scraps with nice Anglicans and thoughtful Catholics because the Church of England and intelligent Catholicism are not the problem. They are the best kind of Christians, but the best lack all conviction. It is the worst who are full of passionate intensity. Look at the evangelical movement in America, and to some extent, now, here. Look at the Religious Right in Israel. Look at fundamentalist Islam. What they share, what drives them, the tiger in their tanks, is an absolute, unshakeable belief in an ever-present divinity, with plans for nations that He communicates to the leaders, or would-be leaders, of nations. They are the very devil, these people, they could wreck our world, and their central belief in God's plan has to be confronted. Confronted with passion. Confronted because, and on the ground that, it is not true.

Disbelief can be passionate. Sometimes it should be. Agnosticism can be passionate. A sense that we lack certitude, lack evidence, lack the external command of any luminous guiding truth, may not always lead to lassitude, complaisance or a modest silence. Sometimes it should provoke a great shout: "Stop. You don't know that. You have no right." ...

Listen to Nietzsche. “This eternal indictment of Christianity,” he said, “I will write on walls, wherever there are walls.”

We who do not believe must be ready with our paintbrushes, our chisels and our cans of aerosol spray. Disbelief can be more than an absence of belief. It can be a redeeming, saving force.

### **WHY ARE WE SHOUTING?**

**John Rafferty**

I’m sure many rationalists and humanists have, like me, heard the same complaint Matthew Parris is writing about above: “What are you getting so riled up about? Most people believe in God and you don’t, so what? If it makes them happy, or makes their lives a little easier, why should you care?”

I don’t.

But too many of them *do*, and won’t leave me alone. “Nice” Christians, Jews, and Muslims enable the fundamentalist fascists who care so much about their god-given “truths” that they want to make my wife, sister and granddaughters chattel, deny my grandchildren a 21st century education, halt life-giving medical research, undo America’s tolerant secularism, and shut me up.

Why are we shouting? Because reasoned discussion doesn’t work with them, because American politics has groveled before them for 30 years, because their money and power are poisoning what was once the freest society the world had ever known, and because, as the Howard Beale character in the movie “Network” shouts, “*We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore!*”

### **“NONRELIGIOUS MOVEMENT” ON THE MOVE**

**Mary Jordan**

*(Excerpted from "In Europe and U.S., Nonbelievers Are Increasingly Vocal" in the Washington Post Foreign Service, 9/15, forwarded by both Giles Kelly and Sharon Krutzel.)*

On both sides of the Atlantic, membership in once-quiet groups of nonbelievers is rising, and books attempting to debunk religion have been surprise bestsellers, including *The God Delusion*, by Oxford University professor Richard Dawkins.

New groups of nonbelievers are sprouting on college campuses, anti-religious blogs are expanding across the Internet, and in general, more people are publicly saying they have no religious faith.

More than three out of four people in the world consider themselves religious, and those with no faith are a distinct minority. But especially in richer nations, and nowhere more than in Europe, growing numbers of people are actively saying they don’t believe there is a heaven or a hell or anything other than this life.

Many analysts trace the rise of what some are calling the “nonreligious movement” to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The sight of religious fanatics killing 3,000 people caused many to begin questioning—and rejecting—all religion.

“This is overwhelmingly the topic of the moment,” said Terry Sanderson of the National Secular Society of Britain. “Religion in this country was very quiet until September 11, and now it is at the center of everything.”

Since the 2001 attacks, a string of religiously inspired bomb and murder plots has shaken Europe. Muslim radicals killed 52 people on the London public transit system in 2005 and 191 on Madrid trains in 2004. People apparently aiming for a reward in heaven were arrested in Britain last year for trying to blow up transatlantic jetliners. ...

Many Europeans are angry at demands to use taxpayer money to accommodate Islam, Europe's fastest-growing religion, which now has as many as 20 million followers on the continent. Along with calls for prayer rooms in police stations, foot baths in public places and funding for Islamic schools and mosques, expensive legal battles have broken out over the *niqab*, the Muslim veil that covers all but the eyes, which some devout women seek to wear in classrooms and court.

Christian fundamentalist groups who want to halt certain science research, reverse abortion and gay rights and teach creationism rather than evolution in schools are also angering people. "There is a feeling that religion is being forced on an unwilling public, and now people are beginning to speak out against what they see as rising Islamic and Christian militancy," Sanderson said.

Though the number of nonbelievers speaking their minds is rising, academics say it's impossible to calculate how many people silently share that view. Many people who do not consider themselves religious or belong to any faith group often believe, even if vaguely, in a supreme being or an afterlife. Others are not sure what they believe.

The term "atheist" can imply aggressiveness in disbelief; many who don't believe in God prefer to call themselves humanists, secularists, freethinkers, rationalists or, a more recently coined term, "brights."

"Where religion is weak, people don't feel a need to organize against it," said Phil Zuckerman, an American academic who has written extensively about atheism around the globe. He and others said secular groups are also gaining strength in countries where religious influence over society looms large, including India, Israel and Turkey. "Any time we see an outspoken movement against religion, it tells us that religion has power there."

One group of nonbelievers in particular is attracting attention in Europe: the Council of Ex-Muslims. Founded earlier this year in Germany, the group now has a few hundred members and an expanding number of chapters across the continent. "You can't tell us religion is peaceful—look around at the misery it is causing," said Maryam Namazie, leader of the group's British chapter. "We are all atheists and nonbelievers, and our goal is not to eradicate Islam from the face of the earth," but to make it a private matter that is not imposed on others.

The majority of nonbelievers say they are speaking out only because of religious fanatics. ... Gaining political clout and access to television and radio airtime is the goal of many of these groups. With a higher profile, they could lobby for all religious rooms in public hospitals to be closed, in response to Muslims demanding prayer rooms because Christians have chapels.

Associations of nonbelievers are also moving to address the growing demand in Britain, Spain, Italy and other European countries for nonreligious weddings, funerals and celebrations for new babies. They are helping arrange ceremonies that steer clear of talk of God, heaven and miracles and celebrate, as they say, "this one life we know."

The British Humanist Association, which urges people who think "the government pays too much attention to religious groups" to join them, has seen its membership

double in two years to 6,500. A humanist group in the British Parliament that looks out for the rights of the nonreligious now has about 120 members, up from about 25 a year ago. Doreen Massey, a Labor Party member of the House of Lords who belongs to that group, said most British people don't want legislators to make public policy decisions on issues such as abortion and other health matters based on their religious beliefs.

But the church has disproportionate power and influence in Parliament, she said. For example, polls show that 80 percent of Britons want the terminally ill who are in pain to have the right to a medically assisted death, yet such proposals have been effectively killed by a handful of powerful bishops.

"We can't accept that religious faiths have a monopoly on ethics, morality and spirituality," Massey said. Now, humanist and secularist groups are becoming "more confident and more powerful" and recognize that they represent the wishes of huge numbers of people.

While the faithful have traditionally met like-minded people at the local church, mosque or synagogue, it has long been difficult for those without religion to find each other. The expansion of the Internet has made it a vital way for nonbelievers to connect.

In retirement centers, restaurants, homes and public lectures and debates, nonbelievers are convening to talk about how to push back what they see as increasingly intrusive religion. "Born Again Atheist," "Happy Heathen" and other anti-religious T-shirts and bumper stickers are seen on the streets. Groups such as the Skeptics in the Pub in London, which recently met to discuss *God: The Failed Hypothesis* are finding they need bigger rooms to accommodate those who find them online.

Graham Wright, a teacher who recently declared himself a nonbeliever, is one of thousands who have joined dues-paying secular and humanist groups in Europe this year. "One has to step up and stem the rise of religious influence," he says. "It's a bit of opposition, isn't it? Why should religions hold so much sway?"

### **RELIGION 101: FINAL EXAM**

*(Based on The Atheism Pages, ebonmusings@gmail.com)*

1. *You are the incarnated Son of the all-powerful and all-loving Creator of the universe.*

*What would be a good way to demonstrate your compassion and power?*

- a. Cure cancer forever
- b. Cause Earth's deserts to bloom with food crops
- c. Conjure up a jug of wine and walk on water

2. *You are the Creator of the universe. Your chosen people are in bondage and their ruler is being quite obstinate about freeing them from slavery. Your best course of action would be to:*

- a. Cause the ruler to drop dead of a heart attack
- b. Persuade the ruler to let your people go
- c. Slaughter a great number of innocent babies

3. *If torture is permissible under certain conditions, which of the following would be the best justification?*

- a. Your prisoner is the only one who knows the date and time of an assassination attempt on the Pope
- b. Your prisoner is the only one who knows where a nuclear device has been planted in Washington, D.C.

- c. Your prisoner has announced that the earth revolves around the sun
- 4. *Your teenage son has returned home from the prom intoxicated. The Bible's instruction is:*
  - a. Sit him down for a heart to heart talk
  - b. Take away his driving privilege for one month
  - c. Smash his head in with rocks
- 5. *Your son-in-law suspects your daughter was not a virgin on their wedding night. To abide by the Bible, you should:*
  - a. Ask him if he was a virgin before you do anything
  - b. Talk to your daughter
  - c. Go find those rocks

**PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION:  
FROM THE MUSLIM "RELIGION OF PEACE"  
DEMONSTRATION IN LONDON THIS SPRING**

*(The following pictures were forwarded by Ellie Karr)*

[Four pictures of demonstrators with placards, saying: 1) FREEDOM GO TO HELL; 2) BEHEAD THOSE WHO INSULT ISLAM; 3) ISLAM WILL DOMINATE THE WORLD; and 4) BE PREPARED FOR THE REAL HOLOCAUST]

**WHY ARE WE SO SCARED  
OF OFFENDING MUSLIMS?**

**Christopher Hitchens**

*(Reprinted from Slate.com, 7/0/07)*

During the greater part of last week, Slate's sister site On Faith ... gave itself over to a discussion of the religion of Islam. As usual in such cases, the search for "moderate" versions of this faith was under way before the true argument had even begun. If I were a Muslim myself, I think that this search would be the most "offensive" part of the business. Why must I prove that my deepest belief is compatible with moderation?

Unless I am wrong, a sincere Muslim need only affirm that there is one god, and only one, and that the Prophet Mohammed was his messenger, bringing thereby the final words of God to humanity. Certain practices are supposed to follow this affirmation, including a commitment to pray five times a day, a promise to pay a visit to Mecca if such a trip should be possible, fasting during Ramadan, and a pious vow to give alms to the needy. The existence of djinns, or devils, is hard to disavow because it was affirmed by the prophet. An obligation of jihad is sometimes mentioned, and some quite intelligent people argue about whether "holy war" is meant to mean a personal struggle or a political one. No real Islamic authority exists to decide this question, and those for whom the personal is highly political have recently become rather notorious.

Thus, Islamic belief, however simply or modestly it may be stated, is an extreme position to begin with. No human being can possibly claim to know that there is a God at all, or that there are, or were, any other gods to be repudiated. And when these ontological claims have collided, as they must, with their logical limits, it is even further beyond the cognitive capacity of any person to claim without embarrassment that the lord of creation spoke his ultimate words to an unlettered merchant in seventh-century Arabia.

Those who utter such fantastic braggings, however many times a day they do so, can by definition have no idea what they are talking about. (I hasten to add that those who boast of knowing about Moses parting the Red Sea, or about a virgin with a huge tummy, are in exactly the same position.) Finally, it turns out to be impossible to determine whether jihad means more alms-giving or yet more zealous massacre of, say, Shiite Muslims.

Why, then, should we be commanded to “respect” those who insist that they alone know something that is both unknowable and unfalsifiable? Something, furthermore, that can turn in an instant into a license for murder and rape? As one who has occasionally challenged Islamic propaganda in public and been told that I have thereby “insulted 1.5 billion Muslims,” I can say what I suspect—which is that there is an unmistakable note of menace behind that claim. No, I do not think for a moment that Mohammed took a “night journey” to Jerusalem on a winged horse. And I do not care if 10 billion people intone the contrary. Nor should I have to. But the plain fact is that the believable threat of violence undergirds the Muslim demand for “respect.”

Before me is a recent report that a student at Pace University in New York City has been arrested for a hate crime in consequence of an alleged dumping of the Quran. [*Ed: See “Think It Can’t Happen Here? Think Again,” below.*] Nothing repels me more than the burning or desecration of books, and if, for example, this was a volume from a public or university library, I would hope that its mistreatment would constitute a misdemeanor at the very least. But if I choose to spit on a copy of the writings of Ayn Rand or Karl Marx or James Joyce, that is entirely my business. When I check into a hotel room and send my free and unsolicited copy of the Gideon Bible or the Book of Mormon spinning out of the window, I infringe no law, except perhaps the one concerning litter. Why do we not make this distinction in the case of the Quran? We do so simply out of fear, and because the fanatical believers in that particular holy book have proved time and again that they mean business when it comes to intimidation. Surely that should be to their discredit rather than their credit.

Should not the “moderate” imams of *On Faith* have been asked in direct terms whether they are, or are not, negotiating with a gun on the table?

The Pace University incident becomes even more ludicrous and sinister when it is recalled that Islamists are the current leaders in the global book-burning competition. After the rumor of a Quran down the toilet in Guantanamo was irresponsibly spread, a mob in Afghanistan burned down an ancient library that (as President Hamid Karzai pointed out dryly) contained several ancient copies of the same book. Not content with igniting copies of *The Satanic Verses*, Islamist lynch parties demanded the burning of its author as well.

Many distinguished authors, Muslim and non-Muslim, are dead or in hiding because of the words they have put on pages concerning the unbelievable claims of Islam. And it is to appease such a spirit of persecution and intolerance that a student in New York City has been arrested for an expression, however vulgar, of an opinion.

This has to stop, and it has to stop right now. There can be no concession to sharia in the United States. When will we see someone detained, or even cautioned, for advocating the burning of books in the name of God? If the police are honestly interested in this sort of “hate crime,” I can help them identify those who spent much of last year uttering physical threats against the republication in this country of some Danish cartoons. In default of impartial prosecution, we have to insist that Muslims take their chance of being

upset, just as we who do not subscribe to their arrogant certainties are revolted every day by the hideous behavior of the parties of God.

It is often said that resistance to jihadism only increases the recruitment to it. For all I know, this commonplace observation could be true. But, if so, it must cut both ways. How about reminding the Islamists that, by their mad policy in Kashmir and elsewhere, they have made deadly enemies of a billion Indian Hindus? Is there no danger that the massacre of Iraqi and Lebanese Christians, or the threatened murder of all Jews, will cause an equal and opposite response? Most important of all, what will be said and done by those of us who take no side in filthy religious wars?

The enemies of intolerance cannot be tolerant, or neutral, without inviting their own suicide. And the advocates and apologists of bigotry and censorship and suicide-assassination cannot be permitted to take shelter any longer under the umbrella of a pluralism that they openly seek to destroy.

### **THE “RELIGION OF PEACE” IN INDIA**

When writer Taslima Nasreen, an outspoken feminist author who has railed against the treatment of women under religion, particularly Islam, showed up for a book release party in Andhra Pradesh in August, a mob of Muslim extremists also showed up to combat her depiction of Islam as oppressive to women ... by throwing things at her, slapping her, and shouting for her death. In March an Indian Muslim group offered an \$11,319 reward for anyone willing to behead this “notorious woman.”

Nasreen said the attack would not intimidate her into silence. Or, as she wrote in a poem:

*I, come what may, will not be silenced.*

*Come what may, I will continue my fight for equality and justice without any compromise until my death.*

*Come what may, I will never be silenced.*

### **SAUDI ARABIA HONORS WOMEN'S MODESTY**

**Catherine Price**

New segregation rules at Saudi Arabian banks are undermining women’s career potential in one of the only realms in which they had any career potential to begin with. Women are now being relegated to women-only suites, or assigned to first-floor offices so that they won’t have to take the elevator with men ... [and] can now speak to male colleagues only by phone and can’t attend meetings.

### **YOUR BURKA: HARMFUL TO YOUR HEALTH?**

Researchers at the United Arab Emirates University examined the vitamin D levels of 178 women ... many of whom “dressed to cover their whole bodies, including their hands and faces, while outside of their homes”—a significant fact because sunlight (in the form of U.V. rays) is the body’s main natural source of vitamin D. The initial result? The researchers found that all but two of the women were deficient in vitamin D.

Not to provoke yet another raging debate on Muslim dress, but it does make me wonder—for Islam and all other religions and cultures that require women to cover their entire bodies — whether a compromise could be reached that would accommodate religious beliefs, personal freedom and now, it turns out, nutrition.

*(Both above from Broad-sheet, salon.com, 6/26/07)*

### **THINK IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE? THINK AGAIN.**

It's now officially a mindcrime in New York to violate Islamic law. At Pace University a man who threw two Korans in a toilet has been arrested and will face felony "hate crime" charges after the university caved in to demands from Muslim students.

Stanislav Shmulevich of Brooklyn was arrested in July on charges of criminal mischief and aggravated harassment, both hate crimes. The Islamic "holy book" was found in a toilet at Pace's lower Manhattan campus by a teacher last October 13. A student discovered another book in a toilet on November 21.

Muslim activists had called on Pace University to crack down on hate crimes after the incidents. Pace classified the first desecration of the "holy book" as an act of vandalism, and said it would offer sensitivity training to its students. Not good enough! the Muslims said. Their spokesman compared toilet dunking to burning a cross on a lawn or painting a swastika on a locker—ignoring the fact that both of those are crimes against persons, not a book. And so the university reversed itself and referred the incident to the NYPD's hate crimes unit.

Which means that a 25-year old Jewish jerk is charged with two hate crime *felonies*, not misdemeanors, even though no violence was involved, and could serve years in prison, for "desecrating" a book.

The cave-in by Pace is no surprise. In January the school first allowed, then prohibited the showing of the film "Obsession" (the anti-Islam film that got its Dutch filmmaker murdered by a Muslim fanatic) by Hillel, the Jewish student group, when the Muslim Student Association (which had been invited to participate in a panel discussion of the film by Hillel) objected and threatened demonstrations. The MSA's objection? The film was "critical" of Islam, which is not permitted by Islam — and the university agreed!

### **JESUS AND MO ASSESS ISLAM'S MEDIA IMAGE**

*(From www.jesusandmo.net)*

**Jesus** (reading a newspaper): Boy, you Muslims are getting a lot of bad press lately ... attempted suicide bombings in London and Glasgow, hangings and stonings in Iran, imams on TV preaching hatred in British mosques, death threats to authors, murdering Yazidis in Iraq ... it seems like every time you open a newspaper or turn on TV there's another example of Muslims behaving badly. Clearly, Muslims must do something to improve the image of Islam — but what?

**Mohammed:** Gag the media?

**Busybody Preacher:** Sonny, does your family pray before dinner every night?

**Little Kid:** No, my mom's a pretty good cook.

### **WHERE WAS THE GARDEN OF EDEN ...**

*(E-mail correspondence between long-time SHSNY members Art Harris and John Arents, 7/17/07)*

**Dear John:** Watching a History Channel presentation on Babylonian history, I learned that the Garden of Eden story was written at least 1,000 years before any of the Old Testament was written.

That should give the Jews and fundamentalists who accept the story as an integral part of their God-given Bible pause, but of course it doesn't. They're not going to be bothered with critical thinking or analysis of facts.

For example, isn't it possible that the Jews picked up the story when they were in exile in Babylon?

There have been a number of expeditions over the last 200 years trying to find the geographic location of Eden, and several explorers have pretty well located where it might have been. Four rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, which still exist, and two others which have vanished, came together at a juncture that those explorers seem to agree fits the Babylonian record of where the Garden of Eden supposedly existed.

Also, the Jews hadn't a clue about Heaven or Hell before the exile; those myths crept in after they returned to Israel. If they appropriate one story, why not another?

Some critical thinking might help to refute some of the myths that still cause people to murder one another.

### **... AND DID THE SNAKE COME FROM AFRICA?**

*(John Arents replies to Art Harris, 7/19/07)*

**Dear Art:** Thank you for your thoughts on the Garden of Eden. It occurred to me long ago that Genesis 2-3 is an excellent allegory for the Agricultural Revolution. The Garden is a hunter-gatherer society viewed in rose-colored hindsight. They needed no clothes. They lived with the animals. Everything was there for the taking. Hunting was exciting. Gathering and preparing were dull, but they could be wished off on the women. Women actually developed a fondness for gathering, which persists to the present. Now we have to wear clothes. We have to work our you-know-whats off all day under the hot sun. Childbirth is painful. (Maybe the men had not noticed before; women wandered off somewhere.) How did this disaster befall us? We must have displeased the Great Spirit somehow.

In the Bill Moyers/Joseph Campbell interviews, Campbell read a story, from Africa I think: "Ulagulu came down and demanded, 'Who told you you could eat the fruit?' 'Why, Snake told me.' It's the same story."

### **MORE BIBLICAL EXEGESIS**

Why has no one been able to find any traces of Noah's ark, even though it docked on top of a mountain?

The termites stayed on board. — *John Rafferty*

### **LOLA'S HEAVEN, JERRY FALWELL'S HELL**

#### **Berkely Breathed**

*(Reprinted from "Opus Comics" on salon.com, 8/19/07)*

*Opus* (the protagonist penguin): Lola Granola ... nice to have you back from your latest spiritual quest.

*Lola Granola* (perennial New Ager): Alas. They never did warm to the idea of nude yoga.

*Opus*: The Amish are like that.

*Lola*: But they sure liked heaven. I like heaven, too.

*Opus*: Do you think all people get to heaven, Lola?

*Lola:* Every single one.

*Opus:* Liberals? Evolutionists? Feminists? ACLU lawyers?

*Lola:* Yep.

*Opus:* Kennedy Democrats? French people? Manly women who don't shave? ... They're all up there?

*Lola:* Yep.

*Opus:* With Jerry Falwell?

*Lola:* Yep.

*Opus:* Goodness. Must he be annoyed.

*Lola:* Eternally.

### **RELIGION 'ROUND THE WORLD**

*Nepal:* After experiencing technical problems with one of their two Boeing 757 aircraft, officials of the state-run Nepal Airlines sacrificed two goats in front of the “troublesome” craft at Kathmandu International Airport in August to appease the Hindu sky god Akash Bhairab.

*Papua New Guinea:* Because villagers believe that HIV/AIDS is the result of witchcraft, AIDS victims are being buried alive in that South Pacific paradise.

*Kenya:* The Friends of Jesus went to Kenya's High Court in a bid to reopen the 2,000-year-old case against Jesus and to clear the Messiah of the blasphemy charge that resulted in his crucifixion.

*U.S.A.:* “To shock Darwinists out of their denial of the overwhelming evidence in Greek art for the reality of Genesis events,” Robert Bowie Johnson Jr., author of *Noah in Ancient Greek Art*, urges creationists to refer to evolutionists as what they imagine they are—“mutants” and “Slime-Snake-Monkey People.”

*Ed:* *Say it loud, say it proud: “I'm a Slime-Snake-Monkey Person!”*

*(From Christiannewswire.com and rightwingwatch.org, 8/21/07, and forwarded by Bill Mitchell)*

### **A TWENTY-WORD REFUTATION OF ALL THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS**

**Donna Marxer**

There are Shiites and Sunnis  
And Mormons and Moonies,  
And they're all a bunch of loonies.  
I rest my case.

### **ODE TO REASON**

**Sol Abrams**

When any man his reason yields  
He's left with no defensive shields  
Against the most monstrous absurdities,  
Like a rudderless ship upon the seas,  
Becomes the sport of every wind  
Caught in cyclones, spinned and spinned.  
Faith takes the helm from the hand of reason,

Committing the crime of mental treason.  
Claptrap contradictions will bedeck  
This mind which can become a wreck.

*This poem above was inspired by the last paragraph of a letter written by Thomas Jefferson to James Smith, a Unitarian minister, dated December 8, 1823, in which he said:*

“Man once surrendering his reason, has no remaining guard against the most monstrous absurdities, and like a ship without a rudder is the sport of every wind. With such persons, gullibility, which they call faith, takes the helm from the hand of reason, and the mind becomes a wreck.”

## **ON STUPIDITY AND EVIL**

### **Giddian Beer**

Why do people do stupid things or accept stupid ideas? Because they're stupid? Not really. Most stupidities are practiced by ordinary people, by intelligent people, even by exceptionally intelligent people. Furthermore, it's obvious that no one is either always stupid or always intelligent, and that stupidity depends more upon the subject and the circumstances than upon the individual.

For this article, stupidity is defined as an activity or policy that would rationally and obviously be expected to (and does) produce a result that is very different (often disastrously) from the intended result. The definition does not include activities or policies that produce contrary results if, at the time of inception, there was no good reason to expect such an outcome. For example, the aggressive forest fire suppression in western U.S.A. which, decades later, caused forest fires to be far bigger and more destructive. When the campaign started, there was no obvious reason to expect that result.

Here are some examples that do fit the definition.

\* In California, three dozen people committed suicide so that they could join a spaceship lurking behind a comet. Subsequently, it was generally accepted that, because of their educational level and because of their imaginative and sophisticated web page, a number of them were probably quite intelligent.

\* A doomsday sect, believing it could hasten that day, released nerve gas into the Tokyo subway system. Again, it was found that this sect included many well-educated professionals—doctors, scientists, lawyers— above average even by high Japanese standards.

\* Some activists (in the U.S. and elsewhere) and government officials (in Africa) have advocated against the use of HIV medicine to combat AIDS, believing that the virus was not the cause of the disease.

\* More recently, imams in northern Nigeria urged people not to take polio vaccine, believing it to be part of a U.S. plot to reduce the Muslim population by making women sterile. As a result over 600 Muslim children contracted the disease, 15 million people in neighboring countries are at risk, and the World Health Organization's goal of eradicating polio, which had been on the verge of success, may fail.

While there is no evidence of any common sense (i.e.: “sound judgment derived from experience”) in such examples, the reasoning process is still intact. In each case the apparent stupidity is quite logical in light of the underlying belief. The common denominator is belief.

If we can except lapses of attention (accidents), because judgment is not in play, and bad decisions based upon insufficient or inaccurate information (as in the case of forest fire suppression) from what we consider stupid, then most stupidity is based upon beliefs.

Pyramid schemes, televangelists, psychics, effortless weight loss, astrology, faith healing, alien abductions, zombification of cult members such as Branch Davidians and Moonies, etc., all flourish under the umbrella of belief and lead people to make stupid decisions which affect their lives and the lives of others.

How about evil? If belief can impel even the most intelligent people to monumental stupidity, can it also inspire ordinary people to monstrous brutality?

Germans of the Nazi era were not intrinsically (genetically) evil. Nor were those Serbs who, more recently, inflicted such gruesome cruelty with such gusto in Bosnia and Kosovo. Nor are those jihadists whose brutal fanaticism has destroyed far more Muslims than hated infidels. For generations, in churches and mosques, in folklore, in political harangues, in classrooms and lecture halls, in print and broadcast media, those peoples have been subjected to torrents of hatred and xenophobia, and to notions of their own superiority, virtue, and victimhood. It is by such belief-infused loathing and paranoia that normal people are led to bomb and torture and burn and kill and kill and kill.

Communism was designed, and proselytized, in the belief that it was the way to improve the lives of the “masses.” Despite the desperate famines due to its stupid agricultural policies, despite the relocations of whole populations, despite purges that included the slaughter of millions perceived to be incompatible with the communist ideology, that belief was widely held for many decades. It still exists among some people.

From the Inquisition and crusades of medieval Europe to the killing fields of Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur, hideous murders and massacres have been done in the belief that a better world could be had by exterminating a portion of humanity.

“Spare the rod and spoil the child” has too often been used to justify child abuse.

The subjugation of women, homophobia, holy war, ethnic hatred, etc., are always justified by belief and have destroyed millions of lives.

However, there is a crucial difference. Unlike stupidity, the existence of evil requires no underlying belief—greed, lust and power-hunger are sufficient. But when evil needs support, beliefs are readily adjusted:

\* Pedophiles often believe that children are benefited when introduced to sex by an adult. Many men believe that there are many women who, consciously or unconsciously, desire rape. These are not hypocrisies, they are really believed! Some even manage to believe that sex with a virgin could cure their venereal disease (for example syphilis and gonorrhea in Victorian England and AIDS in today's Africa and Far East).

\* Slave owners—in antebellum U.S. and elsewhere—often convince themselves that their slaves are better off in servitude.

\* The Conquistadors believed that their exploitation and brutalization of native peoples were justified because they were “bringing Christ to the heathens and saving souls.”

\* In the United States, the “opening of the West” was not just about building railroads and simple folk seeking a better life; it was also about greed, and resulted in a near frenzy of wanton plunder and murder. We called it “manifest destiny.” We said,

“The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” So we believed, and so we justified the ethnic cleansing of America.

We believe for many reasons—convenience, discontent, desperation. And belief enables hope. But belief is so easily controlled by clever instigators, extremists, and militants who tap into dreams and fears. For those who really want to believe, nothing is too absurd: “evidence” is invented as needed; “truth” flows from the mouths of the leaders into the brains of the followers. We are exhorted to intensify faith, to purge doubt, to purify thought. In such circumstances fanaticism, foolishness and inhumanity wax, common sense and understanding wane and are abandoned.

So, when we’re stupid and often when we’re evil, it’s not because we can’t reason or because we can’t tell right from wrong, it’s because of what we believe. And belief is the instrument by which demagogues, charlatans, and holy men manipulate our minds and our lives. Clearly, to have a world with less stupidity and less evil, we need more critical thinking and healthy skepticism, less gullibility, less faith.

### **FOLLOW THE LOGIC, IF YOU CAN, ALL THE WAY DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE**

**John Rafferty**

So Mother Teresa had doubts, in fact didn’t really have faith in God at all, and what a wonderful proof of the power of faith that is.

A new book, a compilation of the private writings of the diminutive fascist Albanian nun who somehow captured the media and a Nobel Prize, and who died ten years ago (*Bad luck in the media circus, Terry: Princess Di — long-legged, sexy, blonde, great clothes sense—died the same weekend*), reveals that, according to the *Time* magazine cover story, “... for the last half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever.”

“She compares the experience to hell,” says *Time*, “and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and even of God. She is acutely aware of the discrepancy between her inner state and her public demeanor. ... Similarly, she wonders whether she is engaged in verbal deception. ‘I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God—tender, personal love,’ she remarks to an adviser. ‘If you were [there], you would have said, “What hypocrisy.”’”

You think?

So, have all the religionists run for cover and disavowed the Catholic Church’s next saint? Not in the wonderful world of faith-based logic.

Religion, any of its apologists will tell you, is based on faith, and faith—which is unfalsifiable—trumps logic and reason—which *are* falsifiable—any and every time. If I have faith in something, however absurd (the sun stood still in the sky over Jericho 3,000 years ago), and you can’t prove it’s false — it must be true.

The early Christian father Tertullian made the point for all time: “The Son of God died; it must needs be believed because it is absurd. He was buried and rose again; it is certain because it is impossible.”

Religionists truly believe that believing is superior to knowing. What’s more, they’ve convinced most non-fundamentalists that we can argue at the top of our lungs about the plausibility of the Big Bang or the musicology of hip-hop, but we must respect the absurd beliefs (Mohammed ascended from Jerusalem to Heaven on a winged horse) of other

people's faiths. Why? Because faith cannot be judged by reason (even Stephen J. Gould fell for that one), while reason may nevertheless be judged by faith, e.g.: stem-cell research is "immoral."

And now, the religionists clamor that Mother Teresa's doubt is proof of her superior faith! If faith is belief in the absence of proof, and is superior to reason, how much more perfect is faith without belief!

No one could make this stuff up.