

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

December, 2008

Of course we celebrate December 25th – it's Isaac Newton's birthday (366 years young).

Herein we serve up various views of the "holy day" season (more commercial?), give gift-giving ideas, consider the clueless among 2008's Dumbth-est, offer advice on arguing with creationists, review America's favorite freethinker's last lectures, think about thinking rats (really!), and ask you to use these pages to tell President-elect Obama what to do – right now! Meanwhile, Happy Birthday, Izzy! — JR

WHY WE VOTE

(Excerpted from the lead editorial of the same name in the post-election, November 17 issue of The Nation)

Along with the ugliness, this election has produced a tremendous number of grace notes: the recent report of employees at an Indiana call center walking out rather than read anti-Obama talking points; the McCain supporters who confronted and shunned an Islamophobe outside a rally (captured on YouTube); and the story (reported on Politico) of how a McCain backer in line to vote early in Hamilton County, Florida, lent his NASCAR jacket to three elderly Jewish women after overhearing that they would not be allowed to enter the polling place wearing their Obama gear. While chatting with the women, who spoke of the alliance of Jews and blacks during the civil rights struggle, the man was seized with the desire to be on the right side of history; when it was time for him to cast his ballot, he voted for Obama as well.

This last story gets at something profound about why we go to the trouble of voting. We vote in order to change the country, to exercise our rights, to make our voices heard and a hundred other clichés as shopworn as they are true. But we also vote because it places us in direct fellowship with other citizens; we vote because it is a secular sacrament, an act of civic secularity. Because it is the ultimate declaration that we are, indeed, all in this together.

[box on page 1]

OBAMA'S FIRST HUNDRED DAYS: YOUR 100-WORD SUGGESTIONS, PLEASE

Stealing an idea from Alternet.com, we ask PIQUE's readers to submit their own "First One Hundred Days" plans for the new administration in Washington.

In 100 words or fewer (word limit strictly enforced) tell us what you want President Obama's team to accomplish—or at least begin to accomplish—in their first 100 days.
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'TIS THE SEASON TO SUPPORT OPERATION FOXHOLE ATHEISTS

Created by the North Alabama Freethought Association (NAFA), Operation Foxhole Atheists sends packages—snack foods, DVDs, drink mixes, travel pillows, magazines

and books—to troops in Afghanistan and Iraq who have identified themselves as atheists or humanists.

You may not agree with the war, but these young men and women didn't start it, they are serving their country, and they deserve our support — especially those freethinkers who have to fight an enemy in front of them and an increasing number of proselytizing bigots in the armed services behind them.

The NAFA website takes PayPal donations, at <http://thenafa.org/ofa/>

Editor's Note: In the past we have promoted the HeroMiles program, which collected unused frequent-traveler miles from donors to give to troops traveling home for the holidays. But a recent check of the program website indicates no updates since before Memorial Day, 2007.

THE VARIETIES OF SCIENTIFIC EXPERIENCE

A Personal View of the Search for God

by Carl Sagan

(A précis for the 9/18/08 SHSNY Book Club)

John Rafferty

Carl Sagan was invited to give the 1985 Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow "... following in the footsteps of some of the greatest scientists and philosophers of the last hundred years – including James Frazer, Arthur Eddington, Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, Alfred North Whitehead, Albert Schweitzer, and Hannah Arendt."

Choosing a title that deliberately recalled William James' 1902 lectures and classic text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Sagan's task, as he saw it, was "... to tell you something of my views on what at least used to be called natural theology, which, as I understand it, is everything about the world not supplied by revelation ... [and] ... my own personal views on the boundary area between science and religion."

The book presents the nine lectures in the series, followed by a lengthy Q&A section involving the huge audiences (the organizers had to keep adding listening rooms for overflow crowds) that media-star Sagan attracted. As fascinating and entertaining as the lectures themselves are, I was stunned, on re-reading his ad-lib answers to often technical, sometimes hostile questions, at the breadth of Sagan's knowledge – from astrophysics and molecular biology to the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history, and on to western and eastern religions, poetry and Reagan-era politics. In a word, *Wow*.

In the first lecture, "Nature and Wonder," Sagan "wonders" again, as he did in his "Cosmos" television series, on the vastness and beauty of the cosmos. By comparison, he says, all of our Iron Age, navel-gazing, this-earth-centered theologies are insufficient to explore the universe. And we must explore, he says, because if "God" gave us "curiosity and intelligence," it would be "unappreciative of those gifts" if we did not.

"The Retreat from Copernicus" traces the history of how science has step-by-step upended our view of the world—and of ourselves—as somehow central, special, or "privileged" in the universe, the "reason why" of creation. And now, he warns, the reactions—by both biblically-literal creationists and more sophisticated "anthropic principle" proponents—are just thinly disguised attempts to make "God" once again central to our worldview.

As science advances and “God” retreats, one of the last “gaps” in our knowledge is the answer to the question of the origin of life. Evolution, which explains life’s development, is now a given, but how, Sagan asks in “The Organic Universe,” did life begin? He does not hesitate to take the reader deep into technical territory (cometary spectrum graphs, anyone?), but it’s worth the trip to learn how rich our solar system and our galaxy are in the organic molecules that are the building blocks of life – and which have proven themselves capable of self-replication in the laboratory.

In “Extraterrestrial Intelligence,” Sagan starts with a classic example of how our “emotional predispositions” cause us to misinterpret data. “Canals on Mars” was a great story that even many scientists wanted to believe – too bad it just wasn’t true. How about, he asks, when “the will to believe is so much greater ... in the area of religion?” We are pre-disposed to find ETs, he says, probably because of the vague hope that more intelligent beings will somehow “save us” from our self-destructive selves.

Have we been visited by ETs? In “Extraterrestrial Folklore,” Sagan considers the “ancient astronauts” hypothesis of the *Chariots of the Gods* best-seller and the on-again, off-again UFO craze. He dismisses the first with precise explanations of how the Egyptian pyramids and Easter Island statues, for instance, were built by our very human ancestors. UFO sightings, he explains, are indistinguishable from medieval “miracle” sightings – people believe they see what they want to see, and no evidence will disabuse them of their beliefs (how many cults thrive even after their end-of-the-world doomsdays have come and gone?). In the search for other intelligences—and of the transcendent—he says, we must apply at least as much logic as we would to the purchase of a car.

“The God Hypothesis,” Sagan says, is really a range of thousands, even tens of thousands of ideas of “god,” stretching back to the religious beliefs of all the tiny hunter-gatherer groups that roamed pre-history. Which “god” are we to hypothesize? The Abrahamic God? The non-god of Spinoza, Einstein, and Tillich? Vishnu? Thor? The spirit-in-the-wood of one of those pre-historic tribes? And which “proof” of “God’s” existence are we to accept, since not one yet devised is conclusive?

“The Religious Experience” is the lecture/chapter Sagan has been building to. In the first half, he postulates two kinds of early social groups: powerful societies with rigid hierarchies, at the top of which is the ultimate father-figure god; and free-form societies with almost non-existent hierarchies and relaxed religions. The first type, he argues, produces warlike, often brutal societies (the headhunting Jivaros), the second type results in more “democratic” societies (Margaret Mead’s Samoans). In the first, animism leads to propitiation, which leads to ritual prayer and sacrifice (even human) to the ultimate father. In the second, religion is a communal, shared experience.

Turning from cultural anthropology to brain chemistry, Sagan points out that there are “molecules” like LSD, aspirin, and thousands of others, that cause all kinds of mental states, actions, reactions in our brain. Is there a “molecule”—he calls it “theosporin”—in our brains that makes us feel religious? Religion—either of the two basic early kinds—Sagan argues, offers the evolutionary advantage of group coherence. That’s good. But the religious experience also makes people content (Don’t worry about injustice in this life, there’s a better one coming), docile, and easier to both lead and exploit.

“Crimes Against Creation” is Sagan’s fervent plea for worldwide disarmament. In an era of drastic change like ours, relying on traditions formulated in the Iron Age is inadequate to our needs, even nonsensical. We are capable of destroying ourselves with

nuclear weapons,* along with thousands, perhaps millions of other species – what some Christian theologians have called “crimes against creation.” To be true to their principles, he argues, every religion should be at the forefront of the drive for disarmament – but none are. Not one. Not one, he says, is truly religious.

**“In 1985 the world had 55,000 nuclear weapons ... today it has about 20,000, still roughly ten times what would be necessary to destroy our global civilization.”—Ann Druyan, Sagan’s wife and collaborator.*

In “The Search,” Sagan sums up: “Our success as a species is surely due to our intelligence, not primarily to our emotions.” We have changed and grown, he says—we have abandoned ancient nonsense like the “divine right of kings” and justifications for slavery—and we must keep going. Implicit in the argument of this final lecture is that religion is one more ancient tradition that we must move beyond, even if we don’t abandon its seeming comforts. We must keep going, he says, including beyond this planet, to find other intelligences if that’s possible, but most importantly, just to keep going. We can’t stop.

The Varieties of Scientific Experience was edited by Ann Druyan, whose Introduction says of Sagan:

His argument was not with God but with those who believed that our understanding of the sacred had been completed. Science’s permanently revolutionary conviction that the search for truth never ends seemed to him the only approach with sufficient humility to be worthy of the universe that it revealed.

... he insisted with Bertrand Russell that “what is wanted is not the will to believe, but the desire to find out, which is the exact opposite.” ... Carl didn’t want to believe: he wanted to know.

Druyan concludes the Introduction with an anecdote. In the notes they were collecting for a book he was never able to write, Sagan commented on an argument of Leibniz’s ...

Leibniz argued that God should be the wall that stopped all further questioning, as he famously wrote in this passage from Principles of Nature and Grace:

“Why does something exist rather than nothing? For ‘nothing’ is simpler than ‘something.’ Now this sufficient reason [God] for the existence of the universe ... which has no need of any other reason ... must be a necessary being, else we should not have a sufficient reason with which we could stop.”

And just beneath the typed quote, three small handwritten words in red pen, a message from Carl to Leibniz and to us:

“So don’t stop.”

ANOTHER LETTER THE *TIMES* DIDN’T PRINT

To the Editor:

I read, with both sympathy and amusement, about Jeanette Norman’s frustration in trying to get atheists to work against a ballot initiative that would overturn *Roe v. Wade* in Colorado (“For Atheists, Politics Proves to Be a Lonely Endeavor,” *On Religion*, by Samuel G. Freedman, October 18).

Welcome to the world of freethinkers, Ms. Norman. We are almost impossible to organize, any two of us in a room together will produce six opinions, we don’t do

obedience or organization very well, and when any one group of us gives marching orders, you can bet the farm that part of the group will about-face, march out and form another group.

In addition to the group of which I am a member—the Secular Humanist Society of New York, affiliated with the Council for Secular Humanism—there are in the New York area alone local affiliates of American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, Ethical Culture, Humanistic Judaism, The Brights, The Center for Inquiry (four different “locals”), and the Skeptics Society ... as well as many MeetUps like Dinner & Philosophy Now, Drinking With Atheists, Drinking Sceptically, and the Flying Spaghetti Monster MeetUp.

Organize? Pick your metaphor for futility: herding cats, nailing Jello to the wall* — either would be easier.

*John Rafferty, President
Secular Humanist Society of New York*

*I resisted adding “shoveling shit against the tide,” but they still didn’t print it.

RELIGION ROUND-UP 'ROUND THE WORLD

AFGHANISTAN: In Kandahar in early November, two Taliban militants opposed to girls’ education used water guns to shoot acid in the faces of at least 15 girls near the Mirwais Nika Girls High School. Islamic veils and burqas didn’t provide much protection: two girls were blinded. Attendance at school the next day was zero.

Glamour magazine reported in April, “In the past two years, 231 of Afghanistan’s students and teachers have been killed; 240 schools have been destroyed; and 590 schools have closed due to the threat of violence, leaving more than 200,000 students with nowhere to go.” Girls, who were banned from school under the Taliban’s rule, are a preferred target: they have been disfigured, blinded, poisoned and killed for going to school.

SOMALIA: In October, in the first public execution since the Islamist al-Shabaab movement captured the port city of Kismayo, Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow, a 13-year-old girl, was forced into a hole in a stadium, then stoned to death by 50 men while a crowd of a thousand watched.

Her crime? While walking to visit her grandmother, Aisha was attacked and raped by three men. When she tried to report the crime to al-Shabaab “authorities,” she was arrested and charged with adultery.

None of the three men were arrested.

The sharia judge who sentenced Aisha, after first claiming she was an adult then announced that the 13-year-old had officially confirmed her guilt, and was “happy with the punishment under Islamic law.”

BROOKLYN: Last year Assemblyman Dov Hikind invited his radio show listeners to discuss sexual abuse of children in the Orthodox Jewish community. They responded, and he says he has collected more than 1,000 complaints and the names of sixty accused sexual predators. “Abusive teachers and rabbis in the schools, pedophiles on the streets, incest in the home,” he says.

But Hikind refuses—on the grounds of confidentiality—to turn over any of his information to the police or to attorney Michael Dowd, who has been a leading advocate for plaintiffs who say they were abused by Roman Catholic priests. Dowd represents six

men who say they were abused by Rabbi Yehuda Kolko, a teacher at Yeshiva Torah Temimah in Brooklyn. Rabbi Kolko, who was charged with sexual abuse in 2006, pleaded guilty to a lesser charge and has left the school.

Dowd has subpoenaed Hikind, demanding his files. Hikind vows to fight the order, even if he has to go to jail. He has a point, that his Orthodox Jewish victims are fearful of becoming outcasts in a community where perceived troublemakers are shunned, or worse. In other words, where Iron Age mores trump modern justice.

And meanwhile, by Hikind's own count, 60 known sexual predators walk free on the streets of Brooklyn.

NOVEMBER PIQUE INSPIRED LETTERS

To the Editor: In November PIQUE, "Think of This the Next Time You Think 'Real Science' Has All the Answers" implies that there were people working on the Large Hadron Collider who worried about the implications of it destroying the world/solar system/universe.

There are two fallacies in the article:

1. There are exactly zero physicists who even take the idea seriously. They all know that there are higher-energy collisions happening many times a day in our upper atmosphere. We only need the LHC in order to observe these collisions more easily.

2. The LHC still hasn't had anything collide. It was only running tests in one direction at a time to ascertain that the individual beams could go as fast as they should. So even if a collision would destroy the universe, it couldn't have happened, since there were no collisions.

In other words, bullshit. — *Colin Rafferty*

To the Editor: Re: the "Arthur C. Clarke rebuts" rebuttal of my article, "Are We Alone?" in November PIQUE, it is absurd to believe that anything that can be imagined is realizable. The imagination is unconstrained; that's why the supernatural can exist there. Reality is constrained; not everything is possible there. My conclusion, that we really are alone, rests on three constraints.

1. The very small probability that evolution on any planet will produce another technologically adept (TA) species – a consequence of the way evolution works.

2. The limit imposed on inter-planetary contact by the size of the galaxy, the inter-stellar distances and the propagation speed of electro-magnetic radiation.

3. The likelihood that any TA species would self-destruct within a millennium or so.

Items 1 and 2 are fundamental, not subject to modification by any TA species, no matter how advanced. Clarke's 1951 quote specifies invention and discovery; his 1983 quote specifies technical feats; clearly, he is not thinking of restructuring the universe or abrogating laws of physics and biology. Though not specific on this point, I think it also applies to Clarke's First Law.

Item 3 *might* be avoided by some TA species if ingenuity and foresight are not overwhelmed by greed and stupidity. But to anyone paying attention it is obvious that the TA species here on Earth is not that kind.

Probably Clarke, like nearly everyone else, was not paying attention.

— *Giddian Beer*

To the Editor: Re: The article “Are We Alone?” it is possible that we are not alone here on Earth. It is possible that there is another species of humans living in some remote area of the planet. If these humans were technologically advanced hominids we could not say that we are alone. — **Robert F. Dickhoff**

Ed: Um, exactly what “remote area” of the planet, Bob?

TWO MORE 2008 DUMBTH AWARD NOMINEES

Addressing the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges on November 11, the political commentator **Michael Barone**, outraged at what he considers the unfair treatment by the media of Republican Vice Presidential candidate, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska, said:

“The liberal media attacked Sarah Palin because she did not abort her Down syndrome baby. They wanted her to kill that child.”

And, commenting on Fox News’ “The O’Reilly Factor” about individual gay protests after the passage of anti-gay-marriage Proposition 8 in California, former Speaker of the House **Newt Gingrich** announced:

“There is a gay and secular fascism in this country that wants to impose its will on the rest of us, is prepared to use violence, to use harassment.”

Messrs. Barone and Gingrich will join five other nominees already on our 2008 Dumbth Award ballot. They are ...

Ann Coulter, our 2007 winner, who told a cheering crowd at the Claire Booth Luce Society (think WASP-y Ann Coulter wannabees) early this year that:

“Biologists believe in evolution, not real scientists like physicists and chemists.”

Sally Kern, who regularly introduces anti-gay and pro-creationism bills in the Oklahoma State House of Representatives and who, in April, stood up in that august venue and declared that:

“Homosexuality is the biggest threat our country has, even more so than terrorism or Islam.”

Randi Rhodes, on the political left and a supposed proto-feminist, in a stand-up routine in San Francisco had this to say about New York Governor Eliot Spitzer getting caught with prostitutes:

“Eliot Spitzer spent \$80,000 on women; I think that’s cool.”

Ben Stein, promoting his mendacious movie, “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed,” in which he tries to blame the Holocaust on Darwin, said in a radio interview:

“[Dachau] is where science leads you. Love of God and compassion and empathy leads you to a glorious place, and science leads you to killing people.”

Tony Zirkle, failed candidate for the Republican nomination in Indiana’s 2nd Congressional district, who addressed the American National Socialist Workers Party celebration of Hitler’s birthday—on a swastika-draped platform—and who later said he thought they were *socialists*, and besides, he thought they were honoring someone named *Steven* Hitler.

What’s a Dumbth Award?

Comedian/Secular Humanist Steve Allen coined “dumbth” to describe the willfully witless among us, and in 1992, then-PIQUE Editor Warren Allen Smith proposed that SHSNY give Dumbth Awards to “those who deserve to have their illogic pointed out.”

Who deserves a Dumbth Award? Mr. Smith suggested, as an example, “a person who falls five floors down an elevator shaft, is rescued by a policeman who crawls into the dark hole unaided, is saved by EMS personnel who rush to the scene, is operated on by a skilled surgeon, is nursed back to health by therapists, and who then credits God with ‘a miracle’.”

Or the recipient of our first award, 2005 winner and TV talk-show personality **Star Jones**, who claimed she was “blessed” by God, Who delayed the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed over 200,000 people until after her honeymoon vacation in the area.

Pat Robertson won the 2006 award for claiming that God gave Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a near-fatal stroke for considering negotiating land with the Palestinians. And our 2007 horse’s-ass statuette was carried off by right-wing hate-monger **Ann Coulter** for her pronouncement that, “all Americans should be Christians” and “We just want Jews to be perfected.”

Send your nominations for the 2008 award to the P.O. box, or e-mail editor@shsny.org, by December 20. Nominees will be published in January, 2009 PIQUE, and balloting will take place throughout that month.

AND THE EARLY FAVORITE FOR 2009 IS ...

Sarah Palin, of course. Considering her fundamentalist beliefs, her appalling ignorance of world affairs (and even geography), and the absence of a Pause/Think switch in her brain, she’s bound to produce a couple of beauts in the coming year.

How do we know? When asked—in a post-election interview in Alaska—to rebut the story leaked by McCain staffers (who considered her disloyal) that she didn’t know Africa was a continent rather than a country, Governor Palin replied:

“My concern has been the atrocities there in Darfur and the relevance to me with that issue as we spoke about Africa and some of the countries there that were kind of the people succumbing to the dictators and the corruption of some collapsed governments on the continent, the relevance was Alaska’s investment in Darfur with some of our permanent fund dollars.”

Sic! How can you bet against that?

15 ANSWERS TO CREATIONIST NONSENSE

Parts 1-2

John Rennie

(The “15 Answers” were given at ScientificAmerican.com in 2002. Reprinting and/or excerpting all of them at once would overwhelm an issue of PIQUE. So we begin with Mr. Rennie’s first two arguments. The others, two or three at a time, will appear in future issues. – JR)

When Charles Darwin introduced the theory of evolution through natural selection 143 years ago, the scientists of the day argued over it fiercely, but the massing evidence from paleontology, genetics, zoology, molecular biology and other fields gradually established evolution’s truth beyond reasonable doubt. Today that battle has been won everywhere—except in the public imagination.

Embarrassingly, in the 21st century, in the most scientifically advanced nation the world has ever known, creationists can still persuade politicians, judges and ordinary citizens that evolution is a flawed, poorly supported fantasy. They lobby for creationist

ideas such as “intelligent design” to be taught as alternatives to evolution in science classrooms. ... Besieged teachers and others may increasingly find themselves on the spot to defend evolution and refute creationism. The arguments that creationists use are typically specious and based on misunderstandings of (or outright lies about) evolution, but the number and diversity of the objections can put even well-informed people at a disadvantage.

To help with answering them, the following list rebuts some of the most common “scientific” arguments raised against evolution.

1. Evolution is only a theory, not a fact or a scientific law.

Many people learned in elementary school that a theory falls in the middle of a hierarchy of certainty—above a mere hypothesis but below a law. Scientists do not use the terms that way, however. According to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), a scientific theory is “a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world that can incorporate facts, laws, inferences, and tested hypotheses.” No amount of validation changes a theory into a law, which is a descriptive generalization about nature. So when scientists talk about the theory of evolution—or the atomic theory or the theory of relativity, for that matter—they are not expressing reservations about its truth.

In addition to the theory of evolution, meaning the idea of descent with modification, one may also speak of the fact of evolution. The NAS defines a fact as “an observation that has been repeatedly confirmed and for all practical purposes is accepted as ‘true.’” The fossil record and abundant other evidence testify that organisms have evolved through time. Although no one observed those transformations, the indirect evidence is clear, unambiguous and compelling.

All sciences frequently rely on indirect evidence. Physicists cannot see subatomic particles directly, for instance, so they verify their existence by watching for telltale tracks that the particles leave in cloud chambers. The absence of direct observation does not make physicists’ conclusions less certain.

2. Natural selection is based on circular reasoning: the fittest are those who survive, and those who survive are deemed fittest.

“Survival of the fittest” is a conversational way to describe natural selection, but a more technical description speaks of differential rates of survival and reproduction.

That is, rather than labeling species as more or less fit, one can describe how many offspring they are likely to leave under given circumstances. Drop a fast-breeding pair of small-beaked finches and a slower-breeding pair of large-beaked finches onto an island full of food seeds. Within a few generations the fast breeders may control more of the food resources. Yet if large beaks more easily crush seeds, the advantage may tip to the slow breeders. In a pioneering study of finches on the Galápagos Islands, Peter R. Grant of Princeton University observed these kinds of population shifts in the wild.

The key is that adaptive fitness can be defined without reference to survival: large beaks are better adapted for crushing seeds, irrespective of whether that trait has survival value under the circumstances.

METACOGNITION? RATS!

(Excerpted from “We Are Not Alone” on VeryShortList.com /science – 11/19/08)

We’ve always known that rats were capable of complex thought: They memorize mazes and form elaborate social hierarchies. Now we’re learning that they seem to think about

thinking itself. Until recently, that crucial skill—called metacognition—was believed to be unique to humans.

Scientists at the University of Georgia tasked rats with identifying “short” and “long” noises. Rodents that answered correctly were given six food pellets; those that answered wrong got nothing. So far, so Pavlovian. But the rats were also given a third option: If they declined to take the test, they received three food pellets.

Most of the rats refused to identify the noises that were hardest to classify — thus suggesting a surprisingly evolved sense of their own knowledge and abilities.

It’s something to think about the next time you reach for the rat poison.

WHAT CHRISTMAS WARS?

Austin Cline

(Reprinted from “Christmas Wars & Conspiracies: Conflicts over the Meaning of Christmas Season” on about.com)

In his infamous tract *The International Jew*, Henry Ford wrote “The whole record of the Jewish opposition to Christmas, Easter and other Christian festivals, and their opposition to certain patriotic songs, shows the venom and directness of [their] attack.” The John Birch Society complained that the “Godless UN” was conspiring against Christmas. Today, conservatives claim that secularists and liberals are trying to replace Christmas. The enemy changes, but it’s the same conspiracy story.

It is claimed that use of Happy Holidays instead of Merry Christmas excludes Christmas and is anti-Christian. This is nonsense. People use Happy Holidays to cover all holidays during the season, including Christmas. Christians who get upset over this aren’t seeking tolerance or respect, they are seeking privilege and status. They want others to make them feel better about themselves by treating Christianity as special and more important than other religions.

If you say Merry Christmas, you assume that the other person celebrates Christmas, often a fair bet, but not as guaranteed as it once was. As the religious pluralism of America increases, so must the sensitivity of its citizens. The fewer traditional Christians there are around, the less people can assume that everyone is celebrating the usual Christian holidays and doing the usual Christian things. It’s impolite to make assumptions about people you don’t know.

Many Christians complain that Christmas is a religious holiday, but is treated in an inappropriately secular way in contemporary America. This has some merit, but it’s not the result of any conspiracy. Christians have been transforming it into a secular holiday by moving it out of churches and into the public, secular sphere. Pagan elements of Christmas have come to dominate its public celebration and Christian meaning has been lost.

Many reactions to the decreasing importance of Christianity and Christmas are more tribal than religious. Some are turning the phrase Merry Christmas into a fetish, something done for its own sake instead of using it as a sincere greeting. It’s an aggressive statement about one’s own identity that is thrown in the face of others as a challenge or even an insult. It’s not about defending religious meaning in Christmas, but defending a religious identity and a set of traditional privileges.

There is no plot among atheists and liberals to take Christ out of Christmas or to eliminate Christianity from the holiday season. The truth is that the growth of religious

pluralism is behind the decline in importance of Christianity and, by extension, the religious aspects of Christmas. Fewer people, including Christians, see Christmas as a time for religious observance. The current status of Christmas is a natural outgrowth of how people (mostly Christians) behave.

Christmas has become more of a commercial enterprise than a religious observance, the responsibility for which lies with Christians and the free market (which conservatives usually defend). Retailers must cater to a broad public, not just Christians, which means that exclusively Christian elements of the holiday fade into the background while aspects which appeal to everyone (usually pagan or recent elements) grow in importance. Christmas is more about Santa than Jesus today.

Complaints about the status of Christmas in America often focus on the secularization of America and Christmas, and it's true that both have occurred. Lost in the rhetoric, however, is the fact that much of what is seen as secularization is really de-Christianization. The holiday season remains religious with many religions taking part, but it no longer exclusively Christian. It sounds better, though, to complain about secularization than about the loss of Christian privilege.

Conservatives' anger is due more to the fact that Christianity no longer dominates American culture; Christmas is simply an egregious example of this trend. The "right" they say they are losing is the "right" to dominate discourse, culture, government, and society. The loss of Christmas as the focus of the holiday season and the loss of public acknowledgment of the religious elements of Christmas represent the loss of Christian privilege occurring throughout American culture.

The most important issue behind the debates over Christmas is what the "meaning" of Christmas is or should be. Conservatives want to return to a Golden Age when the meaning of Christmas was wholly religious, uncorrupted by pagan, commercial, or secular elements. What they seek is an illusion. There are traditional meanings and religious meanings, but no "real meaning." The meaning of Christmas is whatever people celebrating decide to give to it.

Modern Christmas celebrations have little or nothing to do with Jesus, the Feast of the Nativity, or the Incarnation. Consider some popular Christmas traditions: erecting and decorating a tree, hanging wreaths, sending cards, drinking eggnog, giving presents, hanging mistletoe ... where is Christ in all of this?

If people give it a religious meaning, it will be a religious holiday for them. If they fill the day with other meanings (gifts, family, etc.), then it will have those instead. Because the meaning of Christmas depends upon what people do with it, the only way for Christians to reclaim a religious meaning for Christmas is to personally eschew secular, pagan, and consumer activities in favor of religious ones. Give to the poor instead of to Wal-Mart. Go to church instead of a mall. Pray instead of gathering around a lit-up tree.

What they cannot do is insist that the wider culture endorse this and also shed pagan, commercial, or secular aspects of the season. They can't turn the tide of commercialization and secularization. They might convince individual Christians to turn away from it all and focus on religious aspects of a holy day, however. If enough Christians change, perhaps the culture will as well, but the focus should be on what Christians do as individuals.

Trying to force the culture to change by attacking greetings like Happy Holidays is silly. There is something profoundly wrong with the behavior of Christians using Christmas in their Culture War against modernity.

CHRISTMAS SHOULD BE MORE COMMERCIAL

Dr. Leonard Peikoff, The Ayn Rand Institute

(Reprinted from media@aynrand.org, 12/17/07)

Christmas should celebrate reason, selfishness and capitalism. Christmas in America is an exuberant display of ingenuity, capitalist productivity, and the enjoyment of life. Yet all of these are castigated as “materialistic”; the real meaning of the holiday, we are told, is assorted Nativity tales and altruist injunctions (e.g., love thy neighbor) that no one takes seriously.

In fact, Christmas as we celebrate it today is a 19th-century American invention. The freedom and prosperity of post Civil War America created the happiest nation in history. The result was the desire to celebrate, to revel in the goods and pleasures of life on earth. Christmas (which was not a federal holiday until 1870) became the leading American outlet for this feeling.

Historically, people have always celebrated the winter solstice as the time when the days begin to lengthen, indicating the earth’s return to life. Ancient Romans feasted and reveled during the festival of Saturnalia. Early Christians condemned these Roman celebrations – they were waiting for the end of the world and had only scorn for earthly pleasures. By the fourth century the pagans were worshipping the god of the sun on December 25, and the Christians came to a decision: if you can’t stop ’em, join ’em. They claimed (contrary to known fact) that the date was Jesus’ birthday, and usurped the solstice holiday for their Church.

Even after the Christians stole Christmas, they were ambivalent about it. The holiday was inherently a pro-life festival of earthly renewal, but Christians preached renunciation, sacrifice, and concern for the next world, not this one. As Cotton Mather, an 18th-century clergyman put it: *“Can you in your consciences think that our Holy Savior is honored by mirth?”*

Then came the major developments of 19th-century capitalism: industrialization, urbanization, the triumph of science – all of it leading to easy transportation, efficient mail delivery, the widespread publishing of books and magazines, new inventions making life comfortable and exciting, and the rise of entrepreneurs who understood that the way to make a profit was to produce something good and sell it to a mass market.

For the first time, the giving of gifts became a major feature of Christmas. Early Christians denounced gift-giving as a Roman practice, and Puritans called it diabolical. But Americans were not to be deterred. Thanks to capitalism, there was enough wealth to make gifts possible, a great productive apparatus to advertise them and make them available cheaply, and a country so content that men wanted to reach out to their friends and express their enjoyment of life. The whole country took with glee to giving gifts on an unprecedented scale.

Santa Claus is a thoroughly American invention. There was a St. Nicholas long ago and a feeble holiday connected with him (on December 5). In 1822, an American named Clement Clarke Moore wrote a poem about a visit from St. Nick. It was Moore (and a few other New Yorkers) who invented St. Nick’s physical appearance and personality,

came up with the idea that Santa travels on Christmas Eve in a sleigh pulled by reindeer, comes down the chimney, stuffs toys in the kids' stockings, then goes back to the North Pole.

Of course, the Puritans denounced Santa as the Anti-Christ, because he pushed Jesus to the background. Furthermore, Santa implicitly rejected the whole Christian ethics. He did not denounce the rich and demand that they give everything to the poor; on the contrary, he gave gifts to rich and poor children alike. Nor is Santa a champion of Christian mercy or unconditional love. On the contrary, he is for justice – Santa gives only to good children, not to bad ones.

All the best customs of Christmas, from carols to trees to spectacular decorations, have their root in pagan ideas and practices, greatly amplified by American culture, as the product of reason, science, business, worldliness, and egoism, i.e., the pursuit of happiness.

America's tragedy is that its intellectual leaders have typically tried to replace happiness with guilt by insisting that the spiritual meaning of Christmas is religion and self-sacrifice for Tiny Tim or his equivalent. But the spiritual must start with recognizing reality. Life requires reason, selfishness, capitalism; that is what Christmas should celebrate – and really, underneath all the pretense, that is what it does celebrate.

It is time to take the Christ out of Christmas, and turn the holiday into a guiltlessly egoistic, pro-reason, this-worldly, commercial celebration.

Ed.: An attack from the right in "The War on Christmas."

CHRISTMAS PARTYING WITH JESUS

Pat Condell

(From videosift.com/video/Pat-Condell-parties-with-Jesus)

We actually have a little model nativity scene in our house this Christmas, as we do every Christmas, ostensibly for the children, but really it's for everyone, because Christmas is for everyone. Why do we have it? Well, for the same reasons we have a Christmas tree and fairy lights and tinsel and crackers and paper hats – because it's *fun!*

To me, the Christmas story has always been a charming folk tale. I've never really connected it with religion in the sense that I've never associated it with sin or guilt or burning in eternal hellfire, which means I'm usually in a pretty good mood and ready to celebrate. But that doesn't mean I actually believe the story is true, any more than someone who celebrates Halloween believes that witches really fly around on broomsticks, but it doesn't stop them from having fun with the idea.

Now, Christmas was a folk festival long before Christianity ever got hold of it, and it will be long after Christianity's bony fingers have been prised off it, because—*news flash for Christians!*—nailing your deity's name to a festival doesn't make it yours. It's still all about the solstice; it's still all about the rebirth of the sun. No, not the Son of God, the regular sun. It's the celebration of the life force, something Christianity wouldn't really know very much about, because the only thing it celebrates is death. All the supposed benefits of Christianity accrue after death, not before. Life is a penance to be endured, not lived, unless you're a televangelist with a million-dollar house and a couple of Cadillacs.

But the actual nativity scene itself is an iconic scene which is instantly recognizable. A baby born in a stable? You never look at that scene and say to yourself, "I wonder if that's Baby Jesus there, or one of the many other babies known to be born in stables?"

Because the Christmas story is by no means exclusive to Jesus. It was told and retold many times over the centuries, long before Jesus was ever even thought of. To the ancient Egyptians Isis was the mother of God, and each midwinter they depicted her in a stable, nursing a child that she had—guess what?—miraculously conceived.

But there's no reason for that to spoil the party. Because it's a folk tale, and they're meant to be re-used and re-told – it's all part of the magic. And Christmas is a time for magic. That's why, even though I don't believe in Santa Claus, I would never tell a child that there's no Santa Claus. If I was going to tell them the blunt truth about anything, I would probably tell them that there's no Jesus. Or, if there is, his image rights have been hijacked by the forces of evil and he now works directly for Satan, doing his best to keep us fearful and ignorant, making us feel less worthy than we really are, and emotionally crippling us with guilt for crimes that we had nothing to do with. Doesn't that sound like the work of Satan? Not that I believe in Satan, by the way, but we all know that you don't actually have to believe in a thing for it to be part of your life, whether you like it or not. So in that sense I know that Satan exists.

I also know that the Holy Scriptures will back me up on all that, which gives me a warm and fuzzy feeling all over. And isn't that what Christmas is all about? I wish for you all a Merry Christmas, of course, and I want to wish you what I wish for myself, which is, of course, peace, and may all your Christmases be godless and free.

**BORN IN A MANGER,
WANDERED IN DESERTS AND GALILEE,
AND STILL NO PERMANENT ADDRESS**

A judge threw out a Nebraska legislator's lawsuit against God in October, saying the Almighty wasn't properly served due to his unlisted home address. State Sen. Ernie Chambers filed the lawsuit last year seeking a permanent injunction against God.

He said God has made terroristic threats against the senator and his constituents in Omaha, inspired fear and caused "widespread death, destruction and terrorization of millions upon millions of the Earth's inhabitants."

Chambers has said he filed the lawsuit to make the point that everyone should have access to the courts regardless of whether they are rich or poor.

However, District Court Judge Marlon Polk ruled that under state law a plaintiff must have access to the defendant for a lawsuit to move forward.

"Given that this court finds that there can never be service effectuated on the named defendant this action will be dismissed with prejudice," Polk wrote.

But Chambers thinks he's found a hole in the judge's ruling. "The court itself acknowledges the existence of God," he says. "A consequence of that acknowledgment is a recognition of God's omniscience.

"Therefore, since God knows everything, God has notice of this lawsuit."

Chambers, who has served a record 38 years in the Nebraska legislature, is not returning next year because of term limits. He skips morning prayers during the legislative session and often criticizes Christians.

I have come to view Jesus the way I view Elvis. I love the guy, but a lot of the fan clubs really freak me out. —*John Fugelsang*

Christmas: A holiday celebrated by a lot of people going into hock to buy a lot of useless stuff for a lot of people they often don't care much about, all in the name of a man who supposedly never owned anything in his life.

MIRACLE TOAST

(From A Matter of FACT & The Voice, newsletter of the Freethinkers Association of Central Texas, October, 2008)

Excitement is growing in the North England town of Huddlesfield following the news that a local man saw an image of the Big Bang in a piece of toast.

Atheist Donald Chapman, 36, told the *Huddlesfield Express* that he was sitting down to eat breakfast when an unusual toast pattern caught his eye. "I was just about to spread the butter when I noticed a fairly typical small hole in the bread surrounded by a burnt black ring," said Chapman. "Then to my amazement I saw the direction and splatter patterns of the crumbs and the changing shades emanating outwards from the black hole. They were identical to the chaotic-dynamic non-linear patterns that one would expect following the Big Bang. It's the beginning of the world!"

Ever since news of the discovery made national headlines, local hoteliers have been overwhelmed by an influx of atheists from all over England who have flocked to catch a glimpse of the scientific relic. Said one visitor: "I have always been an atheist, and to see my life choices validated on a piece of toast is truly astounding."

To the surprise of many, the UK National Atheist Association has asked its members not to pay attention to the story despite its potential to inspire less faith. "Given what the religious believe already, this is an easy sell," said one disgruntled activist, who said he was going to Huddlesfield anyway, noting that, "Seeing is not believing."

[box on page 10 – back cover]

GIVE PIQUE FOR THE "HOLY DAYS"

Even secular humanists give and get gifts for the holidays: Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or the Winter Solstice. A gift that will please any freethinker on your list—and certainly please SHSNY—is a gift subscription to PIQUE.

A year (11 issues) costs only \$30 for a non-member subscription. An e-mail to editor @shsny.org, or a phone call to John Rafferty, at 212-371-8733, will take care of all the details.

[close box]

AND FELIZ NAVIDAD TO YOU, TOO, STEVE

Steve Nobel, born-again right-wing Christian talk show host on WTRU in Raleigh-Salem, NC (and nationally on Sirius Satellite Radio) when asked the question, What would Jesus say to illegal immigrants?

"Go home."

MERRY HANUKKAH FROM THE WHITE HOUSE

George W. and Laura Bush have invited leaders of America's Jewish community for a Hanukkah reception at the White House.

As *The New York Post* first noticed, the cover of the invitation is a picture of the White House as a horse-drawn wagon arrives – delivering a *Christmas* tree.