

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February, 2008

We have a few opinions. We argue for Ptolemy's system and against scientific proof, kick around evolutionists who don't know (or care about) science, and wonder if our synapses are ourselves. We congratulate the Pope, scold the *Times*, update the Commandments, and consider evaluations of America by Desmond Tutu, a comic-strip character, and Canada. But first, we consider a rational (and so no-hope) idea for the presidential election, and note our own electoral process. — JR

SHSNY ELECTION NOTICE

The triennial election for the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York will take place this spring. Notice is given hereby, as it will be in the March and April issues of PIQUE. Candidate statements and ballots will be mailed to all members on April 15, and returned ballots will be due May 15. The new 3-year Board term will begin June 1.

Who is eligible?

All dues-paid members of SHSNY are eligible for election to the Board. You may nominate yourself or another member(s)—by letter to the P.O. Box or e-mail to editor@shsny.org—at any time before April 1. Please include a brief statement (100-300 words) summarizing the candidate's/your qualifications and vision for the future of SHSNY, which may be written by the candidate and/or the nominator. If you nominate someone else, please include a statement by the nominee that s/he is willing to serve.

Who will stand for election?

Our by-laws* require a *minimum* of five members on the Board, which elects the officers of SHSNY. Currently, the Board consists of nine members. In alphabetical order, they are Remo Cosentino, Arthur Harris, Lee Loshak, Elaine Lynn, Donna Marxer, Samuel Milligan, Irv Millman, Robert A. Murtha, Jr., and John Rafferty — all of whom will stand for re-election, and all of whom hope that even more people willing to work for SHSNY will nominate themselves and join us.

**If you are a member of SHSNY and do not have a copy of the bylaws, call and leave a message at 212-308-2165.*

LET'S HAVE A PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE ON SCIENCE

Shawn Lawrence Otto

(Excerpted from salon.com, 12/13/07)

The juncture of science and politics is the major concern of a new initiative called ScienceDebate2008. Nearly all of America's major policy issues, ranging from global warming to stem cell research, energy policy to pandemic-disease control, data privacy to healthcare, national defense to ocean management—or a manned mission to Mars—have science and technology at their heart, providing considerable dangers and immense opportunities. Successfully grappling with these issues, and more like them, will require

policymakers to have vision and a more thorough understanding of science than ever before.

This presents us with a growing problem in our national political dialogue. We have come to take the scientific and technological transformation of our lives for granted — the iPhone and Wii weren't even words in the common lexicon 18 months ago. Four years ago if someone asked you to “Google it” you might have taken offense, and five years ago the idea of a hybrid car was fringe. Could something like that actually work? Yes, as it turns out, pretty well.

But on the policy side of this cultural change, we haven't kept up. We have been asleep at the wheel when it comes to the expectations we place on our elected officials; we have allowed the wrong issues to sidetrack political debates. No matter one's political flavor, this is a matter of increasing practical concern. In a science-influenced world, we need and deserve leaders who understand the basic rules of the game, or we're going to get shut out.

Today nations like India and China are producing a higher percentage of scientists and engineers than the United States is. The U.S. National Academy of Sciences report, “Rising Above the Gathering Storm,” outlines educational and demographic trends which suggest that the United States may founder in the global economy without a concerted effort toward continuing technological innovation and competitiveness. To get there we need to sharply step up our investments in our higher education research institutions, many of which are state universities. But with no-new-tax pledges and recurring budget crises in several of the states, the stage is set for old-model policymaking debates over taxes and ideology to derail investment in higher education, even as we battle in a global economy where all the rules have changed.

And the states may have a limited ability to address the issue on their own. The recent Urban Institute study “Into the Eye of the Storm: Assessing the Evidence on Science and Engineering Education, Quality, and Workforce Demand” suggests that it's not just our graduation rates or educational investments that are the problem. College graduates in science and technology are, increasingly, not taking the available opening-level jobs in their fields, jobs that are being filled by more eager immigrants. This trend has received publicity in the unskilled laborer workforce—which has driven much of the illegal immigration debate—but it's also present in our high-tech workforce.

Is the next generation of young Americans too lazy to work? Or is something else afoot? The study suggests that downward wage pressure is one factor. But there are others. Can employees expect job stability in a corporate culture that continues to move science and engineering jobs overseas? Will they have the opportunity to engage in big challenges and earn the respect of their peers and our culture?

Popular and political anti-intellectualism is taking a toll on our national esprit de corps and on our economic security. In a time when we lack major national science and engineering policy goals, and when it's not “of status” to be a scientist, or a teacher, or a laborer, who is going to want to do it? And yet intellectual candidates for public office are seldom perceived as cool; in the high school parlance of our national politics, they're not “the kind of guy you'd like to have a beer with.”

How can we transform our state and federal governments—indeed our national culture—to succeed in a world where science and technology set the new rules of the game? It starts with the quality of the “deciders” we put in office. We need to elect

leaders who are able to understand and apply the best science, who will talk about science in public forums, who will prioritize it in policy decisions, and who will make science education a state and national priority before we are outclassed.

We do this in business. We should do it in our national politics. And the way to do it without one candidate sticking out his or her neck intellectually and risking the loss of beer-slinging street cred is to level the playing field for everyone: Let's have a presidential debate about science and technology.

In the two weeks since the beginning of this initiative, it has taken off like a wildfire. More than 60 distinguished scientists and university presidents have joined a broad coalition of elected leaders, journalists, business leaders, writers and others in a call for the presidential candidates to participate in a debate dedicated to science and technology policy issues like climate change, stem cell research, renewable energy, bioethics, the human genome and a dozen others. ...

This flood of passionate endorsements by so many distinguished names in such a short period of time suggests a hunger in the body politic, a deep-seated concern among leaders across a broad swath of our society that is not currently being addressed in our electoral process.

We have all become painfully aware in recent years that it is not only irresponsible but dangerous and expensive to distort and repackage scientific conclusions for political purposes. Our national security and economic prosperity depend upon leadership that looks the truth squarely in the eye, and makes decisions informed by the facts and the best scientific counsel available. Only in this way will we remain viable in a fiercely competitive global marketplace.

This year more than ever, America needs and deserves to hear from the candidates for president about where they stand on science-related issues and the role science will play in their policymaking process as we tackle our many challenges in a world being utterly transformed by the explosion of science and technology.

Ed: Don't hold your breath, even in your dreams.

CHANGE THE SUBJECT

Edith Amster

I would like to suggest that we change the subject in our conversations at our humanist and other freethought meetings — and focus on timely topics that stimulate the mind and help us to better understand ourselves, our community, our environment, and the political issues that we all face. Very soon we will have to make crucial decisions at voting time.

Let's stop focusing on why we are not religious—or on attacking the religious. We are all too sophisticated and intelligent to keep dwelling on the boring topic of god/no god or justifying why we don't believe in god. There are many issues we all face in our nation now that should be discussed in intelligent and civil ways.

CONGRATULATIONS, MASSIMO!

Dr. Massimo Pigliucci, botanist, philosopher, professor of Ecology and Evolution at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, SHSNY Honorary Member, frequent contributor to PIQUE, and all-around good-guy, will wed Ms. Gillian Dunn—who is Director of Emergency Response at the International Rescue Committee—in July. For Massimo and his bride, we offer the traditional Italian toast: *Cent'anni!*

**THE SHSNY BOOK CLUB READS
THE SYNAPTIC SELF**

by Joseph LeDoux

**(Excerpt of summary prepared for discussion by
Elaine Lynn, Book Club Editor)**

Thought, feeling, action, states of readiness for action, as well as their modulation or repression – all this mental activity occurs through firing electrical and chemical signals among neurons, or nerve cells, in particular patterns. (Synapses are minute spaces between neurons where most of the signals take place.)

So goes the belief of most neuroscientists today. It is based on a few decades of stunning advances in identifying systems of neural circuits whose activity is correlated with particular perceptions and responses to those perceptions. The paths of signals from one neuron to another are often strengthened as they occur, so that they are more likely to recur in the same patterns. This is a mechanism of learning even though it exists, not for learning per se, but to carry out specific functions such as seeing, recognizing, and running away from the grad student in a lab coat.

The research has included electrically or chemically stimulating different kinds of nerve tissue in vitro, in laboratory animals, and to a limited extent, in people. Functional MRI and other tools can also help establish where in the brain activity is going on. Generally, the only opportunity to deal with human subjects is when they appear as patients with mental disorders.

Most neuroscientists today believe that alterations in synaptic connectivity underlie learning, and that memory is the stabilization and maintenance of these changes over time. However, most of it is not conscious.

LeDoux emphasizes the distinction between consciousness and the self. He has only a general direction of a vague idea of what something like consciousness might be. However, he makes a good case for including more than our conscious memory, thought and emotion when considering what our Selves are. Most of our mental activities, including cognitive, emotional, and motivational or volitional activity, are not held in consciousness, but make up who we are. This is obvious on ordinary self-reflection, but made all the more striking as he reminds us that Alzheimer's patients still retain their individual personality traits and habits well after their memory has gone.

In some studies, we are able to use ordinary explicit teaching done on a normal level between human beings to reflect what are believed to be certain patterns of synapse firing. Even some amnesia victims who can't remember their experiences from one hour to the next are capable of learning at some preconscious levels, as demonstrated by being able to play a game they don't remember being taught, but playing it correctly because they absorbed the rules and retained them at an unconscious level.

Chemicals participate in synaptic transmission, but it is the pattern of transmission in circuits, more than the particular chemicals involved or the intrinsic characteristics of the cells, that seem to determine the mental state. Your synapses or, more precisely, the patterns of transmission, are your self, LeDoux says.

For a long time, patients have used drugs, from morphine (even when little was understood about its mechanism) to Prozac (when only a little more was understood about its mechanism). Their functions seem to be altering chemical conditions at the

synapses. As you read the details of the research; e.g., about “blocking calcium receptors” on the nerve cells, it might occur to you that to make it finer-grained they would have to get down to the sub-atomic level. However, only a few simple processes have really been elucidated.

LeDoux believes there are no useful non-material explanations for mental functions, and looking at synaptic patterns is presented here as the most fruitful direction of research. From this perspective, the mind is somewhat like a software program and its products except that, among other things, our own actions and interaction with our environment can modify the programs themselves. They can even modify the “computer” (the brain).

I suspect in the future we will be impressed with this period of progress in neuroscience and we will also be struck by how much more sophisticated we will have become since then.

SPEAK UP FOR HUMANISM IN ALBANY

Freethinking New York State residents are invited to attend the first-ever Institute for Humanist Studies (IHS) Legislative Advocacy Day in Albany, Tuesday, February 12, Darwin Day.

After a “fast-paced training course,” groups of participants will meet with elected state officials to advocate in favor of: the expansion of stem-cell research; comprehensive sex education; same-sex marriage rights; and the separation of religion and government.

Most importantly, the event will make New York politicians aware that ethical New Yorkers who do not believe in a supreme being are a politically active constituency that cannot be ignored.

For information and/or to register online, visit:
http://humaniststudies.org/policy/lad_2008.html

NOT NECESSARILY THE NEWS

John Rafferty

A front-page newspaper story about a “pet psychic for the famous” — we’re talking about the *National Enquirer*, right? Guess again.

I searched all 750-odd words of “In Brooklyn, a Psychic for the Famous, or Rather, for Their Pets” for a hint of irony, a scintilla of skepticism. But no, the story on the first page of the January 21 Metro section of *The New York Times* straightforwardly reported the booming business success of one Christine Agro, “pet psychic to the stars” and “trained clairvoyant natural healer.”

Writer Susan Dominus’ story leads with an anecdote about Agro moving to Cobble Hill five years ago and meeting one of her yoga students from upstate New York on the streets of Brooklyn! (*Wow, what are the chances of that?*) Kismet, says the once good, gray *Times*.

For \$200 per half-hour, Agro does “readings” of the needs, desires, and complaints of famous-family pets.

“‘Kindly don’t throw us in the car without telling us where we’re going,’ an irritated golden retriever named Palomino requested through Ms. Agro. ‘Skye is such a big baby,’ vented a pup named True about a rival.”

What's more, Dominus assures us, "Ms. Agro doesn't need to see the pets to talk to them, just a land line—she communes with the pets while simultaneously relaying the conversation to their owners by phone." Oh, and removing "negative energy" while she's at it.

I have on many, many occasions in these pages quoted the *Times*, and depended upon it as our most reliable journalistic source, especially when compared with the tabloid vapidness of the *Daily News* and the often vicious mendacity of the *Post*.

But at a time when television prime time is filled with brain-dead shows about the paranormal, and when presidential candidates with straight faces affirm their beliefs in heaven, hell, and magic Mormon underpants, perhaps I should not be surprised that the *Times* would run a story without skeptical quote marks around words like "kismet," "psychic," and "clairvoyant."

I just expected better.

SECULAR EUROPE'S MERITS

Roger Cohen

(Reprinted from the OpEd page of the NYTimes, 12/13/07)

The cathedral here [in St. Andrews, Scotland], on which work began in the 12th century, was once the largest in Scotland, until a mob of reformers bent on eradicating lavish manifestations of "Popery" ransacked the place in 1559, leaving gulls to swoop through the surviving facade.

Europe's cathedrals are indeed "so inspired, so grand, so empty," as Mitt Romney, a Mormon, put it in charting his vision of a faith-based presidency. Some do not survive at all. The Continent has paid a heavy price in blood for religious fervor and decided some time ago, as a French king put it, that "Paris is well worth a Mass."

Romney, a Republican presidential candidate, was dismissive of European societies "too busy or too 'enlightened' to venture inside and kneel in prayer." He thereby pointed to what has become the principal transatlantic cultural divide.

Europeans still take the Enlightenment seriously enough not to put it inside quote marks. They have long found an inspiring reflection of it in the first 16 words of the American Bill of Rights of 1791: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Thomas Jefferson saw those words as "building a wall of separation between church and state." So, much later, did John F. Kennedy, who in a speech predating Romney's by 47 years, declared: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute."

The absolute has proved porous. The U.S. culture wars have produced what David Campbell of Notre Dame University called: "the injection of religion into politics in a very overt way."

Much too overt for Europeans, whose alarm at George W. Bush's presidency has been fed by his allusions to divine guidance—"the hand of a just and faithful God" in shaping events, or his trust in "the ways of Providence."

Such beliefs seem to remove decision-making from the realm of the rational at the very moment when the West's enemy acts in the name of fanatical theocracy. At worst, they produce references to a "crusade" against those jihadist enemies. God-given knowledge is scarcely amenable to oversight.

But Bush is no transient phenomenon; he is the expression of a new American religiosity. Romney's speech and the rapid emergence of the anti-Darwin Baptist minister Mike Huckabee as a rival suggest how estranged the American zeitgeist is from the European.

At a time when growing numbers of Americans identify themselves as born-again evangelicals, and creationism is no joke, Romney's speech essentially pitted the faithful against the faithless while attempting to merge Mormonism in mainstream Christianity. Where Kennedy said he believed in a "president whose religious views are his own private affair," Romney pledged not to "separate us from our religious heritage." ...

Religion informed America's birth. But its distancing from politics was decisive to the republic's success. Indeed, the devastating European experience of religious war influenced the founders' thinking. That is why I find Romney's speech and the society it reflects far more troubling than Europe's vacant cathedrals.

Romney allows no place in the United States for atheists. He opines that, "Freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom." Yet secular Sweden is free while religious Iran is not. Buddhism, among other great Oriental religions, is forgotten.

He shows a Wikipedia-level appreciation of other religions, admiring "the commitment to frequent prayer of the Muslims" and "the ancient traditions of the Jews." These vapid nostrums suggest his innermost conviction of America's true faith. A devout Christian vision emerges of a U.S. society that is in fact increasingly diverse.

Romney rejects the "religion of secularism," of which Europe tends to be proud. But he should consider that Washington is well worth a Mass. The fires of the Reformation that reduced St. Andrews Cathedral to ruin are fires of faith that endure in different, but no less explosive, forms. Jefferson's "wall of separation" must be restored if those who would destroy the West's Enlightenment values are to be defeated.

THOUGHTS ON GALILEO AND THE POPE **Edward Goldsmith**

Reading the poem "Galileo Galilei," by Charlotte Pomerantz in January PIQUE, about Galileo's contention that the earth travels around the sun, while the Pope of that era argued that the sun travels around the earth, I was reminded of the statement of a physics professor I had at Brooklyn College as an undergraduate back in the 1950's. I forget his name, but not his statement, namely that it all depends on where you want to place the zero point of your graph. In other words the choice is completely arbitrary.

That observation of his really stuck with me.

As I understand it, the Ptolemaic astronomy satisfied the religious authorities, who preferred viewing the earth as the center of the universe, since it fit well with the Bible. The Copernican system placed the sun at the center of the universe, since this simplified certain mathematical calculations, and perhaps astronomers found using it more convenient for predicting the location of a heavenly body at some point in time.

It has been many years since both of these guys, Ptolemy and Copernicus, promoted their systems, and we now are aware of many other stars and planets in the skies. Consequently all sorts of alternate systems can be set up with all sorts of stars or planets at the center of each one. For example, if I lived out on a planet near the star Alpha Centauri, I suppose I would want to place my home planet at the center to simplify things for myself, and most of the guys on my planet would agree.

I suspect that most superficial characters who refer to themselves as humanists actually believe that the sun is the center of our solar system in some fundamental way. That would make them secular fundamentalists, which is an oxymoron. That is precisely what I am arguing against. In other words, neither the Ptolemaic nor the Copernican system presents absolute truth. The adoption of each system merely serves a certain purpose.

ON SCIENTIFIC PROOF

Giddean Beer

Some say that there is no scientific proof of links between global warming and specific regional effects. Not too many years ago tobacco industry officials were saying that there was no scientific proof of links between cigarettes and lung cancer or heart disease. The lead industry claimed that there was no scientific proof that environmental lead was causing neurological damage. And some AIDS activists and heads of some governments argue that there is no scientific proof that HIV is the cause of AIDS.

They are all correct.

Here are a few other concepts for which there is no scientific proof: relativity and the constancy of the speed of light in vacuum, the germ “theory” of disease, evolution, Kepler’s laws of planetary motion. Indeed very little, if any, of science rests on proof. What supports science is evidence.

Mathematics is based on proof. Given a set of assumptions (axioms) the resulting consequences must be discovered and proved. The assumptions may, or may not, be related to observation. But, once a proof is accepted and verified, there is no reason to challenge it.

By contrast, the conclusions of science are based on observations and are usually challenged. Science is like a great set of unending trials in which new evidence is frequently introduced, examined and tested, accepted or rejected, and the verdict adjusted if necessary. Science refreshes itself as it advances.

Though it’s inappropriate to require “proof” in science, “no scientific proof” does mean something. As used by the anti-rationalists today, “no scientific proof” means “don’t believe the evidence.”

AMERICA IS ...

“America is the greatest, freest and most decent society in existence. It is an oasis of goodness in a desert of cynicism and barbarism. This country, once an experiment unique in the world, is now the last best hope for the world.” – Dinesh D’Souza

1. On December 18, the U.N. General Assembly passed, 104 to 54 with 29 abstentions, a non-binding resolution calling for a moratorium on the death penalty. Among the 53 nations joining the United States (Bush Administration Version) in the courageous fight against this outrageous assault on national sovereignty by pusillanimous human rights advocates and all 27 democracies of the European Union were our freedom-loving allies China, Egypt, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, Syria and Zimbabwe.

1a. Oblivious of the irony, George W. Bush officially proclaimed January 20, 2008, National Sanctity of Human Life Day in the United States of America.

2. Archbishop Desmond Tutu railed against the use of detention centers by the United States. “Whoever imagined that you would hear from America,” asked Tutu, “the same arguments for detention without trial that were used by the apartheid government?”

3. An official training manual for Canadian diplomats now lists the U.S. among countries that potentially torture or abuse prisoners.

4. And in the Doonesbury comic strip of January 17, “National Public Radio talk-show host” Mark Slackmeyer interviewed the thuggish President-for-Life of the Republic of Berzerkistan.

Mark: Sir, isn’t it true that your prisons are packed with minorities?

Pres-for-Life: As are yours, I believe. And our numbers are modest, whereas your country has the highest incarceration rate in the world.

Mark: Yeah, but our inmates aren’t tortured.

Pres-for-Life: Excuse me?

Mark: Damn ... that used to be a gimmee.

Pres-for-Life: Don’t worry, we’re all huge Jack Bauer* fans.

**U.S. government super-agent “hero” of the hugely popular TV show “24,” who regularly and creatively tortures dark-skinned villains.*

[box]

**EVENINGS AT 7
IN THE PARISH HALL**

MON ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

TUE ABUSED SPOUSES

WED EATING DISORDERS

THU SAY NO TO DRUGS

FRI TEEN SUICIDE WATCH

SAT SOUP KITCHEN

**SUNDAY SERMON
9 A.M.
“AMERICA’S JOYOUS
FUTURE”**

*From a photo of a real parish hall poster
(it didn’t reproduce) forwarded by the
nonpareil John O’Brien.*

[end box]

MOHAMMED EVALUATES SCIENCE

(All reprinted from jesusandmo.net)

Jesus (reading Nature): Biotechnology is pretty amazing — they reckon GM crops could feed the entire world.

Mohammed: Bah! Not a morsel of accursed Frankenfood shall pass my lips.

Jesus: What about stem cell research? They're making amazing progress toward finding cures for many of our worst diseases.

Mo: The arrogance of scientists who meddle with creation! God alone is the master of life and of its integrity.

Jesus: The latest developments suggest that it may be possible to manipulate a gene which would turn a homosexual into a heterosexual.

Mo: Science is truly a gift from God.

JESUS EXPLAINS PRO-LIFE

Mohammed (reading Bible in bed): I don't understand the Christian pro-life position. In Ex. 21:22 it clearly says that if a man causes a woman to miscarry, he should be fined—not executed, which is the biblical punishment for murder.

Jesus (reading the Koran): Yeah, but it's still taking a life.

Mo: Not if you use the biblical definition of life, which is breath—like when God breathed life into Adam in Gen. 2:7. Embryos don't breathe, so life must begin at birth, not conception. After all, Christians are “born again,” not “conceived again.”

Jesus: OK, I admit it—anti-abortion has nothing to do with the Bible. It's all about keeping women under control.

Mo: Now *that* I can understand.

JESUS AND MOHAMMED EXPLAIN SIN AND MORALITY

Jesus: Barmaid, how do you explain sin and morality in evolutionary terms?

Barmaid: Well, there are no definite answers, but natural selection must play a part. What you call “sins”—gluttony, lust, envy, anger, etc.—are basic impulses that ensure survival. On the other hand, “moral sentiments” such as empathy and altruism probably also have a genetic basis—even if they are principally directed at close kin. We're still figuring out how these factors interact — it's quite fascinating.

Jesus: You mean complicated.

Mohammed: We prefer the scriptural explanation.

Barmaid: The talking snake hypothesis?

Jesus: It's sssso sssimple.

THE “PAGAN DNA” IN PAT ROBERTSON'S PRIMITIVE, PUNISHING DEITY

Sol Abrams

In ancient times, when catastrophes like floods occurred people thought they were being punished by their god or gods, that they had done something to offend their deity. Apparently Pat Robertson is a believer in this punishing pagan god, and not in the forgiving deity he claims to believe in, namely Jesus.

Pat claims that he is a Christian, but real Christians believe in a forgiving Jesus, not a punishing one. Furthermore, televangelist Pat does not practice the teachings of Jesus, who was very critical of the wealthy and who opposed the Pharisees who paraded their

religion in public prayer. Also, Jesus endorsed separation of church and state in his “render unto Caesar” remark, while politician Pat Robertson does just the opposite.

Pat Robertson’s explanation of the Twin Towers disaster was that God was punishing everyone for tolerating secularism. The pagan clergy in ancient societies 3000 years ago did the same thing. Every single idiotic “God-is-angry” explanation of catastrophes is rooted not just in paganism, but primitive paganism.

Rabbi Jacobovitz, chief Orthodox rabbi of the United Kingdom, once said that the Holocaust was God’s just punishment for the Reform assimilationist Jews of Germany. His God is the same as Pat Robertson’s—the primitive, pagan, punishing deity.

That primitive concept—of the punishing god—has survived even in more “rational” and “enlightened” Judaism and Christianity. I call it those religions’ “pagan DNA,” and it shows up in their “Holy Bibles.”

When King Solomon of the united kingdom of Israel-Judah died, his son Rehoboam took the advice of young counselors to not only continue the harsh policies of his father, but to make them even harsher. As a result, a rebellion split the kingdom into Judah and Israel. Rehoboam kept Judah, but Jeroboam, a non-Hebrew, became the king of Israel.

Years later the Hebrew priests put a religious spin on the split. The God of Israel was angry with Solomon, they claimed in hindsight, because he had erected pagan temples to please some of his non-Hebrew wives – which had nothing to do with the facts of Rehoboam’s policies.

The most famous example of the inheritance of “pagan DNA” is the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham would have sacrificed his son to please primitive, pagan Yahweh. Only when the deity was satisfied that He came before Isaac in Abraham’s esteem did he spare the boy. (Jeptha’s daughter wasn’t so lucky, and was sacrificed to insure Yahweh’s help in Jeptha’s military victory.)

Thomas Jefferson in an 1820 letter to William Short wrote, “That sect (Judaism) has presented as the object of its worship, a being of terrific character: Cruel, Capricious, Vindictive and Unjust.”

Leviticus 25 and 26 and Deuteronomy 28 confirm Jefferson’s characterization of the God of Israel, and indeed show Him to be a primitive pagan deity. It is interesting to note that the God of Israel becomes the Father in the New Testament, who sacrifices his “son” in the same old primitive, pagan tradition.

These absurd religious explanations are, in effect, the pagan DNA that has been passed through to Judeo-Christian dogma of the past 2000 years – and the rationale for the hellfire-and-damnation pronouncements by modern-day bigots like Pat Robertson.

THE (UPDATED) TEN COMMANDMENTS OF THE EVANGELICAL RIGHT

Anton Spivack

I. Thou shalt have no other gods before our God.

II. Thou shalt not make any graven images, unless they represent God or his word, in which case they must be erected on public property.

III. Thou shalt not use the name of the Lord in vain, except in advancing our political and social agendas, in which case it can be used any way that works.

IV. Thou shalt keep holy the Sabbath day by going to our megachurches and patronizing our on-site fast food stands and movie theaters.

V. Thou shalt honor thy mother and father, even when they have to beat faith into you or shelter you away from the sinful outside world.

VI. Thou shalt not kill a fetus.

VII. Thou shalt not get caught committing adultery.

VII. Thou shalt not steal, but it is acceptable to write off your custom Mercedes C300 as a “ministry expense.”

IX. Thou shalt not bear false witness, except to disprove Bible-contradicting science or prove the U.S.A. was founded on biblical principles.

X. Thou shalt not covet anything except Christian dominion in America and, eventually, the global supremacy of Biblical Christianity.

SOCIALIZED MEDICINE IN THE U.K. SCREWS UP AGAIN

Starting in September, 12 to 16-year-old schoolgirls in Great Britain will receive vaccinations against cervical cancer caused by human papilloma virus (HPV). The program is expected to save hundreds of lives each year as those girls mature.

No such program is scheduled in the U.S.—or is even being discussed by any prominent politician—because religious conservatives assume it will lead to increased teenage sexual activity.

Ed: And cancer is what the teen sluts deserve, isn't it?

WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF THREE WISE JEWISH WOMEN MEMBERS OF SHSNY HAD GONE TO BETHLEHEM

Barbara G. Lifton.

The three SHSNY members, on their way on a cold winter's night to a meeting of the Chapter in The Barn, a local Thai country restaurant, would have given the three Kings directions, because they always know where they are going!

In addition, upon hearing the three “Wise Men's” purpose for the visit to Bethlehem, they would have informed them that they were wasting their time. Indeed, the only people living in the area around and in The Barn were restaurant workers, faux shepherds hired as a publicity stunt, and a lot of goats and sheep (ready for slaughter). They would have told the Kings that the star was a comet, that the baby, if present in The Barn, was accompanying its parents to dinner to celebrate the Winter Solstice, dedicated to the Triple Goddess of Celtic fame, that there was no ‘son of god’ because there was and is no “god,” and that the restaurant was pricey and did not take credit cards!

That encounter might have solved all the difficulties Western culture, male and female, has had in the last 2,000 years reconciling its natural skepticism about, but strange attraction to, supernatural deities, with its healthy interest in rational thought.

Jewish women, especially secular humanist Jewish women, are not interested in brisket or “schmattas,” they love animals, and they certainly don't talk in the manner described by Ellie Karr in December PIQUE. She has the wrong generation and the wrong stereotype.

Ed: Barbara, where would humor be without stereotypes?

From a Holiday-wishes e-mail from Washington correspondent and PIQUE subscriber Giles Kelly:

Hi, John: There is an interesting op-ed piece in today's Washington Post by Michael Gerson, "Divine Evolution." He seems to be proposing an idea that occurred to some of us a while back, i.e.: Can we not settle this debate simply by a compromise to the effect that evolution has been, and continues to be, guided by God's hand?

DIVINE EVOLUTION

Michael Gerson

(Reprinted from The Washington Post, 12/21/07)

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth. Or not.

And so the debate on origins continues.

This spring, west of Cincinnati, a \$27 million Creation Museum opened its doors, complete with a display showing dinosaurs entering Noah's Ark. Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee is pressed repeatedly on his views of evolutionary biology, rather than health-care policy or Iran. According to the Pew Research Center, about 70 percent of evangelicals believe that living things have always existed in their current form.

I have little knowledge of, or interest in, the science behind this debate. Can gradual evolutionary changes account for the complex structures of cells and the eye? Why is the fossil record so weak when it comes to major mutations? I have no idea. There are unsolved mysteries in Darwinian evolution. There is also no credible scientific alternative.

But whatever the scientific objections, it is the theological objections to evolution that are weakest. Critics seem to argue that the laws of nature are somehow less miraculous than their divine suspension. But the elegant formulas of physics, and the complex mechanisms of evolution, strike me as an equal tribute to the Creator.

Critics also assume that humble evolutionary origins undermine human dignity. But the Bible's description—creation from the "dust of the earth"—is no less humiliating than descent from primates. Men and women have an elevated value because they are known and loved by God, not because of their genetic pedigree.

Historically, it is usually an error for religious people to fill scientific holes with supernatural explanations, because those holes often are filled eventually by the progress of knowledge. A "god of the gaps" is weaker and less compelling than the God of all creation.

And there is little need for such explanations, even for those who take the Bible seriously. Leon Kass, in his masterful work "The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis," observes, "The biblical account is perfectly compatible with the fact of a slowly evolving cosmos, with life arriving late, beginning in the sea and only later emerging on earth, progressively distinguished into a variety of separated kinds."

But this overly hyped debate on biology hides a deeper conflict that could not be more important.

Some scientists claim that a belief in evolution and orderly material laws somehow disproves the existence of immaterial things such as God and the soul—as if biology or physics could refute concepts they don't even examine. There is no telescope that reveals the absence of the divine; no MRI that yields a negative test for the soul. G.K. Chesterton summarizes this naive theory as follows: "Because science has not found something

which obviously it could not find, therefore something entirely different ... is untrue. ... To me it is all wild and whirling; as if a man said, 'The plumber can find nothing wrong with our piano; so I suppose my wife does love me.'"

There is a large distinction between the scientific theory of evolution and naturalism. Naturalism — the belief that the material world is all that is or ever will be — is a philosophy, and a dangerous one. As C.S. Lewis points out, this belief system begins by denying the existence of God, but it cannot end there. "The masters of the method soon announce that we were just as mistaken (and mistaken in much the same way) when we attributed 'souls' or 'selves' or 'minds' to human organisms, as when we attributed Dryads to the trees. ... Man is indeed akin to the gods: he is no less phantasmal than they."

And so, in a purely material universe, human beings are reduced to what one writer calls "temporarily animated meat"—even our consciousness a byproduct of our chemistry. This view, by necessity, has disturbing moral and political implications. Those who believe that men are meat are more likely to treat men as meat. "If I had to burn a man alive," concludes Lewis, "I think I should find this doctrine comfortable."

The belief in an orderly universe does not require belief in an empty universe. And science does not even address the most important questions about human destiny.

"Let us assume that creation *is* evolution," argues Leon Kass, "and proceeds solely by natural processes. What is *responsible* for this natural process? . . . Can a dumb process, ruled by strict necessity and chance mutation, having no rhyme or reason, ultimately answer sufficiently for life, for man, for the whole?" ... And when we finally allow ourselves to come face-to-face with the mystery that there is anything at all rather than nothing, can we evolutionists confidently reject the first claim of the Bible — 'In the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth'?"

From a Holiday-wishes response to Giles Kelly [above]:

DIVINE BALONEY, HOWEVER YOU SLICE IT

John Rafferty

Giles, let's look first at Gerson's baldfaced upfront admission: "I have little knowledge of, or interest in, the science behind this debate." "Little knowledge" is bad enough, "no interest" betrays willful ignorance. Gerson is saying that only the religious side of the argument matters to him. So his column is not an analysis, it's simply an argument for religion.

It's interesting that he uses quotes from three well-known Christian apologists, Chesterton, Lewis and, twice, the egregious Leon Kass (Google him and see for yourself) ... while attributing unsupportable ideas to un-named, straw-man "critics" and "some scientists." Which scientists, please, "claim that a belief in evolution and orderly material laws somehow disproves the existence of immaterial things such as God and the soul ..."? That's nonsense. What nearly all non-theist scientists (let's leave out the loonies on either fringe, okay?) would say is that of course you can't prove a negative (there is no god), but that doesn't give you license to claim a positive (there is a god) without evidence. And there is no evidence. None.

And to say that "science does not even address the most important questions about human destiny" is just another way of saying that religion is more important than science because religion does "address" those questions. But, in fact, religion does not. It simply

states its opinions (differing from sect to sect), without any evidence to support its claims that the good will go to heaven or be released from the chain of being or will become gods themselves. No evidence, just statements, called “beliefs.” Science is a search for evidence, and there is no falsifiable evidence to be found (so far) about “human destiny.”

The big-clincher Kass argument, “What is *responsible* for this natural process [evolution]?” is really the same question we asked each other in middle school or summer camp: “Oh yeah, then who made God?” The assumption that something/someone has to be responsible, something/someone has to be a “first cause” is simply that, an assumption. Tell me *why* something has to be responsible. Tell me *why* someone has to be a first cause. And don’t say it’s only logical, because using logic, you must then ask who/what’s responsible for the responsible agent, who/what causes the first cause?

Of course the underlying premise of the argument is that humans are moral and decent because there is a god and we are made in its image—that if there were no god there would be no morality—that we are more than “temporarily animated meat.” (Again, what scientist believes that we are just meat?) The broad consensus among scientists today is that our morality and our ethics are the products of our evolution. We see cooperative behavior (especially in insects), and empathy and altruism throughout the mammalian class. They are all evolutionary benefits—the species in which individuals cooperate have better chances of reproducing themselves and growing. Aggression and selfishness will work for individual animals in the short run, but groups that share and cooperate pass on more of their genes to more descendants, which is what evolutionary “progress” is all about. Researchers have found that not only other primates, but even dogs and other “lesser” animals have senses of “fairness” and “equity.” Our morality, our ethics, our “goodness” didn’t come down from the sky, it is part of our evolution, our growing up as a species, perhaps a stage in the path of our “human destiny.”

But “Naturalism,” Gerson quotes Lewis as saying, “the belief that the material world is all that is or ever will be—is a philosophy, and a dangerous one.” Dangerous, because if we concede for a moment that humans can be decent and moral without a god, then we’d all have to ask, “Why god?”

But what really tickles me is Gerson’s use of the quote from C. S. Lewis: “Those who believe that men are meat are more likely to treat men as meat. ‘If I had to burn a man alive,’ concludes Lewis, ‘I think I should find this doctrine comfortable.’” How tone deaf do you have to be to defend religion while bringing up the subject of burning people alive?

Giles, you are a rational and reasonable man (one of the best I know), an Enlightenment liberal in the classic sense, and of course you would want to “settle this debate simply by a compromise to the effect that evolution has been, and continues to be, guided by God’s hand”? I would like to, too, and would that we could. But I argue and rant and sometimes scream because in the last couple of decades in America that classic liberal attitude has been strangled by a new religious fundamentalism that will *not* compromise. I don’t care if people want to believe that the earth is 6000 years old and that people played with dinosaurs before getting on Noah’s ark — why should I? Let them believe whatever they want (and I certainly can’t prove that evolution is not guided by some god’s hand). But too many of them insist on putting their nonsense in my grandchildren’s textbooks, on curtailing medical and biological research, on denying

scientific facts like global warming, and on making second-class citizens of my wife, my daughters-in-law and my granddaughters.

They will *not* compromise (a classic liberal idea itself) because they are “doing God’s work,” and compromise would be apostasy. So they’ll repeat nonsense like Creationism/Intelligent Design/Sudden Emergence endlessly, and write specious articles like Gerson’s, full of half-truths and phony “quotes”—it’s all good because it’s all in the service of goodness and right.

THE POPE SOLVES THE CHURCH’S PEDOPHILE PRIESTS PROBLEM

(From The Times [London], 1/7/08)

Pope Benedict XVI has instructed Roman Catholics to pray “in perpetuity” to cleanse the Church of pedophile clergy. All dioceses, parishes, monasteries, convents and seminaries will organize continuous daily prayers to express penitence and to purify the clergy.

Ed: Yeah, that should do it.

NOW, ABOUT THOSE THUGGISH NUNS ...

A spokeswoman for a diocese in southern Italy said that the Santa Chiara nunnery at Bisceglie “is a place of perpetual eucharistic adoration.” But the Vatican has had to intercede to stop fistfights in the convent.

It seems that after the convent’s mother superior and another nun died earlier last year, the three remaining nuns, one of whom is 80 years old, began to argue, then banish each other, and finally pummel each other — over who would become the new mother superior.