

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

January, 2008

Happy New Year – Is the election over yet? Herein we trash “Christian leaders” and Christianity-soaked politics (10 more months of it!) ... begin Dumbth Award balloting ... decry dopey science and dangerous religion ... celebrate libraries, Galileo, and a new Board member ... bring back “brain poopies” and advance a poo theory of life ... and declare Christmas officially “good” and the war on it over! We welcome the new year with a cautionary report, but sign off with some good advice – *JR*

WELCOME TO 2008 ... AND EARTH'S FUTURE

(Reprinted from ScientificAmerican.com, “The World Is Not Enough for Humans,” 10/26/2007)

Humanity's environmental impact has reached an unprecedented scope, and it's getting worse. Since 1987 annual emissions of carbon dioxide—the leading greenhouse gas warming the globe—have risen by a third, global fishing yields have declined by 10.6 million metric tons and the amount of land required to sustain humanity has swelled to more than 54 acres (22 hectares) per person. Yet, Earth can provide only roughly 39 acres (15 hectares) for every person living today, according to the United Nation's Environmental Program's (UNEP) Global Environment Outlook.

“There are no major issues,” the report's authors write of the period since their first report in 1987, “for which the foreseeable trends are favorable.”

Despite some successes — such as the Montreal Protocol's 95 percent reduction in chemicals that damage the atmosphere's ozone layer and a rise in protected reserves of habitat to cover 12 percent of the planet—humanity's impact continues to grow. For example:

Biodiversity — The planet is in the grips of the sixth great extinction in its 4.5-billion-year history, this one largely man-made. Species are becoming extinct 100 times faster than the average rate in the fossil record. More than 30 percent of amphibians, 12 percent of birds and 23 percent of our own class, mammals, are threatened.

Climate — Average temperatures have climbed 1.4 degrees Fahrenheit (0.76 degree Celsius) over the past century and could increase as much as 8.1 degrees F (4.5 degrees C) over the next unless “drastic” steps are taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from, primarily, burning fossil fuels. Developed countries will need to reduce this globe-warming pollution by 60 to 80 percent by mid-century to stave off dire consequences, the report warns. “Fundamental changes in social and economic structures, including lifestyle changes, are crucial if rapid progress is to be achieved.”

Food — The amount of food grown per acre has reached one metric ton, but such increasing intensity is also driving rapid desertification of formerly arable land as well as reliance on chemical pesticides and fertilizers. In fact, four billion out of the world's 6.5 billion people could not get enough food to eat without such fertilization. Continuing population growth paired with a shift toward eating more meat leads the UNEP to predict that food demand may more than triple.

Water — One in 10 of the world’s major rivers, including the Colorado and the Rio Grande in the U.S., fail to reach the sea for at least part of the year, due to demand for water. And that demand is rising; by 2025, the report predicts, demand for fresh water will rise by 50 percent in the developing world and 18 percent in industrialized countries.

At the same time, human activity is polluting existing fresh waters with everything from fertilizer runoff to pharmaceuticals, and climate change is shrinking the glaciers that provide drinking water for nearly one third of humanity. “The escalating burden of water demand,” the report says, “will become intolerable in water-scarce countries.”

The authors — 388 scientists reviewed by roughly 1,000 of their peers—view the report as “an urgent call for action” and decry the “woefully inadequate” global response to problems such as climate change. “The amount of resources needed to sustain [humanity] exceeds what is available,” the report declares.

“The systematic destruction of the earth’s natural and nature-based resources has reached a point where the economic viability of economies is being challenged,” Achim Steiner, UNEP’s executive director, said in a statement. “The bill we hand our children may prove impossible to pay.”

THE POO THEORY OF LIFE

Ted Alvarez

(Reprinted from Scientific American’s 60seconds.com, 11/29/07)

I always knew feces was the key to complex life – why do you think the best jokes involve poop? Scientists have long sought to explain the evolutionary explosion of life that occurred 500 million years ago during the Cambrian period; this population boom eventually gave rise to the ancestors of complex life.

Biogeochemist Graham Logan argues that feces-producing creatures, which actually arrived about 40 million years before the start of the Cambrian, were the key that enabled single-celled organisms to expand.

Before pooping creatures, bacteria consumed most of the available oxygen. Plankton produced oxygen slowly, but bacteria would consume most of it in order to digest dead plankton. The dearth of oxygen didn’t allow for much multicellular development.

Then the crappers came to the rescue.

When feces-producing creatures arrived on the scene, they ate plankton instead of bacteria, sending the remaining feces to sink to the bottom floor. Without as much plankton to eat and with less access to the feces at the bottom of the ocean, bacteria populations starved and shrank, leaving more oxygen for everyone else.

Logan backs up his theory with research on the ratio of carbon 12 and carbon 13 isotopes in rocks from the Cambrian period formed from dead pooping creatures. Animals that eat other animals have greater ratios of carbon 13 in them. Before the Cambrian period, C 13 levels were very high, which fits the idea that bacteria were eating large amounts of dead plankton. Once crapping animals arrived, however, C 13 levels dropped since there was less food for bacteria to eat.

This is just one compelling idea to explain the Cambrian life explosion among many, but I’m officially adopting it. That way, from now on, when I tell people I have to go drop “the miracle of life,” they’ll know what I’m talking about.

ARE SCIENCE AND RELIGION

BOTH BASED ON FAITH?

On November 24, *The NYTimes* published an Op-Ed article by Paul Davies, author of *Cosmic Jackpot: Why Our Universe Is Just Right for Life*, the theme of which is that science, no less than religion, was committed to “laws” and “faith” in a-priori principles that may not be questioned by the orthodox. The full text of the article is available on the *Times* website (go to Opinion, then OpEd, then type “Taking Science on Faith” in the search box), but is summarized fairly well in this extract:

Clearly, then, both religion and science are founded on faith — namely, on belief in the existence of something outside the universe, like an unexplained God or an unexplained set of physical laws ... too.

The next day, philosopher, evolutionary biologist and SHSNY Honorary Member Massimo Pigliucci (his blog is <http://rationallyspeaking.blogspot.com>) replied.

SCIENCE IS NOT AT ALL LIKE RELIGION

Massimo Pigliucci

Paul Davies has joined the small but vocal number of scientists who claim parity between science and religion because both are based “on faith.” Davies’ extraordinary assertion arises from a series of philosophical and factual misunderstandings: first, scientists do not have “faith” in an orderly universe; they assume that there are explanations for natural phenomena and go about testing that assumption.

Second, the idea that there are “laws” in the universe is misleading, as it suggests some sort of law-maker; in reality, there are simply patterns of regular behavior that make predictions possible.

Lastly, it is time that physicists – who are not trained in biology – stop pontificating about our universe being “just right for life.” It is not at all likely that the universe is teeming with life, since most star systems are utterly inhospitable to it. It requires a very large ego indeed to think that billions of lifeless worlds have come into existence so that we could speculate on who did it.

Science is not at all like religion: the latter provides no explanation and is based on blind faith, the former is a highly successful human endeavor that keeps delivering the goods.

ROCK OF AGES VS. AGE OF ROCKS

Art Harris

Why do the creationists have to try to prove their beliefs, have them validated scientifically? After all, religion claims to have all the answers, whereas science has only questions.

Science theorizes possible answers, which are always subject to change or alteration based on new evidence. Religion posits that it is ultimate truth. So why do the religionists feel they have to “prove” their faith’s “truths” in high-school biology textbooks and in our courts of law? (Is it possibly because they believe scientific proof is more valid than religious faith?)

Let religionists believe what they want, and leave the rest of us alone.

IRV MILLMAN JOINS THE SHSNY BOARD

At a meeting December 4, seven of us on the SHSNY Board listened to member-volunteer Irv Millman, who is helping organize our 20th Anniversary Luncheon at The Players, make several very useful suggestions.

“Why isn’t Irv on the Board?” Vice-President Remo Cosentino wondered.

About 30 seconds later, he was. Is.

Irv is a retired ad man and marketing consultant, a humanist, a native New Yorker (Brooklyn subdivision) to the depths of his being, the go-to-guy expert on the city’s restaurants, and a very spiffy dresser – a man who, in a more elegant era, we’d call a “boulevardier.” – *JR*

SHERRI IS US

John Rafferty

If TV personality Sherri Shepherd were only mean-spirited instead of just plain dumb, she’d be the hands-down winner of this year’s SHSNY Dumbth Award. She’s the sweet – but clueless – co-host of the late-morning talk show, “The View,” who in September first admitted that she didn’t know whether the earth was flat or not, and then excused herself as having been flustered and making a “brain poopie.”

She’s done it again. The ladies on “The View” were discussing Greek philosopher Epicurus December 3rd (really, Epicurus!), and the talk soon rambled around to religion. Sherri avowed that Christians lived in Epicurus’s time (341-270 B.C.): “The Greeks had Christians ‘cause they threw them to the lions.”

When Whoopi Goldberg tried to explain the timeline of history Sherri insisted, “I don’t think anything predated Christians ... Jesus came first before them.”

Why does this blinkered ignorance matter to us?

Because someone who is reportedly paid two million dollars a year to discuss national issues with presidential candidates in between frothy babble segments “earns” thirty times what a middle school history teacher makes, couldn’t pass a seventh grade history exam, and hasn’t figured out what the “before Christ” of “B.C.” means.

And because, if you turn on your TV late mornings on a weekday, the hugely-popular “The View” is probably the smartest and most literate show you’ll find.

Never mind Sherri, what the hell is wrong with us?

Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge. – *Charles Darwin*

THE 220-YEAR DEVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

1787

“No religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” – *Article VI of the Constitution of the United States of America, signed by, among others, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton.*

1960

“I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute ... I believe in a President whose views on religion are his own private affair, neither imposed upon him by the nation or imposed by the nation upon him as a condition to holding that office.” – *John F. Kennedy to the Greater Houston Ministerial Assn.*

2007

“The notion of the separation of church and state has been taken by some well beyond its original meaning. They seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God. Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in public life. It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America – the religion of secularism. They are wrong. ... We are a nation ‘Under God’ and in God, we do indeed trust.

“We should acknowledge the Creator as did the Founders – in ceremony and word. He should remain on our currency, in our pledge, in the teaching of our history, and during the holiday season, nativity scenes and menorahs should be welcome in our public places. Our greatness would not long endure without judges who respect the foundation of faith upon which our Constitution rests. I will take care to separate the affairs of government from any religion, but I will not separate us from ‘the God who gave us liberty.’ ...

“Americans acknowledge that liberty is a gift of God, not an indulgence of government. ... Freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom ... Freedom and religion endure together, or perish alone.” – *Mitt Romney at the George Bush Presidential Library.*

Comments:

Romney’s message, which boiled down to let’s-all-be-religious-together, was certainly different from the John Kennedy version, which argued that a candidate’s religion is irrelevant. But then Kennedy was speaking to the country, while Romney had his attention fixed on the approximately 35,000 Iowa religious conservatives who will tip the balance in the first-in-the-nation Republican caucus.

Can I pause here briefly to point out that in New York there are approximately 35,000 people living on some *blocks*? If my block got to decide the first presidential caucus, I guarantee you we would be as serious about our special role as the folks in Iowa are. And right now Mitt Romney would be evoking the large number of founding fathers who were agnostics. – *Gail Collins in the NYTimes, 12/8/078*

[Mitt Romney] did not give a brave speech but a pandering one. Disguised as a courageous, Kennedyesque statement of principle, the talk was really just an attempt to compete with the evolution-disdaining, religion-baiting Huckabee and get Baptists to concede that Mormons are Christians.

“J.F.K.’s speech was to reassure Americans that he wasn’t a religious fanatic,” [Jon Krakauer, author of *Under the Banner of Heaven*] agreed. “Mitt’s was to tell evangelical Christians, ‘I’m a religious fanatic, just like you.’”
– *Maureen Dowd, in the Times, 12/9/07*

The most egregious offender against basic American civics today is Huckabee, who told a group of students at Liberty University, the center of higher learning founded by the late Jerry Falwell, that his sudden rise in the Iowa polls is an act of God. He compared the improvement in his political fortunes to the New Testament miracle of the loaves and fishes. He wasn’t joking, as both his demeanor and his words demonstrated. Huckabee says that we should choose a president who speaks “the language of Zion,”
– *Joe Conason on Salon, 12/7/07*

Yes, both candidates smacked around above are Republicans, but Democrats get no free pass on this issue. In 1976, Jimmy Carter's platform could be boiled down to: "I'm not Nixon, and I won't lie to you because I'm a born-again Christian." And Bill Clinton made sure he was seen every Sunday morning with a Bible in his hand, preferably in front of a foot-stomping, gospel-shouting black choir (the better for TV-news pickup). They are as much the enablers of George W's rampant religiosity in office as Karl Rove – and the current crop of Democrats promises not much better. – JR

PRYING APART POLITICS AND RELIGION

Pat Condell

(Excerpted from "Politics and Religion," on LiveLeak.com, 7/10/07, and forwarded by Joan Slomanson. Mr. Condell is a British atheist-comedian who can be Googled.)

Somebody asked me, "Why do you only talk about religion, and not about other things?" Well, when you talk about religion you really are talking about "other things" in the modern world, if you'll pardon that euphemism for what we've actually got. Indeed, some people now even talk about religion in terms of a "clash of cultures" when they say that Islam and democracy don't get along because – like hospitals and health, or like justice and the law, or like Jesus and born-again Christians – they've got nothing in common.

I think politics and religion is an extremely dangerous mixture, because like sulfur and saltpeter, on their own they're manageable enough, but put them together and you get gunpowder. And I think this is the reason why, for example the fanatics who flew into the twin towers, or the lunatics who blew themselves up in London, although they were politically motivated, they only went through with it because of what they believed about the afterlife or, more exactly, about the unknowable. And I think this is the danger of religion – it operates in this world of reason, but outside the bounds of reason, which is a polite way of saying outside the bounds of sanity.

Some countries, like Iran, for example, are governed by religious fundamentalist nutcases. Other countries, like Israel and Pakistan, owe their very existence to religion. And of course let's not forget the Vatican, which has a seat at the United Nations because it somehow managed to persuade people that it is a legitimate country – all the better for stifling any birth control initiatives that might have slipped under the American government's radar.

Without religion, Pakistan and Israel wouldn't exist. And what a sad loss that would be. That would be almost as bad as losing Nigeria, wouldn't it? – another country divided by religious fundamentalism, Muslims in the north, Christians in the south, maybe a few Jews in between, but not for long, I'll bet.

As for Pakistan, well, that only exists because about sixty years ago in that part of the world Muslims and Hindus just couldn't get along, and they couldn't stop slaughtering each other with machetes for more than five seconds at a time, so the only solution was to start up a whole new country, which is as good as saying, "We can never live together, we'll always be enemies – let's build nuclear weapons and see how it goes."

I think it's quite ironic that the first nuclear conflict on this planet might easily erupt between Muslims and Hindus – between teetotalers and vegetarians. Clearly, red meat

and alcohol may be killers, but they're nothing compared with human stupidity. And that's never in short supply, especially where religion is concerned.

For instance, how long do we have to wait for a serious American presidential candidate to admit that they don't believe in God? In other words, how long do we have to wait for American politics to grow up? They're all terrified of losing the ignorance vote, because that's the vote that's going to elect the next president.

And what a wonderful job it did the last time. ...

All in all, I think politics and religion are too closely entwined, and I think we need to pry them apart if civilization is going to remain on the agenda. Of course, nobody knows what the future holds. You could say it's in God's hands – or Old Butterfingers, as I like to call him – but the way things are going, the future might not even get here. Because right now we're engaged in a tug of war with the past (and lately it's been digging its heels in), and this is one we really have to win. Because if we lose, we're going to find ourselves back in the Dark Ages, where knowledge is a crime, and when free speech is blasphemy.

And that's really why I talk about religion and not about "other things." Peace and love to one and all, if that's not wishful thinking.

[Insert page]

AND THE 2007 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD GOES TO ... *YOU CHOOSE!*

Comedian/Secular Humanist Steve Allen coined "dumbth" to describe the willfully witless among us. 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 ex-TV talk-show personality Star Jones, who said God blessed her by postponing the Indian Ocean tsunami until after her honeymoon. And 2006 winner televangelist Pat Robertson, who claimed God gave Israel's Ariel Sharon a stroke for negotiating with the Palestinians.

For your consideration this year we have a fine crop of four dunderheads, any of whom would be worthy of the not-so-coveted horse's-ass statuette.

[photo] **DANA ROHRBACHER** (R-Calif.) doesn't believe in global warming, and on February 8 challenged four of the world's leading physical scientists who had just told a Congressional committee that there is "little doubt" that the world is getting warmer because of mankind's influence, opining *that past warming might have been caused by "dinosaur flatulence, who knows?"*

[photo] **RUSH LIMBAUGH** announced on the day after the shooting that Cho Seung-Hui, the deranged kid who killed 32 people on the campus of Virginia Tech, was a liberal. *"This guy had to be a liberal.* You start railing against the rich, and all this other — this guy is a liberal. He was turned into a liberal somewhere along the line. So it's a liberal that committed this act."

[photo] **DEBBY SCHLUSSEL**, right-wing blogger, commented June 14 on a Yale study which found that the more daughters a congressman has, the more likely he is to support reproductive rights. “The conclusion they want you to get from this is that pro-life congressmen are insensitive to women,” she said. “But I’d draw a different conclusion: *congressmen who are liberal are more likely to have slutty daughters.*”

[photo] **ANN COULTER** has called for the forced conversion of Muslims and the revocation of women’s suffrage in America. When asked on “The Big Idea” show on CNBC October 8 if we should all be Christians, she answered, “Yes,” explaining that Christians were “perfected Jews,” that Christianity is “the fast track to heaven,” and that she’s not anti-Semitic, but that “*We just want Jews to be perfected.*”

Who gets the un-coveted horse’s ass award for 2007? Mail this ballot (or a copy) to: SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-1913, or email your choice to editor@shsny.org by January 31, 2008. The winner will be announced at a Dumbth Awards ceremony at our 20th Anniversary Luncheon on February 10, and in the March issue of PIQUE.

[Reverse side of insert sheet]

GALILEO GALILEI
Charlotte Pomerantz

FOR MANY YEARS PHILOSOPHY

Was just as dear as A B C:

Aristotle, Bible, Church,

The undisputed trinity.

Their dogma irrefutable:

The heavens were immutable.

The moon a polished metal ball.

The earth didn’t turn or move at all.

Around it traveled stars and sun

In stately circles, one by one.

(There had been but one new star

Which led the Magi from afar.)

Till Galileo Galilei

Looked through his telescope one

day

And thought, “Per Bacchus, what I

see

Refutes the old theology.”

He saw, in fact, enough to throttle

The metaphysic of Aristotle;

Enough to overturn the Bible,

Which is why the Church cried,

“Libel!”

But Galileo watched the night
And knew Copernicus was right.

THE MOON WAS NOT a perfect
sphere (nor was made of cheese),
But roughened like our Earth, with
mountains, craters, seas.

Not only were there blotches on the
glorious lamp of heaven,
But the Seven Pleiades Sisters
numbered more than seven.

There were even darker blotches on
the pure and radiant sun,
And four moons girded Jupiter; he
counted every one.

(Since then, we’ve turned a stronger
telescope upon the heaven,
And found the moons of Jupiter to
number nine plus seven.)

Moons circling a planet before his
very eye!

The Copernican system alive in the
sky!

Four priceless new moons — what
a fabulous chance.

He tried to sell a nice one to Henry,
King of France,

The other three he offered to a duke
and to the Pope,

But all of them were stingy, and all
of them said, “Nope.”

Copernicus had postulated moons
in the sky,

But Galileo saw them before his
very eye.

The earth was not the center of the
universe.

It turned and moved about the sun
– the exact reverse.

Earth was not the center, nor
heaven her canopy.

Other worlds were whirling
through dark infinity.

Thus in 1610 tradition toppled from
its throne

As Galileo gazed at infinity, alone.

BUT THE HARD-BITTEN

Aristotelians wouldn't look
Through his scope or read *Sidereus*
Nuncius, his book.

"Celestial trifles," they brayed, and
"Devilish heresy.

That faker doesn't see what he
pretends to see."

But joyous Galileo took his
telescope

And carted it to Rome to show it to
the Pope!

His Holiness gazed up at the
heavens with delight,

But affirmed the earth didn't move
and the scripture was quite right!

But Galileo Galilei's pen could
hardly stop.

The sun, he wrote, is blotchy and
spinning like a top.

Pope Paul was very angry and
summoned him to Rome,

Declared his writings heresy and
told him to stay home.

Later, during sessions with the new
Pope, Urban Eighth,

They talked and talked and talked
and talked, and each affirmed his
faith.

In 1632 came his first explicit blast,
In Italian, not in Latin, which left
the Church aghast.

The Pope took one stern look at the
raw offending stuff,

Which was dedicated to him, and
shouted, "That's enough!"

The inquisition summoned him in
1633

And declared his propositions to be
dangerous heresy.

Seventy years of age, faced with
trial and tribulation,

Galileo, kneeling, made his famous
recantation.

To lightly paraphrase, he said he
was a dope
To deny the Holy Scripture and
believe his telescope.
He was guilty, he said, by his own
contrite admission,
Of the purest ignorance and
vainglorious ambition.
Of course, earth was the center of
the universe.
Sicuro, the sun moved ‘round it –
not the reverse.
“Nevertheless, it does move,” he
muttered sotto voce.
And the words survived his burial
at the Church of Santa Croce.
Whether he said, “*E pur si muove,*”
we will never know,
But that he knew it did, is
manifestly so;
For when Galileo peered through
his telescope that night,
No deity nor dogma could blur the
wondrous sight.
Not Aristotle, Bible, Church could
ever quite snuff out
The new philosophy, which called
all things in doubt.
Thus ancient orthodoxy was
toppled from its throne
When Galileo gazed at Infinity,
alone.

SO HERE’S TO GALILEO, great
watcher of the sky,
Godfather to all pesky kids who
keep on asking Why?

THE LIBRARY FIX
Garrison Keillor

(Excerpted from salon.com, 6/27/07)

When politics gets mean and dumb, you can cheer yourself up by walking into a public library, one of the nobler expressions of democracy. Candidates don’t mention libraries – they’re more likely to talk about putting people behind bars and no coddling or shilly-shallying with appeals and that judicial nonsense, just throw them in the dungeon and stick their heads in the toilet and do what you gotta do – and yet when I walk into the

library near my house and see a couple hundred teenagers studying, most of them Hmong or Vietnamese, I see the old cheerful America that Washington has lost touch with, the land of opportunity.

The library is the temple of freedom. Growing up, we kids were aware of how much of our lives was a performance for adults. In school, at church, in Scouts, adults were watching, cueing you, coaching, encouraging, commenting; but in the library, you didn't have to perform for the librarian. She simply presided over an orderly world in which you had the freedom of your own imagination. The silence was not repressive but liberating: to allow your imagination to play, uninhibited by others.

Of course, a boy's imagination headed in some directions that the public library could not satisfy, or would not satisfy – I thought that those particular books were kept behind the librarian's counter and that if she liked me, she would let me see them, so I was a very, very good boy, but then it dawned on me that she probably thought a very, very good boy wouldn't be interested in that sort of thing. (This would happen to me often with women.)

Libraries have rushed forward into the new age (whichever one were in now), and the word "librarian" is out. They're Information Professionals now, and it's a Media Resource Center, and it's wired to the max. Just as we novelists have become experiential document specialists producing sensory-data-based narratives encoded in a symbolic format that informally we refer to as English. But a library is still a library. It's a place where serious people go to have the freedom to think without anybody poking and prodding them, in the company of other serious people who sit silently around us and yet encourage us in our own pursuits and projects.

My old hometown Carnegie library with the columns and high-domed ceiling was irreplaceable, and so of course it was torn down by vandals in suits and ties and replaced with a low warehouse-looking library that says so clearly to its patrons, "Don't get any big ideas. This is as good a library as you clowns deserve." But the spirit lives on, in the ranks of dedicated women and men who run the place. ...

The future of our country is not in the hands of bullies, it's with the kids in the library who are doing the work. I am going to bet on that from now on.

THREE-QUARTERS OF A MILLION TERRORISTS NEXT DOOR?

The Government Accountability Office reported in October that more than 755,000 names now appear on the U.S. terrorist watch list.

And the Department of Homeland Security* has been secretly testing a pilot scheme here in New York in which firefighters are trained to identify suspicious material or behavior when they enter homes.

Unlike police, firemen do not need warrants to get into homes and other buildings during technical inspections, making them "particularly useful for spotting signs of terrorist planning."

And so if some NYC firefighter notices your shelves-ful of atheist and anti-Bush books, that watch list could grow to 755,001.

**I simply can not get used to that name – after five years it still sounds like a translation from the East German. – JR*

NOW MEET THE 20 MILLION REAL TERRORISTS NEXT DOOR

John Basil Utley

(Excerpted from "America's Armageddonites Push for More War," on AlterNet.com, 11/3/07)

Utopian fantasies have long transfixed the human race. Yet today a much rarer fantasy has become popular in the United States. Millions of Americans, the richest people in history, have a death wish. They are the new "Armageddonites," fundamentalist evangelicals who have moved from forecasting Armageddon to actually trying to bring it about.

Most journalists find it difficult to take seriously that tens of millions of Americans, filled with fantasies of revenge and empowerment, long to leave a world they despise. These Armageddonites believe that they alone will get a quick, free pass when they are "raptured" to paradise, no good deeds necessary, not even a day of judgment.

Ironically, they share this utopian fantasy with a group that they often castigate, namely fundamentalist Muslims who believe that dying in battle also means direct access to Heaven. ...

Conservative Christian writer Gary North estimates the number of Armageddonites at about 20 million. Many of them have an ecstatic belief in the cleansing power of apocalyptic violence. They are among the more than 30 percent of Americans who believe that the world is soon coming to an end. Armageddonites may be a minority of the evangelicals, but they have vocal leaders and control 2,000 mostly fundamentalist religious radio stations. ...

The beliefs of the Armageddon Lobby, also known as Dispensationalists, come from the Book of Revelation, which Martin Luther relegated it to an appendix when he translated the Bible because its image of Christ was so contrary to the rest of the Bible. The Armageddonites worship a vengeful, killer-torturer Christ. They also frequently quote a biblical passage that God favors those who favor the Jews. But they only praise Jews who make war, not those who are peacemakers. For example, they vigorously opposed Israel's murdered premier Yitzhak Rabin, who promoted the Oslo Peace Accords.

Based on this Biblical interpretation, the Armageddonites vehemently argue that America must protect Israel and encourage its settlements on the West Bank in order to help God fulfill His plans. The return of Jews to Palestine is central to the prophetic vision of the Armageddonites, who see it as a critical step toward the final battle, Armageddon, and the victory of the righteous over Satan's minions.

There are a couple of internal inconsistencies with this prophecy, such as the presence of Christians already living in the Holy Land, and the role of Jews in the final dispensation. In the first case, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and other Religious Right leaders tried to pretend that Christians already in the Holy Land simply didn't exist. As for Jews, they needed to become "born again" Christians to avoid God's wrath (or, according to some Armageddonites, a separate Jewish covenant with God will gain them a separate Paradise).

Everyone else – Buddhists, Muslims (of course), Hindus, atheists, and so on – are then slated to die in the Tribulation that comes with Armageddon. As described in the

bestselling *Left Behind* series, this time of human misery ends with Christ then ruling a paradise on earth for a thousand years. ...

The next election will likely loosen their grip on the White House. However, their growing ties to the military industrial complex will remain. Exposure of their war wanting as a major threat to America and the world may well become as destructive for them as was the famous Scopes trial in the 1920s. But that will only happen if Americans become as concerned as foreign observers about the influence of the Armageddonites.

ISLAM'S SILENT MODERATES

Ayann Hirsi Ali

(Reprinted from The NYTimes Op-Ed page, 12/7/07)

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, flog each of them with 100 stripes: Let no compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if you believe in Allah and the Last Day. (Koran 24:2)

In the last few weeks, in three widely publicized episodes, we have seen Islamic justice enacted in ways that should make Muslim moderates rise up in horror.

A 20-year-old woman from Qatif, Saudi Arabia, reported that she had been abducted by several men and repeatedly raped. But judges found the victim herself to be guilty. Her crime is called “mingling”: when she was abducted, she was in a car with a man not related to her by blood or marriage, and in Saudi Arabia, that is illegal. Last month, she was sentenced to six months in prison and 200 lashes with a bamboo cane.

Two hundred lashes are enough to kill a strong man. Women usually receive no more than 30 lashes at a time, which means that for seven weeks the “girl from Qatif,” as she’s usually described in news articles, will dread her next session with Islamic justice. When she is released, her life will certainly never return to normal: already there have been reports that her brother has tried to kill her because her “crime” has tarnished her family’s honor.

[Ed: the “girl from Qatif” has since been pardoned for her sins, outraging the Sharia “justices” who sentenced her.]

We also saw Islamic justice in action in Sudan, when a 54-year-old British teacher named Gillian Gibbons was sentenced to 15 days in jail before the government pardoned her this week; she could have faced 40 lashes. When she began a reading project with her class involving a teddy bear, Ms. Gibbons suggested the children choose a name for it. They chose Muhammad; she let them do it. This was deemed to be blasphemy.

Then there’s Taslima Nasreen, the 45-year-old Bangladeshi writer who bravely defends women’s rights in the Muslim world. Forced to flee Bangladesh, she has been living in India. But Muslim groups there want her expelled, and one has offered 500,000 rupees for her head. In August she was assaulted by Muslim militants in Hyderabad, and in recent weeks she has had to leave Calcutta and then Rajasthan. Taslima Nasreen’s visa expires next year, and she fears she will not be allowed to live in India again.

It is often said that Islam has been “hijacked” by a small extremist group of radical fundamentalists. The vast majority of Muslims are said to be moderates.

But where are the moderates? Where are the Muslim voices raised over the terrible injustice of incidents like these? How many Muslims are willing to stand up and say, in the case of the girl from Qatif, that this manner of justice is appalling, brutal and

bigoted? and that no matter who said it was the right thing to do, and how long ago it was said, this should no longer be done?

Usually, Muslim groups like the Organization of the Islamic Conference are quick to defend any affront to the image of Islam. The organization, which represents 57 Muslim states, sent four ambassadors to the leader of my political party in the Netherlands asking him to expel me from Parliament after I gave a newspaper interview in 2003 noting that by Western standards some of the Prophet Muhammad's behavior would be unconscionable. A few years later, Muslim ambassadors to Denmark protested the cartoons of Muhammad and demanded that their perpetrators be prosecuted.

But while the incidents in Saudi Arabia, Sudan and India have done more to damage the image of Islamic justice than a dozen cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, the organizations that lined up to protest the hideous Danish offense to Islam are quiet now.

I wish there were more Islamic moderates. For example, I would welcome some guidance from that famous Muslim theologian of moderation, Tariq Ramadan. But when there is true suffering, real cruelty in the name of Islam, we hear, first, denial from all these organizations that are so concerned about Islam's image. We hear that violence is not in the Koran, that Islam means peace, that this is a hijacking by extremists and a smear campaign and so on. But the evidence mounts up.

Islamic justice is a proud institution, one to which more than a billion people subscribe, at least in theory, and in the heart of the Islamic world it is the law of the land. But take a look at the verse above: more compelling even than the order to flog adulterers is the command that the believer show no compassion. It is this order to choose Allah above his sense of conscience and compassion that imprisons the Muslim in a mindset that is archaic and extreme.

If moderate Muslims believe there should be no compassion shown to the girl from Qatif, then what exactly makes them so moderate?

When a "moderate" Muslim's sense of compassion and conscience collides with matters prescribed by Allah, he should choose compassion. Unless that happens much more widely, a moderate Islam will remain wishful thinking.

MUSLIM "MODERATES"? THEY'RE MODERATE FOR MUSLIMS

On the same day Ms. Ali's essay appeared, *The NYTimes* also reported that Samina Malik, a 23-year-old Heathrow (London, U.K.) airport worker was convicted of a terrorism offense and given a suspended nine-month prison sentence and 100 hours of community service. Ms. Malik, called herself the "lyrical terrorist" in online forums, posted poems with titles like "How to Behead," and downloaded jihadist literature.

Many among Britain's 1.6 million Muslims said she should not have been prosecuted, describing her actions as foolish and offensive, but not criminal. Muhammad Abdul Bari, the head of the Muslim Council of Britain, the country's largest Muslim organization, told *The Times* of London that "many young people download objectionable material from the Internet, but it seems that if you are a Muslim, then this could lead to terrorist charges, even if you have absolutely no intention to do harm to anyone else."

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

MAYBE A DEATH SENTENCE.

Martine Reed

I have been very puzzled by the saga in Sudan of the British teacher, the kindergarten class and the teddy bear named Mohammed. All reports I read on that topic mention that “Mohammed” is a very common name for children in Muslim countries.

So, say that your little tyke is named Mohammed and he is not always well-behaved. Your patience is exhausted and you scream at him, “Bad boy Mohammed, stop peeing on the floor” (or some such). Wouldn’t that be the height (or depth) of disrespect – for a good Muslim to put the words “bad” and “peeing” (and others we needn’t mention here) in the same sentence as the name of the Prophet?

Why do they suffer people to give that name to their children? Shouldn’t such offenders be put to death?

BILL O’REILLY WINS THE WAR ON THE WAR ON CHRISTMAS.

O’Reilly on Fox News, December 5:

“If I had not done the campaign, then the forces of darkness would have won the War on Christmas.”

Yes, of course, we all noticed that this December not only salesclerks at Macy’s, but Muslim cabdrivers and Jewish deli counter men all welcomed customers with hearty “Merry Christmas” greetings ... that Top 40 radio abandoned Rudolph and the singing chipmunks in favor of “Adeste Fidelis” ... that commercial TV broadcast Nativity plays and “Messiah” concerts nearly every night ... that Victoria’s Secret, Toys R Us, the makers of violent video games like “Grand Theft Auto,” and misogynist rappers all suspended advertising during the “holy days” ... that the recent poll showing that the very rich in America planned to spend an average of \$10,000 on their pets at Christmas must be a huge lie planted by godless secular humanists ... and that this season was, indeed, the least commercially vulgar, most respectfully Christian, since Bill O’Reilly was a little boy in the fantasy land he now thinks we all once lived in.

Thanks, Bill.

Now, what can you do about getting the pastel eggs, chocolate bunnies and little chickies out of Easter, and getting a flayed and bleeding Christ up on the cross in department store windows?

IT’S OFFICIAL: CONGRESS SAYS CHRISTMAS IS “IMPORTANT.” SUN AND MOON ARE PRETTY GOOD, TOO.

Now that the War on the War on Christmas has been won, Congress has celebrated by officially declaring Christmas “important.”

On December 10, Representative Steve King (R-Iowa) introduced House Resolution 847, entitled, “Recognizing the importance of Christmas and the Christian faith,” which tells the world, officially, what a swell religion we all have.

On the very next day, December 11, the House, sweeping aside all the minor matters cluttering its In box, passed the landmark measure by a vote of 372-9.

The nine cut-and-runners in the War on the War on Christmas who voted against the measure are all, predictably, Democrats, including two of our locals, Gary Ackerman and Yvette Clarke.

Ed: I did not make this up. – JR

**GARRISON KEILLOR'S ADVICE
FOR THE NEW YEAR**

(Excerpted from salon.com, 9/1/7/07)

Lighten up. Get a grip. Leave morose silence to teenagers; it's too dramatic for you and me. We have passed the great test of a republic, to survive the most incompetent leadership, and now we can anticipate a new era, one with no Bushes.

As Emerson said, "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it ... Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense."

In other words, cheer up.