

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

July, 2008

As we head toward summer vacation, we celebrate the Fourth and mourn a missed weekend and Memorial Day mattresses. We consider crimes ancient and modern in Mesopotamia, dethrone the Deity, debunk Moses, elevate Edison, and evaluate religious doctors, TV news and a mendacious movie. We defend polygamy, try cloning an atheist, wonder if we'll all become Buddhists, and define victory in Iraq and our own lives in six words. But first, this important message. — *JR*

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NO AUGUST ISSUE

Next month, the Editor of PIQUE, the local and national staff, and all our correspondents in all our bureaus worldwide will be on vacation.

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THE NEW SHSNY BOARD CRIES: "HELP!"

The newly-elected Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York met June 11 and, as per Article IV of the by-laws, elected officers for the current 2008-2011 term.

John Rafferty was re-elected President. Remo Cosentino explained that because of other new volunteer obligations he would not be able to fill in for the president if needed, and so resigned the vice-presidency. In his place, Elaine Lynn was elected both Vice President and Secretary. Donna Marxer was re-elected Treasurer. All the elections were unanimous.

New Committees and a Call for Volunteers

At John's urging, the existing ad-hoc Events and Book Club programs were formalized as permanent committees, and three new committees were formed.

Programs/Events Committee: Chair, Lee Loshak. Lee is developing an exciting events schedule for fall and winter, but he needs three or four volunteers to help him plan and schedule, to arrive at events half an hour early to help set up, etc.

Book Club Committee: Chair, Elaine Lynn. Elaine needs just one or two volunteers to do the same.

Membership Committee: Chair, Bob Murtha. SHSNY has grown 50 percent in the past three years, and has an almost-astounding 91 percent membership renewal rate because we alert and remind (and nag) members due for renewal. But that requires detailed record-keeping. Bob Murtha needs two or three volunteers who can give two to four hours a month to the job. Once we're organized, you can probably work online from home.

Mailings Committee: Chair, Remo Cosentino. The copy of PIQUE you're holding in your hand was taken to and from a printer, stapled shut, labeled, stamped, and delivered to a post office. Two or three other mailings, postcard announcements, etc.,

have to be hand-processed like that each month. Remo needs three or four volunteers willing to give about four hours a month to the job, which comes with coffee and cookies.

Public Relations Committee: Chair, Irv Millman. Irv is taking over from Elaine and John, and needs two or three volunteers to organize and monitor MeetUp publicity and Google advertising, and to get out print publicity and library and supermarket flyers. Once we're organized, you can probably work online from home.

Volunteer to Make a Difference

Your sweat equity (no real sweat is involved) will earn you a bigger voice in SHSNY matters. Would you like to have more say in what programs we run, what speakers we hear, what books we discuss, what films we see, where and how we gather for brunch or parties? Then volunteer. Give secular humanism — and this, your own member-run organization — just a few hours a month. We need you.

To volunteer—or to just ask about volunteering— leave a message on the phone at 212-308-2165, or email editor@shsny.org. — *John Rafferty*

INDEPENDENCE DAY

Michael Shermer

(Excerpted from Skeptics Dictionary Newsletter #69, July 4, 2006)

Today, we commemorate our nation's independence and separation from the British Empire. I'd like to commemorate as well the vision of independence from the tyranny of men who use God and religion to oppress others. That vision is expressed in both the Declaration of Independence and in the U.S. Constitution.

The Declaration of Independence mentions "Nature's God" and asserts that it is self-evident that "all men are created equal" and "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." The Founding Fathers and Framers were not establishing an atheist nation, nor were they anti-religious. But the Declaration wisely asserts that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." The doctrine that governments derive their just powers from God is rejected in our Declaration of Independence. The King of Great Britain might claim that he was owed allegiance because his authority came from God and that to disobey him was to go against God, but such a claim would be deemed illegitimate in America.

A corollary of the consent-of-the-governed concept is that no President of the United States gets his authority from God. He can pray to God. He can ask God to guide him. But he cannot claim we must obey him because he gets his authority from God.

The Founders did not establish an atheist nation, but they did establish a secular nation, a nation whose power is derived from the purely secular notion of the consent of the governed. They recognized the importance of religion and God in most people's lives, and they wisely understood that only a secular nation could protect religious liberty. Had they established a state church, religious liberty would have suffered, as it did in England and everywhere else where there is a state church.

The preamble to the Constitution asserts that "We the People of the United States" establish the Union. God is not mentioned here or anywhere else in the Constitution. Again, this does not make the Constitution an atheist document. But it does make it a purely secular document. God is not the source of political power, our Union, or our Constitution. Furthermore, there will be no religious test for any citizen or government official. Obviously, this does not mean that only atheists can be citizens or run for

political office. It means that anyone can be a citizen or run for political office without regard to his or her religious affiliation. One expected consequence of this policy was that we would avoid the state-sanctioned religious persecution of minority religions that characterized England and most other countries. There would, of course, still be persecution (witness how the Mormons and other minority religions were treated in the 19th century). Another consequence of this policy is that even an atheist could theoretically become President of the United States. Don't laugh. This country has only been here for 200 years. I don't think we'll last as long as the dinosaurs did, but there is hope that sometime within the next millennium or two the supers* will be able to practice in peace while the brights* run the government. ...

Of course, the religious fanatics have never accepted the facts that God or Jesus was not named as the source of political power and was not named as the Protector of the Nation in the Constitution. They have declared victory anyway, and continue to spread the false notion that this nation is a "Christian" nation, not a secular nation that protects Christians and non-Christians alike. The religious fanatics have had their victories. Bibles are used at the swearing in of Presidents and other office holders and in courtrooms when testimony is to be given or oaths are to be sworn. "So help me God" and "God bless America" are familiar political phrases. Our currency says "in God we trust." Congress put "under God" in the pledge of allegiance. Athletic contests and military battles are preceded by prayers to Our Father or to Jesus.

And despite the fact that religions have universally been the enemies of freedom and equality, millions of Americans have been taught to believe that Christians didn't support and defend but rather put an end to slavery. We're also mistaught that Christians didn't support and defend the inequality of women and others but were solely responsible for bringing about the 19th Amendment in 1920 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I suppose that in a thousand years, when homosexuals and transsexuals are treated as full human beings, Christians will take credit for that, too.

So, on Independence Day I salute our Nation's Fathers for establishing a secular nation free from the tyranny of a state religion and free from the tyranny of any Articles of Faith that must be sworn to before holding public office. I salute them for their foresight in recognizing that the best way to protect religions and religious people from discriminatory legislation was to prohibit such legislation altogether. Though we should admit that it wouldn't take a prophet of much ability to recognize that religious fanaticism would be a significant problem in a democracy unless there was a built-in limit to restrict its natural tendency toward tyranny.

**"Supers" is philosopher Daniel Dennett's term for believers in the supernatural, and it works. "Brights" is the "more positive" term that's supposed to replace atheist, agnostic, skeptic, etc.; it doesn't.*

**DAMN, WE MISSED
"TEN COMMANDMENTS WEEKEND" AGAIN
Bill Berkowitz**

(Excerpted from Mr. Berkowitz's article, "Christian Theocrats Use Their Megaphone to Push 'Ten Commandments Commission'" on AlterNet.org, April 23)

Two resolutions relating to the Ten Commandments are being considered by Congress, one designating the first weekend in May as "Ten Commandments Weekend," the other

celebrating the Ten Commandments Commission, an organization led by Ron Wexler, a veteran of the Israeli army, and made up of a host of longtime conservative evangelical Christian leaders.

The Senate resolution, introduced by Kansas Republican Senator Sam Brownback, with Connecticut Independent Joseph Lieberman as its co-sponsor — aims to once again recognize the first weekend in May as “Ten Commandments Weekend.”

According to Chris Rodda, the author of *Liars For Jesus: The Religious Right's Alternate Version of American History — Volume I*, Brownback’s resolution comes packed with ten “Whereas-es” like, “Whereas, the Ten Commandments are precepts foundational to the faith of millions of Americans,” “Whereas, the Ten Commandments are a declaration of fundamental principles for a fair and just society,” and “Whereas, from the founding of the United States, the Ten Commandments have been part of America’s basic cultural fabric,” followed by quotes from Presidents George Washington, John Quincy Adams, and Harry Truman.

The resolution states that the Senate:

- 1) recognizes the first weekend of May 2008 as “Ten Commandments Weekend”;
- 2) celebrates the Ten Commandments as a significant aspect of the national life of the United States;
- 3) encourages citizens of the United States to reflect on the integral role that the Ten Commandments have played in the life of the nation.

A post last August on the website of Americans United for Separation of Church and State asserted that after the Gulf Coast hurricanes of 2005 [including one named “Rita”], Wexler was quoted as saying “It was revealed to me that in numerology, the numerical value of the Hebrew letters of the name Rita + God is equal to 620. The number of all the Hebrew letters that make up the Ten Commandments is 620! Is there a connection? Could this now be the spirit of God above the water? Rita + God equal 620 equal the Ten Commandments? Could this be the wakeup call for the nation? Now when the Ten Commandments are thrown out of schools and out of courts, could there be a connection? Just think for a moment that there is a correlation.”

Ed: We're thinking, Ron, and we think you're an idiot.

EDISON OR MOSES: WHO DID MORE FOR CIVILIZATION?

Sol Abrams

The proponents of posting Moses’ laws—the Ten Commandments—in our public schools claim that this would prevent shootings like those at high schools in Denver and San Diego. If they took the trouble to read the Pentateuch carefully and with an open mind, they would come to realize how absurd the proposal is.

Proverbs 14: 23 says, “In all labor there is profit, but the talk of lips tendeth only to penury” – that is, actions speak louder than words, and hands that do are better than lips that pray. An exemplar was Thomas Edison, who invented more things than anyone else, who never prayed, and who said that religion was all bunk.

Let’s compare Moses and Edison.

The “laws” of Moses, according to Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, include: a) Do not murder, b) Do not commit adultery, and c) Do not steal.

But Moses: a) ordered the complete destruction of the Perizzites and the Hivites (Deut 20: 16-21); b) ordered the slaying of all Midianite men, male children and pregnant women, and instructed his soldiers to take the non-pregnant women for themselves (Num 31: 1-20); c) ordered his soldiers to take all of the treasures of the Canaanites and totally exterminate them (Deut 6, 7).

Moses, the so-called “Giver of the Law,” regarded in the Judeo-Christian tradition as the alter-ego of God, should have set an example, should have been a paragon of morality. Why post his words in our schools when the actions of Moses spoke so much louder than his words?

Thomas Edison’s life work—over 1300 patented inventions, including the phonograph, the incandescent lamp and the first talking pictures—helped to improve the standard of living for the entire human race. He proudly said that he never knowingly invented anything that could cause harm to anyone. His objective was to improve the quality of human life with his inventions. This is in sharp contrast to the actions of Moses, who slaughtered those whose religion was different from his.

Moses did not believe in freedom of religion, and his second commandment, “Thou shall have no other gods before me,” violates our First Amendment and should not be posted in any public building.

Thomas Edison’s actions speak louder than Moses’ words and deeds. Edison, a non-believer, did far more to improve our quality of life and had much higher standards of morality than the Biblical heroes like Moses, David and Solomon, all of whom were either unwilling or unable to follow the last six commandments.

Schoolchildren—whose morals are supposed to be uplifted by the posting of the commandments—already have higher standards than Moses, David and Solomon.

GOD RESIGNS

(Excerpted from IndiaUncut.com 24 May, 2007)

Dear Humans:

This is to inform you that I quit. I have enjoyed being God for an eternity now—thank you for the opportunity—but I cannot bear the thought of going on and on like this. Enough is enough. I have informed my angels of my resignation (though I didn’t expect them to rush off to buy horns and black clothing right away). This Sunday will be my last day in office, after which I intend to spend some time with my family.

I started off badly, I confess. I was a beginning God and there was no roadmap, so what do you expect? My brief was to create a star, a planet and a satellite with a golf course. The rest of the universe wasn’t in the plans – that’s all the failed attempts. I was finally told that I could stop when I made Earth, even though I got the golf-course wrong. Still, I’m sure there are other entertaining things you can do on the moon.

Then I was asked to populate the earth, and that’s when I had the most fun. I tried various funky things – I thought bacteria were pretty cool, and would rule the earth for sure. I also thought that of all the prehensile organs I gave my creatures, the penis of the whale was much more useful than the opposable thumbs of humans. I mean, how much fun it must be to grip something with that.

But you guys triumphed, largely because I gave you greater computing power. Had I put in a few trillion neurons less, it could all have been different. (And perhaps I should

have worked harder on the dinosaurs.) I admit I got carried away by you because you were the first creatures to notice I existed. Look, validation matters, period.

Then, when you were just beginning to come out of caves and get civilized, I decided to take a nap. It's hard work, all this creation, especially at the level of detail involved, and I was tired. And really, what could go wrong while I slept? Humankind was on the rise, using all its neural computing power to create new things, and I thought: I'll wake up refreshed and see a better world, and maybe I'll get back to work on the moon after a snack or something. Golf is good.

Well, it may seem like I've been absent for a long time, but a few millennia is nothing in galactic terms. So I wake up, rub my prehensile eyes, wrap them round the world, and what do I see? I see that you humans are running the place. Fine, no issues with that. But then I see what you've done to me. ...

I'll just take up three broad points. One, I was supposed to make you in my image. Instead, while I was napping, you went and cast me in yours. I protest. I am not bigoted, misogynist, genocidal or egotistic. I look at how I've been portrayed in all the major religions and I'm appalled that anyone would even consider worshipping that.

The talk of worship brings me to my second point: Why have I been portrayed as corrupt? If I am supposed to reward people for their behavior, why should prayer matter? I am not so insecure that I need to hear praises all the time. Or need temples or churches or mosques built to honor me, or any of the ritualistic things you people do. You do not need to bribe me, ok? Just behave well.

Three, why do you assume I need your puny protection? If some people insult me and I'm petty enough to want to take action against them, there's always lightning – or less subtle punishments such as Himesh Reshammiya music videos*. Stop getting offended on my behalf, please. Especially the more devout ones among you, who embarrass me hugely.

I could go on forever about how all notions of me are corrupted, and used by men—yes, mostly men—for their own selfish purposes. But who will listen to me forever? The one good thing I did was make you mortal, which I now realize is a feature and not a bug. Anyway, I accept culpability for creating a flawed product in the first place, and then for falling asleep. I'm disgusted at my failure, and the only honorable option I have left now is to resign.

See you in Hell.

God

**Ed: We didn't get it, either. He's an Indian rock star.*

POLITICAL NEWS 2008: THE IMPORTANT STUFF

Tom Tomorrow

(From "This Modern World" cartoon on salon.com, 4/21)

(Cartoon: administration figures with apples for heads)

Penguin (the cartoon's commentator): So it turns out that the abuse of detainees really can be blamed on a handful of "bad apples" — and their names are Cheney, Rice, Rumsfeld, Powell, Ashcroft and Tenet.

We now know for a fact that they all met with CIA officers in 2002 to discuss specific interrogation techniques such as waterboarding — and then gave the green light for those techniques to be used. ...

Now, you might think an open acknowledgment that torture was, in fact, an official policy of the United States government ... would be kind of a big news story.

But apparently, you would be mistaken.

(Cartoon: Two “news anchors” for Action McNews Network)

Male Anchor: Our top story tonight—is Barack Obama an elitist, or what?

Female Anchor: Our experts debate: is “Bittergate” the most important political story of the year?

Male: And, are Americans really ready for a president who isn’t a very good bowler?

Female: First, these messages.

A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW ON “EXPELLED: NO INTELLIGENCE ALLOWED”

Ed Goldsmith

To the Editor:

Below is a group email I had intended sending to many people after I had received the CFI email of Paul Kurtz’s condemnation of Ben Stein’s “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed.” However, after I received May PIQUE with your blistering editorial lambasting Stein as a lying phony, I figured I would include this preliminary note, commenting on your editorial.

You [John Rafferty] write as though you know that Stein, with malice aforethought, lured “Dawkins, Dennett and Shermer, the whole elitist crowd,” to use your words, under false pretenses to be interviewed, and then edited the tape in such a way as to make them look like idiots. Now really, how in the world would you know that? It sounds to me as though you are shooting from the hip against the usual right wing targets. You also quote *The NYTimes*, hardly a paper with any objectivity, hardly a paper that I would ever buy, as also having lambasted Stein’s flick as “One of the sleaziest documentaries to arrive in a very long time.”

Although my own religiosity has ebbed and mellowed over the years, I still bristle at seeing people of faith broadly characterized as unscrupulous liars.

On a parallel note, I notice that David Klinghoffer, the Orthodox Jewish writer who has had a column in the liberal weekly, *Forward*, is being pushed out for noting “the indebtedness of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* to evolutionist arguments traceable to Charles Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, with its talk of how natural selection means “the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races.” That topic reminded me that in PIQUE you ridicule the notion “that Social Darwinism led directly to Hitler and the Nazis.” And at the close of your article you admit to not even having seen the movie!

Mr. Goldsmith’s reply to Paul Kurtz’s review

By speaking out so caustically against this Ben Stein movie, “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed,” Paul Kurtz and his associates had interested me in seeing it. I also got interested in looking up the critique of the movie in *Skeptical Inquirer* – my observation being that publicity-wise “every knock is a boost.”

So I bought *Skeptical Inquirer* and read what turned out to be a decidedly pejorative review of the movie by a Dan Whipple. It featured a derogatory picture of Ben Stein wearing short pants like a little boy, and holding a megaphone. Of course, this trick photograph was not in the movie, for I just saw the movie. No, this was an ad hominem

hatchet job of a review. One problem with the colloquy between religious believers and secular humanists seems to be angry hype and exaggeration. As for the film, it showed Ben Stein interviewing various scientists who disagree with the secular point of view, and making a case for establishing that the academic scientific community in the United States functions as a political pressure group that fires any professors who dare to present the case for Intelligent Design. Of course, the department heads of these colleges deny that the firings were politically motivated, for that would make them look like character assassins, political hacks and gate keepers. One such professor who got the axe is Richard Sternberg. As Whipple himself states, "There are three or four other cases explored in 'Expelled,' all of which are presented ... as anti-ID intellectual repression by a Darwinist cabal." Having seen the flick, I must say that the film makes a convincing case that the professors who were canned were, indeed, shafted for shadowy political reasons.

One professor interviewed on camera, critical of Darwin, even says Darwin did not really prove the origins of humankind in any conclusive way. By contrast, CFI elevates the name of Darwin, even charting a trip to the Galapagos to retrace the steps Darwin allegedly took.

Stein even interviews Richard Dawkins, the current literary lionized atheist. The atmosphere of that interview was civil enough, but I was surprised that Dawkins had consented to the interview, for Stein seems to have let some of the wind out of the putative atheist's sails.

Then Stein has footage of his visits to concentration camps that had been used by the Nazis. This study is in line with Stein's Jewish identity. He points out that Darwinists had been heavily into eugenics, and moved to improve the human gene pool by suppressing those humans they judged to be inferior such as the feebleminded and physically deformed. This purge was extended to the elimination of Jews, for which Hitler's Nazis were infamous. Stein makes a case for the easy alliance of Darwinism, eugenics, euthanasia, and Nazi holocaust philosophy.

I admit that my being Jewish, myself, makes me resonate to such items in Stein's movie. I recommend that people view the movie.

The CFI email says that the Committee for Special Inquiry has published a "devastating critique" of the film in the current *Skeptical Inquirer*. I find that evaluation to reek of self-aggrandizement. On the contrary, my own reading of the Whipple review found it to be provocative enough to get me to see the movie, but ultimately most unimpressive, and certainly not at all devastating.

The comic aspect of all this is that there were hardly any people in the theater when I was there. Perhaps hardly anybody gives a hoot about the issue of Darwinism or Intelligent Design other than we few consumers on either side of this issue, namely whether the scientific community in the U.S. is an irreligious political cabal, or not.

Rebuttal

Ed Goldsmith: Thanks for your analysis. In rebuttal ...

1. First, no, I don't know that Stein lured and lied and edited – I relied, as I wrote in a footnote, on what Dawkins reported on his website, what *Scientific American* (a pretty reliable source) published, and what other respected scientists like Michael Shermer have reported about their experiences with the filmmakers.

2. Your opinion of *The Times* is just that, an opinion.

3. Some “people of faith” are, indeed, liars, just as are some people without faith. Ben Stein is one.

4. I know nothing of the details of the Klinghoffer-*Forward* case, but I know that arguing “the indebtedness of Adolph Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* to evolutionist arguments traceable to Charles Darwin’s *Descent of Man*” is like saying that Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* is traceable to revolutionary ideas in Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. And there is nothing in *Descent of Man* about how “natural selection means ‘the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate’ ... etc.” You should have fact-checked those quotes, Ed, they’re both baloney. Darwin rejected “social Darwinists” and eugenicists in his writings and public statements, and Stein is too well educated not to know it – it’s a lie.

5. No, I didn’t see the movie; I relied on authorities I respected. Nor did I hide my point of view, as Stein did when he told the real scientists he interviewed that he was making a film called “Crossroads,” about the “intersection of science and faith.”

By the way, the “derogatory” picture of Ben Stein in short pants is something else you should have checked. The picture is from *Stein’s own* promotion poster. He also made three TV commercials to promote the movie – *filming himself in short pants* to play a “little boy exposing the academic/scientific establishment.” Haven’t you watched any television recently?

Further, if you will bother to look into the cases of the academics supposedly “fired” for their I.D. views—several are debunked at the *Scientific American* website mentioned in my article—you will find yet more examples of Stein’s and the filmmakers’ distortions.

An empty movie house? Maybe there’s hope for the American movie-going public yet. — *John Rafferty*

ART HARRIS’ MEMORIAL DAY RUMINATIONS

On the subject of religion, a friend asked what I called myself. I replied, “skeptical humanist.” A slip of the tongue, but I realized after thinking: it explained a lot. As to the holiday, I’m grateful that we veterans are honored by our country for our sacrifices by letting us buy mattresses at big discounts.

DOES RELIGION MAKE MORE CHARITABLE DOCTORS? APPARENTLY NOT

Martine Reed

Major religions all call upon the faithful to serve the poor (e.g., Matt. 19-21, Deut. 15: 1-11.). Furthermore, it is an intrinsic part of the code of medical ethics for physicians to serve the poor. A 2007 study* conducted by the University of Chicago and the Yale New Haven Hospital aimed at discovering the connections, if any, between a physician’s religious practice and beliefs and his/her willingness to care for the poor.

One might have thought that a doctor who calls himself very religious and practices his religion assiduously would necessarily and logically try to serve the “underserved” population as much as possible. That, however, did not prove to be the case.

A questionnaire was sent to about 2,000 physicians. About 26 percent of respondents stated that their patient population could be considered “underserved”: that is to say there

was a high proportion of patients who were uninsured or receiving Medicaid. To quote the study:

With respect to religious characteristics ... physicians who were more religious in general (as measured by intrinsic religiosity or frequency of attendance at religious services) were not more likely to report care for the underserved. ... (Some) who practice among the underserved may explain their work in religious terms, but they do not appear to disproportionately care for the underserved.

According to the study, there is currently a desire, or perhaps even a policy shift, in certain medical schools, to admit more “religious” students in order to graduate more doctors who will serve in poor areas.

(It has been suggested that) ... medical school admissions officials could increase the supply of physicians who care for the underserved by giving preference to applicants who possess characteristics known to predict a disposition toward such work.

But, as the study demonstrates, this would be a very foolish shift indeed (in addition to other obvious considerations), since churchgoing does not seem to make a doctor any more charitable. As described in the study, a strong sense of social justice seems to be the major characteristic of the doctors who serve the poor. A bias toward a “faith-based” provision of medical services would be inane and against the evidence.

As a lawyer and former legal aid attorney, I’d like to add, most unscientifically, my observation that the zeal for social justice among my fellow public defenders had absolutely nothing to do with their religion or lack of it.

**"Do Religious Physicians Disproportionately Care for the Underserved?" — Annals of Family Medicine, vol. 5, no. 4, July/August 2007.*

THE NEURAL BUDDHISTS

David Brooks

(Excerpted from The New York Times, 5/13/08)

In 1996, Tom Wolfe wrote a brilliant essay called “Sorry, But Your Soul Just Died,” in which he captured the materialism of some modern scientists.

To these self-confident researchers, the idea that the spirit might exist apart from the body is just ridiculous. Instead, everything arises from atoms. Genes shape temperament. Brain chemicals shape behavior. Assemblies of neurons create consciousness. Free will is an illusion. Human beings are “hard-wired” to do this or that. Religion is an accident.

In this materialist view, people perceive God’s existence because their brains have evolved to confabulate belief systems. You put a magnetic helmet around their heads and they will begin to think they are having a spiritual epiphany. If they suffer from temporal lobe epilepsy, they will show signs of hyperreligiosity, an overexcitement of the brain tissue that leads sufferers to believe they are conversing with God.

Wolfe understood the central assertion contained in this kind of thinking: Everything is material and “the soul is dead.” He anticipated the way the genetic and neuroscience revolutions would affect public debate. They would kick off another fundamental argument over whether God exists.

Lo and behold, over the past decade, a new group of assertive atheists has done battle with defenders of faith. The two sides have argued about whether it is reasonable to

conceive of a soul that survives the death of the body and about whether understanding the brain explains away or merely adds to our appreciation of the entity that created it.

The atheism debate is a textbook example of how a scientific revolution can change public culture. Just as *The Origin of Species* reshaped social thinking, just as Einstein's theory of relativity affected art, so the revolution in neuroscience is having an effect on how people see the world. And yet my guess is that the atheism debate is going to be a sideshow. The cognitive revolution is not going to end up undermining faith in God, it's going to end up challenging faith in the Bible.

Over the past several years, the momentum has shifted away from hard-core materialism. The brain seems less like a cold machine. It does not operate like a computer. Instead, meaning, belief and consciousness seem to emerge mysteriously from idiosyncratic networks of neural firings. Those squishy things called emotions play a gigantic role in all forms of thinking. Love is vital to brain development.

Researchers now spend a lot of time trying to understand universal moral intuitions. Genes are not merely selfish, it appears. Instead, people seem to have deep instincts for fairness, empathy and attachment.

Scientists have more respect for elevated spiritual states. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania has shown that transcendent experiences can actually be identified and measured in the brain (people experience a decrease in activity in the parietal lobe, which orients us in space). The mind seems to have the ability to transcend itself and merge with a larger presence that feels more real.

This new wave of research will not seep into the public realm in the form of militant atheism. Instead it will lead to what you might call neural Buddhism.

If you survey the literature you can see that certain beliefs will spread into the wider discussion. ... First, the self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process of relationships. Second, underneath the patina of different religions, people around the world have common moral intuitions. Third, people are equipped to experience the sacred, to have moments of elevated experience when they transcend boundaries and overflow with love. Fourth, God can best be conceived as the nature one experiences at those moments, the unknowable total of all there is.

In their arguments with Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, the faithful have been defending the existence of God. That was the easy debate. The real challenge is going to come from people who feel the existence of the sacred, but who think that particular religions are just cultural artifacts built on top of universal human traits. It's going to come from scientists whose beliefs overlap a bit with Buddhism.

In unexpected ways, science and mysticism are joining hands and reinforcing each other. That's bound to lead to new movements that emphasize self-transcendence but put little stock in divine law or revelation. Orthodox believers are going to have to defend particular doctrines and particular biblical teachings. They're going to have to defend the idea of a personal God, and explain why specific theologies are true guides for behavior day to day. I'm not qualified to take sides, believe me. I'm just trying to anticipate which way the debate is headed. We're in the middle of a scientific revolution. It's going to have big cultural effects.

SAUDI ARABIA COMBATS ATHEISM AND ... UM ... RELIGION

In a major speech, King Abdullah called for representatives of the world's monotheistic religions to meet in Saudi Arabia to discuss ways to combat atheism, and said Pope Benedict was "receptive to the concept."

The same day, Saudi officials denied a Vatican request to build Saudi Arabia's first Christian church.

THE LESSONS OF GILGAMESH

George Rowell

We have all heard of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the ancient Sumerian epic from about 2,750 BCE, only found and deciphered from cuneiform tablets in the late 1800s. It is the story of a mythic hero's journey as he seeks wisdom and immortality, and is supposed to be based on a real Sumerian ruler of Uruk.

Gilgamesh goes through many adventures—too many and too long to summarize here—and his tale has been compared to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But it has one very illuminating point (there's a new translation by Stephen Mitchell) that distinguishes it from later Middle Eastern myths. Gilgamesh finds the plant of immortality, but a serpent steals it from him, and he learns that death is the ultimate reality for all men and women.

"Gilgamesh, where are you roaming? You will never find the eternal life that you seek. When the gods created mankind they also created death, and they held back eternal life for themselves alone. Humans are born, they live, then they die, this is the order that the gods have decreed. But until the end comes, enjoy your life, spend it in happiness, not despair."

That has a very modern, humanist ring to it. So has:

"The river rises, flows over its banks and carries us all away, like mayflies floating downstream; they stare at the sun, then all at once there is nothing."

These quotes, and the epic itself reveal more than we might think – that the first organized Middle Eastern religion did not promise a future Manichean heaven or hell, as Christianity does, nor the *houris* and pleasures of an Islamic afterworld for the worthy. The Abrahamic, apocalyptic, warlike and Manichean religions foisted on much of the world are far different from the Sumerian epics and myths that preceded them, and on which they are based. (If you have not read *History Begins at Sumer*, by Samuel Noah Kramer, by all means, do.)

Heaven and hell are later additions to the myths of the Middle East – the Sumerian religion seems to have had no afterlife of joy or pain, seems to have been more rational than our present Middle Eastern religions.

What changed those religions to their present rabid intolerances and pathologies was the slow, inexorable desiccation of the Middle East, a disaster brought on by increasing, accumulating droughts, followed by famines, pestilence and wars. (Note that none of the Abrahamic religions arose in Egypt, where the Nile provided a steady supply of water.)

In a desiccating world, priests created heavens and hells to compensate after death for life's unhappy reality. As the guardians of the dogma that led to the afterlife, the priests, and the kings they served, gained power. Wish fulfillment and a negative concept of human nature replaced an earlier acceptance of reality.

Another consequence of the drying up of the Middle East was the dethronement of the goddesses. In well-watered Egypt, the great goddess Isis continued to be worshipped, but in the new deserts Ishtar, Astarte, Inanna and others lost their power. Even Yahweh,

the Hebrews' god, lost his goddess wife, Asherah; the priests wrote her out of history, but enough clues remain that we know she once was there.

We don't really realize how much our cultures are affected by climate and weather. Changes of this nature usually work slowly over many generations, but we can not avoid the ambient world. That the rigidities, unrealities, intolerance, and brutalities of the Abrahamic religions—which have led to the deaths of millions—are due to culture changes caused by the desiccation of the Middle East beginning five or six thousand years ago, should be a revelation to believers in those religions. But it won't happen. Early indoctrination in a theological fog of unreality will probably keep the managed majority from ever knowing the truth.

But the Enlightenment, humanism, and the modern scientific worldview will never go away now; they are too powerful in our modern world. Many people are probably more humanist than they realize, and science continues to advance our knowledge of the previously unknown, both on the microscopic and macroscopic levels, from prions to multiverses.

WHY NOT POLYGAMY?

John Rafferty

Once again we've had a lesson in mistrusting the media, especially at its most salacious. By the time we saw the first images on television a couple of months ago of mass arrests and seizures of children at a fundamentalist Mormon compound in Texas, the local police had already begun to doubt the authenticity of the anonymous call they'd received about sexual abuse. No matter. The masters of the media replayed those clips of oddly dressed, silent young women until we got tired of trying to guess how old they were.

So now almost all of the kids are back with their parents, the police have uncovered no instances of abuse (yes, the cult leader is in prison for arranging a "marriage" between a middle-aged man and an under-age girl, but no new crimes have come to light), and the media, moving on, are monumentally uninterested in the psychic damage done to hundreds of children, the physical damage to a farm community's untended crops and livestock, or the incidental damage to the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, the one that guarantees our security in our homes.

Why did an anonymous phone call precipitate such a reaction? Because the cult is fundamentalist Mormon polygamist, and that's "proof" enough of abuse.

Don't mistake me. I make no case for Mormon, a religion I consider even loonier than the ones about the preacher raised from the dead, the boat full of animals, or the heaven-ascending flying horse.

Why loonier? Because reasonably sane Christians, Muslims and Jews can explain away their ancient myths as metaphors or moral lessons. But the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is a product of the modern era of near-universal literacy. The "history" it purports to "reveal"—its mythology of lost-tribes-of-Israel empires and Armageddon-like wars of good and evil in America—was confabulated by Joseph Smith only 160 or so years ago, and so cannot now be explained away as ancient poetry. 21st century Mormons—who can read and earn advanced degrees in the sciences, who are allowed to hold positions of public trust and operate motor cars—believe that Smith, a convicted con man, actually, for real, translated heavenly writings by looking through his

hat (I am not making this up) at golden tablets no one else was allowed to see. That's why.

But about Mormon polygamy: no reasonable person outside the LDS church believes anything but Smith's own horniness inspired his "revelation" about multiple wives. Or perhaps his need for a handy alibi when the first Mrs. Smith found out about the girl who would become Also Mrs. Smith. Either way, or both, polygamy became law in most of the LDS church for half a century. Nobody in traditional-Christian America had thought to make polygamy a crime until the dreaded Mormons started doing it, and so Smith's followers' marital practices became illegal and a convenient excuse to beat up on and even jail the Christianity-slandering heretics.

Of course LDS elders finally realized they had to junk polygamy in order to get their state of Utah into the Union, so mainstream Mormons put the practice to sleep, and the faithful fundamentalists became criminals.

Why? Absent child abuse (including underage "marriages"), why is polygamy* a crime? Why should we deny Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice the right to formalize their relationship(s)? If marriage is a "sacred institution" to conservative Christians, what's wrong with a practice that is commonplace in the Bible? If those women in Texas entered into their "sister-wife" marriages of their own free wills (forget "brainwashing," all religion is brainwashing) and they're not breaking any other laws (as per Jefferson, their action "neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg"), why should we care?

**Legal expert Bob Murtha tells me that "polygamy" means multiple spouses, "polygyny" multiple wives, and "polyandry" multiple husbands. Now I know.*

THINGS IN LIFE LEARNED, SO FAR

A contest

(with no prizes except publication) for secular humanists

The story goes that Ernest Hemingway was challenged to write a story in just six words. His supposed response was: "For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn."

Pretty good, but that's why he was Hemingway. At any rate, the six-word story, or more often memoir, has been a literary parlor game for a while, and now quite a few of those short-form biographies have been compiled in a book called *Not Quite What I Was Planning* – which is also one of the best of the book's exemplar memoirs.

SHSNY's contest for freethinkers is to write your own six-word memoir on the theme that is also the title of this article: *Things in life learned, so far* (six words, see?). "Learned" can also be "done," "decided," "attempted," "loved," "lost," "won" or whatever, and a secular humanist theme or outlook will be preferred, but not required. What *is* required is six words, exactly.

Send your six-word memoir(s) to Editor, at the PO address on the front page, or to editor@shsny.net. To start your creative juices flowing, here are a few examples from the book, first from some well-knowns:

Revenge is living well without you. – Joyce Carol Oates

Secret of life: marry an Italian. – Nora Ephron

Brought it to a boil, often. – Mario Batali

And some unknowns:

The psychic said I'd be richer ...Anything's possible with an extension cord ... Fourteen years old, story still untold ...Wasn't born a redhead; fixed that ... I managed not to destroy anything ... Never really finished anything, except cake.

Start writing. –JR

FOLLOW-UP ON PEACE AND JUSTICE IN IRAQ

(Excerpted from Broadsheet in Salon.com June 4)

Remember last month's story ("The Other War in the Iraq We Created: The One Against Women," by Terri Judd, PIQUE, June) about Rand Abdel Qader, the 17-year-old Iraqi girl who was stabbed to death in an "honor killing" by her father because she was infatuated with a British soldier?

Rand's mother left her husband, saying, "No man can accept being left by a woman in Iraq, but I would prefer to be killed than sleep in the same bed as a man who was able to do what he did to his own daughter."

But her husband found her on May 17, shot her to death, and wounded two of the women's-rights workers who were trying to smuggle her to Jordan.

Arrested? Not yet, and he has announced that the police—that force we trained to work for peace and justice in the new Iraq—have congratulated him.

PASCAL WAS WRONG

Chic Schissel

In reply to Flash Light's election "platform" (PIQUE, April), and an email correspondence with him that mentioned Pascal's Wager, I wrote him the following:

Pascal's Wager says that if you become a believer it might enable eternal bliss and there is no down side: it can help but it can't hurt. But if Pascal's Wager causes you to become religious, if it persuades you to waste a considerable amount of otherwise productive time in praying and religious rituals, that hurts.

Pascal is wrong when he asserts that if God exists, belief in him would enable eternal bliss. Consider the following scenario: A philosophically inclined man decided, on the basis of the wager, to become religious. He died, and stood before God at the portals of heaven.

God: Prove you deserve heaven.

Deceased: I believed in your existence.

God: But there is no evidence of my existence; in fact all the evidence I created clearly disproved my existence.

Deceased: My belief was based on faith, belief despite the evidence.

God: Did I create you with a brain?

Deceased: Yes.

God: Did I expect you to use that brain?

Deceased: I suppose so.

God: Well you haven't. You have gone against my wishes. I don't want you here in heaven. Go to hell.

CLONING DR. SCHISSEL

Flash Light

You were correct, my platform was tongue-in-cheek (PIQUE, June); I don't expect a U.S. court to permit cloning for the purpose of resurrection in my lifetime.

However, I am completely serious in wanting to point out the philosophical implications of current genetic engineering science, and thereby demonstrate that Pascal's Wager may be won by an atheist. As I stated in my response to getting almost 25 percent of the vote, all I need from SHSNY is one volunteer. Now Dr. Schissel has agreed to be cloned. You can find the complete text of our correspondence starting at <http://www.pantheists.org/Pique/Schissel/5-25-08f.htm>

I truly hope the SHSNY board will not excommunicate Chic for this heresy; rather, I invite any SHSNY members who are vehemently opposed to join in the debate, and e-mail me with their objections, which I will publish on the Pantheists.org site, if appropriate, and which you can publish in PIQUE if they interest you. (I also welcome e-mails of support, and/or additional volunteers.) I expect you could have fun with this, if you're comfortable keeping your tongue in your cheek.

HOW TO WIN IN IRAQ:

1. Declare victory. 2. Go home.

At the end of May, Australia pulled its 550 combat troops out of Iraq, declaring their mission a success.