

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

June, 2008

The SHSNY Board election is over, with (gasp!) no surprises, and so we turn to everyday conundrums: what to do if your kid gets religion, if the elevator door-close button doesn't work, if your Constitution is undermined and your history betrayed. We consider American "civic scriptures" and morality in politics, continue to argue the case against God, go to church with our own Three Stooges, and nominate three more of the publicly clueless for Dumbth Awards.— JR

## THE 2008 SHSNY ELECTION RESULTS

The current (2005-2008) Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York met in mid-May to collect, collate and count the ballots received from voting members.

Voters were sent their ballots (two for Family Membership households) in mid-April, along with the candidates' personal statements, and given the option of voting for as many of the ten candidates listed on the ballot as they wished, for None of the Above, or to write in names of their own choosing.

All nine sitting members of the board—President John Rafferty, Vice President Remo Cosentino, Treasurer Donna Marxer, Secretary Elaine Lynn, and members Art Harris, Lee Loshak, Sam Milligan, Irv Millman and Bob Murtha—stood for re-election, and each received votes on at least 60 percent of the ballots received.

The stated goal of a maverick candidate, video artist Flash Light, was "to clone a willing dead atheist, and thereby attempt to resurrect her/him ... call Pascal's wager, and win converts to science & reason." (Of course, it's hard to "state" anything when your tongue is lodged firmly in your cheek.) Mr. Light received votes on fewer than 25 percent of the ballots—almost all on those ballots on which every box was checked—and so was deemed by the sitting Board, as per Article VI, Paragraph 2 of the SHSNY Bylaws, not to "have received a significant number of votes."

No write-in candidates were suggested. One ballot which confused us recorded votes for three of the nominees and one for None of the Above. Go figure.

The new 2008-2011 Board will meet in early June to elect SHSNY's officers for that three-year term. "Meanwhile," current President John Rafferty urged, "all members who are willing to work for SHSNY are welcome on the Board. Come. Volunteer. We need you."

[Head-shot photos of the nine board members, "the usual suspects"]

## "OH, MY GOD, WHAT IF MY KID BECOMES RELIGIOUS?"

Dale McGowan

*(Reprinted from "Parenting Beyond Belief: Anatomy of a Frequently Asked Question," in Humanist Network News, April 16, 2008)*

In a recent article in *USA Today* called “Am I raising atheist children?” author Nica Lalli addressed a common question for nonreligious parents: “How would you respond if one of your children became religious?”

As the topic went rippling through the nonreligious blogosphere, both the consensus inside nonreligious parenting and the false assumptions outside of it were revealed in comment threads.

Like so many questions we hear, the way it is asked is at least as revealing as any answer. Sometimes I can barely hear the question itself for the clatter of the thrown gauntlet.

The tone of the question often implies that all my high-minded claims of parental openness are a self-deluding sham – that hearing that one of my kids had chosen to identify with religion would cause me to fly into an icon-smashing, garment-tearing, child-disowning rage, well before the child had reached the stirring refrain of “Jesus Loves Me.”

There’s a strong consensus among nonreligious parents against putting worldview labels on our children or guiding them by the nose into our own. It’s not unanimous; some of the blog comments I’ve seen since Nica’s piece made me wince, like the atheist mother who said she would not let her child identify with religion.

Fortunately, no hot or staining beverages were in my mouth when I read that. Let? Let? I’m not even sure what that means. But that view is happily rare. Most of us are more committed to parenting our children toward genuine autonomy than churning out rubber stamps of ourselves.

One of the many problems with the question is the implication that religious identification is a single point of arrival, like the day a young adult’s daemon takes a fixed form in *His Dark Materials* or palms begin flashing red in “Logan’s Run.”

Did it work that way for you – or did you pass through a number of stages and try on a number of hats along the way? I thought so. And see what a lovely person you turned out to be.

A close relative of mine went through a period of experimentation with different world views. After being a fairly conventional New Testament Christian for a while, she became something of a Manichaean dualist, believing the world was divided into good and evil, darkness and light. She eventually went through a sort of Einsteinian-pantheist phase before adopting a benevolent, utilitarian-humanism.

Then she turned six.

I encourage my kids to try on as many beliefs as they wish and to switch back and forth whenever they feel drawn toward a different hat, confident that in the long run they will be better informed not only of the identity they choose, but of those they have declined.

Were I to disown my kids each time they passed through a religious identity, I’d have to keep a lawyer on retainer.

Now let’s get specific. My child has become “religious,” you say. Is it “Love-your-neighbor” religious? or “God-hates-fags” religious? “Four Chaplains” religious? or “September 11 hijackers” religious? Dalai Lama? or Jerry Falwell?

Adding to the difficulties is the almost comic range of meaning of “religion.” A good friend of mine has verses from the Book of Psalms scrolling around the walls of his bedroom and believes that Jesus Christ is the son of God and the sole path to salvation –

yet describes himself as “not at all religious, really.” Then you have the Unitarians – the majority of whom are nontheistic – who tend to insist, sometimes downright huffily, that they are religious.

Just as troubling as the idea that I’d protest any and all religious expressions in my children is the notion that I’d applaud any and all nonreligious outcomes.

Though many of the most ethical and humane folks I’ve known have been nonreligious, some of the most malignant and repugnant S.O.B.’s have been as well. So, then: Is it “Ayaan Hirsi Ali” nonreligious? – or “Joe Stalin” nonreligious?

Perhaps you can see why I consider the question, “What if your child becomes religious?” as unanswerably meaningless as, “What if your child becomes political?”

I have three compassionate, socially conscientious, smart, ethical kids, with every indication of remaining so. If they choose a religious expression, it’s likely to be one that expresses those values. They might become liberal Quakers, or UUs, or progressive Episcopalians, or Buddhists, or Jains, framing their tendency toward goodness and conscience in a way different from but entirely respectable to my own way of seeing things. We could do far worse than a world of liberal Quakers.

If instead one of my kids were to identify with a more malignant religion, I’d express my concerns in no uncertain terms. But the consequences of the belief would be the main point of contention, not the fact that it is “religious.”

And my love for my child, it goes without saying, would be reduced by not so much as a hair on a flea on a neutrino’s butt.

### **BUSH COURT: 6, DEMOCRACY: 3**

**John Rafferty**

*We believe in an open and pluralistic society and that democracy is the best guarantee of protecting human rights from authoritarian elites and repressive majorities.*

*– The Fourth of the Affirmations of Humanism*

Responding to the Supreme Court’s 6-3 ruling April 28 upholding Indiana’s “Voter ID” law, some Letters to the Editor of *The New York Times* made clear the extent of this legal disgrace. Following are excerpts from several of the letters printed on May 4.

*The absence of a shred of evidence that “voter fraud” is a real problem confirms that this supposed justification for disenfranchising poor, elderly and minority voters is merely a pretext for the Republican Party’s anti-democracy agenda. ...*

*It seems obvious to me that Indiana (and other states) have found a way to re-introduce the poll tax without calling it a poll tax. ...*

*The claim that those without IDs can just cast a provisional ballot and go to the county clerk’s office within 10 days is ludicrous. Many poor people don’t have cars and thus lack driver’s licenses. ... one has to get to a specific government building to present the documents, have a picture taken and pay the fee [which] could involve an hours-long trek of buses (if there are any), time off from low-paying jobs, and long lines at the agency ...*

Of course not every correspondent to the *Times* agreed. Said a particularly self-satisfied writer:

*It's true that for some people obtaining the proper documents would present difficulties or even an undue burden ... but if a citizen has an earnest desire to cast a ballot, he or she should make every effort to rise above a one-time burden to obtain what is necessary to exercise that right and privilege.*

*Privilege?* The franchise in a democracy is not a privilege – “a special advantage ... or benefit granted to or enjoyed by an individual ...” (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*). It is the *right* of every citizen – “something that is due to a person ... by law, tradition, or nature ...” (*Ibid*).

That right is being restricted, encumbered, poll-taxed, by Republican-controlled state legislatures whose sole motivation is to reduce the number of votes for Democrats while piously blathering about “voter fraud.”

What “voter fraud”? Yes, once upon a time big-city Democratic party machines often voted graveyards and encouraged “voting early and often.” But the only voter fraud I’ve read about in recent years has been voting machine “breakdowns” in (only) black and low-income precincts in Republican-controlled Ohio and Florida.

Oh, and Ann Coulter registering to vote in two different counties in Florida.

The sad fact is that Voter ID laws are working their way through no fewer than 20 mostly-Republican-controlled state legislatures. Particularly draconian, the Missouri version requires a picture ID, and proof of citizenship for new voters, tricky if you’re a woman whose birth certificate name doesn’t match her current married name, especially if she’s been through a name-changing divorce or two (or if she’s one of the twelve nuns in their 80s and 90s—with names like, you know, Sister Joseph—who were turned away from the polls last month in Indiana). How many registered Missouri voters may be affected this November? As many as 240,000.

Arizona has had Voter ID since 2004, and about 17 percent of some 30,000 voters have been rejected because of failure to produce citizenship documents. Does anyone seriously believe those 30,000 are illegal immigrants —people who live in daily fear of the INS—who are coming out of hiding to walk into a room full of cops and other officials to vote on the water bond issue?

Here’s the bottom line: In states with voter ID laws, fewer people will vote. The people who will be denied their right to vote will be overwhelmingly the elderly, the working poor, and minorities.

I’ll leave the final word to one of the *Times*’s letter-writers: *Shame on Indiana, shame on the Supreme Court.*

## **WHAT ELEVATORS CAN TEACH US ABOUT SUPERSTITION**

**Massimo Pigliucci**

*(Reprinted from Prof. Pigliucci’s blog, Rationallyspeaking @googlegroups.com, April 25, 2008)*

Maybe I’ve had elevators on my mind because the one in our building has gone through endless repairs of late, none of which apparently improved its speed or reliability. Or perhaps you simply cannot live in New York City without taking into account elevators as a major component of your life. But then my wife pointed out to me this snippet from an article published recently in *The New Yorker* (every self-respecting newyorker reads *The New Yorker* while in the subway):

*“In the old system—board elevator, press button—you have an illusion of control; elevator manufacturers have sought to trick the passengers into thinking they’re driving the conveyance. In most elevators, at least in any built or installed since the early nineties, the door-close button doesn’t work. It is there mainly to make you think it works. (It does work if, say, a fireman needs to take control. But you need a key, and a fire, to do that.) ... It can be illuminating to watch people compulsively press the door-close button. That the door eventually closes reinforces their belief in the button’s power. It’s a little like prayer. Elevator design is rooted in deception—to disguise not only the bare fact of the box hanging by ropes but also the tethering of tenants to a system over which they have no command.”*

Talk about fooling most of the people most of the time! Of course, superstition is actually a well-known phenomenon in the animal world. Experiments with rats have shown that if you give them a reward (say, food), shortly after they accidentally bumped their shoulder against a wall of their cage, they will start purposely bumping against the wall, expecting a new reward. This is no different from human beings associating a win by their favorite team to them wearing a “lucky” shirt or hat. Both are examples of a widespread logical fallacy, *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after that, therefore because of that), where a causal link between two events is inferred on the basis of an observed correlation. The difference between rats and humans is that the former give up their illogical behavior much sooner than the latter, if no further reward is coming. (Of course, what makes the elevator such a Machiavellian device is that the reward does keep coming!)

More generally, superstition (and therefore religious belief, which is a form of superstition) can likely be traced back to two factors, one of which seems to apply only to humans (and perhaps other closely related primates). The first factor is exemplified in the widespread use of observational correlations in the animal kingdom: it simply makes sense for natural selection to favor the ability to uncover potentially significant patterns in the environment, so that the organism can take advantage of them. However, one would also expect selection to favor the quick abandonment of pattern-based behavior if the pattern turns out not to be a reliable clue for action – exactly what happens with rats.

The second factor applies only to animals with a sufficient sense of self that they develop a need to be consciously in control of their lives: human beings first and foremost. This need for control is in fact so strong that we project agency onto the natural world and invent gods so that we can then pray to elicit favors from them. Or we keep pushing the elevator button even though it doesn’t do anything, smiling with a satisfied smugness once the doors finally do close — even if they would have done so regardless of our pointless actions.

*(Note: Philosopher and evolutionary biologist Dr. Pigliucci drew a full-house audience at the Muhlenberg Library May 6 for his SHSNY lecture, “Of Paradigm Shifts and the Objec-tivity of Science.” If you weren’t there, you missed a fascinating and witty talk, a spirited Q&A session, and another hour-and-a-half of lively conversation over Thai food and beers.)*

**BEN STEIN MAKES HIS BID  
FOR THE 2008 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD ...**

Promoting his mendacious movie, “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed,” on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, Ben Stein said the following.

“When we just saw that man, I think it was Mr. Myers [biologist P.Z. Myers], talking about how great scientists were, I was thinking to myself the last time any of my relatives saw scientists telling them what to do they were telling them to go to the showers to get gassed. That was horrifying beyond words, and that’s where science — in my opinion, this is just an opinion — that’s where science leads you. ...

“Love of God and compassion and empathy leads you to a very glorious place, and science leads you to killing people.”

### **... BUT HAS SERIOUS COMPETITION FROM DICK CHENEY**

Vice President Dick Cheney spoke to a black-tie crowd of Oklahoma Republicans May 2, and said, “When the history is written, it will be said this is a safer country and more hopeful world because George Bush was president.”

Cheney, who got five deferments to avoid service in Vietnam, also said that if the U.S. departs Iraq, it would show America “doesn’t have the stomach for a fight.”

### **... AND A STEVEN HITLER FAN IN INDIANA**

[Head-shot picture of Zirkle]

Meet Tony Zirkle, candidate for the Republican nomination in Indiana’s 2nd Congressional district (he got 30 percent of the vote in the 2006 primary), who on April 20 in Chicago spoke about “the targeting of young white women for pornography and prostitution” at the American National Socialist Workers Party’s celebration of Hitler’s birthday.

Nazis? There must be some mistake, Mr. Zirkle contended afterwards. The swastika-wearing skinheads told him, he said, that they were “national *socialists*.”

[Pic of Zirkle addressing group in front of picture of Hitler, swastikas]

Besides, he was only there because he thought the group was honoring someone named *Steven* Hitler.

## **THE CASE AGAINST GOD (Part 2)**

**Mitchell Silver**

*(Reprinted from the March 2008 issue of Jewish Currents, forwarded by Edith Finell)  
(Ed: Part 1 of this essay, which appeared in May PIQUE, outlined the arguments of the “new atheists” – Lilla, Hitchens, Harris, Dawkins, Stenger – against the “sea of faith” currently countering rationalism, especially in America. The essay continues ...)*

At this juncture we might ask, “Who cares?” Why are the new atheists in such high dudgeon over the persistence of rationally baseless beliefs?

Theism, they contend, is an anti-human ideology. It has a shameful history and poses a continuing threat. This part of the indictment is long, colorful and vivid: the genocidal, vengeful Yahweh, the cruel biblical punishments for minor transgressions, the misogynist Pauline letters, the body- and sex-hating doctrines, the Augustinian self-loathing — just this small sampling from the Western canon attests to the morally repugnant nature of religious thought. It isn’t just thought, however, but deeds that appall the new atheists:

Aztecs offering still-beating human hearts, Christians burning still-living humans, Muslims putting infidels to the sword, Hindus throwing widows on the pyre. The new atheists see religion as a source of endless wars and massacres. These rivers of blood are accompanied by the deep hatred for other creeds that religion instills. They grant that humans may be inclined to clannishness and demonizing outsiders, and that the hatreds and wars motivated by religion might have found other rationales. Yet they are convinced that without religion, we would have been spared much suffering.

But is that so? Daniel Dennett, the eminent philosopher of mind and leading intellectual advocate of materialist, scientifically grounded philosophy, is clearly in sympathy with the new atheists. However, his *Breaking the Spell* has a subtle and importantly different focus. Dennett doesn't want to prove there is no God, or that the traditional God-concept is a morally defective ideal, or that religion is harmful — all of which he no doubt strongly suspects. Rather, he wants us to study religion and religious belief using all of the rational, scientific tools at our disposal. What causes religion, how does it function, who does it serve, and what are its personal and social consequences?

*Breaking the Spell* usefully outlines current knowledge on these matters and interestingly speculates on other possible answers, but primarily Dennett wants more data and better theories based on all of our human sciences, the biological as well as the social. The goal of his book is to dismantle the barriers to such a research program. He is less concerned with breaking the “spell” of theism than with breaking the “taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many.”

Dennett acknowledges the risk that religious belief may turn out to be a good thing after all, while being undermined by our investigations of its nature. That is the implicit fear of those who, Dennett says, “believe in belief.” However, looking at the contemporary world, he sees a greater danger in our continuing blind faith in the benignity of blind faith.

Lawrence Bush's *Waiting for God* is a Dennettian inquiry in the form of a personal memoir. Bush seeks to understand the appeal of religion and “spirituality” to those baby-boomers who had been immersed in what earlier commentators called “the counter-culture,” and who Bush terms “Woodstockers.” The lives of his friends, comrades, family, and especially of Bush himself, constitute his primary raw data. He follows their spiritual journey, speculating on motives, social dynamics, political currents, and historical forces to explain his and their religious twists and turns. Although Bush's reflections are well-informed by the relevant scholarship, the book's greatest strengths are his literary sensibility and strong personal sympathy for both the appeal of religion and the value of hard-nosed skeptical rationality.

The pull of religion, at least as far as Bush himself is concerned, comes not from the traditional God that the new atheists attack; he is almost as impatient as Dawkins with that God, and believes that it is rarely that God who vies for the devotions of Woodstockers. Instead, it is the God that Mark Lilla thought stillborn that Bush finds attractive: the God that the new atheists mock as atheism-that-dare-not-speak-its-name, the God they dismiss as weak tea whose main function is to provide drinking with the respectability that allows fundamentalists to get drunk on stronger stuff — the less definable, more human-friendly but less human-like, more immanent God of liberal, sophisticated religion. Bush is entranced by its siren song and inspired by its possibilities.

However, in the end, at least on a personal level, he buys the new atheists' case. He wouldn't put it as harshly as Hitchens, his moral judgment of religion is more mixed than Dawkins', his feelings more nuanced than Harris' — but Bush agrees that there is no God.

Michael Benedikt is a theologian who is attempting to come to Lawrence Bush's spiritual rescue with a God acceptable to a rationalist. Continuing the tradition that Lilla finds moribund, Benedikt promises a God that will feed the spirit without offending the mind. In *God Is the Good We Do*, he offers a theism that concedes all of the scientific and logical claims of the new atheists, but challenges the meaning and moral they put on the facts. The new atheists treat God as a mistaken idea that, at best, may have had some use for mankind but no longer does. Benedikt, by contrast, views God as an evolving idea, best interpreted as humanity's attempt to discover and describe what is of ultimate value, what makes life worthwhile, what should guide our actions, what we should serve.

Benedikt thinks it unsurprising that primitive theology was, well, primitive; the God idea was misshapen by local prejudices, distorted by fears, corrupted by greed, deformed by vanity. It reflected our ignorance. However, our moral and intellectual growth has provided an increasingly adequate concept of God, and we now should arrive at the notion forthrightly declared in his title, *God Is the Good We Do*, nothing more, nothing less. Where we do no good, there is no God. Whenever we do good, there is God. God is not us, or in our good deeds, or the inspirer of our good deeds — God and our good deeds are one and the same. “Whether or not God exists,” Benedikt writes, “is entirely up to us.”

Benedikt knows full well that that is not what the overwhelming majority of people mean or have meant when they speak of God. Yet he argues that there is great overlap between his God-as-Good-Deeds and the theism of the world's religious traditions — indeed, that his theism is born from their better parts. Most significantly, his God acts in important ways like the God of tradition. Good deeds inspire us, humanize us, and our survival depends on them; they are unconditionally good, accessible, and of enormous power; we can access them when we want, they are most praiseworthy, they are beautiful.

Benedikt makes a comprehensive case for his theology, which he calls theopraxy. He does so with deep learning, intellectual honesty, and humane wisdom, and his may be about the best God a full commitment to rationality will allow. It's not nothing, but is it enough? I think not, for Benedikt's God-as-good-deeds is all inspiration and no consolation. In an odd way, he shares a problem with the new atheists who are cavalier in their dismissal of those needs to which religion ministers. Are you afraid of annihilation, bereft at the death of a child, anguished by unjustified, massive suffering, terrified by your vulnerability to blind, uncaring chance? Well, say the atheists, buck up — those are the facts, do the best you can, be an adult, stiff upper lip and all that.

Of course it makes a certain sense that we ought not fool ourselves, that we should face reality squarely, the better to effectively enact whatever good we can. Benedikt wants to call that enactment “God,” the new atheists want to call it “doing good.” Either way, it's no sweet Jesus. As a remedy for the absence of a powerful, caring, benevolent protector, “do the good you can” — even if it is the only treatment that has any material therapeutic value at all — is so overmatched by the disease, the human condition and all of the evils that flesh is heir to, that I hesitate to rail against the metaphysical snake-oil

industry. Placebos have their place. Most people would rather feel good than be rational — or perhaps it may, indeed, be highly rational to keep God, the loving parent, the mother of all placebos, ensconced in heaven.

Even if one has, as Philip Roth once said of himself, “no taste for delusion,” and agrees with Richard Dawkins that God is a delusion, and a harmful one at that (although this judgment involves ungrounded speculation that I doubt any Dennettian-inspired research can ground), there is still a part of the new atheists’ brief against religion that is troubling: What do they want? If it is to persuade the religious that they are deluded and would be better off without delusion, the mocking tone and disdain that some of these writers show for the needs religion meets and the joys it provides are ill-suited for the task. If it is to persuade their fellow atheists, like myself, to do public battle for their ideology, then their project is reactionary, for a cornerstone of political liberalism is public religious toleration.

Yes, I believe atheism is the correct “religious” view, but I learned from Locke that fighting for the truth in religion leads to bloody and oppressive politics. There is a fight we must have with jihadists, settler messianic Jews, the Christian right and other religious fundamentalists — but it is not with their notions of God, flawed as those might be; it is with the idea that their theologies should have any political power.

## **THE B.S. RE-WRITING OF AMERICAN HISTORY NEVER STOPS**

**Chris Hedges**

*(Reprinted from “Now the Theocrats Want ‘American Religious History Week’” in The Nation, March 9, 2008, and posted on [alternet.org](http://alternet.org))*

*(Note: The following was written before Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney ended their presidential campaigns, but the essential message is still true. — JR)*

Here is an event I have no intention of honoring: American Religious History Week. OK, it’s not official yet. But it is spelled out as Resolution 888 in the bowels of a House committee, sponsored by Republican Congressman Randy Forbes and backed by thirty-one other Representatives. This is an insidious attempt by the radical Christian right to rewrite American history, to turn the founding fathers from deists into Christian fundamentalists, to proclaim us officially to be a Christian nation. If you want to know why Mike Huckabee is dangerous, why his brand of right-wing Christian populism is so frightening, you should read this resolution.

Sent to me by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, the resolution has passages like this: “Whereas political scientists have documented that the most frequently-cited source in the political period known as The Founding Era was the Bible” and “Whereas the United States Supreme Court has declared throughout the course of our Nation’s history that the United States is ‘a Christian country,’ ‘a Christian nation,’ ‘a Christian people,’ ‘a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being’ and that ‘we cannot read into the Bill of Rights a philosophy of hostility to religion ....”

The resolution is staggering for its sheer volume of falsehoods about our history, our system of government and our democracy. It asserts that Thomas Jefferson “urged local governments to make land available specifically for Christian purposes, provided Federal funding for missionary work among Indian tribes, and declared that religious schools would receive ‘the patronage of the government.’” There are seventy-six preambular

clauses like these, leading up to four resolution clauses, the third of which states that the House “rejects, in the strongest possible terms, any effort to remove, obscure, or purposely omit such history from our Nation’s public buildings and educational resources.”

“House Resolution 888 is perhaps the most disgraceful, shocking and tragic example yet of the pernicious and pervasive pattern and practice of the unconstitutional rape of our bedrock American citizens’ religious freedoms by the fundamentalist Christian right,” says Michael “Mikey” Weinstein, head of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation and a former White House counsel for President Reagan.

The resolution may never work its way out of committee, and even if it does, it may never be passed. But it is important because it expresses an increasingly influential ideology. It underlies the ideological appeal of the Huckabee campaign, however adroitly the Republican candidate dodges these issues when speaking to the general public. “I hope we answer the alarm clock and take this nation back for Christ,” Huckabee told a Baptist convention in 1998. He assured the crowd that he had not entered politics “because I thought government had a better answer. I got into politics because I knew government didn’t have the real answers, that the real answers lie in accepting Jesus Christ into our lives.” And this ideology, as illustrated by Mitt Romney’s coded appeal to Christian fundamentalists when giving his Texas speech on faith, or John McCain’s humbling trip to Liberty University, has a powerful pull on Republican candidates.

I saw a persistent rewriting of history in numerous Christian history textbooks, used by hundreds of thousands of children, when I wrote *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*. The revisionists take a minor historical event—in the case of the missionaries, drawing from very rare decisions to provide funds for mission schools or the building of a church on Indian lands—and use it to create a false portrait of a Christian nation. The resolution asserts that the Fourth of July was designed as a Christian holiday, and that in 1779 Congress authorized that Bibles be “printed under their care” and imported for dissemination to the American public. Congress never imported Bibles. But facts matter little.

It is a mistake, despite the seeming implosion of the Republican Party, to count these people out. The Christian radicals have, as the Huckabee candidacy illustrates, broken free from the fetters of their corporate and neocon handlers. They have unleashed a frightening populism that, in the event of an economic meltdown or period of instability, could see the movement ride the wave of a massive right-wing backlash. So when you get tired of the cute sound bites that constitute most coverage of these campaigns, pull out this resolution to remind yourself that we are playing with dynamite, that unless we begin to re-enfranchise tens of millions of Americans – and this means economically – back into the mainstream, unless we again give our workers the chance to earn a living wage, we will fail to blunt this movement and could well fall victim to it.

Let it [the Constitution] be taught in schools, seminaries and in colleges; let it be written in primers, in spelling books and in almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, enforced in courts of justice. In short, let it become the political religion of the nation.

— *Abraham Lincoln*

## WHAT PART OF "MAKE NO LAW

## **RESPECTING AN ESTABLISHMENT OF RELIGION" DON'T THESE CLUCKS UNDERSTAND?**

The Florida Legislature is considering a specialty automobile license plate with a design that includes a Christian cross, a stained-glass window and the words "I Believe."

Rep. Edward Bullard, the plate's sponsor, said people who "believe in their college or university" or "believe in their football team" already have license plates they can buy. The new design is a chance for others to put a tag on their cars with "something they believe in."

"Something?" Not a long-dead Jewish carpenter by any crazy chance, hm?  
[Photo of proposed "I believe" license plate]

## **A VALUES VOTER'S TRAP**

**Austin Dacey**

*(Reprinted from USA Today, 4/28/08, OpEd page)*

Woody Allen confesses that he once failed a philosophy exam when he was caught looking into the soul of the student next to him. Like metaphysics, morality is not the kind of thing that can be lifted from someone else. And to the extent that one tries, one usually loses it in the process. This could pretty well describe what has been happening lately with the Democratic Party's relationship to religion and values in public life.

After the failed presidential bid of 2004, a now-famous (and famously flawed) exit poll of so-called values voters launched a thousand liberal soul-searches. The Democratic Party concluded that because values voters are religious, the way to Washington must lie on the road to Damascus. Since then, it has been closing the God gap that is thought to stand between it and the White House.

Meanwhile, the social agenda of many theologically conservative Christians in America has been expanding beyond abortion and gay marriage to encompass issues such as poverty, the environment, HIV/AIDS and the genocide in Darfur, Sudan. A 2005 open letter signed by more than 60 religious leaders called on the U.S. Congress to consider the federal budget as a moral document. Barack Obama has said, "We need Christians on Capitol Hill, Jews on Capitol Hill and Muslims on Capitol Hill talking about the estate tax. ... We need an injection of morality in our political debate." The evangelical activist and author Jim Wallis heralds the arrival of a Religious Left.

### ***Our loss***

I'm all for more serious moral debate in politics, and I support the right of all to display their conscience in public, whether it be red, blue, or purple. Yet, as an American who is both liberal-minded and entirely secular, I can't help but wonder what we might be losing along the way.

For what it now means to say that poverty or health care are values issues is that evangelicals have started talking about them, and what it now means for liberals to take values seriously is to start talking about them as evangelicals do. As at the recent Compassion Forum among the Democratic candidates, faith and values are now running mates. Such thinking precludes the possibility of a public moral language that transcends sect and invokes the civic values we share as Americans and world citizens.

This would be a betrayal of a great tradition. The Judeo-Christian virtues of love, mercy and humility have a unique place in the moral heritage of the West. But no less

important is the Stoic and neo-Stoic philosophers' notion of universal human reason — a secular conscience — that reveals our earthly good and grounds our natural rights.

We Americans have our own civic scriptures. The American testament has its Creation narrative: Thomas Paine's Common Sense, The Declaration of Independence. It has an Exodus: the Gettysburg Address, the Emancipation Proclamation and the New Deal. Its Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians is Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists; its Psalms, Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. The original moral values are enunciated in the Preamble to that American Talmud, the Constitution: justice, domestic tranquility, common defense, general welfare and liberty.

Sadly, this rich vocabulary of values has fallen out of currency among today's leaders. Could it be that the wrong lesson was taken from 2004?

### ***Authentic morality***

The Pew Foundation scrutinized the 2004 polling data and found that the answers were highly dependent on the framing of the questions. When asked to describe moral values in their own words, only 18% mentioned religion, while more spoke of personal integrity or discerning right from wrong. Recently, the Interfaith Alliance found 68 percent of Americans believe that presidential candidates should not use their religion to influence voters.

Maybe what Americans most want are not religious leaders as such, but leaders who can speak with authenticity in the language of morality. Until we can recover the neglected tradition of secular conscience, liberals like me will remain lost in the wilderness between the Religious Right and the Religious Left.

*(Philosopher Austin Dacey is the Center for Inquiry's representative to the United Nations and the author of The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life, which he will discuss with the SHSNY Book Club June 19)*

## **THE WINNING CAPTION**

**Submitted by Sunny Barnhart**

{Photo of three presidential candidates as the Three Stooges, Obama and Clinton twisting McCain's ears}

Caption: "You're coming to church, whether you like it or not."

## **THE OTHER WAR IN THE IRAQ WE CREATED:**

**THE ONE AGAINST WOMEN**

**Terri Judd**

*(Excerpted from The Independent (UK), "Women Are Being Beheaded for Taking Their Veil Off," and posted on alternet.org April 30, 2008)*

Nineteen-year-old Shawbo Ali Rauf was murdered by her own in-laws, who took her to a picnic area and shot her seven times. Her crime was to have an unknown number on her mobile phone. Her "honor killing" is just one in a grotesque series emerging from Iraq, where activists speak of a "genocide" against women in the name of religion.

17-year-old Rand Abdel-Qader was stabbed to death by her father for becoming infatuated with a British soldier serving in southern Iraq. In Basra alone, police acknowledge that 15 women a month are murdered for breaching Islamic dress codes.

Violence against women is rampant, rising every day with the power of the militias. Beheadings, rapes, beatings, suicides through self-immolation, genital mutilation,

trafficking and child abuse masquerading as marriage of girls as young as nine are all on the increase. In Mosul two years ago, eight women were beheaded in a terror campaign.

Du'a Khalil Aswad, 17, was executed by stoning in front of mob of 2,000 men for falling in love with a boy outside her Yazidi tribe. Mobile phone images of her broken body transmitted on the internet led to sectarian violence, international outrage and calls for reform.

Despite the outrage, recent calls to outlaw honor killings have been blocked by fundamentalists. "Honor killings are not actually a crime in the eyes of the government," said Houzan Mahmoud, who has had a *fatwa* on her head since raising a petition against the introduction of *sharia* law in Kurdistan. "If before there was one dictator persecuting people, now almost everyone is persecuting women.

"In the past five years it has got much worse. It is difficult to describe how badly we have been pushed back to the dark ages. Women are being beheaded for taking their veil off. Self-immolation is rising – women are left with no choice. There is no government body or institution to provide any sort of support. *Sharia* law is being used to underpin government rule, denying women their most basic human rights."

The new Iraqi constitution is a mass of confusing contradictions. While it states that men and women are equal under law, it also decrees *sharia* law – which considers one male witness worth two females. The days when women could hold down key jobs or enjoy any freedom of movement are long gone. The fundamentalists have sent out too many chilling messages.

### **LYING FOR JESUS? IT STARTED WITH PAUL**

**Bill Lindley**

Congratulations on a wonderful article ("Lying for Jesus: Ben Stein Blames Darwin for the Holocaust," May PIQUE).

Lying for Jesus? Well, the Bible has something to say about that, and the verse fits your article so well (not that you are lying) that I must quote the verse in full. Here goes, Romans 3:7, King James version:

*For if the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory; why yet am I also judged as a sinner?*

The speaker is the Apostle Paul.

Thanks again for the education and entertainment.

### **"SEXPELLED: NO INTERCOURSE ALLOWED"**

*(See the spoof video at <http://richarddawkins.net>)*

Anticipating success with their feature film, the producers of "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed," have already leaked a teaser trailer for the film's sequel. Their "teach the controversy" slogan seemed to work well in getting the general public to believe that Intelligent Design is a viable alternative scientific theory to evolution, so the team has moved on to promoting other theories that they feel are being suppressed by the scientific community.

"Sexpelled: No Intercourse Allowed," tells how Sex Theory has thrived unchallenged in the ivory towers of academia as the explanation for how new babies are created. Proponents of Stork Theory claim that "Big Sex" has been suppressing their

claim that babies are delivered by storks. Furthermore, Stork Theory proponents warn of the serious moral dangers posed by teaching children that sex has a function.

They point out that evil dictators such as Hitler, Stalin and Mao all believed in Sex Theory, and they may have even had sex themselves.

There is also a late-breaking new development in the controversy, a new theory called Avian Transportation Theory. Unlike the original Stork Theory, the modern, sophisticated “Avian Transportation Theory” (ATT) merely points out that there are gaps in the orthodox Sex Theory, and that technology like current sonogram imaging is unreliable.

[Cartoon of stork carrying baby]

Moreover ATT does not specify that babies are necessarily brought by storks but by “large birds unspecified” (although many individual ATT theorists privately believe it is a stork).

### **THE FOUNDING EDITOR OF PIQUE SKEWERS THE POPE IN *THE NEWS***

*(Published in the Daily News, April 22, 2008)*

To the Editor:

Pope Benedict’s crediting of religion for the abolition of slavery and support for civil rights is a distortion of history (“A celebration of America, its faith and its enduring ideals,” Opinions, April 17).

Many slaveholders were Christians, while some leading abolitionists were freethinkers, such as William Lloyd Garrison. As for civil rights, white Christians were the ones lynching blacks and enforcing Jim Crow laws, while many civil rights workers were atheists.

— *Warren Allen Smith, Freethinkers New York*

### **... AND BERNADETTE EVANGELIST WRITES THE TIMES ABOUT HARASSMENT IN THE ARMY**

*(A letter sent to The Times, but not yet published.)*

To the Editor:

Your story (“Soldier Sues Army, Saying His Atheism Led to Threats,” April 26, 2008) about Specialist Jeremy Hall, who was the object of abuse and retaliation by a superior officer in Iraq because of his beliefs or lack of beliefs, left me angry and fearful.

Instead of (Hall’s superior) Major Welborn threaten-ing those soldiers who attended a meeting of atheists and freethinkers with barring them from re-enlistments and filing charges against them, the Major needs to be reprimanded, prosecuted, and educated on the freedoms we Americans are guaranteed in the Constitution. How can the Army ask young men and women to sacrifice themselves for these ideals while depriving them of their freedom of religion at the same time?

Our servicemen and women must be made safe to practice their beliefs openly and with respect. Our military officers and personnel must be taught about our Constitution.

— *Bernadette Evangelist*

On “Larry King Live” on CNN, King interviewed Jon Stewart of “The Daily Show.”  
**Larry King:** Is America ready for a woman or a black president?

*Jon Stewart:* This is such a non-question. Did anyone ask us in 2000 if Americans were ready for a moron?

**WITH APOLOGIES TO EVERY READER  
OF PIQUE IN LEONIA, JERSEY CITY,  
WEEKHAWKEN, CEDAR GROVE, FAIRVIEW,  
SOMERSET, EDISON, PLAINFIELD,  
MIDLAND PARK, WATCHUNG,  
MANALAPAN AND PRINCETON ...  
BUT THIS WAS TOO GOOD TO RESIST**

*(From Humanist Network News, April 23)*

**Q.:** Why don't New Yorkers believe in God?

**A.:** Because they know that the light  
at the end of the tunnel is just New Jersey.