

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

May, 2008

Herein we consider the Constitution, global warming, evangelism in baseball and the Taliban in Brooklyn, illegal immigration, oblivious politicians, Dumbth nominees, and the effects of beer on evolutionary development. We re-consider animal cloning, wave bye-bye to the Pope (“*Welcome to New York; now go home*”), salute the Three Stooges, and begin a two-part assessment of the “new atheists.” But first we eavesdrop on a “pitch meeting” for a new movie. — JR

VOTE

If you are a dues-paid member of SHSNY you will have received, about two weeks ago, a ballot for this year’s triennial SHSNY Board of Directors election (two ballots for Family Membership households).

However you vote, do. It’s important.

LYING FOR JESUS: BEN STEIN BLAMES DARWIN FOR THE HOLOCAUST

John Rafferty

(Note: The film, “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed,” was released after the following was written. The NYTimes review of April 18 began, “One of the sleaziest documentaries to arrive in a very long time”

I’ve got it, I’ve got it—I’ve figured out how we resurrect Intelligent Design.

“Resurrect”?

Okay, bad pun. But what we do is we make a movie, a documentary like that surrender monkey Michael Moore is always doing, only this one is all about the atheist, elitist, Darwinist conspiracy to expel religion from college campuses and persecute ID believers. And we call it “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed.”

Wait a minute, “persecute”?

Absolutely! Like the editor who got fired for publishing an ID article ...

He wasn’t fired, his part-time assignment was done.

... and the broad who was denied tenure.

She had years of bad evaluations.

You’re missing the big picture. All we have to do is make the accusations: “ID scientists denied tenure, ID research suppressed.” And you wanna know the beauty part? You ready for this? We don’t drag out the same-old, same-old creation—I mean intelligent design—arguments, irreducible complexity, blah blah. We accuse the Darwinists of depriving ID’ers of their constitutional right of free speech. We make it a First Amendment case!

Teachers should be allowed to say whatever they believe.

You got it!

A geometry teacher who says triangles have four sides?

Are you trying to be funny?

No, no. Interesting idea. Go on.

So, how do we prove the scientific establishment is restricting free speech and persecuting religion? We get them on camera—you know, Dawkins, Dennett, Shermer, the whole elitist crowd— and make them look like idiots.

How? They aren't idiots.

We set up interviews for a documentary “about the intersection of science and religion,” and give it a nice PBS kind of title, like “Crossroads.” We get them talking about evolution—I mean Darwinism—and even speculating about possible theories for the origin of life, you know, really complicated stuff. And then we edit their responses to make them look ridiculous. “Listen to these egghead nitwits: Richard Dawkins believes in space aliens! Daniel Dennett says we came from mud!”

So we lie to get the interviews, lie to them during the interviews, and then distort their answers — lying again.

Hey, we're doing God's work, remember? Lying for Jesus, for Christ sake. Are you with the program or not?

Sorry. Okay, who's our interviewer?

Ben Stein.

Ben Stein the financial columnist? The ex-Nixon speechwriter who hosted that TV game show?

He's our guy. Hates liberals and intellectuals, thinks Darwinism is Satan-worship.

You keep saying “Darwinism” rather than “evolution” or “natural selection”? How come?

Association. “Ism” sound-alikes for our target audience. In the movie, Stein will make the case that Darwinism equals atheism, equals Stalinism ...

Stalin didn't believe in evolution.

... equals Maoism, and especially equals Nazism. We have Stein arguing that Social Darwinism ...

Darwin repudiated Social Darwinism.

... arguing that Social Darwinism led directly to Hitler and the Nazis, while we fill the screen with image after image of concentration camps and ovens. And then, for a big finish, we have Stein visit Dachau. And when the guide tells him that lots of Jews were killed there — picture this, okay? — Stein buries his face in his hands as if it's the first time he's heard of it, and as if he's thinking, “Charles Darwin, how could you have done it?”

So, what do you think?

Well, considering the full-of-crap history and the blatant distortions of science ...

... which are perfect for our target audience, which knows nothing about either subject ...

... then right, it's perfect. Let's do it.

No, I have not seen “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed.” I have relied on the Scientific American report, “Ben Stein's Expelled: No Integrity Displayed,” at www.sciam.com, and on “Lying for Jesus” at <http://richarddawkins.net>.

Lying for Jesus, indeed. — John Rafferty

PAPAL VISIT

The U.S. was paid a visit last month by the chief executive of the richest non-government organization in the world, an entity that buys banks and real estate with its pocket change (and pays no taxes) while thousands of the world's poor die every day of starvation, that proscribes contraception and family planning even though the planet cannot feed its existing six-and-a-half billion, that prohibits poor women from divorcing drunken and criminally abusive husbands while selling annulments-of-convenience to the rich and well-connected, and which employs and protects pedophiles who have sexually molested thousands of children — who said on his arrival here that America's problems were the fault of secularism, and that all we need is “obedience” to his organization.

He was greeted on his arrival, and praised for his “commitment to life,” by a former governor of Texas who signed more orders for execution than any other chief executive in that state's history.

**OUR CONSTITUTION IS A SECULAR DOCUMENT,
NOT A CHRISTIAN ONE. IT GUARANTEES
FREEDOM OF—AND FROM—RELIGION**

Sol Abrams

Christian evangelicals claim that the U.S.A. is a Christian Nation. While it is true that a majority of Americans call themselves Christians, there are many different Christian sects, some traditional, and some with different interpretations of doctrines, e.g., some Christians are pro-choice, others are totally opposed to abortion.

Many Christians do not believe that Mormons are Christians, and some Christian sects do not regard some other Christian sects as Christians. The Mormons define a “gentile” as a person who is not a Mormon. Since Jews are not Mormons, it follows that all Jews are gentiles.

My point: that the majority of Americans call themselves Christians does not make us a Christian Nation.

We Americans are governed by our Constitution, which is a civil document, not an ecclesiastical one like the Bible. The word “God” was deliberately left out of the Constitution by James Madison, who once wrote that “religious bondage shackles the mind and unfits it for any useful service.”

Madison and Jefferson—who wrote the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, which became the basis of the Constitution's First Amendment—were Deists, along with Washington and Franklin, and believed in “Nature's God,” not the God of the Bible.

Madison and Jefferson were particularly critical of religion. In a letter to Samuel Miller, Jefferson wrote,

“Man once surrendering his reason has no remaining guard against the most monstrous absurdities, and like a ship without a rudder is the sport of every wind. With such persons gullibility, which they call faith, takes the helm from the hand of reason and the mind becomes a wreck.”

Jefferson also described the God of Israel as “a being of terrific character; cruel, capricious, vindictive and unjust.” He referred to Christianity's Trinity as “the Triple Monster.”

Those Founders gave us a civil Constitution, not an ecclesiastical one. We are a nation of different religious sects, many of which are Christian. But that does not mean we are a Christian Nation.

The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations ... This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution. — *John Adams*

DIVERSITY: A GOOD THING?

Chic Schissel

Verlyn Klinkenborg (PIQUE, March 2008) says he will not eat cloned meat. He admits no health risks are involved and that his stance is prejudice-based, but he avers that cloning of livestock will kill their diversity, and “humans are only as rich as the diversity that surrounds them, whether we mean cultural or economic diversity.” In many individuals these days the word “diversity” triggers an emotional, essentially religious reaction that is based more on faith than reality.

But diversity is not always a good thing.

When I was young I did not enjoy the diversity of conduct available to today’s young. My generation’s narrow options served to keep our behavior in check; the profusion of options for the young today too often contributes to erratic and anti-social behavior.

Nor are today’s dizzying arrays of technology options always helpful. One can go crazy trying to decide what TV or camera or telephone to buy. And they all seem to work! I concede that technological diversity is ultimately a good thing, but without it life would be as sustainable yet much less confusing.

But cultural diversity is something else. The world teems with diverse cultures, and not all this diversity is valuable and worth encouraging. Cultural diversity includes savages, cannibals, theocratic dictatorships, societies mired in oppressive poverty and never-ending war — and let’s not forget the sweet folks who stone a woman to death if she watches TV without a man present and who think nothing of sending off children to commit suicide by blowing up innocent people. Such diversity offers no benefit to me or humanity. Much of the world’s population is stuck in such cultures and does not contribute to the well being of the planet. Were measures taken to contain harmful diversity, there would still remain enormous, more than sufficient human diversity to serve and improve mankind.

Klinkenborg’s main argument is that the cloning of livestock will ultimately eliminate their diversity. This is unlikely. We expect that cloned animals can be raised with greater disease resistance, with less expense and less stress on the environment, and even with better and more reliable food value and flavor. Enough animals can be retained for breeding and improving the variety — and when we evolve a better and cheaper animal we can clone that one. And even cloned animals can exhibit some variation, as studies on identical twins indicate.

The same goes for genetically engineered crops. The history of agriculture goes back some ten thousand years and has always involved genetic engineering. In recent years methods have been developed that greatly accelerate the process, and this has led to a dramatic increase in the worldwide food supply that has eliminated the long-recurrent famines in places like India and China.

Efforts designed to benefit humanity must be evaluated through the lens of science: that's the bottom line.

**VOTERS AND POLITICIANS ALIKE,
OBLIVIOUS OF THE FACTS**

Bill Moyers

One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal; it has come in from the fringe, to sit in the seat of power in the Oval Office and in Congress. For the first time in our history, ideology and theology hold a monopoly of power in Washington. Theology asserts propositions that cannot be proven true; ideologues hold stoutly to a world view despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality. When ideology and theology couple, their offspring are not always bad but they are always blind. And there is the danger: voters and politicians alike, oblivious of the facts.

**ILLINOIS REPRESENTATIVE MONIQUE DAVIS,
OBLIVIOUS OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT**

Atheist activist Rob Sherman was testifying April 3 before the Illinois House State Government Administration Committee in Springfield, opposing a bill to spend a million dollars on the reconstruction of a church, when Rep. Monique Davis (D-Chicago) interrupted.

“What you have to spew and spread is extremely dangerous,” she shouted. “It’s dangerous for our children to even know that your philosophy exists. This is the Land of Lincoln where people believe in God.

“Get out of that seat. You have no right to be here. We believe in something. You believe in destroying. You believe in destroying what this state was built upon.”

Mr. Sherman ignored her (although the media did not) and continued his testimony.

**CONGRESSMAN CHRIS CANNON (R- Utah),
MEET REP. DAVIS**

Take a bow, Rep. Cannon, for the Stupid Idea of the Month, your bill (H.R. 5514, which got exactly no co-sponsors in the House), “to amend title 28, United States Code, to limit Federal court jurisdiction over State laws restricting pornography” Restrict how? “No court created by Act of Congress shall have jurisdiction, and the Supreme Court shall have no appellate jurisdiction, to hear or decide a question of whether a State pornography law imposes a constitutionally invalid restriction on the freedom of expression.”

That’s right, Mr. Cannon proposes to exempt all state (and city, county, and zoning board) laws from the First Amendment — if the subject is pornography.

To put it a different way, federal courts could still assess whether any law in America restricts your right to free expression — unless that law refers to pornography. In which case, Goober and Mrs. Grundy on the Village Council can trash your rights, and the Constitution.

**POLITICALLY CORRECT BRITS,
FRIGHTENED TO DEATH OF CRAZY MUSLIMS,**

GET CRAZIER AND CRAZIER

(Excerpted from “Three Little Pigs ‘too offensive,’” on BBC News at bbc.co.uk, 1/23/08)

A children’s story based on the Three Little Pigs has been rejected by a U.K. government agency’s annual awards panel because the subject matter could offend Muslims.

The feedback from the judges explaining why they had rejected the CD highlighted that they “could not recommend this product to the Muslim community.”

The digital book (which has already won awards), is a re-telling of the classic tale, casting the pigs as cowboys building their houses of sticks and straw and bricks, and is called Three Little Cowboy Builders.

So the judges also attacked the book for offending builders, warning that the story might “alienate parts of the building trades workforce.”

The judges criticized the stereotyping in the story of the unfortunate pigs: “Is it true that all builders are cowboys, builders get their work blown down, and builders are like pigs?”

WE HAVE OUR FIRST TWO

2008 DUMBTH-AWARD CANDIDATES

Meet Sally Kern. She represents an Oklahoma City district in the Oklahoma State House of Representatives, and last month, apropos of nothing at all, she stood up in that august venue and declared that homosexuality is “the biggest threat our country has, even more so than terrorism or Islam.”

[pic of Sally Kern]

Known for the introduction of bills to segregate books about homosexuality in public libraries and to allow teachers in the public schools to teach “all approaches” (i.e.: “creationism”) to evolution—neither of which passed—Representative Kern blames the defeat of so many conservative Republicans in 2006 not on Iraq or the economy, but on “homosexual activists who are aggressively funding pro-homosexual candidates.” She’s not a bigot, she says, but “the homosexual agenda is destroying this nation, it’s just a fact.”

And from the political left, here’s Randi Rhodes. No, she’s not nominated for her infamous “Hillary Clinton is a big fucking whore” rant, which was simply vicious and foul-mouthed—not Dumbth-quality stupid or clueless—but for another remark in that same San Francisco stand-up routine that got lost in the Hillary headlines.

[pic of Randi Rhodes]

Riffing on politicians caught in sex scandals, the politically progressive feminist actually offered a defense of this year’s most notorious (so far) specimen: “Eliot Spitzer spent \$80,000 on women; I think that’s cool.”

And we once thought you were cool, Randi.

What’s a Dumbth Award?

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

Who deserves a Dumbth Award? Mr. Smith suggested, as an example, “a person who falls five floors down an elevator shaft, is rescued by a policeman who crawls into the dark hole unaided, is saved by EMS personnel who rush to the scene, is operated on

by a skilled surgeon, is nursed back to health by therapists, and who then credits God with ‘a miracle’.”

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

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

Send your nominations for the 2008 award to the P.O. box, or e-mail editor@shsny.net, by December 15. Nominees will be published in January, 2009 PIQUE, and balloting will take place throughout that month.

The next time a believer tells you that “separation of church and state” does not appear in the Constitution, point out that “trinity” appears nowhere in the Bible. Neither does “rapture,” “second coming” or “original sin.” — *Dan Barker, Losing Faith in Faith*

When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That’s my religion.

— *Abraham Lincoln*

THE CASE AGAINST GOD

(Part 1)

Mitchell Silver

(Reprinted from the March 2008 issue of Jewish Currents, forwarded by Edith Finell)

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore

Lay like the fold of a bright girdle furl’d

But now I only hear

Its melancholy long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating . . .

— *from Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1851)*

Well, the tide has turned. The “Sea of Faith” is roaring back to shore, threatening a tsunami. Or so it seems to the authors of a spate of recent books intended not merely to build levees to hold off the rushing waters of religion, but to repel their power and speed their evaporation with the heat of atheist polemics.

That these “new atheist” authors have to fight this fight at all comes as something of an historical surprise. The retreat of religion has been, at least from an elite Eurocentric perspective, a trend for four hundred years, and no reversal was expected. By the mid-19th century, when Matthew Arnold heard only faith’s melancholy withdrawal, God looked to be a terminal case, and by century’s end, Nietzsche had memorably issued the death certificate.

As Mark Lilla tells the story in *The Stillborn God*, the deity’s demise began when “He” was replaced by social rationality as the basis of legitimate political authority. In the 16th and 17th centuries, much blood and treasure were lost in the contest to decide

which God would be sovereign. In response to the havoc, Thomas Hobbes made the decisive, radical breakthrough in political theory by asserting that political legitimacy can be based on meeting human needs. Government is grounded in its worldly effectiveness, with no heavenly mandate required for legitimate political authority.

Simultaneous with the Lord's dismissal from a role in running politics was a shrinking role for God in running the natural world. Enlightenment science uncovered a natural world of mechanical cause and effect, pulled not in accordance with God's far-seeing will but by matter and energy, which are blind and have no wills. Charles Darwin's achievement seemed the last nail in the coffin for theism. Before Darwin, life's exquisitely functional complexity strongly suggested a designing mind as its fabricator. Darwin replaced The Mind with the marvelous but mindless "designing" power, over the eons, of natural selection.

Already by the late 18th century, astronomer and mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace "had no need of this [God] hypothesis," and the U.S. Constitution spoke of "We the People," not God, as the foundation of the state. Politically and epistemologically, God was marginalized. Scientists and statesmen were all going godless.

As God pined away, with little sympathy and even a "good riddance" attitude from some intellectuals, another section of the intelligentsia fretted over God's demise. They thought religious belief brought something valuable to our lives. While they neither could nor wanted to revive the traditional concept of God, which fomented civil strife and impeded science, they sought a refurbished God concept, one that managed to inspire morality, stimulate creativity, stay despair, and provide solace, yet without being culturally specific, irrationally demanding, or empirically meddling (except, perhaps in the initial set-up). Lilla traces the career of this refurbished God and judges that it hardly ever came to significant life — hence the "stillborn" God.

Whether or not that refurbished God really did die at its nativity is a question we shall return to later; but the one thing today's new atheists hold in common with traditional believers is the opinion that this refurbished God—the God of sophisticated, liberal theologians (Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Kaplan) and abstruse philosophers (Spinoza, Hegel, Whitehead)—doesn't deserve to live. "He" is not God enough. According to Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a founding member of the anti-Nazi Confessing Church, believes only in a "nebulous humanism." Hitchens has no beef with this humanism, apart from its being mislabeled 'God'. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, as he usually does, puts the new atheists' case most clearly: "If the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is 'appropriate for us to worship.'"

Sam Harris similarly begins his book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, in solidarity with traditional Christians' rejection of modern, liberal theology. Harris assures Christians that he, unlike liberal theologians, takes Christian belief in God to mean what most Christians think it means: that Jesus really did perform miracles, really was resurrected, really will return. Real Christians, Harris says, don't take these as symbolic or metaphorical propositions, and neither will he. Harris respects their beliefs too much to misinterpret them as tropes — he just thinks ... that these beliefs, honestly and straightforwardly interpreted, are false and pernicious. It is these beliefs in the traditional God that the new

atheists want to put in the dock (although they also charge liberal theology as an accessory).

The urgency of their indictment is fueled by the sense that old-time religion, assumed to be withering away by the European bourgeoisie and their spiritual fellow travelers, is now virulently vibrant. We had thought, say the new atheists, that our Enlightenment forebears, the old atheists, had triumphed in the decisive struggle against superstition. But Hindu fanaticism, messianic settler Judaism, New Age mysticism, and most especially, reactionary, murderous Islamic jihadiism and reactionary, moralistic American Christian fundamentalism, have convinced the new atheists that the battle for rationality and humanism still rages, is as important as ever, and may well be lost. *Aux armes!*

Here, in sum, is the new atheists' anti-God brief: Belief in God, as traditionally conceived, lies somewhere between very probably false and manifestly absurd. In addition to being untrue, it is a pernicious belief that has caused horrific suffering and continues to cause serious harm. Whatever good has been motivated by theistic belief would likely have occurred without it, and no future good is dependent upon it. More sophisticated, liberal conceptions of God may be innocuous in and of themselves, but they are devoid of much content and useless. Moreover, they provide cover and respectability to the noxious beliefs of traditional theism.

The new atheist case is powerful, and all of its advocates under review make it with good writing and more or less venomous humor. These are often angry, as well as rollickingly funny, indictments. Sam Harris reads like hard-hitting journalism — concise, occasionally unfair, but always pointed and punchy. Hitchens, more often unfair, is also more literary, digressive, and wrathful in his delectable skewering of religious absurdities and abominations. The most thorough, well-wrought presentation of the prosecution, however, witty and pointed but not at the expense of the argument, is Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, which is the best comprehensive survey ... of the current case against theism.

Dawkins walks the reader through the venerable philosophical arguments meant to prove God's existence, and their equally venerable refutations. The cosmological argument—that we need God to get things going—is shown to be question-begging. The ontological argument—that God, correctly understood, must be conceived of as existing—is shown to be either outright fallacious or, if it proves something, that something is not necessarily anything God-like. The ever-popular “argument from design”—the claim that the world is too delicately, beautifully, purpose-embodilyingly wrought to have emerged by accident—is dismantled by Dawkins, as an evolutionary biologist, who is as impressed with the beauty and fabulously ingenious workings of the natural world as the most pious believer, but is also capable of explaining it without God.

At least for the biological world, he explains, we already possess a non-mysterious explanation of apparent design: natural selection. It is an explanation confirmed by the empirical evidence and compelling on purely logical grounds. In a world of limited resources and of reproducers (even the simplest life forms, barely more than molecules) who make highly reliable but not always exact copies of themselves, one's kind has got to be relatively good at reproducing to stick around. To be a good reproducer, you've got to be good at getting food, good at avoiding becoming food, and good at the reproductive process itself. If you don't make the grade in one of these areas because you don't have the requisite skills or the competition is too fierce, your descendants are no-shows. “Fit”

with the environment determines who's best suited for reproductive success. Some variations in the copies being made will fit the conditions at hand better than others, and the reproducers possessing these variations will reproduce most successfully. Keep repeating the game and the surviving types become incredibly well suited. No God, but lots of "design." Biology doesn't need God.

Nor does any other science. Science, however, has become too prestigious to be denied, so apologists for theism have resorted to one of two strategies. One liberal religious strategy is to claim that all scientific discoveries, actual or potential, are simply irrelevant to religion – that God is not about what science is about. A second argues that scientific findings are compatible with God's existence or even confirm it. While all of the new atheists deny that science and religion make friendly bedfellows, it is Victor Stenger, in *God, The Failed Hypothesis*, who makes the most sustained and general case that science actually disproves traditional theism.

Stenger argues that any scientific hypothesis positing an entity's existence is tested by looking for evidence of its existence. God's existence, given how "He" is described in world scriptures and by traditional theists as good, caring, powerful, wise, influential, miracle-making, the world's creator, etc., should leave lots of scientifically discoverable traces. Yet there is no evidence of miracles, no inexplicable calibration of natural laws, no perfection of natural design, no natural justice. Science—and not for want of trying—has simply not found any such effects. Stenger argues convincingly that science not only does perfectly well without supposing God but actually takes us a long way towards refuting divine existence. The "God hypothesis" of traditional theism has been scientifically falsified, and the liberal God, unfalsifiable because it doesn't do anything, is of no interest to Stenger – because it doesn't do anything.

At this juncture we might ask, "Who cares?" Why are the new atheists in such high dudgeon over the persistence of rationally baseless beliefs?
(Part 2, the conclusion, will appear in June PIQUE.)

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #91

What to do about campus massacres? Arizona's Senate Judiciary Committee has approved a bill that will allow anyone with a concealed weapon permit to carry guns in public colleges and universities.

State Senator Karen S. Johnson wanted her bill to cover all public schools, including kindergarten, but was dissuaded. She's still uneasy. "I feel like our kindergartners are sitting there like sitting ducks," she said.

Right, so why stop at kindergarten? Those wimpy Arizona lawmakers ought to emulate the Virginia House of Delegates, which stood tall (PIQUE, April, 2005) against a law that would have barred Virginians from entering a day-care center with a loaded gun.

... #s 92-102

Bills to allow more people to carry more guns on college campuses are now also working their way through legislatures in Alabama, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Washington.

and ... #103

The Oklahoma House of Representatives Education Committee a while back approved House Bill 2211, "promoting freedom of religion in the public schools," which actually promotes the abandonment of education.

The bill (actually the work of the Liberty Legal Institute in Texas, where it has been enacted), requires public schools to guarantee students the right to express their religious viewpoints in a public forum, in class, in homework and in other ways without being penalized.

For instance, if on a test a student says that the earth is not 4.65 billion years old, but only 6,000, based on his or her religious beliefs, the answer would have to be marked as correct. If a student chose to speak to a group of students in a school-sanctioned assembly to tell them they must accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior or go to hell, then that student would have a right to do so, according to this bill. To be fair, the same would be true if the student chose to tell the assembly that they would not go to hell, that there is no hell and that those who promote belief in hell are liars. Of course any of these scenarios would lead to endless lawsuits, which is exactly what is happening in Texas.

So two First Amendment rights clash: “free exercise of religion” and “freedom of speech.” What to do?

The superintendent of the Denton, Texas Independent School District has decreed that no students may ever speak in assembly, to graduation, to the crowd at an athletic event or in any other group function. If no students are ever allowed to speak, he said, there will be no discrimination and no basis for lawsuits.

Simple solution: Nobody has any rights – shut up.
(From a Denton Sun article, forwarded by Edith Amster)

THE MARKETPLACE OF FAITH

Jackson Dykman

(Excerpted from Time, 3/10, forwarded by Rebecca Kelly)

Americans love to shop, even for religion. More than 40 percent of U.S. adults have changed their faith since childhood, many opting for no faith at all. That’s the key finding of a major study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which surveyed 35,000 people in five languages to create the most detailed portrait yet of the country’s religious landscape.

The study found that the fastest-growing religious group is people without any religious affiliation. But that doesn’t mean the U.S. is experiencing a secular surge. Most in this group aren’t atheists; they just describe their religion as “nothing in particular.”
[Ed: And those “Unaffiliated,” including atheists and agnostics, outnumber—ready for this?—traditional black Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Mormons, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Orthodox, Muslims, Hindus, Other Christians, Other Faiths, and Don’t-Knows – all put together!]

Protestants remain a bare and strikingly diverse majority; the study found widespread movement among 100 variations of Protestantism.

For America’s faithful, it’s a buyer’s market.

Comment: *Buyer beware.*

EVIL AUTHORITY, BAD PARENTS, AND SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIANITY

(From the recent HBO series “In Treatment.” Paul, a psychiatrist, is treating Sophie, a 16-year-old who is suicidal because she unconsciously blames herself for her parents’ divorce and her father’s subsequent abandoning of her.)

Paul: Have you ever read the Bible?

Sophie: Isn't that, like, illegal for you to ask me that?

Paul: Not really. It's really just a subject like any other. So you can choose to talk about it or not. Anyway, in the New Testament God is always portrayed as being good, and wickedness and evil is a human thing, a human problem. Actually, it's one of the things that helped Christianity to spread very quickly. Can you think why?

Sophie: Because people like to feel shitty about themselves?

Paul: That's it, exactly. We prefer to live in a world where God is good and man is bad, rather than a world where God is bad.

So an evil authority, an unfair government, neglectful parents—that's a pretty scary concept—makes our whole life seem scary and meaningless. It is one of the reasons why children will blame themselves before their parents.

Comment: *And why grown-ups will blame tsunamis and earthquakes on anyone (gays, feminists, et al) rather than the benevolent God they believe has created and loves them.*

GLOBAL WARMING: FIVE FACTS AND A COROLLARY G. Beer

THE FACTS: (1) Growing concern about global warming has reduced public attention to the different threats against the health of our planet and the lives of its inhabitants. Some of these, such as loss of water resources, are much aggravated by global warming. Others, such as deforestation, contribute to it, while still others, such as overfishing, pollution and soil depletion, are mostly independent of it.

(2) Even if greenhouse gas (mainly carbon dioxide) emissions could be reduced enough so that natural processes removed equal amounts, and the gas concentrations in the atmosphere stopped increasing, the heating would continue until a new equilibrium was established. This would take at least several decades. The consequence would be degradation or ruin of many habitats worldwide. Adaptation would be difficult.

(3) But something different will happen. Only a few of the goals for combating global warming contemplate such drastic limits to the emissions. All the others, the main ones, call for reduction by some percentage to be attained some years in the future. Therefore, the concentrations will continue to rise. There will be no equilibrium. Heating will increase and accelerate without limit. The result will be devastation to all habitats. Adaptation will be impossible.

(4) An example? The planet Venus is enveloped by a heavy, 96 percent carbon dioxide atmosphere, which has caused a runaway greenhouse effect. Venus's surface temperature is about 482°C (900°F), hotter than Mercury, hot enough to melt lead. While there is little reason to believe Earth will end up that hot, it will surely become much hotter than it is now.

(5) The main called-for limits (above) to our emissions are not achievable. Fossil fuel producers are increasing their outputs to meet surging demands. Given the power of greed and stupidity to (at least temporarily) overwhelm ingenuity and foresight, even the current inadequate goals will not be realized in a timely way.

THE COROLLARY: Extensive species extinctions and environment destruction, due to planetary heating and other causes, will continue into the next century. One of the terminated species will be *Homo sapiens*.

Marvin Richardson, an organic strawberry farmer in Idaho who is challenging Senator Larry “Wide Stance” Craig for his U.S. Senate seat, had his name legally changed to Pro-Life.

Beer is living proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy. [See next article]

— Benjamin Franklin

**THE BUFFALO-AND-BEER EXPLANATION OF
THE EVOLUTION OF THE HUMAN BRAIN.
CHEERS!**

(Forwarded by Martine Reed)

Back in the 80’s on TV’s “Cheers,” Cliff Clavin was explaining the Buffalo Theory of Evolution to his buddy Norm one afternoon in the bar. Like so:

“Well ya see, Norm, it’s like this. A herd of buffalo can only move as fast as the slowest buffalo. And when the herd is hunted, it’s the slowest and weakest ones at the back that are killed first. This natural selection is good for the herd as a whole, because the general speed and health of the whole group keeps improving by the regular killing of the weakest members. In much the same way, the human brain can only operate as fast as the slowest brain cells. Excessive intake of alcohol, as we know, kills brain cells. But naturally, it attacks the slowest and weakest brain cells first. In this way, regular consumption of beer eliminates the weaker brain cells, making the brain a faster and more efficient machine. That’s why you always feel smarter after a few beers.”

**OBAMA’S PROBLEM IS NOT REV. WRIGHT,
IT’S “MAGIC THINKING” CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE**

Al Henick

Most of us have seen excerpts on TV or YouTube of the illustrious Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s raving—worthy of winning the Dumbth Award hands down. Barack Obama takes issue with his pastor for these remarks, but refuses to “disown” him. He explains his tolerance, saying that Wright taught him Jesus, taught him about salvation and morality in general. Some teacher! Did Wright teach him where Jesus (and His Father) were during 9/11 when 3000 innocent people died, including many African-Americans and hundreds of firemen and policemen trying to save lives? Or where Jesus was when a tsunami killed more than 200,000? Or where Jesus was during the colossal holocaust in which six *million* died?

Secular humanists can only repeat what has been said many times – that as far as those events are concerned, the best thing you can say about Jesus or any other god is that they don’t exist.

We all know that if a candidate does not profess to believe in the supernatural, omnipotent being of one organized religion or another, he or she cannot run for president. I can forgive most candidates for this position, even if they are not wholly sincere, but politically motivated. But when Obama embraces and flaunts this kind of faith as a reason for tolerating sermons that poison the congregation with vicious, racist statements teaching hate, that is not easily forgiven.

My personal, instinctive feeling, without evidence or proof of any kind, is that Barack Obama is too highly intelligent to believe the supernatural dogma and magic of his religion. If I am wrong, then he is far less intelligent than I thought, rather than a profound liar.

Comment: Senator Obama's Reverend Wright problem is going to get even bigger when more people become aware that over a year ago Rev. Wright predicted that he, Wright, would become a problem for Obama when "the Jews" found out about his opinions. — JR

[Photshopped pic of Obama, McCain and Clinton as the Three Stooges. Caption: "Send your caption to editor@shsny.org.]

NO, LET'S NOT HAVE A PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE ABOUT ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

John Rafferty

I don't get CNN's Lou Dobbs's nutty obsession with "illegal immigration" at all (remember his claim of 30,000 illegal-immigrant *lepers?*), but I certainly understand the appeal of a smoke-and-mirrors campaign issue that a popular newscaster has dropped into the laps of politicians who'd rather talk about anything other than the war, the economy, the environment, global warming or the price of gasoline and heating oil – let alone the damage done to our basic freedoms by eight years of a faith-based administration.

Presidential nominee John McCain is a decent man who for years tried to address the problem realistically and honorably, even working with Democrats to find workable solutions. But in the insanity of this never-ending presidential campaign he caved in to the demagogues of right-wing radio and now sounds like every other jingo. Obama? Clinton? No better. And the worst thing we could possibly do about "the problem" right now is to have a presidential debate in which McCain and whichever of the Democrats is nominated will simply try to present him or herself as the "toughest."

The war? The economy? Hell, no! Let's talk about small brown people invading our country "like cockroaches." They're taking all those \$5-an-hour/no-benefits pool-boy, hod-carrier, stoop-labor, crop-picker, fish-gutter, and housemaid jobs away from our own millions of white high-school graduates who need pictures of Big Macs and Value Meals on their cash-register keys at MacDonald's because they can't read—or the hundreds of thousands of our college graduates with "degrees" in Cinema History or Cross-Cultural Studies who can't find the U.S. (let alone Mexico) on a map—who would love to have those jobs if only Miguel and Rosalita would go back home and not beat our kids to the parking lot shape-up at six in the morning.

We've always had illegal immigration (who stamped the Pilgrims' visas?), and unless we become North Korea, we always will. Build a fence—not just 220 miles across hundreds of American homeowners' back yards, but all the way from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico—and entrepreneurs will start selling places to 50 Mexicans (or Guatemalans or Hondurans) on boats meant for 20, and motor them to beaches miles behind the fence in Texas and Southern California. Double the size of the Coast Guard to patrol those waters, and the boats will head for Louisiana and Florida. Erect D-Day defenses all along our coasts, and someone will start selling Mexicans \$300 "holiday weekends" in Vancouver on overloaded airbuses, which will fly back to Mexico on

Sunday evening—surprise!—empty. And so we'll start building a fence across our northern border.

I don't know what the "solution" to "the problem" is. What I do know is that as America's problems come and go, it's a long way down the list. As *The New York Times* editorialized March 4 ...

Let's agree that any country needs to control its borders and ports, and that this one has done too little on that front. But that worthy goal founders when the overall strategy boils down to simplistic components—bits of fencing and technological cure-alls—rather than a comprehensive solution that also attacks the reasons people cross illegally. Despite what critics of "amnesty" say, immigration reform has never been a choice between legalization and enforcement, because legalization is enforcement. Only by bringing people onto the books and being realistic about the supply of visas, letting people in through ports of entry, instead of chasing them across the desert, will the country restore sanity and order to this broken system.

And why is all this a humanist issue? Because it's about human lives, about what it means to be an American, what it means to be America.

HEY, GETCHA PEANUTS, YA COLD BEER, YA CHRISTIAN FAITH RIGHT HERE

Murray Chass

(Excerpted from "Is a Night Devoted to Faith Really About the Money?" in The New York Times, 3/14/08)

The United States Constitution provides for separation of church and state. It does not provide for separation of church and baseball. It's time, though, for a separation of church and baseball.

Several weeks ago, I related the problem that some minor league umpires have with baseball chapel, the ubiquitous Christian Sunday morning sessions that occur in major league and minor league locker rooms.

One umpire, Josh Miller, who was released at the end of last season, told of the difficulties he encountered the past six years in being trapped in these sessions because he had no alternative place to go while the other umpires listened to the chapel leader preach about their belief in Jesus Christ. Miller is Jewish.

There is another faith-based development in baseball, Faith Night, a religious celebration that occurs at major and minor league ballparks across America.

Third Coast Sports, which began Faith Nights in the minor leagues five years ago, stages a Christian music concert before or after the game, and players present testimony to their belief in Jesus Christ.

It is the kind of event popular in small minor league towns throughout the country, but it is also catching on in the larger cities of the majors. Why should teams be in the business of promoting any particular religion?

The idea has caught on in baseball because clubs want to sell tickets. That's why Major League Baseball will never halt Faith Nights. Anything for a few dollars more. But it has no place in baseball. Baseball crowds are made up of people of all faiths and no faith.

Third Coast's Web site says, "Third Coast Sports ... seeks to provide churches with opportunities for outreach and churchwide fellowship." Does that sound inclusive? Outreach to whom? What its events do is give the company a foothold in baseball marketing.

Just what baseball needs — peanuts, popcorn and proselytizing.

THE BROOKLYN TALIBAN

Thousands of Orthodox Jews were planning to go to Madison Square Garden in March to see and hear popular Hasidic entertainer Lipa Schmeltzer, who weaves pop melodies with traditional Hasidic songs.

But a *fatwa* – excuse me, *edict* – signed by 33 rabbis who are “infallible” in matters of Torah, warned that the sight of dancing and singing performers would cause “ribaldry and lightheadedness,” would lure young people from spiritual purity, prohibited Jews from attending, and demanded that Mr. Schmeltzer cancel.

Which he did. (“I have a wife, kids, a mortgage.”)

In Brooklyn, New York. In America. In 2008.