

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

October, 2008

The politics issue – how could we not this season? We offer a political scorecard, a view from the humanist right, and the latest Religious Right outrage ... evaluations of evolution from a teacher, a scholar, and a toy tiger ... warnings on the dangers of democracy, of badly-timed rationalism, and visits to Lourdes ... appreciations of a long-dead Bishop of Armagh, a Massachusetts governor, and short-skirted nuns ... and we ask, What kind of atheist, agnostic, skeptic (or not) are you? — JR

## **“PULPIT FREEDOM SUNDAY”: THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT’S LATEST ASSAULT ON THE CONSTITUTION**

**John Rafferty**

*(Based on “Web Electioneering Attracts U.S. Review of Tax Exemptions,” by Paul Vitello, in The NYTimes, 9/3/08)*

*“I have every right to preach against anyone and anything that is anti-Biblical, and if they [the I.R.S.] don’t like it, that’s too bad.” – Wiley Drake, pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park, California.*

*“If churches want to play the game of politics, let them pay admission like everyone else.” – George Carlin*

While the rest of us worry about (and make political decisions based upon) whether the next administration and Congress will raise or lower our taxes, and whether new tax policies will stimulate or strangle the sagging economy, one segment of our society is blissfully immune from those concerns.

Religion.

Big Oil may get tax breaks for capital investments worth more than the equipment they buy, Agribusiness may get billions for growing what we don’t need or could buy cheaper elsewhere, and corporations of all kinds can move their businesses offshore (but not really) to mini-nation tax havens, but Religion in America enjoys the biggest tax break of all — zero taxes.

And not just no taxes on what the faithful may put in the collection plate or donate to the building fund. When the church (including *the* Church), the synagogue, mosque, or storefront “temple” invests its surplus in real estate, the stock market, or Eurobonds, it doesn’t pay any taxes on those profits, either. Why?

Because they’re all Religion, the biggest special-interest taxpayer swindle in American history. And all they have to do to keep up their con job is abide by just one rule: they have to stay out of politics.

But they don’t, and they get away with it.

Under section 501(c)(3) of a 1954 federal law\*, religious, charitable, and educational groups (SHSNY is one, too) are tax exempt as long as they do not participate in “activities that favor or oppose one or more candidates for public office.” Simple enough, right?

But every Sunday, right-wing priests and preachers all across the country urge their parishioners—*from their pulpits*, in flagrant violation of Internal Revenue Service regulations—to vote for or against political candidates. Understand, they *are* allowed to urge *issues* on their followers, e.g., “Vote against same-sex marriage,” or “Elect Pro-Life candidates.” Those ministers, rabbis, whatever, are even allowed, like all other citizens, to *personally* endorse candidates – what Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center calls the “wink-wink” rule.

But they are not allowed to say – from their pulpits, or in their newsletters or on official church blogs or websites – that a vote for Mormon Mitt Romney is “a vote for Satan” (Bill Keller, Florida televangelist), or that Barak Obama “is a long-legged mack daddy [pimp]” and his mother “a trashy white woman” (Pastor James David Manning of Atlah World Ministries in Harlem).

Nor can a pastor, like the above-quoted Wiley Drake, endorse Mike Huckabee for President on church letterhead and in church e-mails. (When Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State blew the whistle on him to the I.R.S., Drake infamously exhorted his congregation to pray for Lynn’s—and Lynn’s children’s—death and/or disfigurement.)

But they do, every Sunday. And they keep their tax exemptions, because in the age of the blogosphere and YouTube, the right-wing hucksters can get their message to their flocks and millions more in minutes, while the investigatory wheels of the I.R.S. turn exceeding slow.

And now, not content with the wink-wink rule, the Religious Right\*\* is mounting a challenge to the 501(c)(3) regulation itself. Says the right-wing-Christian legal defense group called the Alliance Defense Fund, “It is our contention that in church it is the pastor who should determine what is said, not the I.R.S.”

In May, the ADF invited clergy around the country to challenge the I.R.S. rules by preaching sermons on September 28 specifically opposing candidates for office whose politics conflict with “scriptural truth.” It’s called “Pulpit Freedom Sunday,” about 25 ministers agreed to participate, and some of them will post the sermons they preach that day on their official church Web sites.

We don’t know how successful “Pulpit Freedom Sunday” was/will be, because this issue of PIQUE will be/should be in the mail on September 28. And we don’t know how timely and diligent the I.R.S. will be in pursuing the lawbreakers. But we can easily guess what the Religious Right’s ultimate goal is — a constitutional test case of the 1954 law that they can take all the way to the right wing of the Roberts/Scalia/Thomas-dominated Supreme Court.

And there’s not a damn thing we can do about it.

Except vote.

As President of a 501(c)(3) organization, I cannot endorse a presidential candidate in these pages. But I can urge you to register, campaign, proselytize, contribute, and *vote* to keep a secular Supreme Court.

You figure it out.

*\*Passed and signed by conservatives—a Republican Congress and a Republican President—although today’s far-right loonies probably would not consider them “real” Republicans.*

*\*\*If anyone can send me – editor@shsny.org – a comparable example of a left-wing group flouting the 501(c)(3) exemption as in the instances above, I'll be glad to publicize it here.*

## **A SECULAR CRIB SHEET FOR VOTING THIS NOVEMBER**

**John Rafferty**

The Secular Coalition for America has published a “secular scorecard” for every member of the 110th Congress. It rates all 435 incumbent Representatives and 100 Senators on roll call votes (RC) and sponsorships or co-sponsorships (S) of bills that are of interest to secularists and humanists.

Nine recorded votes and bill sponsorships in the House are of particular interest to us. The votes include: two bills (H.R.3 and S5) on expanding embryonic stem cell research (we won both votes, but the Current Occupant of the White House vetoed the final version); a motion (H.R.1429) to allow religious discrimination in the hiring of Head Start teachers (we killed that); the Lowey Amendment (H.Amdt. 367, offered by Nina Lowey of New York’s 18th) to reverse current U.S. foreign aid policy by providing contraceptive grants to family planning organizations (we won); and a bill (RC327) which ordered the U.S. Mint to produce commemorative coins as a fundraiser for the Boy Scouts of America, which explicitly discriminates against nontheists and gays. We lost – only eight Representatives out of 411 voting had the nerve to vote against the Boy Scouts, none from our neighborhood.

Legislation now pending in the House includes H.R. 2104, the Public Prayer Protection Act of 2007, a “court stripping” bill that would prohibit federal courts from hearing Establishment Clause challenges of “official prayers” by elected or appointed officials – in other words, overturning the First Amendment. We’re against, and so are all our Reps. H.Res. 888, American Religious History Week, is a resolution that promotes a bogus Christian-nation reinterpretation of American history. We’re against, and so are all our guys.

H.R. 819, the Prevention First Act of 2007, supports responsible, science-based, medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education in schools as opposed to abstinence-only programs. The bill, sponsored has 162 co-sponsors (as of August 29), including all our Reps except Pallone and Ferguson of New Jersey, and New York’s King, Weiner and, oh yeah, family-values-guy Vito Fossella, the retiring drunk-driving adulterer. (We wish the citizens of Staten Island and Brooklyn’s 13th District—some of whom are us—better luck this November.)

H.R. 1713, the Protection Against Transmission of HIV for Women and Youth Act of 2007, seeks to revoke the abstinence-only earmark on global AIDS spending. It has 99 co-sponsors, including most of our Reps.

For details on all the bills, amendments and sponsorships, and on how your Representative voted on each issue (including all you out-of-area PIQUE readers), go to [www.secular.org/scorecard/2007/house.html](http://www.secular.org/scorecard/2007/house.html).

Here (in the box on page 3) is the Secular Coalition’s summary scorecard for the 36 Representatives in SHSNY’s tri-state area. The best possible score would be a 9 (not one of the nation’s 435 Representatives got higher than a 7 — damn Boy Scouts), and the worst possible score on the secular scale, of course, a 0.

<b>NEW YORK</b>		16th Serrano (D)	4
1st Bishop (D)	5	17th Engel (D)	3
2nd Israel (D)	6	18th Lowey (D)	4
3rd King (R)	0	19th Hall (D)	4
4th McCarthy (D)	6	<b>NEW JERSEY</b>	
5th Ackerman (D)	4	6th Pallone (D)	3
6th Meeks (D)	5	7th Ferguson (R)	0
7th Crowley (D)	5	8th Pascrell (D)	4
8th Nadler (D)	5	9th Rothman (D)	6
9th Weiner (D)	3	10th Payne (D)	6
10th Towns (D)	4	11th Frelinghuysen (R)	2
11th Owens (D)	4	12th Holt (D)	5
12th Velazquez (D)	4	<b>CONNECTICUT</b>	
13th Fossella (R)	1	3rd DeLauro (D)	5
14th Maloney (D)	6	4th Shays (R)	6
15th Rangel (D)	5	5th Murphy (D)	4

### *In the Senate ...*

Of our area's six Senators, only Frank Lautenberg, Democrat of New Jersey, is up for re-election this year. The Secular Coalition for America rated senators on six issues: roll-call vote RC30, proposing tax benefits for enrolling in religious schools (Lautenberg, the Coalition, and us against); and RC127, to expand cell stem research (all for it). Senator Lautenberg is not a sponsor or co-sponsor of that "court -stripping" bill (S415) or a constitutional amendment promoting school prayer (S11), but is co-sponsoring S21 for responsible sex ed, and, unfortunately, S3070, offering federal aid to the Boy Scouts — for an almost perfect secular score (*damn* Boy Scouts!).

### *And next year ...*

We have a mayoral election coming up. One of the announced candidates is Anthony Weiner of Queens and Brooklyn's 9th District, whose score you can see above.

Just so you know.

## **CONSERVATIVE HUMANISM**

### **Arthur Harris**

Some humanists who equate liberalism and socialism as the basis for humanism have difficulty in accepting that a political conservative can also be a humanist. While some humanists share ideas and ideals with the left, that doesn't make humanism "leftist," any more than being for racial equality in the 1930s (I remember) made one a Communist. And a desire to have trains run on time does not make one a fascist.

Political conservatives run the gamut from Rockefeller Republican to the Religious Right. While I and too few of my friends consider ourselves centrist or even Libertarian in some aspects, much of the humanist left allows for no such distinction and lumps us with the far right. Both the left and right can be intolerant of ideas that do not hew to the party line.

Many of us centrists support free choice and the death penalty, free speech and the right to carry a gun.

We'd like lower taxes and less government, but understand the need for a military force, highway construction, garbage collection, and police and fire departments. While we understand the need for welfare, we would like to have those in need, where possible,

get an education and assume responsibility so as not to perpetuate generations of welfare recipients. And we certainly do not identify with the Religious Right.

The political views of both the left and right shape their interpretations of humanism, and many of the humanistic left seem to equate humanism with pacifism. I don't. Certainly humanists have a right to defend and retaliate against attacks. Robert Ingersoll, a humanist icon, raised a cavalry troop and fought in the Civil War.

The world—and our idea of defense—have changed rapidly since WWII. Pearl Harbor killed our illusion that two oceans were our “first line of defense”; ICBMs in the 1960s reduced our warning time to minutes; and September 11 eliminated even that lead time.

Now we must consider preemptive strikes on perceived enemies, a concept that many humanists abhor. Yet, if we wish to remain free and safe, it is a subject that must be explored. I, for one, have no compunction in identifying and destroying those who would destroy us before they can carry out their acts. Yes, I'm thinking about Iran pursuing a nuclear bomb.

As a boy growing up in tough neighborhoods, I learned the uselessness of appeasement. I learned it in the streets and learned it from the newspapers that showed a militant Germany appeased by Chamberlain and France plunging the world into a war that caused more than 50 million deaths. Had Hitler been confronted when he entered the Rhineland, war would have been avoided. He confessed later that he had been bluffing in the Rhineland and would have withdrawn if the Allies had called him on it. (During the same period the left in the West, including some humanists, gave the brutal Soviet system a free ride.)

Humanism is not pacifism. Pacifism is a luxury for some because others are willing to fight, and die if necessary, defending ideals the pacifists hold dear.

As a youngster I was a member of One World, the precursor to the UN, which I also supported. Now the UN is largely a collection of thugs and democracy's enemies, and its demise would be mostly mourned in New York by the hookers and night clubs. When Iraq can chair the Human Rights Commission, and Syria can sit on the Security Council, while the US is ejected from committees and democratic Israel is excoriated daily, it's obvious the inmates are running the asylum.

Self-reliance and responsibility are other areas where conservatives and liberals diverge. Conservatives hold that it is up to the individual to assume responsibility over one's life as much as one can. Smokers still sue tobacco companies after more than 45 years of warnings about the dangers of smoking. An old lady attempted to open a hot coffee cup held in her lap while driving and was awarded millions when it spilled and burned her.\* Why should anyone who decides to do foolhardy things be compensated for stupidity?

Let's not equate capitalism with companies that break the law. Miscreants should be prosecuted, with jail time for those responsible. It is not conservatism that causes crimes like Enron's, it's simple greed, and greed is spread evenly across the entire left-right spectrum.

Some humanists support animal rights. No sane person wants helpless animals to suffer needless pain. But research requires experimentation, trials and testing. Because the law forbids the use of lawyers, animals are needed. How many animal rights folk

would permit a loved one to die of diabetes because hundred of dogs died during Dr. Bantings' experiments?

I enjoy a Peter Lugar steak. If some humanists are PETA members or vegans, that's fine; I'm not going to strong-arm them into a steak house. But why shouldn't I be allowed my choice to wear fur or eat meat? It's not only some of their beliefs I disagree with, it's their tactics.

The difference in the political outlook of humanists is the reason for the diversity of opinion as to what makes a humanist. Both the right and left extremes are sure they know the road to perfection. It is not a view shared by us lesser mortals.

*\*Ed: \$480,000, not "millions," and what the media never made clear was: 1) McDonald's deliberately served take-out coffee 20 degrees hotter than any other restaurant (so customers wouldn't complain of cold coffee); 2) McDonald's had already settled over 700 scalding claims, considered them a cost of doing business; 3) the 81-year-old woman suffered third-degree burns requiring skin grafts and seven days in hospital; and 4) she only sued because McDonald's ignored her request for compensation for medical bills. - JR*

## **A TEACHER ON EVOLUTION'S FRONT LINE**

**Amy Harmon**

*(Excerpted from "A Teacher on the Front Line as Faith and Science Clash," in The New York Times, August 24, 2008. The full, quite lengthy article can be accessed at [www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/education/24evolution.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/24/education/24evolution.html)?)*

ORANGE PARK, Fla. – David Campbell switched on the overhead projector and wrote "Evolution" in the rectangle of light on the screen.

He scanned the faces of the sophomores in his Biology I class. Many of them, he knew from years of teaching high school in this Jacksonville suburb, had been raised to take the biblical creation story as fact. His gaze rested for a moment on Bryce Haas, a football player who attended the 6 a.m. prayer meetings of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in the school gym.

"If I do this wrong," Mr. Campbell remembers thinking on that humid spring morning, "I'll lose him."

In February, the Florida Department of Education modified its standards to explicitly require, for the first time, the state's public schools to teach evolution, calling it "the organizing principle of life science." ...

But in a nation where evangelical Protestantism and other religious traditions stress a literal reading of the biblical description of God's individually creating each species, students often arrive at school fearing that evolution, and perhaps science itself, is hostile to their faith. Some come armed with *Ten questions to ask your biology teacher about evolution*, a document circulated on the Internet that highlights supposed weaknesses in evolutionary theory. Others scrawl their opposition on homework assignments. Many just tune out. ...

Their abiding mistrust in evolution, he feared, jeopardized their belief in the basic power of science to explain the natural world — and their ability to make sense of it themselves.

Mr. Campbell started with Mickey Mouse.

On the projector, he placed slides of the cartoon icon: one at his skinny genesis in 1928; one from his 1940 turn as the impish Sorcerer's Apprentice; and another of the rounded, ingratiating charmer of Mouse Club fame.

"How," he asked, "has Mickey changed?"

Natives of Disney World's home state, they waved their hands and called out answers.

"His tail gets shorter," Bryce volunteered.

"Bigger eyes!" someone else shouted.

"He looks happier," one girl observed. "And cuter."

Mr. Campbell smiled. "Mickey evolved," he said. "And Mickey gets cuter because Walt Disney makes more money that way. That is 'selection.'"

Later, he would get to the touchier part, about how the minute changes in organisms that drive biological change arise spontaneously, without direction. And how a struggle for existence among naturally varying individuals has helped to generate every species, living and extinct, on the planet.

For now, it was enough that they were listening. ...

"Evolution has been the focus of a lot of debate in our state this year," he said. "If you read the newspapers, everyone is arguing, 'is it a theory, is it not a theory?' The answer is, we can observe it. We can see it happen, just like you can see it in Mickey." ...

The poor treatment of evolution in some state education standards may reflect the public's widely held creationist beliefs. In Gallup polls over the last 25 years, nearly half of American adults have consistently said they believe God created all living things in their present form, sometime in the last 10,000 years. But a 2005 defeat in federal court for a school board in Dover, Pa., that sought to cast doubt on evolution gave legal ammunition to evolution proponents on school boards and in statehouses across the country. ...

The morning after his Mickey Mouse gambit, he bounced a pink rubber Spalding ball on the classroom's hard linoleum floor.

"Gravity," he said. "I can do this until the end of the semester, and I can only assume that it will work the same way each time." He looked around the room. "Bryce, what is it called when natural laws are suspended – what do you call it when water changes into wine?"

"Miracle?" Bryce supplied.

Mr. Campbell nodded. The ball hit the floor again.

"Science explores nature by testing and gathering data," he said. "It can't tell you what's right and wrong. It doesn't address ethics. But it is not anti-religion. Science and religion just ask different questions."

He grabbed the ball and held it still.

"Can anybody think of a question science can't answer?"

"Is there a God?" shot back a boy near the window.

"Good," said Mr. Campbell, an Anglican who attends church most Sundays. "Can't test it. Can't prove it, can't disprove it. It's not a question for science."

"But there is scientific proof that there is a God," Bryce said. "Over in Turkey there's a piece of wood from Noah's ark that came out of a glacier."

Mr. Campbell chose his words carefully.

“If I could prove, tomorrow, that that chunk of wood is not from the ark, is not even 500 years old and not even from the right kind of tree – would that damage your religious faith at all?”

Bryce thought for a moment. “No,” he said.

The room was unusually quiet.

“Faith is not based on science,” Mr. Campbell said. “And science is not based on faith. I don’t expect you to ‘believe’ the scientific explanation of evolution that we’re going to talk about over the next few weeks.”

“But I do,” he added, “expect you to understand it.”

## **A TEACHER OF EVOLUTION RESPONDS**

**Philip Appleman**

*(The following was printed in The NYTimes, August 31. Dr. Appleman is the editor of “Darwin,” the Norton Critical Edition, and a long-time member of SHSNY.)*

To the Editor:

Your excellent report about teaching evolution to high school students reminds us that indoctrinating the young (“Because I say so,” “Because God did it”) is relatively simple and requires no mental effort on the student’s part, whereas actually teaching (“Consider these reasons,” “Observe the following data”) demands active attention and intellectual effort.

By the time students reach high school, many of them have been indoctrinated for years by perhaps well-intentioned people whose own backgrounds were formed by religious indoctrination. No wonder it is so hard for teachers to make the case for facts, evidence or even common sense.

As a 21st-century society, we owe a deep debt of gratitude to teachers like David Campbell, who year after year work patiently at the difficult job of replacing indoctrination with learning.

## **CHURCH OF ENGLAND TO DARWIN: SORRY.**

**OH, WAIT. UM ... NEVER MIND**

Charles Darwin received a formal apology last month from the Church of England for its initial rejection of his theory of evolution — 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

“The Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still,” a church spokesman, Rev. Malcolm Brown, wrote on the church Web site.

But while Brown’s statement reflects the church’s new, 21st century position on Darwin, it “isn’t an official apology,” another church spokesperson said.

## **HOBBS PARSES EVOLUTION FOR CALVIN**

**Bill Watterson**

*(The 1985-95 comic strip “Calvin and Hobbes” – yes, named for the theologian and the philosopher – featured six-year-old Calvin, and Hobbes, a plush toy to everyone else, but a real, live tiger in Calvin’s vivid imagination.)*

**Calvin:** Isn’t it strange that evolution would give us a sense of humor? When you think about it, it’s weird that we have a physiological response to absurdity. We *laugh* at



nonsense. We *like* it. We think it's funny. Don't you think it's odd that we appreciate absurdity? Why would we develop that way? How does it benefit us?

**Hobbes:** I suppose if we couldn't laugh at things that don't make sense, we couldn't react to a lot of life.

*[He walks off.]*

**Calvin** *[staring out at the reader]:* I can't tell if that's funny or really scary.

[cartoon}

**Hobbes:** Do you think there's a god?

**Calvin:** Well, *somebody's* out to get me.

### **ATHEISM: a•the•ism [noun]**

**James Zimmerman**

*(Reprinted from The Minnesota Atheist, September, 2008)*

I have been an atheist on two separate occasions in my life. Currently, of course, I am one. But several years back, I was an atheist for about thirty seconds.

On that occasion, when my conscious mind at last caught up with what I had been denying for years, I privately updated my belief structure from Christianity to atheism. But no sooner did I declare myself an atheist than I switched my self-designation to agnostic.

The reason? Simple: the definition of the word; or, more accurately, my perception of the word. And that is, quite possibly, the biggest misconception people generally have of atheists. The *New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (1989) defines atheism as "the denial of the existence of God, particularly with regards to theistic formulations." But perhaps the *Cynic's Dictionary* comes closer to the definition held by the majority when it defines atheism as "a godless religion that retains all the dogmatic posturing of the faiths it so confidently denies, with few of the consolations."

It was the general consensus that an atheist is so dogmatic, so hard-headed in his beliefs that led Thomas Huxley, in 1869, to coin the term "agnostic." For many who leave the religion of their childhood, the label "agnostic" seems more favorable; more palatable.

But is this really true? Does the term "atheist" imply someone who is inflexible in her beliefs about the supernatural, whereas an "agnostic" is, though still going to hell, at least open to the possibility of a god?

"Agnostic" literally means "without knowledge," that is, an agnostic either has not looked into the evidence for and against the existence of a god, or believes that not enough such evidence exists to make a decision. This has led to the side effect of agnostics being viewed as ignorant, indecisive, or incapable/afraid of stating their beliefs. The same Greek prefix in "agnostic" (a-) also makes an appearance at the beginning of the word "atheist." Strictly speaking, then, an atheist is not, as many believe, opposed to the idea of a god (that would be an antitheist) but is, simply, "without god."

So if neither word labels someone as a person who rejects reason and evidence, what's the difference?

David Mills, in *Atheist Universe*, claims the difference between an agnostic and an atheist is guts. The two worldviews overlap, he said, but the latter is a more firmly held

position. Douglas Adams even styled himself a “radical atheist,” to signal that he really meant it.

The atheists, then, have done their homework. They know that the “Something from Nothing” belief of the religious is flawed; that the “First Cause” argument begs the question. They understand that, while it is not possible to unequivocally disprove God, the burden of proof falls upon those who hold the affirmative position. Even if evidence was brought forward proving the existence of a supernatural entity, this still doesn’t answer the question of which god. While Christians categorically reject thousands of gods on the basis of lack of evidence, an atheist merely rejects one additional god. This is why the term “agnostic” has come about: a coherent definition of “god” must be put forward before the question of its existence can be meaningfully discussed. After all, even an atheist will admit there are some gods – each year “American Idol” anoints a new one!

At one time, all humans were atheists, and everyone is born an atheist. It is only due to the introduction of religion in civilization at large, and on an individual basis, that the term has become a necessary identifier. In that way, “atheist” is a retronym. Like “silent film” and “acoustic guitar,” it is a term that has been employed to a preexisting object to separate it from what was invented later. However, “atheist” is a term, like “youth” or “white” or “Christian,” that is self-applied and, though there is a vague consensus as to its meaning, means something different to each person who applies it.

So whether you consider yourself to be impartially agnostic, technically agnostic, a de facto atheist, or a strong atheist (four terms provided in Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*), make sure your philosophical position is understood by those that inquire of it.

#### **HOW ABOUT YOU?**

The above appeared in *The Minnesota Atheist*, which then asked its readers to define their own atheism. We now ask: How do you define your secularity, your humanism, atheism, agnosticism? E-mail your short definitions or thoughtful essays to [editor@shsny.org](mailto:editor@shsny.org), or snail-mail to the P.O. Box address on page 1. — JR

#### **ISAAC ASIMOV ON THE RATIONAL MINORITY**

Despite all the further advances of technology, despite the fact that we have computerized the world, despite the fact that robots are doing the menial work of humanity and that human beings are freed to work creatively at human tasks, despite the fact that we have expanded to the moon and beyond and are rapidly penetrating the solar system generally, and despite the fact that we understand the universe far better than we used to a century ago, the vast majority of human beings still take comfort in their various superstitions and still follow any pied piper who fills their ears with nonsense while filling his or her own pockets with money. And we [rationalists] are still in the minority and still struggling to convince people that, if, indeed, there were a god, he would in the end reject anyone who failed to make use of that one truly godlike gift. — *Isaac Asimov, 1989*

#### **FAITH: 2. RATIONALISM: 0.**

*(Forwarded by Edith Amster, who says there’s a time and a place even for rational thinking.)*

During the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror, one morning’s executions began with three men: a rabbi, a priest, and a rationalist skeptic.

Facing the guillotine, the rabbi was asked if he had any last words. He cried out, "I believe in the one true God, and He shall save me." The executioner positioned the rabbi below the blade and pulled the cord. The huge cleaver plunged downward, but stopped abruptly, just inches above the rabbi's neck.

"It's a miracle!" gasped the crowd. And the executioner agreed, letting the rabbi go free.

Next in line was the priest. Asked for his final words, he declared, "I believe in Jesus Christ, who will rescue me in my hour of need."

Again the executioner positioned his man and pulled the cord. Again the blade flew downward, and again it stopped just short. "Another miracle," sighed the disappointed crowd, as the executioner let the priest go.

Now it was the skeptic's turn. "What final words have you to say?" he was asked. But the skeptic didn't hear. Staring intently at the ominous engine of death, he seemed lost. Not until the executioner poked him in the ribs and the question was asked again did he reply.

"Oh, I see your problem," he said, pointing. "You've got a blockage in the gear assembly, right there."

### **RELIGION AS ENTERTAINMENT IN ITALY**

An Italian prosecutor is trying to charge actress-comedian Sabrina Guzzanti with "offending the honor of the sacred and inviolable person" of Pope Benedict XVI.

Guzzanti had suggested that "within 20 years the Pope will be where he ought to be – in Hell, tormented by big gay devils, very active ones, not passive ones."

[photo of "nuns" in short skirts lined up at a bar]

Father Antonio Rungi's superiors have killed his idea of a beauty pageant for nuns, and the public, he said, "deliberately misinterpreted" his "innocent initiative."

Yes, he said, he originally emphasized that "external beauty: is a "gift from God," and, yes, he sang the praises of "really very, very pretty" nuns from all over the world ("the Brazilian girls above all") – but Rungi said he wasn't going to put nuns on a catwalk. He added that his pageant would have taken a "complete" look at contestants and evaluated "inner beauty" as well, you know, just as in every major beauty pageant across the globe.

### ***THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM***

**by Fareed Zakaria**

**(A précis for the SHSNY Book Club, 8/21/08)**

**Elaine Lynn**

Why have so many new democracies in the world quickly become corrupt autocracies, or collapsed — basically failing to govern their countries at all? How did our own state government of California go from being the most-admired and well-run state government to producing "a political system that is as close to anarchy as any civilized society has seen," under the domination of state ballot initiatives and referenda? Why did federal laws passed to increase the information and influence of ordinary citizens result primarily in advantages to corporations and other wealthy organizations with professional

lobbyists? These vital issues are examined in *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, by Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek International*.

Throughout the world, political institutions that could examine issues, compete and compromise are being lost without effective replacements. Other institutions, deliberately insulated from temporary majorities to protect the fundamental principles of democracy, are often corrupted and weakened.

The word “democracy” refers only to a method of selecting members of government: that essentially every adult citizen can vote. For elections to be free and fair, there has to be free speech and assembly to some extent but, as the author easily demonstrates, adding other characteristics that Americans think of as normal or necessary for democracy makes the term so vague as to be analytically useless.

Other important aspects of our political system are traditionally gathered under the rubric of “constitutional liberalism.” The term “liberal” refers to the political tradition that emphasizes the autonomy and liberty of the individual,\* and “constitutional” refers to the central role of law. Constitutional liberalism began in the West as rights of life and property, and freedom of speech and religion. Asserting these as natural rights of individuals, our traditions emphasized restrictions on the power of government, equality under the law, impartial courts, and separation of church and state.

Throughout modern history, constitutional liberalism developed gradually, with relatively limited democracy. In most liberal countries, the proportion of citizens who could actually vote a hundred years ago is lower than generally assumed today but, after WWII, most Western nations established universal suffrage.

Trying to establish full democracy without that vital framework doesn't succeed, as examples throughout the world illustrate. Even in Europe, Zakaria points out, “deviations from the Anglo-American pattern—constitutionalism and capitalism first, only then democracy—were far less successful in producing liberal democracy.” He provides brief interesting sections on France and Germany, contrasting them with Great Britain and the US. Without the dispersion of economic power throughout a nation, the rule of law, and specific quasi-independent institutions that sustain them (such as a banking system and courts which are regarded as legitimate), true democracy cannot be established and maintained.

“Elections are only one virtue of governance,” he writes. “Economic, civil, and religious liberties are at the core of human autonomy and dignity.” Consequently, we should be looking at a country's advancement in constitutional liberalism.

The philosopher Karl Popper wrote that a democratic electorate can vote for anything except the elimination of democracy. That would deny the very essence of democracy, because it would deny that right to everyone who did not vote to abolish it at that time, and to everyone's descendants as well. Yet elections have time and again put into office momentarily-popular political leaders, religious leaders and others who carried out profoundly undemocratic policies, undermining the possibility that the nations might regain democracy in the near future. What is the virtue of a completely open election if the majority or plurality winners are opposed to democracy and make short work of it after taking power?

A certain range of Gross Domestic Product per capita seems to be an indicator of short-term capacity to develop into a democracy and remain one. Statistical studies appear to show that countries with a GDP per capita of \$6,000 or more in today's

currency are very resilient. But democratic regimes with per capita income under \$1,500 have an average life expectancy of only about eight years. Equally important is an independent bourgeoisie whose wealth is based on new economic activity of their own rather than natural resources (oil, minerals) the government can monopolize. Not only does the higher economic level, as measured by the GDP per capita, help stability directly, but those with independent sources of power usually can create limits on the power of central governments.

Many nations that began independent life with an emphasis on free elections degenerated into autocracies. Some elected leaders ignored constitutional restrictions, if they existed, and felt free to start arbitrarily arresting political competitors, allowing corruption on a scale so great it defied attempts to establish modern economies or even feed their people. Yet other new countries which began as semi-authoritarian, e.g., South Korea, Taiwan, “liberalized the economy, the legal system, and rights to worship and travel, and then, decades later, held free elections.” These democracies appear to be stable for the long run.

What makes it possible for a country to become democratic and for that democracy to endure? Many autocrats don’t think they’re democratizing when they are modernizing, though that may be the eventual result. For example, land reform takes land out of the poorly-used feudal realm and brings it into the marketplace. Similarly, autocrats recognize the need for a government that will protect property rights, business contracts, and consumer demands, because a modern economy depends on them. This strengthens the nongovernmental areas of influence, supporting recognition of the need for individual rights under the law. These processes create many focal points of strength that are at least partially independent, including large and small businesses, local governments, and new sources of culture and communication.

Zakaria offers Indonesia as a case where outside intervention to force full and immediate democratization turned the clock back for a whole nation, because the society had not yet built an adequate liberal constitutional framework for it. Indonesia was a relatively secular, tolerant society, in the process of economic liberalization, which was run by an autocratic government. It had no potential sources of power developing outside Suharto and his cronies, and so, no alternative institutions. In addition, it was in the danger zone of low per capita GDP, and it was economically dependent on natural resources.

Ironically, natural endowments such as oil are strongly correlated with economic failure, impeding, as they do, the development of modern economic and political institutions, laws, and administrative systems. They are often used to support governments directly, without any perceived need of taxes or modern economic structures. In 1998, the International Monetary Fund and the United States demanded immediate and radical reform from Indonesia in return for economic aid. “Since it embraced democracy,” the author says, “Indonesia’s gross domestic product has contracted by almost 50 percent, wiping out a generation of economic progress and pushing more than 20 million people below the poverty line. The newly open political system has also thrown up Islamic fundamentalists,” resulting in a concentration of minority religious political power that hadn’t existed there before.

Zakaria devotes a long chapter to the Middle East, most of whose governments are failures. He does not attribute this to its most internationally conspicuous trait, its primary

religion. There are about 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, only 260 million of whom live in the Middle East. But, “in an almost unthinkable reversal of a global pattern, almost every Arab country today is less free than it was forty years ago.”

The Saudi royal family’s effective attempt to hold back dissent by buying off the Wahhabi has had tragic consequences in recent years because it has financed extremist activities and institutions throughout the Muslim world. In Saudi Arabia, religious fundamental-ism had no real competition in terms of political parties, free press, and other pathways for dissent.

However, it is not engulfing all Muslims, most of whom find the Wahhabi version of Islam too rigid and incompatible with their own Muslim traditions. Islam doesn’t have religious authorities in the sense that, say, Roman Catholicism has; any learned man can theoretically challenge any other on what Allah’s true intentions are. Zakaria thinks bringing the Islamists into an open political culture will betray their claim to authority and they will be seen for the ineffective local politicians they are. He cites Iran as an example.

Zakaria takes an optimistic view: Iran has a limited democracy today, but, “Iran will evolve into a secular democracy in a process that mixes reform and revolution. The reasons are obvious: the regime has mismanaged the economy, is repressive politically, and faces millions of alienated young men and women. Most important, in Iran theocracy has been discredited. The Islamists have lost their trump card.”

He goes on to say that “wherever Muslim fundamentalists have been involved in day-to-day politics – Bangladesh, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran – their luster has worn off. They routinely poll well below traditional political parties. . . . If [Egypt and Saudi Arabia] would open up some political space and force their fundamentalist foes to grapple with practical realities . . . they will stop being seen as distant heroes and will be viewed as local politicians.”

He notes that Christianity didn’t reform and modernize from within, ab initio, as it were. The larger cultures in which Christianity was embedded evolved and modernized, leaving religions with no choice but to adapt to their changing societies.

*\*"Liberal" in its classic, nineteenth-century sense.*

Benjamin Franklin once said, “Democracy is two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for dinner. Liberty is a well-armed lamb, contesting the vote.” — *Bill Moyers*

No drug, not even alcohol, causes the fundamental ills of society. If we’re looking for the source of our troubles, we shouldn’t test people for drugs, we should test them for stupidity, ignorance, greed and love of power. — *P.J. O’Rourke*

### **THE WICKED WITCH OF THE RIGHT, AGAIN**

[picture of Coulter aiming gun]

I hereby nominate the renowned Ann Coulter for her second consecutive Dumbth Award for the following remark made to the Claire Booth Luce Society in early 2008 on evolution:

“Biologists believe in evolution, not real scientists like physicists and chemists.”

— *Dennis Middlebrooks*

## JESUS AND MO COMPARE SINS

*(From [jesusandmo.net](http://jesusandmo.net), 3/11/08)*

**Jesus** *(at His computer)*: Uh oh, the Vatican has included pedophilia on a new list of Seven Deadly Sins.

**Mohammed**: Ho, ho, very funny, Jesus. Listen, pedophilia was cool in those days.

**Jesus**: Aisha was 9 years old, Mo. You can't just shrug her off as if she was an embarrassing hairstyle you used to wear in the '80s.

**Mo** *(looking over Jesus' shoulder at the computer screen)*: Wait. The obscenely wealthy Catholic Church has also declared obscene wealth a mortal sin. I wonder why hypocrisy doesn't make it onto that list of theirs.

**Jesus**: Stop trying to change the subject.

## MOHAMMED'S PERCEPTION PROBLEM

*(Transcribed from [jesusandmo.net](http://jesusandmo.net), 9/16/08)*

**Mohammed** *(reading from a computer screen)*: "The Pedophile Prophet"?! That is so unfair. I rose from humble origins to command armies of thousands. Do they call me "The Powerful Prophet"? No.

I implemented a multitude of laws upon which to base the most just and perfect society on earth. Do they call me "The Principled Prophet"? No.

I converted millions to the one true religion. Do they call me "The Persuasive Prophet"? No, they don't.

But I have sex with *one* nine-year-old girl ...

**Ed**: *Extra credit if you can identify the old dirty joke on which this is based.*

## HERE'S ANOTHER PHIL APPLEMAN LETTER, BUT ONE *THE TIMES* WILL NEVER PRINT

To the Editor:

Your account of the pilgrimage of Pope Benedict XVI to the "healing shrine" of Lourdes ("Pope Visits Shrine at Lourdes," Sept. 14) includes a bit of context by mentioning the previous visit of Pope John Paul II, who died less than a year after visiting the healing shrine.

For a fuller context, you might also have included the pilgrimage of Cardinal O Fiaich, Roman Catholic Primate of All Ireland, who, within hours of visiting the healing shrine, fell ill and died on the spot.

## JUST A FEW MORE SIX-WORD MEMOIRS

By last month's September-issue deadline, 85 readers responded with six-word memoirs in our "Things in life learned, so far" contest (six words, see?). But like most freethinkers (three in a room, twelve opinions), some PIQUE readers have a free-form attitude toward deadlines.

And some editors will ignore rules anytime for a few good lines. Add these:

Six words? Can't think of anything. – Paul Morris

What I've learned about women: nothing. – Doug Sheer

Middleaged redhead confronts deepest fear: dye. – Kathleen Morris

Always seeking answers, or better questions. – Betsy Gordon

Mired in complacency? Evolution changes everything. – Jeff Kaufman

Smiles make me stronger than tears. – Mary Ellen Goodman  
Be cynical, realistic – people are opportunistic – Elsie Fjerdingstad  
Experience everything possible before operation terminates – Arnell Dowret  
Real, unadulterated, spontaneous without yesterdays bullshit. – Seymour Storch  
Shoes and chocolate, elixirs of life. – Rowena Johnston  
No particular liking but the truth. – Michael De Dora, Jr.  
Love is just around the corner. – Jack Schweitzer  
Six words? I'm not worthy. - Harry Graber  
God's will for you is me. - Harvey Offenharz  
People, more than anything, are categorized. – Mariam Bazeed  
Love, peace, justice; love, peace, justice. – Ronni Solbert  
God also loves atheists – who cares? – Bill Lippe

### **OCTOBER 12 IS FREETHOUGHT DAY**

**John Rafferty**

It's the anniversary of the date in 1692 when Governor William Phips of the Massachusetts Bay colony declared that "spectral evidence" would no longer be admissible in court, ending the Salem Witch Trials.

After 19 people had been hanged for acts of "witchcraft," based on evidence from "specters," "angels" and "devils," Phips stopped the proceedings "because I saw many innocent persons might otherwise perish." From October 12 on, evidence admitted in court in Massachusetts had to be observable to the ordinary senses.

So many holidays honoring saints and superstition, but this is the only one commemorating reason.

So on October 12 think freely, all day long.

### **AND CELEBRATE OCTOBER 23: HAPPY 6012th BIRTHDAY, WORLD!**

Thanks to James Ussher, a 17th century Bishop of Armagh, in Ireland, we know exactly how old the Earth is. The good bishop pored through his Old Testament, counting all the begats and the lifetimes of the patriarchs, subtracting them from the birth of Jesus (never mind that that was off by at least four years) — and came to the precise conclusion that God created the world on October 23, 4004 BCE, a Sunday, at four in the afternoon.

Keep the birthday celebration noise down, please.