

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

September, 2008

We're back. Is the election over yet? Did anyone win? Herein we examine our lives in six words, contemplate consciousness, atheism as a pre-condition of humanism, the educational downside of creationism and upside of evolution, septuagenarians on the FBI's watch list, kosher chickens, and assault rifles in church. We honor Robert Ingersoll, who'd have been shocked to his shoes by George Carlin, but probably would have laughed right along with us. Requiescat in pace, Class Clown.— *JR*

GEORGE CARLIN

1937-2008

I gotta tell you the truth, when it comes to bullshit, big-time, major-league bullshit, you have to stand in awe —*in awe*—of the all-time champion of false promises and exaggerated claims — religion. No contest.

Religion easily has the greatest bullshit story ever told. Think about it. Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man, living in the sky, who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things he has a special place—full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish—where he will send you to live for ever and ever, until the end of time.

But he loves you.

He loves you, *and he needs money!*

He always needs money. He's all powerful, all perfect, all knowing, all wise — somehow, just can't handle money. Religion takes in billions of dollars. They pay no taxes, and they always need a little more.

Now, talk about a good bullshit story — *ho-lee shit!*

And ...

I have just as much authority as the Pope, I just don't have as many people who believe it.

If churches want to play the game of politics, let them pay admission like everyone else.

THERE IS NO GOD, NO HEAVEN – NOW WHAT?

Tom Flynn

(Excerpted from Mr. Flynn's Op-Ed column, "Feeding Back," in Free Inquiry, June/July, 2008. Mr. Flynn's column begins with several references — which I have condensed here — to previous columns and letters. — JR)

My essay, "Why the 'A' Word Won't Go Away," portrayed atheism (that is, the absence of theistic belief*) as a necessary but insufficient precondition for secular humanism.

This engendered blog discussion, and Nathan Bump's essay, [which stated]:

“While a forthright religious skepticism clearly informs the humanist project, I would argue that this is not the point to be emphasized.”

Judging from the response to my essay, a significant minority among secular humanists agrees with him. A larger group, including other secular humanists and many of the religious believers with whom humanists interact in society, disagrees.

What’s really going on here?

By way of analysis, let’s consider two oft-quoted and famously concise one-liners about humanism. Inventor Paul MacReady once quipped: “Secular humanists don’t believe in God and don’t steal.”

In *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973), Paul Kurtz offered a more serious, yet not less compact, summation of the humanist project: “There is no deity to save us, we must save ourselves.”

Note what is going on in each of these maxims: *atheism comes first*. Kurtz’s aphorism even implies that the humanist project is not only secondary to atheism but logically dependent on it: it is because there is no deity that humans have the opportunity, indeed the obligation, to save themselves.

For many secular humanists, this makes obvious sense. After all, if there was a deity to “save us”—or even credible grounds to suspect such a deity might exist—then we might not *need* to “save ourselves.” In that case, our struggle to develop autonomous and naturalistic moral values would be at best a bagatelle, at worst moot. In a culture where some form of theism is a default assumption, it is only after we accept atheism that the secular humanist project acquires pressing urgency.

To me, secular humanism is the best possible answer to the question: “There is no god, no heaven – now what?” Before that question can be answered, though, it must be *asked*.

Still, Bupp speaks for an estimable minority among secular humanists—among them Paul Kurtz himself, in many of his later writings—in viewing atheism as irrelevant, even distracting. Why such divergence of views on what seems like a bedrock issue? I think the difference reflects, at least in part, each individual’s life experience regarding religion. Those who never took religion particularly seriously, or whose families or communities have been nonreligious for several generations, tend to take the absence of religious belief for granted. For them, it’s simply not a big deal. Members of this group—who tend to be prominent among distinguished academics and scientists, as well as among residents of Western countries other than the United States—literally can’t see why the break from religion matters so much to so many others.

Who are these others, for whom belief or disbelief in God is the biggest deal of all? First, there are those secular humanists who *do* view atheism as foundational to their life stance—in my experience, a slight majority among those who regularly attend humanist group meetings. Then there are wavering believers, some of whom will discard their former convictions and move toward atheism—also, one hopes, toward secular humanism. Finally, there is the far larger group of religious believers, from fervent to indifferent (80-plus percent of Americans). Members of all three groups see the “God question” as (1) important and (2) logically prior to the rest of the secular humanist project.

I’ll admit that members of this camp, myself included, have as much difficulty understanding how others could think the “God question” inconsequential as they find it

puzzling that we consider it so important. We all need to be more cognizant of this diversity.

To those who by dint of their own background see atheism as a trivial issue, I would offer an amiable caveat. Please keep in mind that most religious believers, zealous and otherwise, do see the God question as pivotal. Half or more of current secular humanists have been recruited from this group, which also includes the vast majority of more-or-less-religious Americans, hostile or merely curious, with whom secular humanists interact. Whether moving from religion toward humanism or challenging an unbeliever across the water cooler, for these people, secular humanism begins with atheism. What we can agree on, I suggest, is that atheism is only the beginning.

**... I define atheism etymologically as a-theism, the absence of theistic belief. Skewed by centuries of derogatory usage, it is often assumed that atheism requires active denial of God's existence; I disagree and number among the atheists all who for whatever reason hold no belief that a theistic God exists. Among other benefits, this definition supports the commonsense outcome that anyone who answers "No" to the question, "Do you believe in a loving, caring God?" is an atheist. That's enough about that pie fight for this space!*

LET'S BORROW AN IDEA FROM THE BRITS

John Rafferty

(Based on reports in July, 2008 Fig Leaves, newsletter of the Free Inquiry Group of Cincinnati, and Rationalist International Bulletin (India) No. 175 – June 15, 2008.)

As of May 26, astrologers in Great Britain, along with “babas,” “godmen,” faith healers, fortune tellers, mantra-healers, mediums, psychics, seers, soothsayers, tantrics, tarot card readers and other rip-off artists, who bilk gullible Brits out of more than 40 million pounds a year, are now required to warn their prospective customers—prominently in all advertising, printed materials, and websites—that their services are “not experimentally proven” and “for entertainment only.”

I'm no fan of the European Union's regulations-happy bureaucracy, but this British initiative, implementing the Union's Unfair Commercial Practices Directive, strikes me as a triumph for common sense. If only we could do it here.

But considering the spinelessness and willful scientific ignorance of the average American politician, the Psychic Friends Network and the fabulists who regularly predict the Second Coming in the *Star* and the *National Enquirer* have nothing to fear.

But if we could ... ah, if we could ... then might we not be able to put the astrologers behind us and advance to posting those “not experimentally proven” and “for entertainment only” disclaimers on every bible, koran and catechism, and on every mosque, synagogue and church door in the country.

Those who believe in telekinesis, raise my hand. — *Kurt Vonnegut*

ON THE OTHER HAND, HERE'S A “RELIGIOUS” HUSTLER TO APPLAUD

John Rafferty

Just for fun, take a trip to <http://postrapturepost.com/index/html>, the online home of The Post-Rapture Post, “The Postal Service of the Saved.”

The Post-Rapture Post (PRP) is a mail forwarding service for Christians who expect to be “raptured” up to heaven on the “Great Day of Reckoning,” and who want to send day-after messages to their “left behind” friends and family (“Sorry about that,” perhaps, or even “Nyah-nyah”) who didn’t disappear along with them.

“Just write your letter and it will be hand-delivered immediately following the exodus of the pure from the Earth,” PRP’s home page explains, and continues. “But you must be asking yourself, ‘How can the letters be delivered after the Rapture?’ The answer is simple. *The creators of the site are Atheists.* That’s right, we don’t believe in God. How else would we be able to deliver your correspondence after the Rapture?”

What a great business model: provide Christians with a unique service they really, really believe they need. As one on-site “testimonial” says, “Thank you guys for staying behind to get our letters out.”

What letters? Well, your Class I Message—a written note, 1500 character maximum—“will be sent via our carriers to the recipient of your choice” for just \$4.99. “Expect two to six weeks for delivery after the Rapture.”

A Class II Message, for \$9.99, is “for those who want a typed* message ... printed on resume quality paper. Available in white, eggshell, goldenrod, and sky blue.”

**I guess PRP expects lots of Class I Messages in crayon.*

But what the hell, there’s only going to be one Rapture, right? So why not go for the \$799.99 deluxe Class III Message, “Our flagship model. Your message of up to 3,000 characters is hand-scribed on medieval style parchment sheets, and then rolled and wrapped with a fine Italian ribbon. Expect delivery in as little as one day, depending on the transportation options available to those rejected from the Kingdom of God.”

But wait, that’s not all. You can order glossy, torments-of-hell-illustrated note cards, too, each with “room inside for a personalized message,” for just \$7.99 each. My favorite, the “I Told You So” card makes sure each of your friends and family know, “You should have listened to Jesus.”

T-shirts, hats, mugs? Of course — “everything you need for the Endtimes!” And it’s all the brainchild of a young atheist computer scientist who says that, “while I don’t personally believe, I feel that others may need my services in the event that the impossible happens. Also I need money to support my sinful lifestyle.”

Who says American entrepreneurship is dead?

COUNTING DOWN: THE LAST (142) DAYS OF THE GEORGE W. BUSH ADMINISTRATION *Contraception is the new Abortion ...*

(Excerpted from “White House Tries to Define Contraception As Abortion,” by Cristina Page, on AlterNet.com, 7/16.)

In spectacular complicity with the religious right, the Department of Health and Human Services on July 14 released a proposal that allows any federal grant recipient to obstruct a woman’s access to contraception by redefining many forms of contraception as abortion.

Until now, the federal government followed the American Medical Association and American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists definition of pregnancy—that it begins at implantation. Now, however, HHS defines pregnancy based on a 2001 Zogby

International American Values poll which revealed that “49 percent of Americans believe that human life begins at conception.”

Since there is no test to prove conception (rather than uterine implantation), there is no way a woman can prove she’s not pregnant, and so could be denied the birth control methods 40 percent of Americans use—the pill, the patch, the shot, the ring, the IUD, and emergency contraception—under HHS’ new pop-poll “science.”

But post-fetal life is cheaper than ever ...

(Excerpted from “US Environmental Agency Lowers Value of Human Life,” Elana Schor, in The Guardian, UK, 7/11)

It sounds like gallows humor, but the numbers are no joke: the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has lowered the value of a human life by nearly \$1 million under George Bush’s administration.

The EPA’s estimate of the “value of a statistical life” was \$6.9 million this May, down from \$7.8 million five years ago. Though it may seem like a harmless bureaucratic recalculation, it has real consequences. When drawing up regulations, government agencies put a value on human life and then weigh the costs versus the lifesaving benefits of a proposed rule.

Take, for example, a hypothetical regulation that costs \$18 billion to enforce but will prevent 2,500 deaths. At \$7.8 million per person (the old figure), the lifesaving benefits outweigh the costs. But at \$6.9 million per person, the rule costs more than the lives it saves, so may not be adopted. The less a life is worth to the government, the less the need for a regulation, such as the tighter restrictions on pollution that the EPA today refuses to impose, effectively postponing any action on climate change until after Bush leaves office.

... and he’s such a fun guy!

(From Harper’s Weekly, 7/15)

President Bush met with other world leaders for the last time at the G8 summit in early July to discuss climate change. “Goodbye,” he said as he left, grinning and punching the air, “from the world’s biggest polluter.”

THE GREAT AGNOSTIC

The fact that we don’t publish PIQUE in August has led to an inadvertent year-after-year omission of any celebration in these pages of an important anniversary, the August 11 birthday of America’s greatest humanist — Robert Green Ingersoll, (1835-1899).

In this year of piety politics, when candidates from the presidential level to the aldermanic all tell us how important blind, unthinking faith is to their decision-making, it’s refreshing to consider a time when America’s “Great Agnostic” was also our most popular orator and a powerful politician. Here are two views:

THE LEGEND OF A HERETIC

Francis Wilkinson

(Excerpted from The New York Times, July 21)

At the end of the 19th century, Robert Ingersoll was the most notorious heretic in the land, famous for his lectures debunking Christianity and the Bible. Yet Republicans — yes, the party of George W. Bush and the Rev. Pat Robertson — begged him to campaign in their behalf.

Campaign, he did. For more than two decades, Ingersoll barnstormed across the country drawing huge crowds, including one at an 1896 campaign appearance in Chicago for William McKinley that the *Chicago Tribune* claimed was 20,000 strong. Ingersoll was not merely a stage attraction but a confidant of Republican leaders — and a highly public one. He nominated Senator James G. Blaine for president at the party's 1876 convention in Cincinnati and nearly won Blaine the nomination. When Blaine lost to Rutherford B. Hayes, Ingersoll stumped vigorously for Hayes in turn.

Ingersoll's lectures on religion — "Some Mistakes of Moses" was a typical title — left the pious apoplectic. Evangelicals considered his influence so pernicious that they organized a day of prayer for his conversion. (He thanked them for their concern but remained happily heretical.)

His pointed, often comical, impiety probably cost him a cabinet post or ambassadorship, but Ingersoll's proximity to President Hayes and his Republican successors was on open display; they didn't reach for garlic and crucifixes when "Pope Bob" visited the White House.

Victorian America, that supposedly repressed, high-button era, not only tolerated Ingersoll, it celebrated him, rewarding him with respect and wealth and honors. Mark Twain called Ingersoll a "master," and Walt Whitman described him as "a bright, magnificent constellation." But Ingersoll struck a chord that reverberated beyond the cultural elite. Tens of thousands of Americans paid money to listen, laugh and learn at the feet of the Great Agnostic, even if they didn't share his views. Clerics were often spotted in the crowds. ...

Looking back from this era in which political discourse is bound by religious strictures, Ingersoll's legend seems not only distant but tall, as though he were a kind of Paul Bunyan of blasphemy. Today, no major politician would risk association with the brilliant and big-hearted Great Agnostic, whose oratory commanded the late 19th century stage like no other.

GOOD-BY, GENTLEMEN!

In the 1890s, a delegation from the Republican party called on Ingersoll to ask him to be their candidate for Governor of Illinois — and suggesting that he remain silent about his religious views. Not change them, just keep quiet about them. Ingersoll replied:

Good-by, gentlemen! I am not asking to be Governor of Illinois ... I have in my composition that which I have declared to the world as my views upon religion. My position I would not, under any circumstances, not even for my life, seem to renounce. I would rather refuse to be President of the United States than to do so. My religious belief is my own. It belongs to me, not to the State of Illinois. I would not smother one sentiment of my heart to be the Emperor of the round world.

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #s 73, 74 & 75

Alabama police on July 28 went to arrest Anthony Hopkins, an evangelical preacher who, they had just discovered, had killed his wife several years ago and stuffed her body in a freezer after she caught him abusing their daughter.

Police entered the Inspirational Tabernacle Church of God in Christ in Jackson to arrest Hopkins on charges including murder, rape, sodomy, sexual abuse and incest, but he was in the middle of a sermon, so the cops waited politely until he finished.

Oklahoma City's Windsor Hills Baptist Church had planned to give away another assault rifle this year at the church's annual youth conference, but one of the organizers (presumably the gun donor) was unable to attend. Youth pastor Bob Ross said the gun giveaway encourages young people to attend the weekend event.

Texas was condemned by the International Court of Justice for executing a Mexican national who had not been advised of his right to consular assistance. "Texas," replied the office of the state's attorney general, "is not bound by the World Court."

Ed: Nor, it seems, by ordinary standards of fair dealing.

THE BOOK CLUB READS CONVERSATIONS ON CONSCIOUSNESS

Elaine Lynn

(Following is a précis of Conversations on Consciousness, by Susan Blackmore, prepared for the SHSNY Book Club meeting of July 24)

In the last two or three decades there have been astounding advances in neuroscience. It is almost a commonplace that we can measure electrical and other activity in the brain and associate it with, or correlate it to, e.g., whether a person is concentrating on a visual image (or, even more specifically, identifying a face, which has a whole neural area of its own), or a math problem, or spoken language or, say, moving his right arm. Now we have apparently established that the area of the brain that would be activated by a decision to move his arm is, in fact, activated a fraction of a second before a subject makes the conscious decision to move it. (I personally don't think this indicates anything about free will and determinism; it just gives us more information about how the brain, including activity at an unconscious level, functions. OK, maybe a little spooky.)

In the relatively new field of cognitive sciences, a field of consciousness studies has blossomed. Major participants in the field were interviewed by Susan Blackmore and given to us in the chatty, personal form of the interviews themselves. She tries to press the participants for the specifics of their theories and, reading this, you'll appreciate just how new the field is. This book has a charm of its own, and can be read with interest by scientist and non-scientist alike. There is even a short, but unusually helpful, glossary.

Blackmore asks the philosophers and scientists why consciousness is a special problem, what brought them into the cognitive sciences, whether they have free will, how their interest in the subject affects their lives ("I don't squish bugs anymore," one fellow confided) and what will happen to their consciousness when they die.

The central issue they discuss, how conscious subjective experience can be created by physical processes in the brain, is officially known by the technical term, "the hard problem." Some think that more knowledge of the physical brain will make this problem disappear because a relatively complete detailed description of how the neurons fire, communicate with each other, and so on, will be, in effect, a description of the experience. And why not? Why should an explanation of an experience be of the same nature as the experience? We build physical models with different substrates from those of the objects being modeled. We make mathematical models of activities and objects which we don't instinctively perceive as mathematical. In fact, for a long time we have

been using the concept of emergent properties to help explain why gas molecules can combine to create a completely new form, liquids, and how individual actions in a society can create economic effects which are far from those individual actions writ large.

Others say that scientists who think more knowledge of the physical brain is a solution might be mistaking correlation for causality. We can often correlate neural activity with what people do or report they are experiencing, but that doesn't prove those physical changes in our brain caused particular actions or perceptions.

The hypotheses that reduce consciousness to, e.g., patterns of neural activity, are counter-intuitive even to many who propose the hypotheses. Most people, including some scientists and philosophers, see the explanation of physical processes in our nervous system as leaving an essential problem unsolved. A few scientists have come up with, mmm, not immediately persuasive ideas involving quantum mechanics. To call this approach underdeveloped would be kind.

David Chalmers, first to use the expression "the hard problem," and respected in the field, has recently concluded that consciousness has to be regarded as a fundamental feature of the world and that we need to look for the natural laws governing its relations with physical properties. This conclusion has not yet garnered many adherents in a day when science is almost exclusively grounded in some kind of materialism.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett doesn't believe a unitary consciousness exists. He has demonstrated that there is less to our consciousness than we think, which may lead to a more integrated view of our consciousness with our clearly physical functions. Among the many important examples he has given is the illusion of continuously viewing something without consideration of constant blinking and shifts of our focus. Since then, experiments have established that when a picture being viewed by someone is changed during a blink or saccade (large eye movement) the subject doesn't notice or recognize the change. Another example might be things we didn't realize were being perceived at all. Some people whose visual cortexes have been damaged, resulting in partial or complete blindness, seem to have another source of vision. When asked to guess as to change from light to dark, or the movement of a patch of light or large object in front of them, they "guess" some things correctly much more than 50 percent of the time, that is, more than could be explained statistically. Particular instances are in dispute, but there is no reason to think our body doesn't make accommodations with resources we don't yet know we have. People with brain damage frequently present modifications of their neural activity, which appear to have shifted some work from a damaged part of the brain to another area.

THINGS IN LIFE LEARNED, SO FAR - PART 2

John Rafferty

Our summertime contest for freethinkers was to write your own memoir (story, whatever) in just six words, i.e., "Things in life learned, so far" (six words, get it?). The response was way beyond expectations, so much so that we've had to group them in categories — and in smaller typeface. Wow! Thank you all.

Let's start with the ...

Strictly Secular Humanist

Religion and cockroaches will never die. — Norm R. Allen, Jr.

Born again? Been there, done that. — Phil Appleman

Read the Ten Commandments: ho-hum. – Patricia Berger
Joined Atheists, lost soul, gained reason. – Jane Everhart
Forgive me for asking why, God. – Harry Greenberger, NOSHA
Brain had no answers: found faith. – Alfred Henick
Too old to see God now. – Lee Loshak
Good news: morality possible without God! – Abe Markman
Made my brain leaven; forgot heaven. – W. Andy Meier, CDHS
Feared God young, revere Universe now. – Dennis Middlebrooks
Higher power is free of charge. - Harvey Offenhartz
Lost my religion, gained my sanity. – Rudi Oosting
Lost: my religious conviction. Found: reason. – Harold Saferstein
Escaping Islamic law for my son. - Ismail (Sara) Sajidais
Pure happiness is being an atheist. – Sibanye
Secular humanism is food for thought. – Joan Kanel Slomanson
The “Good Book” ain’t so good. – Jina Spitaleri
Humanity’s sustenance: conscious educated respectful
coexistence. – Charles Alexander Zorn

Philosophical

Keep your sanity; ignore the world. – Jay Appleman
No certain truths, including this one. – Earle Bowers
Written on the wind, and gone. – Marilyn Henrion
Truth’s longevity is greater than error. – Serge Ledan
Each day, do justice, be good. – Barbara Lifton
All knowledge is merely a myth. – Flash Light
Seldom is more often than never. – Bill Lindley
Lost, found Nietzsche. Lost, found Justine. – Robert Ondricek
Someday will come, but not today. – David Rafferty
Life’s worrisome banalities slowed wisdom’s arrival. – George Rowell
Money buys most everything, except poverty. – Harold Stephens
Still here after all these years. – Wayne Whitmore

On The Good Life

Live intensely, laugh heartily, love daily. – Edith Amster
Dancing to the beat of life. – Jo Bernard
Secret of good living: eat Italian. – Remo Cosentino
Married, had kids, have grandchildren. Great! – Gene Edelstein
Stay awake, there’s lots to see. – Max Hahn
Health and happiness: ride a horse. – Connie Hare
In second childhood; happier than first. – Ralph Jones
It’s going by much too fast. – Emily P. Kingsley
Life’s so beautiful, never enough time. – Elaine Lynn
“Things in life” ain’t for kvetches. – Mikali Mandel
One episode of pleasure after another. – Chic Schissel
Rhubarb pie: love at first bite. – Janet Strauss

Of Love & Marriage

Love God? Yes, I married Her. – John Arents
She knows me – but loves me. – Gordon King

Playing, schooling, Army, married, kids, married. – Irv Millman
All you need is love. Duh. – Brian Rafferty
Married a Rafferty—please help me. – Christine Pointis Rafferty
Family? Work? Nihilist needs mate, finds. – Martin White, CDHS

Enigmatic

Naked, the mammoth fog concealed her. – Regine Kelly
Things I should have done, maybe. – Camille Padula
I will never do that again! – Pamela Saunders
I hope it is worth it. – Anton Spivak

Epitaph-ic

Long time sailing, now firmly aground. – Rocky Coe
I finally understand, but it's too ... – Gerry Dantone, LISH
Eventually I learned to live alone. – Robert Dickhoff
Found key, didn't turn in lock. – Barbara Friedberg
He gave a damn; then some. – Stanley Friedland
When it's all out, I'm done. – Ed Henrion
Arose this morning, found myself dead. – Jesus*
Cute, peaked at five, lived anyway. – Donna Marxer
I tried. I chose. I lost. – Richard McMahan, CDHS
Old too soon, enjoyed the ride. – Bob Murtha
Believed I'd do good, and did. – Juliet Nierenberg
A librarian who never said SHHHH! – Tess O'Leary

**Really Harry Greenberger*

Pointedly Political

Silver spoon, sloth, saved, stardom, slide. – George Bush*
Will my vote repair the world? – Edith Finell
Brainless advocates are not exclusively McCain's. – George Mandel
**Really Donna Marxer, who says he's too lazy to write it himself.*

Self-Revelatory

Dared to be a nerd, finally. – Dale Almond
Curiosity hasn't killed me yet. – George Almond
Precocious, pubescent, pretty, promiscuous, penitent, posthumous. – Anonymous
Forgot what I was looking for. – Juliana Ferrell
Sorry about that, my screw-up. – Chuck Fritsch
Radical mathematician's daughter, rational and nondiscreet. – Marie Huffman
Second 40 years, documentary on text. – Barbara Jacobs
Even my heart is perfectly irregular. – Shane Luitjens
Sixty. Planning to put down roots. – Jean MacDonald
Whatever happened to the skinny kid? – John Rafferty
Saving my Tizanidine for an emergency. – Toni Spotswood
Busted shocks, bad tires, cool shades. – Brad Wheeler

Advice & Admonitions

Going forward, begin with the end. – Patrik Arenas
You've reached the door, now push! – Irving Jacks
Dive in, hope for the best. – Richard Loughborough
Create something beautiful to leave behind. – Richard Milner

Always try to avoid the unavoidable. – Betty Nicholson

And About This Contest

I refuse to participate in gimmicks. – Mark MacDonald

Six word story craze: blame Rafferty – Dick McMahan

John Rafferty, what hast thou wrought? – MacDonald-Hackett Vermont wine-soaked dinner-party consensus

What's next? How about "Haikus for the Holidays"? Shall we try "Write Your Own Epitaph"? How about "Complete the Sentence, 'In Five Years, I ...' in 10 words or fewer?" Let us know what you think, including your own ideas for PIQUE-reader participation. Write the PO Box (see page 1) or editor@shsny.org.

GIVING CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE ...

(Based on "Ethical Guidelines for Kosher Food Released," by Marissa Brostoff, on Forward.com, July 31.)

Responding to the horrendous conditions at the nation's largest kosher slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa, that were uncovered by a federal immigration raid in May, a group of Conservative rabbis has released guidelines for a program to monitor and certify working conditions in kosher food production.

"Companies will be favored if they pay their workers the industry average or above; offer comprehensive health insurance and retirement benefits; and provide workers with paid time off for vacation, sick, and maternity leave," according to the guidelines for what is called the *Hekhsher Tzedek* program.

BUT, OF COURSE ...

Orthodox rabbis, including the ones who turned blind eyes to the disgusting practices in Iowa, and who enjoy a monopoly on kosher certification, argue that no changes are necessary. Ethical issues, they argue, should not be tacked on to the age-old system of kosher laws.

Ed 1: Absolutely! Let's not let ethics interfere with religion.

Ed 2: And rebbes, let's get working on a kosher cheeseburger.

**OF SWINGING CHICKENS, SHATNES, AND
THE 613 COMMANDMENTS**

Art Harris

One of the more archaic rituals still practiced by Orthodox Jews is *Kapporuth*. Just before Yom Kippur, a live chicken is twirled above the head three times while certain prayers are recited with the purpose of transferring the sins you've committed during the year to the chicken.

Not only does swinging the chicken flush away your sins, the bird can then provide dinner. An alternative can be money waved around, which then goes to charity. I think that how high you are on the scale of orthodoxy is what determines your choice.

No doubt this practice dates back to our caveman ancestors asking forgiveness of the animals they killed. Or maybe not. But as always, these rituals are taken seriously, and raise serious questions. Can one use an umbrella while the chicken circles one's head? After all, a yarmulke covers only a small part of one's pate.

On another note, Justice Antonin Scalia broke challah with a group of Orthodox Rabbis recently and spoke against “banishing the Almighty from the public forum.” Surrounded by bearded rabbis dressed in black (always a safe fashion note), he decried what he feels is government drift favoring non-religion over religion.

From where I sit, there’s no drift. It seems more like we non believers are sculling upstream with one oar, while the government uses a nuclear powered ship to pull us toward theocracy.

Writing his opinion on a Kentucky case regarding the Ten Commandments in a public building, Scalia urged his colleagues to acknowledge a single Creator and the importance of religion. I’m sure the Justice is aware that Judaism is bound by 613 commandments, not ten. To put that many on a building would require a lot of stonemasons for round the clock labor.

And while he was there, he might have asked the rabbis about the commandment for *shatnes*, prohibiting the wearing of any fabric combining wool and linen. It’s one of the questions, like mine about the chicken and the umbrella, that *Fiddler on the Roof’s* Tevye promises will “cross a rabbis eyes.”

THE CONS OF CREATIONISM

(Editorial reprinted from The New York Times, 6/7/08)

When it comes to science, creationists tend to struggle with reality. They believe, after all, that evolution by means of natural selection is false and that Earth is only a few thousand years old. They also believe that students who are taught a creationist view of biology—or who are taught to disregard the Darwinist view—are not being disadvantaged.

The Texas State Board of Education is again considering a science curriculum that teaches the “strengths and weaknesses” of evolution, setting an example that several other states are likely to follow. This is code for teaching creationism.

It has the advantage of sounding more balanced than teaching “intelligent design,” which the courts have consistently banned from science classrooms. It has the disadvantage of being nonsense.

The chairman of the Texas board, a dentist named Don McLeroy, advocates the “strengths and weaknesses” approach, as does a near majority of the board. The system accommodates what Dr. McLeroy calls two systems of science, creationist and “naturalist.”

The trouble is, a creationist system of science is not science at all. It is faith. All science is “naturalist” to the extent that it tries to understand the laws of nature and the character of the universe on their own terms, without reference to a divine creator. Every student who hopes to understand the scientific reality of life will sooner or later need to accept the elegant truth of evolution as it has itself evolved since it was first postulated by Darwin. If the creationist view prevails in Texas, students interested in learning how science really works and what scientists really understand about life will first have to overcome the handicap of their own education.

Scientists are always probing the strengths and weakness of their hypotheses. That is the very nature of the enterprise. But evolution is no longer a hypothesis. It is a theory rigorously supported by abundant evidence. The weaknesses that creationists hope to teach as a way of refuting evolution are themselves antiquated, long since filed away as

solved. The religious faith underlying creationism has a place, in church and social studies courses. Science belongs in science classrooms.

OPTIMISM IN EVOLUTION

Olivia Judson

(Op-Ed reprinted from The New York Times, 8/13/08)

When the dog days of summer come to an end, one thing we can be sure of is that the school year that follows will see more fights over the teaching of evolution and whether intelligent design, or even Biblical accounts of creation, have a place in America's science classrooms.

In these arguments, evolution is treated as an abstract subject that deals with the age of the earth or how fish first flopped onto land. It's discussed as though it were an optional, quaint and largely irrelevant part of biology. A common consequence of the arguments is that evolution gets dropped from the curriculum entirely.

This is a travesty.

It is also dangerous.

Evolution should be taught—indeed, it should be central to beginning biology classes—for at least three reasons. First, it provides a powerful framework for investigating the world we live in. Without evolution, biology is merely a collection of disconnected facts, a set of descriptions. The astonishing variety of nature, from the tree shrew that guzzles vast quantities of alcohol every night to the lichens that grow in the Antarctic wastes, cannot be probed and understood. Add evolution, and it becomes possible to make inferences and predictions and (sometimes) to do experiments to test those predictions. All of a sudden patterns emerge everywhere, and apparently trivial details become interesting.

The second reason for teaching evolution is that the subject is immediately relevant here and now. The impact we are having on the planet is causing other organisms to evolve — and fast. And I'm not talking just about the obvious examples: widespread resistance to pesticides among insects; the evolution of drug resistance in the agents of disease, from malaria to tuberculosis; the possibility that, say, the virus that causes bird flu will evolve into a form that spreads easily from person to person. The impact we are having is much broader.

For instance, we are causing animals to evolve just by hunting them. The North Atlantic cod fishery has caused the evolution of cod that mature smaller and younger than they did 40 years ago. Fishing for grayling in Norwegian lakes has caused a similar pattern in these fish. Human trophy hunting for bighorn rams has caused the population to evolve into one of smaller-horn rams. (All of which, incidentally, is in line with evolutionary predictions.)

Conversely, hunting animals to extinction may cause evolution in their former prey species. Experiments on guppies have shown that, without predators, these fish evolve more brightly colored scales, mature later, bunch together in shoals less and lose their ability to suddenly swim away from something. Such changes can happen in fewer than five generations. If you then reintroduce some predators, the population typically goes extinct.

Thus, a failure to consider the evolution of other species may result in a failure of our efforts to preserve them. And, perhaps, to preserve ourselves from diseases, pests and

food shortages. In short, evolution is far from being a remote and abstract subject. A failure to teach it may leave us unprepared for the challenges ahead.

The third reason to teach evolution is more philosophical. It concerns the development of an attitude toward evidence. In his book, *The Republican War on Science*, the journalist Chris Mooney argues persuasively that a contempt for scientific evidence—or indeed, evidence of any kind—has permeated the Bush administration’s policies, from climate change to sex education, from drilling for oil to the war in Iraq. A dismissal of evolution is an integral part of this general attitude.

Moreover, since the science classroom is where a contempt for evidence is often first encountered, it is also arguably where it first begins to be cultivated. A society where ideology is a substitute for evidence can go badly awry. (This is not to suggest that science is never distorted by the ideological left; it sometimes is, and the results are no better.)

But for me, the most important thing about studying evolution is something less tangible. It’s that the endeavor contains a profound optimism. It means that when we encounter something in nature that is complicated or mysterious, such as the flagellum of a bacteria or the light made by a firefly, we don’t have to shrug our shoulders in bewilderment.

Instead, we can ask how it got to be that way. And if at first it seems so complicated that the evolutionary steps are hard to work out, we have an invitation to imagine, to play, to experiment and explore. To my mind, this only enhances the wonder.

JULY PIQUE INSPIRED LETTERS

To the Editor: Two points about “A Different Point of View on ‘Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed’” in July PIQUE. First, if we allow intelligent design in science classes as an alternative to evolution, why not the creation myths of other cultures, too? They’re as valid as ID. Similarly, we might have astrology in science classes as an alternative to astronomy. Then we could add hundreds conspiracy theories as alternatives to history.

And of course “Darwin did not really prove the origins of humankind.” He was doing science, which gathers evidence, by experiment and observation, then draws conclusions. It doesn’t prove anything.

Re: “Neural Buddhists” by David Brooks, first, consciousness probably does “emerge . . . from [something like] idiosyncratic networks of neural firings.” But beliefs grow from seeds implanted by external sources or from attempts to understand the perceived world.

Also, Mr. Brooks writes, “Genes are not merely selfish, it appears. Instead, people seem to have deep instincts for fairness, empathy and attachment.” People also have deep instincts for greed, hatred, cruelty and detachment. I am always amazed by the ability of those who write about spirituality and related matters to gush over humanity’s good instincts while ignoring its evil ones. The likely proximal source of fairness, empathy, and maybe cruelty, too, is mirror neurons, not genes.

And, just because different mental states (such as aroused, meditative, hypnotic, delusional, spiritual, “transcendental experiences,”) can now be observed with modern instruments and techniques, there is no reason to imagine that these states are evidence of a “larger presence” or a higher power. They are all in the head, only in the head. The

notion that science reinforces mysticism is a new delusion. Mysticism, like religion, is mainly a method for messing with minds.

Usually, I admire David Brooks' writing, even when I disagree. However, here he's wandering in fantasyland, where, sadly, he has lots and lots of company.

Re: John Rafferty's "Why Not Polygamy?" here's one reason why not: Humans birth males and females in equal numbers. If, in any society, some males have multiple wives, then many others can have none. What happens to them? What are they to do?

Also, LDS elders did not "realize" they had to "junk polygamy." Such accusations devalue their faith. Devout people may not make accommodations with necessity. Instead, they have revelations from God. - Giddian Beer

To the Editor: In the July issue of PIQUE, there is a delightful article: "God Resigns." In it, God asks, "Why have I been portrayed as corrupt?" I think I can answer the question.

Lord Acton provided us with two pieces of wisdom, but he omitted a third piece that makes the situation clear. Lord Acton opined that 1) Power tends to corrupt, and 2) that absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.

I supply the clincher: 3) God is omnipotent.

It's amazing how many people draw a total blank when I supply the three pieces together. – *Bill Lindley*

To the Editor: Have you seen this "freedom of speech" story from *The Washington Post*?
Censoring 'The Jewel Of Medina'

Random House has decided to abandon publication of The Jewel of Medina, by journalist Sherry Jones. Fearing the book might incite the same violent reaction as the Danish Muhammad cartoons, and that company staff and property might come under attack from Muslim extremists, Random House terminated Jones' contract ...Random House was particularly concerned about a scene in which the Prophet Muhammad consummates his relationship with Aisha, a child bride."

According to Wikipedia, "Aisha was six or seven years old when betrothed to Muhammad. She stayed in her parents' home until the age of nine, when the marriage was consummated."

So Random House thought only *Muslims* would be offended? Peace. – *Flash Light*

WE MADE THE HONOR ROLL

John Rafferty

In January we reported in these pages that the "terrorist watch list" of the Department of Homeland Security and its Transportation Security Administration had reached the absurd level of over 750,000—most all of whom were/are American citizens.

Well, now (I'm writing in mid-July) the list has climbed to more than 1,230,000 ... including, as we found out when we flew to that hotbed of international intrigue, Asheville, North Carolina, my 4'11" wife, Donna Marxer and, by association I guess ... me.

In lieu of congratulatory flowers, please send donations to the ACLU, or send us a saw in a cake.

(Want to know more about the Department of Homeland Security's efforts to "protect us" when we travel? Take a trip to http://action.aclu.org/travel_quiz)

IF I WAS A TERRORIST

A James Pence Video

(Forwarded from YouTube by Ellie Karr)

If I was a terrorist and wanted to destroy the American way of life, I wouldn't use planes and bombs to kill folks. Hells bells, that's too risky, and you might get caught or killed or both.

Real terrorists get results, and they lay the blame where it can't be found. So here's what I would do if I was a terrorist.

I would foreclose on millions of homes, you know, kick folks out of their homes.

I would devalue the dollar so the price of everything would go up.

I would outsource Americans' jobs so they couldn't find work.

I would move the factories to foreign countries, you know, all the good-paying jobs?

I would make education unaffordable. You know, terrorists don't like having educated people around.

I would make healthcare difficult to get, and let the insurance companies get away with murder.

I would listen to their telephone calls, monitor their e-mails, and use that information to stick it to them.

Then, I would give myself a big old tax cut, and sit back in luxury, and watch 'em fight over the crumbs.

But you know what? We live in the United States of America—thank you, Jesus—and the people who represent us would never, ever, let them get away with that, would they? Would they?

THANK YOU, VOLUNTEERS

Four volunteers—so far—have responded to our plea for help in July PIQUE. Pamela Saunders and Edith Amster have signed up to help Program/Events Chairman Lee Loshak; Giddian Beer is willing to fold, staple and stamp for Mailings Chairman Remo Cosentino, and Jay Gumbiner says he's willing to pitch in wherever needed. Thank you, each and every one.

And to everyone else, we have a busy, busy season of events coming up this fall and winter. Give SHSNY just a couple of hours a month. Email editor@shsny.org, or call 212-308-2165 and leave a message.

CORRECTIONS

1. The article, "Independence Day," in July PIQUE, was not written by Michael Shermer, but by Robert Todd Carroll in 2006, and reprinted in Shermer's *Skeptic's Dictionary* #69 in July, 2007—which is how I confused the authorship. Thanks to Robert Tapp, Dean of the Humanist Institute, for the correction.

2. The correct web address for the Chic Schissel correspondence with Flash Light on cloning atheists is: <http://www.solidstatelight.com/panthe/Pique/Schissel/5-25-08f.htm>

3. Yes, we changed the date of August Movie Night (scheduling conflict) and the August Book Club selection (the book wasn't available) after the July Calendar pages were printed and mailed. Sorry.

4. And if you tried in vain to email an entry in our Things In Life Learned, So Far "contest" (see page 6) to editor@shsny.net, my apologies. The address *should* have read editor@shsny.ORG, of course ... and *should* have been caught by me or any of the *eleven* people who "proofed" PIQUE before it went to the printer. – JR

JOHN McCAIN SUPPORTS CLONING
"I will try to find clones of Alito and Roberts."