

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April, 2009

As we enter the Easter/Passover season we deliver some deserved kicks to the Holy & Apostolic Church's useless gonads, consider Bernie Madoff and Jewish faith, sniff out "pro-life" hypocrisy, write a bunch of godless bus ads, nominate our first 2009 Dumbth candidates (including the first non-American – guess who), celebrate a recent Saturday reading, promote poetry, and suggest surrender in the War On Drugs. But first we remind Barack Obama that he isn't George W. Bush.— JR

KEEPING THE FAITH, IGNORING THE HISTORY

Susan Jacoby

(Reprinted from the OpEd page of The NYTimes, 3/1/09)

Nearly everyone now takes for granted the wisdom, constitutionality and inevitability of some form of federal financing for community social services run by religious groups. Who anymore can imagine that the United States managed to exist for over 200 years without the government providing any direct aid to faith and its works?

It is truly dismaying that amid all the discussion about President Obama's version of faith-based community initiatives, there has been such a widespread reluctance to question the basic assumption that government can spend money on religiously based enterprises without violating the First Amendment. The debate has instead focused on whether proselytizing or religious hiring discrimination should be permitted when church groups take public money. This shows how easy it is to institutionalize a bad idea based on unexamined assumptions about service to a greater good.

In 1996, President Bill Clinton started down the slippery slope toward a constitutionally questionable form of faith-based aid when he signed a welfare reform bill that included a "charitable choice" provision allowing religious groups to compete for grants. Under President George W. Bush, a separate White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was established – a significant expansion of "charitable choice." Mr. Bush, who instituted his program through executive orders rather than trying to get a bill through Congress, quickly put the money to political use.

The administration provided large grants for projects favored by the Christian right, like Charles Colson's Prison Fellowship Ministries and Teen Challenge, a drug rehabilitation program that openly pushed religious conversion (even using the phrase "completed Jews" to describe teenage converts from Judaism) as a way of overcoming addiction. John J. DiIulio Jr., the first director of Mr. Bush's faith-based office, resigned after only eight months and later complained about the politicization of the program.

Throughout Mr. Bush's second term, the Democrat-ic Party's "religious left" maintained that the party needed to shed its secular image to attract more religious voters. As far as these Democrats were concerned, the only problem with faith-based programs was that most of the money was going to conservatives.

Enter Barack Obama, who spoke the language of both faith and secularism – and who promised during the campaign to expand faith-based aid while, at the same time, prohibiting proselytizing and religious hiring discrimination in federally financed

programs. Yet earlier this month when the president announced his new faith-based team, headed by a Pentecostal minister, Josh DuBois, Mr. Obama left the Bush orders in place and Mr. DuBois later announced that hiring practices would be vetted by the Justice Department “case by case.”

Some have tried to justify direct, White House-administered faith-based aid by pointing to long-established practices allowing programs like Medicare and Medicaid to pay for services provided to patients in religiously affiliated hospitals. But for these hospitals, nondiscrimination in hiring and patient admissions was always a condition of eligibility for any federal money.

It is also worth noting that Mr. Obama’s compromise has drawn criticism not only from secularists and civil libertarians but from religious conservatives like R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who maintains that the unlimited right to proselytize and to hire members of their own faith is essential if churches are not to compromise their mission. As a thoroughgoing secularist, I consider Mr. Mohler much clearer-minded than Democratic faith-based advocates, who wish to believe that devout proselytizers are somehow going to stifle themselves while providing “secular” social services.

The fact is that many people served by these projects—including children with absent fathers, addicts and prisoners—form a captive audience. It cannot be easy to say no to a proselytizer if saying yes means a warm bed in a homeless shelter, extra help for a child or more privileges while serving jail time. Embrace Jesus as your savior and, who knows, you may get early parole.

Furthermore, as Mr. Mohler points out, there is also a peril to religious independence from government in these programs. What government gives, government can take away. What happens if hard-pressed African-American churches serving poor communities—where enthusiasm for faith-based initiatives has always been high and only intensified during the current economic crisis—come to rely on government money and the rug is pulled out from under by a future administration?

Those who argue in favor of more religious involvement in government, and vice versa, always claim that the First Amendment does not mandate separation of church and state but simply prohibits state preference for any church. But even by that religion-infused standard, faith-based aid cannot help but favor some religions over others. For instance, nearly all non-Orthodox Jewish groups and liberal ecumenical religious organizations are opposed to government subsidy. How can it not violate the First Amendment to set up a program that even by default favors those groups eager to jump on the federal gravy train?

The other canker at the heart of faith-based initiatives is the assumption that religiously based programs work better than secular and government efforts. For the faithful the efficacy of these programs is an article of faith, not a conclusion supported by objective evidence.

Back in 2003, there was a flurry of excitement surrounding a study that at first glance seemed to suggest that participants in Mr. Colson’s prison programs in Texas had been rearrested at much lower rates than other released prisoners. There was just one problem: the study excluded everyone who quit the program in prison – two-thirds of the starting group. It is as if the Department of Education were to measure the success of

public schools by not counting dropouts. This ought to give pause to Mr. Obama, who has spoken so often about restoring evidence and science to public policy-making.

President Obama might also take a moment to reread the religious freedom act passed by the Virginia General Assembly in 1786, with strong support from both Baptists and freethinkers. That law, which prohibited tax support for religious teaching in public schools, became the template for the establishment clause of the First Amendment and also helped establish our American tradition of government freedom from religious interference and religious freedom from government interference.

Yet we are moving blindly ahead with faith-based federal spending as if it were not a radical break with our past. If faith-based initiatives, first institutionalized by the executive fiat of a conservative Republican president, become even more entrenched under a liberal Democratic administration, there will be no going back. In place of the First Amendment, we will have a sacred cash cow.

ART HARRIS RESPONDS TO MILT VERSTANDIG'S RESPONSE

I'm assuming that Milton Verstandig ("Secular Double Standards," March PIQUE) is purposely raising up straw men in his reply to my January essay, "Aux Armes," when he asks, "What right do we have to impose our secular beliefs [in the public schools] on those who do not want their children learning this theory [evolution]?"

Teaching religion in public schools is against the law, which is why parochial schools exist. If parents want to bypass public school, let them pay their share for public education anyway; as citizens we all pay for things that some of us never use or receive. What's more, a public school student is free to reject any part of his education. If he decides that one plus one equals five that's his choice. It won't help him get a job as an accountant and he'll probably flunk out, but he isn't compelled by the threat of eternal damnation to believe otherwise.

As a secularist, I believe the purpose of public education is to learn facts wherever possible. Evolution is based on evidence observed and conclusions derived. Religion offers "divine truths," none of which are provable by any measure, hence the word "faith." Wilson Mizner said, "Faith is a wonderful thing, but it's doubt that gets you an education." And Einstein said that he never learned any morality from his studies of science.

WHEN "PRO-LIFE" MEANS PRO-ABORTION

John Rafferty

(Based on the Guttmacher Institute report, "1.94 Million Unintended Pregnancies ..."; on "Public funds prevent 800,000 abortions a year," by David Crary, in USA Today; and "'Pro-Life' Movement Admits Pro-Abortion Stance," by Cristina Page on huffingtonpost.com – all 2/24/09.)

Let's be clear about this: The political campaign to overturn Roe v. Wade and re-criminalize abortion in America is only a *tactical* goal of the leaders of the so-called "pro-life" movement; their long-term *strategic* goal is to turn back more than a half-century of gradual sexual liberation, reproductive health advances and even common sense.

Millions of “pro-life” Americans who abhor abortion—let’s face it, no one’s first or favorite “choice”—have no idea that the people who speak for them, who collect their donations, who urge them onto the picket lines in Washington and outside clinics, will also, if they ever get their way, deny us all sex education, family planning services, and contraceptives.

Yes, contraceptives. Anti-choice jihadists like Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council and Troy Newman of Operation Rescue want a return to an America in which pharmacists could go to prison for five years for selling condoms without a doctor’s prescription (Connecticut law until the mid-1950s), when “sex education” consisted of telling teenage boys they’d grow hair on their palms and go blind if they masturbated (*Old joke: I’ll quit when I need glasses*), and “family planning” was considered anti-family radicalism.

Want proof? Consider a report released February 24 by the respected Guttmacher Institute, which says:

By providing millions of young and low-income women access to voluntary contraceptive services, the national family planning program prevents 1.94 million unintended pregnancies, including almost 400,000 teen pregnancies, each year. These pregnancies would result in 860,000 unintended births, 810,000 abortions and 270,000 miscarriages. Absent publicly funded family planning services, the U.S. abortion rate would be nearly two-thirds higher than it currently is, and nearly twice as high among poor women.

“The national family planning program is smart government at its best,” says Rachel Benson Gold, the study’s lead author. ... “It reduces recourse to abortion. And it saves significant amounts of taxpayer money.”

Public expenditures for family planning in 2006 totaled \$1.85 billion, with 71% of those funds coming from the joint federal-state Medicaid program. ... “States as varied as Texas, New York, South Carolina and Missouri have decided to undergo the cumbersome and time-consuming process to seek federal permission, known as a waiver, to expand family planning services to more women who need them,” says Gold. “It’s a popular policy because it helps women while saving public dollars. It more than pays for itself.”

The report recommends that Congress eliminate the waiver requirement, and also endorses pending congressional legislation that would increase funding for Title X family planning. Some advocacy groups hope to more than double the current funding to \$700 million a year.

A program that prevents 800,000 abortions a year, and hundreds of thousands of teen pregnancies, and which more than pays for itself with four dollars saved for every dollar invested – a no-brainer good deal, yes?

Not for Troy Newman, who calls it a “shameful population control program that targets low-income families,” ignoring the facts that: 1) a major factor in low-income status is unwanted pregnancies and births; and 2) that teenage girls become “low-income families” when they have those unwanted babies.

And not for Tony Perkins, who is concerned about the concept of public funding of contraception for (gasp!) unmarried people, who of course are not supposed to be having sex. (More than 9 million women, including nearly 2 million under 20, received publicly

funded contraceptive services in 2006.) “The issue is whether taxpayers should fund, and thereby encourage, behavior that’s risky and morally questionable.”

Right, Tony, let’s fund those 1,940,000 unwanted babies up through their eighteenth birthdays instead.

As for that increase in funding for Title X family planning—which would prevent even more unwanted pregnancies, more abortions—Perkins argues that the federal money frees up other Planned Parenthood funds for its abortion services. “It’s another Planned Parenthood bailout,” he complains. “It covers their overhead.”

(Funny, that’s the same argument secularists have against the President’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives – that federal funds for church charity work allow the churches to spend more on proselytizing and politicking.)

Nine of ten Americans use or at least approve of contraception, four of five voters want all women to have access to family planning, and more than seven out of ten want federal funding to help pay for birth control for low-income women. Why? Because along with federally-funded programs that reduce unwanted pregnancies and abortions, it all makes sense – economic sense, moral sense, common sense.

But not to the “pro-life” jihadists. Their ultimate goal is an end to sex education, family planning and legal contraception – a complete reversal of the 20th century’s sexual revolution. And a few hundred thousand avoidable abortions, who cares?

Not them.

AND WHEN “PRO-LIFE” IS ANTI-CHILD

John Rafferty

Unlike their evangelical counterparts (see above), the Neanderthals of the Roman Catholic Church will never waver in their “pro life” stance, even if it costs the life of a nine-year-old rape victim.

A nine-year-old Brazilian girl was raped—probably repeatedly since she was six—and made pregnant with twins by her stepfather. Doctors concluded that her life was endangered by the four-months-along pregnancy, and ordered an abortion, which is permissible in Brazil only in cases of rape or to save the life of the mother – both of which exceptions applied in this case.

The abortion was carried out, the girl’s life (and health and well-being) was saved, and the Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Jose Cardoso Sobrinho, who said the law of God was above any human law, promptly excommunicated the girl’s mother and the doctors.

Then came the media firestorm, as the country’s overwhelmingly Catholic population condemned the archbishop, as did President Luiz da Silva, himself a Catholic. The archbishop had truly stepped in it.

But never fear, the Vatican rode to the rescue of ignorance and irrationality. Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, who heads the Church’s Pontifical Commission for Latin America, told the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* that the twins “had the right to live,” that the archbishop had been right to excommunicate the mother and doctors, and that attacks on Brazil’s church were “unfair.”

Unfair? Four-months-along non-viable fetuses have a right to life that a living little girl of nine (*the same age as three of my granddaughters, goddamn you!*) does not? How I wish there really were a hell for the likes of Archbishop Sobrinho and Cardinal Re – for

the lake of boiling pitch kept bubbling for the liars and hypocrites in the eighth circle of Dante's inferno.

And what about the stepfather, who is also suspected of having sexually abused the nine-year-old's 14-year-old physically handicapped sister? He was caught and arrested as he tried to flee the country. And our co-irreligionist Sibanye, of CFI-Harlem, wonders if the Church has excommunicated him, too.

Uh-uh. Forgiveness and absolution await Daddy Dearest in the confessional, while Mom and the doctors are condemned to Catholicism's everlasting inferno.

AND IF THE VATICAN IS STILL WONDERING WHY CONGREGATIONS ARE SHRINKING ...

(Excerpted from "Vatican: The washing machine liberated women," by Miranda Bryant, The Independent, 3/8/09)

As International Women's Day was celebrated March 9, the Vatican had a novel message for the women of the world: give thanks for the washing machine. That appliance—"Put in the powder, close the lid and relax"—did more for women's liberation than the contraceptive pill, the liberalization of abortion, or working outside the home, said the official Vatican newspaper, *Osservatore Romano*.

WILLIAM LOBDELL TELLS AN OVERFLOW AUDIENCE ALL ABOUT LOSING MY RELIGION

Reported by John Rafferty

The March 14 lecture at the Muhlenberg Library by William Lobdell, author of *Losing My Religion: How I Lost My Faith Reporting on Religion in America – and Found Unexpected Peace*, was a joint presentation of SHSNY and CFI-New York, and was a smash success by any measure.

First, the audience. They filled the room, blocked the doorway, and stood tiptoe in the hall to see and hear. A terrific turnout of regulars and newcomers – including a beaut of a babe-in-arms.

[pic of Lobdell at book signing]

Second, the lecture. Mr. Lobdell is a written-word journalist, but proved himself a polished, entertaining speaker who mixed readings from his new book with witty anecdotes about his intellectual journey from a messy, unexamined life to the warm comfort of evangelical faith, then to doubt and rejection as a result of his reportorial work on corruption and abuses in organized religion in California, and finally to atheism. His account of an evening with a Catholic congregation that simply refused to believe the truth about their pedophile priest held the library audience in silent thrall.

Finally, the after-party. When the lecture ended at 4:30, more than 30 of us trooped up to the upstairs room at Pongsri Thai restaurant across 7th Avenue for late lunch or early dinner (lunner? dinch?), for book signings and earnest conversations with Bill Lobdell, and for the many lively discussions along the long table that went on until nearly seven o'clock.

The most common comment this reporter heard? "What a great afternoon!"

THE BOSS ON EVOLUTION IN NEW JERSEY

(From the March, 2009 Secular Circular, Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara)

Judge John E. Jones, III, who presided over the Kitzmiller v. Dover “intelligent design” versus evolution case in Dover, Pennsylvania, told a Darwin Week audience in California in February that during an August, 2005 concert, rocker Bruce Springsteen told his audience, “In Dover, PA, they’re not sure about evolution. Here in New Jersey, we’re countin’ on it.”

[2-Page “April Fool” insert begins here]

PEEK

Newsletter of the Sexual Humorist Society of New York April 1, 2009

Continuing a hallowed tradition that goes all the way back to 2007, on this auspicious date each year we put aside considerations of church-and-state, First Amendment fusses, and issues of war and peace, to bring the good news of new ice cream flavors, bearded-lady liberation and African-American employment. We visit Darwin in Dayton, say goodbye to Giuliani and to God, confess our editorial sins, and reveal what’s really been happening to all your unanswered prayers. — JR

BLACK MAN GIVEN NATION’S WORST JOB

(Excerpted from The Onion, 11/5/08)

[Head-shot pic of Obama frowning]

African-American Barack Obama, 47, was given the least-desirable job in the entire country last November when he was elected president of the United States of America. In his new high-stress, low-reward position, Obama will be charged with such tasks as completely overhauling the nation’s broken-down economy, repairing the crumbling infrastructure, and generally having to please more than 300 million Americans and cater to their every whim on a daily basis. As part of his duties, the black man will have to spend four to eight years cleaning up the messes other people left behind. The job comes with such intense scrutiny and so certain a guarantee of failure that only one other person even bothered applying for it. Said scholar and activist Mark L. Denton, “It just goes to show you that, in this country, a black man still can’t catch a break.”

NEW ICE-CREAM FLAVOR HONORS OBAMA: YES, PECAN!

Ben & Jerry’s new “Yes, Pecan!” flavor is selling so well, says a company spokesperson, that the Vermont ice-cream maker has asked the public to suggest flavors to commemorate ex-president George W. Bush. Among the suggestions received are:

- Grape Depression
- Abu Grape
- Nut’n Accomplished
- Iraqi Road
- Freedom Vanilla

Chunky Monkey-in-Chief
Caramel Preemptive Stripe
NeoconPolitan
and ...
Heck-Of-A-Job Brownie
[pic of "Yes, Pecan" ice-cream pint container]

LARGE HADRON COLLIDER MAY HAVE DESTROYED GOD "BY ACCIDENT"

(From Uncyclopedia, 9/11/08)

GENEVA, Switzerland – Concerns that the Large Hadron Collider might destroy the Earth proved unfounded, but scientists warned that they may instead have accidentally destroyed God.

Detectors in the billion-dollar machine recorded a massive outburst of Higgs bosons, nicknamed the "God particle," about three seconds into the first experiment. Scientists speculate that God may have accidentally strayed into the high-powered opposing beams of protons the collider generates, and been disintegrated.

"We detected so many Higgs bosons in such a short space of time, there's little chance God could have survived," said Dr. Tara Sheers, a particle physicist from the University of Manchester.

But, she said, the accident should not greatly impact the world's major religions. "From the results of today's experiment, we can conclude that while God probably did exist, He probably doesn't now. Theologically speaking, this is much the same position we were in on Tuesday. It's ironic that at the very instant that we had scientific evidence of the existence of God, He most probably ceased to exist."

However, Steve Myers, head of the accelerator and beam department at CERN, said some sort of letter of apology and condolences to the leaders of the world's major religions might be in order.

"We really didn't mean to 'do a Nietzsche,' as it were, and kill God, but then again, God's been dead for over three hours now, and things still seem to be going on pretty much as usual in the universe. God may have been destroyed, but it's not the end of the world."

In a major liberalization move today, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia afforded Saudi bearded ladies many of the same rights as men. Bearded ladies will be permitted to vote, drive cars, and go about freely in public.

[Inset box]

PUBLIC NOTICE

Dear World:

The United States of America, your quality supplier of the ideals of liberty and democracy, would like to apologize for its 2001-2008 service outage.

The technical fault that led to this eight-year service interruption has been located. Replacement components were ordered Tuesday, November 4th, 2008, and have begun arriving. Early tests of the new equipment indicate that it is functioning correctly and seems to be fully operational.

We apologize for any inconvenience caused by the outage and we look forward to resuming full service – and hopefully even improving it in the years to come. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Very Truly Yours,

The USA

[close inset box]

32 PERCENT OF PRAYERS ARE DEFLECTED OFF PASSING SATELLITES

(Reprinted from The Onion, 3/19/2008)

HOUSTON – According to an official NASA report released Saturday, nearly 32 percent of all prayers exiting Earth are deflected off satellites orbiting the planet, ultimately preventing the discharged requests for divine intervention from ever making it to the Gates of Heaven.

“After impact with the satellite, these diverted prayers typically plummet back into the atmosphere, where they either burn up or eventually land, unanswered, in a body of water,” the report read in part. “Of the remaining prayers, research confirms 64 percent fail to make it past the stratosphere because they aren’t prayed hard enough, 94 percent of those with enough momentum are swallowed by a supermassive black hole at the center of the Milky Way galaxy, and 43 percent are eaten by birds.”

The report concluded that, of the 170 billion prayers issued last month, one made it to God, whose reply was intercepted by a hurricane and incorrectly delivered to a Nigerian man who reportedly did not know what to do with his brand-new Bowflex machine.

RUDY GIULIANI ENDS RECOUNT EFFORT

SUN CITY, FL, April 1, 2009: Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani today ended his five-month long battle to overturn the 2008 presidential election results after a last-ditch address to supporters in this retirement community, which awarded him 14 write-in votes last November.

“The delegate I won in the primaries was not allowed to put my name in nomination at the Republican convention,” he argued. “That prevented hundreds of delegates from choosing me over that loser ex-prisoner from Arizona, and millions of 9/11-conscious Americans from voting for me instead of the skinny guy from the ‘second city.’”

The fund-raiser brunch at which he spoke netted only \$64.28 from eleven retirees, leading Mr. Giuliani to concede that his quixotic crusade was over. “I give up,” he said as an aide counted the change, “this won’t even pay for the bagels and lox. Who’s got the tip? Give the waitress ten bucks, will you?” he asked a follower as he left the room. “No, wait, make it nine-eleven.”

EVOLUTIONISTS FLOCK TO DARWIN-SHAPED WALL STAIN

(Excerpted from The Onion, 9/5/2008)

DAYTON, TN – A steady stream of devoted evolutionists gathered in this small Tennessee town today to witness what many believe is an image of Charles Darwin made manifest on a concrete wall in downtown Dayton.

“I brought my baby to touch the wall, so that the power of Darwin can purify her genetic makeup of undesirable inherited traits,” said Darlene Freiberg, one among a crowd assembled here to see the mysterious stain, which appeared Monday on one side of the Rhea County Courthouse, the location of the famed “Scopes Monkey Trial” and one of Darwinism’s holiest sites.

Since witnesses first reported the unexplained marking, this normally quiet town has become a hotbed of biological zealotry. Capitalizing on the influx of empirical believers, street vendors have sprung up, selling evolutionary relics and artwork to pilgrims waiting to catch a glimpse of the image. Available for sale are everything from small wooden shards alleged to be fragments of the “One True Beagle”—the research vessel on which Darwin made his legendary voyage to the Galapagos Islands—to lecture notes purportedly touched by English evolutionist Alfred Russel Wallace.

Others have attempted to discredit the miracle entirely. “It’s a stain on a wall, and nothing more,” said the Rev. Clement McCoy, a professor at Oral Roberts University and prominent opponent of evolutionary theory. “Anything else is delusional fantasy. I hope these heretics see the error of their ways before our Most Powerful God smites them in His vengeance.”

JOHN RAFFERTY ADMITS EDITORIAL BIAS

Acknowledging the growing number of critics who see editorial bias in the selection of writers for PIQUE, Editor John Rafferty today admitted that he does, indeed, favor certain contributors, notably John Rafferty.

Defending his over-use of Rafferty (see pages 1, 3, 4, and 8 of this issue), Rafferty praised Rafferty’s “felicitous phrasing,” his “laser-sharp wit” and his “seeming encyclopedic knowledge of so many subjects.”

“I can’t help it,” he said, “I just love the guy and everything he writes.”

[End “April Fool” insert]

THE SHSNY BUS SLOGAN CONTEST

Last month we reported on the burgeoning campaign to post atheist and humanist ads on buses begun in London (and subsequently supported by Richard Dawkins) which has spread around the world. We asked for your suggestions for slogans for buses in New York, and you responded.

There’s probably no god, be a good person anyway! – Lori Rothman

Sleep in, there ain’t no god. – Art Harris

There is no god. Get over it! – would be perfect in New York, said Harvey Offenhartz

Santa, the Tooth Fairy, and God. – Woody Slomanson

Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness’ sake. – Jason Torpy, quoting AHA Washington’s slogan.

Hands that help are better far than lips that pray. – Norm Allen, Jr., quoting Ingersoll

Don’t believe in god? You are not alone! – from both Sid Finehirsh* and Mary Ellen Goodman

If prayers really worked, there wouldn’t be wars. – Joan Kanel Slomanson

God does not solve problems; rational thought does! – Edith Amster
Religion: Good = Obeying God's Law. Humanism: Good = Doing the right thing. –
Gerry Dantone
My brain is my shepherd. – Betsy Gordon
In Us We Trust. – Paul Grosswald
Who is this "God" person anyway? – Else Fjerdningstad
To think that I used to pray to a god that I now know never existed. – Harold

Saferstein

Imagine No Religion. – Stanley Wiegand
Faith is fiction; Science is non-fiction. – Robert Ondricek
God is great, god is good, we are god. – Bill Lippe
God is Santa Claus for adults. – Jack Schweitzer
Bibles? We don't need no stinkin' bibles. – David Rafferty
God, fix the economy, please! – Arthur Urrows
Atheism? Real peace of mind: Ahhhtheism! – Stan Friedland
From the 10,000 possible gods, what makes yours so special? – Emily Kingsley
Atheists believe in life after birth, not after death. – Dennis Middlebrooks
We can be good—no, better—without god. – John Rafferty
Tried to call God last night; no answer. – Ed Henrion
Did you hear the one about the talking snake? – Wade Cothran
Get off your knees and up on your feet. – Donna Marxer
Humanists don't play God, they just act human. – Remo Cosentino
Reality never lets you down. – Brad Wheeler

From the New Orleans Secular Humanist Association:

We chose from many suggestions for our streetcar ad: *Don't believe in god? You are not alone.*

It resulted in two newspaper articles, two radio talk shows and one TV interview.

Others suggested:

Doubting your religion? Evolve to Humanism.
Free yourself from faith-based thinking.
Doubt faith? Embrace reason.
Science works. Faith doesn't.
When you're finished with fairy tales.
Doubt religion? Ready for reality?

– Harry Greenberger, NOSHA

*"I pledge \$100 for that slogan [see his choice, above] on the M1 bus." – Sid Finehirsh

**JOIN SID FINEHIRSH ON A COMMITTEE
TO RAISE FUNDS TO BUY NYC BUS ADS**

E-mail editor@shsny.org

**WE HAVE 2009'S FIRST DUMBTH NOMINEE:
POPE BENEDICT XVI**

[Head-shot pic of pope]

On his way to AIDS-ravaged Africa on March 17, the Pope told reporters on his Alitalia plane that:

“You can’t resolve it [AIDS] with the distribution of condoms. On the contrary, it increases the problem.”

As a *NYTimes* editorial opined, the Pope “has every right to express his opposition to the use of condoms on moral grounds ...” but “deserves no credence when he distorts scientific findings”

**AND WE HAVE OUR SECOND:
MICHELE BACHMAN**

[Head-shot pic of Bachman]

In a talk show interview in February, Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN) once again embarrassed herself. She frightened even conservatives last fall by suggesting that Congress investigate the media for “un-American ideas.” And on the dais at February’s Conservative Action Committee gathering, whooped at new African-American Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele, “You da man, you be it!”

This time she told KLTK’s Chris Baker that she opposes the Obama administration’s stimulus plan because it’s part of a Democratic conspiracy to “direct” funding away from Republican districts, so that Democratic districts can “suck up” all federal funds.

But she doesn’t think Obama’s plan will work anyway, she says, because:

“We’re running out of rich people in this country.”

**KARMA, DHARMA,
PUDDING & PIE**

Philip Appleman

A Review by John Rafferty

Our own Phil Appleman—award-winning poet, novelist, Darwin scholar, and long-time SHSNY member—has published his eighth book of poetry, *Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie*, and it’s a beaut.

Phil’s publisher calls it “a gleeful romp through human foibles, absurdities, and perversities and a sharp exploration of the comic failings of fundamentalists and evolution-deniers,” and for once a press release is perhaps too modest in its praise.

Karma, Dharma, with witty and sophisticated illustrations by Arnold Roth, is a freethinker’s delight, best illustrated not by me, but by a small sample. Let’s take the title poem, which is the first of “Five Easy Prayers for Pagans” ...

*O Karma, Dharma, pudding & pie,
gimme a break before I die:
grant me wisdom, will, & wit,
purity, probity, pluck, & grit.
Trustworthy, helpful, friendly, kind,
gimme great abs and a steel-trap mind.
And forgive, Ye Gods, some humble advice –
these little blessings would suffice
to beget an earthly paradise:
make the bad people good
and the good people nice,
and before our world goes over the brink,
teach the believers how to think.*

Buy this book. In fact, buy a few and give them as gifts – it's that much fun.
Karma, Dharma, Pudding & Pie, by Phillip Appleman, April, 2009, The Quantuck Lane Press (W.W. Norton & Company), \$24.95 Clothbound, ISBN-13 978-1-593720360.

JEWES, FAITH & BERNIE MADOFF

Art Harris

I was raised in an orthodox Jewish home. By the time I was bar mitzvah, I had become an agnostic, and have since progressed to card-carrying atheism.

There were many reasons that put me on that path, but the short list consists of coming to the conclusion that we prayed to a God with no compassion. Just his permitting the evil of the Holocaust would have been enough, but then a visit to see a friend's painfully dying baby, just one among wards full of infants born with various terminal ailments, turned me away from God. It's not only that I don't believe there is one, it's that I wouldn't pray to something or someone so uncaring.

I do not want the reader to assume that my conversion was affected by only those examples, but they were leading causes.

Over many years my experiences have taught me that the more religious a person one finds, the more likely one finds a hypocrite and a thief.

There's the old joke about a pastor who ran a horse trading business on the side and sold a passing traveler a horse that he knew was dying. When taken to task by a parishioner, he replied, "It's ok, it's in the Bible: 'He was a stranger and I took him in.'"

Sadly, I have found similar attitudes prevalent among Orthodox Jews. In every religion's self-appointed pecking order, there are groups who feel more pure than other groups. For example, the Hasidim* look down on the black-hat Orthodox, who in turn disdain the Conservatives, who themselves consider the Reform movement as "beyond the Pale" or apostate. It's a totem pole with each group sitting above and looking down on the group they consider below them in rank of piety. But other religions have the same structure.

**(The Hasidim are a curious group. Why wearing clothing in the style of 19th century Polish noblemen makes one closer to God completely eludes me. But then there are many other things I don't understand.)*

My experience has taught me that a group's assumed position high on the totem pole enables them to justify stealing from and cheating those "below" them – while the lower on the pole the more tolerant the group, and the less likely, it seems, that they would cheat me.

Bernie Madoff may have been an equal opportunity thief. Apparently while claiming to be pious, he cheated any Jew, as well as a few non-Jews with money. He was well known for his charity. Why not? It wasn't his pocket he was digging into.

I know too many Jews who almost kiss the floor when praying and, when done, leave the shul to prey on others. For that remark, I'm sure I will be termed an anti-Semite. I am not, I'm simply anti-Religious. After all, some of my best friends are Jewish.

JESUS AND MO DISCUSS AFRICA AND ... UM

(Reprinted from Jesusandmo.net, 3/18/09)

Mohammed (*staring at computer*): Abstinence only clearly doesn't work against this terrible disease. It continues to cause untold suffering and millions of deaths every year. It is particularly heartbreaking when it is passed from mother to child.

We have to face the reality that people are going to have sex, and encourage them to use condoms to prevent it spreading. Especially in Africa, which is the one continent where it's actually on the increase.

Jesus: I thought AIDS was on the rise everywhere.

Mo (*reading screen headline: "Pope to Africa"*): I'm not talking about AIDS, I'm talking about Catholicism.

WE'RE ADDICTED TO FAKE OUTRAGE

(and our drug policy is idiotic)

David Sirota

(Excerpted from "We Are a Nation of Junkies Hooked on Media-Fabricated Outrage," on alternet.org, 2/16/2009)

One thing is painfully obvious after Michael Phelps' marijuana "scandal" erupted: Our society is addicted to fake outrage — and to break our dependence, we're going to need far more potent medicine than the herb Phelps was smoking.

If you haven't heard (and I'm guessing you have), the Olympic gold medalist was recently photographed taking a toke of weed. The moment the picture hit the Internet, the media blew the story up, pumping out at least 1,200 dispatches about the "controversy," according to my LexisNexis search. Phelps' sponsors threatened to pull their endorsement deals, and USA Swimming suspended him for "disappointing so many people."

America is a place where you can destroy millions of lives as a Wall Street executive and still get invited for photo-ops at the White House; a land where the everyman icon—Joe Sixpack—is named for his love of shotgunning two quarts of beer at holiday gatherings; a "shining city on a hill" where presidential candidates' previous abuse of alcohol and cocaine is portrayed as positive proof of grittiness and character. And yet, somehow, Phelps is the evildoer of the hour because he went to a party and took a hit off someone's bong.

As with most explosions of fake outrage, the Phelps affair asks us to feign anger at something we know is commonplace. A nation of tabloid readers is apoplectic that Brad and Jen divorced, even though one out of every two American marriages ends the same way. A country fetishizing "family values" goes ballistic over the immorality of Paris Hilton's sex tape ... and then keeps spending billions on pornography. And now we're expected to be indignant about a 23-year-old kid smoking weed, even though studies show that roughly half of us have done the same thing; most of us think pot should be legal in some form; and many of us regularly devour far more toxic substances than marijuana (nicotine, alcohol, reality TV, etc.).

So, in the interest of a little taboo candor, I'm just going to throw editorial caution to the wind and write what lots of us thought—but were afraid to say—when we heard about Phelps. Ready? Here goes:

America's drug policy is idiotic.

Doctors can hand out morphine to anyone for anything beyond a headache, but they can't prescribe marijuana to terminal cancer patients. Madison Avenue encourages a

population plagued by heart disease to choke down as many artery-clogging Big Macs and Dunkin' Donuts as it can, but it's illegal to consume cannabis, "a weed that has been known to kill approximately no one," as even the archconservative Colorado Springs Gazette admitted in its editorial slamming Phelps. Indeed, it would be perfectly acceptable—even artistically admirable in some quarters—if I told you that I drank myself into a blind stupor while writing this column, but it would be considered "outrageous" if I told you I was instead smoking a joint (FYI — I wasn't doing either).

That said, what's even more inane than our irrational reefer madness is our addiction to the same high that every pothead craves: the high of escapism. Nerves fried from orange terror warnings, Drudge Report sirens and disaster capitalism's roller-coaster economics, our narcotic of choice is fake outrage – and it packs a punch. It gets us to turn on the television, tune in to the latest manufactured drama, and drop out of the real battle for the republic's future.

WE CAN'T WIN "THE WAR ON DRUGS"

Alvaro Vargas Llosa

(Reprinted from "Shot in the Arm: What has the Drug War done for you lately?" in The New Republic, 3/11/09)

A decade ago, the U.N. General Assembly set an objective of "eliminating or significantly reducing" narcotics cultivation and trafficking "by the year 2008." According to the data of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, the effort has been an unmitigated disaster. Opium and cannabis production has doubled, while cocaine has slightly increased. The same proportion of adults—five percent—consumes drugs today, mostly marijuana, as in 1998.

As officials from around the world gather in Vienna to chart the next decade of the anti-drug effort, it may be time to rethink the entire approach.

Echoing the Prohibition era in the United States, illegality has engendered organized crime empires that, in order to supply narcotics, undermine the peace and institutions of many countries. The latest example is Mexico, where President Felipe Calderón has unleashed the wrath of the state against the drug lords. The war between the state and the cartels, and among the mafias themselves, has mostly taken place in northern cities such as Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana and Culiacan. Ten thousand people have been killed and drug-related corruption has been exposed at the highest levels, including the attorney general's office.

The anti-drug budget worldwide is staggering: The United States alone devotes more than \$40 billion yearly to the effort. Yet whenever attempts to limit supply manage to raise street prices in one country, prices go down in other countries: In Europe, the price of cocaine has dropped by half since 1990. But the crackdown has reduced the purity of the drug, increasing the harm to people's health. According to police, in Britain the purity has decreased from 60 percent to 30 percent in a decade.

Not to mention the consequences to individual liberty. Those who banned alcohol in 1920 felt compelled to amend the Constitution before they could pass Prohibition. No such amendment was ever presented to legitimize what Richard Nixon first called the "war on drugs" in 1971.

The excesses committed in its name have created all sorts of social stigmas--including the fact that about 30 percent of black males in America spend some time in jail in large part due to drug-related offenses.

Three Latin American former presidents—Brazil’s Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Mexico’s Ernesto Zedillo and Colombia’s César Gaviria—recently put out a report condemning the war on drugs as a counterproductive failure, advocating a public health-based approach instead of repression. In anticipation of the meeting in Vienna, *The Economist* magazine, the bible of many current and aspiring enforcers of the law, devoted its cover, a survey and an editorial to making the case for legalization. For years, conservative publications such as *The Wall Street Journal* have run articles expressing the same view, including those by its expert on Latin America, Mary O’Grady. Leaders on the right (Henry Kissinger) and organizations of the center-left (George Soros’ Open Society Institute) have also spoken out on the issue.

No one knows exactly how drug use would be impacted by its legalization or its decriminalization. In countries where it is severely punished, consumption is high, which might mean that it would stabilize or even drop. Many European countries—Spain, Portugal, Italy, several Swiss cantons—have extremely lenient drug policies; consumption in those countries (except for Spain) is not very high. But even assuming a moderate increase in consumption, decriminalization or legalization would eliminate or substantially diminish the horrific side effects of the current war.

A movement in favor of legalization has existed in the United States for years. Because it is associated with the cultural war that has raged since the 1960s, its impact has been small. But the debate goes on. In many states the police do not go after personal possession of marijuana, and California is considering a bill that would make it legal. The vestiges of Puritan dogmatism—which H.L. Mencken memorably called the “inferior man’s hatred of the man who is having a better time”—have made it difficult to open a serious debate nationwide.

Today we regard the Opium Wars of the 19th century—by which the British retaliated against China for clamping down on opium imports—as crazy. One and a half centuries from now, people will read in amazement that so much blood and treasure was wasted in the failed pursuit of a private vice that a relatively small percentage of the world population was not ready to give up.