

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

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We celebrate the bicentennial of the birth of the man—and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his book, *On the Origin of Species*—that changed the world. We look at evolution from several perspectives (including the ignorant), parse the reasoning of libertarianism, consider the self-delusions of religions, debate their tax exemptions, and admit atheists to Heaven. And while on the subject of change, we make further suggestions to the man we hope will transform America.— JR

## ENGLAND'S NOBLEST AND HER GRANDEST

**Robert Green Ingersoll**

This century [the 19th] will be called Darwin's century. He was one of the greatest men who ever touched this globe. He has explained more of the phenomena of life than all of the religious teachers. Write the name of Charles Darwin on the one hand and the name of every theologian who ever lived on the other, and from that name has come more light to the world than from all of those. His doctrine of evolution, his doctrine of the survival of the fittest, his doctrine of the origin of species, has removed in every thinking mind the last vestige of orthodox Christianity. He has not only stated, but he has demonstrated, that the inspired writer knew nothing of this world, nothing of the origin of man, nothing of geology, nothing of astronomy, nothing of nature; that the Bible is a book written by ignorance at the instigation of fear. Think of the men who replied to him. Only a few years ago there was no person too ignorant to successfully answer Charles Darwin; and the more ignorant he was the more cheerfully he undertook the task. He was held up to the ridicule, the scorn and contempt of the Christian world, and yet when he died, England was proud to put his dust with that of her noblest and her grandest. Darwin conquered the intellectual world, and his doctrines are now accepted facts.

[Head shot pic of elderly Darwin]

Caption: *February 12, 1809 – April 19, 1882*

## CHARLES DARWIN'S DIFFICULT LEGACY

**Edward O. Wilson**

*(From "The Reading File," The New York Times, 11/6/05)*

*In an afterword to *From So Simple a Beginning*, a two-volume edition of four books by Charles Darwin, including *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, Edward O. Wilson, the prominent entomologist who edited the texts, considers why the theory of evolution remains so controversial.*

Why does such intense and pervasive resistance to evolution continue 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, and in the teeth of the overwhelming accumulated evidence favoring it? The answer is simply that the Darwinian revolution, even more than the Copernican revolution, challenges the prehistoric and still-regnant self-image of humanity. ... In the more than slightly schizophrenic circumstances of the

present era, global culture is divided into three opposing images of the human condition.

...

The dominant one, exemplified by the creation myths of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), sees humanity as a creation of God. He brought us into being and He guides us still as father, judge and friend. We interpret His will from sacred scriptures and the wisdom of ecclesiastical authorities.

The second world view is that of political behaviorism. Still beloved by the now rapidly fading Marxist-Leninist states, it says that the brain is largely a blank state devoid of any inborn inscription beyond reflexes and primitive bodily urges. As a consequence, the mind originates almost wholly as a product of learning, and it is the product of a culture that itself evolves by historical contingency. ...

Both of these world views, God-centered religion and atheistic communism, are opposed by a third and in some ways more radical world view, scientific humanism. Still held by only a tiny minority of the world's population, it considers humanity to be a biological species that evolved over millions of years in a biological world, acquiring unprecedented intelligence yet still guided by complex inherited emotions and biased channels of learning.

Human nature exists, and it ... forms the behavioral part of what, in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin called the indelible stamp of our lowly origin.

### **WHY EVERYONE SHOULD LEARN THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION The Editors of *Scientific American***

*(Reprinted from SciAm.com, 12/15/08)*

Charles Darwin did not think of himself as a genius. "I have no great quickness of apprehension or wit which is so remarkable in some clever men ..." he remarked in one passage of his autobiography. Fortunately for the rest of us, he was profoundly wrong in his assessment. So on February 12 the world will mark the bicentennial birthday of a scientist who holds a rightful place alongside Galileo, Copernicus, Newton and Einstein.

Darwin's genius—and, yes, genius is the right word—is manifest in the way his theory of evolution can tie together disparate biological facts into a single unifying framework. Evolutionary geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky's oft-cited quotation bears repeating here: "Nothing in biology makes sense, except in the light of evolution."

Yet it is also worth noting during this anniversary year that Darwin deserves a lot better than he gets. When the popular press needs an iconic image of a brilliant scientist, it invariably recycles the famous photograph of Albert Einstein having a bad hair day. (Einstein accompanies John Lennon and Andy Warhol on Forbes's list of top-earning deceased celebrities.) Darwin's failure to achieve icon status is the legacy of creationists and neocreationists and of the distortion of his ideas by the eugenics movement a century ago.

But Darwin is so much more than just a quaint, Victorian historical figure whose bust in the pantheon deserves a place among those of other scientific greats. Theory needs to explain past, present and future—and Darwin's does all three in a form that requires no simplifying translation. His theory is readily accessible to any literate person who allots a pleasurable interlude for *On the Origin of Species*, its prose sometimes

bordering on the poetic: "... from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

Most important, Darwin's legacy has a direct bearing on how society makes public policy and even, at times, on how we choose to run our lives. Overfishing of mature adults selects for smaller fish (and higher prices at the supermarket), and excessive use of antibiotics leads, by natural selection, to drug resistance, all considerations for regulators and legislators. Many modern diseases—obesity, diabetes and autoimmune disorders—come about, in part, because of the mismatch between our genes and an environment that changes more quickly than human genomes can evolve. Understanding this disparity may help convince a patient to make a change in diet to better conform to the demands of a genetic heritage that leaves us unable to accommodate excess, refined carbohydrates and saturated fats from a steady intake of Linguine Alfredo and the like.

Biologist David Sloan Wilson initiated a program in evolutionary studies called EvoS at Binghamton University that extends beyond just the life sciences to encompass the humanities and the social sciences: the program is now being adopted at other schools. Students learn the basics, that evolution is both theory and fact and, crucially, that it serves as a way of looking at the world that provides deep predictive and explanatory power. They then proceed to use this analytical framework to explore subjects as diverse as cancer, pregnancy, mate choice, literature and religion.

One way to celebrate Darwin's birthday is to contemplate how evolutionary studies can achieve broader adoption in secondary and higher education. Natural selection and the complementary idea of how genes, individuals and species change over time should be as much a part of developing critical thinking skills as deductive reasoning and the study of ethics.

**"NO ONE HAS SEEN HUMAN EVOLUTION,"  
THE CREATIONISTS ARGUE. OH, REALLY?**

*(Reprinted from "The Milk of Evolution," an editorial in The New York Times, 12/14/06)*

Evolution is a process that most of us associate with a geological time scale — the slow elucidation of life over the last 3.5 billion years. We also tend to assume that the most recent signs of continuing evolution must be happening in species with short life spans and rapid reproductive rates.

A team of scientists has now discovered that an important human genetic trait—a tolerance in adults for the milk sugar called lactose—might have developed in several East African ethnic groups 2,700 to 6,800 years ago. That is astonishingly recent.

It may also be the first genetic example of what researchers call convergent evolution in humans. In other words, lactose tolerance among African raisers of livestock arose independently of the same adaptive trait in northern European pastoralists. But there is something still more surprising about this discovery. The genetic change came about because of cultural change. The shift to cattle raising some 9,000 years ago gave an immediate survival advantage to adults who could digest milk, an ability infants usually lost as they aged.

We are used to the idea that species evolve because of changes in their natural environment. But part of the natural environment of humans is culture itself, and it is striking to think that genetic adaptation in humans has been driven, at least in part, by

how humans have chosen to live. The dynamism of human culture has always seemed to move faster than evolution itself, but this discovery suggests otherwise. To understand this about ourselves is to realize how little we know about the long-term effects of the ways we choose to live.

**CAN HUMANS REALLY ALTER  
EARTH'S CLIMATE?  
IT SEEMS WE'VE DONE IT BEFORE.**

**Andrew Leonard**

*(Excerpted from "How humans cooled the earth – 500 years ago," on salon.com, 1/08/09)*

One of the tell-tale signs of a really thought-provoking book is that soon after reading it, you start seeing its thesis replicated everywhere you look. So it has been with ... Charles Mann's *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*.

The massive depopulation of the Americas via smallpox, hepatitis and other diseases introduced by Westerners (perhaps as much as 95 percent of the existing population died in vast pandemics) and the large landscape-altering scale of agriculture practiced across the "New World" by pre-Columbian cultures are two of the big themes of *1491*. Both popped up in a presentation made by two scientists at the annual meeting of the American Geophysical Union last December. The scientists contend that after the die-off, massive reforestation on abandoned agricultural land occurred on a large enough scale to contribute significantly to the period of global cooling between 1500 and 1750 known as the "Little Ice Age."

After examining soil samples and sediment cores from numerous locations in Central and South America, Richard Nevle, a visiting scholar at Stanford's Department of Geological and Environmental Sciences, and Dennis Bird, also from Stanford, concluded that the reforestation sequestered as much as 10 to 50 percent of the carbon necessary to cool the earth. Up until 1500, the soil samples showed a steady increase in charcoal content, likely generated from human-caused fire used to clear forest. After 1500, the scientists discovered a drastic drop in charcoal content. No more burning.

The scientists acknowledge that reforestation was just one factor in contributing to global cooling. It may not even have been the most critical factor. But the research is sobering nonetheless, in its hint as to humanity's power to alter the fundamental characteristics of life on this planet, long before we were burning fossil fuels as if there were no tomorrow. We did it back then, we're doing it now, and maybe, just maybe, if we exert our collective will in the proper direction, we can fix our mistakes. Let's just hope it doesn't require another vast die-off to set things to rights.

**15 ANSWERS TO CREATIONIST NONSENSE**

**Parts 5-6-7**

**John Rennie**

*(The "15 Answers" were given at ScientificAmerican.com in 2002. Since they are detailed, we are reprinting two or three "Answers" at a time. Answers 1 and 2 appeared in December, 2008 PIQUE; 3 and 4 in January, and the rest will appear, two or three at a time, in future issues. – JR)*

The arguments that creationists use are typically specious and based on misunderstandings of (or outright lies about) evolution, but the number and diversity of the objections can put even well-informed people at a disadvantage. To help with answering them, the following list rebuts some of the most common “scientific” arguments raised against evolution.

**5. *The disagreements among even evolutionary biologists show how little solid science supports evolution.***

Evolutionary biologists passionately debate diverse topics: how speciation happens, the rates of evolutionary change, the ancestral relationships of birds and dinosaurs, whether Neandertals were a species apart from modern humans, and much more. These disputes are like those found in all other branches of science. Acceptance of evolution as a factual occurrence and a guiding principle is nonetheless universal in biology.

Unfortunately, dishonest creationists have shown a willingness to take scientists’ comments out of context to exaggerate and distort the disagreements. Anyone acquainted with the works of paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard University knows that in addition to co-authoring the punctuated-equilibrium model, Gould was one of the most eloquent defenders and articulators of evolution. (Punctuated equilibrium explains patterns in the fossil record by suggesting that most evolutionary changes occur within geologically brief intervals—which may nonetheless amount to hundreds of generations.) Yet creationists delight in dissecting out phrases from Gould’s voluminous prose to make him sound as though he had doubted evolution, and they present punctuated equilibrium as though it allows new species to materialize overnight or birds to be born from reptile eggs.

When confronted with a quotation from a scientific authority that seems to question evolution, insist on seeing the statement in context. Almost invariably, the attack on evolution will prove illusory.

**6. *If humans descended from monkeys, why are there still monkeys?***

This common argument reflects several levels of ignorance about evolution. The first mistake is that evolution does not teach that humans descended from monkeys; it states that both have a common ancestor.

The deeper error is that this objection is tantamount to asking, “If children descended from adults, why are there still adults?” New species evolve by splintering off from established ones, when populations of organisms become isolated from the main branch of their family and acquire sufficient differences to remain forever distinct. The parent species may survive indefinitely thereafter, or it may become extinct.

**7. *Evolution cannot explain how life first appeared on earth.***

The origin of life remains very much a mystery, but biochemists have learned about how primitive nucleic acids, amino acids and other building blocks of life could have formed and organized themselves into self-replicating, self-sustaining units, laying the foundation for cellular biochemistry. Astrochemical analyses hint that quantities of these compounds might have originated in space and fallen to earth in comets, a scenario that may solve the problem of how those constituents arose under the conditions that prevailed when our planet was young.

Creationists sometimes try to invalidate all of evolution by pointing to science’s current inability to explain the origin of life. But even if life on earth turned out to have a nonevolutionary origin (for instance, if aliens introduced the first cells billions of years

ago), evolution since then would be robustly confirmed by countless microevolutionary and macroevolutionary studies.

When it was first said that the sun stood still and the world turned round, the common sense of mankind declared the doctrine false; but the old saying of *Vox populi, vox Dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God), as every philosopher knows, cannot be trusted in science. — *The Origin of Species*

## HEAVEN FOR THE GODLESS?

Charles M. Blow

*(Reprinted from the OpEd page of the NYTimes, 12/27/08)*

In June, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a controversial survey in which 70 percent of Americans said that they believed religions other than theirs could lead to eternal life.

This threw evangelicals into a tizzy. After all, the Bible makes it clear that heaven is a velvet-roped V.I.P. area reserved for Christians. Jesus said so: “I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” But the survey suggested that Americans just weren’t buying that.

The evangelicals complained that people must not have understood the question. The respondents couldn't actually believe what they were saying, could they?

So in August, Pew asked the question again. Sixty-five percent of respondents said—again—that other religions could lead to eternal life. But this time, to clear up any confusion, Pew asked them to specify which religions. The respondents essentially said all of them.

And they didn’t stop there. Nearly half also thought that atheists could go to heaven—dragged there kicking and screaming, no doubt—and most thought that people with no religious faith also could go.

What on earth does this mean?

One very plausible explanation is that Americans just want good things to come to good people, regardless of their faith. As Alan Segal, a professor of religion at Barnard College told me: “We are a multicultural society, and people expect this American life to continue the same way in heaven.” He explained that in our society, we meet so many good people of different faiths that it’s hard for us to imagine God letting them go to hell. In fact, in the most recent survey, Pew asked people what they thought determined whether a person would achieve eternal life. Nearly as many Christians said you could achieve eternal life by just being a good person as said that you had to believe in Jesus.

Also, many Christians apparently view their didactic text as flexible. According to Pew’s August survey, only 39 percent of Christians believe that the Bible is the literal word of God, and 18 percent think that it’s just a book written by men and not the word of God at all. In fact, on the question in the Pew survey about what it would take to achieve eternal life, only 1 percent of Christians said living life in accordance with the Bible.

Now, there remains the possibility that some of those polled may not have understood the implications of their answers. As John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum, said, “The capacity of ignorance to influence survey outcomes should never be

underestimated.” But I don’t think that they are ignorant about this most basic tenet of their faith. I think that they are choosing to ignore it ... for goodness sake.

## **I’M NOT SURPRISED AND I AM SURPRISED**

**John Rafferty**

I am not particularly surprised by the results of the two Pew surveys referred to by Mr. Blow above. I think a very sizable number of Americans sort-of subscribe to something we might call Religion Lite, a vaguely Christian, more-Panglossian, squishy kind of confidence that everything will – someday soon, if not quite yet – turn out all for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Or afterlife. Or something. The hard-right evangelicals and outright crazies get most of the media attention (and ours), so much so that a bigot like Rick Warren can be described as ecumenical as long as he keeps smiling.

What Mr. Blow did not focus on in the OpEd column but which was interesting to me were the graphs accompanying his article that showed how four of the different religious/ethnic groups polled by Pew—White Catholics, White Evangelicals, White Mainline Protestants and Black Protestants—view the go-to-heaven chances of each other *and* of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Atheists, and “People with no religious faith.”

Overall, most Americans think that the religions or non-religions of most *other* Americans can lead them to heaven. 51 percent think even the dreaded Muslims could get there, and 52 percent think Hindus are on the right track (although I’d bet that most Americans think “Hindu” is the name of their cabdriver’s god).

But guess who were the most open-minded about a heavenly Open-Door policy for other faiths or non-faiths. White Catholics. Really? My old gang? That mob whose gun-moll nuns taught me that everybody – everybody – who didn’t believe in the lockstep tenets of the Baltimore Catechism, the absolute inerrancy of Pius XII, and the divine right of Archbishop Francis (Fatso) Spellman to rule New York like a Tammany boss, was going to roast in Hell for eternity – *those* guys?

White Catholics are the most liberal in their readiness to issue Admit One passes to the other groups; two out of three actually believe that “people with no religious faith” will go to heaven if they’re good, and half of them believe even atheists will. Wow.

But now for the bad news, which politically correct (I think) Mr. Blow deliberately ignored. While significant percentages of the three other groups thought others than themselves—even “people with no religion” and atheists—could go to heaven, Black Protestants were the least forthcoming. What percentage of Black Protestants thought that those of “no religion” and atheists—you know, us—had a chance at eternal life?

Zero and zero.

## **MORE SUGGESTIONS FOR THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S FIRST 100 DAYS**

*I would like* to see Obama and his administration end the war and significantly work toward world peace ... implement a national health program that is affordable for everyone ... make definitive strides toward reducing global warming ... institute secure measures for balancing the economy ... recognize gay marriage ... and would it be too much to ask that secularists be given more of a voice? — *Pamela Saunders*

**Obama would have to** renounce his socialistic “spread the wealth” program and admit that it was to con the “underprivileged” opportunists to vote for him. He would have to produce his elusive and controversial birth certificate, he would have to reveal, in full, his connections with Rod Blagojevich, he would have to show his connections with Rezko, and those with Rahm Emanuel, and expose all the sleazy machinations of the Chicago political machine.

Of course, he would never do any of these things, because that would be committing political suicide, leaving us with that waffling idiot, Joe Biden, for President.

— *Ed Goldsmith*

**End both wars**, close Guantanamo, reduce military spending, and observe the Geneva Conventions. Healthy economies can support social programs; excessive military expending saps social programs, with poor and middle class suffering most severely. Support public works programs, as well as both fair trade and unions, (Employee Free Choice Act). Work to renegotiate existing mortgages; restructure regulations of major banking transactions, future foreclosures, home mortgages, and bankruptcy. All transactions to be transparent. Sign Kyoto Protocol. First things first, but don't forget stem cell research, rights of ethnic minorities, women, LGBT, veterans benefits, universal health care, and increasing unemployment compensation. — *Lee Loshak*

**In order:** 1) get out of Iraq; 2) get out of Afghanistan; 3) get out of Kazakhstan; 4) get out of Uzbekistan; 5) get out of Kyrgyzstan; 6) get out of Tajikistan. — *Fitz*

**End the Office** of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. This “office” clearly is an unconstitutional idea, used by George W. Bush as an end run to divert tax monies into religious hands, most of which was given to Christian organizations often prejudiced by sectarian policies and discrimination.

Form a truly democratic Office of Unity and Community Support to support groups that explicitly do not discriminate or unconstitutionally promote religion, and instead promote programs that demonstrably improve the common good. — *Charles Alexander Zorn*

**I expect Obama** to stop sucking up to the Religious Right as he did throughout his campaign and as has done by selecting theocon Rick Warren to deliver the “invocation” at his inauguration.

I expect him to overturn all of Bush's restrictions on funding for international organizations supporting women's reproductive rights and on Bush's prohibition of federal funding for abortions for military personnel.

I expect him to overturn all discriminatory policies directed against gay military personnel.

I expect him to announce that harassment of non-religious cadets and service personnel at the nation's military academies and armed forces must cease.

— *Dennis Middlebrooks*

**Stop torture**, restore habeas corpus, close Guantanamo, turn American soldiers into a Peace Corps to help Afghans rebuild their shattered land, cut off all aid to Israel, tear



down their wall and end the occupation, and while you're at it make certain W, Cheney, et al, are held accountable before the world. — *Ronni Silbert*

***Stimulate the economy*** by ending the income tax, instituting a national sales tax instead. This would end slavery of the individual to the state, allowing productive people to create more jobs through business, consumption, or investment, and would tax the wealthy (who consume the most). Slash government spending (including, end the war), end all corporate welfare (industry bailouts, etc.), balance the budget immediately (including Social Security), and have the Federal Reserve peg the dollar to gold or some standard so bureaucrats can't keep debasing our currency. Don't sacrifice our individual economic and personal liberties on the altar of the state. — *Wayne G. Whitmore*

***George W. Bush*** issued many regulations overturning progress in environmental protection, reproductive health of women, enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, Constitutional protections, and others. Obama's staff should begin immediately to review all regs issued during the past eight years, and how to overturn them.

Also, the staff should review the performances of all Bush/Cheney appointees to such departments and agencies as: State, Justice, Labor, Interior, Homeland Security, Veterans Affairs, Health, Agriculture, NEA, NIH, NIMH, EEOC, and of course, the Judiciary; many were incompetent political appointees. Also, review and investigate private contracts issued for troop support and reconstruction in Iraq. — *Barbara Lifton*

***The first one hundred days*** should focus on the economy in this manner: job creation through public works programs and regulation of all the industries. Regulation of the industries from A-Z would create jobs for degreed members of our society. A corporate tax—on imports too—should be imposed to help pay for it. (I insist that you form a task force to investigate where the \$700 billion bailout went and is going. I want heads to roll and people jailed if they defrauded the government, the taxpayers!) Second, withdrawal from Iraq. Last, mandated renegotiated mortgages at reasonable rates. — *Sibanye*

***Universal health care.*** Don't let insurance companies control our health care.

Delete poverty. I'm not talking welfare, I mean decent jobs at decent pay.

Let scientific priorities be determined by scientists. Let's get serious about clean and green.

Remember that people who rise up against intolerable oppression are not the terrorists.

Restore the rule of law, delete the legacy of Ashcroft, Gonzales and Mukasey.

Get out of Russia's face; we don't need NATO in the Caucasus or a new cold war.

Restore the fairness doctrine.

Make it easy to vote.

A few thoughtful, left-of-center judges would be nice. — ***Bob Murtha***

***Get out of Iraq.*** Solve Afghanistan. Hunt down and kill Osama bin Laden. Give veterans the care and benefits they've earned. Re-commit to the Geneva Conventions. Restore the alliance of Western democracies.

Repeal the “Patriot” Act. Prosecute the torturers and those who authorized torture. De-politicize the Justice Department.

Starve the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives until it withers and dies. Sign the Kyoto Protocols. Put scientists in charge of science.

Re-regulate Wall Street and the banks. Make bailout money work for homeowners and small businesses, not banks. Make mass transit a priority.

Initiate a constitutional amendment to eliminate the Electoral College. — *John Rafferty*

***He’s got enough*** on his plate without my advice. I really am impressed with his choices and think there may be a good man at the helm. — *Art Harris*

Second thought, three days later: Destabilize Iran politically. The regime is hated by most of the population and funneling money to help the opposition might undermine the present regime. Not a U.S. boot on the ground, though. — *Art Harris (again)*

## SECULARISM AND LIBERTARIANISM:

### ROOTED IN REASON

Wayne Whitmore, M.D.

*On October 28, long-time SHSNY member Dr. Wayne Whitmore lectured to an appreciative SHSNY audience at the Muhlenberg Library. The following is his own précis of his provocative and well-received talk.*

In his talk, “Secularism and Libertarianism: Rooted in Reason,” Dr. Whitmore wanted us (secularists) to extend our powers of reasoning beyond disbelief in a god, to a defense of individual liberty, personal responsibility, and limited government envisioned by our Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and enacted in our Constitution. As a concerned citizen, he sees the slow erosion of our individual freedom over the past century, to a government that is becoming too powerful, too intrusive, and too restrictive. We are abdicating personal responsibility for our lives, to one of collective responsibility through big government regulations and social programs which we are forced to participate in and pay for.

The first part of his talk was spent reviewing the errors of reasoning involved in the arguments for the existence of a god. To do this, he reviewed the metaphysical concepts of existence, consciousness, the law of identity, and the law of causality. He reminded us that reason, through our five senses, is our only means to true knowledge, that language is the tool that allows us to integrate abstract conceptual information, and that consciousness is controlled by our free will. Thus true knowledge is awareness of the facts of reality, whereas belief (which may or may not be true in reality) is merely assent to or agreement with a statement. He also pointed out that ethics is a code of values directed toward enhancing and promoting the primary value, which is human life. The values of rationality, honesty, integrity, productiveness, and benevolence, reflect actions that sustain and enhance our lives as individuals.

The specific mystical arguments for the existence of a god and the logical fallacies involved in their debunking were: the cosmological or first cause argument, which violates metaphysical concepts of existence and causality; the argument from design, which violates the law of causality and invokes the logical fallacy of the argument from ignorance; the argument from miracles, which violates metaphysical concepts of

causality and identity, and invokes the logical fallacy of the argument from ignorance; the argument from revelation, which violates the metaphysical concept of causality and invokes the logical fallacies of the argument from ignorance and appeal to authority; and the argument that we need god as a source for spiritual and social values, which illustrates the logical fallacy of the argument from ignorance. The contradictory definitions of god as “all-knowing,” “all-powerful” and “all-good” violate the law of identity, the law of causality, and invoke the logical fallacy of circular reasoning. The existence of evil defies reason and is an ever-present conundrum for theists.

Dr. Whitmore then extended his reasoning to political philosophy by discussing the foundation of our country’s government. The moral foundation of the U.S., he reminded us, was the Declaration of Independence, which uses reason to uphold the ideal of individual liberty from a tyrannical government. Our Constitution is our legal foundation. It drew upon the common law tradition of liberty, property, and contract. These “rights” were “unalienable,” which meant that they were ours by right reason, and not given to us by government. Thus the Constitution was—and is—the doctrine for securing our rights as individuals and for preventing the government from becoming too powerful by specifically enumerating its powers. The Founding Fathers were so worried that the government would grow and infringe on our individual liberties that in 1791 they added the first ten amendments we know as the “Bill of Rights” to the Constitution after it was ratified. To emphasize that fear and protect the people, the 9th Amendment specifically states, “The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.”

Dr. Whitmore pointed out that this focus on the people as individuals, written into our Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, is what makes these such libertarian documents; libertarianism being the political philosophy that maximizes individual liberty under a rule of law. Libertarianism says, in effect, “You decide what to do with your body, your property, and your life as long as you respect another individual’s right to those same rights.”

Dr. Whitmore went on to discuss the logic behind libertarian positions on numerous political issues. First, he talked about how our Federal government infringes on our rights and liberties under the guise of helping to protect us from ourselves. He used the “war on drugs” to illustrate this point – how a victimless crime, in this case individual drug use, has been used by the federal government to create and abuse new search and seizure laws, and greatly increase government spending and regulation. The “war on drugs,” he says, destroys economies, changes governments, and finances terrorism throughout the world. The trillions of dollars wasted on this “war” since the 1970’s, he pointed out, could have been spent much more productively helping drug users to stop “using,” and on rehabilitation and education.

Next, he spoke about the libertarian position on foreign policy, which is non-interventionist, but does not prevent individual citizens from supporting any causes anywhere around the world (as long as they aren’t directly seditious to the U.S.). Dr. Whitmore pointed out that the U.S. military currently has a presence in 135 countries around the world and that NATO still exists despite the collapse of the Soviet Union. Perhaps, he suggested, if the US stopped its policy of “telling other countries how to run their governments,” we would not only be able to reduce defense spending, but we also

might serve less as a terrorist target and more as an example of how individual liberty and free markets work to bring happiness to the greatest number of people.

The libertarian position on healthcare is directly opposed to the popular idea of forced participation under a so-called “universal” policy. We all have rights to trade our money, our goods or our services and to acquire through free trade the things we as individuals perceive are necessary for our lives. But no one has a “right” to healthcare at someone else’s expense. Under our Constitution, we can’t make one group (or individual) pay for something another group (or individual) wants; this would be a blatant redistribution under the force of law, totally contrary to our Founding documents’ intention. On the other hand, we can improve healthcare, greatly reduce the cost of healthcare insurance, and thereby increase people’s incentive to buy it, through deregulation. This would include removing mandates on healthcare insurance, allowing people to purchase insurance in any state, creating transparency (through universal insurance forms and codes, as well as industry-wide standardized insurance plans), and provide a tax deduction for all people who buy insurance (not just those who get it through their employers). This must also be followed by strictly enforcing the contractual obligations of insurance companies and allowing individuals to keep their insurance policies wherever they are employed or unemployed.

Dr. Whitmore said that libertarians see Social Security as a coercive Ponzi scheme of sorts. Billed by FDR as a “retirement program,” it is actually a direct transfer of payments from workers to non-workers (retirees). The so-called “savings” (or Trust Fund) don’t exist since the money is spent immediately by the government on other things. The fox is guarding the henhouse. Libertarians would like to see people, and not the government, control their own retirement money. Rexford Tugwell, a member of FDR’s “brain trust,” three decades later called the New Deal programs “tortured interpretations of a doctrine (the Constitution) intended to prevent them.” The joke is on us – posterity.

Dr. Whitmore urged the audience to stand up for individual rights, to keep close watch on elected officials (and let them know you’re watching), and to vote for politicians who are “respectful” of our Constitution and who will preserve our liberties and freedom. It is very important, he said, that we understand that social liberties and economic freedom (the right to dispense one’s own money and property as one sees fit) are inseparable – you can’t have one without the other.

Dr. Whitmore concluded by asserting that reason is the basis for understanding the world and our place in it. That belief without reason is an abdication of our principal intellectual responsibility. And that reason is as important in understanding governmental issues as it is in understanding the fundamental issues of existence and knowledge.

### **JOHN ARENTS RESPONDS TO ART HARRIS**

*To the Editor:* Reference is made to “Aux Armes!” by Arthur Harris, PIQUE, January. It is offensive to me that a clergyman cannot exercise free speech in his pulpit for fear of losing his church’s tax exemption. He is supposed to be a moral leader as well as a spiritual and doctrinal leader. If a political position that is immoral by the standards of his church is prominently advocated, he would be negligent if he did not warn against it. This is all right as long as he does not name the candidates or parties that he is denouncing or praising. This omission is a mere subterfuge; everyone in his congregation will know

perfectly well who they are. Why should he have to go through this silly and embarrassing charade?

Churches are nonprofit organizations. They have no income to be taxed. The exemptions that Mr. Harris deplors are twofold: exemption from local real property taxes and the ability of contributors to deduct their contributions from their taxable income. My suggestion is not that churches be deprived of these privileges, but that they be extended to advocacy organizations like political parties and political action committees. One effect would be to increase political contributions, reducing the need for tax-supported funding of campaigns. Expanded local tax exemptions might strain municipal budgets, but a larger part of them should be provided by federal and state subsidies anyway. A poorer community has a greater, not lesser, need for services like police protection, education, and recreational facilities.

Let us treat all the haranguers alike, whether they are pushing salvation or perdition, liberality or frugality, freedom or constraint. — *John Arents*

#### **ART HARRIS RESPONDS TO THE RESPONSE**

***To the Editor:*** As one who takes Voltaire to heart, I do not wish to deprive anyone of their right to free speech, including the clergy. What I'm opposed to is the clergy flouting the rule that prevents them from openly endorsing a candidate, or as the Mormon church did recently, in mounting a campaign against California's Proposition 8 that went far beyond preaching from the pulpit.

It is one thing to preach to one's own followers and quite another to buy ads in newspapers and set up phone banks, etc., to promulgate one's views. This practice lends itself to distortion and subterfuge.

Much of the "information" offered is usually inflammatory, misleading and too often untrue, and unless the group offering that point of view is identified, the general public cannot evaluate it properly.

I agree in general with Mr. Arents that tax exemptions be extended to all advocacy groups, but let the churches share in the tax burden in any case. Keep in mind that government money finances religion-run hospitals that will not offer legal abortions, forcing women who wish or need one to travel far in many cases, and permits churches to deny employment to people who cannot pass their religious litmus tests. — Art Harris

#### **ELAINE LYNN CHASTENS JOHN RAFFERTY**

***To the Editor:*** Regarding your "Late Night Thoughts on the Start of the Just-Ended Season of Peace and Joy" in January PIQUE, I'd like to add a few more late afternoon thoughts of my own. Late night thoughts usually come into perspective in the morning. The synecdoche of one person's accident (the Wal-Mart employee trampled to death by Christmas shoppers) as a definition of horrible, evil, materialistic U.S. culture isn't really valid, I think. I would substitute something a little less morbid and a little more realistic.

Even in Paul Kurtz' piece ("Is Belief in God Essential for Moral Virtue?," January PIQUE, which I realize you are in no position to change), I think his characterization of "the hedonistic, particularly American, brand of intemperate consumption" is a straw man. Everywhere people have disposable income, and most of them run to spend it on material things (even buying other people in some places). The biggest difference between horrible American consumerism and everyone else's is that we have more of

that income and it's distributed across a larger percentage of the population. — *Elaine Lynn*

### **GIDDIAN BEER TAKES ON PAUL KURTZ, TOO**

*To the Editor*: "Is God Essential for Moral Virtue?" (PIQUE, January) by Paul Kurtz, is a rather smug statement of human "moral sense" (of which I have no doubt at all) without any mention of the at least equally prevalent human wickedness and depravity. — *Giddian Beer*

### **ANOTHER SETBACK FOR MUSLIM "WOMEN"**

An eight-year-old Saudi Arabian girl was denied a divorce from her 58-year-old husband because she was too young to file. — *Harper's Weekly*, 12/30/08

### **SELF-HYPNOSIS**

**Alfred Henick**

I must confess to being deficient in the reading and knowledge of the great philosophers of the last few centuries, and their views of religion. If my ideas have been previously proclaimed by others, and they probably were, attribute that to my ignorance, not to plagiarism. But I have some thoughts that I must share with anyone who is interested.

It amazes me how so many prominent, respected, and intelligent-appearing people subscribe to the most absurd beliefs, which they would scoff at if they were called by any name other than "religion." Some of their fantasies make Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy sound plausible. To believe in an omnipotent Being who monitors some six billion humans simultaneously is very difficult to accept, especially without a shred of scientific evidence. What's worse, there is a mountain of evidence by "reason" that He does not exist. I'm sure I don't need to enumerate the various catastrophes, plagues, holocausts, and assorted horrors that afflict so many millions of innocent worshipers, for whom not a God-like finger is lifted in assistance. And don't let anyone repeat to me the cop-out that they are taken to another imaginary world of bliss. All one needs do is witness the pain and suffering of children in a cancer hospital for months before they die. Is this part of their salvation?

The same God who is held in such adulation by so many was supposed to have created this earth. If so, He furnished it with not only hundreds of devastating diseases and catastrophes, but also with thousands of species of beautiful creatures of every description, most of whom kill and eat each other in order to survive. Of course, the most prolific predator of all is Man, who not only kills and eats millions of animals (the younger the better), but raises and grows them for that purpose. You or I, and certainly any budding scientist, could have designed a better arrangement for survival.

Assume, for one moment, that the God that most of the religions of the world worship really exists. Since all these religions contradict one another in some way, only one could be correct. Why does not God, in a booming voice, say, "Look, the right religion is number 236, and all the others are false!?" Think of the millions of lives He could have saved from slaughter in the name of religion.

The average American prides himself in being skeptical about most things—you know, "Show me, I'm from Missouri." Except when religion is concerned, a sort of self-hypnosis takes over. It's called "faith."

*P.S.: In the recent national college football championship game, Tim Tebow, the quarterback of the winning Florida team thanked Jesus Christ in a post-game interview for letting him win. Didn't Jesus like Sam Bradford, the quarterback of the losing Oklahoma team? Maybe God took the points.*

**Ed:** Thanking Jesus for the cameras has become a ritual – what could be called in football “an automatic.” What was new in that game was quarterback Tebow greasepainting “John” under his right eye and “3:16” under his left, so that every time the camera was on him—only every play of the game—a national audience of millions got the “John ... 3:16” New Testament message.

One wonders what his coach, his college, the NCAA, or the TV network would have done if instead he'd spelled out “Allah ... akbar” or “There is ... no God.” — JR

### **LET'S GIVE THE LAST WORD(S) TO DARWIN**

“It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.”

“In the long history of mankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.”

“To kill an error is as good a service as, and sometimes even better than, establishing a new truth or fact.”

“The highest possible stage in moral culture is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts.”

“How so many absurd rules of conduct, as well as so many absurd religious beliefs, have originated, we do not know; nor how it is that they have become, in all quarters of the world, so deeply impressed on the minds of men; but it is worthy of remark that a belief constantly inculcated during the early years of life, while the brain is impressionable, appears to acquire almost the nature of an instinct; and the very essence of an instinct is that it is followed independently of reason.”

“Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress and have never since doubted for even a single second that my conclusion was correct.”

“It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing in the bushes and various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and yet so dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object we are capable of conceiving, namely the production of higher animals, directly follows. There is a grandeur in this view of life.”

[Head shot pic of young Darwin]