

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

January, 2009

We begin the year with depressing assessments of our future and of the season just past, but end celebrating a talented new (to us) freethinker. In between, we tell the new President what to do, consider church tax exemptions and an unusual political alliance.

We review a play, vote on 2008's Dumbth-est, wonder if human evolution is over, if there ever was a Mohammed, if we're alone in the universe, and whether God is morally necessary or just a cigar-smoking, lazy lout. — JR

HAPPY NEW YEAR

(Excerpted from reports on CNNPolitics.com, 11/20/08, BBC News, 11/21, and Harper's Weekly, 11/25.)

The U.S. National Intelligence Council released a report to U.S. policymakers intended to prepare them for a future of waning U.S. influence as countries including China, India, and Russia grow in standing. The report suggests the dollar may be replaced as the world's major currency, and that demand for oil, food, and water "will outstrip easily available supplies" and lead to global conflicts. "Conditions will be ripe for disaffection, growing radicalism ... youths into terrorist groups ... all current technologies are inadequate. This," it concluded, "is a story with no clear outcome."

"The U.S. will remain the single most important actor but will be less dominant," the report says, and by 2025 its biggest rival will be China, which will be the world's second largest economy, be a leading military power, and is expected to become the world's biggest polluter and largest importer of natural resources.

Other countries such as India and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia, Iran and Turkey, will also likely see their power—and desire for natural resources—increase.

"Strategic rivalries are most likely to revolve around trade, investments and technological innovation and acquisition, but we cannot rule out a 19th century-like scenario of arms races, territorial expansion and military rivalries" which could lead to the collapse of governments in Africa and South Asia, and the rise of organized crime in Eastern and Central Europe.

And the use of nuclear weapons will grow increasingly likely, the report says, as "rogue states" and militant groups gain greater access to them.

The (relatively) Good News

But al-Qaeda could decay "sooner than people think," the report says, citing the group's growing unpopularity in the Muslim world, "given its harsh ideology, unachievable strategic objectives and inability to become a mass movement."

And overall, the BBC found it worth noting, U.S. intelligence has been wrong before.

**LATE NIGHT THOUGHTS ON THE START OF THE
JUST-ENDED SEASON OF PEACE AND JOY**

John Rafferty

Ten years ago the term “Black Friday”—denoting the beginning of the Christmas shopping season on the day after Thanksgiving—was unknown; today it is part of the common lexicon, and TV newscasts on Black Friday evening predictably lead with frenzied scenes of frantic shoppers bursting through store doors.

As most readers of PIQUE surely know, on that Friday six weeks ago an employee of a Wal-Mart store in Valley Stream, one Jdimypai Damour, 34, was trampled to death by 2,000 onrushing “shoppers,” some of whom had been waiting since 9:00 the previous evening, when that store’s doors were opened at 5:00 a.m. “Hundreds of people,” a local policeman reported, “walked past him, over him or around him” while officers tried to do CPR.

Afterward, our local newspapers wrung their hands editorially over the frenzy, while ignoring the fact that they had all promoted Black Friday in the days before, retail store advertising being one of the few surviving income sources for newspapers. Even the good, gray *Times* had a “Black Friday Shopping Survival Guide” on a blog, and Long Island’s own *Newsday* offered a “Black Friday blueprint,” with store openings listed so shoppers could plot strategy, including a note that at 5:00 a.m. customers at that Green Acres Wal-Mart could buy a 42-inch LCD TV for \$598. Many shoppers continued to pursue that particular bargain even as Damour lay dying.

Am I the only one who is struck by the geographic and chronological facts that with a 5:00 a.m. opening time on Long Island, in the country’s Eastern (earliest) time zone, there was probably not an earlier beginning to the “Christmas shopping season” in all of the nation? And that the very first event of the 2008 “season of peace and joy” in America was the homicidal act of a mindless, consumerism-crazed mob?

Joy to the world.

IS BELIEF IN GOD ESSENTIAL FOR MORAL VIRTUE?

Paul Kurtz

(From the 11/20/08 “On Faith” column in The Washington Post – forwarded by Edith Amster)

A growing sector of world civilization is secular; that is, it emphasizes worldly rather than religious values. This is especially true of Europe, which is widely considered post-religious and post-Christian (with a small Islamic minority). Secularist winds are also blowing strong in Asia, notably in Japan and China. The United States has been an anomaly in this regard, for it has suffered a long dark night in which evangelical fundamentalism has overshadowed the public square, with its insistence that belief in God is essential for moral virtue. This is now changing and secularism is gaining ground.

The “new atheists” have attempted to balance the scales, for religious dissent until now has been largely muffled. They have appealed to science to criticize the unexamined claims of religion. This has shocked conservative religionists, who respond that atheists are “too negative.” Perhaps, but this overlooks the fact that there are varieties of unbelief and that secular humanists (the *bête noire* of fundamentalists during the Reagan years) define their outlook affirmatively in the light of positive ethical values, not by what they are against but what they are for.

Secular humanists are generally nonreligious, yet they are also good citizens, loving parents and decent people. They look to science, the secular arts and literature for their

inspiration, not religion. They point out that religious belief is no guarantee of moral probity, that horrendous crimes have been committed in the name of God, and that religionists often disagree vehemently about concrete moral judgments (such as euthanasia, the rights of women, abortion, homosexuality, war and peace).

The ethics of secular humanism traces its roots back to the beginnings of Western civilization in Greece and Rome, through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the scientific and democratic revolutions of the modern world. Secular humanists today affirm that every person should be considered equal in dignity and value and that human freedom is precious. The civic virtues of democracy are essentially humanist, for they emphasize tolerance of the wide diversity of beliefs and lifestyles, and they are committed to defending human rights.

But, “how can you be ethical if you do not believe in God?” protests the believer. Perhaps such a person should enroll in an elementary course in ethics, where there is a rich philosophical literature dealing with this question. The good is usually defined as “happiness” though there are differences between the eudemonistic, emphasizing enriched self-development, and the hedonistic, particularly American, brand of intemperate consumption. Perhaps a harmonious integration of the two theories can be achieved. I would call it rational exuberance. Philosophers have emphasized the importance of self-restraint, temperance, rational prudence, a life in which satisfaction, excellence, and the creative fulfillment of a person’s talents is achieved. It does not mean that “anything goes.” Humanist ethics focuses on the good life here and now.

Secularists recognize the centrality of self-interest. Every individual needs to be concerned with his or her own health, well-being, and career. But self-interest can be enlightened. This involves recognition that we have responsibilities to others. There are principles of right and wrong that we should live by. No doubt there are differences about many moral issues. Often there may be difficulties in achieving a consensus. Negotiation and compromise are essential in a pluralistic society.

However, there is now substantial evidence drawn from evolutionary biology that humans possess a moral sense (see Marc Hauser, Steven Pinker, and David Sloan Wilson). Morality has its roots in group survival; the moral practices that evolved enabled tribes or clans to survive and function. This means that human beings are potentially moral. Whether or not this moral sense develops depends on social and environmental conditions. Some individuals may never fully develop morally – they may be morally handicapped, even sociopaths. That is one reason why society needs to enact laws to protect itself.

There is also of course cultural relativity, but there are, I submit, also a set of common moral decencies that cut across cultures – such as being truthful, honest, keeping promises, being dependable and responsible, avoiding cruelty, etc., and these in time become widely recognized as binding. Herein lie the roots of empathy and caring for other human and sentient beings. Such behavior needs to be nourished in the young by means of moral education. In any case, human beings are capable of both self-interested and altruistic behavior in varying degrees.

Secular humanists wish to test ethical principles in the light of their consequences, and they advise the use of rational inquiry to frame moral judgments. They also appreciate the fact that some principles are so important that they should not be easily sacrificed to achieve one’s ends.

To say that a person is moral only if he or she obeys God's commandments—out of fear or love of God or a desire for salvation—is hardly adequate. Ethical principles need to be internalized, rooted in reason and compassion. The ethics of secularism is autonomous, in the sense that it need not be derived from theological grounds. Secular humanists are interested in enhancing the good life both for the individual and society. Today, a new imperative has emerged: an awareness that our ethical concerns should extend to all members of the global community. This points to a new planetary ethics transcending the ancient religious, ethnic, racial, and national enmities of the past. It is an ethic that recognizes our common interests and needs as part of an interdependent world.

Secular humanists don't believe in God, and they don't steal. – (*Who said this? I've lost the attribution.* – JR)

AUX ARMES!

Arthur Harris

The time for those who value “Freedom from Religion” to become very active in resisting the never ceasing efforts of the religious to use secular law to enforce their beliefs on a general public may have finally arrived, in that non-believers are a growing minority.

No longer a fringe, fully 18 percent of the U.S. population do not list themselves as believers or members of any religion. An additional substantial segment of the population admits that while they refer to themselves as Christian or Jewish or whatever, they rarely attend religious services or do so only on a few specific holidays.

There is no reason why all Americans should carry water for religion. Most churches abrogated any semblance of the reason for the tax exemption which was given on the grounds that they were charitable, gave their services free and only preached salvation with no strings attached. Now, the government pays them to operate hospitals, old age homes and a myriad of other services which they charge for and may profit from. It also permits them to decide which services they can refuse to provide to patients and to discriminate in hiring.

If the true believers want to prevent abortion and gay marriage within their flocks, I have no reason to oppose them and I agree that they have the right to reach out to others to join them in those beliefs.

What I oppose is the blatant disregard that some churches have for the prohibition against politicizing from the pulpit. The recent and successful effort by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) in California to prevent gays from marrying is an example. The LDS church willfully crossed that line, knowing the current administration and Supreme Court would look the other way.

Not being gay, I don't have a dog in that fight. But angered by the never-ending attempts of the religious to try to force non-adherents into observing, even obeying their beliefs has allied me with the gays. Please explain how two gays living in Massachusetts, and marrying, affects a farmer living in Iowa.

However, a new dawn may be in the making with Supreme Court justices being appointed by the new administration. I believe that a real effort to sue to revoke the tax privileges of the LDS should be undertaken soon. It will take years before such a case

could wend its way up to the Supreme Court and by that time one or more appointments by Obama could tilt the scales.

When Barry Lynn of Americans United informed the IRS about Pastor Wiley Drake and his pulpit endorsements of Mike Huckabee, Drake urged his parishioners to pray for Lynn's and Lynn's family's death or disfigurement. ("Wiley," what a wonderful name for that pastor, but his last name is the wrong animal. I can think of several better choices.)

Should we succeed against the Mormons, other churches might withdraw into their shells, fearful of losing their tax exemptions, although I would love to see a challenge to all churches on that score alone.

The gay movement, allied with non-believers and the indifferent, ought to bring out enough voters to firm up the spines of those elected officials who kiss the ring of the religious right. No doubt many other Americans would join in to help abolish the free ride the churches get that was never written into the Constitution.

Secularism is not about being anti-religious, it is about civility and keeping people's faith, or indeed lack of it, separate from the workings of the state. — *Paul Pettinger, National Secular Society (UK) Newslines, 8/28/08*

15 ANSWERS TO CREATIONIST NONSENSE

Parts 3-4

John Rennie

(The "15 Answers" were given at ScientificAmerican.com in 2002. Since they are often detailed, we are reprinting or excerpting two or three "Answers" at a time. Answers 1 and 2 appeared in December, 2008 PIQUE, 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.

3. Evolution is unscientific, because it is not testable or falsifiable. It makes claims about events that were not observed and can never be re-created.

This blanket dismissal of evolution ignores important distinctions that divide the field into at least two broad areas: microevolution and macroevolution. Microevolution looks at changes within species over time – changes that may be preludes to speciation, the origin of new species. Macroevolution studies how taxonomic groups above the level of species change. Its evidence draws from the fossil record and DNA comparisons to reconstruct how organisms may be related.

These days even most creationists acknowledge that microevolution has been upheld by tests in the laboratory (as in studies of cells, plants and fruit flies) and in the field (as in Grant's studies of evolving beak shapes among Galápagos finches). Natural selection and other mechanisms—such as chromosomal changes, symbiosis and hybridization—can drive profound changes in populations over time.

The historical nature of macroevolutionary study involves inference from fossils and DNA rather than direct observation. Yet in the historical sciences (which include astronomy, geology and archaeology, as well as evolutionary biology), hypotheses can

still be tested by checking whether they accord with physical evidence and whether they lead to verifiable predictions about future discoveries. For instance, evolution implies that between the earliest-known ancestors of humans (roughly five million years old) and the appearance of anatomically modern humans (about 100,000 years ago), one should find a succession of hominid creatures with features progressively less apelike and more modern, which is indeed what the fossil record shows. But one should not—and does not—find modern human fossils embedded in strata from the Jurassic period (144 million years ago). Evolutionary biology routinely makes predictions far more refined and precise than this, and researchers test them constantly.

Evolution could be disproved in other ways, too. If we could document the spontaneous generation of just one complex life-form from inanimate matter, then at least a few creatures seen in the fossil record might have originated this way. If superintelligent aliens appeared and claimed credit for creating life on earth (or even particular species), the purely evolutionary explanation would be cast in doubt. But no one has yet produced such evidence.

It should be noted that the idea of falsifiability as the defining characteristic of science originated with philosopher Karl Popper in the 1930s. More recent elaborations have expanded the narrowest interpretation of his principle precisely because it would eliminate too many branches of clearly scientific endeavor.

4. Increasingly, scientists doubt evolution's truth.

No evidence suggests that evolution is losing adherents. Pick up any issue of a peer-reviewed biological journal, and you will find articles that support and extend evolutionary studies or that embrace evolution as a fundamental concept. Conversely, serious scientific publications disputing evolution are all but nonexistent. In the mid-1990s George W. Gilchrist surveyed thousands of journals in the primary literature, seeking articles on intelligent design or creation science. Among those hundreds of thousands of scientific reports, he found none. In the past two years, surveys done independently at Southeastern Louisiana University and Case Western Reserve have been similarly fruitless.

Creationists retort that a closed-minded scientific community rejects their evidence. Yet according to the editors of *Nature*, *Science* and other leading journals, few antievolution manuscripts are even submitted. Some antievolution authors have published papers in serious journals. Those papers, however, rarely attack evolution directly or advance creationist arguments; at best, they identify certain evolutionary problems as unsolved and difficult (which no one disputes). In short, creationists are not giving the scientific world good reason to take them seriously.

BOB DICKHOFF RECOMMENDS ...

... the exhibition, “Climate Change: The Threat to Life and a New Energy Future” at the American Museum of Natural History, which explores the science and history of climate change, how it will probably affect all of us, and offers possible solutions to the problems.

I recommend it to all humanists and others who care about the future of our planet. The exhibition runs through August 16, and tickets can be ordered by phone: (212) 769-5200, or at the American Museum web site: [www .amnh.org](http://www.amnh.org).

AND THE 2008 SHSNY DUMBTH AWARD GOES TO ... YOU CHOOSE!

Our Dumbth Award is SHSNY's annual tribute to the witless and/or willfully ignorant among us, the chowderheads who don't know, and the mean-spirited who don't care about reason, rationality, science or truth.

Like the recipient of our first award, 2005 winner and ex-TV talk-show personality *Star Jones*, who said God blessed her by postponing the Indian Ocean tsunami until after her honeymoon. And 2006 winner televangelist *Pat Robertson*, who claimed God gave Israel's Ariel Sharon a stroke for negotiating with the Palestinians. Last year's winner (nominated again this year), right-wing harridan *Ann Coulter*, suggested that all Jews in America "be perfected" by becoming Christians.

For your consideration this year we have a fine crop of dunderheads, any of whom would be worthy of the not-so-coveted horse's-ass statuette. Careful readers of PIQUE will notice that we have cut our list of nominees from seven (see PIQUE, December, 2008) to a more manageable five, eliminating Randi ("*Eliot Spitzer spent \$80,000 on women – that's cool*") Rhodes and Tony ("*I thought those National Socialists I spoke to were socialists, and that they were honoring Steven Hitler*") Zirkle.

VOTE

[boxes next to pictures of each candidate]

MICHAEL BARONE, the political commentator, outraged at what he considers the unfair treatment by the media of Republican Vice Presidential candidate, Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska, said on November 11: "*The liberal media attacked Sarah Palin because she did not abort her Down syndrome baby. They wanted her to kill that child.*"

ANN COULTER, our 2007 winner, told a cheering crowd at the Claire Booth Luce Society (think WASP-y Ann Coulter wannabees) early this year that: "*Biologists believe in evolution, not real scientists like physicists and chemists.*"

NEWT GINGRICH, commenting about individual gay protests after the passage of anti-gay-marriage Proposition 8 in California, announced: "*There is a gay and secular fascism in this country that wants to impose its will on the rest of us, is prepared to use violence, to use harassment.*"

SALLY KERN, who regularly introduces anti-gay and pro-creationism bills in the Oklahoma State House of Representatives and who, in April, stood up in that august venue and declared that: "*Homosexuality is the biggest threat our country has, even more so than terrorism or Islam.*"

BEN STEIN, promoting his mendacious movie, "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed," in which he tries to blame the Holocaust on Darwin, said in a radio interview: "*Dachau is where science leads you. Love of God and compassion and empathy leads you to a glorious place, and science leads you to killing people.*"

Who gets the un-coveted horse's-ass award for 2008? Mail this ballot (or a copy) to: SHSNY, P.O. Box 7661, FDR Station, New York, NY 10150-1913. Or, even better and

faster, e-mail your choice to editor@shsny.org *by January 31, 2009*. The winner will be announced in the March issue of PIQUE.

**THE SHSNY/CFI-NEW YORK THEATER GROUP
SEES – AND REVIEWS – “THE ATHEIST”**

Martine Reed

“The Atheist” ought to be entitled *The Egoist*, since the play, a one-man show, is concentrated on the life and angst of one self-indulgent man, and deals only in passing with issues of belief and disbelief. As a member of SHSNY, I was, of course, hoping with some naiveté, when 20-or-so of us gathered at Theatre de Lys for a matinee performance December 6, for a drama where an atheist would be a well-meaning hero, crushing the hypocrisy of the believers. In that sense, and that sense only, I was at first a bit disappointed. It’s irksome to see an atheist depicted as someone who eliminates God from his worldview simply for the convenience of doing whatever he wants. Most atheists and agnostics are not that unidimensional, and do try to do the right thing. However, the play is far deeper and more meaningful. It is also brilliantly written, fast-paced, and compelling, and the solo actor, Scott Campbell, is magnificent.

Good theater is based on tension and conflicts. Our anti-hero may have rejected God and all morality for the sake of serving only his own needs, but nevertheless, he has ideals. He yearns for the authenticity of true selflessness, of unconditional love. He does not find it in his mother, in his young girlfriend or his older mistress. He, the atheist, may act ruthlessly to create a name for himself as a muckraking journalist, but the most sordid and venal acts are committed, in fact, by others, including some who claim to be pillars of the church and society. Our atheist, at least, does not claim respectability.

I wish great success for the play and its actor, although the reviews so far have been lackluster. Maybe the very title frightens audiences? Actually, there is one tiny little thing in the play which may rub people the wrong way, and gratuitously at that, although I found it quite in keeping with the desperately sardonic tone.

The character refers to a certain beloved talk-show hostess as “Fat O.” Big mistake! You can spit on God and burn the flag, but thou shalt not trash Oprah.

**LARRY BEINHART READS (JUST A LITTLE)
FROM SALVATION BOULEVARD**

Mystery writer Larry Beinhart, author of *American Hero*, the novel on which the hit movie “Wag the Dog” (January’s SHSNY Movie Night selection) was based, entertained an SHSNY/CFI-New York gathering December 9.

The verb “entertained” is apt because Mr. Beinhart’s talk, which broadly considered the condition of and prospects for today’s freethought community in America (“We need leadership, our own Elmer Gantry”), was as witty as it was wide-ranging and informative. So was the lively Q&A session that followed, and an hour or more of excellent dinner-table talk that eight of us enjoyed (all were invited) at a nearby restaurant afterward.

Mr. Beinhart’s newest novel is *Salvation Boulevard*, about the murder of an atheist professor, ostensibly by a Muslim student. The student’s lawyer is Jewish, and he hires a born-again Christian investigator to get to the truth. While making a point in his talk about the enduring questions of faith and morality, Mr. Beinhart read only one passage from the book, and it was a beaut.

In the passage, the young Muslim accused of the murder of the atheist Professor MacLeod remembers a Socratic moment in the class.

“The subject was the problem of evil: if God is good, all knowing, all powerful, and the creator of all things, how can there be evil in the world? It’s a very old question, going back at least to Epicurus, around 300 BC. There is a whole subcategory of theology, called theodicy, that is still attempting to deal with it twenty-three hundred years later.

MacLeod was presenting his own version, which was colorful, and had a little twist at the end.

A man is sitting beside a pool, enjoying his cigar and a Mojita. A woman and her child are nearby. A stone falls out of the sky and knocks the woman out. Unattended, the child falls into the pool. It’s only three feet deep, so it would be easy for the man to get up and rescue the toddler, but he sits by and watches the child drown.

When the woman wakes up, she finds her baby dead. She screams and weeps. She yells at the man smoking his cigar, “Why didn’t you save my baby?” The man tells her she should be grateful for this great chance to experience grief and loss. Further-more, she should love and adore him for giving her that opportunity.

Then MacLeod asked the class if they thought the man’s actions were evil. Everyone had to agree that they were, but the metaphor was obvious, and one student spoke up. “That’s true for a man,” he said, “but not for God. God moves in mysterious ways, and we can’t understand the mind of God.”

“Fine,” MacLeod said. “Let’s accept that for the moment. Here’s the question, the real question. We all agree that the man was evil. How is it that we hold ourselves to a higher moral standard than we hold God?”

OBAMA’S FIRST HUNDRED DAYS: OUR 100-WORD SUGGESTIONS

What I most want the Obama administration to accomplish is the enforcement of equal rights for all citizens. This is one of the great ideals to which the United States has always aspired, and one of the primary reasons I voted for Obama, because his opponent would have opposed equal pay for women as well as same-sex marriage. The election of an African-American president is in itself a major step forward in equality, but we have a long way to go, and considering his background, Obama should take that into account. –
Anton Spivak

Increase science funding, close Guantanamo.– *Diane Ezer*

Do something to help the 32 million American children who don’t get enough to eat. –
Robert F. Dickhoff

Our citizenry badly need economic security to save their homes. Please create more jobs, and give economic help and security to those who will or are about to lose their homes and possessions. Provide health care to all who need it and can’t afford a private

plan. Our great nation needs strong, healthy and secure citizens to compete in a global economy.

Our country depends on a big middle class who work, pay their bills and taxes, and stay healthy. Re-align our tax structure more fairly so those who work can keep more of their hard-earned income. – *Edith Amster*

Immediately cancel and discontinue the unconstitutional giveaways of taxpayer money to “faith-based” institutions. – *Harry Greenberger*

He should do what ACLU tells him to do. I don’t need 100 words for that. – *Bill Lindley*

Most important is restoration of the rule of law, from an end to torture and indeterminate, uncharged lock-ups to an end to signing statements and “I am the law” philosophy. At home the administration must develop a universal health plan; globally the Obama team must regain our international respect by cooperating with other nations on climate control, and on military, economic and health matters so that the whole world will be safer and can prosper together.

Obviously, control of the bailout money needs to be given to someone concerned about all Americans, not just the Wall Streeters. – *Mary Ellen Goodman*

Late in Bush’s first term, the President put through measures limiting and delaying Freedom of Information Act requests, placing more government documents into a higher security status than before, and making the workings of the federal government less open to the people. I would like to see these reversed. – *Brian Lemaire*

Hang in there! The vast right wing conspiracy to ruin the U.S. is still alive! – *Giddian Beer*

I would like to see the new president abolish the faith-based initiatives program. I would also like to see full diplomatic relations with Cuba and an end to the embargo of that nation. – *James Holmes*

End the war on “terrorism.” Pull out of Iraq, then Afghanistan. There were no Afghans on the 9/11 planes, nor did they plan or finance it. There were training camps, but the Taliban was willing to close them. Our excuse for invading was they didn’t turn over bin Laden. We’ve been there seven years, but still haven’t caught him. Al Qaeda doesn’t “live” in Afghanistan; it lives in the minds of Muslims who resent US aggression. Leave the Arab world and stop supporting Israel’s theft of Arab land, and oppression of Palestinians. That done, negotiate a truce with bin Laden. – *Flash Light*

Dear Mr. President-Elect:
As you fix what George Bush wrecked
By the second of May, would you kindly
Mend my bank account and find me
Some money to pay my expense
Of groceries and power and rent?

I'll be grateful if you could
Throw in some new clothes should
The climate grow warmer
Than the Ice Age (the former),
And a little largesse
When we're out of this mess.
Some new jewels would be nice
And some wine once or twice,
And it would not be an onus
If Art got a bonus.
I rest my case.
Sincerely, Your Base,
– Donna Marxer

The central lesson of the “Great Depression” is the need to stabilize the economy. Hoover’s failure was strict adherence to market principles. His policies resulted in an “economic abyss.” FDR sensed the problem was psychological as well as economic. He reassured Americans with his call to above all, try something. Obama has done this; he must also avoid Hoover’s disastrous initiatives: raising taxes and limiting imports. Obama’s priority is to reflate the economy: create public works, continue unemployment insurance, help the states and small businesses, encourage Americans to believe that government’s role in their lives is both necessary and right.

– Remo Cosentino

AND GUESS WHAT THE REST OF THE COUNTRY WANTS HIM TO DO

(From Brinna’s Broadside blog on opensalon.com, 12/12)

President-elect Obama’s website, Change.gov offers us the chance to communicate our hopes, dreams, fears and needs. This is governance from the ground up, the way it was meant to be. A new program on the website is one where citizens may pose specific questions, and others can vote on their importance, bringing significant questions to the top of the list.

In the short six-and-a-half hours the “Open for Questions” segment of Obama’s change.gov website actually stayed open, 7300 questions were posted, 10,000 people participated and 600,000 votes were cast for the most important issues on people’s minds. Guess which question had the most votes?

“Will you consider legalizing marijuana so that the government can regulate it, tax it, put age limits on it, and create millions of new jobs and create a billion dollar industry right here in the U.S.?”

Yes, with all the difficult issues facing us, marijuana legalization was the most prominent in people’s minds. ... Here’s a quick tally. Two of the top ten, and six of the top twenty questions addressed our government’s policies surrounding cannabis (recreational and medicinal) and the “War on Drugs” in general.

Apparently, the arrest of nearly 1,000,000 otherwise law abiding citizens each year for mere possession of cannabis, the persecution of the sick and dying, and the continued

incarceration of one of every 100 adults, (and the imprisonment, jailing, probation or parole of one of every 31 adults) is finally getting on peoples' nerves,

These questions will not go away. I'm afraid lawmakers around the country will have to suck it up and realize that, as Barney Frank put it, "This is an issue where the public is way ahead of the politicians."

Ed. Note: Aside from the facts that billions of dollars are wasted pursuing and jailing marijuana "criminals" and the lives of tens of thousands of non-violent citizens have been ruined (and that the entire 40-year "War on Drugs" is a colossal failure – laughable if its effects weren't so tragic), this is an issue that perhaps only a new President, who has already admitted to smoking weed and even "trying" cocaine (uh-huh) can address. Not head-on, as in legalizing pot—that would be political suicide—but perhaps sideways, as in relaxing enforcements, shifting emphases, reducing mandatory sentences, etc., until the public gets the idea.

But one thing the "Open for Questions" experience on Obama's change.gov website illustrates is that marijuana advocates are politically aware, active, and know how to use the Internet to advance their ideas. Would Art Harris (see "Aux Armes!" page 3) consider allying with them to 1) abolish church tax exemptions, and 2) legalize pot? – JR

YES, WE ARE REALLY, REALLY ALONE

Chic Schissel

I agree with Giddian Beer ("Are We Alone?" November PIQUE and follow-up letters in December) that in our galaxy, the Milky Way, we are very likely alone, alone in the sense that there is not another living species in the galaxy able to communicate with us. Beer gives us his reasons, and I would like to add a few others.

1. Our solar system sits on the very edge of the Milky Way and our planet enjoys rotating and orbital speeds and a distance from our sun that enable a stable planetary temperature, generally from zero to one hundred degrees centigrade. These conditions on Earth are favorable to life as we know it, but such conditions are extremely rare throughout the galaxy. Most of the other planets are more to the galaxy's interior and are subject to greater energy turbulence and instability, resulting in widely fluctuating temperatures and probable chaotic climates. To communicate to us over distance requires a metals technology refined to produce controlled electromagnetic radiation; this cannot be done if the metals are alternately frozen, melted, or gaseous. Nor is it likely that a technologically adept (TA) species can evolve in conditions of volatile instability.

2. Even if a TA species has managed to evolve and has learned to communicate using tools suitable to a turbulent environment (perhaps light waves or a method unknown to us) we would not have the technology to receive and interpret such messages.

3. Life has been on Earth some three billion years, but only in the last century has an Earth life form been able to devise a metals technology with the capability to communicate. This comes down to one thirty millionth of the time life has been on Earth, but even this greatly overstates the possibility. In our case TA was the result of a wide range of random biological, social, and historical occurrences; the chances of this happening were infinitesimal. Even should a TA species evolve somewhere else and develop the ability to send messages we could receive and interpret, the timing of the event would certainly be off by eons – Beer points this out.

4. Carl Sagan was a hero to us, but I think the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence (SETI) is a waste of time.

Sometimes I think the surest sign that intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe is that none of it has tried to contact us. – *Bill Watterson, cartoonist*

EVOLUTION IS SO OVER ... OR NOT

Ruth N. Geller

(Excerpted from HumanistNetworkNews.org, 10/15/08. Ms Geller is the editor of Humanist Network News.)

Is this as good as it gets for the human race? Award-winning geneticist Steve Jones thinks that we are as smart, fit, healthy and strong as we are going to be. According to Jones, the evolution of the human race, if not stopped dead in its tracks, has at least slowed to a snail-like crawl.

Jones puts a large part of the blame on the fact that there are fewer men becoming fathers past the age of 35 than in earlier times.

There are three components to evolution: natural selection, mutation and random change. The reduced number of older men fathering children in the Western world, along with use of contraception and marriage patterns, are affecting our genetic future, according to Jones.

In a BBC Today radio interview on Oct. 7, Jones said, “We’ve made evolution stop almost by accident. ... Evolution turns on inherited differences in the ability to reproduce, it turns on errors in DNA, and variations in the number of children people have. And all its components, which we understand pretty well now, at least for the time being and at least in the developed world seem to have lost some of their power.

“No variation equals no natural selection.”

According to Jones, in Charles Darwin’s day half of all British children were dead by the age of 21; in present times 99 percent of them are still alive. Many of the children died from genetic reasons, making them raw material for natural selection.

Jones thinks that because of global movement and interracial mixing, the face of the future will be “brown.” He doesn’t think that our brains will be bigger in the future, or that we are in fact smarter than our ancestors – just that our brains are more capable of making greater connections.

Jones is a professor of genetics and head of the Genetics, Evolution and Environment department at University College London (UCL) who is well known in the U.K. He has written or co-written six scientific books. *The Language of the Genes* and *In the Blood* have seen multiple reprints.

Perhaps his most heralded work is *Darwin’s Ghost: The Origin of Species Updated* (1999), which was published in the U.K. as *Almost Like a Whale*.

Jones has spent years researching the ecological genetics of snails, fruit flies and humans in an attempt to answer a question. On his UCL faculty web page, he asks, “Without variation there could be no genetics and no evolution, so why is it there? Perhaps surprisingly we have no real idea.”

Evolutionary biologist and philosopher [and SHSNY Honorary Member] Massimo Pigliucci told the Humanist Network News that he has no idea why Jones thinks human

evolution is grinding to a halt. While he finds *Darwin's Ghost* a brilliant work, he finds a lot of holes in Jones' current theory.

Pigliucci said that the idea that older fathers are better for evolution is "quite debatable to say the least," pointing out that "for most of human evolution fathers rarely got to the ripe age of 35."

Pre-agricultural age *Homo sapiens* didn't have the means to sustain multiple sexual partners and there is no proof that polygamy was typical of early humans. Yet human evolution proceeded just fine, nonetheless, wrote Pigliucci in an e-mail.

Addressing Jones' prediction of a "brown future," Pigliucci said that "humanity is nowhere near the level of completely random mating that would be necessary to achieve that.

[And] "... to complicate matters, it may be that small populations can undergo rapid random evolution (though the extent to which that happens is still under debate), but it is also true that large populations (and ours is huge!) also respond quickly to natural selection because of the much higher degree of genetic variation present."

HOW IS THIS "MUSLIM" NOT DEAD?

Andrew Higgins

(From "Islamic Theologian's Theory: It's Likely the Prophet Muhammad Never Existed" on wsj.com, 11/15/08)

Muhammad Sven Kalisch, a Muslim convert and Germany's first professor of Islamic theology, fasts during Ramadan, doesn't like to shake hands with Muslim women and has spent years studying Islamic scripture. Islam, he says, guides his life.

So it came as a surprise when Prof. Kalisch announced the fruit of his theological research. His conclusion: the Prophet Muhammad probably never existed.

Muslims, not surprisingly, are outraged. Worried German police told the professor to move his religious-studies center to more secure premises.

When Prof. Kalisch took up his theology chair four years ago, he was seen as proof that modern Western scholarship and Islamic ways can mingle – and counter the influence of radical preachers. He was put in charge of a new program to train teachers in state schools to teach Muslim pupils about their faith.

Muslim leaders cheered and joined an advisory board at his Center for Religious Studies. Politicians hailed the appointment as a sign of Germany's readiness to absorb some three million Muslims into mainstream society. But, says a minister responsible for higher education in the region, "the results are disappointing."

Prof. Kalisch, who insists he's still a Muslim, says he knew he would get in trouble but wanted to subject Islam to the same scrutiny as Christianity and Judaism. German scholars of the 19th century, he notes, were among the first to raise questions about the historical accuracy of the Bible.

Kalisch devoured works questioning the existence of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Then "I said to myself: You've dealt with Christianity and Judaism but what about your own religion? Can you take it for granted that Muhammad existed?"

He had no doubts at first, but slowly they emerged. He was struck, he says, by the fact that the first coins bearing Muhammad's name did not appear until the late 7th century – six decades after the religion did.

He traded ideas with some scholars in Saarbrücken who in recent years have pushed the idea that “Muhammad” wasn’t the name of a person but a title, and that Islam began as a Christian heresy.

By early this year his thinking had shifted. “The more I read, the historical person at the root of the whole thing became more and more improbable,” he says.

He has doubts, too, about the Quran. “God doesn’t write books,” Prof. Kalisch says.

Ed Note: Not even Bibles? It’s the damndest thing about people thinking freely and critically – they so often turn out “disappointing results.”

WE GAIN A NEW RECRUIT

(Reprinted from 12/12/08 Newslite, newsletter of the National Secular Society (UK), at www.secularism.org.uk)

[pic of Streep as nun]

Oscar-winning actress Meryl Streep is promoting her new film “Doubt” about the struggle that the Catholic Church is having in coming to terms with the modern world. She plays an authoritarian nun, Sister Aloysius. When asked about her own attitude to religion in an interview in *The Sunday Telegraph*, she said: “I think I can understand the solace that’s available in the whole construct of religion. But I really don’t believe in the power of prayer, or things would have been avoided that have happened, that are awful. So it’s a horrible position as an intelligent, emotional, yearning human being to sit outside of the available comfort there. But I just can’t go there.”

[pic of Streep as Streep]

So from where does she draw consolation? “Consolation? I’m not sure I have it.

“I have a belief, I guess, in the power of the aggregate human attempt – the best of ourselves. In love and hope and optimism – you know, the magic things that seem inexplicable. Why we are the way we are.”